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Adventist Concepts of Discipleship and Nonconformity

Denis Fortin

A Biblical View of Discipleship¹

Seventh-day Adventists believe that the person who accepts Christ as Savior is called to a Christ-like life of spiritual, mental, physical, and relational growth; like the child Jesus to grow “in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men” (Luke 2:52). The goal of our lives is to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ within the fellowship of the church, His body.

Our Fundamental Belief #11, “Growing in Christ,” states in part,

“... Jesus’ victory gives us victory over the evil forces that still seek to control us, as we walk with Him in peace, joy, and assurance of His love. Now the Holy Spirit dwells within us and empowers us. Continually committed to Jesus as our Saviour and Lord, we are set free from the burden of our past deeds. No longer do we live in the darkness, fear of evil powers, ignorance, and meaninglessness of our former way of life. In this new freedom in Jesus, we are called to grow

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into the likeness of His character, communing with Him daily in prayer, feeding on His Word, meditating on it and on His providence, singing His praises, gathering together for worship, and participating in the mission of the Church. As we give ourselves in loving service to those around us and in witnessing to His salvation, His constant presence with us through the Spirit transforms every moment and every task into a spiritual experience. (Ps 1:1, 2; 23:4; 77:11, 12; Col 1:13, 14; 2:6, 14, 15; Luke 10:17-20; Eph 5:19, 20; 6:12-18; 1 Thess 5:23; 2 Peter 2:9; 3:18; 2 Cor. 3:17, 18; Phil 3:7-14; 1 Thess 5:16-18; Matt 20:25-28; John 20:21; Gal 5:22-25; Rom 8:38, 39; 1 John 4:4; Heb 10:25.)”

If we can be disciples of Jesus it is first because God is the embodiment of love (1 John 4:8). Even before Creation, God expressed love for humanity by working out the plan of salvation. Since the entrance of sin, however, humanity is separated from God and, on its own, cannot understand this kind of love (Isa 59:2). Therefore, God takes the initiative in self-revelation, wanting to restore the relationship with humanity and to save them from sin and its penalty. God’s self-revelation is manifest through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, His Word, nature, the work of the Holy Spirit in people’s lives, and providential workings.

Humanity was created in the image of God, capable of love and fellowship with God and others, and with moral freedom to choose whether to obey and follow the Creator (Gen 1:26, 27). Adam and Eve were enjoying a daily relationship with God until sin separated them from God and one another (Gen 3:12). They exchanged their godly dignity and the truth about their Creator for the lies of a created being who has brought devastation and shame to all humanity (John 8:44). Through Christ, God reconciled Himself with humanity and provided the way by which humanity could be restored to relationship with Himself and their fellow human beings. Jesus revealed the deceptive, self-absorbed nature of Satan and all who follow him, while showing Himself to be a shepherd-Savior who died for His sheep to provide them with reconciliation and abundant life.

Like sheep following a trusted voice, believers know the voice

of their Shepherd and are called to follow (John 10:27). They invite God's presence on a daily basis, and radical changes occur in the way they relate to the Creator and to others. Through Christ's transforming grace, believers are called to reflect God's character (Eph 5:1, 2) and through the influence of the Holy Spirit to come to a unique relationship with God through a steadfast relationship of obedience.

Jesus commands us to abide in Him to receive life and to maintain a living relationship with Him (John 15:4). Abiding in Jesus means believing in Him as the Son of God, obeying what He says, loving one another with the community of God's people, extending that love by obeying Christ's command to bring the gospel to the world, and following His example to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:18-20).

Having spent three years teaching the Twelve, Jesus left them with the great gospel commission to follow His example in making disciples. To empower them to accomplish that commission, He gave them His greatest gift, the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 16:13). They were to teach all things that Jesus taught. Disciples today still grow and mature through the Spirit. Only a Spirit-led disciple can make another disciple for Jesus Christ. Thus the life of a disciple extends the Master's love and ministry to the world.

God showed His love for the Church by sending His Son to die for her (1 John 4:9). He also designed that His love for the Church manifest itself through His disciples. He calls them to the task of loving one another and of edifying and building up the Church. The biblical teachings of the fruit and gifts of the Holy Spirit are the key to understanding how God loves and builds up the Church through His disciples. He provides every grace and ability that is needed to fulfill this commission.

The fruit of the Spirit provides the graces through which God's love is revealed in the relationships of disciples with one another. This fruit includes love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22, 23). The gifts of the Spirit, such as teaching, evangelizing, faith, and service, provide disciples with the ministries that build up the body of Christ (1 Cor

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12:28; Eph 4:11). God is responsible for the success of this work, only asking that His disciples serve as willing instruments in His hands.

Throughout history God has called men and women to testify of His goodness, share their faith, and invite those who did not know Him to follow. As the first disciples of Christ were invited to follow and then were commissioned to “go and make disciples,” so each believer becomes part of a continuing line of witnesses who seek to expand the fellowship of believers. In simple form, Christian witness involves a passionate testimony of a personal encounter with Jesus and an invitation to follow Him.

Discipleship through the Life Span

Given this biblical understanding of discipleship, through the years Seventh-day Adventists have established numerous ministries and activities to facilitate what we now call discipleship through the life span. Although we have not articulated our vision of discipleship like this until recently, we have been attentive to the concept of discipleship since our early beginning. And like many other Protestant denominations, our concept of discipleship is founded on the understanding that education, both informal and formal, the knowledge of the Word of God, and service facilitate the formation of one’s character and the transformation of one’s life in preparation for God’s kingdom and eternity. The Word of God is at the center of this concept of education and discipleship. In contrast to other denominations where the focus of the religious life is to partake of the proper sacraments in order to be saved, Adventists view discipleship as the acquisition of the knowledge and experience that will prepare one for heaven.

A devotion to Bible study is at the core of our efforts at discipleship and remains the focus of much of what we do. Early Adventists promoted the study of Scripture and through the years this commitment has remained an identifying mark of Adventism. To facilitate the study of Scripture we have offered public conferences and seminars on various biblical topics, particularly on the prophecies of the books of Daniel and Revelation. Much of our numerical growth

of new converts has been achieved through these conferences and much of the practical focus of our pastoral and ministerial education is to equip our pastors to give these conferences.

Apart from these activities, the organization of a cross-generational Sabbath School program is certainly the predominant mechanism of discipleship and religious education the Adventist church has espoused since 1852. For about one hour each Sabbath morning in each congregation, various Sabbath school classes are offered for all age levels. Depending on the size of the congregation, this program includes Bible lesson studies for young children, for elementary and secondary age groups, for college students, and adults. To facilitate this program, an extensive array of weekly lesson guides are prepared by the Sabbath School department of the General Conference and are translated into a multitude of languages. On any given Sabbath, adult members in Canada will likely study the same topic as those in Rwanda, in Russia, in Mexico and in New Zealand.

Another crucial element of discipleship in the Adventist church is the extensive educational system we have created. From a small beginning in 1872 with the start of a one-room school in Battle Creek, Michigan, and the creation two years later of our first college (which is now Andrews University), Seventh-day Adventists now operate the largest protestant educational system in the world with 5,815 elementary schools (according to 2011 statistics), 1908 secondary schools, and 112 colleges and universities, and we employed 89,000 teachers and enrolled 1.750 million students. The Sabbath School program and the educational system have been at the heart of the process of discipleship and religious education in the church.

Through the years we have also created numerous other ministries and activities that have contributed to the discipleship of our church members and to the growth of the church. Various ministries have focused on teaching the faith to children. Among these we have the Adventurer Club and the Pathfinder Club which have provided co-educational scout-like programs to elementary and secondary age children and youth. On our college and university campuses we have had numerous types of activities, clubs and outreach programs. In our local congregations, other activities like youth, women's and

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men's ministries, small group ministries, and many more, have attempted to provide an environment in which members and visitors can grow in their faith and love for Christ and his Word. All these ministries and activities attempt to facilitate a spiritual development and growth through the lifespan, from birth to senior years, that at any moment of one's life one can be a committed disciple of Jesus Christ.

Relationship to the World

How Adventists have related to the world is a matter that deserves much more study than we've done so far. In 1989, Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart published such a study, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream*. Their main conclusion is that Adventists have sought to provide an alternative to the American dream, as they replicated the institutions and functions of American society. And in doing this the Adventist relationship with the world has been ambiguous. This relationship with the world has also been characterized by both a personal and a denominational response, and both have changed over time.

Like many other Protestant denominations, membership in the Seventh-day Adventist church is voluntary and for those who are born in the church, a decision to join the church is made at the time of baptism. Being a Christian requires obedience to clear ethical demands and a religious experience of piety and faithfulness is expected. One leaves the world, so to speak, in order to join the Seventh-day Adventist movement. Along the lines of H Richard Niebuhr's typology of the relationship of the church to culture, Seventh-day Adventism started out as a movement against culture in some sense, but has settled as a denomination in tension with culture, with more and more attempts at transforming culture.

The theological roots of the Adventist relationship with the world are to be found in their doctrine of the Sabbath, their eschatology, and their ecclesiological self-understanding and mission. At the heart of Seventh-day Adventism is also a restorationist view of church history and an attempt at recapturing New Testament Christianity. Yet we have not always been successful at reaching this

goal. Like Judaism in relation to other world religions, Adventists are easily distinguished from other Christians by their observance of the Sabbath. The careful observance of a day that runs counter to mainstream Christianity has caused Adventists to not only be different but also to feel different. A desire to observe Sabbath in a society that does not value this day has made Adventists feel ostracized from their communities, sometimes lose employment, and at times even caused them to be persecuted for their faith. In response to this faith need, Adventists have tended to congregate together in some communities where their own institutions (schools, hospitals, publishing houses, etc) generated employment opportunities, avoiding a Sabbath-keeping conflict. Adventists have also tended to take up professions that minimize this conflict or to choose self-employment. It is in this context and out of this experience that Adventists have been such strong supporters of religious liberty for all people.

The Adventist teaching on the second coming of Christ has also affected their relationship with the world. Adventists see themselves as having a prophetic mission and destiny. In the book of Revelation an end-time message is proclaimed by three angels to all the world (14:6-12) to prepare the world for Christ's coming (14:14-20). Two key passages of Revelation (14:12; 12:17) are interpreted as referring to a special group of people at the end of time which will keep the commandments of God and have the faith of Jesus. Thus obedience to God's will as revealed in the Ten Commandments and adherence to a simple New Testament faith as taught by Jesus are believed to be the identifying marks of those who will see Jesus coming on the clouds of heaven at His coming. Adventists understand themselves as the fulfillment of this prophecy and sharing this message with the world is their mission.

In response to Jesus' call for His disciples to be in the world but not of this world (John 17:15, 16), Adventists have taken seriously their commitment to a lifestyle that will reflect God's character and will prepare them for heaven. To enhance this preparation for eternity, Adventists have shunned the world and its ways by emphasizing proper behavior and healthy lifestyle choices. In counterpart, some behaviors have been reprimanded, such as drinking, smoking, danc-

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ing, and some public entertainment activities (theatre, cinema, etc). Instead, simplicity of lifestyle has been promoted with the shunning of expensive clothing and possessions, and the avoidance of jewelry. Even vegetarianism is seen as a part of this preparation for eternity—what we won't eat in heaven, we might as well get along without on earth.

These biblical concepts have undergirded the Adventist attitude and response to the world. However, the traditional relationship of uneasiness with the world has morphed in the last generation or so. What used to be clearly marked or considered as “the world” is now not perceived to be as offensive. Much has happened in society that has led many Adventists to reconsider some of their earlier positions. Like Niebuhr explains in his works, a process of ecclesiastical institutionalization and adaptation to the world has been evident in Adventism.

Our approach to lifestyle issues (the dos and don'ts of the Christian life) became a serious point of conversation a couple generations ago. There is little doubt that Adventists used to be fairly legalistic about life and our religious practices. Although we have always believed in salvation by grace through faith in Christ's death on the cross, our teaching about salvation emphasized the good works a believer saved in Christ should do. Then the proverbial pendulum swung from a legalist approach to life to almost an antinomian perspective. And consequently the result has been much less agreement on what an Adventist now “looks” like. Although we are still in strong agreement regarding Sabbath observance, healthy lifestyle choices and avoidance of harmful substances, there is some diversity of opinion and practice regarding the wearing of jewelry and personal entertainment choices. Even how to keep the Sabbath is no longer an opinion we all agree on. Perhaps some would say that the distinction between the church and the world has become blurry and we are in need of revival and reformation again.

But changes in the Adventist relationship with the world have not happened only at the personal level. The denomination's response to the world has also morphed. It is a paradox that for a denomination that is so committed to emphasizing the soon return

of Christ and the need to prepare people for this event, Adventists have built themselves a comfortable “kingdom” on earth. Given our emphasis on pre-millennialism and the utter destruction of this earth and its treasures at the second advent of Christ, it is somewhat puzzling that we have encouraged the development of vast and extensive educational and medical systems, we promote local welfare activities and reforms, and we have developed a fairly large and well-structured church organization. Many of our other ministries, such as publishing and media, have substantial assets.

If, as we say, we believe in the cataclysmic soon coming of Christ, we have certainly established a significant Adventist “kingdom” on earth. These ministries and social activities, however, should be understood within the context of our missiological thought. Adventists believe that the mission of the church is an extension of the work of Christ who went about teaching and healing. This mission to spread the gospel and the three angels’ messages to all the world is more effective and successful if all aspects of human life are touched. Hence, health and temperance reforms, education, and social welfare are integral aspects and functions of the mission of the church to proclaim a loving and saving message to a dying world in dire need of hope. Adventist eschatology influences its missiological views which in turn drive its social thought. In this sense, our approach to culture has become one that seeks to transform it, within our circle of influence, while at the same time we believe this world is bound for destruction as it is intrinsically evil and beyond redemption. This is also reflected in the ambiguous nature of our relationship with the world.

Perhaps the transformation of the Adventist relationship with the world, from being against culture and in tension with it to attempting to transform it, within the limitations explained above, becomes more obvious when we consider the fact that in some countries Adventists have become a large segment of the general population (for example, Jamaica, Peru, Bolivia, and some places in Africa). The current Governor General of Jamaica, Sir Patrick Allen, is an ordained Seventh-day Adventist minister. In many places, Adventists now have elected and appointed government officials.

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Hence, they are less and less against the local culture, but more and more attempting to transform it.

This shift in the relationship with the world is also evident when it comes to military service and bearing of arms. Although our official church position remains that we are not supporting voluntary service in the armed forces nor the bearing of arms, we now have thousands of young men and women in the United States armed forces and all of them bear arms and have some conflicts with Sabbath keeping. Anecdotally, we know that many Adventists in the United States own personal weapons and guns (and not for the purpose of providing food for their families). I personally believe the Adventist position on non-combatancy was adopted more as a pragmatic teaching during times of conflicts and warfare than as a solid biblical and theological position at the core of the church's teaching. We seldom discuss it now. Hence, our *de facto* position has become one of freedom of choice. In this case, it is not a question of the church against culture or even attempting to transform it; it is the church working with culture, a culture of violence.

The Adventist relationship with the world is thus an ambiguous one. As disciples of Christ we are committed to living a life of faith in obedience to the Word of God. But the larger our church becomes and the more diverse we are, the more we will be required to wrestle with what it means to be in this world and yet not of it. Still, it is our hope that Jesus will soon return and this process of wrestling with these issues won't be necessary. It is a paradox that this blessed hope may also prevent us in the meantime from having a stronger witness in this world of sin.

ENDNOTES

¹ This section is adapted from the brochure, *Growing Disciples*, published by the Ministries Committee of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists for the 2007 Annual Council.