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Multi-Ethnicity/Multi-Culturalism and the Life and Writings of Ellen G. White

There is apparent incongruity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church between its stated doctrinal belief and its practical implementation of the gospel. The church's doctrinal statement affirms the power of the gospel to break down ethnic/cultural barriers (*Fundamental Beliefs* 2008). However, these "barriers" still exist in Adventism, because by-and-large Adventists have developed ethnic-specific churches.

This poses a potential challenge to ministry in the post-modern world. For most post-moderns racial diversity is both the norm and celebrated. Racial inclusivity in the post-modern world and racial exclusivity in the church suggest that something is amiss (Sweet 1999:394). In order to minister effectively to postmoderns, racial diversity needs to become the norm in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Until it does, the church will risk losing those in emerging generations who are turned off by any appearance of exclusivity.

Ellen White lived and wrote in a time when the biggest multi-ethnic/multi-cultural issue in North America was the growing color line between Anglo-Americans and African-Americans. Her counsel to the Seventh-day Adventist Church regarding this issue offers some clear principles for the much larger multi-ethnic/multi-cultural issues facing the church in the twenty-first century.

Race Relations in the 1890s

By 1890, civil rights for African-Americans had worsened as the southern states found ways to overturn every federal decision that was beneficial to African-Americans. The year 1890 also marked the first year of what would be ten of the worst years of racial killings in the United States. During the decade from 1890 to 1900, two times as many lynchings occurred in this country as during any other period. Eighty-two percent of

those lynchings occurred in the South, and the vast majority could be classified as hate crimes against those of African-American decent (Franklin 1969:338-343).

Even in the northern states segregation was slowly becoming accepted as the American way of life. In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the "color line" was threatening to become the accepted norm. By the time of the General Conference session of 1891, held in Battle Creek, Michigan, the Seventh-day Adventist Church "was at best ambivalent concerning its responsibility to black persons. At worst, the church was recalcitrant" (Pollard 2004:23).

On Sabbath, March 21, 1891, Ellen White, then sixty-four, stepped up to the pulpit, and to a group of thirty key General Conference leaders delivered a sermon on racial equality and the responsibilities of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to take its message and mission to the neglected African-American population.

There has been much perplexity as to how our laborers in the South shall deal with the 'color line.' It has been a question to some how far to concede to the prevailing prejudice against the colored people. The Lord has given us light concerning all such matters. There are principles laid down in His Word that should guide us in dealing with these perplexing questions. The Lord Jesus came to our world to save men and women of all nationalities. He died just as much for the colored people as for the white race. (E. White 1898:9)

In addressing the "color line," there is only one authoritative source and that is God's Word. At the 1887 General Conference Session discussion on the "color line" had focused on the prejudices of the South (*GC Daily Bulletin* 1887:3). Ellen G. White articulates clearly that the extent of people's prejudices was not what mattered or what should determine the answer to the question of the "color line." The definitive answer to the issue was to be found in God's Word and the principles he had laid down for us there. For her, the most clear and definitive answer comes at the foot of the cross. On the cross, Jesus died as much for African-Americans as for Anglo-Americans or any other ethnic/cultural groups.

In her sermon White clearly laid out the current condition of the church and what God had revealed to her about it. With deep sadness, she lamented the current condition of the church toward African-Americans, which showed a lack of Christ's love in the hearts of church members. She recalled the searing words of Christ, spoken in anguish to her heart, as He looked at his church and cried out, "All ye are brethren." To express such prejudicial attitudes was literally "closing the door of their hearts

to Jesus." Those who were expressing such attitudes were in need of the "transforming grace of Jesus in their own hearts" (E. White 1898:11).

White would go on in her sermon to state in even more emphatic terms how serious a sin prejudice really is. To slight someone, merely because of their color, was not only a slight to that person, but at its deepest level was a slight to Christ himself. Such prejudicial attitudes prove that those who harbor them do not have the Spirit of Christ dwelling in them, but rather are "slaves of sin and of Satan" (1898:13). Those who are truly transformed by Christ will not harbor prejudices against anyone or any race, for Christ has purchased us all with his precious blood. White also made it abundantly clear that the church needed to deal with those prejudices then, not later. Church members better be able to sit side by side with a person of a different color here if they are to be prepared for heaven, where people of every race will be "seated at the same table to eat bread in the kingdom of God" (13).

Ellen White then went on to challenge the church to take on the work that by and large to this point had been neglected. She made it clear that there was no excuse for the Seventh-day Adventist Church neglecting to work among all people of the South, including the millions of neglected African-Americans. She emphasized that the neglect of this work among African-Americans was a sin that "rests upon us as a church" (1898:15). She again reiterated that Adventist policies and practices for dealing with the "color line" must be based on biblical principles, not on the feelings and prejudices of Anglo-Americans in the South (16). Some church leaders had made the argument at the 1887 General Conference that if churches were integrated, it would drive away Anglo-American members (*GC Daily Bulletin* 1887:3); however, she contended that a church had no right to exclude African-Americans and that African-Americans and Anglo-Americans should all hold membership in the same church (E. White 1898:15).

That sermon was not readily accepted by church leadership at the General Conference Session of 1887 and the delegates took no action on the issue of the "color line" (*GC Daily Bulletin* 1887). Ellen White was well aware of the risk she was taking in delivering this sermon:

After my severe illness one year ago, many things which the Lord had presented to me seemed lost to my mind, but they have since been repeated. I know that which I now speak will bring me into conflict. This I do not covet, for the conflict has seemed to be continuous of late years; but I do not mean to live a coward or die a coward, leaving my work undone. I must follow in my Master's footsteps. (E. White 1898:11)

Her words regarding her sermon would prove to be prophetic. Her call seemingly fell on deaf years. No actions were taken relative to the “color line” at the 1891 General Conference Session (*GC Daily Bulletin* 1891).

The Fallout

A succession of events followed Ellen White’s sermon at the 1891 General Conference Session. In September of 1891, Ellen White found herself on a ship headed for Australia. The Foreign Mission Board at the General Conference session of 1891 voted to ask Ellen White to travel to Australia by late autumn (A. White 1983:14). It was a trip that she had resisted but one that had been pushed on her by church leaders who claimed she was needed there to help the Seventh-day Adventist Church to develop in that region (E. White 1891). Set within the time frame of her controversial sermon, it seems at least possible that her trip was pushed on her by church leaders as a way to get some relief from her pushing and prodding on the race issue.

Ellen White would remain in Australia for the next nine years. However, she had no intention of being silent on this subject. While in Australia, she wrote ten articles about the “color line” and the necessity of working among African-Americans. These articles were published in the *Review and Herald* between April 2, 1895 and February 4, 1896. In those ten articles two themes emerged which she repeatedly emphasized.

She wrote that there was no justification for prejudice or the existence of the “color line” among the disciples of Jesus Christ. She called the church to lay aside its sins of neglect and prejudice, and to begin laboring diligently for the souls of our African-American brothers and sisters. She strongly believed that our brothers and sisters in Christ, no matter what their skin color, should be welcomed into our churches and into our worship services. There was no justification for segregation here on earth, since in heaven all would be fellowshiping together.

Understanding Later Statements

Certain isolated statements from volume 9 of the *Testimonies for the Church* have been used throughout the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a reason to promote what amounts to segregationist policies in the church. However, it is unfair to take these statements and isolate them. They must be seen in the big picture view of Ellen White, her consistent racial message throughout her lifetime, and the historical context in which the statements were written.

In the big picture view, from early childhood, Ellen White grew up in an environment which nurtured and developed in her a worldview of absolute equality regarding race relations. This would lead her, from

the very outset of her prophetic ministry, to be an outspoken radical abolitionist. There were a variety of positions taken by anti-slavery groups. Some advocated the end of slavery and the development of a state in the Deep South for African-Americans. Others advocated for financially compensating slave-owners for freeing their slaves and then colonizing African-Americans (to Africa, Central America, or the Caribbean Islands). Still others merely advocated no further extension of slavery. In contrast, Ellen White identified with the most radical-abolitionist who called for an immediate end to slavery and the integration of African-Americans into the United States as free citizens (Staudenraus 1961:211-223). She spoke out strongly against the sin of slavery (1861:359), supported John Brown's actions at Harpers Ferry (Gilbert 1922:216-217), called for civil disobedience against the fugitive slave law, and during the Civil War, decried not only the South's propagation of slavery, but also the North's refusal to do something about it (E. White 1861:359).

Following the Civil War as the Adventist Church began to struggle with the "color line" and drag its feet in bringing the Three Angels' Messages to African-Americans, Ellen White courageously raised her prophetic voice. Though she knew what she was going to say would bring her into conflict, she was willing to deliver God's message.

Not only must her comments in the *Testimonies for the Church* (vol. 9) be seen within the big picture view of everything Ellen White did and said regarding race relations, they must also be seen within the historical context of her son Edson's letters to her on his work in the South, a work that was steadily becoming more difficult and more dangerous and even life threatening to everyone involved because of the prejudicial attitudes and actions of White Southerners.

Ellen White's Response to the Volatile Situation in the South

The material for volume 9 of the *Testimonies*, which was compiled during 1908 and printed in 1909, was compiled from numerous Ellen White documents written prior to 1908. The primary source material for the controversial passages seem to have come from two letters written in response to the volatile situation in the South (Graybill 1970:59).

In a letter written in 1899, with the issues that Edson had related to her fresh on her mind, she wrote to F. E. Belden. At first glance, White's words might seem to contradict all she believed and taught for the previous fifty years. These statements can only be seen within the historical context of the then volatile south. "There are some who think it right to treat them [colored race] in all respects on an equality with white people" (E. White 1899:4). Ellen White would have to include herself in that group. As was seen in her 1891 sermon, she clearly believed in the equality of the races.

She was not suddenly changing her mind on the subject, but rather pointed out that currently the climate in the South made it “unsafe” to practice this principle on all levels. She then went on to give a practical example: “White and colored children are not to be associated promiscuously in the Southern States” (1899:5). First, note very clearly her geographical region for this principle. It was not to be applied everywhere, but only in the “Southern States.” She makes this comment not because blacks and whites are not equal, but because “our work would be placed in jeopardy and lives would be sacrificed” (1899:5). In order to protect the workers and those being worked for against the attacks of white racist, she acknowledges the need for some “separate work.”

She then goes on to make it abundantly clear that this is not the way God wanted it to be or the way it should have happened. The reason we are where we are now is because the Church failed to act as it should have at the time of the abolition of slavery.

In Manuscript 60 she addressed the issue of the South and the need for colored workers. “We need, O so much, colored workers to labor for their own people, in places where it would not be safe for white people to labor” (E. White 1904:4). Notice clearly the context of her words, she did not say black people could only labor for their own people or that whites should not labor for black people. To make such a statement would have contradicted everything else she had ever said. However, within the historical context of the volatile south, she said it should happen, where it “would not be safe for white people to labor.” In many parts of the South, Whites working among Blacks were a “lightening rod” issue that endangered the lives of the White workers as well as the Blacks they were working with.

She also wrote about issues relevant to work in the volatile South in a letter written to the Nashville Church. She made it clear that the segregationist views and laws in the south were not an excuse for them to exist in the church. From the top (workers in our institutions) to the bottom (church members), believers should be “cleansing from their lives every wrong principle” (E. White 1907:1). She desired to make it clear that though we had to do our missionary work within the confines of white racism, it would not and could not be tolerated in God’s church.

These letters and manuscripts form the basis from which the following statement from *Testimonies* Volume 9 was compiled.

The colored people should not urge that they be placed on an equality with white people. The relation of the two races has been a matter hard to deal with, and I fear that it will ever remain a most perplexing problem. So far as possible, everything that would stir up

the race prejudice of the white people should be avoided. There is danger of closing the door so that our white laborers will not be able to work in some places in the South. In regard to white and colored people worshiping in the same building, this cannot be followed as a general custom with profit to either party--especially in the South. The best thing will be to provide the colored people who accept the truth, with places of worship of their own, in which they can carry on their services by themselves. This is particularly necessary in the South in order that the work for the white people may be carried on without serious hindrance. . . .

Let the colored believers be provided with neat, tasteful houses of worship. Let them be shown that this is done not to exclude them from worshiping with white people, because they are black, but in order that the progress of the truth may be advanced. Let them understand that this plan is to be followed until the Lord shows us a better way. (E. White 1909:204, 206-207)

Again, these words must be understood not as a blanket across-the-board principle for how the work was to be carried out, but as a message to a particular time and a particular place. It was a message of how to deal with events transpiring in the volatile South, between the late 1890s and into the early 1900s. Even in the South, these principles were not to be carried out forever, but only "until the Lord shows us a better way." Edson's interpretation of his mother's words add credence to the idea that this was not a broad-based principle to be carried out everywhere but only applicable in a certain time and place.

Edson's Interpretation and Application of His Mother's Words

Although Edson is not an infallible interpreter of his mother's words, his opinion on the subject is of value. After all, he worked more intimately with his mom on the subject of race relations than anyone else and it was a subject near and dear to both of their hearts (Graybill 1970:65). In a letter he wrote to Miss M. A. Criswell, he responded to a query from her regarding the establishment of an integrated school in Washington, DC, in light of his mother's testimonies. "Now in regard to the Testimonies respecting colored schools unmixed with whites. I understand that this refers to the South only where mixed schools will not be tolerated. God forbid that we should build up a color line where they do not exist" (J. E. White 1899:1-2).

Edson very clearly saw his mother's testimony as applicable only in the volatile context of the South. To apply this testimony to any other time or place, other than that to which it was given, Edson viewed as a sin. Her testimony was not meant to create a "color line where they do not now

exist." Her testimony applied only to the "South" and its current situation.

Conclusion

It has now been almost 120 years since Ellen White wrote her prayerful hope that in the South God would someday show us "a better way." Yet, it seems that the church she fought so hard for and the "color line" she labored to rid the Seventh-day Adventist Church of is the very church that developed following her death. Even more disturbing is the fact that people have used and manipulated her words to promote practices in the church that, whether by intent or not, lead to racial segregation. However, through a study of her life and teaching on the subject, it is clear that she never envisioned a church divided along racial lines like the Seventh-day Adventist Church is in North America today, at both the local church level and the conference level.

It seems that in North America today, there is a need to revisit the life and teachings of Ellen White and to begin to live out more fully the call and the challenges of her landmark sermon of 1891. Postmodernity heightens the urgency of this task. In order to be relevant to post-moderns, the church must listen to the voice of post-modernism that is calling it to truly live out the principles of the gospel within the boundaries of multi-ethnic/multi-cultural ministries.

If racial discord is to be healed from the creation of separate organizations within the Seventh-day Adventist Church based on ethnicity, it seems it must begin where the first division took place, between the Anglo-Americans and African-Americans. Both groups must look honestly at the history of how we got to where we are today if we are ever going to make the changes necessary to move with the Lord towards a "better way." Anglo-American Seventh-day Adventists must honestly reconcile with a history of bigotry and racism that led to the separation of the African-American work in 1945 (Dudley 1997:161). African-American Seventh-day Adventists must remember the vision behind the move to Black churches and conferences. "The major objective of that movement was the institutionalization of the Christian faith in a non-racist form" (Paris 1985:129). To that end, African-American churches saw themselves not as the ultimate solution, but as only a temporary one which was made necessary by the evils of racism. It is now time to look for that better way.

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