BLACK SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS AND THEOLOGICAL DIRECTIONS
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Introduction

Many nations and peoples look back with pride at their “golden eras,” while others look forward with eager anticipation to the arrival of expected utopias. What options, though, are open to Black Seventh-day Adventists, particularly in the arena of theology, when we can neither look back with pride, nor be completely satisfied with present accomplishments, nor anticipate the future with confident expectation—if certain prevailing proclivities persist?

Was Neal Wilson, former president of the General Conference of SDAs, speaking for Adventist Blacks when he wrote, in the preface to the book Movement of Destiny, “So often through the passage of time the original goals and purposes for this Movement of Destiny become blurred and are nearly lost. Our vision becomes dim. We cannot look back, and we do not seem to be able to look ahead”? Or was he simply reflecting the harsh reality that as a movement we cannot look back with pride, for we have “fumbled the ball” on matters that were designed by God to make us distinctive and exemplary?

At this critical time, can Black SDAs have an impact on the theological direction of the Seventh-day Adventist Church? Those assuming there can be no impact, evidenced by the minor presence they maintain at the theological centers of the church, have missed the point. Black SDAs have made, are making, and must continue to make significant contributions. However, we must learn from the past, maximize the present, and prepare for the future. Endless possibilities exist, but the task must be embraced and vigorously pursued.

The myth that African-Americans lack educational ability must be dispelled along with the myth of the late 1920s and early 1930s that suggested Blacks lacked administrative ability. Continued assent to the notion that Blacks are inferior academically indicates that notions of racial superiority and bigotry still reside in the hearts of brothers and sisters in Christ, and it’s time for us to allow a rich dose of Christ to wash us clean from our inherent or acquired prejudices so that the rest of us can pursue vigorously the freedom we have in Christ. Adventists, majority and minority, have the same mission, in the same church founded by the same Lord; thus we must be willing to reflect the kinship He established to glorify His name.

It has seldom been a lack of preparation or ability that has prevented Blacks from influencing theological directions to the degree that they could or should. More often it has been a lack of opportunity. Charles Kinney, who was born a slave, was identified as exhibiting great potential as a church worker after becoming an SDA. Though sponsored by the church for two years of preparation at Healdsburg College, it was the colporteur work to which he was assigned following his studies. Eventually he became the first African-American to be ordained as an SDA minister.

William H. Green was another Black with potential to influence theological direction. A graduate of Shaw University, he held degrees in both theology and law. His law practice found him arguing cases even before the United States Supreme Court. This speaks well of his talents and potential. In the church he distinguished himself in the Adventist ministry and had the distinction of being, as secretary of the Negro Department, the first Black elected to the General Conference. The wisdom of his election as secretary in 1918 was demonstrated by his administrative and diplomatic skills as well as by the growth of the Black work under his guidance until his untimely death 10 years later.

Summing up the period of his leadership, church historian Richard Schwarz notes that the growth of the period took place despite “the survival and spread of discriminatory practices in Adventist schools and sanitariums and in some churches.” He even contends that “tragically, all too many American Adventists of Caucasian background found it difficult to shake off their culturally acquired prejudice against blacks.” What more might Green have achieved had the climate been right or had he been given more opportunities?

Frank Loris Peterson also had the potential to affect theological directions to a greater extent than he was given opportunity. His life and career presented a number of firsts in the SDA Church. He was the first Black to graduate from Pacific Union College, to publish a book in the denomination (1934), to serve as secretary of the Pacific Union Colored Department, to be elected associate secretary of the General Conference, and to be elected vice president of the General Conference.

Peterson’s book, The Hope of the Race, expressed his desire to inform people and impact their thinking on doctri-
nal and theological issues. Also, his administration of the Negro Department of the General Conference witnessed the inauguration, in 1935, of Message magazine, "a new evangelistic journal aimed at American Blacks." Through the years this journal has given Black thinkers a vehicle for expression as well as a medium for some limited theologizing—particularly when its editorship passed on to African-Americans.

If there was one Black Adventist in the mid-twentieth century who had the expertise and training to influence the church's theological directions, that person was Owen A. Troy, Sr. Described as "a creative, constructive genius, a man of explicit detail who used his great talents to the honor and glory of God," Troy was the first person in the Seventh-day Adventist Church to earn a Doctor of Theology (Th.D.) degree (he received his M.A. at the University of Chicago and his Th.D. from the University of Southern California). However, he never taught at the SDA Theological Seminary or at any of the SDA colleges in North America. Five years after he received his doctorate, he was called to be associate secretary of the General Conference Sabbath School Department because of his expertise in biblical Hebrew and Greek.

Denied real scope for meaningful and adequate theological expression in the arena where it really mattered, Blacks turned to writing. But here too they were faced with problems. Since most Blacks were denied the opportunity for theological training, they were unable to utilize "proper" theological language to command the attention of the scholarly world— their works were regarded more as doctrinal and devotional than theological.

This tendency to disregard Blacks as legitimate scholars was not limited to the Adventist academic community. Cain Felder notes: "Only a few decades ago White Bible scholars, who had exclusive prerogatives as the academic elite, would have found it unthinkable that African-Americans could be bona fide scholars. The very notion would have brought either laughter or some condescending quip from members of the Euro-American biblical academies, which were then composed entirely of White males. Until recently the idea of a Black Bible scholar—whether Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish—was something of a novelty, an aberration."

James Cone concurs and notes that "it was generally assumed by most Whites, and many Blacks as well, that Black culture had no unique contribution to make to Christianity in general and humanity in particular."

Undaunted by these hurdles, many Black SDAs employed the denominational publications to express themselves, while others authored books. Regarding denominational publications, Blacks primarily had access to Message magazine. However, as an associate secretary of the General Conference Ministerial Association, E. E. Cleveland sat on the editorial board of Ministry magazine. To the extent that this gave him a voice in determining the editorial policy and theological content of that journal, he was able to influence theological directions. A review of his articles confirm this fact. Since Owen A. Troy, Sr., had the opportunity to affect the theological direction and content of the Sabbath school quarterly, he too, in some limited way, helped to determine theological directions.

Recently Roy Adams, Ph.D., a Black graduate of the SDA Theological Seminary, was made an associate editor of the Adventist Review. In that capacity he participates in decisions that determine the theological directions of that journal. Besides, his editorials and articles have influenced the theological thinking of both Adventist clergy and laity.

Recently, also, the Review invited Calvin Rock, D.Min., Ph.D., a former president of Oakwood College and a vice president of the General Conference, to author a monthly column called Faith Alive. With his background in ministry and ethics, Rock has used this column to influence the theological thinking of the church to some extent.

E. E. Cleveland, the most prolific Black author to date, has produced devotional, doctrinal, and theological books. While he has not utilized the classical theological jargon, he has influenced others to think critically about what they believe, and to do so in the context of and from a scriptural and theological base. To that extent we can say he has influenced SDA theological directions.

To illustrate, consider The Middle Wall. In the first chapter Cleveland presents some of the dilemmas Black Christians in this country face and asks his Caucasian brethren, "Do you really understand?" He climaxes the chapter by advancing the notion that while they don't, Christ does. Since He too experienced rejection.

After presenting Peter's vision and experience at Cornelius' house for what they really were—a call to break down prejudice—Cleveland makes some pertinent points aimed at influencing the theological thinking of his readers. Highlighting the Jerusalem leadership's reaction to Peter's unprecedented initiative, he says: "No church can call itself Christian and yet not rebuke this evil (racial friction) in its midst. Love and racial prejudice cannot dwell in the same heart or house without that house being divided against itself.

"Again, today in many places a similar situation exists. How must it be dealt with? The answer is the eleventh chapter of the book of Acts... The full weight of gospel authority was turned against the prejudiced attitude. It was exposed for what it was... sin against God and man. The gospel of love must be more fully preached if the church is to free herself of this deadly evil. Christianity is not the white man's religion or the black man's. It is the religion of Jesus Christ, and its churches are houses of prayer for all people."

After demonstrating how Jesus and Paul broke down
the middle wall, along with noting the contributions of modern abolitionists, Cleveland invites his Caucasian readers to remember the plight of their fellow Black Christians. He suggests that in crisis times God alone (theology) can stem the tide.

Cleveland moves deeper into theology when he addresses the issue of the social gospel, seeing it as “the teaching that now man may by human means convert this world into the kingdom of God on earth.”15 While he appears to repudiate the social gospel, he does espouse some of its aims: “The true Christian can no more isolate himself from society’s needs than he can view social reform as his primary work. And it is not.”14

There is truth to this argument. Walter Rauschenbusch, one founder of the social gospel, says: “Our labor for the kingdom here will be our preparation for participation hereafter. The degree to which we have absorbed the laws of the kingdom into our character will determine our qualification for the life of heaven.”15

Rauschenbusch continues: “Class pride and its obverse passion, class contempt, are the necessary spiritual product of class divisions. They are the direct negation of solidarity and love. They substitute semihuman, semiethical relation for full human fraternity. The class system, therefore, is a sinful denial of the kingdom of God, and one of the characteristic marks and forces of the kingdom of evil.”16

Rauschenbusch suggests that “the social gospel is the old message of salvation enlarged and intensified.”17 What he means is that the prevailing approach to the gospel has been individualistic since it focuses on seeing the sinfulness of every human heart and does not address the sinfulness of the social order and its share in the sins of individuals. It “seeks to bring men under repentance for their collective sins and to create a more sensitive and more modern conscience. It calls for the faith of the old prophets, who believed in the salvation of nations.”18

While it is true that the gospel is not all social, there is a social dimension that must not be ignored. The gospel must not be so otherworldly that it is of no earthly good. People who need to hear the gospel now have needs that must be met. Some are saying, “Pie in the sky for the sweet by-and-by cannot feed me or my children now.” Recognition by the church that it has a role in the social order and its share in the sins of individuals. It “seeks to bring men under repentance for their collective sins and to create a more sensitive and more modern conscience. It calls for the faith of the old prophets, who believed in the salvation of nations.”18

One must question the notion that Black publications are primarily devotional and/or doctrinal in character. For example, Peterson’s book admittedly has a doctrinal bent, but its theological intent is evident in its opening and closing chapters, which begins with “In the Beginning God” and ends with “In the End God.” His preface also acknowledges his intent that he presents God as the answer to humanity’s questions, the solution of our problems, and our only hope for the future. Examination of the writings of C. E. Moseley, E. E. Cleveland, and O. A. Troy, among others, especially in Ministry magazine, also attest to this tendency toward theologizing, albeit in a doctrinal garb.

There has been relative silence on the issues of Black power, Black liberation, the developing countries, feminist/womanist theologies, etc. Here also was opportunity to influence the theological directions of our church and move administration in a direction that would have confronted the issues of racism, poverty, bigotry, as well as social justice, and would also address the concerns of a large segment of its membership while at the same time engendering honest theological debate and interpretation, but we apparently fumbled the ball.

It is significant that it was the debate concerning the creation of Black unions in the SDA Church that elicited from Black leaders some theological reflection on the civil rights struggle and, to some extent, Black theology. In a White
paper titled “A Better Way,” presented to the commission to study regional unions on January 13, 1970, Calvin Rock attempts to influence the direction of the church socially, sociologically, and religiously. Rock presents three theological milestones yet to be achieved by the church: righteousness by faith; the “pilgrim complex,” or ethic; and and togetherness.

Rock, whose paper addresses the latter point, rightly argues that Adventists are “a conservative people who have evidently taken their conservatism too far.” He suggests that “to carry our conservatism into the area of human relations as applies to desegregation is to pervert and misapply an otherwise healthy tendency.” Adventists, says Rock, are Fundamentalists who are “given to more dogmatic and authoritarian preachers that confirm our positions rather than a liberal understanding of principle.”

These insightful observations could have benefited the church had its leadership listened to his plea. However, it took 18 years and a Caucasian Lutheran researcher, Merton P. Strommen, to gain the church’s attention. As a matter of fact, Strommen explains the tension that Rock observes in his church:

“Three of our major studies have shown that when ministries accent what a person does—is preoccupied with rules and regulations—serious flaws appear in the members. Our massive study of 4,000 Lutherans showed that upward of two in five are law-oriented. As such, they tend to be prejudiced, self-oriented, aloof from community needs, authoritarian in their approach to parenting, and intent on seeking their personal advantage. By way of contrast, those whose focus is on what God is doing for them are far more likely to have an intensely personal commitment to Christ, a happy outlook on life, openness to needed change, involvement in social issues and helping activities.”

Thus the solution to Rock’s dilemma is found in a theological direction. The Adventist position on social and racial issues is an outgrowth of our theology. SDAs are conservative and law-oriented; therefore, it is no wonder that there is little interest in issues relating to social justice. As Rock puts it: “We cannot be too surprised that we are slow to evolve from any social or theological position.”

In 1976 Rock presented a second paper on the same issue and with the same intent. From his standpoint as an ethicist and a theologian he looked at the morality and ethics of the treatment of Blacks in the church, and hence the need for Black unions to provide lateral and vertical mobility. He argues that the church, given its track record and the problems it faces on minority issues, should be willing to make room for cultural pluralism. For him, that is the best model to solve the dilemma that Blacks in the SDA Church face.

Also producing a paper for the commission on Black unions was Lorenzo Grant, Ph.D., who argues that the model employed by other presenters, especially Rock, is sociological and thus, in his estimation, unacceptable for ecclesiastical conclusions. In his discussion Grant posits a creative political model utilizing Black theology and quoting from such gurus as James Cone.

After quoting Rosemary Reuther, who suggests that “black theology walks a razor’s edge between a racist message and a message that is validly prophetic, and the character of this razor’s edge must be analyzed with the greatest care to prevent the second from drifting toward the first,” Grant too becomes prophetic, warning that “this solemn responsibility is not the domain of the white hierarchy. The black theologian must in his inmost soul be true and honest with God.” An interesting suggestion, certainly, that is neither explained nor followed up by Grant.

Again, what we see here is an attempt to influence the theological and political direction of the church. According to Grant, the ethical dilemma facing the church must lie at the door of those who have the oversight of the total church. He attempts to make church leaders aware of the need for growth in applying social justice for the diverse constituency of the church. To achieve his aim he employs what he knows best—theology.

In his classes at the SDA Theological Seminary, Walter B. T. Douglas, Ph.D., has been one of the foremost proponents of liberation and Black theology, influencing the theological thought of his students through his lectures. Douglas also presented a paper to a professional meeting on the topic.

Pedrito Maynard-Reid wrote a dissertation at Andrews University that he later published through Orbis Press. Addressing the matter of the rich and poor in the book of James, he attempts to influence thought on the matter of social justice. Since his work was not published through denominational channels, it has not had much impact on theological thinking within the church.

Currently Black scholars, nationally and internationally, are challenging the prevailing Eurocentric biblical posture. Cain Felder notes: “Although it may surprise some well-meaning Christians and Jews in America today, much of what is regarded as legitimate and objective biblical analysis (exegesis) and interpretation (hermeneutics) have been done for the distinct purpose of maintaining Eurocentrism. The biblical role of non-Europeans in general and Blacks in particular has thereby been trivialized and left in the margins.”

To counter this tendency, an Afrocentric approach to biblical interpretation is being posited by Black scholars. Certainly our White counterparts will not and cannot speak for us on these issues, which involve social justice. We must lift up our voices and our pens in defense of just causes and in support of right and justice.

Because Blacks and other minorities remain underrep-
resented on committees and venues that determine the church’s doctrinal direction, there is a need for the voices and pens of Blacks to be prominent in the church. In the SDA Church in general there is an increase among people of color in Europe, Africa, and the Americas—it might even be the case that people of color are the majority in the church today. Here in the United States, the birthplace of the SDA Church, there is today a decline in membership among Caucasians and an increase among minorities.

Concurrent with these developments is what sociologists are calling the “browning of America,” which means there might not be a reversal of this trend in the foreseeable future. Thus there is indeed a great need for Black Adventists to have a major role in determining the theological directions of the church. The trend of having others think for us and tell us what to do must be halted; we are equal partners at the table and must not abdicate our place or our responsibilities to anyone. The shaping of the theology of the church is just as much our task as it is anyone else’s.

Only by examining the past can one discern the pitfalls and problems that dogged the feet of our forebears. Further, only by learning from the past can one move to the future on sure footing. It is natural, then, that as we seek to explore theological directions for our tomorrows we examine such directions in our yesterdays and todays. With this information in hand, we are certainly equipped to move forward.

Black SDAs and Theology

As the historical overview has indicated, Blacks have been doing theology in a garb that, though legitimate, may well be dubbed unconventional when judged by the standards set by the majority culture. One such avenue has been preaching, which historically has played a vital role in Black religiosity.

Denied access to the forums already mentioned, and given the ready and captive audience for theologizing that the weekly church congregation provided (an audience that wanted to hear the Word of God as articulated through His preachers), Black preachers found in the weekly sermon a vehicle of theological articulation. As such, Black preachers have by and large taken their preaching seriously. We’ve treasured the time with our congregations when we have an opportunity to interpret and communicate God’s Word.

C. E. Bradford, I believe, would concur with this notion. “In your work as Seventh-day Adventist clergyman,” he counseled in his book Preaching to the Times, “you exercise both priestly and prophetic functions. . . . As prophet you declare the eternal Word as gospel, not as a mere writer of sermons but, as James H. Robinson puts it, ‘a medium between the mind of God and the hearts of men.’”

Bradford further endorses the link between preaching and theologizing when he brings the two together in his discussion of the sons of Issachar. He even calls upon preachers “to do some hard theological thinking.” Bradford then makes by far one of his most pertinent statements marking this link: “We [preachers] may never become systematic theologians, but we are for all of that practical theologians, because there can be no divorce between theology and preaching. Every pastor is a theologian in residence. Preaching is a sort of immediate theologizing. And, remember, if it won’t preach, it’s not good theology.”

Examples of this concept can be deduced from Bradford’s sermon to the 1980 General Conference session in Dallas, Texas, in which he spoke of a “pathetic search for a more satisfying formula, a new theological construct to ‘finish the work.’” Bradford related “the need to love God and to love one’s neighbor as an essential posture in doing anything for the Lord” and that the church “must be vertically alive to God and horizontally in touch with men and all that troubles them.”

In this address Bradford was certainly trying to influence theological directions. How else can one interpret the intent of the following statement: “The church must be in deed and in reality the Just Society. The principles of justice and neighbor love must be worked out in the laboratory of human experience, in the here-and-now”? That this unique call is coming from a high-ranking church leader is astounding.

Mervyn Warren, Ph.D., professor of preaching and chair of the Religion Department at Oakwood College, would also concur with the conclusion we are arriving at regarding preaching being viewed in the context of theology. In his doctoral dissertation on the preaching style of Martin Luther King, Jr., and in a later work titled Black Preaching: Truth and Soul, Warren argues in favor of this correlation, maintaining that the centralization of the church in the life of African-Americans is a theological outcome of freedom to participate in preaching and worship.

This link between preaching and theology is evident in the wider Black community as well. Concurring with Bradford and Warren on this point, Latta Thomas goes further to associate music with preaching: “This is the amazing thing—that blacks were able to see themselves and the power of a liberating God in the stories and models of Moses, Daniel, Joshua, the three Hebrew boys in the fiery furnace, John, and Jesus. . . . They created songs to celebrate these convictions. We now call them spirituals and congregational songs. Not only that, those black toilers in the heat of the day created a biblical theology, long before Bultmann, with ‘Sweet Jesus’ as the center. . . . It is no accident, therefore, that the early American black church in bulrush exile produced a Nat Turner [and] a Gabriel Prosser.”

bution of Afro-Americans has long been neglected. In our time we are beginning to recognize the significant contribution that they have made and continue to make. From the devotional power of the great Negro spirituals to the dynamic theology of rapid social change of a Martin Luther King, Afro-American religious poets and thinkers have covered the spectrum of the great themes of American theology: freedom, love, justice, and the church’s social responsibility.”

Curtis also corroborates the notion that “Martin Luther King was the most important theologian of our time, not because of the plenitude of his literary production, but because of his creative proposals for dealing with the structure of evil.” Herbert Richardson advanced this idea in an article titled “Martin Luther King—Unsung Theologian.” Since it was not the plenitude of his written theological production that warranted that designation, it must have been his preaching and his speeches, for these are the vehicles that propelled him into national prominence. Here, then, is corroboration that preaching is indeed a legitimate way to do theology.

Interestingly enough, Black theology, which has been the premier modus operandi for most Black scholars for more than a quarter century, had its genesis in the pulpits of Black churches. Crediting the roots of Black theology to “the small group of radical black clergy,” James Cone says: “To theologize from within the black experience rather than be confined to duplicating the theology of Europe or white North America was the main objective of the new black theology. It represented the theological reflections of a radical black clergy seeking to interpret the meaning of God’s liberating presence in a society where blacks were being economically exploited and politically marginalized because of their skin color.”

Given, then, this association of preaching with theologizing, who can estimate the impact of Black preaching on the theology of the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

Directions of Theology

Today a plethora of voices, both national and denominational, are seeking to influence people, their directions, and their future. There are myriads of questions, challenges, and approaches to theology and Scripture. If we are to influence theological directions of our church, which view of theology shall we espouse and/or articulate? What shall be our contribution theologically on the issue of the church’s future?

Our church is facing a crisis: our members do not believe as unquestioningly as they once did, they do not give as willingly as they once did, and they do not trust leadership as unequivocally as they once did. They are clamoring for more autonomy, more involvement, more say. Some among us even think we are becoming more congregational. Is there truth to the idea that “at an increasing rate the church is becoming a meaningless abstraction”? In which theological direction shall we go on this issue? Shall we maintain the status quo, or should we become creative? Shall we seek divine guidance as we reexamine the issues as the pioneers did? Just what shall our contribution be?

Another theme that is being discussed in theology generally is Black theology. Black theology is only one segment of a larger movement in the theological field today. The larger reality is “liberation theology.” In theory, liberation theology refers to any theology that addresses or deals with oppressive situations. Most known is that sector that originated in Latin America and whose advocates believe they should be on the side of the poor, for that is where God is. Other forms include Black theology, feminist/womanist theologies, developing-countries theology, African theology, etc.

Latta Thomas points out that “in most black American communities today, liberation, self-determination, healthy identity, and justice for black people are the main items on the [theological] agenda.” He points out that while this does not mean a neglect of concern for others, it implies that since they are presently at the bottom of the social and economic ladder, they must have priority now.

Since our constituency is Black, will we follow this agenda, or will we ignore these concerns? Will we address these concerns from an SDA perspective so that our members, who doubtlessly have an interest, will not have to read them in a context that may challenge or distort their faith?

In fact, the church in general, our segment included, is alienating—or, put more mildly, losing the attention of its intellectuals. Part of the problem is that we are not addressing their concerns. While we are concerned with doctrines and lifestyle, they are more interested in the implications of how Christ affects my decision-making; how I address the perplexing questions of life, such as abortion, euthanasia, surrogate parenting, etc., in the light of my Christian stance; how I face the racism of my church and maintain my faith; and whether I should be involved in social action as an SDA Christian.

The theological directions of the church that we advocate should include responses to these concerns. Noel Erskine notes that “an important task of Black theology is the reclaiming of Black America from humiliation.” Should that be a part of our agenda as SDA scholars and clergy?

Furthermore, there is a segment of the Black community that views the Bible as the creation of Caucasians. For many, the cross and the Bible are increasingly becoming symbols of European aggression. They are asking, “Is the Bible Eurocentric, Afrocentric, or what?” and “Is it relevant to the needs of this generation?” Shouldn’t the theological direction we advocate restore confidence in the Bible as the Word of God?

Some Black scholars, becoming aware of this trend and seeing a problem in the prevailing methodologies of biblical
interpretation, have taken a stand. They see a Eurocentric approach that not only has downplayed the Black presence in Scripture but also given that presence a negative and derogatory portrayal.49 Will our vision of theological directions encompass this area, which needs to be addressed for our people? My question is Will we take seriously the Black experience as a dictum of theological reflection?

As we contemplate this notion, I would remind us of a comment by Erskine: "Any theology in North America that ignores [the Black experience] runs the risk of being irrelevant."50 Do we want to be irrelevant to our people?

The foregoing is a brief synopsis of what is happening theologically on the national scene. Denominationally, we are consumed over doctrinal issues. If we are to influence theological directions, what shall be our posture on:

1. The sanctuary? This is the 150th anniversary of the Great Disappointment, and as it is remembered, some in our ranks are concerned about our view of the sanctuary and the investigative judgment. Some leaders are concerned that there is great disbelief among the ranks of the clergy on these issues.

As we face the future and seek to influence theological directions, what shall be our view on the following issues? Is there a sanctuary in heaven? What really happened in 1844? Did Christ enter a new phase of His ministry, or did He go into a new apartment in the heavenly sanctuary? Besides, is there an investigative or pre-Advent judgment? Who is judged—the living, the dead, the saved, the unsaved? If we are to influence theological directions, we must decide on our views and where we stand on these issues before we can move forward.

2. The nature of Christ? Currently, the church is polarized on this issue. One camp insists that Christ had the fallen nature of humanity, which is the historic Adventist position. To this camp Christ had to be human in order to be our example and to save us. For them this was part of the message of Waggoner and Jones in 1888, and was also the position of Ellen G. White.

The other camp suggests that Christ had the pre-Fall nature of Adam. He was fully human, but as the Second Adam He came as the first Adam came. This group also feels that this position is articulated by Ellen G. White.

The interesting thing is that these two groups talk at each other and never to each other. What shall be our view on this issue? Shall we study and pray as the early pioneers did, asking the Lord to reveal His truth to us, or shall we join one or another of these camps?

3. The role of law? Another issue that still consumes us involves the function of the law in the Christian’s life. While most Adventists will agree that we are saved by faith and not by works, not as many are sure of the relation of works to salvation. Some believe we are saved by faith alone; others believe that salvation is by faith and works, or, as they explain, by faith that works. Just what is the precise relationship, and what position should we take to the future on this issue?

Much debate is going on in regard to justification and sanctification. Some espouse one and deny or downplay the other. Also being debated are inspiration, eschatology, the role of Ellen White, and the atonement. The latter is the latest issue and can be summarized simplistically as to whether Christ died as a substitute for human beings (penal substitution) or to build community, that is, to bring people together in a fellowship of love. Again the lines are drawn.

A Possible Direction for SDA Theology

While within the Seventh-day Adventist Church we are more concerned about doctrines, outside the church the issues are different. Which model shall Black Adventists follow? It is up to us to decide what kind of message we will have for the future.

The twenty-first century is approaching; what will we take to it? Will we continue to do business as usual, or will we make a difference? Many of our brothers and sisters face disease and deformity, both physical and spiritual. Many are dissatisfied about how they are living and how they know they should be living. They are facing injustice and inequality, economic and otherwise; there is oppression of body, mind, and spirit, and fear of death. What certainties, what hope, shall we offer to meaningfully address these needs?

While within the church the ongoing debates are polarizing and alienating people, the debate outside the church is bringing people together in fellowship and meaningful dialogue. Among Blacks in general primary concerns involve the application of truth to life and issues of social justice. Where shall we stand?

Surely Black Seventh-day Adventists cannot afford to be spectators sitting by, watching history unfurl. We must be profoundly involved. We must face the future with meaningfulness and relevance. Since the cross unites, not divides, we must find ways to address doctrines that will not cause alienation. Furthermore, our emphasis should not be on doctrines solely for the sake of doctrines, but on application of doctrines to meaningful Christian living that is not only inwardly focused but also outwardly focused, extending to God’s needy children outside the fellowship.

As we look to the direction in which Black Seventh-day Adventist theology should go, a few things must be noted. First, the role of God is significant. Throughout the centuries of the Black struggle faith in God has been undaunted and a stabilizing factor. Even when the Word of God was used against us, to entrench our misery and make our lot more harsh, our faith stood firm. Thus the role of the Bible must be fundamental—there can be no equivocating. Our
world began with God, it is being sustained by Him, and it will end with Him. He must, therefore, be a central core of any theology that we will articulate.

Second, the role the Bible has had in the Black community is a crucial fact that must be neither ignored nor minimized. Viewed as the Word of God, the Bible is esteemed, its words are taken as authoritative, its counsels viewed as normative, and its liberation struggles, particularly those motifs relating to the liberation from Egyptian bondage, are actualized. Viewed as the Word of God, the Bible is esteemed, its beyond which we can’t go without hurting ourselves. Viewed thus, they are designed for our protection, to keep us happy rather than as restrictions to distress us and make us unhappy.

Now, to suggest that there is a believing community implies that there is unbelief. Precisely so, for through a seed of doubt sowed by the tempter, the first humans doubted and disbelieved God, thus plunging our world into sin. The Creator had warned the first pair that if they failed the test of loyalty they’d been given, they would die. But when Adam and Eve did precisely what they were advised not to do, sin and death came. However, a loving Creator did not eternally destroy them. Instead, He made an “everlasting covenant” with them to rescue them from their fallen condition. That is precisely what He did in Jesus Christ, and He invites His believing community to share this news with the world.

Those who accept this news of salvation, shared by God’s agents, join a community of believers founded at Pentecost and congregated around its resurrected Lord. God promised a Saviour. Humanity anticipated a Messiah. But when He came in an unexpected manner, though He was the Son of God He was neither acclaimed nor accepted. In fact, He was rejected as an impostor and insurrectionist.

The preexistent Son of God was bruised and ill-treated, crucified and buried; but He rose again by the power of God and ever lives to make intercession for His saints. In Him God became part of humankind. Hence, He was fully God and fully man. Any emphasis on one nature to the exclusion of the other does Him injustice. Further, we do not have definitive proof to support one side above the other conclusively.

Thus we must advocate a Christology that is rooted in the preexistence, incarnation, passion, and resurrection, as well as exaltation, of Jesus, the Son of God, who was the most perfect revelation of God. This Christology sees Jesus’ successful earthly sojourn as an answer to Satan’s challenge against God. Further, it advocates the vicarious life and death of Jesus on our behalf. He was made sin for us and died “once for all.”

The result of His sacrifice, according to Romans 5:1, is peace. But peace is not just the absence of physical strife; it encompasses soul peace, a peace that comes from a right re-
relationship with God—a vertical dimension—effected through Jesus Christ. But there is a horizontal dimension, too. Abraham was blessed so that he could be a blessing (Gen. 12:1-3). Peace is effected through a cross that has a vertical as well as a horizontal beam. Likewise, Christ not only unites us with God but also with one another, a horizontal imperative of the cross and of redemption that impels the believing community.

Thus our Christology must exclude neither substitution nor community building. The two are not mutually exclusive. Further, Jesus told His disciples that their love for one another will convince the world that they are His followers. The gospel does not divide or polarize people—it unites them; it does not segregate or divide people—it brings them together and makes peace between them. Thus if we find ourselves being alienated from others of the household of faith by what is said or believed, someone or something needs reconnection with Christ.

Now, if the community is not to be divided by what it believes but rather to be united by it, should it be divided by its constituents? Note that whenever the church experienced phenomenal growth, it occurred when it has been most oblivious of its composition and when it was united by the Spirit. These times include the days prior to and following Pentecost, the ministry of Stephen and Philip, the ministry of Saul and Barnabas at Antioch, etc. Lack of growth and problems always accompanied disunity.

For example, Acts 6 details the rupturing of relations between Hebraic and Hellenistic Jews ultimately threatening the unity of the church. Hebraic Jews generally cultivated a superiority complex because they lived in the homeland and had not compromised with the enemy and with Hellenization. Furthermore, they had not adopted the language of the enemy, as the Hellenistic Jews had. These prejudices spilled over into the church and spoiled the unity of the neophyte movement, marring their experiment with a just society. The charge was levied at the Hebraists, who were in charge of the food distribution, that they were favoring their own and neglecting the needs of the Hellenists. These charges, true or false, were believable and precipitated a rupturing of relations and a breakup of unity.

If we who live in the closing days of the world are to fulfill God’s mission successfully, we must learn from these experiences and not allow differences to divide us. Diversity must be celebrated; we are one people with the same God, the same mission, and the same destiny. Differences in language, culture, and ethnicity are givens, but let us unite under God to fulfill the mission He has assigned us. John Donne is certainly correct: “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main . . . ; any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

If we are thus to fulfill God’s mission, we must learn from the experience of the early church. To the extent that we do, we will be willing to widen our circles and broaden our vision. If our vertical relationship is in place, and if self is crucified with Christ, as it should be, there will be no problem with our horizontal inclusiveness.

We must forget our differences and unite so God can use us to accomplish His task. Wouldn’t it be great if our generation could experience phenomenal growth under the guidance of the Spirit? If it is to be, we must know the formula.

A believing community can obtain its motivation, energy, drive, and direction only from the sources that motivated the early church: the Word and the Spirit. We must recognize that God has spoken to His community through Scripture. Though Scripture is the recording of experiences/encounters that individuals and nations have had with God, it is more than that. Our theology must recognize the guiding hand of God redemptively in history as He has led His chosen ones to accomplish His purposes. As such, Scripture, while inspired and sacrosanct, is a revelation of God recorded by human beings in human language.

Moreover, the believing community must be conversant with the content and intent of Scripture to avoid the mistakes of the past and be guided in the present and the future. Scripture informs us that when the Holy Spirit was first received, the believing community was in one place and in one accord; differences were put aside, as they prayed in the name of Jesus for a fitness to meet others. Their foremost desire was to reflect in their lives the image of God. If these same aspirations characterize the church in its latter days, God will extend His recognition by pouring out His Spirit in latter rain power, just as He did at Pentecost in early rain power. Just as the Spirit was the driving force behind the phenomenal growth of the early church, He will guide and direct the last-day church in the same way.

The direction theology should take, therefore, must encompass belief in the Holy Spirit and in the Scriptures as the Word of God. Note that belief in Scripture has always been part of the Black tradition, especially those sections dealing with liberation and the exodus motifs. To be relevant, theology must maintain this focus—but should have the liberation Christ achieved at His exodus and the building of a united community centered under the Holy Spirit foremost on its agenda. Doctrines cannot unify the church. Organization cannot do it. Only a congregation of the church around the resurrected Lord, as happened at Pentecost—and recognized in heaven by the outpouring of the Spirit—can accomplish this task.

Eschatology must feature prominently in any theology for the future. Adventist eschatology, as the name implies,
has featured the imminent return of Christ. We have seen events in the late eighteenth century as heralding the rise of the Adventist Church and the beginning of the end time. We have also seen ourselves as Laodicea, the church that is to usher in the Second Advent.

The problem is that as the Second Advent has seemingly been delayed, there has been an increase of apathy and a lack of commitment to this doctrine. Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockart, in their book Seeking a Sanctuary, suggest that there has been a decline in belief in the imminent Second Advent and that it has been replaced by a new emphasis on justification. If they are correct, then reevaluation is needed, because the question is not which should occupy center stage, justification or the Second Advent. The point is that God is seeking people who have been justified by the blood of the Lamb and who are preparing for the Advent.

Any eschatology that focuses on the delay or the coming itself is misdirected. There needs to be a healthy tension between eager anticipation of the eschaton and the supposed delay. If we believe Jesus that no one but the Father knows the time of the Second Advent, then the church was to usher in the Second Advent.

The Adventist Church is not to be concerned about social justice? Shouldn’t our voices be heard against injustice? This is not just a liberal agenda; it is God’s agenda for His people: “These ought ye to have heard against injustice?” (Micah 6:8) is representative of the early pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, who were involved in the antislavery and abolitionist movements as well as the Underground Railroad. Shouldn’t we also be concerned about social justice? Shouldn’t our voices be heard against injustice? This is not just a liberal agenda; it is God’s agenda for His people: “These ought ye to have heard against injustice?” (Micah 6:8).

Now, as Black Seventh-day Adventists ponder theological directions, we must espouse a theology of hope and of liberation. Blacks in this country, though emancipated more than 100 years, have lost faith in a system that has left them enslaved economically and dependent on handouts. They have lost faith in a system that has seen a large percentage of Black males incarcerated and who thus cannot be positive role models for their young, a system in which they are valued for their brawn and seen as inferior intellectually.

God is a liberating God—isn’t that the point of the Exodus and Calvary? We must, therefore, proclaim liberation from sin, injustice, and oppression. God has freed us to become liberators: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” and “You, my brothers, were called to be free” (Gal. 5:1, 13, NIV). We who have been freed must never enslave others; we must never be supporters of any system or cause that shackles others. We must have an undying commitment to liberation and justice.

If indeed Christ has freed Christians to be liberators, then the Black Seventh-day Adventist Church has an obligation to join the task of liberation. Black, womanist/feminist, developing countries, liberation, African, and Caribbean theologies, etc., are, I believe, cries of oppressed peoples for liberation in Christ. That is the way we should interpret R. S. Sugirtharajah and her colleagues in Voices From the Margin. To the extent, then, that these are pleas for help, they should influence the theological direction that Black Seventh-day Adventists take. As people who have experienced oppression, we should address the task of listening to and aiding these fellow Christians who seek to be heard and who deserve to be.

The Sabbath and healthful living can be presented in a context of liberation. In Deuteronomy 5, observance of the Sabbath is set in the context of liberation from Egyptian bondage. We can reinforce this concept from the standpoint of liberation from the bondage of sin as effect in the death
and resurrection of Jesus. Sabbathkeeping is then not only an act of obedience to a divine command; it is a worshipful response to the love of Jesus, a modeling of the example set by a Saviour who respected the Sabbath by resting on it at Creation as well as in redemption.

Similarly, healthful living can be seen in the context of a loving response to the liberation from sin. Romans 12:1 challenges Christians to present their bodies in the best condition possible to God as a living sacrifice and as a rational service of worship. Because Jesus liberated us from the bondage of sin, our response as Christians ought to be to preserve our bodies in the best condition possible, since we are stewards and since the Master bought us at such a high price. This motivation for healthful living is powerful, for it removes the focus from us and places it where it rightly belongs—on Jesus and His liberating sacrifice on the cross. Which right-thinking person could resist or neglect such a great sacrifice on their behalf?

But there is another way to view healthful living. Since God is Creator and the world belongs to Him, then as stewards of His grace we have a responsibility to take care of the environment for Him. As such, we must articulate a theology that addresses the responsible use of the environment so that it can best serve the purpose for which the Creator designed it. Such a theology would address the preservation of the rain forest, endangered species, and the killing of animals for pleasure and gratification—perhaps providing a better basis for vegetarianism.

Conclusion

As we face the twenty-first century, I see challenges and opportunities. At no other time in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church have Black Adventists been poised to contribute meaningfully to Adventist theology. I don’t believe, however, that we should wait for handouts or for inclusion. There are things we can and should do, and places where we can start.

First, I believe that we cannot continue to embrace a Eurocentric theology. However, proclaiming an Afrocentric theology could be interpreted as reverse discrimination. I would suggest a Christocentric theology, and by this I am not pulling Christ down into a human problem as the Corinthian Christians did. Like Paul I am seeing Christ as the one who gives meaning and legitimacy to any doctrine or theology; He must be the center and focus of any meaningful dialogue.

This theology, rooted in a believing community that finds its purpose for being in Christ and thus unites around Him and His agenda, embracing a social dimension while not neglecting traditional beliefs and/or doctrines, can be relevant and effective in today’s society and the future. So where do we go from here? The ball is in our court. What shall we do with it? We must decide.

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3 Schwarz, p. 391.
4 Ibid.
5 See the North American Informant, March–April 1977. Titled “The Way the Lord Has Led Us,” this issue focuses on the progress of the Black work in North America and on persons who were influential in its growth.
6 Frank Loris Peterson, The Hope of the Race (Nashville: Southern Pub. Assn., 1934). This work will be discussed later.
7 The name was first proposed as the new name of the Gospel Herald in 1906. However, the name was never employed for that magazine. Actually the magazine was revived in 1910 and continued under its old name.
13 Ibid., p. 1, 2.
14 Ibid., pp. 3, 4.
15 Ibid., p. 6.
16 Ibid., p. 11.
17 Walter B. T. Douglas, “Liberation Theology and Theologies of Liberation” (paper presented to a professional group).
18 Ibid., p. ix.
35 In Reynolds, p. 259.
38 Thomas, pp. 17, 18.
42 As cited by Curtis. For the full article, see Herbert Richardson, “Martin Luther King—Unsung Theologian,” *Commonweal*, May 3, 1968, p. 201a.
44 Cone, p. 1.
47 Thomas, p. 11.
48 Erskine, p. 3.
49 See Felder, *Sowing the Road and Troubling Biblical Waters*; Thomas; and Cone.
50 Erskine, p. 3.
51 John Donne, *Devotions on Emergent Occasions*, no. 17.
54 See Schwarz, p. 98.