

SOCIOLOGY TRUMPS THEOLOGY  
Richard Winn ~ November 19, 2011 ~ ASRS San Francisco

Before I begin, let me applaud the organizers of this conference for being open to hear the voice of a "sympathetic outsider." I trust they will not regret this decision 20 minutes from now. Though it may bring to mind a proverb often spoken by my mentor, Edward Heppenstall, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend." (Proverb 27:6)

I will begin with a few stories.

I was shaking. Partly it was because the old Sacramento Central SDA Church on 23<sup>rd</sup> and K Streets was cold. Mostly it was because, as a bashful eleven year-old, I was sitting in the front row of the church being grilled by Elder Raymond H. Libby as to whether I subscribed to each one of the Fundamental Beliefs as printed on the backside of the Baptismal Certificate. Following the sonorous reading of each statement, I was expected to announce my agreement.

Some of them were no-brainers. Of course I would never smoke! (Dad was a physician and this piece of healthful living was bedrock in my childhood.) But as for all the intricacies of the trinity, prophetic interpretation, proof of belonging to The Remnant, and substitutionary propitiation for my sins? I can still remember feeling, "Who am I to disagree? If this black-suited man of God is reading from an official document, why would an eleven year-old say, 'Wait a minute! Let's go over that one again.'" So, as the congregation sang "Just As I Am," I stepped into the baptismal tank (trying not to let the black robe float up and expose my white underwear) and – officially – became a church member.

This coming-of-age ritual in historic Adventism was grounded on the premise that "being Adventist" was defined by siding with the select few who had found doctrinal purity. All evangelism, even among the youth of the church, was an exercise in mounting well-rehearsed arguments in which selected Bible verses were aimed down the barrel of logic toward a defined doctrinal bull's eye. While the trappings of vege-burgers, Ingathering, and no-football-on-Sabbath eventually became parts of my culture, the tacit understanding was that my denomination stood on vantage ground. We (alone!) had deciphered divine truth and packaged it in tightly worded statements. These truth-claims were to be championed to the whole world so that all who would agree with them might thereby find salvation. The assumption was that God would save those who were clear-thinking enough to "get it right" from among the doctrinal confusion of the Christian world. The prior assumption is that the whole world has agreed to accept the Bible, literally interpreted, as their authority -- an increasingly difficult assumption to defend.

Recently I was in conversation with two Seminary-trained, M.Div.-holding successful pastors. I asked them when they had last preached a sermon on the 2300 days. One said, "So long ago I can't even remember." The other said, "Never."

A few months earlier, I was soaking in a large hot tub with a number of young people, each of whom had recently completed four years of expensive Adventist higher education. After chatting about their experience in general, I probed more specifically. "What meaning did they recall about November 13, 1833? What important conclusion came from connecting Revelation 12:17 and Revelation 19:10 (King James Version only)? What was at issue in the Investigative Judgment? What was the likely meaning of 'soon' as in 'the soon Second Coming of Christ'? Could they explain the day-for-a-year principle in interpreting biblical prophecy? Why was the number 666 vital to interpret? Why was Glacier View important in SDA history?"

Beyond being puzzled, they soon were laughing. They had no idea what I was talking about and were quite sure none of their classmates would have known, either. Or even cared. When I asked why they had invested so many years of their lives in this distinctive form of education, their responses were somewhat generic. This is where their friends from academy were going. They were fulfilling family expectations. They hadn't considered other options. They were comfortable with the lifestyle expectations – the non-smoking policies, the conservative diet, the participation in religious ceremonies and the telling of common stories. It was about a sense of spiritual community.

One of my Seminary colleagues told me some 20 years ago, "Adventism is my sociology, it's not my theology." Why, then, did he remain actively engaged in the church, even on the payroll? His response was very thoughtful. "The church has developed an amazing world-wide system of schools and hospitals through which we can do genuine good for humankind. It's a system of caring that can make a real difference in the world. Within it, I know what I can do, who I am, and how I can use these structures to achieve personal goals. I just ignore the doctrines."

Driving with friends through one of America's great cities a few weeks ago, we passed an Adventist church and noted a large banner mounted on the side, proclaiming, "Decoding Prophecy!" One passenger expressed a feeling of deep embarrassment about being associated with this form of evangelism. When asked why, he went straight to the assumptions behind the message. He mused, "If the all-powerful, all-loving, all-knowing God of the universe has vital information about the survival of the human race, why would he hide it in ancient symbols and numbers that are so obscure that everyone who has tried to decode them for the last 2000 years has got it wrong?" He went on to comment, "Prophecy is like a childhood rag doll: there's too much sentimental attachment to throw it away, yet I wouldn't play with it in adult company." This speaker, however, admitted to deep sympathy with many of the things Adventism is accomplishing for the world.

I would propose that the Adventist church, especially in North America, is experiencing an enormous shift. A large number, particularly among the more highly educated, are migrating from a doctrine-as-defining-feature Adventist identity to a sociological identity. It is an often-unspoken shift from "We alone have The Truth" stance to a these-are-my-people stance. This often takes the form of a sweet agnosticism regarding the theological battles on which the New England pioneers carved out their place in the turbulent theological geography of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century.

We could argue about whether this *should* be happening, but that is not my issue today. My observation is that it *is* happening, in varying degrees, particularly within most faith-based colleges and universities in the year 2011. I would also make some suggestions about why it might be happening and propose ways in which Adventist higher education may position itself toward this emerging reality.

(I must be clear that I am speaking here as a private citizen and not as a representative of WASC. While my work with higher education in the region these last eight years has provided important perspectives on certain challenges within faith-based higher education, and thus has informed this presentation, it does not in any way indicate formal positions of the accrediting association.)

This relocation of the center of gravity in people's understanding of what it means to be Adventist is very liberating to some even as it is terrifying, even diabolic, to others. It triggers in these troubled hearts that seldom-spoken assumption that the more literal and creedal its

doctrines, the closer a church is to the divine mind. To step back even slightly from this devotion to explicit truth-claims is to begin the journey on the downward path away from God.

Perhaps nowhere is this shift played out more dramatically than in the Adventist institutions of higher education. These campus populations are typically younger, with critical life-pathway decisions still pending. Often their parents, who are paying some or all the tuition bill, exercise their right to be very specific in what they expect. For some, those expectations take the form of wanting their children to be fully indoctrinated into the truths they themselves hold. The fact that the college years are a time of identity formation, and thus of distancing from traditional authorities, represents an unacceptable risk for some parents. Their cherished children, they are convinced, cannot emerge from these years with any doubts about Adventist verities. It would be dangerous for Adventist educators to disregard the intensity and sincerity of these feelings.

Adventism began its excursion into higher education more than 130 years ago with neither the ability nor the inclination to know what shape it would be taking in 2011. There was no way to anticipate the consequences of the creation of a higher education system which would, in time, produce generations of students deeply exposed to vast amounts of scholarly activity not screened by ideological gate-keepers. The concept of a collision of epistemologies could not have been articulated by the founders of this system; now it confounds scholars in disciplines that did not even exist 130 years ago, from nuclear physics to nanotechnology. The intervening decades have seen society move beyond the industrial age, the electronic, atomic, and now the digital ages, all driven in varying degrees by the extent to which scientific thought and evidence-based reasoning have become pervasive in human experience. While heroic peacemakers suggest that science and faith can be viewed as two alternative ways of knowing, university classrooms and laboratories seldom permit this kind of cognitive bifurcation. While theologians hold serious conversations with each other about the meaning of Bible texts, the case for why the literal rendering of the texts matters is becoming harder to make, even within the church.

The argument in favor of elevating doctrine as the defining characteristic of "being Adventist" is compromised by the inescapable fact that doctrine is a human construct. It is our overlay, our imposed set of meanings, our way to make sense out of stories, events, and reflections that were never intended to be doctrinal statements. No doctrine has ever dropped out of the sky untouched by human hands. There are human fingerprints smeared all over every such truth-claim. For example, there is no doctrine of the atonement in the New Testament. The forensic model, the appeasement-of-wrath model, the moral influence model of the atonement, and many others are all the attempts by humans to interpret these historic events and place them within a coherent theological system. Doctrine is inescapably influenced by the paradigms of thought dominant at the time a doctrine emerges or is re-examined in the flow of history. To own this fact is to liberate a church. It will force the recognition that doctrine is not out of our hands to review. One can recognize the finiteness, even the irrelevance, of a doctrine without fear of a divine spanking. To elevate doctrine to the level of THE defining denominational boundary is to assign it a weight of consequentiality it may not be able to carry.

This leads to the question of whether there are reasons for being Adventist other than to subscribe to its 1850s doctrinal formulations. And this question, in turn, begs the prior question, "Who gets to decide on the meaning of being Adventist?" Formally, it could be asserted that the church's high officials in a formal business session could make that decision. Pragmatically, it is being made all the time in the local churches where memberships reside, and doing so with widely varying degrees of latitude. In these settings, there is clearly an incentive to be inclusive and tolerant. If members want to participate in the life and financial viability of the congregation,

whatever their motives, let them! The quest for a sense of belonging, for a fellowship with people who hold common values, supersedes a quest for precise alignment with often-esoteric doctrinal statements. Those long-standing members of the faithful may reveal a very complex, multi-faceted set of ties that bind, not the least of which may be momentum and inertia. And the frontal lobes are perhaps not the dominant force in these attachments.

Permit me to unpack three words that are critical to our understanding of what happens to faith during the college years: *Faithing is Developmental*. I slip the word "faith" over into a verb form, "faithing," in deference to the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith<sup>1</sup>. His several writings on faith and belief posit that "faith" is not a passive submission to another person's list of true things to believe. It is the hard and ongoing work of the mind to make sense of one's world, especially with reference to ultimate matters of power, love, and meaning. This resonates with the constructivist view of knowledge, in which that which we come to know is the product of dialogue, reflection, tentatively asserting what we think is so, then revising it and expanding it in the face of new challenges. We construct meaning through the engagement of our minds. And when we construct meaning that seeks to encompass human history and destiny and its place in the ultimate order of the cosmos, we call that "faith." And since the mind of any intellectually vigorous person is constantly working on the shape and intensity of that meaning, I like to visualize it as "faithing." It reminds us that the process is always fluid and open-ended.

And it is also *developmental*. I reference here to that growing body of literature that describes stages of profound change in the very nature of faithing and the processes by which faith is formed. James Fowler, in *Stages of Faith*<sup>2</sup>, draws on the works of Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg and other developmentalists to describe in modern terms what the Apostle Paul hinted at when he confessed that, as a child, he thought and spoke as a child, but when he grew up, he moved beyond those childish ways. Fowler is joined by others such as Sharon Parks<sup>3</sup> in describing the college years in particular as that time when the magical thinking and either/or conclusions of childhood are often replaced by a more nuanced, inclusive, non-judgmental faith.

Similarly, Alexander Astin, in his summative work, *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives*,<sup>4</sup> documents how the college years do not typically diminish students' interests in things spiritual. Rather these years transform how one goes about being spiritual. For most, it is a journey away from simplistic attachment to one's childhood beliefs, from a dogmatic triumphalism, and toward a greater sense of tolerance and curiosity toward the beliefs of others and of the great religious traditions.

William Perry's classic model for the intellectual development<sup>5</sup> of college student posits a similar pathway from the either/or acceptance of other person's authority toward trusting one's own capacity to construct knowledge and test it in the marketplace of ideas. From the works of these authors and many others emerges a rich picture of a developmental pathway that is increasingly "owned" by individuals during their college years. Dogmatism and denominational elitism can take a hard hit during this journey, which can strike fear in the hearts of the traveler and of denominational leaders alike. It should be noted, however, that not all college students embark on this journey or travel it at the same speed. Indifference to the issues, fear of change, and multiple other anchoring forces will see many exit their college years with a faith experience similar to that with which they entered. This maturational spread of faith experiences can be a picture window by which we can decipher the tensions tearing at the church today. To which end of the spectrum should institutional leaders respond? And do they have real options.

These are volatile transitions of personal and collective identity that are being faced by many conservative denominations at this time in history. Their struggles, especially on faith-based campuses, would suggest there are no easy answers. Nor are these transitions likely to be guided by transcendent wisdom "from the top," as leadership by its nature is vested in stasis

and continuity. At the personal level, it's difficult for one to discern a meaningful "point of entry" into the fray; but for those who might be in a position to make a positive contribution to a church's educational system torn by its mid-life identity crisis, I would propose three specific perspectives.

1. University chaplains and faculty of religion might come to view themselves less as "teachers" and more as "mentors." Their professional self-understanding could shift from being pillars of authoritative wisdom to being guides of each student's emerging self-hood as spiritual beings. This would mean acknowledging that, in today's pluralistic and interconnected world, there is no private monopoly on knowledge and certainly not on Truth. It means that young believers must become both skilled and empowered to construct their own house of faith. It means faculty and chaplains relinquishing the obligation to produce a pre-determined outcome, replacing it with a vision to impart to their students the skills needed to become self-actualizing spiritual adults. It embraces the understanding that their students' faith formulations will be of little lasting value unless owned and constructed *by them*. If the Adventist tradition is to be seen as carrying value beyond the college years, it must be embraced *on its merits* by these vigorous young minds.
2. From among the loudly competing voices claiming ownership over the future of the church, leaders of denominational schools need to determine who their constituency really is. Adventism covers an amazing spread of anchors for defining the essential character of "being Adventist." Are colleges and universities obligated to surrender to the noisiest, the most conservative, voices as their only, or even their primary, constituency? Should the cultural Adventists, who simply want a good quality education in a caring environment so they can go on to graduate school and professional careers, be dismissed or derided?
3. As tuition-driven institutions, North American SDA colleges must be known for providing quality education – for providing a rigorous and relevant intellectual experience that leads successfully to graduate education and/or good careers. In a world of rapidly increasing costs for higher education, reduced government funding, and thus dramatically deepening student debt, students and families have become far more pragmatic when making college choices. The Return On Investment (the ROI) has become soberingly crucial; college must go well beyond being a Sabbath School on Steroids. It must be a pathway to a financially viable future. Those who would see Adventist higher education return to the Bible Colleges of a previous century choose to be blind to this critical reality.

I've been both an observer and a sometime participant in many of these conversations since the early days of the Stanford Adventist Forum in the 1960s. I've seen progressive Adventists who have long wished that the church in North America would become just like them. I now suspect this to be a fool's errand. Such a shift would ruin the church for the thousands of members for whom scholarship is suspect and certainty is paramount. For the conservative wing of the denomination, "church" is a transaction in certainty. Those who need certainty have struck a contract with those who deliver certainty. And the currency of this transaction is biblical literalism. Should either party question the currency of this transaction, its value would immediately plummet, creating an organizational recession of major proportions. Should Adventism thrive in North America, I propose it will come through the introduction of an underground currency, first a trickle and then a flood of tolerance toward an increasingly broad sense of Adventist identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief: The Difference Between Them* (Princeton: The Princeton University Press, 1979)

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<sup>2</sup> James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981). See also his *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000)

<sup>3</sup> Sharon Deloz Parks, *The Critical Years: Young Adults and the Search for Meaning, Faith, and Commitment* (New York: HarperCollins 1991)

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Astin, Helen S. Astin, Jennifer Lindholm, *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011)

<sup>5</sup> William G. Perry, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968)