

## Inter-faith Isolationism Squanders the Adventist Advantage

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Seventh-day Adventism parachuted onto the public square through the presidential campaign of Benjamin Carson. But in connecting with his political constituency, Carson downplays his denominational identity.

Must Adventists distance themselves from our church and its distinctive doctrines to impact the twenty-first century? My thesis is that *contextualized yet uncompromised Seventh-day Adventism is uniquely capable of collaboration in the public square*. My rationale is that Adventist fundamental beliefs are intrinsically relational and thus incarnational in the neighborhood, marketplace and classroom. This is significant because isolationist ideology and strategy, intended to safeguard denominational distinctiveness, ironically betray it.

Theological evidence for my thesis is the gregarious nature of Adventist doctrine, particularly the Sabbath, Second Coming, and the Sanctuary with its celestial judgment. These beliefs are organically zoetic<sup>1</sup>—conveying life not only quantitatively but qualitatively—the abundant *zōē* Jesus promised for restoring His body of believers to the *imago Dei*.

Testing elements are New Testament *koinōnia*, which partakes of and shares Christ's corporate life, and Old Testament *shalom*, which epitomizes its societal wellbeing.

Historical evidence for my thesis is the development of Ellen White's inter-faith relationality. She transcended initial isolationism to become an example of how Adventists today may succeed in the public square without forfeiting our unique message and mission. Contemporary evidence is theological collaboration of Loma Linda University's Dean of the School of Religion with Faithlife Corporation, makers of Logos Bible Software.

### ***Imago Dei* relationality created and restored**

Isolationism is pseudo-sanctity and false security. The church is not a spiritual bomb shelter. Jesus commissions us to permeate society: "You are the salt of the *earth*" (Matt. 5:13).<sup>2</sup>

Humanity is intrinsically relational, made in the image of a Creator who is communal both in Trinitarian essence and function.<sup>3</sup> Adam and Eve's fall from the

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<sup>1</sup> Zoetic means "alive, living, spirited" (*Merriam Webster Dictionary* online. Accessed Nov. 11, 2015). It derives from *zōē*, which the New Testament prefers over *bios* to describe salvific life. Although "zoetic" has some secular usage, it is scarce in Christian literature. Among 81,951 digital books and resources in the Logos Bible Software library, "zoetic" is found only once, in a secular thesaurus.

<sup>2</sup> Ancient Rome often paid soldiers with salt; hence the term "salary." So, in a sense, Jesus wants to provide a salary to the world's marketplace through His church.

<sup>3</sup> We see the mystery of monotheistic plurality in the first verse of Scripture: *elohim* is plural; its linkage with a singular verb conveys plurality in oneness. This is clarified in the *shema* of Deut. 6:4, which employs

*imago Dei* introduced isolation and alienation—hiding from God and strife with each other. The promised death they suffered on the day they sinned expressed itself in the demise of relationality.<sup>4</sup>

To save us from sin, Jesus suffered its fatal estrangement on the cross and by His subsequent resurrection created a new human race (Eph. 2:14-16)—the church. As Son of God, Jesus bonded us to His Father; as the Son of Humanity, He connects us with each other. Thus the fundamental function of our new creation in Christ is inSpirited community with God and one another. Such unity is more than everybody behaving agreeably; it is our corporate oneness with Christ expressed in loving one another as He loves us.

So anyone who comes to God is born again through His vivifying Spirit into Christ's communal body.<sup>5</sup> God's plan of salvation therefore transcends getting one's own sorry soul pardoned and then sanctified in personal purgatory. Whatever one's sincerity about sinlessness, whoever neglects the communal core of Christianity is living a lie—as if Jesus never came to unite us to one another in His salvific body. “Love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:10). *Thus any doctrine that does not support the spiritual discipline of community with Christ and one another is false teaching.* And eschatology that enshrines personal perfectionism is theologically bankrupt and missiologically useless in the public square. We are “being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Eph. 2:22, NKJV<sup>6</sup>); thus spiritual maturity in the final remnant involves Christ's communal righteousness.<sup>7</sup>

### **Vivified into *koinōnia* unto *shalom***

Early Christians lived in *koinōnia* among themselves and their neighbors. The apostles' teaching nurtured empathetic outreach (Acts 2:42) as believers shared material goods in *koinos* (verse 44), thus winning “favor with all the people” (verse 47). Spectacular church growth sprouted from their *koinōnia* community—sharing from who they were together in Christ—rather than devising an evangelism

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not the singular *yachid* but rather *echad*, connoting a composite unit—as in a bunch of grapes (Num. 13:23) or the corpus of all humanity (Gen. 11:6).

<sup>4</sup> The foundational problem with sin is death (Rom. 5:12-14). Being “dead in trespasses and sins” includes alienation (death of relationship), isolation (death of community), guilt (death of innocence) shame (death of self-worth), hatred (death of love), aimlessness (death of purpose), despair (death of hope), sorrow (death of joy), etc. We usually focus on guilt as the problem with sin, but guilt is only one among many citizens of death's dark tomb—all of them conquered in the death and resurrection of *Christus Victor*, “prince of life” (Acts 3:15).

<sup>5</sup> Evangelists often call people out of the world to “stand alone” for Jesus, their “personal savior.” Converts naturally become holy loners seeking personal perfection to survive divine scrutiny in the celestial judgment. Actually, biblical perfection is a corporate enterprise in which individual believers contribute their part in a symphony of grace-based obedience and communal worship, fellowship and service.

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all scriptures are from the *English Standard Version*, Wheaton, IL: Standard Bible Society, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> The God who works all things together for good has predestined His children to be conformed together into the likeness of His Son, so that Christ may become the firstborn among many brethren (Rom. 8:28,29). The promised *prōtotokos* community of Romans 8 is the final remnant of Revelation 12.

strategy for the public square that was compartmentalized from incarnational daily living. *Koinōnia* in the early New Testament church facilitated contagious *shalom*, fulfilling God's original utopian purpose for Jerusalem.

Within the Palestinian Jewish birthplace of the church, *shalom* was much more comprehensive than *eirēnē* in contemporary Hellenistic culture, or what Western society today regards as peace. Beyond the absence of conflict and anxiety, *shalom* is positive and proactive, promoting social justice, wellbeing and material comfort for all.

One's personal *shalom* (Ps. 4:8) is shared with family members (Gen. 43:27). From the home it ripples outward to the faith community (Ps. 29:11) and beyond to the public square (1 Kings 5:11, 12)—even reaching out to enemies (Jer. 29:7). *Shalom* extends beyond humanity to animals (Gen. 37:14) and ultimately includes inanimate creation (Zech. 8:12).

All of that was included by the Prince of *Shalom* in pronouncing: "Blessed are the *shalom*-makers" (Matt. 5:9). *Shalom* and *koinōnia* are God's antidote for our leprosy of "isms." Such evils include materialism, racism, chauvinism, exclusivism, institutionalism—and isolationism.

### **Servants of the Sanctuary**

Whatever the spiritual struggles of Seventh-day Adventists, we are theologically positioned more than any faith group to experience and exemplify both *shalom* and *koinōnia*.

*Shabbat shalom* embraces not only the wealthy and privileged but also servants and aliens. On the seventh day, nobody is out of work since everyone is at rest. Whatever their socio-economic status, all believers worship side by side and fellowship face to face.

Adventism's health message and ministry promote *shalom* of the body temple through Ellen White's eight natural remedies.<sup>8</sup> Absent is the artificial pagan dichotomy between body and spirit; this attracts neighbors who increasingly value holistic living. And vegetarianism facilitates *shalom* for both animals and the planet through ecological responsibility.

Adventism takes environmental *shalom* to a higher level than secular society. Our neighbors talk wistfully about saving the earth; we join them in its stewardship but also envision an earth made new with the eternal city of *shalom*—humanity's long-sought utopia.

Adventist eschatology involves *koinōnia* when Jesus escorts us to the New Jerusalem. His Second Coming is joint participation in an event that transports us together to heaven—not as isolated, disembodied spirits. Protestant and Catholic eschatology also fails to facilitate *shalom* with its doctrine of hell, which eternalizes suffering.

Adventism promotes closure from the reign of evil—which cannot be complete without disclosure. And so our doctrine of pre-Advent judgment reveals a

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<sup>8</sup> "Pure air, sunlight, abstemiousness, rest, exercise, proper diet, the use of water, trust in divine power—these are the true remedies." Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), 127.

God willing to address the questions of His celestial universe. During the millennium that follows the *eschaton*, we humans are granted insight into God's inscrutable dealings with us and our loved ones before the termination of sin and sinners.<sup>9</sup>

We may rejoice that our prophetic chronology is soundly Scriptural, but we should lament legalism that still lurks in our teaching of the celestial judgment in heaven's sanctuary. Some Adventists feel compelled to bring back the uncertainties of the old covenant Day of Atonement, not realizing that the new covenant calls us to corporate confidence in the body of Christ, who has "perfected for all time those who are being sanctified" (Heb. 10:14). In Christ's victory at Calvary we have overcome Satan's accusations regarding our personal imperfections (Rev. 12:9,10).

Heaven's sanctuary is our salvation headquarters, a friendly place where sinners flee for refuge to Jesus—not just our historic Savior but our real-time 24/7 Advocate with the Father (Heb. 7:25). His compassionate ministry provides not only release from guilt but empowerment for ministry.<sup>10</sup> As Christ is our representative in heaven, we on earth are his royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9), servants of the sanctuary.

Our vacation from guilt involves a vocation of service, facilitating *shalom* and *koinōnia* as Christ's ambassadors to a fearful, alienated world. *Heaven's sanctuary is the human resource center of the universe*. From the time it opened for business on the Day of Pentecost, our High Priest has been empowering and synchronizing our spiritual giftedness in His service.<sup>11</sup>

### **Adventism is comprehensively zoetic**

We have seen how Adventist doctrine facilitates *koinōnia* (sharing life together) and *shalom* (the quality of that life). Thus Adventism at its best is zoetic, based upon "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:3), as summarized here:

- The seventh day Sabbath is zoetic: Christ's accomplishment of life in Creation and new life through Calvary is memorialized weekly for worship.
- Heaven's Sanctuary is zoetic: Christ's priesthood is based upon His indestructible life (Heb. 7:16), through which we draw near to God.

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<sup>9</sup> How ironic that some Adventists who purport to promote the "judgment hour message" prefer to preach at neighbors rather than to dialogue, which lies at the heart of the sanctuary/judgment agenda.

<sup>10</sup> For centuries fellow Protestants have promoted the "priesthood of all believers," often in reaction to Rome's confessional. But priests are not passive. The subsequent neglect of Christ's call to ministry diminishes discipleship and insulates believers from their holy calling. There is no inherent ethical mandate in the gospel as commonly taught, Douglas John Hall says: "The substitutionary character of the sufficiency-of-grace approach leaves an ethical vacuum. ... [But to say] that the Spirit of God incorporates us into the representative life and work of the Christ is to say that we are given a distinctive ethical direction and calling. With and in the Christ, we are to live out of a redeemed creaturehood, a new humanity, that lives not for itself but for others—lives, that is to say, representatively." *Professing the Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 525.

<sup>11</sup> Jesus prayed, "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18). "Sent" here is *apostellō*, as in (Luke 4:18/LEB): "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ... to send out in freedom those who are oppressed."<sup>11</sup> Despite suffering oppression such as poverty and persecution, the Spirit-filled church is liberated in Christ to be His ambassadors of *shalom*.

- The Judgment is zoetic: believers “do not come into judgment (*krisis*) but have passed from death into life” (John 5:24)
- The “state of the dead” points to “the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought *zōē* and immortality to light through the gospel (2 Tim. 1:10).
- Finally, our health message is obviously zoetic, not merely eating properly to have a heart that beats longer but to have a loving heart of righteousness, *shalom* and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17).

### **Ellen White’s exodus from isolationism**

A renaissance of zoetic *koinōnia* and *shalom* will flourish among God’s final remnant preceding Christ’s return. Jesus predicted this in the judicial division between His community of compassionate sheep versus Satan’s selfish, isolationist goats (Matt. 25:31-46.). Early Adventists tended to overlook those 16 verses with their powerful warning about what really matters to God in the judgment. They focused instead on the doom of everyone who rejected the Midnight Cry: “and the door was shut” (verse 10). To our Sabbatarian pioneers, this meant that the door of probation was already sealed forever to anyone who had heard but rejected the Millerite message.<sup>12</sup>

Ellen White herself initially believed and taught this “shut door.”<sup>13</sup> But soon she transcended initial isolationism to become an example of how Adventists today may function and flourish in the public square without forfeiting our divine message and mission. Ellen White joined non-Adventist temperance rallies—to the consternation of Sabbatarian denominationalists more interested in being “peculiar people” than collaborative neighbors seeking societal *shalom*.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Adventists correctly identify the symbolic lack of oil in the lamps as a shortfall of the Spirit—but illogically tend to miss what this means in practical terms: What counts in the celestial judgment is faith that bears the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy and peace, primarily) in compassionate ministry to the sick, poor and imprisoned. Jesus emphasized this in powerfully warning that the goats of self-confident religiosity are on the high road to hell. Many compute prophetic chronology concerning probation without realizing that they are outside the fold of grace. They will wake up 1,000 years too late, finding themselves shut out from the community of grace-based, *shalom*-sharing sheep.

<sup>13</sup> Ellen White maintained her belief in a post-Disappointment shut door even after God gave her a vision to the contrary, according to a former secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate: She “did not at first understand the meaning of the ‘open door’ in her February, 1845, vision.” Robert Olson, *The Shut Door Documents* (Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1982), 12. Previously Ellen White had mistaken her December 1844 vision: “That seventeen year old Ellen should misinterpret one of her visions should elicit no surprise when one remembers that . . . at one time the apostle Peter mistakenly believed in a shut door” *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>14</sup> In 1888, four decades after the Great Disappointment, Adventist leaders convened in Minneapolis. A big debate divided the delegates. Ellen White famously rebuked the contentious spirit that cursed the General Conference Session. Meanwhile, that same month she spoke at a rally of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. *Manuscripts and Memories of Minneapolis 1888 compiled by the Ellen G. White Estate* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1988), 534]. She collaborated with fellow Christians who at that time were agitating for a national Sunday law. Obviously, Ellen White didn’t favor Sunday legislation, but she did find common cause with those seeking moral reforms in American society.

Ellen White expanded her affiliation with non-Sabbatarians, entrusting initial publication of her legacy book, *Steps to Christ*, to Dwight Moody's brother-in-law, Fleming Revell. In other writings, she extensively copied the language of non-Adventist authors, *effectively collaborating with their teaching*. Both friends and enemies of Ellen White overlook this astounding fact.

### **Conclusion**

Since Ellen White transcended isolationism to collaborate whenever appropriate with non-Seventh-day Adventists, we who claim her heritage can do no less. Setting an example is Jon Paulien, Dean of the School of Religion at Loma Linda University. He partnered with Faithlife Corporation, makers of Logos Bible Software, to produce a seminary-level Mobile Ed eschatology bundle. Paulien spared nothing of our distinctive teaching, even the mark of the beast—but only in the context of the victorious, life-giving Lamb. During two weeks at Faithlife headquarters in Bellingham, Washington, Paulien's grace, wisdom and candor won the respect of Faithlife executives, theologians and video specialists as he presented uncompromised yet contextualized present truth in the twenty-first century.

May Adventists everywhere transcend isolationism and interact in the public square, without denying or diluting our divine mission. Our relational/incarnational doctrine requires it.

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