Ministers of Reconciliation: An Identity for Adventist Religion Scholars

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God is in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. This is the gospel. We have it on the authority of Paul. Moreover, the truth of it is manifest, as Athanasius taught, in the liberation of adulterers, murders and the demon possessed, to which we can also add the liberation of the proud, the covetous, the fearful and the angry. Anyone who looks with eyes to see can see it. Anyone who listens with ears to hear can hear it.

The theme of our session this year might, if we do not exercise sufficient care, obscure for us the reconciling power of God in Christ that daily manifests itself. Christ is surely embodied in the liberated ones who no longer commit adultery, or murder or are literally enslaved by demonic powers, who have subdued their pride, renounced their covetousness, received courage and extinguished the fires of their anger, in other words, who have peace with God. This is the visible church, the place where the reconciled can be seen. It is real. You see it if you look. You know this. But we are in the habit of referring to this reality as the invisible church and treating ecclesiastical powers and houses of worship, and catalogs of fundamental beliefs and streams of revenue as the visible church, when, in fact, this is precisely where the body of Christ is all but invisible.

Joy at the reconciliation of the world to God in Christ is, therefore, tempered by pain in awareness of alienation from God that still plagues the world and mysteriously the Church, mysteriously for how is it possible that we who have died to sin, nevertheless do not walk in newness of life? How is it that we fight? Why is it that in our necessary efforts at creating communal order, both material and spiritual, that we so routinely behave as though we are still at enmity with God in the most fundamental sense, at enmity with God because we confuse our wills with the will of God?

In part, our sin is a sign of the times. Our cultural context offers us constant validation, and therefore unremitting temptation to indulgence, of this sinful conceit that we are the measure of goodness. In one of his most indispensable essays from the journal *First Things* titled “Christ and Nothing,” David Hart writes and I quote at length,

As modern men and women—to the degree that we are modern—we believe in nothing. This is not to say, I hasten to add, that we do not believe in anything; I mean, rather, that we hold an unshakable, if often unconscious, faith in the nothing, or in nothingness as such. It is this in which we place our trust, upon which we venture our souls, and onto which we project the values by which we measure the meaningfulness of our lives. Or, to phrase the matter more simply and starkly, our religion is one of very comfortable nihilism….

We live in an age whose chief moral value has been determined, by overwhelming consensus, to be the absolute liberty of personal volition, the power of each of us to choose what he or she believes, wants, needs, or must possess; our culturally most persuasive models of human freedom are unambiguously voluntarist and, in a rather debased and degraded way, Promethean; the will, we believe, is sovereign because unpremised, free because spontaneous, and this is the highest good. And a society that believes this must, at least implicitly, embrace and subtly advocate a very particular moral metaphysics: the unreality of any “value” higher than choice, or of any transcendent Good ordering desire towards a higher end. Desire is free to propose, seize, accept or reject, want or not want—but not to obey…

Of this cultural situation, which tragically thoroughly infects us, Hart remarks,

It seems to me much easier to convince a man that he is in thrall to demons and offer him manumission than to convince him that he is a slave to himself and prisoner to his own will. Here is a god more elusive, protean, and indomitable than either Apollo or Dionysus; and whether he manifests himself in some demonic titanism of the will, like the mass delirium of the Third Reich, or simply in the mesmeric banality of consumer culture, his throne has been set in the very hearts of those he enslaves. And it is this god, I think, against whom the First Commandment calls us now to struggle.[[1]](#endnote-1)

This is, somewhat surprisingly to me, a thoroughly Adventist call. It is a call to worship the only one worthy of worship, God. It is the first angel’s message. If the nihilistic religion of modernity deifies the self, we cannot struggle against this god through personal or denominational self-assertion. We cannot preach the first angel’s message by preaching about the preaching of the first angel’s message. The message isn’t about us. And what is true of modernity’s god applies twice over to modernity intensified in the intellectual fashion of post-modernity, which can reasonably be said to insist on its superiority to modernity precisely through the superior purity of its nihilism. To struggle against this god, we shall have to find a way to be ministers of reconciliation that God is accomplishing rather than pursing the triumph of ourselves over ourselves.

Is it helpful to think about this? The answer to that question is not obvious. It is not obvious that thinking is helpful anytime, never mind thinking about the fact of divine reconciliation. But the correct non-obvious answer is--yes. Adventist scholars of religion are called to that task, to think about the gospel in a church, in the world, that still suffers in alienation from God. Whatever else we religion teachers may be, our primary vocation is to think purposefully. The purpose of this intellectual vocation is to nurture reconciliation.

It is a daunting calling, first and foremost because it must be answered in full awareness that we ourselves are incompletely reconciled to God. We shall always have to think and speak with the reservation that, despite our best efforts, our thinking will sometimes repeat the sin of self-deification. And it is a daunting calling because thinking about God is everywhere, both inside and outside of the Body of Christ, sooner or later said to be impossible. Nevertheless the call to struggle against the deity of the self presupposes that fitting worship is possible. And if worship is possible, thinking about the one worshipped is also possible. The one we worship is the reconciler. What can thinking about this supply us?

Think again about Paul’s teaching. The cultural moment we inhabit makes us sensitive to Paul’s political and hierarchical diction. We are “ambassadors” of reconciliation he says. Ambassadors are state representatives, representatives of the queen, or president or prime minister and when posted to a foreign nation they inhabit an embassy claiming to be a piece of the territory over which their sovereign rules. Moreover the mission of an ambassador is to advance the interests of the state, to protect and promote its dominion, to extend the sovereign’s rule.

Happily, before he named the followers of Christ ambassadors, Paul declared that God, having reconciled the world to himself in Christ gave us, who are new creations in him, the *ministry* of reconciliation. A distinction between a minister and an ambassador might lack a difference, yet it is not unreasonable to hear a difference between the terms, the difference between duty and privilege. The minister serves. The ambassador represents.

It is the “gentiles” Jesus said, who seek to rule over others. Disciples are to desire service rather than dominion. As much as contemporary sensibilities alert us to nuances of power, those same sensibilities at best counsel despair regarding anything other than the pursuit of power and, at worst, they enflame the lust for power that promises to fill the vacuum of despair.

Just how seductive the appetite for power can be is apparent in the cheapening of the term “service” by corporate executives seeking to be perceived as “servant leaders.” When I hear the term “servant leader” I understand I am in the presence of the pursuit of power. I am being given notice where power resides. The ministry of reconciliation to which Adventist scholars of religion may dedicate themselves ought not to be, and is in no way required to be, a pursuit of power by intellectual means under a mere guise of service. The pursuit of power alienates. It polarizes. It produces winners and losers. Dedication to service promises reconciliation.

Renunciation of the pursuit of power is anything but simple. Kierkegaard understood just how difficult it is to “will one thing.” I confess my own passionate attachment to truth, having survived black fear that the truth might be terrible instead of good and beautiful, has also been driven in part by a sense that to know what is true is to possess ultimate power, the power to compel agreement, and with agreement behavior, and with behavior, privilege. And yet Jesus said that knowing the truth liberates. It will liberate us from the pursuit of power just as surely as it will from other forms of self-deification.

To those of you inclined to accept my suggestion that the proper ecclesial role for Adventist scholars of religion is a ministry of reconciliation carried out by purposeful thinking about the fact of God’s reconciling presence in Christ, I would like to extend two specific invitations.

First I invite you to make an effort to produce a more extensive reconciliation between the two organized groups of Adventist religion scholars than is achieved through the wholly commendable and sacramentally significant sharing of a communal meal once a year as we shall do again this evening. And second I invite you to work with me to organize in depth conversation between Seventh-day Adventist Church leaders and those of us engaged in academic life.

I have two stories to illustrate what I am inviting you to do. In June of 2008 with the financial support of Frank Perez then President of Kettering Health Network, Chuck Scriven, then President of Kettering College, organized a conversation with the following participants, Jo Ann Davidson, Dick Davidson, Connie Gane, Roy Gane, Ed Zinke, Ernie Bursey, David VanDenburgh, Chuck and myself.

The conversation unfolded over a three day week-end. Each participant prepared a two page statement of her or his understanding of the character of scripture. We each read our prepared statements aloud and then time was given to discussing the thoughts presented. We took our meals together, worshipped on the Sabbath together and ate popcorn together Saturday night. Several days later Chuck received a note of thanks from one of the participants which expressed what was a common sentiment, namely that the experience had been one of the spiritual high points of our lives. It is in fact good and pleasant for sisters and brothers to dwell together in unity. We enjoyed unity.

Members of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies and the Adventist Theological Society can do serious theological work together. We did. We did not aim to arrive at a consensus. I still don’t agree with Roy Gane regarding his presentation at the 2007 meeting of ASRS in which he insisted that God commanded the Israelites to kill all of the Amalekites. I think Roy is interpreting I Samuel 15:2-3 correctly if interpretation is even required for the phrase “Thus says the Lord of hosts.” But I think Samuel was guilty of that fundamental enmity against God that confused what he thought was a necessary political act with the will of God. My reason for thinking so is I John 1:5, “God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.” Dr. Scriven organized our long ago conversation partly as a follow up to Dr. Gane’s presentation and my front row, distinctly audible, flat footed rejection of its thesis. Our differences are important. They are no reason for alienation.

For a whole host of reasons, I think it regrettable that the participants in that decade old conversation did not follow up with more serious mutual work. Today I am inviting them and any of you who care to participate to go back to work together. What any willing participants in that conversation might wish to consider should be left up to them. If I were to state the most important reason for the division between the Adventist Society for Religious Studies and the Adventist Theological Society it would be a differences over fallibility in scripture. That would make an excellent starting point for serious work. I am inviting you to a ministry of reconciliation. We enjoyed unity at Ridgeleigh Terrace in no small part because we had no power, no demand for agreement, and most important of all no investment of intellectual ego.

My second invitation is for you to join me in organizing serious conversation with denominational leaders. This needs to be done again without seeking power, or consensus or individual supremacy. Why do I propose this, especially since a long and deep and phenomenally expensive conversation has been conducted with Adventist scholars and church leaders over the topic of ordaining women? That conversation failed, in spite of scholarly good will. Let me tell you about a conversation that succeeded although not in the way I hoped at the time.

You will recall the time when the concerted effort to revise fundamental belief #6 emerged. I hoped then that such a revision could be prevented. I was convinced and remain convinced that the determined, and now successful, effort to revise the belief arose out of a failure to consider more options for understanding God’s creative activity than those generally supposed to be available.

Being perfectly clear about my insignificance in the Seventh-day Adventist church, I thought, nevertheless, that there was one possibility for me to make a positive difference. I am a personal friend of Dr. Jan Paulsen. His and Kari’s gracious generosity in sharing supper with me most Friday evenings during the academic year 1971-1972, when Jan and I both studied at the University of Tübingen, marked the beginning of our friendship.

I thought an exploration of options for thinking theologically about creation that are not normally considered might result in Dr. Paulsen sharing with his denominational peers the notion that there is more than one way to affirm God the creator. I will say parenthetically here that, as far as I am aware, in spite of the vast relevant literature on this topic, the best option has yet to be articulated. Toward the end of persuading Dr. Paulsen that more options exist I invited him to spend a week-end with Chuck Scriven, Jim Londis and me in Kettering discussing natural history and creation. Once again proving his generosity, he agreed.

The four of us spent the weekend in intense conversation. None of us share exactly the same understanding of the multitude of profound questions requiring consideration. And I must admit that I and my colleagues failed to persuade Dr. Paulsen that a truly novel understanding is available. But Dr. Paulsen’s “take away” forms the basis for this invitation of mine to organize more such conversations between academics and church leaders. At the conclusion of our time together he said to the three of us, “You need to spend more time like this talking with church leaders. They need to know that academics like you love the church.” And so we do.

We will have a communal meal in a few hours. It will be a triumph of Paul’s teaching in Romans 14 that we must receive one another despite theological and ethical differences. I urge you to add to your self- understanding as an Adventist academic the role of a minister of reconciliation, who pursues that ministry by thinking about the reconciliation God is conducting in Christ and by sharing your thoughts with one another and with the leaders of the Adventist denomination.

1. David Hart, “Christ and Nothing,” in *First Things*, October, 2003. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)