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Adventism's Promise for Black Liberation

Douglas Morgan, Washington Adventist University

In 1892, as the Kentucky state legislature considered a bill to mandate racial segregation in rail coaches, a slender school teacher from Lexington raised her voice with a power that inspired these lines from Paul Laurence Dunbar:

Give us to lead our cause
More noble souls like hers,
The memory of whose deed
Each feeling bosom stirs;
Whose fearless voice and strong
Rose to defend her race,
Roused Justice from her sleep,
Drove Prejudice from place.¹

The “noble soul” with a “fearless voice” was Mary E. Britton, not only a teacher but a newspaper columnist and friend of anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells. Within a year of her public stand against the onset of legal segregation, Mary Britton joined a new Seventh-day Adventist congregation organized in Lexington by Elder Alfonso Barry. Britton’s new life direction would lead her to Adventism’s first school of medicine, the American Medical Missionary College, and then back to Lexington where she became

¹ “To Miss Mary Britton,” Paul Laurence Dunbar Poetry, Wright State University Libraries, <http://www.libraries.wright.edu/special/dunbar/poetry.php?type=poem&id=348> (accessed 23 Oct. 2015).

the city's first licensed African American female physician. She combined her medical practice with wide-ranging activism and journalistic advocacy for social justice and benevolence in the public square.²

Three years after Mary Britton's celebrated anti-segregation speech, at an Emancipation day celebration in Springfield, Ohio, a black Baptist preacher blasted the Republican party for its betrayal of the Negro with such inflammatory eloquence that the *Cincinnati Commercial Gazette* denounced him not only for slurring the name of Lincoln but dishonoring the American flag. The furor sent shockwaves south of the Ohio River, where a segregationist Kentucky newspaper reported that the young preacher had caused a "pronounced sensation" with a speech that added to mounting and troubling evidence that "the negro is in earnest in his demand for social recognition."³

Only ten months later, in July 1896, we find this same fiery orator, Lewis C. Sheafe, in the pulpit of Battle Creek Tabernacle, making his debut as a Seventh-day Adventist preacher.⁴ By then, surely, he would have read Ellen White's *Review and Herald* articles that her son Edson compiled in *The Southern Work* in which the prophet envisioned a comprehensive initiative for making good the promise of freedom to a people who, after legal emancipation thirty years before, had, in the words of Du Bois, "stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery."⁵ The mission would help them claim their "God-given freedom" to discover and follow the way of Christ for themselves. It would entail "teaching them to read and to follow various trades and engage in different business enterprises."

² Paula J. Giddings, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 140-141; Laretta Flynn Byars, "Mary Elizabeth Britton (1858-1925)," in Jessica Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Women*, Book II (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1996), 55-57; R. Steven Norman, III, "Fighting for Justice: Mary E. Britton, Adventist Pioneer and Community Leader," *Southern Tidings* (Feb. 2006), 4-5; Tom Eblen, "Mary Britton was a Woman Ahead of Her Times," The Bluegrass and Beyond weblog (14 Feb. 2012), <http://tomeblen.bloginky.com/2012/02/14/mary-britton-was-a-woman-ahead-of-her-time/> (accessed 31 Oct. 2015).

³ Douglas Morgan, *Lewis C. Sheafe: Apostle to Black America* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2010), 104-108; Editorial page, *Hartford Weekly Herald* (16 Oct. 1895), 2.

⁴ Morgan, 116.

⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 26.

Thus the Adventist prophet insisted that “cotton field will not be the only resource for a livelihood to the colored people,” at the very time in which the ascendant forces of white supremacy were engaged in a systematic effort to see that it was. She called on farmers, financiers, builders and craftsmen to join ministers and teachers in this broad-ranging mission and thereby make “the best restitution that can be made to those who have been robbed of their time and deprived of their education.”⁶

Ellen White did not expect Adventists to meet the needs of the black South all by themselves. Indeed she affirmed the responsibility of the national government as well as other denominational and voluntary agencies. But she centered her missiology of liberation on the church.⁷

Lewis Sheafe caught the vision. “My heart leaped for joy as I thought of the help to come to my people through the third ang[el’s] message,” he testified in a letter to Ellen White.⁸ Armed with credentials designating him a delegate at large “to represent the colored race” at the 1899 General

⁶ Ellen G. White, *The Southern Work* (1901 edition, Ellen G. White Writings online, Ellen G. White Estate, egwwritings.org), 44, 53, 60-61. The reference to the cotton field as the only place of employment is a oversimplification here taken to signify not only the reduction of black farmers to long-term debt peonage but systematic restriction of blacks to the lowest levels of agricultural, service, and industrial employment. See Rayford W. Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson*, 2nd ed. (New York: De Capo Press, 1965), 153-156.

⁷ *Testimonies for the Church* 9: 205; *Southern Work*, 44. This historical essay addresses Adventism’s interaction with the public realm from a broadly “neo-Anabaptist” standpoint. James Davison Hunter uses this term to describe Christian thinkers such as John Howard Yoder, Stanly Hauerwas, James McClendon, and Craig Carter who emphasize that “the community of faith is its own *polis*....Citizenship in the church is true citizenship, one that trumps loyalties in the world. It creates an alternative space in the world and an alternate set of practices against which the world is judged and beckoned.” See *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 161. Adventist writers associated with neo-Anabaptist thought include Charles Scriven, *The Promise of Peace: Dare to Live the Advent Hope* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2009) and Ronald E. Osborn, *Anarchy and Apocalypse: Essays on Faith, Violence and Theodicy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010).

My use of “liberation” rather than “transformation” with reference to Adventism’s “promise” is prompted by New Testament scholar Scot McKnight who observes that liberation connotes change that is “radical, from the inside out and bottom up,” and brings economic empowerment to the oppressed. McKnight faults the theologies of social transformation and liberation set forth by influential figures such as Rauschenbusch, Moltmann, and Gutierrez, among others, for locating the working of the Kingdom of God mainly in the public sector, thereby decentering the church. This essay explores a slice of Adventist history for what it might suggest about the possibility of a church-centered social ethic of liberation. See Scot McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2014), 228-255.

⁸ Lewis C. Sheafe to Ellen G. White, 25 May 1899, Ellen G. White Estate files.

Conference, Sheafe took the floor to “heartily” endorse plans to expand the church’s medical missionary work in the South. At the very moment of America’s plummet to its historic nadir in race relations, this passionate race advocate declared: “I believe that Seventh-day Adventists have a truth which, if they will let it get a hold of them, can do more in this field [the black South] to demonstrate the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ than can any other people.”⁹

Sheafe’s twenty turbulent years of Seventh-day Adventist ministry would end in alienation from the “organized work,” but not before he established a strong black Adventist presence in Washington, D.C., and, through two rounds of heart-wrenching conflict, prodded the General Conference leadership first to establish the North American Negro Department in 1909 and then to place it under black leadership in 1918.¹⁰

A third vignette takes us to Los Angeles where, according to the standard account, the first black Adventist congregation west of Kansas City originated in 1906 with group Bible studies conducted in the home of a postal worker and his wife, Theodore and Estelle Troy.¹¹ True enough, except that it turns out

⁹ Morgan, 142-144. The intriguing note of post-modernity (“a truth”) aside, Sheafe, as a seminary-educated minister, active in a wide gamut of national and local organizations for civil rights and race advancement, and well-read in history and politics, was well-positioned to make this assessment.

¹⁰ Morgan, 178-356, 372-400. “An Appeal in Behalf of the Work among the Colored People,” signed by twelve leading black Adventist ministers, prompted organization of the North American Negro Department at the 1909 General Conference. The Appeal referred to the “growing race-problem” in America that “is invading the sacred confines of our church” – an unmistakable allusion to the crisis evoked by the withdrawal of Sheafe’s Washington, D.C. congregation from denominational affiliation in 1907. The “loss of confidence” among colored Americans experienced by “the great Protestant bodies, because of their inability to meet the situation has come to us,” they declared, necessitating action to “restore and conserve” the “confidence of the race” if they were to “expect greater success in our labours” (Archives of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, hereinafter cited as GCA).

After a short-lived reconciliation with denominational leadership in 1913, Sheafe joined with J.W. Manns of Savannah, Ga., in 1916 in establishing the Free Seventh Day Adventists as a separate black-led denomination. In view of these developments, the General Conference leadership at the 1918 session recognized the importance of an “advance move” they had previously been unwilling to make – appointment of a black man to head the Negro Department, according to W.H. Green, who received the appointment (“A Word Regarding the North American Negro Department,” n.d., GCA).

¹¹ Louis B. Reynolds, *We Have Tomorrow: The Story of Seventh-day Adventists With an African Heritage* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1984), 175-176.

that T.W. Troy was much more than a postal worker. He was in fact a highly successful business entrepreneur described as a “prominent black activist” by one historian and as a “live wire in the community” and “a great worker for the advancement of his race” by the *California Eagle*, southern California’s leading black newspaper in that era.¹²

The gatherings at the Troy home led to organization of the Furlong Tract church with 28 members in 1908. It is the young people of this congregation who are of greatest interest for present purposes and to them our attention will return presently.¹³

But by now we have seen enough to establish that in its initial, formative phase, the rise of Adventism among African Americans was marked by a striking pattern of high-achieving converts dedicated to racial advancement.¹⁴ This took place at the very time when the last vestiges of hope that

¹² Susan Shifrin, “Temple, Ruth J.,” in Darlene Clark Hine, ed., *Black Women in America: Science, Health, and Medicine*, Encyclopedia of Black Women in America (New York: Facts On File, Inc., 1997). *African-American History Online*. Facts on File, Inc., <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE01&iPin=AFEBW0726&SingleRecord=True> (accessed 14 July 2015). “Los Angeles Loses a [First] Class Man,” *California Eagle*, Dec. 13, 1919, 4; “The Forum,” *California Eagle*, 16 May 1914, 4-5.

¹³ Reynolds, 179-182.

¹⁴ When Mary Britton joined the church in 1893, the total membership of the handful of black Adventist churches organized in the South was under 50, with the overall denominational black membership likely totaling under 100. When Lewis C. Sheafe joined the church in 1896, he became just the third officially-credentialed black Adventist minister. Growth over the ensuing dozen years established a strong and lasting foundation for the black Adventist work, with membership reaching approximately 1,400 by 1909. The estimate is pieced together from Richard Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, rev. ed. (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Department of Education, 2000), 234-235; Reynolds, 113; Sydney Scott, “Work in the South for the Colored People,” *Gospel Herald* (Feb. 1907), 6-7.

Among the approximately 1,400 African Americans who embraced Adventism during this formative phase, a sampling of those from the relatively small well-educated and professional segments of the black population includes, in addition to Britton, Sheafe, and the Troys: Franklin W. Warnick, a friend of Sheafe and fellow graduate of Wayland Seminary; Amy Temple of the Furlong Tract church, a nurse and graduate of Shaw University; James H. Howard, graduate of Howard University medical school and one of the most highly-placed African Americans in federal government service during the late nineteenth century; James’ wife, Isabella Cook Howard, graduate of Oberlin College; Rosetta Douglass Sprague, Oberlin graduate and daughter of Frederick Douglass; J. Alexander Chiles, attorney and like Britton a member of the Lexington church; W.H. Green, attorney converted through Sheafe’s evangelism in Washington; Franklin H. Bryant, author and educator; Matthew C. Strachan, educated at both Fisk University and Battle Creek College, effective writer and political organizer, both in the denomination and the public square; James K. Humphrey, though born and educated in Jamaica where he graduated from Colbar College, his influential ministry was in New York City, where he joined the Adventist movement and began establishing congregations during the pre-1909 era. To these examples we might add Jessie Dorsey, a second

America would make good on the political promises of the Reconstruction era were being crushed.¹⁵ In that context, the Adventist program for development of the whole person offered a promising, alternative path for racial liberation.

Sheafe, for example, along with many of his generation, came of age believing that the promise of the 14th and 15th amendments and the Civil Rights Acts of 1866 and 1875 would move decisively toward realization. His was a heart freshly embittered by the nation's betrayal when it leapt for joy at the thought of what the third angel's message could mean to his people.¹⁶ He threw himself utterly into this obscure and demanding cause. The work he began in Washington, D.C. in 1902 brought the church by 1905 to the threshold of establishing a strong educational and medical missionary center in the cultural center of black America.¹⁷ But it was not to be. Like too many others for too many decades after

generation Adventist from Ohio who, before marrying Green in 1908, was the close associate of Elizabeth Wright in establishing what became Voorhees College in Denmark, South Carolina.

Anna Knight came from a humble background, but learned about Adventism as a precocious reader, and then through education rose to leadership as a missionary and educator. In her fascinating work *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi's Longest Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), historian Victoria Bynum writes that Anna "escaped rural Mississippi and gained protection against sexual exploitation and poverty within the nurturing environment of Seventh-Day Adventism." Thus, though marred by its accommodation to segregation, Bynum nonetheless sees the overall impact of Adventism as liberating for Knight and her Mississippi community. The school that Anna, and later her sister, Grace, operated in Jones County, along with Oakwood College, became, for the extended mixed-race Knight clan, "their most important resources for battling against total debasement under increasingly strict racial segregation" (Chapter 8).

¹⁵ Historian Mark Elliott writes that during the 1880s "the opportunity still existed for the federal government to promote black interests in the South" such as voting rights, education, and economic opportunity. However, the failure of the Republican party to give its full backing to passage of a bill to protect black voting rights introduced by Sen. Henry Cabot Lodge in 1890 "all but dashed" hopes for federal action to sustain the promise of Reconstruction; see *Color-Blind Justice: Albion Tourgee and the Quest for Racial Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 166, 243-244, 247-248.

¹⁶ In 1895, South Carolina joined the progression of Southern states that, in view of the Lodge Bill's failure in 1891, enacted measures designed to disenfranchise black voters. That summer Sheafe publicly debunked the supposed merits of the South Carolina legislation. In his indictment of the Republican party at Springfield in September, he also cited the Senate's failure to acknowledge Ida B. Wells' unimpeachable exposé of lynching as a means of social control through terror rather than vigilante justice against perpetrators of particularly heinous crimes. See Morgan, 101-108.

¹⁷ For Sheafe's own account see "The People's Seventh-day Adventist Church of Washington, D.C.," *Review and Herald* (24 Aug. 1905), 15-16.

him, Sheafe's attempt to cash the promissory note of Adventist freedom came back marked "insufficient funds." Yet, the aspirations, the dreams evoked by the promise, remain significant. Not without reason did Sheafe believe he had found in Adventism a better hope, better promises and a better path to the liberation of his people than that offered by the political system.

In embracing Adventism, neither Britton nor Sheafe abandoned pursuit of justice and equality in the public arena. For them, conversion to Adventism was not a turn from public to private, or from engagement to disengagement, social to individual, activist to quietist, or from the present world to "pie-in-the-sky." But the target changed, with priorities shifted accordingly. Rather than transformation of the social order through a direct assault on the legal and political system, they now focused on holistic liberation of oppressed people through an alternative political structure called church.¹⁸ The methods are now noncoercive – persuasion, education, healing – rather than coercive legislation.

Their hope was no longer centered on America, even Christian America; indeed its ultimate failure was anticipated. But a movement that offers holistic liberation to all people through the "everlasting gospel," can neither be indifferent to injustice and oppression nor collude with it. The imperatives of mission, of witness to the good news, doing good works that glorify God, and love of neighbor, all demand support for freedom movements in the public realm in every way consistent with the gospel.

Britton's work for justice and mercy as an Adventist physician and journalist illustrates how the church – through its evangelistic mission and educational program – generates individuals who nurture *shalom* in the public square through persuasive rhetoric (a newspaper column, in her case) and activism through existing agencies. Returning now to the Californians, we see at least glimmers of how the

¹⁸ McKnight, 154, asserts that "the 'social' dimension of holistic redemption is *first* and *foremost* found in the social reality called the church."

church itself could become an intentional agency for racial liberation and spawn creative new agencies as well.

Though largely forgotten today, Owen A. Troy, Sr., son of Theodore and Estelle Troy, must surely rank among the most forward-thinking Adventist leaders of any race during the early-mid decades of the twentieth century (1920s to 1950s). Amidst relentless and skillful advocacy for racial justice in the denomination, he developed churches into thriving agencies for Adventism's program of holistic liberation in urban black communities. One shining moment came during the darkest hour of the Great Depression at Shiloh Church on the south side of Chicago. Under Troy's leadership, the church sustained the phenomenal growth that began in the previous decade under G.E. Peters. Shiloh Academy became a full high school, with a print shop for both commercial work and vocational instruction. At the Shiloh Clinic begun in 1932, five doctors and three nurses served thousands among the "needy public" each year. "A church should be interested in the welfare of the community....the business enterprises, the education, health, and daily life of its people," Troy told the *Pittsburgh Courier*.¹⁹

Meanwhile, after graduating from the College of Medical Evangelists at Loma Linda and becoming the first female licensed to practice medicine in California, Troy's friend from childhood in the Furlong Tract church, Dr. Ruth Janetta Temple, had established the first health clinic to serve the 250,000 residents of southeast Los Angeles. The clinic developed into the Temple Health Institute. From there she initiated the Health Study Club program to educate the public on community health issues such as nutrition, sex education, immunization and substance abuse. The program brought together not

¹⁹ "Church Serves Everyday Life of Community," *Pittsburgh Courier* (7 Sept. 1935), A10.

only parents, teachers, and school children but eventually drew in street gang leaders, nightclub owners and their patrons.²⁰

Troy and Temple collaborated in forming a voluntary organization, the Community Health Association, which originated the Disease Prevention Week that the California state legislature instituted as an annual event in 1945. Here was a benevolent civic organization originated and led by Adventists that drew together leaders from all sectors of the community to advance the common good. In 1978 Dr. Temple told an interviewer that she “got the concept of a truly large program for community work in public health” from study of “a book called *The Ministry of Healing*” in a class at Loma Linda taught by Dr. A.W. Truman.²¹

Neither Troy nor Temple saw their focus on the distinctively Adventist vision and mission as somehow at odds with or even disconnected from the black freedom struggle in America. Despite its pervasiveness in the Adventism of his era, Troy emphatically rejected the notions that Adventist ministers must “refrain from entering programs for social and economic reforms” or speaking out “against racial segregation.”²²

Based on her own experience, Ruth Temple regarded public health education as “the swiftest most naturally effective of all racial barrier-breakers.” Her endeavors gained her entry into “the most exclusive and ordinarily narrow circles,” and she had found such groups not only welcoming but “tenacious” in following through with cooperation. This led her to “feel that there is no limit to what

²⁰ Shifrin, “Temple, Ruth J.,” Libby Clark, “State’s First Black Woman Physician and Agricultural Scientist,” *Los Angeles Sentinel* (13 Feb. 2003), C8; “Interview with Ruth Janetta Temple,” *Black Women Oral History Project*, Vol. 9 (Wesport, CT: Meckler, 1991), 304-311.

²¹ “Interview,” 284, 310-313.

²² Owen A. Troy circular letter to ministers, 4 May 1948, Arna Wendell Bontemps Papers, Syracuse University Library.

such a program can accomplish in the race relations field” and contributed to her passion for expanding her efforts even further.²³

The innovators we have glimpsed put their all into utilizing the holistic, medical missionary ideals at the heart of Adventism for the liberation of an oppressed people. Their deepest motivations and boldest aspirations sprang from the church. Driven by the imperative of preparation for a new world to come, they placed their highest priorities on the expansion of this alternative social construct, not on perfecting American democracy through law, politics, or even civil disobedience.

Their stories suggest that:

- 1) Adventists may make their most meaningful and effective impact on the public order as a consequence of, not in spite of, faithful focus on the church’s distinctive mission, inspired by its message of transcendent hope.
- 2) Placing priority on development of an alternative social reality formed by this distinctive vision for liberating the whole person rather than structural transformation of the surrounding society does not and must not mean insularity or disengagement from the public realm.
- 3) Rather, such ordering of priorities generates a pioneering creativity that in turn generates social change by bearing a winsome witness to new possibilities.

²³ Ruth J. Temple to Arna Bontemps, 11 Dec. 1944, Bontemps Papers. Temple’s work eventually won the endorsement of two governors of California – Pat Brown and Ronald Reagan, and three presidents of the United States – Johnson, Nixon, and Carter; see Clark, “State’s First Black Woman Physician.” Such public recognition can testify to the far-reaching impact of a church-based initiative, but the danger of co-optation lurks if it becomes the main goal or litmus test of success. One cautionary example from Adventist history brought to light by Roland Blaich is the case of Hulda Jost, director of Adventist welfare work in Germany during the 1930s. The incorporation of the Adventist Welfare Society into the National Socialist Welfare organization no doubt impressively demonstrated the potential societal impact of the denomination’s health and humanitarian agencies. Not only that, it did much to preserve the denomination’s institutional existence under dire straits for several years. Yet her effectiveness in bringing Adventist community service into the public square came the high cost of her becoming a propagandist for the Nazi regime. See “Selling Nazi Germany Abroad: The Case of Hulda Jost,” *Journal of Church and State* 35:4 (Autumn 1993), 807-830.

- 4) If truly shaped by the biblical, prophetic heritage, the Adventist commitment to restoration of the whole person, must, with discernment, identify and ally itself with the oppressed in liberation struggles in the wider society that others may be more prominent in leading.