

**The Role and Relevance of the Black Adventist Religion Teacher/Scholar
in an Age of Anti-Intellectualism**

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American Christianity has begun to establish a false dichotomy between biblical learning and biblical living, placing a heavy premium on praxis while dismissing heavy biblical thinking. This issue of anti-intellectualism has also invaded the Seventh-day Adventist Church, resulting in “a kind of demagoguery that creates unwarranted suspicion toward education.”¹ Unfortunately, a large number of our youth are refusing to give Seventh-day Adventism the time of day because they deem it anti-intellectual—a denomination that values ignorance and credulity far above critical intelligence. In addressing this problem, Adventist scholars of color need to play an important role in the process of encouraging change that will result in a less polarized and anti-intellectual church environment. This paper will present a general overview of the negative impact anti-intellectualism has on the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and some workable solutions that will serve as an antidote to this phenomenon.

Anti-intellectualism harms the church theologically and doctrinally

The embrace of anti-intellectualism has resulted in an incorrect theological standing on several issues in the church. The misapplication of headship theology to the issue of women’s ordination is the first noticeable harm. Adventist scholars of color must be forthright in making it known that headship theology should have no place in

¹ Charles B. Bugg, *Preaching from the Inside Out* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 126.

Adventist theological thought. We must join the early pioneers of the church, who in defense of the ministry of Adventism's most prominent women in ministry – Ellen White, stridently pushed back against headship ideologies.

The prophetic voices of Black Adventist scholars are needed in order to correct these hermeneutical errors of interpretation. The view that all humans are equal, but some humans (males) are more equal than others (females), must be corrected. Black theology and the black church must deal with the double bondage of black women in church and society. In order to achieve this goal, two strategies must be employed by Adventist scholars of color. As James Henry Harris posits, we must begin “To treat black women with the same respect as men. This means that women who are qualified for ministry must be given the same opportunities as men to become pastors and to serve in such leadership positions... Second, theology and the church must eliminate exclusionist language, attitudes or practices, however benign or unintended, in order to benefit fully from the talents of women.”²

It's for these reasons that Adventist scholars, in particular those of color, cannot with good conscience and a sound theological foundation, support the compliance document recently voted at the Annual Council of the World Church in Battle Creek, MI. In my view, the full inclusion of women in ministry will only facilitate a hastened completion of our mission. The view that ordained men can only accomplish some aspects of the church's mission is a traditionalist approach, which continues to hinder the completion of the Great Commission. Rather than seeking to discipline fields that disregard the voted action on women's ordination, the General Conference needs to heed

² James Henry Harris, "Practicing Liberation in the Black Church," Religion-Online.org. The Christian Century, June 13-20, 1990.

the 1892 counsel of Ellen White. She was correct and continues to be correct when she writes: “We cannot then take a position that the unity of the church consists in viewing every text of Scripture in the very same light. The church may pass resolution upon resolution to put down all disagreement of opinions, but we cannot force the mind and will, and thus root out disagreement. These resolutions may conceal the discord, but they cannot quench it and establish perfect agreement.”³

Anti-intellectualism harms the church Evangelistically

For a protracted period of time, anti-intellectualism in the Seventh-day Adventist Church has created a false dichotomy between social justice and evangelism. The mistaken notion that Seventh-day Adventists should not engage in social justice does not emanate from the early practices and teachings of the Advent Movement. In fact, it was not until the 1920s that anti-intellectuals in the church greatly influenced by the Fundamentalist movement, started to spread these seeds of error.

Regardless of what the anti-intellectuals claim, the fact remains that Seventh-day Adventist Christians who live or work in needy communities in order to do evangelism must inevitably become involved in helping their friends and neighbors with their pressing economic and social needs. If you wish to share your faith with needy people, and refuse to do anything about the painful conditions in which they live, that it is a profound demonstration of lack of love, and impracticality of the highest order. We must not confuse evangelism with doing justice, nor should we separate them from one another.

³ “Love, the Need of the Church,” Manuscript 24, 1892, in Manuscript Releases, 11:266.

Furthermore, from the Bible's perspective, evangelism defined as merely the verbal expression of the good news forms a very narrow understanding of the term. As Gustafson explains, "The gospel of Jesus Christ is not just a word; it is a living word'. At its fullest, it is not only 'propositional statements' but 'the incarnation of the Word of God into the cultures and lives of mankind.'"⁴

Along with ministering to the needs of those in our communities, the plight of the immigrants and refugees, some of whom are Seventh-day Adventists, must never slip the attention of the Black Adventist scholar. Is it time for us to form a coalition, and to advocate for the rights of these disenfranchised brothers and sisters? We need to correct the view of white Seventh-day Adventist evangelicals, who claim to hold the Bible in the highest regard, but who are more opposed to immigration reform, and have more negative views about immigrants, than any other religious demographic.⁵ We need to keep before "Spiritual Israel" the biblical injunctions God repeatedly brought to the attention of Ancient Israel, that "The stranger shall be to you as the native; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers once" (Leviticus 19:34). "Love the sojourner, for you once were sojourners" (Deuteronomy 10:19); "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you were strangers once" (Exodus 22:21). Israel entered the Promised Land as immigrants from another place, so God urges them to be kind and welcoming to immigrants.

The prophetic voices of Black Adventist theologians are needed to correct the church's emphasis on escape theology (the view that the sole purpose of the church is to

⁴ The Integration of Development and Evangelism, James W. Gustafson *Missiology: An International Review*, WJI. XXVI, No.2, April 1998

⁵ Betsy Cooper et al., "How Americans View Immigrants, and What They Want from Immigration Reform: Findings from the 2015 American Values Atlas," Public Religion Research Institute.

preach the gospel and prepare the world for Christ's second coming), which is taught at the expense of engagement theology. C.S. Lewis cautions us to guard against being so heavenly minded that we have no earthly value when he writes:

Hope is one of the Theological virtues. This means that a continual looking forward to the eternal world is not (as some modern people think) a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither.⁶

The prevalence of social issues in our country and our denomination's religious institutions, demand a prophetic response from Adventist theologians of color. Like Ellen White, we are to speak truth to power in defense of the poor, the immigrant, victims of racism, sexism and all other forms of injustices. As Calvin Rock states, we need more black Seventh-day Adventists who are academically prepared to contribute to Adventist theology the perspectives of the oppressed, and thus provide for the church a more balanced social perspective."⁷ This is important, because as the Father of Black Liberation Theology, James Cone highlights: "It is impossible to do Christian theology with integrity in America without asking the question, What has the gospel to do with the black struggle for liberation?"⁸

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Harper Collins, 2001), 134.

⁷ Calvin B. Rock, "Ellen G. White and Black Theology," in *The Enduring Legacy of Ellen White and Social Justice* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2017), 48.

⁸ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 6.

We should not allow fear to cripple us, as the only necessity for the triumph of evil in our church, is for Black Adventist scholars to say or do nothing! Like Ellen White, we should not be fearful of the negative repercussions when we seek to do justice. We should emulate her bold stance for the right, evidenced in her 1891 statement:

“I know that that which I now speak will bring me into conflict. This I do not covet, for the conflict has seemed to be continuous of late years; but I do not mean to live a coward, or die a coward, leaving my work undone. I must follow my Master’s footsteps. It has become fashionable to look down upon the poor and upon the colored race in particular. But Jesus, the Master, was poor, and He sympathizes with the poor, the discarded, the oppressed, and declares that every insult shown to them is as if shown to Himself.”⁹

Anti-intellectualism harms the church Spiritually and Socially

A large number of anti-intellectuals in the Seventh-day Adventist Church appear to have had their religious convictions trumped by politics. They are more willing to embrace political rhetoric that support misogyny, racism, unethical and immoral practices, rather than heeding the counsel of the Holy Scriptures on these matters. When anti-intellectual Christians allow political parties and nationalistic fervor to dictate their beliefs, we end up with a polarized church, mass exit of our youth and unpopularity with God. Furthermore, such political partisanship hamstring the church’s ability to pursue the core of its mission – to spread the gospel to every nation, kindred and people.

Black Adventist scholars, who are grounded in the fundamentals of the Christian faith, need to emphasize the value God places on every human being, regardless of their race, nationality, or gender. We should advocate for an intellectual faith that places emphasis on the truthfulness of Paul’s statement that “There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). When such

⁹ Ellen White, *The Southern Work* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1901), 10.

intellectual faith is actualized, then Adventists will truly love God with the mind...and will be moved to love their neighbors as themselves.

Conclusion

Although anti-intellectualism has negatively impacted the Seventh-day Adventist Church for several decades, all hope is not lost. As Black Adventist scholars, we have been called for such a time as this to be prophetic heralds of truth, justice and the Christian practices that coincides with the mind and ministry of Christ. In achieving these goals, firstly, we will need to become more visible in our local churches, building trusting relationships between the academy and the local church. These relationships will open the door for us to stem the tide of anti-intellectualism. We can no longer be permanent fixtures at our college or university churches.

Secondly, we must transform our classrooms into training centers for critical thinking. Our students are to be taught how to critically think about and reason the issues affecting our church, and to formulate solutions that are faithful to Scripture.

Thirdly, we will need to identify and mentor more students of color who have a vested interest in the field of theology. Pouring our lives into the next generation of Adventist scholars of color is the only method that will guarantee the ongoing fight for justice and equality in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Fourthly, there is need for greater collaboration among Religion faculty of color in the area of writing and publishing. This will not only assist with the rank and tenure process (which is oftentimes a harrowing experience to navigate, especially if you are the only person of color in your department); but it will also assist black scholars in surviving and thriving in academia without losing our voices or integrity.

Finally, we've come too far to give up now. Let's stay in the struggle until the end, as we pray, advocate and continue the fight against anti-intellectualism in our church, which threatens the very foundation of our educational institutions.