

“Every man is equally a child of God by creation”: Tribalism, Nationalism, Ethnocentrism and Casteism in Adventist Historical Perspective

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This is a huge topic which cannot really be adequately dealt with in 15 minutes. My aim, as a result, is not so much to instil information as to provoke you to think more about the trajectories in our history regarding racism.

We too often deal with racism, ethnocentrism, nationalism, and other forms of prejudice, as though prejudice were only a personal or individual question. But it is very often structural or institutional. There is a danger that we look at individuals in our history (or our present) and say, Well, they were not (or are not) racist, so the church didn't have, or can't have, a problem with racism. Yes, it did; yes, it can. And that's because of structural prejudice and institutional racism.

Institutional racism is racism “embedded as normal practice within society or an organization”. Institutional racism became a familiar term after it was used in the report of a public enquiry, conducted by British judge Sir William Macpherson into the systemic failure of British police to properly investigate the death of a young black man, Stephen Lawrence, murdered by a gang in 1993 when he was just 18 years old. Macpherson found the police to be institutionally racist which he defined as: “The collective failure of an organization to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour that amount to discrimination through prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping which disadvantage

minority ethnic people.”¹ Many of those guilty of prejudiced behaviour would indignantly deny that they were racist. But a large part of institutional racism is “unwitting racism”, and here is a last definition. The Lawrence Report concluded: “Unwitting racism can arise because of lack of understanding, ignorance or mistaken beliefs. It can arise from well intentioned but patronising words or actions. It can arise from unfamiliarity with the behaviour or cultural traditions of people or families from minority ethnic communities. It can arise from racist stereotyping [or] out of uncritical self-understanding.”² It highlights the importance of what we are doing in this year’s Issues Committee meeting—we are engaging in critical self-reflection, in the light of Christ’s teachings and of the apocalyptic prophecies that repeatedly draw no distinction between “nations, and kindreds, and tongues, and peoples” (Rev. 14:6 NKJV cf. 7:9, 10:11).

But the issue of structural and institutional racism highlights the need for us to think not only about Adventist *individuals* but about Adventist *collective practice*—and, because we are a Church, about Adventist *teachings*. Let me be clear: Seventh-day Adventists at various times, in various places, and on every continent, have discriminated, based on skin colour, language and other ethnic or racial signifiers. If we had time enough, I could give you chapter and verse. For now, I will just tell you, it is the historical fact. If South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States, have particularly vexed histories, in many other countries, too, Adventists, individually and/or institutionally, manifested ethnic, national, and racial prejudice.

¹*The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry: Report of an Inquiry by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny* (Cm. 4262-I, submitted to Parliament Feb. 1999), para. 6.34.

² *Ibid.*, para. 6.17

What, however, of our teachings? In *practice*, sinful human beings often fall prey to their sinful nature and fall short, which means there are likely to be good and bad episodes together (something I'll come back to). But when **principles** *themselves* are distorted and tainted, then the *practice* is bound to be bad, entirely. The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa and the Southern Baptists in the United States historically testify to the truth of what happens when biblical principles are corrupted: adherents of those churches became both perpetrators of and apologists for the worst kinds of racist behaviours. So I believe it is important to note that, while at times some of our forefathers believed in distinctions based on race, tribe, caste, ethnicity or nationality, they *never justified* this from the Bible—or from writings of Ellen White.

This is what Ellen White wrote about the *principles* at stake. Now, recognizing that we live in a fallen, violent and prejudiced world, sometimes her counsel on the *practice* of dealing with race and ethnicity included an admixture of compromise with racist realities—sadly, Adventists often used this as an excuse to justify maintaining the status quo rather than striving to change it. However, Ellen White's definitive statement of *principle* about how we treat people of other races is this, written in 1900:

In regard to the question of caste and colour, nothing would be *gained* by making a decided distinction, but the Spirit of God *would* be *grieved*. We are all supposed to be preparing for the same heaven. We have the same heavenly Father and the same Redeemer, who loved us and gave Himself for us all, without any distinction. . . . When the love of Christ is cherished in the heart as it should be, when the sweet, subduing spirit of the love of God fills the soul-temple, there will be no caste, no pride of nationality; no difference will be made because of the colour of the skin. Each one will help the one who needs tender regard and consolation, of whatever nationality he may be. . . . By the mighty cleaver of truth we have all been quarried out from the world. God has taken us,

all classes, all nations, all languages, all nationalities, and brought us into His workshop, to be prepared for His temple.³

So, Seventh-day Adventists in the past never maintained racist doctrine. On the contrary, they knew that their prejudices were their own and had no biblical rationale. Sadly, what we find is in some ways worse than misreading scripture. We find church leaders using weasel words to explain why discriminatory treatment was unavoidable, despite it having no warrant in the Holy Scriptures or the Spirit of Prophecy; and it was often justified in prejudiced language.

Consider, for example, a letter Robert Hare, medical director of Washington Sanitarium, wrote in April 1944 to GC Treasurer William Nelson, who was his board chair. This was seven months after Lucy Byard, a “colored” woman, as Hare called her, using the terminology of the time, had not been admitted as a patient, even though she was a faithful church member. Seriously ill but turned away, she died in a segregated hospital in Washington DC’s downtown. Hare protested to the GC president: “I would just as willingly minister to the needs of a colored patient as anyone else, but mentally, emotionally, and in certain physiological respects they differ from the white, and I do not favor mixing them.”⁴ Hare had prejudged all blacks before he ever met them—and prejudice is, of course, the root of the word “prejudice”. Hare was not alone. GC Treasurer Nelson replied to Hare: “The Psychology of these black people is so different from the white that it would be impossible for us to mix them.”⁵

³ Ellen G. White to W. S. Hyatt, letter 26 (Feb. 15), 1900.

⁴ Robert A. Hare to W. E. Nelson, April 6, 1944, p. 1. General Conference Archives, Box: 10991, Folder: “Colored Situation.”

⁵ W. E. Nelson to R.A. Hare, April 9, 1944, p. 1. General Conference Archives, Box: 10991, Folder: “Colored Situation.”

Robert Hare was in many respects a generous and open-minded man, as his medical work in US cities showed. But that doesn't change the fact that, going back to the definition of institutional racism, the organization he headed failed utterly "to provide an appropriate and professional service to people [regardless] of colour, culture, or ethnic origin." As GC Treasurer, William E. Nelson presided over the creation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's world humanitarian work in the mid-1940s, as a result of which generous gifts, mostly from white church members in North America, Western Europe and Australasia, were deployed to ease the suffering of people all around the world, regardless of race, color, ethnicity, nationality, caste, or indeed religion. As a church administrator, then, in the grand scheme of things, Nelson was far from discriminatory. But in some of his personal attitudes he *was* prejudiced; and he encouraged Washington Sanitarium—perhaps other Adventist institutions, too—to be institutionally racist.

I also think of a letter written some 25 years earlier, in 1910, by then GC President Arthur Daniells to a woman who had written to him concerned that her daughter was being courted by a black man from the Caribbean.⁶ Daniells wrote to her that while nobody doubted that some blacks were very fine men, the fact was that the couple would face so much opposition because of prejudice that the best thing was for the parents to strongly discourage her from seeing the man. Daniells phrased it as though it were disinterested advice, about a situation that had nothing to do with him, ignoring the fact that he was *himself* representative of that opposition and *manifested* that prejudice. And yet, Arthur Daniells as GC president encouraged the ordination of pastors without regard to color or caste. (The PowerPoint shows a photograph of

⁶ This letter is in a private collection; I have been shown it but not been given permission to *quote* it.

him with church leaders and ministers in India, including Indian ministers, some of them ordained by Daniells on his visit).

What the cases of Hare, Nelson and Daniells illustrate is that exemplary behavior to some people groups can go hand in hand with discriminating against others, individually or collectively. But they also highlight another point: it's sometimes assumed one is *either* 100% prejudiced or 100% unprejudiced. In the early 1980s, in Sydney, Australia, two families of black South Africans, who had escaped discrimination in their own country, joined my local church. They were warmly welcomed and everyone I knew was genuinely horrified at how white South Africans treated the country's majority population. Yet, as I realised when I grew older, part of what they had fled was the institutional racism of the Seventh-day Adventist Church *in* South Africa at that time; and as I also came to realize, when it came to Asians and some South Pacific Islanders, many Australians, including some of my fellow church members, were deeply prejudiced—and it is something many Australians, including even Australian Adventists, are still in denial about.

All this is to say that it is not enough in looking at church members or church leaders in our past, or today, or when looking at *ourselves*, to say “Well, he or she was or is, or I am, very tolerant of such and such a group. They can't, *I can't* possibly be prejudiced.” We have to ask, might I respect one group and discriminate against another? Or, more profoundly: even if I am free of bigoted beliefs or behaviors *personally*, am I complicit in institutional racism? Do I tacitly accept, do I silently collude in, do I countenance, forms of institutional behaviors that discriminate against people because of how they look or sound, or where they were born? If so, my hands are not clean. I am not living up to the principles we have as a people.

The good news is, as well as a history of prejudice, we also have a history worthy of emulating. I am going to end by quoting an obscure early Adventist leader, George C. Tenney. Why him? While Tenney did work with Ellen White at times, he was *not* close to her. He *was* a church leader, but *not* one of the most influential or important. He was “middle management”. He was average. He is illustrative of what a significant number of church leaders thought and taught about racism and nationalism. In 1895 Tenney published a book describing service as a missionary. This is its conclusion:

The differences between races are those of education and environment rather than of nature. Distinctions of color are at most but “skin deep.” Every human being bears in his human frame the image of his Maker; and in his soul the impress of the divine attributes. . . .

One nation has no occasion to glory over another. None possess any powers or qualities that they have not received. Our talents are ours only as a trust; and as freely as we have received, so freely let us give. Every man is equally a child of God by creation. Every man is included in the price paid for the redemption of the race. In that world to come there will be “no more sea” to separate man . . . there will be “one fold and one Shepherd.” The nearer men and nations approach one another in sympathy and universal love, the more . . . we are brought in contact with others and the better we understand their troubles, their struggles with adversity, and their aspirations for a better life, the more active our sympathies become. Thus are we better enabled to perceive that all men are members of one family; children of a universal Father.⁷

Those are the last words in his book, a clarion call to come out of the Babylon of bigotry. The pity is that, both in Tenney’s time, and for decades after, Seventh-day Adventist church

⁷ G. C. Tenney, *Journeys by land and sea: A visit to five continents* (Chicago, Battle Creek, MI & London: International Tract Society, 1895), pp. 391-92.

members and church leaders did not live up to this; yet we can say, truly, that Adventists have long understood good principles. Today as much as ever in our history we need to *live up* to those principles, to value all the children of our universal Father, from all of whom will be drawn, at the end of time, that “great multitude that no one [can] number, from *all* nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues,” who will stand “before the throne [of God] and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Rev. 7:9–10 NKJV). On that day we will finally see no distinctions—what we will see at last with great clarity is that we are alike created in the image of God, and that for us all, alike, God’s son gave Himself that we might be redeemed.