

# The Church and Society

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## Introduction

“Justice” in Micah 6:8 means more than general faithfulness in human relations. It intends strict equity, absolute fairness, and even redress with regard to the rights of all. Succinctly stated, it is the equitable distribution of benefits within a given society, giving to all their due. “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice” (RSV).

God’s command that His people “do justice” challenges their societal conscience as perhaps no other scriptural mandate. Here, He, who is the *God* of justice (Job 37:23) and whose throne is built upon the *principle* of justice (Ps 89:14), makes the *goal* of justice a primary stipulation of divine approval. This is not the sum of the church’s societal concerns, but the consequences of the activities which it assumes make it an urgent priority.

### A Problem for the Church

The problem for the church today is just what it has always been—that of reconciling the justice aspect of Christian duty with its sense of evangelistic mission. Since injustice is chiefly enforced by systems that operate within the secular arena, churches that view secular structures as outside their realm of responsibility are necessarily limited in their justice endeavors. Thus, conservative religionists usually resolve the tension that they see between the commands “do justice” (see Mic 6:8) and “go preach” (see Matt 28:18) by assigning justice a lesser definition or by regarding its concerns as tangential to piety. Typically, such Christians choose politically conservative parties and personalities, are reluctant toward involvement in civic affairs and social memberships, and are manifestly timid regarding issues of societal change. In a word, they are *socially* as well as *theologically* conservative.

In view of this problem the primary questions for this chapter will be, (1) How did Christians get this way? (2) How does this posture square with the biblical example? (3) What differing attitudes, if any, are mandated by the mission of Seventh-day Adventists?

## Development of the Church’s Social Conservatism

### Religion’s Tendency to Conservatism

What must first be understood is that, broadly speaking, religion itself is a historically conservative force. By the exercise of one of its prominent functions, the sacralization of societal norms and values, religion continuously justifies existing societal patterns.<sup>1</sup> Through this means, it is largely responsible for the dominance of group goals and group discipline.

It is true that religion is also capable of revolution, and that many of history’s most notable societal upheavals have been spawned by religious fervor. These are the times when

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<sup>1</sup> Sacralization is the process whereby “one’s forefathers and the heavenly Father end up in an indistinguishable religious blend. ‘Always acting as if in the presence of canonized forefathers, the spirit of freedom, . . . is tempered with an awful gravity.’ . . . The past with all its injustices is indiscriminately sanctified; and ancient wrongs are institutionally regularized” (William F. May, “The Mythic Foundations of the Politics of the Conservative,” *Soundings* 3, no. 1, Spring, 1970, 32)

human exigencies have pushed citizens to break with the hallowed deference that religion bestows upon societal formulations—when theological truth overcomes religious passivity and the ethic of justice bursts through the routinizations of society so forcefully as to demand liberation from the status quo.

Such occasions, however, are not the common consequence of religion's interaction with society. The day-to-day functional reality of religion, effected by its rituals and its traditionalism, tends to legitimate existing allocations of facilities, not to correct or overthrow them. The problem is that the formulations to which religion clings are often telescoped by the new arrangements of advancing societal thought. The dynamics of human ingenuity do not allow a static society. There is no such thing as the pegging of comprehensions or a fixation of societal arrangements that guarantee harmony between old traditions and new (present) reality.

Societal cognitions are constantly changing: In the centuries of antiquity, it may have been by virtue of the will of the “gods,” who dictated new locations and relationships; in later centuries by the dictates of reason that decreed fresh approaches and solutions, and today by the wonders of science and technology, which move society more rapidly than ever into the onrushing future. It is the gap between the perceptions of the new society that time produces and the assumptions of the old traditions which religion so grudgingly yields that, as much as anything else, stamp it as socially conservative.

### **Influence of Greek Philosophy**

Another identifiable source of Christian caution toward society is its rich legacy of Greek philosophy. The Grecian thinkers, who so strongly affected the beginnings of Western society, bequeathed it a distinctly conservative societal attitude.<sup>2</sup> For them, action was far less noble than thought. The fact that no work of human hands could equal in beauty the silence of the changeless cosmos translated for them into the belief that all “unquiet” activity—the political kind included—was inferior to peaceful meditation. Aristotle gave clearest expression to this view when—in summarizing the options for lifestyle under the headings of action, contemplation—and their combination: action and contemplation—he concluded that the most exalted way of life is contemplation. His clearest expression of this principle holds that the greatest of all joys is not just thinking (contemplation), but “thinking about thinking.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Influence of Augustine**

The works of Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354-430), the philosopher turned Christian, give further example of the conservative moorings of Christian thought. Augustine's deeply spiritual and highly influential writings are freighted with the bias for contemplation vis-à-vis activity that he acquired in the philosophic schools of his youth.

Augustine understood all citizens to have moral obligations of charity. But in his work, *The City of God*, although he takes time to outline duties of family unity and societal betterment, his concepts of *massa perditionis* (a radical emphasis on inherited, personal guilt), *homo moriturus* (life being a succession of the dying following the dead), and *Deo initio* (God—not humanity—as Originator of all proper activity) outweigh any optimism he may have had concerning human change and betterment.

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<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1973), 14-15.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachian Ethics*, Book 10: chap. 8, 1178G.

Other concepts that give his writings a highly conservative hue are, (1) his view that even friends are to be used in the eudaemonistic register in one's quest for contemplative happiness, (2) his belief that God deals primarily in the souls and the churches—not in the saeculum or society, (3) his understanding that the majority are predestined to be lost and only a select few saved, (4) his celebrated response to Cicero's Hortensius with a pledge to leave the active life of secular ambitions and temporal cares for devotion and the search for truth, and (5) his protracted wars with the highly activist and socially conscious Pelagians.

### **Influence of the Renaissance**

The pronounced contribution of classical philosophy to Christian societal caution is paralleled and augmented by a much more recent influence: the Renaissance. By transforming Christian eschatological conceptions into modern ideas of progress, the Renaissance promised a future happiness brought about not by societal endeavors but by intellectual prowess. Fueled by the notion that continuous accumulation of knowledge and extension of reason would bring about a progressive conquest of nature and the spread of social cohesion, Renaissance fervor presented the hope of endless possibilities of progress. Its influence is typified in the optimism of Priestly who predicted:

Nature, including both its materials and its laws, will be more at our command; men will make their situation in this world abundantly more easy and comfortable; they will prolong their existence in it and will grow daily more happy. . . . Thus, whatever the beginning of the world, the end will be glorious and paradisiacal beyond what our imagination can now conceive.<sup>4</sup>

This renovation of society was to be accomplished not so much by actively confronting societal evils as by the bestowal of the high and noble powers of reason upon the citizenry. The effect of this thinking was the reinforcing of the notion that social action is less a cure for human ills than individual enhancement, and that the path to a truly just society is one of quiet education and reflection, not aggressive or clamorous social programming.

### **Influence of the Reformation**

Perhaps the most efficient source of Christian societal conservatism is the movement which Protestants proclaim as normative for their actions: the Reformation. Whereas, Greek philosophy rendered societal activism unworthy of truly cultured citizens and the Renaissance created an optimism that discouraged practical elements of justice, the Reformation spawned a pessimism regarding society which rendered social action as hopeless, or at best a lesser use of one's time and energy.

It is possible to isolate in the thought systems of both Luther and Calvin a number of theological strains that contribute to this process. A primary factor in Luther's system is that he allows the foundational truth, "the just shall live by faith," to function not only as relief from monastic perfectionism but as a release from all uneasy conscience. Luther did not deny that Christians should do good works.<sup>5</sup> However, he made salvation possible without works, and this sometimes degenerates into "without action." Thus he could write,

But this most excellent righteousness, the righteousness of faith, which God imputes to us

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<sup>4</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man 2* (New York, 1964): 165.

<sup>5</sup> "We do not, therefore, reject good works; on the contrary, we cherish and teach them as much as possible. We do not condemn them for their own sake but on account of this godless addition to them and the perverse idea that righteousness is to be sought through them; for that makes them appear good outwardly, when in truth they are not" (*Luther's Works*, vol. 31, edited by Harold J. Grimm; general ed. Helmut T. Lehmann [Philadelphia, 1957], 363).

through Christ without works, is neither political nor ceremonial nor legal nor work-righteousness but is quite the opposite; it is a merely passive righteousness, . . . For here we work nothing, render nothing to God; we only receive and permit someone else to work in us, namely, God. Therefore it is appropriate to call the righteousness of faith or Christian righteousness “passive.”<sup>6</sup>

In Luther’s thought no obligation rests upon the Christian to change societal structures so that they might better conform to the requirements of justice. An example of His bias toward established authorities is reflected in his well-known admonition to rulers that they “hit, stab, and kill” when dealing with protesting rebels.<sup>7</sup> Like so many Christians before and after him, his unqualified endorsement of government resulted from a categorical view of Paul’s admonition in Romans 13:1-4.

Calvin’s contribution to the apolitical quality of Christianity is derived from positions similar to those of Luther. His sharp distinction between the “celestial” and “terrestrial” kingdoms is illustrative. To the class of celestial things belong “the knowledge of God, the knowledge of the divine will, and rules for the bending of our lives to His will.” To the class of terrestrial things belong “political science, domestic economy, all the mechanical arts, and the liberal and natural sciences.”<sup>8</sup> It was this severe dichotomy of human experience that blurred Calvin’s sense of duty in the secular realm and which allowed him to write concerning tyrannicide:

But we must, in the meantime, be careful not to despise or violate that authority of magistrates, full of venerable majesty, which God has established by the weightiest of decrees, even though it may reside with the most unworthy men who defile it as much as they can with their own wickedness. For, if the correction of unbridled despotism is the Lord’s to avenge, let us not at once think that it is entrusted to us, to whom no command has been given except to obey and suffer.<sup>9</sup>

An even more pervasive influence, however, is Calvin’s rigid ethical system which urges the Christian to a high degree of moral attainment while failing to allow for nuances of judgment within moral standards. By neglecting to apply Scripture to particular situations, Calvinism overlooks the historical relativities that are imbedded in Scriptural commands and, therefore, inadequately engages the question of what is just and what is unjust in societal relations.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, in a real sense, both the Renaissance and the Reformation share hearty accountability for the socially conservative outlook of modern Christianity. The former, because it was primarily interested in freeing the human quest for knowledge from all social, political, and religious restraints, and the latter because it was primarily interested in freeing individuals to appropriate the grace of God by faith untainted with human effort.

Added to these general theological roots of Protestant Christianity are a number of specific notions which are particularly meaningful for societal conservatism within the Seventh-

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<sup>6</sup> *Luther’s Works*, vol. 26, ed. Jarsolov Pelikon, assoc. ed., Walter A. Hansen (Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 45.

<sup>7</sup> *Luther’s Works* 18:358. Also *Luther and Culture*, eds. George W. Forell, et al. (Decorah, IO, 1960), 59.

<sup>8</sup> *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 3, chap. 19, sec. 15, general editors: John Baillie, John T. McNeill, Henry P. Van Dusen (Philadelphia, 1960), 847.

<sup>9</sup> John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 4, chap. 20, sec. 31, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, 1518.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin, like Luther, was not insensitive to suffering, but he saw its removal as out of the sufferer’s hands. As he wrote to the Protestants in Anjou (1556) discouraging their plans for rebellion, “Just now I am even more greatly saddened and troubled because of the threats to which you are being subjected, and the further prospect, to which we cannot shut our eyes, of a persecution greater than anything you have experienced. . . . But we can only groan in prayer to God that it may please Him to save you by the hand of that good and faithful Shepherd to whose care He has committed you” (Albert-Marie Schmidt, *Calvin and the Calvinistic Tradition* [New York, 1960], 78).

day Adventist Church. Four such determinative beliefs are: (1) apocalyptic eschatology, (2) sectarian ecclesiology, (3) a radically deterministic view of God, and (4) the “free-will” image of man.<sup>11</sup>

## **Some Theological Aspects of Adventist Conservatism**

### **Apocalyptic Eschatology**

While Seventh-day Adventists in the more developed societies do not preach and sing about the second coming of Christ with the fervor of their forbearers, they still teach that the event is imminent. The faith of these believers in the cataclysmic end of this world, as that of the less affluent member groups, is still the “eschatological given” in the light of which all the church’s social projects are engaged.

The societal consequences of such a view are, for the most part, highly predictable. Certainty of an imminent end tends to make serious plans for societal change unrealistic. Earthly projects are not a priority for apocalypticists. They live in the expectant posture of the people who Gilbert Murray describes as knowing how short time is “do not undertake to build that which they cannot finish or to employ those materials fit only for use in a structure that would require many generations or unlimited time for . . . completion.”<sup>12</sup> Such individuals tend to turn from society’s social needs to what they regard as “the work of the Gospel” and devote themselves wholly to that endeavor.

Historically speaking, many of the early Adventists were strong advocates of societal reform. In fact, a number who became Millerite leaders were members in humanitarian associations at the time they initially heard or read Miller's lectures.<sup>13</sup> Upon becoming Millerites, however, they usually forfeited membership in those bodies. For while the Millerite doctrine involved pronouncements regarding certain societal issues (such as slavery and capital punishment), their working philosophy usually reflected that of Joseph Bates, the eminent Sabbatarian, who, upon identifying with Millerism, decided that he was too busy preparing himself and others for the second coming of Christ to continue as before in addressing societal causes.<sup>14</sup>

That this view has survived the decades is demonstrated by the words of the distinguished church leader who wrote concerning his visit to the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi, Kenya, November 22 to December 10, 1975:

But I could not approve of much that happened in Nairobi. I felt sad to see strong churches and good people vote to commit their resources and energies to programs that Christ never assigned to His church. In my opinion, millions of people will die unevangelized and unsaved because the WCC and its member churches have been diverted from their true mission. Christ commissioned his followers to preach the Gospel and to lift the crucified Christ, but too many are neglecting this path and are becoming involved in other pursuits (some worthwhile to be sure, but many of which should be undertaken by Christians individually or by secular organizations). We

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<sup>11</sup> Man, as a free actor, is essentially unfettered by social circumstances, free to choose and thus free to effect his own salvation. Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark, “Prejudice and the Churches,” *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, ed. Charles Y. Glock (Belmont, CA, 1973), 93ff.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (New York, 1963), 90.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan M. Butler, “Adventism and the American Experience,” *The Rise of Adventism*, ed. S. Gaustad (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 176.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

disagree with the direction that the World Council of Churches is going, not because we believe the members and leaders are bad people, but we believe that they are “off the track.” However sincere they may be, they do no favor to the lost world by offering them the stones of political freedom, economic prosperity, or racial equality, when they hunger for bread—the Bread of Life.<sup>15</sup>

But again, the kingdom of God on earth has never been a major plank in the doctrinal platforms of apocalypticists. Society for them is thoroughly hopeless and holds potential for relief from oppression only by the conquest of God’s futuristic kingdom of glory.

### **Sectarian Ecclesiology**

As the sense of apocalyptic time in Millerism tended to mute long-range societal concerns, so their skepticism toward all religious and political institutions guaranteed a strong ecclesiastical individualism. Their appeal to other Christians to “come out of Babylon”—an accurate and necessary fulfillment of Revelation 18:1-4—was at first accompanied by a determination not to manufacture a separate organization for themselves.

However, a number of factors served to change the thinking of the believers and led to their leaving the existing churches and their formalizing an independent group. One factor was the series of visions given the prophetess, Ellen G. White, in 1859 in which she was told by God that efficient organization was needed for reliable witness. The other was the early believers’ aggressive denunciation of “nominal Christianity” as apostate religion and the subsequent hostilities that they encountered.<sup>16</sup>

That which most enduringly contoured the church’s sectarian ecclesiology was neither of the above. It was a misapplication of Ellen White’s counsels regarding the church’s participation in societal reform. The church prophetess cautioned that care must be taken with respect to social projects which would make “the work of the church” more difficult. Typical of her statements in this regard are:

Let us do nothing that will unnecessarily arouse opposition—nothing that will hinder the proclamation of the gospel message. Where demanded by custom or where greater efficiency is to be gained, let the white believers and the colored believers assemble in separate places of worship.<sup>17</sup>

These statements, written in 1900 at the height of recrimination—lynchings, stonings, etc.—against the black race were intended by Ellen White as common sense cautions against efforts that would literally close down the Adventist Church. They were not intended as preferred rules of conduct. After all, she had stated in earlier, less troublesome times:

You have no license from God to exclude the colored people from your places of worship. Treat them as Christ’s property, which they are, just as much as yourselves. They should hold membership in the church with the white brethren. Every effort should be made to wipe out the terrible wrong which has been done them.<sup>18</sup>

Unfortunately, however, many interpreted her remarks regarding noninvolvement in this matter at the height of racial tensions as permanent policy. They understood her to mean that

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<sup>15</sup> *Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 29, 1976.

<sup>16</sup> “As early as 1841 there was a report of a mob that attempted to break up a meeting of a lecturer who preached on the Midnight Cry. The next year several churches took official action against members who sympathized with or adhered to Miller’s ideas, and many churches closed their doors against Millerite lectures” (Jonathan M. Butler, “Adventism and the American Experience,” *The Rise of Adventism*, ed. S. Guastad [New York, 1974], 78).

<sup>17</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* 9 (Mt. View, CA, 1909): 208.

<sup>18</sup> Ellen G. White, March 21, 1891, *The Southern Work* (Washington, DC, 1966), 15.

Adventists should forever avoid involvement in societal change, lest they risk adding to their unavoidable stigma of being Sabbatharians the additional weight of social activism.

### Radical Determinism

A third theological position that heavily influences Adventist conservative policy is the church's highly deterministic view of divine initiative. Again, questionable understandings of Ellen White's counsels have contributed heavily to this viewpoint. An example of the prophetess' remarks regarding God's participation in human affairs is:

In the annals of human history the growth of nations, the rise and fall of empires, appear as dependent on the will and prowess of man. The shaping of events seems, to a great degree, to be determined by his power, ambition, or caprice. But in the word of God the curtain is drawn aside, and we behold, behind, above, and through all the play and counterplay of human interests and power and passions, the agencies of the all-merciful One, silently, patiently working out the counsels of His own will.<sup>19</sup>

A very colorful testimony of her regard for divine initiative in human affairs involves her description of the Civil War battle at Bull Run, also called the Battle of Manassas (July 21, 1861). Mrs. White was given a vision during the assembly of the Roosevelt, New York, conference, August 3, 1861. She related to the group that she was shown a detailed account of how, in this pivotal battle, the Northern troops were miraculously spared from certain annihilation.

Seeing the successful escape (retreat) of Northern forces from the battle as an act of God intended not only to spare their lives but to preserve the cause of right, she later wrote:

Had the Northern army at this time pushed the battle still further in their fainting, exhausted condition, the far greater struggle and destruction which awaited them would have caused great triumph in the South. God would not permit this, and sent an angel to interfere. The sudden falling back of the Northern troops is a mystery to all. They know not that God's hand was in the matter.<sup>20</sup>

That such statements were not intended to depress Christian participation in the realm of sociopolitical endeavors is clear when one reads the broad context of Ellen White's counsels on involvement in societal matters. Her urgings that believers vote on issues affecting the health and welfare of the nation,<sup>21</sup> her encouragement to young people who aspire to sit in legislative halls and help enact the laws of the nation,<sup>22</sup> her praise of godly statesmen and women, such as Moses,<sup>23</sup> Joseph,<sup>24</sup> Daniel,<sup>25</sup> and Esther<sup>26</sup> render her writings free from any narrowness in respect to Christian effort in the sociopolitical arena.

Such admonitions notwithstanding, the notion persists with many that God will Himself solve the problems of this proximate world and that societal duties, if engaged at all, must be addressed by the individual but never the corporate body. When one adds to Adventism's radical dependence upon a just kingdom beyond an imminent eschaton the belief in a Sovereign God

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<sup>19</sup> Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA, 1903), 173.

<sup>20</sup> White, *Testimonies for the Church* 1 (Mountain View, CA, 1885): 267.

<sup>21</sup> Ellen G. White, *Temperance* (Mountain View, CA, 1949), 253-56.

<sup>22</sup> Ellen G. White, *Messages to Young People* (Nashville, 1930), 36.

<sup>23</sup> White, *Education*, 61-64.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-54.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-57.

<sup>26</sup> *The SDA Bible Commentary* 3 (Washington, DC, 1954): 1139-40.

who overrules human initiative to carry out His purposes in history, it is easy to understand their pessimism with respect to altering societal structures.

### **The Freewill Image of Man**

A fourth theological outlook involved in the structuring of the Adventist societal mentality is what Charles Glock and Rodney Stark term “the free-will image of man.”<sup>27</sup> According to these authors, this image, which differs from denomination to denomination, may also, over a period of time, differ in the same persuasion. In any event, through the decades it has for theological conservatives been a chief causal factor in the development of a socially cautious outlook.

The strength of the “free-will image of man” within Adventist theology is readily apparent in the literary corpus of Ellen G. White. That the “will” occupies a prominent place in her moral schema is not surprising. Before joining the Millerites in 1842, she was a devoted Methodist, and Methodism in her day closely followed the tenets of Wesley, whose Arminian roots gave high value to personal opportunity and accomplishment.<sup>28</sup>

When one considers that Wesleyan Arminianism, in many ways a reaction to Calvinistic predestination, championed such beliefs as (1) sin consists in acts of the will, (2) the will as the faculty of self-determination, and (3) the synergistic view of human will as one of the causes of regeneration, White’s emphasis in this regard is quite understandable. For her, the will is the governing power in human nature. “Everything depends on the right action of the will.”<sup>29</sup>

Ellen White’s belief that success in secular as well as spiritual matters is contingent upon the resolute exercise of the will is reflected in her telling commentary on Matthew 11:12.<sup>30</sup>

“The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.” This violence takes in the whole heart. To be double minded is to be unstable. Resolution, self-denial, and consecrated effort are required for the work of preparation. The understanding and the conscience may be united; but if the will is not set to work, we shall make a failure.<sup>31</sup>

The message here for a great many is that poverty, illiteracy, and other similar ills, are a result of individual sloth, and that those who suffer from such are themselves to blame for their miseries. In the words of Glock and Stark, “It is not that Christians condone the social forces that deprive . . . but rather that they do not recognize the existence of such forces in the world.”<sup>32</sup> Then these two theorists conclude:

To the extent that Christian theology and institutions support a radical view of individual freedom and accountability, their members can be expected to reject the very premise upon which the battle against prejudice and discrimination rests. For if the disadvantaged condition of minority groups is proof of their unworthiness, how can people be expected to support measures to help them? In the eyes of such Christian laymen, the doctrines of the church and its efforts on behalf of human rights often seem contradictory.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark, “Prejudice and the Churches,” in *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (Belmont, CA, 1973), 95.

<sup>28</sup> P. Gerard Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, 1977), 7-8.

<sup>29</sup> Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA, 1892), 47.

<sup>30</sup> “And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force” (Matt 11:12, KJV).

<sup>31</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Youth’s Instructor*, May 24, 1900.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Y. Glock, “Prejudice and the Churches,” 95.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*



How is it that the notion of radical determinism discussed earlier and that of extensive “free will” can coexist in the same cognitive experience? It is possible because conservative believers tend to compartmentalize these ideas, allocating the principle of radical determinism to the arena of societal and public concerns and employing the dynamics of free will to the arena of religious salvation and individual success.

Thus, the notion of a hardy free will—the primary source of America’s belief in rugged individualism and its justification for private wealth—continues to be the chief ideological mainspring in the shaping of societal attitudes in that wing of Protestantism to which Adventism belongs.

## **Socioreligious Characteristics and Adventist Conservatism**

A group’s societal posture is determined not only by its theological assumptions, but it is influenced by its socioreligious characteristics as well. Four such mannerisms recently documented as involving religious social conservatism are: devotionalism, doctrinalism, particularism, and communalism.<sup>34</sup>

### **Devotionalism**

Charles Glock and Rodney Stark measured the correlation between devotionalism and social conservatism by differentiating among respondents with regard to the measure of importance they attached to doing good to others “as a prerequisite for salvation.” Through what they called an “ethicalism index,” they found that individual commitment to Christian ethics is a powerful antidote to prejudice but, paradoxically, that Christians who attended church infrequently were more likely to be attached to the ethics of the NT than were more active members.<sup>35</sup>

This inverse relationship between religious commitment and social liberalism is corroborated by Seymour Lipset and Earl Raab, who show that high devotionalism, along with a lack of formal education, is correlative to social conservatism. The findings of Lipset and Raab are summarized in table 1.<sup>36</sup>

### **Doctrinalism**

One of the studies in which *doctrinalism* surfaces as a key variable in Christian social conservatism is “Ministers as Moral Guides: The Sounds of Silence,” conducted by R. Stark, Bruce D. Foster, C. Glock, and H. Quinley.<sup>37</sup> This study investigated Protestant ministers from nine major denominations in California. Their finds, detailed in table 2 (involving 1,493

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<sup>34</sup> Robert Wuthnow, “Religious Commitment and Conservatism: In Search of an Elusive Relationship,” *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, ed. Charles Y. Glock (Belmont, CA, 1973), 117-28.

<sup>35</sup> Rodney Stark and Charles Y. Glock, *American Piety: The Nature of Religious Commitment* (Berkeley, CA, 1968); also Charles Y. Glock, et al., *To Comfort and to Challenge* (Berkeley, CA, 1967).

<sup>36</sup> In table 1, below, the authors classify “Rednecks” as socially conservative, economically liberal; “Right Radicals” as conservative both socially and economically; “Consistent Liberals” as liberal both socially and economically; and the “Old Guard” as socially liberal, economically conservative.

<sup>37</sup> Rodney Stark, et al., “Ministers as Moral Guides: The Sounds of Silence,” *Religion in Sociological Perspective: Essays in the Empirical Study of Religion*, ed. Charles Y. Glock (Belmont, CA, 1973), 160.

questionnaires with a response rate of 63 percent) reaffirms the influence of *doctrinalism*, as well as “*other worldliness*,” and the “*miracle motif*” upon political and social attitudes.<sup>38</sup>

Lipset and Raab, who developed this index as a means of examining Christian social conservatism, also found that the more doctrinally conservative the religious leader, the less prone he/she is to speak out against societal evils. Ninety-three percent of the individuals who scored zero (the lowest possible mark) on the doctrinal index had taken a stand on a societal issue at some time or another; only 42 percent of those who had a high doctrinal index had ever done so. Sixty-six percent of the individuals who scored zero had addressed societal issues from the pulpit over the past year at least five or six times, while only 10 percent of those who scored four (the highest mark) had done so.

Religious Commitment	Eight Grade		High School		College	
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
<b>Rednecks</b>						
High	30 <sup>a</sup>	(138)	30	(227)	17	(66)
Low	14	(14)	8	(37)	3	(37)
<b>Right Radicals</b>						
High	37	(183)	26	(227)	27	(66)
Low	7	(14)	5	(37)	0	(37)
<b>Consistent Liberals</b>						
High	2	(183)	3	(227)	8	(66)
Low	14	(14)	10	(37)	42	(37)
<b>Old Guard</b>						
High (1)	1	(183)	2	(227)	8	(66)
Low	14	(14)	16	(37)	24	(37)

<sup>a</sup> Percentage of those who have an eighth grade education or less are Rednecks and have a high religious commitment. Seymore Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *Politics of Unreason* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 471.

### Particularism/Communalism

The other two characteristic—*particularism* (the tendency toward dogmatism) and *communalism* (the disposition to exclusivity in associational patterns)—have not been as conclusively identified with societal conservatism as have *devotionalism* and *doctrinalism*. However, evidence that they are operative in this regard is advanced by several theorists,

<sup>38</sup> The following statement is regarded by many as a clear endorsement by the church prophetess, Ellen White, of the “miracle motif” position: “He who was our example kept aloof from earthly governments. Not because He was indifferent to the woes of men, but because the remedy did not lie in merely human and external measures. To be efficient, the cure must reach men individually, and must regenerate the heart” (Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* [Mountain View, CA, 1898], 509).

including Robert Wuthnow, in his study, “Religious Commitment and Conservatism: In Search of an Elusive Relationship.”<sup>39</sup> (Table 2).

	Low 0 (28)	1 (134)	2 (296)	3 (467)	High 4 (568)	Total (1,493)
1. “If enough men were brought to Christ, social ills would take care of themselves.”						
Percent agree	7	17	35	41	77	44
Percent disagree	86	69	54	51	21	42
2. “It would be better if the church were to place less emphasis on individual sanctification and more on bringing human conditions into conformity with Christian teachings.”						
Percent agree	93	80	73	51	19	47
Percent disagree	4	11	18	36	60	42
3. “It is not as important to worry about life after death as about what one can do in this life.”						
Percent agree	100	93	90	76	42	68
Percent disagree	0	6y	7	19	47	26
Rodney Stark, et al., “Ministers as Moral Guides: The Sounds of Silence,” <i>Religion in Sociological Perspective: Essays in the Empirical Study of Religion</i> , ed. Charles Y. Glock (Belmont, CA: Wadworth Publishing Co., 1973), 160.						

What must now be reiterated is that devotionalism, doctrinalism, particularism, and communalism are all prominent characteristics of Seventh-day Adventism. The church’s high degree of religious commitment (devotionalism) is evidenced by its members’ church attendance and their unusually liberal financial giving patterns. The strength of their theological convictions (doctrinalism) is quite evident in the positive emphasis common to their teachings.

Adventist conviction that their religion fulfills the prophetic description of the true church (particularism) in the end-time is evidenced by their evangelical motif which lays heavy emphasis upon proselytizing. Their proclivity toward exclusivity in associational patterns (communalism)—not as pronounced now as formerly—is highlighted by the hedges formed in endogamous marriage, Christian education, and continuing, if less strenuous, denunciations of all other branches of Christianity as Babylon or apostate religion. These four characteristics guarantee the church a strong appeal to the conservative mind—a factor important to the perpetuation of its societal caution.

<sup>39</sup> Wuthnow records: “Only when orthodoxy is combined with ‘particularism’ or radically ‘fundamentalistic’ views does it show frequent correlations with conservative secular attitudes . . . *communalism* is the only dimension that seems unambiguously related to conservatism, especially social conservatism—confirming the expectation that sustained in-group association is related to intolerance” (Wuthnow, “Religious Commitment and Conservatism,” 160, italics mine).

## **Adventist Social Service**

This is not to say that the Seventh-day Adventist Church lacks compassion or that it is completely void of a societal agenda—it is not. Through such programs as Christian Record Services International (CRSI), the church's outreach to the sight and hearing impaired; Adventist Development and Relief Agency International (ADRA), its worldwide organization for community development and for disaster relief; the Community Service units of its local congregations; and its vast and well respected health system, the church succeeds in bringing relief to victims of misfortune on a very wide scale.

Those are both noble and necessary. However, these service activities are probably more a function of Micah's other injunction, "love mercy," than the more challenging command, "do justice." The requirements of justice go beyond providing relief to those victimized by natural disaster and economic misfortune. They also include the structuring of systems that will guarantee the community's continued fairness in the distribution of its benefits.<sup>40</sup>

## **Biblical Perspectives**

### **Society Under Israel's Theocracy**

The history of Judaism is instructive. We note, for instance, that the book of the covenant (Exod 20:22–23:19) comprises a code of ordinances and exhortations that among other stipulations forbade the oppression of strangers, widows, and orphans; the retention beyond sundown of the pledged garment of the poor; usury or interest upon charitable loans to the needy; and conspiracy to pervert justice.

The Hebrew move from the mobile, agrarian society of the Exodus to a more established, city-dwelling people in later centuries occasioned even more forceful directives. Thus, Amos lists oppression of the poor as a primary cause of divine retribution (Amos 2:6-7) and decries a religion that is satisfied with rituals but ignores justice (Amos 5:11-25). And Micah vigorously excoriates those who confiscate the fields and houses of the poor and pervert equity (Mic 2:1-3).

And the latter prophets reveal a justice concern no less demanding: Ezekiel chides his hearers for hiding behind collective responsibility for injustice and emphasizes individual accountability for honesty, benevolence, and equity (Ezek 18:5-9); Isaiah, who pronounces woe upon those who decree and dispense with partiality (Isa 10:1-4), capsulizes his appeal for the regard for the disinherited when he asks, "Is not this the fast that I have chosen? . . . Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and . . . when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him . . . ?" (Isa 58:6-7, KJV); and Jeremiah equates one's willingness to render justice with the quality of one's relationship with God (Jer 22:16).<sup>41</sup>

The books of wisdom contribute also. Solomon enjoins against abuse of the fatherless (Prov 23:10-11) and stoutly denounces oppression and wrongful judgments (Eccl 3:16–4:1). Job eloquently affirms his intention to remain honest in matters of commerce (Job 31:5-8). His recognition that in the area of social relations master and slave are equal before God (Job 31:13-

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<sup>40</sup> The church's Department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty that addresses principles and problems of freedom of conscience worldwide is perhaps its most consistent and effective thrust in this regard.

<sup>41</sup> It is important to observe that with the development of a more complicated society the interpretation of moral responsibility as including the non-Israelite widened. So that God's earlier instructions emphasizing concerns for servants, maids, and strangers (Lev. 25:6) expands in later times to responsibility for even the cities of their captors. This concern is most clearly expressed in God's command to Jeremiah: "Do your best for the welfare of the country where I have sent you to be exiles; pray to the Eternal for it, since your welfare lies in its welfare" (Jer 29:7, Moffatt).

15), his disavowal of callousness toward the poor, the hungry, the widows, the fatherless, the ill-clad, etc. (Job 31:16-23), his rejection of wealth as a claim to favoritism (Job 31:24-25), his care for strangers (Job 31:32), and the purity of his motives with respect to ownership (Job 31:38-40) are stirring witness against the societal unconcern of even modern-day believers.

### **The Ministry and Example of Jesus**

The ministry of Jesus, however, given the sociopolitical circumstances of His day, is an example and guide for societal conscience more pronounced than that of any of the OT prophets. Luke's account of Christ's societal activity is very vivid: Christ's emphasis and concern for the captives, the blind, and the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19), the poor and the hungry (6:20-21), the sick and infirm (7:22-23), the despised Gentile (7:1-10), economic oppression and excess wealth (18:18-28; 16:5), and charity for the needy (12:32-34; 10:30-37), defines His service on earth in terms of society's victims in ways yet unappreciated by a great percentage of His followers. Christ not only straightened their limbs and filled their stomachs; He lifted their hopes and freed their spirits from the psychological yokes that an insensitive society had levied upon them.

Christ's persistent regard for the status of women also has special notice in Luke's Gospel.<sup>42</sup> Since women were among the heavily oppressed in the society in which Christ lived, His stance toward them is especially noteworthy. In His attention to their plight, Jesus censured those who "devour widows' houses" (Luke 20:47), spoke approvingly of the widow who wore down an indifferent judge with pleas for justice (Luke 18:1-5), labeled as adulterers men who divorced their wives in the established tradition of Hebrew law (Luke 16:18), and included "some women" in His evangelistic company (Luke 8:1-3). Had Jesus' teachings and example with respect to women's status been adopted by the people of His day, radically new patterns of societal relations would have been inaugurated.

Christ's correctives regarding government—itsself—are more subtle but they are seen in His: (1) response to the question about tribute by relegating to Caesar a place subordinate to and critiqued by God (Mark 12:17), (2) reference to Herod Antipas as "that fox" (Luke 13:32), (3) refusal to satisfy the depraved curiosity of that same Herod at the time of his trial (Luke 23:9), (4) bold reminder to Pilate that his vaunted authority was both subordinate and temporary (John 19:11), (5) repeated focus on the kingdom of grace as the higher and ultimate source of legal and social ethics (Matt 5), (6) emphasis of the freedom of the soul from all coercion as a superior good (Matt 10:28), (7) counsel on how to assert one's freedom and one's dignity by voluntarily doubling the oppressor's requirements (Matt 5:39-42), and (8) elimination of the fear of death through the power of the resurrection (John 6:39-40).

It is incorrect to describe Christ as a political revolutionary. He was not that in the usual understanding of the expression, but He was revolutionary nonetheless. He was revolutionary in that His ministry resisted oppressive structures. His reminders, "It hath been said . . . but I say," illumine not only His attacks upon legalism but they are thematic for His societal relations as well. Christ never frontally attacked the Roman system, but by His words and example, He planted capsules of social freedom which, under more favorable circumstances in later generations, burst forth in overt, active demands for equity.

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<sup>42</sup> "Clearly, women had a prominent place in Jesus' teaching, as well as in His service. It is to be noted that the Gospel of Luke, more than any of the others, emphasizes Jesus' teaching about and relative to women. It has sometimes been designated as the gospel of womanhood. All told, some thirteen women who are not mentioned in other gospels are mentioned in Luke" (Walter F. Specht, "Jesus and Women," *Symposium on the Role of Women in the Church* [Biblical Research Institute Committee], 80).

## Ellen White and Societal Concerns

Further inspiration for a more effective societal conscience in socially conservative Adventism is gained by closer attention to a number of specific categories in the thought of Ellen White. What must be remembered is that while Ellen White was the chief spokesperson and defender of the church, she has also served as an outspoken critic of many of its postures. Her ministry was not only formative and apologetic, it was also corrective. A critical study of her writings reveals that in spite of her conservative ecclesiology and her radical view of divine initiative in earthly affairs (see above), Ellen White posits sociotheological insights which mark her as clearly advanced to much of Adventism's sociality—past and present.

### Concreteness Vis-à-vis Abstractness

Ellen White's emphasis on concreteness is demonstrated in that she refused to identify with mainline American Christianity's penchant for engaging metaphysical themes while ignoring the historical situation of the human agent. In spite of the fact that she witnessed Christianity's radical swing to transcendent concerns as it reacted against the social gospel, she maintained a keen sense of societal awareness.

Among the real world issues of her time with which she grappled were: (1) slavery, (2) the Civil War, (3) the reconstruction, (4) women's suffrage, (5) prohibition, (6) child labor practices, (7) Darwinian evolutionism, and (8) the urbanization of America and its concomitant evils of escalating tensions between capital and labor, abuses by the rich, human misery in crowded, unsanitary ghettos, and the disintegration of traditional family mores.

### “Proleptic” Eschatology Vis-à-vis “Apocalyptic” Eschatology

Ellen White's prolepticism or belief that activity in the “here and now” should be illumined by the principles of the realm beyond the eschaton are highly perceptive. Some of her more choice statements in this regard are: (1) “When the Lord's people are filled with meekness and tenderness. . . they will make a heaven below in which to prepare for heaven above”;<sup>43</sup> (2) “Those who are accepted at last as members of the heavenly court, will be men and women who . . . sought to put the impress of heaven upon their earthly labors”;<sup>44</sup> (3) “We are to practice the principles of heaven here below”;<sup>45</sup> (4) “Human agencies are the hands of heavenly instrumentalities, for heavenly angels employ human hands in practical ministry.”<sup>46</sup>

### Stewardship

Through this symbol—perhaps her most distinctive contribution to ethical theory—Ellen White is able to relate divine commission to humanitarian endeavor while avoiding the extremes of humanism on the one hand and other-worldliness on the other. One of her more pointed statements reads:

Those who are indifferent to the wants of the needy will be counted unfaithful stewards, and will be registered as enemies of God and man. . . Instead of closing our eyes and senses to the wants of those who have nothing, instead of adding more and more facilities to those that are

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<sup>43</sup> White, *Testimonies for the Church* 7 (Mountain View, CA, 1902): 131.

<sup>44</sup> Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, CA, 1913), 58.

<sup>45</sup> White, *Testimonies for the Church* 9:197.

<sup>46</sup> White, *Testimonies for the Church* 6 (Mountain View, CA, 1900): 456.

already abundant, let us seek to see what we can do to relieve the distresses of the poor.<sup>47</sup>

That her stewardship concept goes beyond the individual or personal level is clear from the following: “The work of gathering in the needy, the oppressed, the suffering, the destitute, is the very work which every church that believes the truth for this time should long since have been doing.”<sup>48</sup>

### **Civil Disobedience**

Keying upon the words of Peter, “We ought to obey God rather than man” (Acts 5:29), she repeatedly enjoins that when the principles of the two valued realms—earthly government and heavenly government—clash, it is the latter that must be obeyed, the consequences notwithstanding. Her public defiance of the Fugitive Slave Law illustrates this point. Her wording is: “The law of our land requiring us to deliver a slave to his master, we are not to obey; and we must abide the consequences of violating this law. The slave is not the property of any man.”<sup>49</sup> Her position on this issue and her praise of the German Christian princes for defying government authorities at the Diet of Spire (1529) is daring for her day.<sup>50</sup>

Again, while none of the above makes it possible to classify Ellen White as a political theologian or a societal activist in the common sense of these terms, together they structure for her a societal posture that is a strong critique for the majority of conservative Christians and churches—both in her day and in ours.

### **Conclusion**

In the light of Micah’s justice command, this overview of the church’s societal personality suggests the following conclusions:

1. While religion makes a needed contribution to society by its legitimation of existing characteristics—a function sometimes called its priestly role—when it blindly acts in this regard, it blesses the status quo and weighs society’s benefits toward the advantaged or the “haves” and against the oppressed or the “have nots.”<sup>51</sup> And that is contrary to the biblical example. It cannot be forgotten that its scriptural charter assigns the body of Christ a companion function: the prophetic role. The mandate to direct society by voice and example beyond oppression to a just and equitable society. For Adventism, as for every other denomination, theology must never become subservient to formalism. It is only when the former critiques and informs the latter that the church’s sacralization role is genuinely functional.

2. The early Greek vision of societal involvement, which Christianity assumed, can be mitigated in modern believers by conscious reflection upon an even earlier and more authentic influence—the prophetic voice of Judaism. The prophets are not hesitant in this regard. Their concern for even the “strangers in their midst” and for the “lands in which they dwelt” is deserving of Christian reappraisal in our quest for proper societal attitudes. Of course, Judaism’s

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<sup>47</sup> White, *The Southern Work*, 38; also in “An Appeal for the South,” *Review and Herald*, December 12, 1895, 315.

<sup>48</sup> White, *Testimonies for the Church* 6:276.

<sup>49</sup> White, *Testimonies for the Church* 1:202.

<sup>50</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA, 1950). 197ff.

<sup>51</sup> In the psyches of many religious conservatives “The well-ordered society stands rather than moves. God is the central weight in a universe where everything, if in good order, is sand-bagged in its place, through the law—and virtues—of gravity: reverence to God, deference to superiors, humility toward office and contentment with lot” (William F. May, *Soundings*, Spring, 1970, vol. 53, no. 1, 38).

failure was the opposite of the Greeks. Theirs was not a lack of direction but the failure to obey, and they lost the blessings which proper societal concern would have produced.

It is the duty of the church today to outdistance its inheritance of both Grecian quiescence and Hebrew elitism. Psychological legacies—like the other kind—have strong nostalgic meanings; however, when consciously identified and objectively viewed, we are able to allocate them appropriate significance.

3. It is not true, as many reformers taught, that the secular kingdom (the state) is off limits to Christians, a thing apart from the sacred realm. Peter and Paul remind us that both realms are ordained of God (1 Pet 2:13-15; Rom 3:1). They are not irreconcilable antagonists, but are as Karl Barth reminds us, an outer circle (the state) and an inner circle (the church) sharing a common origin and a common center.<sup>52</sup> In this view the state is established and empowered by God to preserve order and protect the church from chaos and to provide God's people time and opportunity to preach the gospel. Such an understanding makes Christian indifference to civil activities impossible. The church simply cannot ignore the philosophy and deeds of an order so closely tied to its mission. In Barth's words, "Such indifference would be equivalent to the opposition of which it is said in Romans 13:2 that it is a rebellion against the ordinance of God."<sup>53</sup>

While the church cannot, should not, become *the* government or "fall into the trap of identifying itself with one particular form of government or political system," it must at all times bare witness to the truth, and it cannot do so without assuming the causes of justice.<sup>54</sup> History has proven the Renaissance thinkers to be grossly overoptimistic. Truth functions on earth not as visionary will or abstract principle; it has heart and hands and feet to be used for the restoration of wounded humanity into the freedom and image of God. Christian mission and Christian duty are not antithetical or simply complimentary notions; they are synonymous. Our charter does not provide us a choice "between offering the gospel of peace and lifting the yokes of oppression as if the two activities were separate agenda."<sup>55</sup>

4. Paul's opting for a more humane relationship between slave and master and not the overthrow of slavery, as well as his counseling against women speaking in church does not sanctify such social relationships. True, the revolutionary kind sometimes push against the cognitive boundaries of their era—always straining toward future comprehensions. And sometimes, as in the case with the Apostle Paul in Galatians 3:28, they actually succeed in forecasting societal codes of later periods.<sup>56</sup> But essentially the prophets are also generational, that is, bound by the perceptual categories of their day.

Since prophets may be limited by the cognitive idioms which they inherit, or circumstances may mitigate against forward moves that would reproach the church and hinder its task, it is unreasonable for us to transplant their words as literal guides for the sociopolitical circumstances of succeeding centuries. Nor should we be surprised when a later prophet, as seen in Ellen White's contrast with the apostle Paul on civil disobedience (cf. the return of Onesimus to Philemon), differs from a prior figure. *The prophets' word regarding societal responsibility always provides absolute principle, but it does not provide absolute policy.* Their societal

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<sup>52</sup> Karl Barth, *Community, State, and Church* (Gloucester, MA, 1968), 156.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>54</sup> Bert Beach, *Bright Candle of Courage* (Boise, ID, 1989), 71.

<sup>55</sup> Jan Paulsen, "Is Social Service Our Mission?" *Adventist Review*, August 31, 1989, 19.

<sup>56</sup> Even with Onesimus, Paul experienced a breakthrough. Perhaps he could not conceive a slaveless society, but he did admonish Philemon to love his slave as a brother, and that was truly revolutionary for his society.



counsels come to us as “middle axioms”—that is, waymarks of thought—not “trans-generational” rules fixed and finalized for all times.<sup>57</sup>

Given this position, the church’s challenge is not a precise duplication of the actions of Jesus and Paul or of even so recent a personality as Ellen White. Instead our endeavor should be to demonstrate the principles that their actions convey. The question for us today is not what did they do, but what would they do in our present world of thought and opportunity? In other words, the church is not called upon to mimic what they did but to apply the tenets of truth and justice that they gave us as courageously in our world as they did in theirs.

5. The church’s societal responsibility suggests not only the rendering of welfare but advocacy and protest as well. The oppressed seldom have the leverage to plead their cause adequately. They require representation—the advocacy of those of superior resources who are willing to appeal on their behalf. Contrary to the assumption of most conservative Christians, appealing to institutions of the civic order or to Caesar himself is neither sinful nor diversionary. That is why Isaiah could write, “Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow” (Isa 1:17, KJV). And again, in condemnation of those who turned their heads away from oppression: “Your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue hath muttered perverseness. None calleth for justice, nor any pleadeth for truth: they trust in vanity, and speak lies; they conceive mischief, and bring forth iniquity” (Isa 59:3-4, KJV).

And along with service and advocacy there must be protest. Those who read Christ’s decision to keep “aloof from earthly governments” and not to attack Roman oppression<sup>58</sup> as a prohibition against protest overlook a number of significant variables.

First is the fact that in many countries a great deal of societal injustice is perpetrated by private institutions, that is, industry, education, business and the like. Against such abuses Christ did protest. He did so in decrying against unjust wealth (Matt 19:21-26), unjust divorce (Matt 19:4-12), unjust communication (Matt 5:37), unjust status (Luke 11:43), unjust authority (Luke 11:46), unjust judgments (Matt 23:23), unjust rewards (Matt 23:35), and unjust obstruction of justice (Luke 11:52).

Second, the military rule under which Christ lived was so restrictive that to protest against the government would have been strategically inconceivable—that is, suicidal. It would not only have aborted His ministry, it would have set an impossible standard for believers in subsequent ages who also would be forced to live under inescapable tyranny. One must balance the silence of NT characters, even Christ, regarding tyranny, with the scathing rebuke rendered by Amos and others against oppressive governments. The Bible does not exempt the nations from moral evaluation and rebuke.<sup>59</sup>

Third, while it is true that the remedy for injustice does not lie in “merely human and external measures” and “to be efficient, the cure must regenerate the heart,” it cannot be forgotten that sufferers are just as relieved when oppressors are restrained by admittedly

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<sup>57</sup> The term “middle axioms” was coined by J. H. Oldham and is defined as the direction or way in which Christian faith should express itself in a given generation. It realizes that while the kingdom of God lies beyond our best achievements, God does have purposes that can be realized in this world. “Middle axioms” are not absolute or final plateaus. They are “the next step that one’s generation must take” (J. Philip Wogaman, *A Christian Method of Moral Judgment* [Philadelphia, 1976], 21).

<sup>58</sup> See n. 32.

<sup>59</sup> “The book of Amos, as we have it now, opens with denunciations of Israel’s neighbours for their crimes against common humanity. (1:1–2:3). The prophet lashes with his tongue Damascus, Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab for their barbarous behaviour—massacres of innocent victims, atrocities of all descriptions, oppression, violence and cruelty” (William Neal, *Harpers Bible Commentary* [New York, 1962], 291).

incomplete measures. The relief of the oppressed—not the conversion of the oppressor—is the immediate goal of justice. Furthermore, to say that the cure does not lie “merely” in human and external measures is to say that it does lie “partially” there and not entirely in divine or internal operations.

Among the legitimate means by which the Christian can protest injustice are: (1) voting for proper officials and issues, (2) writing letters and petitions to individuals of influence, (3) making speeches and writing articles that educate citizenry regarding injustice, (4) lobbying in such bodies as Congress and the United Nations in an attempt to influence legislation, (5) boycotting firms and products that prey upon the oppressed, and (6) even marching in demonstrations for freedom as was engaged by many sincere Christians during the civil rights struggles in America. The church is not political when it thinks this way. It is true that all political reform is societal endeavor, but it does not follow that all societal reform is political endeavor.

5. The church must by its internal social and organizational experience demonstrate the high qualities of justice that it wishes for the secular realm. This means that instead of modeling, as it often does, the unjust, bureaucratic and hierarchical forms around it, the church must courageously strive toward the societal ideals of God’s Word. Justice must be manifested within if it is to be advocated without.

The church knows that final justice lies beyond the eschaton. But it is ever prodded by Micah’s mandate to champion its virtues, nevertheless, in the “here and now.”<sup>60</sup> To do otherwise is not only a neglect of stewardship; it is a lessening of relevance—and, very significantly, the loss of rich satisfactions and sure benedictions.

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<sup>60</sup> “Perfect freedom and perfect justice are goals worthy of our commitment as Christians. Indeed, God holds us accountable for what we have done to foster or hinder these goals. Yet, in a fallen world, neither will be fully realized. That perfection will come only when the King of heaven returns. But for now, it is our Christian duty to seek to change this imperfect world for the better” (Kenneth S. Kantzer, “The Jericho Factor,” in *Christianity Today*, January 15, 1990, 14).