Seventh-day Adventism and the Achievement of Transcendent Identity

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Cover Page Footnote

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Abstract

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is one of the most racially and culturally diverse religious groups in the United States. With the church's Biblical mandate to proclaim the Three Angels' messages to all peoples, the need for a unity that acknowledges yet transcends individual and collective differences is imperative. However, racial and cultural tensions, particularly between Caucasians and African Americans, continue to hinder this aim. While theological discussions regarding such issues are common within the church, sociological nuances are not always clearly pointed out. This paper investigated sociological theories behind and challenges to multicultural religious settings, the obstacles Adventist history has posed regarding healthy Caucasian and African American relations, and sociological, theological, and practical considerations for attaining greater unity. It is concluded that the achievement of a transcendent identity lies not in ignoring racial or ethnic differences, striving blindly for more multicultural churches, or becoming too insular in the celebration of cultural identity, but in delving deeper into the reality behind such differences and their use in furthering the mission of the church.

Seventh-day Adventism and the Achievement of Transcendent Identity

As a worldwide religious movement, the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) church encompasses myriad races and cultures. Within the United States, this is increasingly true, as Seventh-day Adventists comprise the most racially and ethnically diverse religious group in the country (Lipka, 2015). The Adventist mission of proclaiming the Three Angels' messages "to every nation and tribe and language and people" necessitates the creation of a transcendent identity that simultaneously respects culture while remaining united on the basis of faith (Revelation 14:6, English Standard Version). However, continued cultural tensions, fostered by history and ideologies outside of and within Adventism, often threaten this aim, especially between Caucasians and African Americans. Although much has been discussed in academic and public circles regarding this topic, light is not always shed on particular subtleties concerning the nature of human interactions and Adventist thought. Exploring sociological factors behind multiculturalism, resolving challenges based on Adventist history of Caucasian and African American interrelations, and embracing sociological, theological, and practical reform are critical to attaining greater understanding and unity as members advocating the cause of Christ.

Multicultural Churches and Reoriented Identity: Theories and Challenges

Sociological ideas on and challenges to multiculturalism in a church setting provide insight regarding how transcendent identity should and should not be achieved. Although many Christians do not dispute that their unity rests upon the foundational belief in Jesus Christ, individual and collective attributes such as culture, heritage, and environment influence how a church is structured and functions. The aspects of race and culture alone can create the greatest division and isolation since they are foundational to how individuals perceive and interact with each other. The ability to overcome these challenges appears to reside in a church's emphasis on

a shared and transcending religious identity. Marti (2008) noted that in multiracial congregations, worship music, Bible classes, sermons, and other ministry tools are commonly used to accomplish this aim. A particularly effective tool is perhaps that of small groups, in which participation in various activities or hobbies sparks and nurtures friendships among members (Dougherty, 2003). Rather than diversity being ignored, these approaches help to reorient the concept of identity so that church involvement and integration are not based chiefly on race or culture, but on religious and relational commonalities.

Although greater emphasis on religious identity and unity would likely strengthen the church's mission efforts, the necessary shift of thought and practice may not be so easy to achieve, both among Adventist members in general and among African American and Caucasian members specifically. Certain sociological factors present intriguing answers as to why. Kraft (1978) outlined a variety of attitudes individuals have towards diversity or multiculturalism. Three of these attitudes may often occur within a church setting. The first is the "melting pot attitude," in which diversity is perceived as bad and a necessity to congeal is urged so that only one type of sameness exists. The second attitude, a "laissez-faire" approach, results in the belief that diversity is bad but that nothing should be done since everyone will eventually assimilate. The third stance is the "tourist attitude," in which individuals' respect for diversity is accompanied by the biased perception that "thank God we are not strange the way they are" (Kraft, 1978, p. 122). These responses complicate the church's ability to both embrace and rise above racial and cultural differences in terms of collective identity. "Sameness" is also perpetuated as the ideal. Some scholars have elaborated on this concept through the discussion of the homogeneity principle, which argues that individuals who interact well with each other do so "only because they have a high degree of homogeneity," or sameness, with each other (Kraft,

1978, p. 121). Although the criteria for "sameness" is multifaceted, race and culture are frequently defining elements. Some may disagree with how this principle should be utilized in the church, or even if God approves of homogeneity (Kraft, 1978). Additionally, it must be noted that individual diversity within one racial or cultural group can also challenge how well members of that group interrelate. However, it cannot be denied that the desire for sameness occurs in life and is a common aspect of human nature.

Naturally, church members who prioritize race and culture may leave more diverse congregations for those that follow their unique racial or ethnic patterns of religious expression (Marti, 2008). Within African American churches, this trend may be influenced by historical elements and minority group paradigms. Facing oppression throughout slavery, the Jim Crow era, the Civil Rights movement, and beyond, African Americans found the church to be one of the few settings in which they could truly exercise their human rights (Patillo-McCoy, 1998). In 17th-century New England, for example, segregated churches allowed African Americans to worship without negative treatment, train leaders, aid the poor, and cultivate solidarity (Archer, 2017). Although today's trials for African Americans are different, continued injustice and racism perpetuate the feelings of oppression that many experience, as well as the social relief a religious setting can bring. According to Tatum (1997, p. 80), "having a place to be rejuvenated and feel anchored in one's cultural community" results in positive outcomes for racial and ethnic minority groups. Even when oppression is not overtly present in or perceived by that community, the "cultural conditioning…is so deeply ingrained that, while not indissoluble, it is for all practical purposes not eradicable" (Rock, 2018, p. 172). The ingraining of culture can exist for any group, including Caucasians, and beyond the quest for sameness, members of any group may simply feel most understood and appreciated by those of their same culture. Unfortunately, this

outcome may complicate the issue of religious unity if Adventist African Americans use the

platform of the church to promote ethnocentrism, alienating themselves from other groups, and

perceiving all Caucasians to be racist or prejudiced (Rock, 2018). On the other hand, Caucasian

believers may be in danger of misunderstanding the nature of inequality between both groups,

attributing it simply to higher "relational dysfunction among black Americans" (Emerson, Smith,

& Sikkink, 1999, p. 401). Regardless of the group, however, patterns of individual and collective

behavior and thought heavily impact the ability to focus on religious harmony as opposed to

racial and cultural differences. Between Adventist Caucasians and African Americans, the

complexity in maintaining healthy interrelations is only heightened by the legacy of the church's

past.

Adventism, the U.S., and the plight of Race: Insights from History

Since its inception near the end of the Civil War, the SDA church has wrestled with

Caucasian and African American interrelations. Although a few issues could be considered

unique to a church setting, all of the major struggles that developed were influenced by the

mainstream, race-based oppression of African Americans by Caucasians and their dominant

system of power. With the exception of Native Americans, African Americans "have suffered

the widest, deepest, and too frequently, the most murderous inequality for the longest stretch of

our nation's history" (Lebron, 2017, p. 128). The fact that inequality and disharmony still persist

in some areas makes it imperative that history be remembered so that reconciliation can occur,

appropriate appreciation of differences can be expressed, and errors are not repeated.

One error of the early Adventist church was its neglect to heed the apostle Paul's warning

to not conform to the habits of the world (Romans 12:2). Expressing her frustration with the

response of Adventists to recently emancipated slaves, Ellen White (1909) stated that, like the

U.S. government and other Christian denominations, the church "failed to act its part" in providing adequate resources (p. 205). While White and other early leaders attempted in liberal ways to correct the prejudice and social injustice towards African Americans, such issues remained largely unalleviated (Rock, 2018). African Americans were given a lower priority concerning evangelistic outreach and were treated differently even from other groups of color, such as those from the Caribbean. For example, Bull and Lockhart (2006) noted that although overseas missions had been established, with the number of converts already in the thousands, the church initially approached African American communities with less vigor. As a result, the number of African American members of the Adventist Church in 1894 was only 50. Additionally, due perhaps to historical differences in how West Indians and African Americans were perceived and treated by Anglo-Saxons during and after slavery, West Indians were generally more accepted in Caucasian Adventist churches and did not receive the discrimination to which African Americans were subjected (Kopelson, 2014; Bull & Lockhart, 2006). Examples like these highlight the nuanced nature of how early Adventists generally responded to African Americans and race.

As the issue of integration arose, the response of the SDA church mirrored that of other Protestant denominations. As noted by Penno (2016), biracial congregations existed during the First Great Awakening but were quenched by dissenting Caucasians in the South. As the 19th and 20th centuries progressed, separate congregations and even race-specific denominations arose, interrupted only briefly by periods of integration in denominations such as the Church of God. Within the Adventist Church, a growing number of individuals began to believe that unless segregation continued, African Americans could not be evangelized without alienating Caucasian populations (Bull & Lockhart, 2006). This led Ellen White and other anti-

segregationist church leaders to concede in 1895 that having Caucasians and African Americans worship together "cannot be followed as a general custom with profit to either party…the best thing will be to provide the colored people who accept the truth, with places of worship of their own..." (White, 1909, p. 206). Though unfortunate and even controversial, this compromise was realistic considering the often-violent expression of the flawed social paradigms ostracizing African Americans during that period. However, many Adventists adhered too strongly to White's advice, obeying it as though it were a "perpetual principle" by which to abide (Rock, 2018, p. 24).

Subsequent attempts for equality and integration continued to incur conflict. After holding evangelistic tent meetings, which thousands of people attended, African American minister L. C. Sheafe established the first multiracial SDA church in Washington, D.C. in 1903. However, Sheafe had originally been assigned by General Conference leaders to hold the tent meetings in order for segregated congregations to be established (Rock, 2018). When the General Conference moved its headquarters from Battle Creek to the nation's capital, many Caucasian members withdrew from Sheafe's church to organize a separate congregation (Dudley, 2000). The tenacity of the idea of separation also influenced the Adventist Church's still-controversial organization of separate African American Regional Conferences. Branson (2000) noted that the church's response was an alternative between two Protestant positions: full integration, which predominated in the Episcopalian and Presbyterian denominations; or full separation, as in the Baptist and Methodist denominations. However, with management of the unique needs of the Adventist African American community being placed under the leadership of those who understood those needs best—fellow African Americans—the regional conferences

became the "fastest growing organizations that the church has witnessed in its history of over 100 years" (Dudley, 2000, p. 298).

In the decades following World War II, the Adventist Church's response to the African American community's intensifying call for equality and integration began to improve, but was still fraught with challenges. The fact that African Americans were prohibited for such a long period of time from eating in the Review and Herald cafeteria, being admitted into Adventist hospitals, and rooming with Caucasians on Adventist college campuses, provide further grounds upon which racial tensions and perhaps resentment may linger today (Rock, 1970). However, many members are genuinely committed to the mission of the church and are willing to take steps to foster reconciliation. It is in this focus on mission, and in the face of continued issues, that pursuing unity remains paramount.

Achieving Transcendent Identity: Three Areas of Reform

Within the church, achieving and maintaining an identity that transcends the boundaries of race and culture requires understanding in at least three areas: sociology, theology, and practicality. Members must recognize the divisive thought patterns affecting their interactions with each other. For example, Caucasians may sometimes conclude that Blacks "prefer their own churches," a statement that inadvertently justifies segregation (Shaw, 1971, p. 35). Some African American Adventists may support such ideology due to an unbalanced view of the church's past race relations, as well as the prejudice both sides may still possess. Such perceptions make it easy to become sidetracked and forgetful of the reality that "a healthy culture doesn't consider the external eye as a threat but rather a necessary ally" (Gutierrez, 2015). Seeing other groups within the church as allies, even with the added influence of homogeneity, allows negative attitudes towards diversity and past events to be appropriately addressed and reconciled.

Patterns in Adventist theology also provide room for reform. Shaw (1971) claimed that one reason racism persists in Adventism is because of an over-emphasis on the vertical relationship between an individual and God. From this imbalance, the importance of horizontal relationships between that individual and others can fall to the wayside. Contributing to this is what Rock (2018) described as a "socially lacking eschatology" (p. 185). The Second Coming of Christ and the spiritual gravity of the Three Angels' messages, which are defining beliefs of the Adventist Church, have been upheld so strongly by some believers that current social issues are either ignored or minimized (Rock, 2018). Seventh-day Adventists need to balance their anticipation of Christ's return with action that fulfills Christ's command to heal the divisions and suffering in the world. Lastly, ultraconservatism and fundamentalism may prevent the willingness of members to revise their view of aspects of the church that are invariably influenced by culture, such as worship style (Rock, 1970). To alleviate this, D. Na'a (personal communication, Oct. 28, 2019) suggested that members keep in mind that individuals of different cultures will express their love and devotion to God differently. For example, Seventh-day Adventists believe in keeping the Saturday Sabbath holy. However, cultural nuances will influence how people apply that principle. The dissensions that so often result can subside once members recognize that although the application is different, they are all genuinely trying to follow the Biblical principle of protecting the Sabbath. As stated by Kraft (1978, p. 123), "the realistic acceptance of the potential rightness of other approaches to life is, at the cultural level, the equivalent of Christian acceptance of the validity of other individuals at the individual level."

However, discussing unity from a sociological or theological standpoint is not enough. Practical tools must also be utilized to enact reform. One tool is education regarding not only how to see the shared principles behind cultural applications, but also how to understand the

Bible's view of culture and the reciprocity groups should show each other (Na'a, personal communication, Oct. 28, 2019). While Christ did not condone the ethnocentric Jewish traditions, He nevertheless "came and covered Himself in Jewish culture," implying that God not only appreciates culture but wants believers to utilize it in carrying out the Gospel commission (Na'a, personal communication, Oct. 28, 2019). This freedom, however, also requires intentionality and communication. There are certain aspects of every culture that are not appropriate or Biblical and should not be implemented within a church setting. Members of various cultures present within a church should also be humbly willing to enlighten others and seek understanding rather than disagreement and misunderstanding.

Lastly, it must be remembered that, as noted by Rock (2018, p. 168), "informal integration," or the establishment of meaningful relationships and connections between people of different cultures, is governed by choice. Without realizing it, many Adventist members may be ascribing to the idea of the "miracle motif," which asserts that "as more individuals become Christians, social and personal problems will be solved automatically" (Emerson & Smith, 2000, p. 117). However, the alleviation of the problems facing the Adventist Church involves the deliberate process of daily renouncing one's sinful nature, grappling with the tension and struggles that plague a sinful humanity, and making changes while trusting in God's transformative power. Although some may believe that collective success in such a process and in the resolution of cultural and racial tension will remain "a most perplexing problem," there is significant power in choice (White, 1901, p. 83). Members can choose to keep ever before their minds the mission of Adventism, which Rock (2018) stated should be the church's highest concern. As the proper focus is maintained, racial and cultural issues can be appropriately

rectified, and the value of differences can be utilized in church ministry while remaining secondary to the impact of religious identity.

Conclusion

Collectively, Seventh-day Adventists in the United States strive to advance the work of a "spiritually united, worldwide remnant church" that shares the light and truth of the Three Angels' messages with the world (Rock, 2018, p. 219). However, lingering racial animosities and cultural tensions, which are impacted by increasing diversity within the church, threaten the achievement of an identity that is grounded primarily in religious unity. True alleviation of racial and cultural conflict between members requires the complexity of human nature, group customs, Adventist history, and various attitudes and beliefs to be more deeply explored. As members address their divisive patterns of behavior and thought and cooperate with Christ's transformative power in fostering a transcendent unity, the Adventist church can reach new heights in fulfilling its God-given commission to proclaim the Gospel and embrace all peoples from all walks of life.

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