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ADVENTIST IDENTITY AND EVANGELICAL CRITICISM

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A recent article in a popular evangelical journal states that "Seventh-day Adventism is experiencing an identity crisis. Ironically the present confusion is in direct contrast to the confidence of Adventism's pioneers."¹ The author, Kenneth R. Samples, associates that identity crisis with a "doctrinal controversy" which "can be traced to their interaction with evangelicals in the 1950's."

The interaction he identifies as "extensive meetings" between Walter Martin, author of *The Truth About Seventh-day Adventism*,² Donald Grey Barnhouse, editor of *Eternity* magazine (both now deceased), and leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church. Those meetings, the journal writer says, "established an unprecedented openness between Adventists and evangelicals."

Evangelical Criticism of Adventist Beliefs

Samples is of the opinion that, due to the influence of Martin and Barnhouse, a current he calls "evangelical Adventism" can be identified within the SDA church. A major factor characterizing this current is the belief that righteousness by faith consists of justification only, with sanctification as its fruit. The implication is that such a view was not held within Adventism prior to the influence of Martin and Barnhouse.

Samples suggests that the "crisis" in Adventism surfaced in

the 1980's with the firing or resignation of some "evangelical Adventists," the most prominent being Desmond Ford. Thus the impression is given that Adventism in the 80's was purging itself of those who held to an uncompromising stand on justification through faith alone.

The truth is that the gospel of justification through faith was believed and preached by Seventh-day Adventists long before the "interaction" of the 1950's. Many examples could be cited. A primary example is the 1929 publication of *Christ Our Righteousness* by Arthur G. Daniells. In simple, uncomplicated language Daniells articulated the doctrine of justification through faith alone: "It is the gospel that reveals to men the perfect righteousness of God. The gospel also reveals the way that righteousness may be obtained by sinful men, by faith."³ The sinner yields, repents, confesses, and by faith claims Christ as his Saviour. The instant that is done, he is accepted as a child of God. His sins are all forgiven, his guilt is canceled, he is accounted righteous, and stands approved, justified, before the divine law. This is righteousness by faith.⁴

Daniells makes it clear that "the *knowledge* of sin; not the *deliverance* from sin" comes by the law.⁵ "This wonderful truth [about justification and righteousness] should be perfectly clear to every believer; and it must become personal experience."⁶

Ellen White said that the message of righteousness through faith was (1) sent by the Lord specifically to the Adventist people in 1888 many of whom had lost sight of Jesus, (2) is the message to be given to the whole world, (3) is the third angel's message to be given with a loud voice resulting in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and (4) the evidence of its reception is obedience to all of God's commandments.⁷

The question must be posed as to whether some Adventists have listened so intently and so believingly to evangelical criticism that we are in danger of losing sight of what happened historically in 1888, and of our mission.

Evangelicalism's Own Crisis

One of the dangers for Adventism today is coming from a contemporary evangelicalism which itself is undergoing an identity crisis and doctrinal controversy. Critical pressure from evangelicals

has tempted some Adventists to abandon part of the message of justification/righteousness through faith which was brought to this Church 100 years ago. The rub is Ellen White's fourth point relative to justification: that the evidence of its reception is obedience to all of God's commandments.

The crisis within evangelicalism is revealed by two of its own theologians.

John F. MacArthur, Jr., a prominent evangelical pastor and Bible expositor, speaking of the erosion of the gospel within evangelicalism, says:

Sinners today hear not only that Christ will receive them as they are, but also that He will let them stay that way! . . . Multitudes approach Christ on those terms. . . . They have been deceived by a corrupted gospel.⁸

What is missing in the popular evangelical understanding of faith, is the "determination of the will to obey truth."⁹

Evidently, there are evangelical preachers today who are telling their listeners that all they have to do is believe the facts about Christ, whether or not they obey Him, and they will be saved; and that salvation does not necessarily result in changed behavior. "The teaching that Christian's are freed from observing any moral law is rampant in today's evangelical community."¹⁰

Donald G. Bloesch, professor of systematic theology at Duquesne Theological Seminary, recognizes that "The contemporary Church is in a state of theological ferment."¹¹ He proposes a "theology of evangelical devotion" to Christ. Hallmarks of that devotion are: (1) the believer being made righteous, and (2) victorious living. He writes:

Devotion to Jesus Christ separates us from the world in its sin as well as identifies us with the world in its suffering. . . . Sanctification must follow justification, since God makes righteous those who He declares righteous. . . . It is not the cross of Christ so much as the power of the risen Christ, the Spirit of Christ, that needs to be given special attention today.¹²

He also speaks of the kingdom of God as the "remnant of the faithful,"¹³ and says that "justification is to be fulfilled in sanctification if it is to benefit us."¹⁴

These examples indicate that the minimization of sanctification is a major problem among evangelical theologians and preachers today. If it has not done so already, this inevitably will impact the grassroots level of evangelical churches in terms of ethics and morality.

Discipleship: A Missing Obligation

Even among those who have great admiration for the martyred Dietrich Bonhoeffer, not much attention is given to his words. Writing for a Church that had preached justification through faith for over 400 years, he stated: "Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner."¹⁵ In speaking of Luther's return from the cloister to the world, Bonhoeffer wrote:

It is a fatal misunderstanding of Luther's action to suppose that his rediscovery of the gospel of pure grace offered a general dispensation from obedience to the command of Jesus, or that it was a great discovery of the Reformation that God's forgiving grace automatically conferred upon the world both righteousness and holiness. . . . It was not the justification of sin, but the justification of the sinner that drove Luther from the cloister back into the world. . . . In the depth of his misery, Luther had grasped by faith the free and unconditional forgiveness of all his sins. That experience taught him that this grace had cost him his very life, and must continue to cost him the same price day by day. So far from dispensing him from discipleship, this grace only made him a more earnest disciple. When he spoke of grace, Luther always implied as a corollary that it cost him his own life, the life which was now for the first time subjected to the absolute obedience of Christ. Only so could he speak of grace. Luther had said that grace alone can save; his followers took up his doctrine and repeated it word for word. But they left out its invariable corollary, the obligation of discipleship. . . . [Luther] always spoke as one who had been led by grace to the strictest following of Christ.¹⁶

Notice the relationship between free forgiveness (grace), and the obligation of discipleship (obedience) in Bonhoeffer's understanding of Luther. The orthodoxy of Luther's followers relative to free grace (justification) spelt the end and destruction of the Reformation as the revelation on earth of the **costly** grace of God. The justification of the sinner in the world degenerated into the justifi-

cation of sin and the world. Costly grace was turned into cheap grace without discipleship.¹⁷

In other words, the essence of the Reformation was abandoned. That abandonment is manifest today by the focus of evangelicalism on such concerns as ecumenicity, resolution of social issues, and the establishment politically of the kingdom of God upon earth. If the orthodoxy of Luther's followers meant the destruction of the Reformation's intent, if its major goal has not yet been fully attained, then history supports the belief that the Seventh-day Adventist church was called into being to recover and restore the Reformation's emphasis on what Bonhoeffer refers to as costly grace. This is not arrogance or exclusivism, simply the recognition of reality.

Contemporary evangelical Christianity, critical of the Seventh-day Adventist church, would have it join in the preaching of cheap grace and easy-believism. This kind of evangelicalism holds that any consideration of sanctification/holiness is legalism, that sanctification is nothing more than getting used to justification, and does not see Christian obedience as a part of faith and salvation. The influence of this kind of evangelicalism has made it possible for an Adventist preacher to say publicly, "Behavior has nothing to do with salvation."

Justification and Sanctification are Inseparable

Genuine faith, that comes from Above, always includes the desire to obey. Without the desire to obey, the message of salvation is corrupted. According to Paul, the gospel is to be obeyed (Rom. 6:17; 1 Thess. 1:8). John the Baptist taught that Jesus was to be obeyed. For him, faith and obedience were synonymous (Matt. 3:8; John 3:36). In the life of the early church it was clear that faith and obedience were harmonious (Acts 6:7). In the great faith chapter, Hebrews 11, faith and obedience are inseparable. As far as the Bible is concerned, obedience is proof of faith, and disobedience is proof of disbelief. (See James 2:26.) As one of my professors was fond of saying, "Good works do not save you, but their absence will damn you." MacArthur says:

Jesus characterizes true righteousness—the righteousness that is born of faith (cf. Romans 10:6)—as obedience not just to the letter of

the law, but to the spirit of the law as well (Matthew 5:21-48). . . . Jesus sums up the gauge of real righteousness in this shocking statement from the Sermon on the Mount: "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).¹⁸

Because God's standards are beyond the reach of human endeavor alone, He graciously provides faith to believe, as well as all the resources of heaven to enable the believer to follow Him successfully in faith and obedience. While modern individuals may want to know the blessings of salvation, they do not necessarily want to acknowledge or submit to the authority, the Lordship, of Christ. Jesus as Savior, yes! Jesus as Lord, no! But it is in the very nature of sonship to obey. Jesus was obedient to His Father's will, and the Christian is to be obedient to the will of his Lord.

There are evangelicals today who would say that, while every believer is justified, not every believer will be sanctified, that justification does not necessarily result in changed behavior. But that is an incorrect separation of justification and sanctification, a false dichotomy. The truth is that every sinner whom God justifies He also sanctifies. That is to say, true saving faith will result in obedient living.

Those whom God declares righteous (imputes righteousness), He makes righteous (imparts righteousness). While justification and sanctification are distinct theological concepts, they are united in experience. A person cannot have one without the other. Only those who are justified **can** be sanctified, and it is only those who are being sanctified who can rightly **claim to be** justified. The believer is certainly not justified **because** he is being sanctified, but neither can he be justified **without being** sanctified.

It is not the person who knows certain facts about Jesus that will enter heaven, but the one who "does the will of my Father." One who is lawless will not enter heaven (Matthew 7:21-23).

Daniells indicates that justification/righteousness through faith results in obedience in that the new believers

"keep the commandments of God." They have experienced the marvelous change from hating and transgressing the law of God, to loving and keeping its righteous precepts. . . . This wondrous transformation can be wrought only by the grace and power of God, and it is wrought for those only who lay hold of Christ as their substitute, their surety,

their Redeemer. Therefore, it is said that they "keep the faith of Jesus."¹⁹

Having known and experienced the blessings of justification: regeneration, being born anew, and canceled guilt, "They should know by victorious experience that they have laid hold of, and are being kept by, 'the faith of Jesus,' and that by this faith they are empowered to keep the commandments of God."²⁰

Justified freely by the grace of God in Christ appropriated through faith, and empowered by that grace to obey God's commandments, is the core of the 1888 message. What some contemporary evangelicals are urging Adventists to abandon is belief in the power of grace to transform the sinner into a faithful and obedient child of God. (See Eph.1:18-23, 3:14-21). It is that part of the Adventist understanding of justification/righteousness through faith that bothers evangelicals, but which has motivated a call for reformation by some of their own thinkers and preachers such as MacArthur and Bloesch.

Some evangelicals are prepared to relegate Seventh-day Adventists to the cult-heap if we persist in maintaining a balance between justification and sanctification in salvation. Which led Samples to ask: "In the late 1970's, Seventh-day Adventism was at the crossroads: Would it become thoroughly evangelical? Or would it return to sectarian traditionalism?" For Adventism to become "thoroughly" evangelical means abandoning its understanding of the interdependence of justification and sanctification in salvation, and opting for the contemporary evangelical view. The threat is implied that refusal to do so would bring with it the stigma of being classified, by contemporary evangelicalism, as sectarian.

Shall We Follow Evangelicalism's Drift?

Perhaps we should challenge evangelicals with the question of whether they have strayed so far from basic Christianity that they are incapable of recognizing the Biblical accuracy of Adventism regarding justification/righteousness through faith? It was the balanced message of justification and sanctification that made Adventism so attractive to me twenty years ago. I saw in Adventism what I had been preaching for 10 years, and which was no longer appreciated by the denomination I previously served. Sanctification

was viewed with jaundiced eye as a form of legalism at worst, and as synergistic at best.

The saving faith of Christ and the commandments of God as the two foci in the doctrine of justification/righteousness through faith (see Rev. 14:12), are what George Knight refers to as "the great truths of evangelical Christianity" that were rescued in 1888 and placed within the larger and proper framework of the other great truths entrusted to Adventists.²¹ Ellen White was of the opinion that the message received in 1888 "was no new light, but it was old light placed where it should be in the third angel's message."²² Evidently the need for both of these truths (justification/righteousness through faith, and obedience) to be **rescued** within the Christian tradition was deemed crucial by 1888.

This is the message I heard preached, taught, and confessed twenty years ago when I arrived at Andrews University to attend the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, seeking to discover whether or not Christ lived in Adventism. In this sense, virtually everyone I encountered at the Seminary were evangelical Adventists. I did not know there were any other kind. I do now.

Fundamental to Adventism has been, and still is, justification/righteousness through faith. Much of the criticism of Adventism as legalistic has been based on ignorance, prejudice, changes within the evangelical understanding of justification, and/or unwillingness to accept the Lordship of Christ and Christian obedience as essential components of salvation and discipleship.

The developing crisis of Revelation 13 is the background for the loud cry of the three angel's of Revelation 14. Thus the message given to the Adventist church in 1888 was not to be viewed narrowly. While many Adventists needed to hear it too, the church was to be the agent by which that message was rescued and set in the context of other important truths such as the Sabbath, the sanctuary ministry of Christ, His return, and the message of judgement in Daniel 8 and Revelation 14, and then presented to the whole world in proclamation and mission. It was more than a call to Adventists to come to grips with basic Christianity. It was a call for Adventists to preach a balanced view of law and gospel as part of justification/righteousness through faith to the world.

Have We Begun to Believe Our Critics?

The Holy Spirit was looking toward the future in 1888, and the present situation in evangelical Christianity may very well have been anticipated and foreseen. That precisely is why we need to be clear about our message, and be wary as we listen to evangelical critiques of that message.

If the Adventist church is undergoing an identity crisis, it may be because we have been listening to evangelical criticism for so long that we have begun to believe it. What is needed to maintain our identity is the restudy and revival of the Biblical message that made this movement such a powerful spiritual force in the world. Let us return to the feed troughs of our own spiritual tradition: Scripture and the writings of Ellen G. White. There are some things that we can learn from evangelicals, but there is much they need to learn from us. That will never happen if we abandon what God has given us by His Spirit through His Word and our history.

Samples concludes by saying:

if Seventh-day Adventism is going to be blessed of the Lord, its identity must come from a fidelity to the everlasting gospel. May the leaders and scholars within Seventh-day Adventism have the courage to return to the good news preached by the apostles and the Reformers. May it not be said that Seventh-day Adventism is more sure of its denominational distinctives than it is of the gospel.²³

If it is to be true to itself and to the Reformation, Adventism must be certain of both the everlasting gospel and Adventist distinctives. Its time we stopped flinching every time an evangelical barks. There is no need to apologize for our message. If apologies are due, they should be made to God and to our own constituents if we are not preaching our message with the power and conviction inherent in it.

Endnotes

1 Kenneth R. Samples, "The Recent Truth About Seventh-day Adventism", *Christianity Today*, Feb. 5, 1990, p. 19.

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4 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

- 5 Ibid., p. 22.
- 6 Ibid., p. 29.
- 7 *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 91, 92.
- 8 Ibid., p. 170.
- 9 Ibid., p. 173.
- 10 Ibid., p. 190.
- 11 *The Crisis of Piety* (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1988), p. 7.
- 12 Ibid., p. 19, 16, 17.
- 13 Ibid., p. 17.
- 14 Ibid., p. 19.
- 15 *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1957), p. 37.
- 16 Ibid., pp. 42, 43.
- 17 Ibid., pp. 43, 44. Emphasis supplied.
- 18 *The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 177.
- 19 *Christ Our Righteousness*, p. 83.
- 20 Ibid., p. 85.
- 21 *Angry Saints* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald, 1989), p. 128.
- 22 Manuscript 24, Nov. or Dec., 1888.
- 23 Samples, op. cit.

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THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN CLEAN AND UNCLEAN ANIMALS IN LEV 11: IS IT STILL RELEVANT?

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Is the distinction of clean and unclean animals made in Lev 11:2-23, 41-45 (and in Deut 14:3-20)¹ still relevant today? The majority of Christians and even certain groups of Jews no longer observe these distinctions in their dietary habits. It is claimed by some that the adherence to the Biblical dietary instruction is an inconsistency on the part of observing Christians, being based—so it is alleged—on the ceremonial law, a law fulfilled in Christ and not binding for Christians.

This matter raises the essential issue whether the dietary instruction of Lev 11 (and Deut 14) is outside the framework of Old Testament ceremonial/ritual law. Are these food instructions part of universal Biblical law and “moral imperatives”² that are still valid for Bible-believing people today? These questions pose major issues that are faced as regards the distinction of clean and unclean animals and their relevance for dietary practice today.

The majority of modern commentators and exegetes interpret the clean/unclean distinction to be a ritualistic, cultic, and ceremonial in nature. That is to say, the clean and unclean animal distinction is part of the Israelite cult and belongs to the so-called