

To what extent has Adventist sectarianism resulted in its being a prophetic minority, with a witness for peace, justice, and humility?

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Answer to the Question Posed by Gerald Winslow in Preparation for his Metro New York Adventist Forum meetings, 4-10-10.

Clarification of question: A sect is defined by Stark and Bainbridge as having high tension with society, marked by separation/exclusivity, difference, and mutual antagonism.

Early Adventism was highly sectarian: it viewed itself as the Remnant, God's true Church in the last days; its separate schools, communities, rules that made their lifestyles different, attitudes and close internal ties made mixing with others difficult, it over-emphasized its peculiar beliefs and correspondingly neglected shared beliefs made them different and separated them from others, while their negative expectations of the US government and other churches, their insistence on not working on Saturdays and their open working on Sundays and their refusal to participate as soldiers in the Civil War, and their aggressive strategies in their evangelism, which set out to humiliate the clergy of other groups, fostered mutual antagonisms. They largely refrained from involvement with society, at best making proclamations from the periphery in their publications condemning institutions and practices. While several key members had been heavily involved in the Abolitionist Movement before joining their ranks, their focus on the imminent return of Christ, which would be too soon for positive changes to be made in society, which was expected, indeed, to descend into chaos, distracted them from their earlier activities. Their huge commitment to spreading their message of warning to the world took precedence over everything else.

Nevertheless, their separation from society allowed them to take radical stances on certain social issues, since everything was subject to the priority of using all resources to spread their message. So women were used prominently and once they turned their attention to Blacks, these were initially integrated into existing churches.

However, as time passed they became actively involved in a political campaign to prevent passage of Sunday sacredness laws even though they had prophesied their passage and saw them as a sign that the end was indeed about to come, but EGW now took the position that these events needed to be delayed now in order for them to complete their mission. Their institutions prospered and they sought accreditation for them, which resulted in better educated professors teaching new understandings, the possibility of careers outside the church for graduates, and the upward mobility of their educated members. They moved from being conscientious objectors during the Civil War (adopted because of their discomfort with killing, and problems for Adventist soldiers with Sabbath observance, diet, and "bad influences" as their separation was compromised, to noncombattancy and an eagerness for admiration by governments and good relations with them with perks and privileges ranging from joining the ranks of military chaplains to freedom to exist and run their institutions under even the nastiest of regimes.

That is, they were moving from sect to denomination, but remained sufficiently sectarian to have a great deal of commitment, strong internal ties, resources, and rapid growth – what Mauss regards as an ideal balance

for Mormons, but with considerable internal diversity which left that position unstable, with internal pressures to move in both directions.

To what extent have Adventists been a prophetic minority, witnessing for peace, justice and humility?

- 1) By distracting the abolitionists they attracted to membership, they condemned slavery in the US but took little action against it – indeed, EGW stated that slavery would continue until the return of Christ.
- 2) The Remnant belief has often fostered arrogance rather than humility – e.g. the strategies that humiliated the clergy of churches that observed Sunday in public meetings.
- 3) Their trajectory from COs to “conscientious cooperators” and their embrace of any regime that would grant it freedom to exist and to run its institutions includes many embarrassing episodes.
- 4) In the 1890s Kellogg set out to establish programs that served the poor; however these were seen as a distraction from mission and abandoned as tensions between him and church leaders increased.
- 5) Adventists have especially attracted the poor to join them, have helped bring them literacy and encouraged them to better themselves, and have occasionally produced unintended radicalism, as among the Aymara Indians of Peru. However, their broad trajectory has included acceptance of the status quo, support for existing regimes, an embrace of capitalism and of class distinctions, and upward mobility.
- 6) They developed programs fostering religious liberty, originally for self-serving reasons in their battle against Sunday sacredness legislation in the US, but these broadened over time to include a concern for the religious liberty of all external groups. Nevertheless, this did not extend to the Reformed SDAs in Nazi Germany when they feared that their refusal to serve in the military could, by confusing the authorities, harm Adventists. However, internally, as Adventism has diversified, it has developed a huge concern for maintaining unity at all costs and a thrust for more uniformity rather than room for liberty of expression, and for different views and behaviors.
- 7) On the whole, Adventists have proved politically inept, and those who have become involved in politics where there are many members (PNG, Jamaica, etc) do not have their consciousness raised to ask how their faith should help shape the policies they pursue.
- 8) While there has been incremental progress over time, on the whole the Adventist record of modeling internal justice has been poor, especially once they started to care what others (usually religious conservatives were the key reference group) thought of them. So US Advs moved from racially integrated churches to segregation, limited and often segregated opportunities for black members in schools and in employment in institutions, and church leaders were so reluctant to allow black advancement into the ranks of leaders that they chose to establish segregated conferences in order to ensure that they led only among their own race. In South Africa they practiced apartheid before it became the law of the land, and once that occurred it was embraced with so much enthusiasm that its practice continued until the embarrassment of the world leaders became so great that they intervened to secure change. Similarly with the ordination of women, the acceptance of gay and lesbian members, and the response to the AIDS epidemic when it affected members. Concern for legislation easing restrictions on immigration and securing the environment would seem to be naturals for Adventists, but this has not really occurred.