

Beasts, Rules, Grace, and Relevance: What is the Message of Multicultural Adventism?

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These days we hear a lot of talk and analysis of "message", especially of the stances of politicians and the content of advertisements. Message is a word long-used by Adventists. But let us begin by asking ourselves: What was the core of the message of Jesus? Read Matt.28: 19, 20. Teach what? What - message?

Early Adventists embraced the phrase "present truth." What do you understand to have been the core of their message? [The peculiarly Adventist doctrines. It was assumed that those hearing the message were already Christians. However, when foreign missionaries found themselves teaching animists, they demanded that church leaders write a broader statement of belief.]

What about Adventists today? What is the core of the message you have heard from our Church? [The 27 "Fundamentals" are a fairly broad statement of belief, but the document still highlights the peculiar doctrines and behavioral rules. But some of the Fundamentals receive little attention in SDA churches and publications. What is the core of Adventist teaching today?]

What is the core of the message being presented by (our/your) congregation?

I am completing a large study of international Adventism, which I have researched in 56 countries in all 13 geographical Divisions of the world church. Whenever I visited Adventist colleges or secular universities where Adventist students had formed organizations I held focus groups among the students. One of the questions I asked them was what was the core of the Adventist message as they understood it.

Answers differed enormously. e.g., in Africa they tended to emphasize baptism (which seemed to be seen as a magical rite), Sabbath observance, and stewardship (which is receiving a great deal of emphasis as funds from abroad have fallen sharply). Jesus was almost never mentioned.

In contrast, in Western Europe, where Christianity feels under siege because church attendance in general has declined to very low levels, the mood among Adventists was often quite ecumenical and the message emphasized Jesus, faith, forgiveness.

In U.S. academies and colleges not long ago there was a heavy emphasis on rules – concerning clothes, music, dancing, jewelry, movies, diet, etc. The concern for such rules was reflected also in the gossip and controversies in many churches (especially around Nominating Committee time) and in the behavior of many Adventists (e.g., when the movie "The Sound of Music" was in vogue among Adventists, many traveled many hours on the Sabbath in order to see it in a gymnasium on an Adventist campus rather than risk seeing it in a local cinema).

It is hard to see how some of these core messages align with the message of Jesus, or how they are relevant to those hearing them. Yet Adventism is growing fast in many such places. This fact made me wonder if there are underlying messages that speak to local cultures successfully. Let me explore a couple of examples. For example, the situations in Animist cultures, where the presence of the spirits of their ancestors is very real to the people.

Before traveling on my research, I had gained the impression from reading the Adventist Review that people possessed by spirits appeared mostly at baptisms, when a simple command in the name of Jesus sufficed to silence the demons. However, I discovered that fear of the spirits of the ancestors was widespread among Adventists in Animist cultures, and that our members also often tried to make use of the spirits. [Meanwhile, sermons tended to focus on the Beasts of Daniel and Revelation] i.e., the message of the sermons seemed highly irrelevant to the needs of the people. Nevertheless, Adventism in PNG, and especially the Highlands, is experiencing very rapid growth. I tried to discover why. Adventism and upward mobility in PNG. This paper reports my findings: ronaldlawson.net/2019/05/27/a-changing-church-adventism-in-papua-new-guinea-in-the-1980s-and-1990s/

Let us turn our attention to Africa. In the early decades of the Adventist mission enterprise there, the fact that we sponsored schools was important to our growth. (Socialization, upward mobility.) But today the growth is so rapid there that it is impossible to provide education for more than a small fraction of the children and youth. Once again I asked what was the reason for the growth, which is now much greater than earlier. Adventism does provide educational opportunities for a few, and it encourages other members to become literate or pursue the educational opportunities that are available, so it is a factor in some members experiencing upward mobility. However, most Adventists continue to be very poor, so what I have mentioned does not seem to be the main factor.

I found a clue in the fact that life is so uncertain in Africa that the Africans like as many insurance policies as possible – e.g., medicine – they see in the teaching that seems to understand last day events and thus to throw light on the vast uncertainties of their lives, and in the magical rite of baptism, another kind of insurance policy. (Unlike people in the Developed World, who typically abandon one religious membership when they take on another, the people of the Developing World value multiple - memberships.) e.g., the growth-rate among Pentecostals usually far exceeds that among Adventists, in part because their theology meshes easily with the belief in the activity of the spirits of the ancestors. Both Pentecostals and SDAs offer baptism – why not accept every insurance policy in the hope that one will work when needed?

Another way in which underlying messages can be read is in the stances the church adopts towards governments:

In the US, C19th Adventists expected persecution from the government over Sabbath observance. Blue laws; Congress. Even though such persecution would have confirmed that Christ's return was at hand, Adventists chose to put a great deal of energy into opposing the passage of laws mandating the observance of Sunday. With time this melded into a campaign to convince the authorities that Adventists were good citizens and to promote good relations with the US government. An excellent measure of these changes, and successes, is found in the shifting positions of Adventism towards military service:

Civil War – conscientious objectors

WWI – embraced non-combatancy – express patriotism and yet not kill

WWII – would-be medics trained by military on Adv campuses – "conscientious co-operators"

Korean War – chaplains

Divisions of opinion during Vietnam War resulted in making the position of members on military service a matter of conscience – military recruiters to campus, volunteers without protections, chaplains rise to

top positions. Pride in Adm Barry Black, now Chaplain of the Senate, a symbol of the extent to which the Adv position has shifted over time.

[Adventism has also compromised with oppressive governments in] Other countries:

- USSR
- Nazi Germany (why? not the Papacy!)
- Latin America (Pinochet, Folkenberg in Guatemala)
- S. Korea (Park and military training)
- Philippines and Marcos
- Kenya
- South Africa

Why? Adventists have been so locked in to our traditional interpretations of the beasts of D&R, we have failed to see the beast-like qualities of oppressive modern regimes. The prime goal has been to avoid having the church or its institutions closed down by authorities, and also, through establishing an exchange relationship with governments, to gain benefits if possible. But what is the message sent by embracing such priorities?

As I have pondered how to present a message whose core is relevant and in accord with the message of Jesus, a recent experience has proved very enlightening.

Over the past 18 months I have developed a close friendship, initially via the internet, with an MD who grew up and was educated in Tunisia, Northern Africa, and is now practicing medicine in a hospital in Rennes, France. Tunisia is one of the few countries where there are no Adventists. Nabil's native tongue is Arabic, and he was raised in a family where both parents were practicing Muslims. However, he notes that of all the Muslim societies, Tunisia is the most open.

Nabil and I vacationed in Belgium this past Summer. About the second day he sat me down and eagerly told me about Islam. Wow! But then he explained that he had felt compelled to tell me about it in detail because of my ignorance on the subject, something he feels I shared with most Americans.

Nabil explained that he is not a practicing Muslim. The basic reason for this is that it is always presented in a fundamentalist fashion – Muslims are obliged to accept everything in the Qu'oran, for it is seen as the words of the Prophet, and thus all from God. However, as he had proceeded with his education, he found that he could not accept everything – e.g., he asked himself how could the rules oppressing women be from God? As time passed he also faced considerable internal struggle, for he discovered himself to be gay, and therefore to be rejected by his religion, even though he eventually concluded that this was the way God had made him.

Nabil told me that many of his fellow students had become atheists, feeling that since they could not accept the whole package they had to abandon it totally. However, he had somehow retained a belief in God, and even though he was no longer a practicing Muslim, he continued to search. He then asked me eagerly about my faith, which we had already discussed from time to time in our correspondence. Over the next couple of weeks we returned to that topic several times.

I had taken my Bible with me, in part because I wanted Nabil to see how it was made up. In answer to his questions, I took him to the parts most important to me – to what Jesus said about the two great

commandments; the Beatitudes in Matthew 5; Jesus' parable about the judgment in Matthew 25, where he seems to say that our ultimate destiny depends on how we respond to others in need; Jesus' revelation of a loving God, eager to forgive us, to save us, bidding us to follow him. Nabil was very moved by all of this, and especially by the thought that God was loving, for he had seen God as rigid, demanding service based on fear. After thinking about this for a couple of days he told me that this view so fitted what he was seeking that he thought that maybe he had always, inside, been a Christian without knowing it. He added that he thought that it was this understanding of God that his fellow students, who had abandoned all belief in their religion, needed to hear.

Nabil also wanted to know about Adventism, since he knew I was an Adventist. I told him honestly that the core of my faith lay in what I had already told him, and that Adventism was primarily important to me as my religious community. I told him something of Adventist history and of the special beliefs. This material did not grab him to the same extent as what I had told him earlier. However, he insisted on coming to church with me the next Sabbath in Brussels. The prospect of this rather worried me, for I had no idea what the English-speaking congregation there would be like.

We found a conservative immigrant congregation, so legalistic that half-way through the SS discussion Nabil decided to go for a walk. The worship service was forgettable, both sermon and music. But potluck – ah! community!

We had been to an organ recital at the Catholic Basilica – returned for High Mass. This time the music was good, but there was no sense of a warm community.

Before I left, Nabil asked that I give him my Bible, and he has been reading it, and we discuss what he finds there. When I was worried about Scott he told me that Jesus would say to worry only about today and not tomorrow! He recently told me that he feels he has been looking for what Christianity teaches, especially its view of a loving God concerned for us and especially the poor and downtrodden, all his life. He is preparing to take the US medical exams so that he can move here, and says he is looking forward to coming to church with me here.

It seems very clear to me what message Nabil is responding to – a message of a loving, accepting God. He finds that extremely relevant to himself, and feels that his friends and classmates in Tunisia need the same message. But if he does come here to America and comes to church with me, **what message will he find at the core of our church?** I am asking about both the overt and the underlying message.