

# Embracing Authoritarians: Seventh-day Adventism and Dictatorships

English translation of an interview in [Zelota](#) magazine, Brazil, published April 2021

*Interview with Dr. Ronald Lawson, an Adventist sociologist scholar, about the relations between the Adventist church and politics around the world*

Dr. Ronald Lawson is an Australian Adventist sociologist, now living in the US, who spent two decades interviewing around 5,700 Adventists all over the world. His aim was to better understand our diversity and our development as a religious group in different societies. Such a massive amount of data is partly available [on his website](#), and will be fully published in his forthcoming 4-volume series, called *Apocalypse Postponed*. *Zelota* interviewed him in order to learn more about the ways in which our church dealt with politics around the world — and he had astonishing stories to tell us.

***Zelota Magazine*** — In your texts you mention many instances of relationships held between the SDA Church and right or left-wing dictatorships, but most of the mentioned alliances are with right-wing governments. Do you see the Adventist communities as less willing to resist political abuses coming from the right? Why does that happen?

***Dr. Ronald Lawson*** — Adventists have had close relationships with regimes of both Left and Right: those with the Left included the Soviet Union towards the end, under Gorbachev in particular; and almost all of the Eastern European regimes throughout the post-war period. We had really close relationships with those governments, with the possible exception of Eastern Germany, a government whose ass we didn't manage to kiss. I think that Adventists will toady to any authoritarian government we need to protect the church, its institutions, and its structure, and that we became good at that. But when they get a choice between left-leaning and right-leaning parties in democracies in developed countries, it is different: the church does not take a position there because it has no prospect of exercising influence (we are too small) and fears repercussions, at least on its outreach — but personally, when we come to voting in elections, Adventists tend to fear socialism and to favor the Right. This attitude goes back to at least Ellen White's negative regard for the labor movement. However, there are exceptions to this pattern — for example, in the US, while white Adventists have tended to vote Republican, Black Adventists are very strongly Democrat; this is true also for educated and poor Adventists there. In the developing world, in some countries Adventist numbers have made them unexpectedly politically powerful. The Prime-minister of Jamaica is an Adventist, the Governor-General (the titular head-of-state) and a goodly number of members of Parliament are also. We are also politically important in Papua New-Guinea, where the Prime-minister and several ministers are Adventists, and in some African countries. But the church has done no consciousness-raising concerning what policies Adventist politicians should pursue, and when I asked them "how does being an Adventist affect the policies you pursue?", they didn't know what I was talking about! They had never thought about it. It's not like we should tell them what they should do, but they are not even thinking about how a Christian should govern! In Jamaica they have terrible anti-gay pogroms — gays are beaten up and murdered, and the government doesn't do anything. The political leaders are Adventists, but they look down on gays, because Adventists look down on gays. It's a really miserable situation.

***Zelota Magazine*** — Do you see any qualitative difference in the nature of church alliances with right- or left-

wing dictatorships?

**Dr. Ronald Lawson** — Our leaders will kiss the ass of any dictator that they hope will then help us.

**Zelota Magazine** — In the *Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion* (2007), you state that Adventists "became identified as strong proponents" of the separation between church and state. However, in the same document as well as in other occasions, you mention the existence of political lobbies for the benefit of the SDA Church. Isn't there a contradiction between both statements?

**Dr. Ronald Lawson** — The apparent contradiction is because I see 3 phases here: 1) We pursued religious liberty (1880s-1890s) because we thought ourselves, and our Sabbath observance, were in danger—we did that instead of letting the Sunday Law happen to us, which we thought was the one last sure sign before Jesus would return! We are still looking for the Sunday Law, even though there's not the slightest piece of evidence (in the US at least) that any politicians have that as a goal. 2) As we became more comfortable with society, we became a denomination; we built and controlled the International Religious Liberty Association, and we became more willing to try to help other religious groups that were suffering persecution; 3) Recently Adventist leaders have come to use the cry of religious liberty to try to get political decisions that would protect Adventist doctrinal prejudice against certain minority groups, especially LGBT people. For example, the Adventist response to a US Supreme Court decision in 2020. When the US Supreme Court decided it was illegal for anyone to discriminate against sexual minorities, the Adventists didn't want to have that law! It was good for everyone else, but religious people wanted their right to discriminate. We should not be forced to have a gay teacher or a gay cleaner in an Adventist school, we should be able to discriminate on the grounds of our religious liberty. Of course I am very much against that, and I think it is a misuse of our religious liberty. It is not the function of religion to discriminate.

**Zelota Magazine** — You once mentioned that Robert Folkenberg, then a president for the Central America church union, "was concerned when some in his mostly impoverished flock joined the guerillas because of their hatred for the president's policies" in Guatemala. Could you tell us more about these Adventist guerrilla fighters? How did the church deal with them?

**Dr. Ronald Lawson** — In many Latin countries, the Adventist leadership identified with the high status people and the political Right; because they were leaders of the church they saw themselves as being important in society, and as such saw themselves as part of the elite. Therefore, they sympathized with military dictators, while the majority of Adventists were poor and sympathized with the Left. It was a division within the church, but they didn't talk about politics, except when it came to actions. This was true in Guatemala: Folkenberg built the Union HQ in the snootiest part of Guatemala City (it was a beautiful building! I was there), while large numbers of Adventists lived in the shacks (favelas) like in Rio, on the steep volcanic hills around the city (lots of ash), and were hurt severely by the large earthquake there in the 1970s. Some of those linked up with the guerillas as soldiers, and these threatened the Union directly (even sending a letter), since they found themselves on opposing sides. So shortly after Folkenberg left the Union, it responded to the threats by packing up and moving away to Costa Rica! The building then was left for the local mission. That is, the Adventist leaders frequently seem to see themselves as part of the elite. This included Folkenberg when he was the union president: he boasted to me that he had had such a close relationship with the general who was then president of Guatemala that he could visit him in the Presidential Palace when he wished to, and that he was the first Protestant to be given a farewell dinner there when he was on the point of leaving

Guatemala. Folkenberg was so proud of this, but that general was one of the most bloodthirsty presidents in the history of Guatemala! So you can imagine what the poor members thought of this relationship. They saw it as very offensive.

***Zelota Magazine*** — Did the administration have a problem with admitting most of their members were poor?

***Dr. Ronald Lawson*** — In Adventist churches you need baptisms. The General Conference is pushing you to have baptisms all the time, you're sort of competing. In the 1980s there was a tremendous competition between the South American Division and the Inter American Division: which one would have more baptisms? So you take whoever you get. And who do you get? The elite do not join the SDA, the ones who join are the poor people, who want to be educated and want to go to Heaven, since their life here is miserable. The thought of Jesus coming soon becomes important to them. Have you heard of cargo cults? In New Guinea, for example, there were tribes which formed their own religion, because they said: "The white people have got all the cargo, we got no cargo!" And they believed that God would send them cargo, and they would get rich as the white people were. That's sort of the idea: SDA appeals to people who want cargo! Poor people come to the SDA because the church encourages education, because people can rise in society, and at the same time, if that does not happen fast enough Jesus is coming back next week anyway, and then they will move into a mansion in heaven!

***Zelota Magazine*** — We have been documenting the fact that some Adventists fed, healed and lodged Fidel Castro's guerrilla fighters, including Ernesto Che Guevara. Could you tell us a little more about the relationship between Adventists and the Cuban Revolution?

***Dr. Ronald Lawson*** — I have not been to Cuba. Can you tell me what you know, for I would love to know, please. I do know that the Cubans who came to the US hated Castro, of course, and have always supported Republican candidates very strongly.

***Zelota Magazine*** — In the Encyclopedia you also mentioned that ADRA has sometimes acted as an US government foreign policy tool, such as when it established a strong program in Honduras precisely when the country was fostering Reagan-funded Contras to destabilize Nicaragua. Are there more instances of ADRA acting as a government tool? What else you can tell us about the relationship between Adventists and the Sandinista socialist Revolution?

***Dr. Ronald Lawson*** — As I understand it, this happened because of the policies of the Reagan administration here in the US. Most of the ADRA income at that time came from a US government program, US-AID. They were giving money to particular projects that would help the government policies. This meant that they could only work where the US government allowed them to work. During the Sandinista period, there was no US aid to Nicaragua, so ADRA could not work there. But the US was trying to build up Honduras, for the anti-Sandinista forces were trained there. So there was plenty of aid for Honduras, which meant that ADRA obtained several US-AID contracts there, which in turn made it a tool of the US foreign policy. I am sure that many American Adventists approved personally of this. It was because of the anti-Sandinista attitudes of the American missionaries there that Adventists lost their hospital and got themselves banned from operating for a while in Nicaragua. (The missionaries who were the medical staff at the hospital left Nicaragua, leaving the hospital unable to operate.) But when I was there, only months later, a local pastor had become president of the Mission, and he was sympathetic to the

Sandinistas and was trying to get the Adventists to work on the government-run community projects. He thought the Sandinista government was doing good things in the communities, and that the church could be involved in that. He told me this when I interviewed him, and I expressed my support. This led him to ask me to preach at the largest church the next Sabbath, and to show the congregation why I felt that working with their communities in this way was congruent with the Gospel. He attended there also and introduced me. In the afternoon an additional meeting was held during which the members asked me many questions and expressed support for what I had advocated. The church members were clearly confused, because they wanted to help the Sandinistas, but the prior missionaries had told them not to.

The Mormons were banned too, but they were actively working against the Sandinistas — they are a very Republican church.

***Zelota Magazine*** — You once mentioned that the Adventists became known throughout Chile as the “friends of Pinochet”, a far-right military dictator. Could you tell us more details about this alliance? Did it find any resistance in the Adventist community of the time?

***Dr. Ronald Lawson*** — The situation there was very similar to that in Guatemala—the elite union church supported General Pinochet, while most of the other churches had poor members and had supported President Allende. Pastors I interviewed explained these dynamics to me. The church leaders kissed the ass of Pinochet and got advantages as a result—the torture and disappearance of so many of those who opposed him caused the Catholic Cardinal to condemn him, so that he sorely needed the support of other religious groups to shore up his credibility, and the Adventists helped to provide that. For example, when he visited the Adventist college, accompanied by a full retinue of reporters and TV cameras, the college held an outdoor welcoming ceremony at which the college president, in a prayer that was broadcast on TV, thanked God for sending Pinochet to “save the nation.” The rewards then bestowed on the Adventists included awarding the college much-needed accreditation (the college had had to be linked to one of the universities in Chile, so that Adventist students had to go sit for the exams set by the university, and the Adventist college couldn’t use its own syllabus), finishing the road to the college, and a reputation as the special friends of Pinochet. But I was told that most of the members felt betrayed and embarrassed by what the church leaders had done. I do not know whether this led some Adventists to abandon the church, and I didn’t hear of any resistance against the church leaders’ stand. I remember interviewing a Chilean pastor whose church members were gypsies. The gypsies were very low class in Chile, and the pastor said his church members really hated being known as the friends of Pinochet.

***Zelota Magazine*** — You mention that in Argentina the church leaders prioritized Sabbath observance over the avoidance of training with weapons — to the point where they concluded that the General Conference did not understand their situation. Could you tell us more about this debate? How widespread was this position on Latin America?

***Dr. Ronald Lawson*** — I was told in several countries that it was the Jehovah’s Witnesses who refused to fight, and who lost privileges as a result—Adventists wanted to have the right to own land and run hospitals and colleges, so they joined the military comfortably because it gave them connections and advantages, and they assured me that the generals did not fight wars, they became involved in politics! But soon after I was there, and the Argentinians had told me these things, Argentina fought a war with Britain over what they called the Malvinas

Islands (and the British called the Falkland Islands), and Adventist soldiers and airmen were killed in combat. Church leaders also proudly told me stories about their access to the military government, and said “no Adventists disappeared” during the years of military dictatorship (the Adventists who sympathized with the guerillas were probably considered to be not Adventists). They complained of missing the advantages they had had under the generals (they didn’t have the same access to democratic governments because they didn’t have large numbers), and they also complained about the new power of the labor unions under the recently restored democratic regime. So once again the church leadership showed its comfort with the dictators, and discomfort with democracy.

The history of Adventists and the military goes through phases. So initially, the first war was the American Civil War (1861-1863); Adventists were very much against slavery, and the Civil War was about slavery, but Adventists would not fight in the war. Ellen White was very strong in this. Her position and the position of the newborn General Conference was that anyone who enlisted in the war would be disfellowshipped. It was so important for Adventists not to fight (you shall not kill and you shall keep the Sabbath, but how can you keep the Sabbath if you’re a soldier? Not possible) they were conscientious objectors in the American Civil War. In the end of the 19th Century there are stories of Argentinian Adventists who refused to be conscripted and got in trouble, so it was still a widespread stand. In the 20th Century in Germany, right before WWI, Adventists refused to be in the military and they were penalized for it. But as soon as WWI broke out, the German church said ‘I will fight for the fatherland’. And they became regular soldiers, and they fought — even on the Sabbath. In America and in the British Commonwealth (Australia, New Zealand, Canada, etc), Adventists became non-combatants. They wanted to be patriotic but they didn’t want to kill, so they thought if they worked on medical things they could work on the Sabbath. We got them to be trained to do medical things. Then they would get medical positions and get conscripted into the military, but they got permission to be non-combatants and not carry a gun. But being a non-combatant became an English-speaking thing, since Adventists were regular soldiers in most other countries. The same thing happened in WW2: again we trained people to be medical people: in US the training was done by the military in Adventist colleges. Of course you’ve heard of Desmond Doss, the famous Adventist non-combatant. But again, in Germany, we fought. There the church said ‘We can work in factories on the Sabbath, it’s for the Fatherland’. There were also contradictions during the Korean War in the 1950s. In 1954, the GC session passed a resolution which made non-combatancy a doctrine, therefore applying it to the whole world. But it became obvious that couldn’t be done in some countries, and they took it back and never implemented it.

Then we have the Vietnam War (VW). The VW was a very dividing war, Americans were very divided about it. Adventists were divided about it: some were conscientious objectors and refused to have anything to do with the war. Some others (probably most of them) supported non-combatancy, which had become regular procedure since WWI. But some were so enthusiastic that even if they were not conscripted they enlisted, so you had all three categories of Adventists in the VW. This became so divisive that in 1971 the GC threw up their hands and said “We don’t have any position on war”. The conscription for VW had ended, but the military wanted soldiers, and the Adventists could get educational opportunities inside the military, so they began enlisting. The problem is that every president since in the US aside from Carter has involved the Americans in a new war! Adventists thought they were enlisting for educational benefits, but they really got to fight. Now there are no official church positions on war, which means Adventists are fighting and potentially killing each other.

**Zelota Magazine** — While commenting on the SDA church statements on Adventists and firearms, you use mostly examples from the US and Europe. Latin America, on the other hand, has a history of resistance against injustices committed by colonialism and imperialism. In this case the very nature of the war would be changed, since it is promoted with the aim of the people's liberation, and recently we found that even Joseph Bates was an active supporter of the Haitian Revolution, for example. Do you think this context demands a different approach on the involvement between Adventists and firearms?

**Dr. Ronald Lawson** — I find this a difficult question. For me, the decision to be a conscientious objector when I had to register for military service in Australia was an important personal decision. I am a supporter of the ideas of peaceful protest, following Ghandhi and Martin Luther King—and, as I understand the Bible, Jesus. But I have become increasingly aware of how long peaceful protest can take to change oppressive situations, so I don't want to be judgmental of other people. I am telling you my personal story, but I don't think everyone should necessarily do the same. I should add, however, that I am very suspicious of Latin generals, given the number of military dictatorships and coup d'états the hemisphere has seen over the years. I also feel very uncomfortable about the Adventists who wish to be seen as patriots—I do not believe in patriotism, I am an internationalist. I think far too much evil is done in the name of patriotism. See, for example, what I have written about Operation Whitecoat (during WWII and the Korean War): which was when the General Conference, flattered by a request to it by the American government, encouraged Adventist conscripts to volunteer as guinea pigs for a program that was researching biological weapons. Since we did not do drugs and stuff like that, we would be healthier and more standardized samples. Then you had this church, who was devoted to healthful living, encouraging its members to be exposed to Anthrax and various other biological things they were considering using in weapons. And this was all for patriotism, to feel good with the government. The government praised us, and we love being praised by the government.

See also what I have written about the pain felt by Adventists in South Korea; American Adventists fighting there encouraged their Korean fellows to be non-combatants like them. But the government did not promise they could do that. Adventists refusing to use military weapons were executed at the front and many more were imprisoned for several years. But then the General Conference switched its position on military service in 1971. At the time of the VW, when China entered the war and the military dictator in South Korea became concerned about China, he said the universities had to train their students with weapons. The Adventist university then had to decide whether to train their students with weapons or go out of existence, and it chose to train their students with weapons. This was, of course, a total reversal of what had happened before, and the Koreans who were imprisoned for refusing to carry weapons were so hurt by this experience. I find it a really sad story, but that's what happened.

**Zelota Magazine** — There were some sad stories of conscientious objectors in the Soviet Union as well, right.

**Dr. Ronald Lawson** — Yes. but what happened in the USSR was that the church divided! You had the official church and the unofficial church. The unofficial church refused to be involved in military training, but the official church members did train. So it was the "True and Free Adventists" who went to prison for many years because they wouldn't fight.

**Zelota Magazine** — Would you give us a quick summary of the SDA church stand regarding South African apartheid, a regime of violent racial segregation that lasted for decades? What did you see changing - for the better or the worse - in these last 20 years?

**Dr. Ronald Lawson** — I was last in South Africa in 1999. Just as I am preparing to do some extra interviews in Brazil to get myself up-to-date with what has happened to the church there in recent years, I am in the process of trying to arrange the same in South Africa. I cannot evaluate the events since 1999 very well at all. But I can tell you that separation of Adventists by race there long pre-dated Apartheid. Everything was separate, and eventually there were two race-based Adventist unions (a white and a black union) that did not communicate with one another. For example, when it came to Ingathering, the white church collected money from the much more wealthy white people, while in the black church the money came from the poor black people, so that the white church collected much more money. Who needed the most help? The black people. However, it then helped only the white people and not the much more needy black people. I also interviewed a gay Adventist whose family, who were farmers, treated the Blacks with dignity, which was highly unusual under Apartheid. The South African military at that time was a completely white force whose task was to combat the rebellious Black radicals. When the person I interviewed reached the age for conscription, he felt that he could not serve in such a force, because he was sympathetic with the blacks. Therefore he approached the church seeking its support in his claim to be a conscientious objector. The church in Australia had given me such support, but the South African church refused to honor this member's conscience; in other words, he would have to go into the army and brutalize the blacks. So he left the SDA Church, and he was bitterly disappointed with it, since they would not support his conscience, and he migrated to Canada — where I got to meet him as a member of Kinship. Note that the South African churches were not forced to be segregated—neither Catholics nor Anglicans segregated. But we segregated even before apartheid. The Adventist General Conference eventually realized that South Africa was getting so much international attention that continued segregation could give Adventism a bad name and cause it embarrassment, and so it stepped in to force integration at the organizational level—they were not forcing the churches to integrate, they could remain segregated, but they wanted to merge the structure and bring the two unions together. That inevitably meant having a black president, because there were far more black Adventists than whites. So we ended up with a black church in South Africa. That led to organizational issues: local black pastors had many churches to care for, while white pastors sometimes had only one church. But they were paid the same amount of money, since the black churches paid less tithes and therefore got to pay less for their pastors. When the Cape Conference decided to give every pastor the same number of churches, new issues arose: white pastors would be in charge of black churches, where the black people didn't even speak English! They spoke their tribal languages, so everything had to be translated.

Another great source of embarrassment was that the GC was saying “You have to come together organizationally, you can't be separated by race.” But in the US the conferences are separated by race! We have black conferences here.

During my two visits to South Africa, which were 13 years apart, I saw the pain of desegregating Helderberg College and the city churches after the end of Apartheid—and the complaints received. The first time I was at the College there were only three or four black students — they were not allowed to live in the dorms. 13 years later the College had integrated, and the whites had left the dorms because the blacks were living in the dorms. The whites complained that the blacks were noisy and didn't keep the bathrooms clean, so they went to live in apartments. Now Helderberg is basically a black college. Most of the white pastors have left South Africa; they have gone to Australia and Britain.

Adventists only desegregated when they felt forced to. We didn't do it because we embraced racial equality; we did it

because it was enforced by law. The sad history of segregation and the delay in its resolution also caused great damage to the Adventist work among whites, who often disliked desegregation. There was a big central SDA church that was famous, because in the 1950s a black magazine sent a reporting team there on a Sabbath morning – a white photographer and a black reporter. The black was not allowed in the church. They escorted him out and basically threw him out of the church, and the photographer got photos of that happening that were published. When, much later, blacks were allowed to live in Johannesburg, they came to this church in large numbers, and the whites didn't like it, because the church was crowded, and they had to sit close to each other, and the mothers would simply breastfeed their babies in the middle of the church, something the whites didn't do. So the whites started complaining instead of dealing with cultural diversity.

This is a sad story, but it has to be told. I don't gather these stories in order to do damage, but because they have to be known. "The truth shall make you free".

**Zelota Magazine** — You reported many instances of organized resistance in the Adventist community against institutional alliances with left-wing dictatorships, which even led to church schisms, but none in the right-wing ones (except on Nazi Germany). Are there cases, especially in Latin America, that you did not mention or that we couldn't find?

**Dr. Ronald Lawson** — When there was opposition to the official church stance, which occurred to my knowledge only in the Soviet Union and Hungary, it came each time from conservative groups that splintered from the official church for disliking the compromises that were made. For example, in Hungary it involved not having an Adventist college, but having the Adventist ministers working in an ecumenical college. The conservative Adventists did not like that, because they were "the remnant" and all, so they split off from the official church. The same thing happened in the USSR with the True and Free Adventists: they were "true" and "free" for not following the government instructions, but the official church had advantages, it was allowed to exist, while the True and Free Adventists were put in prison. So you have to be really fervent in your beliefs to fight the church there.

I have no evidence of organized movements or objections to alliances of the church with right-wing dictatorships. What recently came to my knowledge is that there were Adventists involved with the guerrillas against military dictatorship in El Salvador, but this (and the Guatemala story) are the closest to organized resistance movements I know.

**Zelota Magazine** — Here in Brazil we see many Church leaders engaged in a demonization of left-wing and Marxist political views, to a point that echoes the very Red Scares that happened in the US during the Cold War. How did the Adventists deal with it back then? Did the SDA Church endorse or stand up against it in any way?

**Dr. Ronald Lawson** — It was ok to be a left-wing or even a socialist politician in the US during the 1930s (Roosevelt even had a socialist vice-president). That of course changed dramatically with the Cold War against the Soviet Union, and with the rise of McCarthyism. Adventists were silent—I have found no evidence that they ever spoke out against the persecution led by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the late 1940s and 1950s. This is in some ways odd, and certainly sad. McCarthy was doing to the Political Left what Adventists believed would happen soon to them, but they did not denounce it. This is another case of the dynamic pointed out by Otto Neimoller concerning Christians being silent as the Nazis removed other groups—until the Nazis came for them. When I asked people who had been



around at that time, their best explanation for this was that Adventists were distracted by the Evangelical Conferences — conferences between Adventists and Evangelicals that took place in the 1950s — and the fallout from *Questions on Doctrine* (answers given by Adventists to Evangelicals, where Adventists doctrines were changed in order to be better accepted by the Evangelicals). I would add their discomfort with the ideology and programs of the Left, and their internal focus and official disregard for politics. Other factors were Ellen White's warnings about organized Labor, which I conclude were based on a misunderstanding of the dynamics of the capital-labor conflict in the USA in the late nineteenth century, and the fact that Adventists were not drawn from factory workers because those workers had no alternative to working on Sabbaths, but were initially mostly farmers and then, later, also professionals such as medical workers.

**Zelota Magazine** — In “The Evolution and Current Issues of the SDA Church” you state that the reasons for Ellen White being wary of labor unions was that she feared committing to group solidarity could compromise the Adventists’ freedom of conscience, which is really interesting since those Ellen White passages are often used to classify labor unions as inherently evil. Could you tell us more about your view? What is the relevance of that position for Adventists today?

**Dr. Ronald Lawson** — When I was a professor, I was always a member of the professor’s union. And I have taught about the labor movement in my protest movements course, and written about it in Australia in my book on *Brisbane in the 1890s*. I think Ellen White was wrong about unions. She was a small town person all her life—she wrote bad things about cities, she encouraged that Adventist institutions be built away from cities, but today in the US Adventism is primarily a city and suburban church. She was clearly very influenced by the stories of violence caused by unions, when in fact the workers were mostly responding to the violent strategies employed by the owners of the factories and the railroads and mines — like hiring goons to beat the workers up. So the violence really came from above, and the workers were trying to defend themselves. My point was that she believed that by joining a union, and agreeing to strike if the majority voted to strike, that would leave Adventists not able to follow their individual conscience. I do have some sympathy with that—I was happy that during my 38 years as a professor we never voted to strike, for I would have hated to leave my students without their classes. But the only way to answer the power of the boss or the landlord is to act collectively—that I am sure of. I’ve written a lot about tenants getting together to fight landlords, and I’ve talked about labor unions but I never wrote much about them. I feel that behind Ellen White’s talk about giving up freedom of individual conscience was also her respect for the “rights” associated with property ownership; she was from a small town, a rural community, where there were much bigger concerns with property ownership. It was also her fear of the violence blamed on union strikes by the newspapers, and the fact that Adventists were not factory workers, since factory workers had to work on the Sabbath. As I said, I think she was wrong. I think it is important to act collectively, and that this is the only way of not being exploited as a worker or a tenant.

**Zelota Magazine** — In a few occasions you lament the fact that Adventists disregard Christ’s teachings when voting for some politicians. From a general perspective, what should be the basic principles followed by Adventists when choosing a candidate?

**Dr. Ronald Lawson** — In following the teachings of Jesus, I believe in looking at both the character and the policies of a candidate. By character I mean such things as truthfulness, reliability, the way he or she treats people, etc. The policies should reflect taking special care of the poor (and so not a main concern for how they impact ourselves) and those in need, refugees and other “strangers”, and those who face discrimination and mistreatment, such as LGBT folk; not being beholden to rich donors to the campaign, not pouring funds into the military; concern for stewardship of the environment; reducing inequalities in society, including creating opportunities for the education, employment, and housing of the disadvantaged; religious freedom is important, but not the freedom of the religious to discriminate.

**Zelota Magazine** — The role of Christianity in politics is being discussed nowadays more than ever. Some say religion and politics should not meet at all. Do you think it is that simple? Is it possible to follow Christ’s teachings and not be involved in politics? If not, what would you conceive as healthy or harmful ways for us to engage in politics?

**Dr. Ronald Lawson** — When I was in Latin America I had the opportunity to speak to gatherings of Adventist university students in several countries, and really attracted their interest when I encouraged them to be involved in society and politics etc. It became obvious to me that they had been taught to be separate, isolated, and involved only in the Church. It is all part of the traditional Adventist position to focus only on the outreach of the church, and to avoid getting close to those who are not of our particular group. I disagree totally with that approach.

Christians subdivided over whether Jesus encouraged involvement in political matters. However, he lived under Imperial Rome – a brutal dictatorship. There were no opportunities to be involved except through using violence. However, when we are part of a democracy, we are invited to participate. I believe that we should do so. I am in favor of abandoning Adventist self-absorption and separation, of waiting for Sunday laws which won’t come, and instead to apply our faith to following Jesus – to doing good. Charity is haphazard and insufficient – I live up on a hill where everybody is middle-class. And I look down on a valley where the poor people live. I don’t know those poor people. If I get to know some I might help them in a charitable way, but I can’t help them all, and my neighbors don’t need help. Charity does not create fairness. So let us work to show what it means to have the kingdom of Christ among us, impacting the world. Let us make sure that we are working for the kingdom, and not confusing political leaders with Christ – political necessities must not muzzle us. This can cause a problem if we are working for a government as a civil servant when its policies become anti-Christian, but these potential problems are not an excuse for us to not deal with political contradictions. We are also called to make the social systems work. In the US, a lot of educated Adventist have learned that Adventist conspiracy theories are not likely to become true. We have barely been persecuted at all!

Unlike the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who have been persecuted all over the world. Mormons were persecuted in the 19th Century, but we avoided persecution. Instead, we need to become involved, and if we do, we are more likely to be persecuted for acting in accord with our consciences. We also have to help in the betterment of our fellow Christians’ consciences: many of the supporters of President Trump in America are right-wing Evangelical people.