

## **Sabbath, Prophecy, and Justice**

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There are two very important terms in Adventism. Perhaps they are the two most important terms in Adventism, and for sure the term “justice” is not one of them. These two terms are part of the inset of our identity as a denomination, and yet these are perhaps the two most misunderstood terms in our church. These two terms are:

1. Sabbath
2. Prophecy

For this particular assignment, I am supposed to talk about justice. So what about justice? The irony is that “justice” - a term scorned by too many in this faith community is inseparably linked to these two most cherished terms - Sabbath and Prophecy.

Justice is the “j” word

- don't say it!
- that's sacrilegious!

So if “Justice” is inseparably linked to “Sabbath” and “prophecy” we have three misunderstood terms - Sabbath, Prophecy, and Justice.

Today I aim to engage you in a conversation about justice, so that together we can examine the extent to which this Sabbath observing movement of prophecy ought to own the term “justice”.

As I have said, justice prophecy and Sabbath are inseparably linked

Let us first examine the term justice,

### **Justice**

#### Justice is Righteousness

The Hebrew and Greek terms that Bible translations render “righteousness” actually mean “justice”. And so translation from one language to the next is the first point at which justice becomes misunderstood. When one thinks in English about “justice”, one may think “retribution”, or “revenge”. But the terms for justice in the Hebrew and the Greek have no such connotation.

In their preaching of righteousness the Hebrew prophets often use a twin terminology – the Hebrew words: *mishpat* and *zedakah*. Bible translations vary in their translation of these terms.

Some say “*judgment and righteousness*”,

Some say “*Justice and righteousness*”

and others say “*fairness and justice*”.

It is difficult to distinguish between the two terms, because both terms mean *justice*.

*Mishpat* is retributive or even-handed justice. It upholds rules that settle disputes based on “right rather than might.”<sup>1</sup> It ensures that all receive what is rightly theirs so that no one may pursue their own interests at the expense of others.

*Tzedakah* cannot be pinned down in law because it is a timeless ideal, based on the particular circumstance, in response to social, political and economic inequities.<sup>2</sup> When the prophets use both terms together in the quest for the ideal community, they hardly distinguish between the two, but allow the terms to define each other.

-For example in Amos there is a famous text (Amos 5:24): “...let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream”. The text uses both *mishpat* and *zedakah* as parallel terms. And what is the prophet talking about? He is lamenting over Israel’s sin which includes economic corruption- greed, bribery, and lack of care for the needy (4: 1; 5:12).

The New Testament uses one word that captures both the implications<sup>3</sup> of *Mishpat* and of *Tzedakah*. That word is the Greek word *dikaionē* - the same word we translate *righteousness*.

Matthew 6:33 actually says: “...seek first the kingdom of God and God’s *justice*...”

The beatitude actually says: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for *justice*.” When he says “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for *justice*” Jesus is speaking for the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized the kind of people who are not even allowed beyond the gates of the temple. He is not speaking of personal piety.

### Justice is Spiritual

In scripture, justice is not a secular term. Justice is righteousness and righteousness is justice. Justice is the fundamental teaching of the Hebrew prophets, and of Jesus of Nazareth. You may notice that in spite of the topic of this workshop – “Social Justice” – I have not used the terminology thus far. The use of the terminology “social justice” indicates the secularization of justice. The effect of this terminology is to separate

matters of justice from spiritual matters because we assume that the social aspect of life is different from the spiritual. In scripture justice is a social matter. Righteousness is social responsibility, not personal piety; and that social responsibility lies at the heart of true spirituality. This is God's message through the prophet Amos to address a social situation where the few extremely rich exploited the many who suffer in poverty:

*I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.*

*Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals  
I will not look upon.*

*Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

This is a clear pattern that we observe in those prophetic oracles that call for *mishpat* and *tzedakah* – justice. In fact the Isaiah oracle begins with the dismissal of all the religious rituals - new moons and Sabbath observances, as he calls for justice for the oppressed, the orphan and the widow. And this is the trend throughout Isaiah.

(There is a part of the church's history where it gathers to sing praises to God while it valorizes "Jim Crow." That is due to the secularization of justice. We need to keep checking ourselves. Are we still embracing any other injustice because we do not see any relationship to our spirituality?)

### Sin as Social

Those prophetic oracles on *mishpat* and *tzedakah* that we find in the preaching of the Hebrew prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Hosea all follow a pattern similar to what one may observe in Amos. In this context, they categorically describe sin as social/communal, rather than ritualistic/individualistic.

Jesus' teachings follow a similar pattern. Matthew divides the teachings of Jesus into five blocks. The first block, The Sermon on the Mount (5-7) ties in coherently with the fifth block. The first block climaxes with what we call the Golden Rule (7:12) - an ancient proverb that goes as far back as Confucius (c. 500 B.C.E.) who said "Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself." Jesus' version is positive "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you." And He says: "this is the law and the prophets." The final block of teachings climaxes with the statement on the final judgement in Chapter 25. All the nations gather before God. The just (the righteous) are at the right hand of God, and the unjust (the sinners) at the left. The

righteous and the sinner are characterized not by personal piety or the lack thereof, but by their social responsibility – what they did or did not do to others they did or did not do to God.

### Justice is *shalom*

Very closely associated with *mishpat* and *tzedakah* is the term *shalom* often translated “peace”. Like *mishpat* and *tzedakah*, *Shalom* is public and communal, not individualistic and private. It is about liberation for the oppressed, community well-being, wholeness and security based on fair practices and right relationships. *Shalom* is the outcome of justice, and is concerned with the actions of economic, political and religious powers as they affect the poor and powerless.

### **Social Justice?**

So what do we do with the topic “Social Justice”? We cross out the “social” because “social” here is redundant. Biblical justice is social. Justice is righteousness. Righteousness is social responsibility - just relationships with fellow creatures, not personal piety or private morality. This lies at the heart of the prophetic oracles

### **Prophecy**

So what is prophecy? Having said much about the prophets, I will begin by saying what prophecy is not. Prophecy is not prediction. The prophetic gift has been misrepresented as a cacophony of sensational predictions of the end of the world. This is not the case in either old or New Testament.

The prophetic task is a vindication of the oppressed - a calling out of corruption and injustice.

And this is the case even in apocalyptic books such as *Daniel* and *Revelation*.

(2, 300 days “prophecy” in Daniel addressed the Syrian oppression of Jews and the desecration of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes when he went in and offered up a pig to the god Zeus. In fact the word translations render cleansed in Daniel 8:14 comes from the *tzedek* root – future passive – literally meaning “justified”, or “restored to right relation” - as in liberated from Syrian oppression. The apocalyptic visions of Revelation addressed the oppression of the early church by the Roman Empire)

So even the scriptures we rely on for prediction are essentially messages of hope and assurance – that God vindicates the oppressed.

The Biblical definition of prophecy is speaking for God on behalf of the oppressed. The pursuit of justice defines the prophetic task. So the prophetic mandate is not one that advances an evacuation theology:

“Jesus is coming soon to take us from this wicked world; so do not worry about  
 health care for everyone,  
 and gender discrimination,  
 and racial profiling, and travel bans.”

This “evacuation theology” enables the church to turn a blind eye to, and even enable injustice. The church that is truly prophetic does not excuse injustice as a sign of the end of the world. A movement of prophecy does not marginalize and “other” its own members while it constantly chants “Jesus is coming soon” as though it is a mere cliché. The true work of prophecy is unpopular; it demands the rolling up of sleeves and the willingness to suffer at the hands of the very “people of God” as did Jesus and the Hebrew prophets. Prophecy must occur in the biblical sense as a call and a hope for justice in the world, and that includes justice in the church.

In Luke’s gospel this prophetic task is explicitly the mission of Jesus of Nazareth.

This is how Luke puts it:

When Jesus after his baptism, filled with the Spirit returned to Galilee to begin his ministry, he went into the synagogue, he stood up and read from the scroll of Isaiah (61:1-2a):

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*

According to Luke, Jesus then hands over the scroll and declares: “*Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*”

This is what Luke is saying:

Jesus took up from where the Hebrew prophets left off in the quest for justice in the world. Luke continues the prophetic story in the book of Acts with the account that the Spirit fell upon Jesus’ followers – men and women who gathered in Jerusalem to pray. (Acts 1-2). So the church is to continue the prophetic quest from where Jesus left off.

This reading from Isaiah is Jesus’ mission statement:

*to bring good news (i.e., the gospel) to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

Let us take a closer look at the last part of this Isaiah oracle. It says:

*to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

The year of the Lord's favor refer to year of Jubilee. Jubilee is ultimate Sabbath in ancient Israel. It is the 7x7th year. That is, it climaxes seven cycles of Sabbatical years. This brings us to Sabbath.

### **Sabbath and Justice**

It is from this same prophet Isaiah that Seventh-day Adventists quote our most widely quoted Sabbath text, Isaiah 58:

*If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath  
From pursuing your own interests on my holy day  
If you call the Sabbath a delight  
And the holy day of the Lord honorable  
If you honor it not going your own ways  
Serving your own interests  
Or pursuing your own affairs  
Then you shall take delight in the Lord  
And I will make you ride upon the height of the earth  
I will feed you with the heritage of you ancestor Jacob  
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.*

The reigning impression among Seventh-day Adventists is that this passage refers specifically to the Seventh-day Sabbath. Indeed it may be, but not specifically.

None of the references to Sabbath in Isaiah carries the definite article "the". Isaiah speaks of *Shabbat*, not *the Sabbath*. This text literally says:

*...if you will refrain from trampling **Shabbat**.  
If you call **Shabbat** a delight*

This is consistent with the fact that in the Hebrew Bible *Shabbat* transcends the ritualistic observance of a day. In fact God hates the ritual (Isa. 1:13). The seventh-day itself symbolizes the all-encompassing principle of justice and defines the prophetic ideal. In all their observance, Israel misses its significance. *Shabbat* in scripture is not just the seventh day, it is also seventh year – sabbatical year, and seven times seventh year – jubilee. After six years of planting, the land must rest. After six years of service, the slave must be emancipated and given enough provisions to start over. Jubilee comes at the end of seven cycles of sabbatical years falling on the 50<sup>th</sup> year. According to Lev. 25:10, the fiftieth year is sacred—it is a time of freedom and of celebration when everyone receives back foreclosed property, slaves return home to their families, and the land rests.

Close reading of the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment in both the Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 version indicates that Sabbath is about solidarity in community. Everyone must rest, including the livestock and the slave. The Exodus version reminds Israel that all creation comes from One. And the Deuteronomy version reminds Israel that they were slaves in Egypt – they were once outcasts on the margins of society. It is a comprehensive call for solidarity to “do to others as you would have them do to you.” For really, all creation is one, “since God is One” (Romans 3:30).

It is also important to note that in both the Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 version of the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment it says the seventh-day is – *Shabbat* - not *the* Sabbath. There is no article there. Like the seventh year and the Jubilee year, the seventh day is *Shabbat* or *a Shabbat*.

This is to say that observance of the seventh day is emblematic of the entire message of justice and liberation that characterizes the story of salvation.

Jubilee is the “year of the Lord’s favor” or “the acceptable year of the Lord” as the KJV renders it. It is ultimate *Shabbat* because it summarizes all that *Shabbat* is about. It is emblematic of the practice of righteousness, i.e., *justice* which is the focal theme of Hebrew prophecy. It is in this sense that in Ch. 61 prophet Isaiah describes his mission as the proclamation of Jubilee (proclamation of *Shabbat*): Thus when Jesus gets up in the synagogue and reads from Isaiah, he is saying that his purpose is to continue the work of the Hebrew prophets to bring about justice and liberation – to restore *Shabbat*.

So let us look again on the Isaiah 58 text. Many get carried away reading that part about *doing your own pleasure on Sabbath*. However, the text specifies what *your own pleasure* actually is:

<sup>3</sup>“Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve *your own interest* on your fast day, and *oppress all*

*your workers.* <sup>4</sup>Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. <sup>5</sup>Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a *day acceptable to the LORD?* <sup>6</sup>Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? <sup>7</sup>Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

<sup>8</sup>Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. <sup>9</sup>Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, <sup>10</sup>if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. <sup>11</sup>The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. <sup>12</sup>Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

So in light of this context of justice, this is how Isaiah 58:13-14 actually reads:

<sup>13</sup>If you refrain from trampling Sabbath, ie, if you attend to justice and refrain from all kinds of oppression; if you make the practice of just principles your delight; not going your own ways, serving your selfish interests; <sup>14</sup>then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

### **Shabbat and Shalom**

With the call to observe Shabbat comes promise. The promise to “make you ride upon the heights of the earth;” and “feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob” is not a promise to an individual Sabbath observer. True Sabbath observance does not take place in privacy; rather it takes place in community where justice resides. The promise



is actually the promise of *shalom* – community well-being and prosperity - the outcome of justice. Human community flourishes in peace and security when it practices justice.

Shabbat is justice and Shalom - the gospel of liberation that Isaiah preaches. This is the gospel that Jesus resurrects by reading his own mission statement right out of Isaiah Ch. 61.

Shabbat is liberation

*good news to the poor*

**i.e**

(Equal pay for equal work?

Less pay for overpaid C.E.Os and a little more [for crying out loud] for the struggling, often overworked Walmart associate?)

*release to the captives*

**i.e**

(Rehabilitation, rather than incarceration for the drug addict?)

*recovery of sight to the blind,*

**i.e**

(Affordable health care for all? Could this country can afford it, if greed were not such a huge factor in corporate culture?)

*freedom for the oppressed*

**i.e**

(Within the constraints of the law, can the “Mexicans” and the Muslims cross the border? Like the rest of us, do they come seeking a better life for themselves and their children? “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you”

*vindication for the stigmatized and profiled.*

**i.e**

(Is “Black Lives Matter” the genuine cry of a group singled out for punishment?

Are LGBT people God's children? And Government is instituted by God (Romans 13:1). So regardless of my personal moral views, is it the duty of government to protect them?

These are questions of justice, questions of righteousness.

### **The Church: Agent of Justice in the World**

In *Acts* Luke tells us that the church is to take up where Jesus left off. Jesus is God's Christ. What does "Christ" mean? It means "anointed". When the Spirit fell upon the Jesus followers at Pentecost it signaled their anointing ("...to preach good news...") The church is to be *Christ* in the world. This means that it must lay down its life for God's creatures in the world. This means that it should be on the forefront of justice for all those vulnerable to oppression and exploitation, including the non-human aspects of creation (as the biblical *Shabbat* indicates).

#### So what lesson can the church learn from *Shabbat*?

1. No aspect of creation is secular

God is fully involved in the world

Religious or civic

Christian or Muslim

Ancient scripture or modern science

Worshipping saints or drunkards stumbling home

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says:

"The separation of the sacred from the secular denies the unity of God and the world achieved in the revelation and work of Christ."<sup>4</sup>

2. God suffers with us in the world:

"I was hungry...,

I was thirsty...,

I was a stranger...,

I was naked....,

I was sick and in prison....”

### 3. Justice is about caring for creation in all its manifestations

When the church attempts to separate itself

from the experience of the world,

it misrepresents God who is One.

“Is God the God of the Jews only?” (Rom. 4:29)

God is not “out there”, God is right here suffering and struggling with the very “least of these.”

When the Church joins that struggle, and that suffering, it begins to represent Christ the *logos* of God incarnate in the world.

## Conclusion

When Sabbath observance begins, it becomes the instrument of God’s power unto salvation. For salvation in scripture is not about evacuating this world and absconding our responsibility to make it better. It is about taking up the prophetic task to bring in jubilee – ultimate *Shabbat*. Salvation begins here and now in just relations through social responsibility.

The time is ripe for Jubilee. Are we ready to observe *Shabbat*?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.rabbisacks.org/reeh-5767-tzedakah-the-untranslatable-virtue/>, retrieved December 13, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> See, Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 112.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 196.