



MELANESIAN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

Vol 37 (2021)

Editorial

Geoffrey D. Dunn

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Theology and Social Issues in Melanesia**

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Peer Reviewed Articles

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part 2:**

History, the Resurrected Jesus Christ, the Living Spirit

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Journal of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools



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Individual articles can also be downloaded free of charge from <http://www.theologyontheweb.org.uk>.

Some early back issues are available in print. Please contact CLTC at PO Box 45, Banz Jiwaka, PNG.

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ISSN 0256-856X Volume 37 (2021)

This journal is indexed in the ATLA Religion Database®, a product of the American Theological Library Association, 300 S. Wacker Dr., Suite 2100, Chicago IL 60606 USA.

See <https://www.atla.com> Email: atla@atla.com

This journal is abstracted in *Religious and Theological Abstracts*, 121 South College Street (P.O. Box 215), Myerstown PA 17067, USA.

See <http://www.rtabstracts.org> Email: admin@rtabstracts.org

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PO Box 45, Banz Jiwaka, PNG

CONTENTS

Contents v

Abbreviations vi

Editorial Geoffrey D. Dunn, FAHA viii

Conference Report

Report on MATS 2021: Theology and Social Issues in Melanesia

Barrie Abel Jr. 1

Peer Reviewed Articles

Natural Theology and the Different Bodies of the Christian Gospel: Part 2: History, the Resurrected Jesus Christ, and the Living Spirit

John G. Flett 5

Catholic and Seventh-day Adventist Dialogue in Melanesia: An Exercise in Pastoral and Contextual Praxis Theology

Douglas Young, SVD 23

The Seventh-day Adventist Position on Interfaith and Ecumenical Dialogue: A Reflection on the Good Samaritan of Luke 10:25–37

Thomas Davai Jr. 35

The Soul within Oceania

Philip Gibbs, SVD 45

THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST POSITION ON INTERFAITH AND ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE: A REFLECTION ON THE GOOD SAMARITAN OF LUKE 10:25–37

Thomas Davai Jr

Catholic Theological Institute, Bomana, PNG

Abstract

Roger Massey observes that “while our water-tight doctrines and lofty theology are necessary for the packaging and passing on of eternal, life changing truths, they have served as poor cement to hold people together. Doctrines and theologies help us and serve us, just as our denominations (or non-denominations) and traditions serve to define us ... but they have not served to unite Christians.” This definition identifies the limitation of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) church’s involvement in interfaith and ecumenical movement. However, SDA does not exist in isolation from other Christian communities. In that task, this article looks at the positive ecumenism that foster practical, on-the-ground, issue-oriented fellowship, and caring for other Christians, which is based on the biblical principle of our primary calling is to love God with our whole being and our neighbours as ourselves.

Key Words

Interfaith, ecumenical dialogue, Seventh-day Adventist church, doctrines, policy, Good Samaritan, love of God, neighbour

INTRODUCTION

The Seventh-day Adventist position on interfaith and ecumenical dialogue is to not hold membership in any ecumenical body that eradicates or erases the distinctive Adventist voice. Therefore, Adventists choose to accept and maintain observer status in such bodies. However, Adventists can still partner with other ecumenical bodies regardless of doctrinal boundaries based on God’s love and human goodwill, which is based on the biblical principle of our primary calling to love God with our whole being and our neighbours as ourselves (Matt 22:37–39; Mark 12:30–31; Luke 10:27). This principle also contains one of the most told and retold parables in the entire Bible: the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). The directive of the Lord in this parable is “to go and do likewise.”

This parable illustrates those who do not want to expose themselves to human need based on doctrinal grounds, and those who see the need to expose themselves to human need regardless of doctrinal and cultural boundaries. If read carefully, this parable strongly underlines the need to acknowledge the common basis of human goodwill, which helps to place the doctrinal differences in their proper perspective.

Interfaith and ecumenism based on the principles to love God and neighbours as ourselves, illustrated by the Good Samaritan, should be the ethos of the dialogue. Emphasis on these principles would lead to SDAs partnering with other ecumenical bodies with an unreserved act of goodwill and mercy to human life, to make this world a better place for all human beings, contributing to better health, education, and humanitarian work in all dignity, freedom, justice, peace, and fraternity.

ADVENTISM AND INTERFAITH AND ECUMENISM

Pacific Adventist University (PAU) is a Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) run institution. And hosting the 2018 MATS Conference on the theme “Interfaith and Ecumenism” would be generally seen as a challenge by fellow Adventists. This challenge is based on SDAs’ reluctance to be “officially involved in the organized ecumenical movement.”¹

The reluctance is decisively influenced by beliefs that often lead to “doctrinal and relational intolerance in reference to other Christians.”²

Initially, SDAs believe they have a distinctive message to prepare the world for the imminent coming of Jesus according to Revelation 14. Thus, full participation in the ecumenical movement and certain types of interchurch relations would limit the church’s distinctive message and mission in fulfilment of Revelation 14.³ The reluctance also centres on the belief in the seventh-day Sabbath. The Sabbath provides “practical, historic, prophetic, and theological barriers to fully joining the modern ecumenical movement.”⁴ Also, there is the traditional SDA teachings on controversial

¹ Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, “Adventists and Ecumenical Conversation,” https://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/Adventists_-_and_Ecumenical_Conversation_0.pdf.

² Nicholas P. Millar “Adventist and Ecumenism,” *Ministry Magazine* (April 2013).

³ John Graz “Ecumenism and the Adventist Church,” <https://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/Ecumenism-and-the-Adventist-Church.pdf>.

⁴ Millar “Adventist and Ecumenism,” 19.

issues. For instance, in looking back, SDAs see centuries of persecution and anti-Christian manifestations of the papal power. They see discrimination and much intolerance by state or established churches. And “Looking forward, they see the danger of Catholicism and Protestantism linking hands and exerting religio-political power in a domineering and potentially persecuting way.”⁵ This is sadly being overemphasised, which leads to apathy and disinterest toward other Christians, and to unwillingness to move beyond the doctrinal boundaries.

For example, this apathy and disinterest at a congregational level is displayed in the Facebook page called *Bible Discussion* that has 154,047 members at the time of the writing of this article. This page is a battle ground for Christians, and unfortunately SDAs and Catholics are at the forefront in this battle. I personally encourage MATS members, theology students, and practicing clergies to refrain from participating in this group discussion. For it deepens and widens hatred and disharmony.

Within this backdrop, an interfaith and ecumenical dialogue that involves ideological search for doctrinal and institutional unity can be seen as a negative ecumenism for it threatens unity, unless one is prepared to lose one’s existing faith to embrace the other. It also threatens the mission of the Adventist church. For SDAs are concerned about this *nature of the unity* that is being sought and *the methods* that are employed in the attempts to accomplish it. Therefore, “the rule of thumb is to not hold membership in any ecumenical body that eradicates or erases the distinctive Adventist voice in reference to the sovereignty of God the Creator, the Sabbath, and the Second Coming.”⁶ That means SDA as a church is not part of the ecumenical organisations that require membership, but they do enjoy guest or observer status at meetings.

Roger Massey highlights the effect of doctrinal boundaries by observing that “while our water tight doctrines and lofty theology are necessary for the packaging and passing on of eternal, life changing truths, they have served as poor cement to hold people together. Doctrines and theologies help us and

⁵ Bert B. Beach, “Ecumenical Movement,” *Ministry Magazine* (June 27 1985).

<https://www.adventist.org/en/information/official.../article/.../-/ecumenical-movement>

⁶ Ganoune Diop, “Why Adventists Participate in UN and Ecumenical Meetings,” *Adventist Review* (9 October 2015) <https://adventistreview.org/news/why-adventists-participate-in-un-and-ecumenical-meetings>.

serve us, just as our denominations (or non-denominations) and traditions serve to define us ... but they have not served to unite Christians.”⁷

In spite of this, I see the MATS conference on interfaith and ecumenical dialogue as a privilege to show that ecumenism after all is not a “distasteful” word when defined clearly. This conference demonstrates that a positive ecumenism does/can exist.

In policy ADM 10.10 of the South Pacific Division of the Seventh-day Adventist church in relation to other churches, it is stated that:

(1) We recognize those agencies that lift up Christ before the world as a part of the Divine plan for world evangelization, and we hold in high esteem Christian men and women in other communions who are engaged in leading men and women to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

(2) When interacting with Christians of other denominations, other missionary societies and religious bodies, the spirit of Christian courtesy, frankness and fairness shall prevail at all times.

(3) We recognize that true religion is based on conscience and conviction. It is therefore to be our constant purpose that no selfish interest or advantage shall draw any person to our communion and that no tie shall hold any member other than the belief and conviction that in this way the person finds true connection with Christ. If a change of conviction leads a member of our church to feel no longer in harmony with Seventh-day Adventist faith and practice, we recognize not only the right but also the responsibility of that member to change, without embarrassment, religious affiliation in accord with belief. We expect other religious bodies to respond in the same spirit of religious liberty.⁸

This policy, I believe, reflects John 10:16: “I have other sheep that are not of this fold” and highlights the fact that SDA church should balance out the equation by equally emphasising a positive ecumenism. In that task, this article looks at the positive ecumenism that fosters “practical, on-the-ground, issue-oriented fellowship, and caring for humanity”.⁹ We may now look more closely at the scriptural injunction for the love of God and neighbour as illustrated in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

⁷ Roger Massey, “Relationship as a Basis for Christian Unity and Fellowship ... A Question of Salt,” *Kairos* 2 (2008): 129–33.

⁸ Steve Currow, email message to Thomas Davai Jr, 10 July 2018.

⁹ Millar “Adventists and Ecumenism.”

POSITIVE ECUMENISM: A REFLECTION ON UNITY IN LOVING GOD

The first biblical principle of positive ecumenism, according to Luke 10:25–37, is to love God with our whole being: individually, denominationally, and within the wider Christianity. This should be the fundamental basis of positive interfaith and ecumenical dialogues. As stated in the parable, the lawyer’s reading of the law to love God with “all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” (v 27) is within a relational framework.¹⁰

The lawyer understands that to keep the law is not to keep isolated commandments, but rather to be in relationship with God, in which he is correct. However, his question “who is my neighbour?” (v 29) makes him fall back to a negative ecumenism. His question implies that only those who keep the law within the covenantal family to which the lawyer belonged will be saved.¹¹ According to Jesus, this is not the case. In response to his question, Jesus turns the lawyer’s negative ecumenical concept around by stating that the purpose of the law is not to define who is within the boundary of covenantal relationship and who is not, but rather to give identity to God’s covenant people, which is positive.¹²

Similarly, in the interfaith and ecumenical dialogues in Melanesia, our first primary purpose is to clearly define our identity as God’s covenantal people. It is imperative to note that it is not about defining who is justified by being part of God’s covenantal people, but what it means to be part of it. It is not to define who the member of God’s covenant is, but to define what it means to be a member of God’s covenantal family. It is not about who God’s people are, but how to be God’s people.¹³ It is significant to note that regardless of doctrinal, cultural, or denominational boundaries, God is committed to the plan to redeem people of all nations and walks of life through the offspring of his covenantal family, Jesus Christ.

To be a neighbour is what it means to be the ethos of God’s covenant people—to be a people who show mercy beyond doctrinal or denominational boundaries. This principle is further demonstrated in Mark 9:38–41:

¹⁰ The term “lawyer” refers to an expert in the Mosaic law, and it is the Mosaic law that is the issue in the encounter between him and Jesus.

¹¹ Colin M. Ambrose, “Desiring to Be Justified: An Examination of the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37,” *Sewanee Theological Review* 54 (2010): 17–28, at 28.

¹² Ambrose, “Desiring to Be Justified,” 28.

¹³ Ambrose, “Desiring to Be Justified,” 28.

“Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.” “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward. (NIV)

According to this passage, the logic John had was, if there’s an “us,” there’s got to be “them.” Not everyone can be on “our side,” so there’s got to be an “other side.” John says that this guy who performed a miracle by casting of demons in Jesus’ name, because he was not one of “us,” was told to stop. John doubtless figured Jesus would be pleased with his theological line-drawing. Jesus refused to accept John’s line-drawing.

I like the way Michael L. Lindvall of the Presbyterian church, pens Jesus’ response:

First stroke, Jesus says that anybody who uses his name in a positive way will hardly be able to say much negative later on. Then Jesus simply says: “Whosoever is not against us is for us.” And in the third stroke of White-Out, he declares that anybody – *anybody* – who does you an act of kindness – a drink of cold water for instance – will have their reward. So..., if there’s an “our side,” if there’s the “Jesus side,” exactly who *is* on the “other side? Jesus’ answer is that it’s not so simple.¹⁴

Here is an illustration by a Roman Catholic priest Anthony de Mello that clearly reflects the lawyer’s and John’s theology line-drawing. Mello tells:

A Catholic priest, a Protestant minister, and a Jewish rabbi. They were engaged in a heated theological discussion, when, suddenly an angel appeared in their midst and said to them: “God sends to you his blessings: make one wish for peace and God will fulfill your dream.” The Protestant minister said, “Let every Catholic disappear from our lovely land. Then peace will come.” The Catholic priest said, “Let there not be a single Protestant left on our sacred soil.” “And what about you, Rabbi?” the angel asked. “Do you have no wish of your own?” “No,” said the rabbi. “Just attend to the wishes of these two gentlemen, and I shall be pleased.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Michael L. Lindvall, “Who’s on Our Side,” <https://www.brickchurch.org/Customized/uploads/BrickChurch/.../PDFs/.../09302012>

¹⁵ Andy Kinsey “A Caution against Bigotry: Mark 9:38–41,” https://www.sc.fhview.com/sc_customlayer/getdownload/2011092006090190D515/.../pdf

Of course, we all belong to religious groupings that functions like “our side”, “their side”, and “your side”—Catholics and Protestants. I am a proud part of the Seventh-day Adventist church. It is this congregation that is the side I am on. I treasure this Adventist identity. It defines who I am, and it distinguishes me from people who do not share the Adventist faith commitments.

But, according to this passage, Jesus draws the line in a different way. He draws a bigger circle, one that includes people of mercy who offer to strangers a cool drink; a bigger circle that includes people of good will; a circle of covenantal family who love God and live together for God; a bigger coventual circle that clearly helps us to see God’s goodness at work in others.

I believe that we should enter dialogue with our commitment to love God, which can transform our interfaith and ecumenical spirit. The love of God who is the creator and redeemer, primarily, should be the centre of our ecumenical identity.

POSITIVE ECUMENISM: A REFLECTION ON UNITY IN LOVING OUR NEIGHBOURS

The essence of Massey’s argument is demonstrated by the lawyer’s question “who is my neighbor?” in verse 29 seen earlier.¹⁶ It also reflects an actual debate of the time when ancient cultures drew a line between insiders and outsiders for legal purposes, just like the doctrines and dogmas that draw lines between Christians among themselves and with people of other faiths. Brett Younger correctly says that “neighbor was a term of a limited liability.”¹⁷ By this, he illustrates:

Pharisees excluded those ignorant of the law. Essenes included only Essenes. Exclusion of enemies was assumed (Matthew 5:43). No group was more unacceptable to Jews than Samaritans; they ranked lower than despised trades, Jewish slaves, Israelites with a blemish, and Gentile slaves. If a Samaritan volunteered the temple tax, it was to be returned.¹⁸

¹⁶ In Jewish interpretation, various commentators restrict command to love one’s neighbour. See Ambrose, “Desiring to Be Justified,” 17–28.

¹⁷ Brett Younger, “Luke 10:25–27—Preaching Like the Good Samaritan,” *Review and Expositor* 90 (1993): 393–98, at 394.

¹⁸ Younger, “Luke 10:25–27,” 394.

While it is true that doctrines and dogmatic boundaries reflect the debates of the ancient cultures in the historical reading of Luke 10, the kindness of the Samaritan in this parable becomes an example of loving one's neighbor regardless of cultural, creeds, doctrines, and dogmatic boundaries.¹⁹

Jesus replies to the lawyer's question "who is my neighbour?":

In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man in his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'" (Luke 10:30–35) (NIV).

In Walter Klaassen's case study on the paradigm of love using Luke 10:25-37, he asserts that love in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–34) is activity oriented, meaning, it is an action of love on behalf of others. He then observes, by taking into account that the Samaritan in the parable is the marked contrast to the personal, casual, self-oriented concern of the lawyer, just to create a legal argument (v 29).²⁰

Klaassen further demonstrates that love is an action of sacrifice moved with compassion and pity. The Samaritan is moved with empathy and sympathy, ignoring the cultural norms and boundaries. Without hesitation, he spontaneously outflowed the act of love for the one in need.²¹

PERSONAL REFLECTION

It is just possible that we are standing on the road to Jericho. The parable of the Good Samaritan symbolises applied Christianity and promotes acts of

¹⁹ Though the whole parable is an exhortation to act in order to attain eternal life, loving one's neighbour beyond legal or religious boundaries is the dominant crux of the parable.

²⁰ Walter Klaassen, "A Case Study in True Love: Luke 10:25–37," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 9 (1991): 331–34, at 332.

²¹ Klaassen, "A Case Study in True Love," 333.

kindness beyond boundaries.²² According to Ganoune Diop, it is “legitimate for all people of goodwill to unite to save lives, to protect lives, and to affirm the importance and sacredness of life.” He further says that “it is even urgent for all people to partner to make this world a better place for all human beings, contributing to better health, education, and humanitarian work in all dignity, freedom, justice, peace, and fraternity.”²³

We may engage in creedal dialogues and contextualise these creeds into Melanesian perspectives, or we may assume the authority of our doctrines, dogmas, and creeds, but without partnering in the Good Samaritan spirit, we may be simply like the lawyer in Luke 10:29, whose intension was to simply create a legal debate.

In interfaith and ecumenical dialogue in Melanesia, I suggest we pursue the question with another query like Jesus’ response to the lawyer by telling an illustrative story of the Good Samaritan and ending it with “Go and do likewise” (v 37). Instead of testing Jesus, we need to be tested by the Lord by not objecting to Jesus’ neighbours.

Jesus words to “go and do likewise” is another feature of the parable that is vital. It challenges us to move away from a dogmatic and legalistic conditioned mindset to a life of concern for people beyond one’s heritage and familiar surroundings.²⁴

CONCLUSION

Adventist practice in relationship to other council of churches (national, regional, and world) is that of “observer-consultant” status. This helps the church to keep informed and better understand trends and developments. Ecumenism is seen differently in different contexts, and within the context of Adventist beliefs, it is seen that those ecumenical organisations are usually not “neutral.” Adventists see that ecumenical movements often have quite specific goals and policies and play sociopolitical advocacy roles. So, there is little point to becoming only a halfhearted member.

However, in recent years, Adventist leaders and theologians have had opportunities for dialogue with other church representatives. These

²² Peter Rhea Jones “The Love Command in Parable: Luke 10:25–37,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 6 (1979): 224–42, at 226.

²³ Diop, “Why Adventists Participate.”

²⁴ Arland J. Hultgren, “Enlarging the Neighborhood: A Parable of the Good Samaritan,” *Word & World* 37 (2017): 71–78, at 76.

experiences have been beneficial. Mutual respect has been created. Worn-out stereotypes and inaccurate and untrue doctrinal perceptions have been removed. In Melanesia, MATS is playing a huge part in this transformation.

This shows that Adventist church has not isolated itself from unity with other ecclesiastical bodies. The SDA church is positive in fostering communal love of God as the creator and redeemer, and loving and caring for humanity as our neighbours on practical and issue-oriented grounds. We expect other religious bodies to respond in the same spirit of religious liberty. This should be ethos of interfaith and ecumenical dialogues in Melanesia.