Rudy Dingjan

From Brainy to Smurfette

A relational approach to be the remnant

Conference on Church and Adventist Identity in the 21st Century

Avondale College, January 16-18 2011

And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ. (Rev. 12:17)

The Seventh-day Adventist Church sprang up in the 19th century and grew strong and global in the 20th century. Her self-identity involved words like obedience and truth. If we would like to make a comparison with the Smurf people, Brainy, would be the character to symbolize our movement: calling fellow Christians to do as God has said, urging them to listen, as the return of Jesus Christ is imminent.

Brainy Smurf is always right. In the 19th and the greater part of the 20th century ‘being right’ was a great asset. Being shown the truth from the Bible, millions were won over and joined the Adventist movement. But from the latter part of the 20th century onward we see that the growth of the Adventist church comes to a hold in areas of the world, where secularization and post-modernism now define life. It is expected that this phenomenon will spread globally.

In the Netherlands, evangelistic campaigns stopped to bring results. We experienced what Brainy often experiences among his Smurf people: no interest in what is the truth or what is right. Other criteria now define what people are looking for. Objective facts made way for relational criteria like authenticity and transparency.

Is there still a task or message with which Seventh-day Adventism can address people of the 21st century? I don’t only refer to non-Adventists, but also to our youths. Whether we like it or not, they are from a different planet. If we are not able to connect with them, it only takes one non-interested generation to extinguish any church or movement.

In a paper presented to a convention on youth ministries, Jeroen Tuinstra, youth secretary for the Netherlands Union Conference, noted that research shows that SDA youths willow follow in the footsteps of their parents and copy their life style, but for different reasons. I will try to show that this principle can also be applied to the sense of calling that drives the Adventist church.
It is interesting to note, that when you look up Ellen White’s use of Revelation 12:17, she consistently uses this text to show that the remnant will be faithful to the commandments of God, especially to the Sabbath. I have not found her using this text to show that the testimony of Jesus refers to the prophetic gift amongst the remnant of God. But I must admit that I am no expert in her writings.¹

But according to Revelation the testimony of Jesus is still an identifying mark of Gods remnant. What then, should we aim for, as we try to live up to remnant status?

When you search the New Testament to find what in essence the testimony of Jesus contained, in other words, what was Jesus’ central message, I only find John, the writer of Revelation, describing it in his first letter: This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5). Further on in his letter John repeatedly defines God’s being light as his being love. He states that this characteristic of God should define the way the church operates.

Is there any connection between this concept of Jesus’ testimony and the Adventist message? Definitely.

During the formative years of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, she acquired a number of peculiar (in the eyes of other Christians) teachings: the Sabbath, the judgment, the holistic view on the nature of man, including the state of the dead and the health message, besides the commonly shared teaching on baptism. Each of these are correctors of teachings that have degraded the character of God and have shaded His love. Let us discuss them one by one.

The Sabbath

My oldest daughter bought a fairly old house in Utrecht (very close to the Jaarbeurs buildings, in which the 1995 General Conference met). I am her handyman. She usually calls me, tells me what things have to be fixed and settles for a date when I will come to do the jobs. On the set date I come in, carrying my toolboxes in both arms, and I will directly go the room where job of the day will be. And then, as I make my way, I hear her voice behind me: “Dad, first sit down!”

She was born in another generation than I was. She cares for relationships. To her, friends are of utmost importance. She wants me to first sit down, so she can offer me hot chocolate and have a chat. Work comes after that.

As I read Genesis 1 and 2, I recognize this attitude in God. Adam and Eve are created the sixth day. Their job description is to rule the earth and take care of the garden of Eden. So day seven I see them wake up, wanting to start their work, but God says: “First sit down! Let’s start with a day of fellowship. Work comes later!” The Sabbath was installed as a weekly reminder that to God relationships are more important than achievements, just like a God who is love would reason. The first full day men ever lived, was a Sabbath!

¹ In no way do I want to dismiss the prophetic ministry of Ellen White in this article. As you read on, you will find that her writings refer to a deeper issue identifying the remnant, concurring with what this article is about.
Reading through the Old Testament, the Sabbath felt as an obligation only to the employers. They had to make sure everyone under their mastery had a day off. For the employees the Sabbath felt as a day of joy, not as an obligation. No one was to be excluded from this day of community, both with each other and together with God. The sad thing was, that by the time of Jesus the Sabbath had been turned into an achievement . . .

The Sabbath refers to God as the creator. In creation we recognize the never missing relationships between all matter and creatures. Nothing and no one exists for itself. All dead and living things depend on and support one another. Think of water and oxygen, allowing themselves to be bound to and released from other molecules, be boiled, frozen or evaporated, to be of service to life. No creature can do without others or innate matter. Life is all about relationships, because the creator is love.

In these relationships, you recognize that all living things both give and receive. The apple tree produces apples to grow new apple trees. But not only for procreation: Bees visit its blossoms for their nectar. Birds, animals and man eat apples and are fed. Its leaves produce oxygen at night and bring shade in the day. On their part, those who feed on the nectar and apples fertilize its blossoms and produce manure. And, by the way, they transport the apple grains to other places, so new apple trees can grow. The apple tree gives much and takes a little. If all living things do this, there is abundance and joy to life. Every organism left on its own will die. Relationships are vital.

The Judgment

Traditionally, we talk about a time line and procedures as we study the judgment. Post moderns don’t have the least interest in the minute details of time prophecies. But they have a keen interest in the quality and transparency of the process. And there is good news: the doctrine of the judgment shows how God opens the books. He does not close them. There are no secret meetings or dictatorial decisions behind closed doors. In three steps complete openness is offered to the universe.

At this moment the angels are informed about the ones whom they will assemble when Jesus will return to earth to claim His own. During the millennium the saints of all ages are given insight in the judgment, while in the final climax also all other persons will be resurrected to be informed about the reasons why they cannot be part of the new heaven and earth. Thus in the end all knees will bow to God, acknowledging the transparency and fairness that belong to a God of love.

The Nature of Man

The holistic view of man has an enormous influence on other basic teachings. We already mentioned the judgment. If man has a separate, immortal and ever conscious soul, the Biblical teaching of the judgment doesn’t click. When you die, you go to hell or heaven directly, without any room for the transparency of the judgment.
But there is much more. Had God created immortal men, we could say He started something He was not able to handle in the long run. As if he started a fire He couldn’t extinguish anymore. Like humans building nuclear plants: getting energy out of them is fun, but when the work is over, you are put up with nuclear waste. You are forced to do something with it. So after man became subject to death, which, I assume, was not planned, God was forced to receive the soul of Abel into heaven when he was slain, and to create hell the moment the first unrighteous person died.

The truth is far better. When man left the way of love, he abandoned life. Sin leads to death. Life in sin is a dead end. It does not lead to a T-crossing, at which God has to decide whether you may go left or right. God was not forced in any way to do something about the deadly human situation. Had He let sin run its course, the human race would extinguish itself and no one would ever have questioned Gods role in it.

But because He is love, He could not let go of man. So He planned his redemption, going out of His way, passing the cross, to redeem men from the utter meaninglessness of death. God doesn’t have to put up with immortal souls that need a place to stay. He purposely saves dead people and people that will die, because He loves them and wants them around for eternity. What a far more loving picture of God!

The holistic view of man also influences the concept of salvation. I often hear alarm bells being rung when there is a discussion over the use of evangelistic methods from Willow Creek or Purpose Driven Church. But those who ring these alarm bells don’t have any problem with reading and using evangelical explanations of the gospel. This is strange, because being lost and being saved are very different concepts to those who believe in the immortality of the soul and to those who have an holistic view of man.

For the one who thinks in terms of immortal souls, to be lost is a matter of God, automatically condemning you to hell. To be saved is a matter of making sure God will allow you to enter heaven instead. Will He permit you to enter? The words of Jesus in John 14:6, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me, and of Peter in Acts 4:12, Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved, are read as meaning: you can only receive permission for heaven, if you have personally asked this via Jesus. Thus salvation becomes only eligible to Christians.

This position is not biblical. In Romans 2:6-16 Paul is talking of people without the Tora and/or Christ, whose lives show that God’s law is written in their hearts. They will be judged accordingly. In 1 Timothy 4:10 he states: For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe. This implies that there are people who don’t believe, that will be saved by God. How can we reconcile the statements in this paragraph with what Jesus and Peter said about the exclusive role of our Lord?

Holding on to the holistic view on man, there is no contradiction. To be lost, means to die without any future expectations. The wages of sin is death. Man and beast await the same fate, no one can get away from it. Prior to John 14:6 Jesus explains what salvation contains: In my Father’s house are many mansions: if [it were] not [so], I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, [there] ye may be also (vss 2,3). The only way-out of lostness is Jesus, who can resurrect the dead
when He comes again. No one else can or will get you out of the grave but Jesus. He is the only one able to do this. Whether you knew Him personally or not, none but He will resurrect you, not Confucius, nor Nero, nor a priest, Mohammed or Plato.

Our holistic view on man also becomes evident in the way we treat our bodies. I plead that we do not present healthful living as an obligation, because otherwise God will be angry. That is the attitude of a kid, that brushes his teeth only because his mum tells him to. The Adventist life style is an expression of God’s love. He only wants the best for us. Like all loving parents want the best food for their children and hate it when they smoke, drink or use drugs.

**Baptism on Profession of Faith**

With other denominations Adventists stand for baptism on profession of faith: God respects human freedom. No one can be forced to become his child. Like a loving God would do. He pleads with man to connect with Him, like a man proposes to his future bride. God is all about relationships, all about love!

**Smurfette**

This brings us back to the figure of Brainy. In the Bible, God’s church is not depicted as a man, but as a woman. To be more precise: as a bride waiting for her husband. May I therefore suggest that we replace Brainy with Smurfette?

Not that truth doesn’t matter to her. Ask any bride whether he is the TRUE one, and if he is truthful. She will certainly have opinions about that!

The difference between Brainy and Smurfette lies in what they think is important. Where Brainy primarily is concerned with hard data and information, Smurfette is interested in the color of her husband’s eyes, his reactions, his emotions, his character. Though Brainy may claim to know many hard facts, he misses out on the relational aspects. And it happens to be so, that God’s primary interest lies in relationships.

---

2 Because of this, I think Adventists should be known as the ones who have utmost joy around Easter. The resurrection of our Lord is our only tangible proof for life after death. So salvation is a very concrete event when you have an holistic view on man. 25 times in the New Testament, salvation is from illnesses, and 24 times from tangible danger. I also checked the whole New Testament on references to entering the Kingdom, being saved etc, and found 376 of them. Out of these, 130 directly refer to the second advent. 27 indirectly refer to the second advent, because it is explained in the rest of the Bible book. 189 References don’t give details on when salvation is executed, but all of these allow an interpretation referring to the second advent. In 30 places the New Testament states that salvation is received already, looking forward to the saving act of Jesus when He returns.
What if the Advent movement came to be known as the place where people love God the best? Where there is the deepest knowledge about and appreciation for God's character, which boils down to love? Our belief system certainly paints the most positive picture of God to be found anywhere. Let us treasure this and experience it as the hallmark of Adventism.

Now let me come back to Ellen White. Though she never applied the testament of Jesus to herself, she certainly bore its fruits! Anyone reading her writings can testify that her greatest burden was to tell about the love of God. Adventist church historian George Knight states that this was by far and most her primary topic. All other subjects follow way behind.

The Conflict of the Ages series, regarded to be Ellen White's greatest description of what she understood Adventism to stand for, illustrates this very well. The very first words of the very first chapter of the very first book (Patriarchs and Prophets) are: "God is love." The very last words of the very last chapter of the very last book (The Great Controversy) are: "God is love." Everything in between is an elaboration of this subject.

It is my conviction that this is the first step we need to take, in order to be a movement that rocks the 21st century. The effects will be tremendous:

Goodness

First of all, Romans 2:4 is very clear on what brings people, also post modern infidels, to repentance. Or despiest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance? Strong arguments, well-built cases or huge miracles will not do the job. Just like a lover cannot win the heart of his sweetheart by setting a world record or perfectly stating his case, but by gentleness, God draws people to Himself through His kindheartedness. The word goodness (chrèstos) is used by Jesus after he pleads us to come to Him and find rest. Then he adds: For my yoke [is] easy, and my burden is light (Matt. 11:28-30). Easy is the translation of the Greek chrèstos.

We don’t worship God because He is the strongest or the wisest, but because He is love in Person. Proclaiming the goodness and kindness of God, the Advent movement will have the proper instrument to reach people of the 21st century.

This reminds me of a story that illustrates a typical Brainy approach over against a Smurfette approach. The head of one of our printing presses in Africa became a good friend of the director of the Roman Catholic press in the same city. This led to a pleasant relationship between the two plants. There machines were compatible. When one press had problems, the other press would come to aid. When the Adventist press would run out of paper, the Catholics borrowed some of their stock and vice versa.

Then the Catholic press received a huge assignment: The pope would visit Africa and they were to print the programs and flyers. In the middle of the printing process their press broke down, beyond immediate repair. The Catholic director humbly approached his Adventist colleague. "I know this is a sensitive matter to you, and I do not want to cause you any trouble. So I will understand if you say no
to my request, but...” The Adventist decided that helping was the proper thing to do, because he knew his friend would do the same for him.

Of course it became known that this Adventist press had been printing Papal flyers. One church leader in particular thought this was a great mistake and tried to make the press director to see this. But he would not give in.

Ten years later the church leader and the press director, who now had other responsibilities, met in another setting. The church leader brought the subject up again: “In retrospect, don’t you agree you made a mistake?” “Yes,” was the answer, “Yes Indeed, I made a mistake.” Imagine the happiness on the church leader’s face, when he heard these words. But only for a short time. “I should not have charged him!”

I think that is the goodness that rocks the world!

**Becoming what you worship**

The second effect is explained in 2 Kings 17:15: *And they rejected his statutes, and his covenant that he made with their fathers, and his testimonies which he testified against them; and they followed vanity, and became vain, and went after the heathen that [were] round about them, [concerning] whom the LORD had charged them, that they should not do like them.* The writer states that because they worshipped worthless idols, they themselves became worthless as well. You become like the one you worship. We are changed by beholding. *But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, [even] as by the Spirit of the Lord.* (2 Cor. 3:18).

In German morning or evening worship is announced as *Andacht* (attention). That is what worship is all about: concentrate on the one you worship. This will influence you. You see it in the rock scene: In the time of Elvis all guys copied his hair style. Greasers were all over the place. I had one too. But when the Beatles conquered the world, I threw away my hair grease and tried to see the hairdresser as little as possible.

Now, if God’s overwhelming love is the central content of the *testimony of Jesus*, and we concentrate on and worship God’s character of love, this will influence our characters. The Adventist community should not only be the place where God’s love is best understood and preached. As a result it should also be the place where the most loving characters are best developed. Wouldn’t that be the way through which God’s character can be revealed in His people?

**Structure**

We must start with this rediscovery of this magnificent good news in the Adventist message. Next, we must find structures in which these concepts fit into the life of the church. Small groups, house churches, and simple churches seem to be better ways to implement this full experience of God’s overwhelming love. But that is not the scope of this article.