Book Review


Nathan Brown’s book was written as a companion volume to a recent set of Sabbath School study guides (third quarter 2019). It is thus divided into thirteen chapters each of about eight pages. As such, it is directed towards a popular readership within the church. The sequencing of the chapters is not particularly logical and not, one suspects, what Brown would have chosen had he been able to provide his own structure. That said, he works well within these constraints and offers this short, very readable volume on social justice, a subject much neglected by Adventist publishers over the years.

Brown is the manager of the Australian Adventist publishing house, and he also does a fair amount of writing, which provides some of the backdrop for the book. Its authority derives in no small part from the fact that he is not a mere armchair commentator. He has worked with several NGOs including Adventist Development and Relief Agency and Amnesty International. His work with ADRA provides him with some of the narratives which illustrate his case.

The chapters visit some well-worn themes like the creation, the Sabbath, the Egyptian captivity, the life of Jesus and the prophets but offer fresh perspectives, which relate to the plight of the underprivileged in our world. In addition to that the book draws on the work of Adventist pioneers, most notably Ellen White, showing that the contemporary church has somewhat lost touch with some of the radical teachings on social justice of its early leaders.

Brown notes that well over 2,000 verses in the Bible speak of the concern of God for those who suffer poverty, injustice and oppression. That being the case, he asks how those who profess to be followers of Jesus can not be interested in those on the margins.

In chapter 1 Brown laments the fact that so much conversation about creation has been devoted to polemic about dogmatic matters that we miss the central teaching that we are all made in the image of God, “part of the great
web of humanity”, and thus have responsibilities to each other. Quoting Martin Luther King Jr., obviously a hero of his, he says “I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be” (16). In chapter 2 he notes that a staggering number of people in our world are refugees, are forced into various kinds of modern slavery, are the victims of genocide and persecution, or through accidents of birth are subject to social exclusion in its many and terrible forms. “[I]n the face of injustice, God is inviting us to join the work he is already doing” (p. 20).

Chapter 3 is devoted to the Sabbath, which provides an opportunity to re-balance our own lives and our relationships with others. It is too easy to be caught up in the values of the marketplace. As well as the weekly Sabbath itself, the Sabbatical year and the Year of Jubilee remind us of the need to examine our relationship with the economic systems with which we are bound up. It is easy to oppress remotely.

Chapter 4 acknowledges that tackling social injustice requires a great deal more than personal action however committed that may be. Inevitably, it is a political question, which the Adventist Church has typically shied away from. All our choices are in some sense political; we cannot avoid involvement in politics, the life of the polis. Brown offers a severe indictment of the record of the Adventist Church. The corporate silence of Adventists displays a profound misunderstanding of the church’s mission, and the need to rethink our role in matters of social concern.

Chapter 5 supplies a call for the Church to speak again with a prophetic voice. There is a time to be angry. “God’s anger always comes with tears,” he says (p. 44). Too often it has settled down with the status quo. We have been complicit in the oppression of those at the bottom of the human chain. At the same time, he warns us against a guilt which would prevent us from doing the little that we can. In chapter 6 he makes the connection between social justice and worship. Too often perhaps our acts of worship focus rather on personal piety at the expense of our social obligations.

In chapter 7 Brown comes to the heart of Christian teaching – that God is with us – through all the experiences of life. Citing Bono – and displaying a refreshing range of reference – Brown notes: “God is with us if we are with them”. “With-ness” is an inescapable part of Christian discipleship, uncomfortable as it may sometimes be.
Chapter 8 tackles the question of righteousness and how we have tended to emphasize individual freedom from blemish over restorative justice. Immediate aid is good but long-term development is even better. This is impossible without political action and that may well involve compromise – such is life.

Chapter 9 confronts a difficult question for the Christian church. It concerns the matter of investing energy into preaching the gospel on the one hand and engaging in social action on the other. Quoting another observer, he says: “A church that is invisible and largely absent from the public arena will not be taken seriously by educated citizens who care about their communities.” The next chapter follows a similar theme.

Chapter 11 tells the story of Adventists who helped Jews to escape the clutches of the Nazis at the risk of their own lives. Several are now honoured at the Holocaust memorial at Yad Vashem. This episode he takes to be a stark instance of the larger cosmic struggle between “the Righteous among the Nations” and the force of evil empire. “Empire” has to be resisted in all its forms.

In chapter 12 Brown invites us to examine our own prejudices, our tendency to view certain categories of people as somehow less than ourselves. Our money is often a prism, which focuses our values. He asks us to consider disinvestment of our funds in companies where exploitation is to be found somewhere along the supply chain. Fair trade and sustainability are important elements in our consumer choices.

Chapter 13 highlights the fact that the early Adventists had a strong record on abolitionism, peace witness, and temperance. The contemporary church dare not do less. Only then can we profess to “do justice, love kindness, walk humbly.”

A striking omission from Brown’s book – because it did not feature in the Sabbath School studies presumably – is a consideration of the effect of Adventist apocalyptic teaching on social action. If God will soon intervene in human affairs to right all injustices, there seems little point in seeking to rectify them now. A prime example of this is Joseph Bates who came to believe that proclaiming the imminent advent trumped his commitment to the abolition of slavery and to the temperance cause. It is a good thing the slaves did not depend on the Adventists for their freedom. The protection of the environment in the climate emergency might offer a contemporary example.
Book Review

Brown’s book is gentle, generous and broad in its sympathies. He treads lightly around many contentious issues. That is no doubt because of the context in which the book emerged. There is room for a more angry, or at least, impatient, appeal to the Church. Perhaps Brown will in time produce it.

For those who have already given serious thought to issues of social justice Brown’s book may contain little that is new. The strength of the work is that it is very readable and makes accessible to a wide church readership many of the pressing issues of the day. In addition to that Brown’s own commitment to social justice brings a freshness and passion to these burning issues. The only sadness is that such a book did not emerge from an Adventist publisher long before this. That is an indictment of us all.

Michael Pearson, Ph.D., is a retired lecturer in ethics at Newbold College of Higher Education in the UK and a blogger at www.pearsonsperspectives.com (together with his wife Helen). E-mail: mpearson@newbold.ac.uk