

Addressing the needs of the poor in the midst of theological urgency

By

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The Seventh-day Adventist Church grew out of the Second Awakening movement of the 19th century. While there were numerous preachers and lay leaders involved in the proclamation that Jesus Christ would return some time in the 1840's, William Miller, a licensed Baptist preacher, from Low Hampton, New York was a leading representative of that movement. What was it that made Miller and his collaborators stand out from many others who proclaimed the return of Jesus Christ? Miller represented the group who advocated the *literal* return of Christ whereas the other camp advocated the *symbolic* return of Christ. In other words, the second group agreed to the approximate date¹ but did not believe in Christ's literal return. Rather, they advocated that at the end of the Daniel prophecies a new era, a millennium, would bring peace and prosperity to the world.

While Miller's sermons² emphasized the literal return of Christ, he also strongly accentuated Christian conversion and responsibility. His emphasis on the Christian life, I believe, exists as one of the sources of why Seventh-day Adventists, who trace their roots to Miller, became very concerned about the earthly conditions of their neighbors and eventually involved in broad, though selective, social issues. For example, Joseph Bates, one of Miller's strong public supporters, along with others, were involved in the underground railroad movement for slaves while at the same time proclaiming the soon and literal return of Christ. The theological basis for the involvement in social issues by a group that focused on the imminent return of Christ will be explored in this paper.

All the Bible studies, as well as preaching and believing, did not result in the literal return of Christ in the 1840's. Those who advocated a symbolic return found it less challenging

¹Both groups based their position on the prophecies of Daniel and other prophetic books of the Bible.

² William Miller, *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ about the Year 1843; Exhibited in a Course of Lectures* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1842). This book contains the "lectures," as Miller referred to them that made him a very popular speaker in many churches and organized camp meetings. In some instances, railroads even provided extra cars to accommodate the crowds that were going to the Miller camp meetings.

to face the issue because they explained that in some way Christ *did* return, and, given sufficient time, the evidence of His return would become apparent. Those who believed (the Miller group) in the literal return were devastated. Miller returned to his farm, and although he did not lose his faith, he no longer carried on a public ministry. His family built a chapel, as a testimony to his faith, next to his farm house in Low Hampton, New York, where they and friends worshiped.³

Those who believed in the literal return of Christ (such as Miller) faced what seemed to be insurmountable obstacles. What could they believe now that Christ had not returned? How would they explain an event known as the Great Disappointment? They believed that the Bible taught a literal return and that it would occur in the 1840's. After the disappointment, was there any basis to even believe in the Bible? The very popular Miller Movement was no longer a movement. Most renounced their previous beliefs. There were those who insisted that the Bible remains God's Word and that the problem was the *interpretation* of the Daniel (and other) prophecies about the return of Christ. Whereas Miller interpreted "...2,300 evenings and mornings..." from Daniel 8:14 as symbolic for years that would end in 1844 with the return of Christ, some of his followers such as, Hiram Edson, Owen R. L. Crosier, and Franklin B. Hahn came to the conclusion that while the prophecy did end in 1844, it did not end with the return of Christ. Rather, in 1844 Christ started His final priestly or intercessory ministry in the heavenly sanctuary and following that period, Christ would, indeed, return. Thus, the integrity of the Bible was preserved, the validity of the date was still maintained, but the event was reinterpreted.⁴ Those who accepted this interpretation became the nucleus of what eventually became the *Seventh-day Adventist Church*. Individuals who accepted this view and the seventh-day Sabbath, formed groups that eventually took on the name Seventh-day Adventist and organized into a denomination in the 1860's.⁵

Doctrine and its application in the life of the church

Seventh-day Adventists have always maintained that they do not have a creed, and instead, doctrine is governed by the Scripture. While true, the fact remains that a certain group

³ The chapel still stands and is owned by the Adventist Christian Church (one of the denominations that grew out of the Millerite Movement) with the provision that Seventh-day Adventist Church has perpetual rights to use it. Both denominations use the chapel for special services. As evidence that William Miller's faith did not disappear even though Christ did not return, he placed the following words over the pulpit: "For at the time appointed the end shall be."

⁴ See "Sanctuary," s.v. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, for a discussion of this interpretation.

⁵ The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (world organization) was organized May 21, 1863 in Battle Creek, Michigan, where its offices remained until 1903 when it moved to the Washington, D.C. area. See "General Conference," s.v. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, v. 10.

of doctrines has been identified as central to the denomination. The formation of these central doctrines was gradual, and by the time the church organized in the early 1860's the central doctrines were developed. By the twentieth century the church, in its world session known as the *General Conference*, formally voted on what are known as Fundamental Beliefs.⁶ These Fundamental Beliefs, twenty-eight as of the 2005 General Conference Session, can be modified, added to, or eliminated only in a General Conference session made up of clergy and lay delegates from throughout the world. For this study, we will only focus on the Fundamental Belief entitled "The Second Coming of Christ." It reads as follows:

The second coming of Christ is the blessed hope of the church, the grand climax of the gospel. The Saviour's coming will be literal, personal, visible, and worldwide. When He returns, the righteous dead will be resurrected, and together with the righteous living will be glorified and taken to heaven, but the unrighteous will die. **The almost complete fulfillment of the most lines of prophecy, together with the present condition of the world, indicates that Christ's coming is imminent. The time of that event has not been revealed, and we are therefore exhorted to be ready at all times.**⁷

This has been, and still is, a core doctrine among Seventh-day Adventists. It advocates an immediacy and urgency of preparation for the return of Jesus Christ. Expressions such as, "almost complete fulfillment of most lines of prophecy;" "Christ's coming is imminent;" "exhorted to be ready at all times,"⁸ create a sense of theological urgency. The message becomes clear—the Bible tells us Christ is coming; it will be soon, so be ready. Such theological urgency about the return of Christ should describe a church totally focused on preparation for the return of Christ and a church that has no interest in the worldly needs of people. Yet in reality, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been and is deeply involved in people's needs or, as some would describe them, "social issues."⁹

Involvement of the church in the needs of the poor started early. In 1866, within three years of the denomination's organization, the church started what was then known as Battle

⁶ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: An Exposition of the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, (Silver Spring, MD: Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005). Hereafter *Beliefs*.

⁷ *Beliefs*, 371. Emphasis supplied.

⁸ *Beliefs*, 371.

⁹ In Adventist writings the word "needy" seems to be often used.

Creek Sanitarium for the purpose of serving the health needs of the population.¹⁰ From that one medical institution, the church has developed a world-wide health system consisting of large medical centers and numerous clinics serving the needs of those who cannot afford to pay for their health care. Of specific interest to this paper is the formation of the Dorcas Society in 1874, eleven years after the church was formally organized. This Society began in Battle Creek, Michigan, in the home of Mrs. Henry Gardner with eight women becoming charter members of the organization. Though its name has changed (also known as Community Services) in some parts of the world, this ministry has become a vibrant lay movement that addresses the needs of the poor.¹¹

Theology and the work of Dorcas for the poor

The Dorcas Society started as a lay movement in the Seventh-day Adventist Church and continues as such with some administrative support from the organization. The last congregation where I was the senior pastor had a large group that provided food, clothing, and other services¹² to the poor. All of the individuals involved in this work were volunteers. The leader was a woman in her late 70's who routinely spent 40-45 hours a week in the center the group operated.

This lay movement, started in 1974 in the Adventist church, was not an original concept but was based, as its name reveals, on the work of Dorcas or Tabitha as recorded in Acts 9:36-43. In this short biblical passage we meet Dorcas; the only woman in the New Testament specifically referred to as a “disciple,” and are told of her ministry, death, and resurrection. Luke gives us a summary of her work for the widows of Joppa. The Book of Acts opens with Jesus’ return to heaven and the promise that “ ‘This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven’ ” (Acts 1:11). Acts filled the chapters with stories of the followers of Jesus inviting others to commit their lives to Jesus Christ—the Christ who came into this world, died, was resurrected, and will return again. Similar themes are found in most of the other New Testament writings. Paul and others diligently traveled throughout their world to fulfill the commission of preaching the gospel. A sense of urgency is evident and yet within this context of urgency we find the story of a woman “who was always doing good and helping the poor” (Acts 9:36). No mention is made of any preaching by Dorcas, and yet her death revealed what an important work she accomplished.

¹⁰ Its most famous leader was John Harvey Kellogg, M.D. who developed the institution to serve the health needs of not only church members but the poor as well. He was well known as a physician and developed breakfast products. His brother, W. K. Kellogg was the marketing genius. For additional information, see various entries in the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* and Richard W. Schwartz, *John Harvey Kellogg, M.D.: Pioneering Health Reformer* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2006).

¹¹ “Dorcas Societies,” s.v. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*.

¹² They even provided dog food for dogs. I discovered that because one of the individuals who was receiving help for his family complained to our head office that the center did not have his dog’s favorite brand.

Her work as a disciple was of such nature that God fulfilled Peter's words and brought her back to life.

What, if any, is the theological significance in the story of Dorcas? Are there theological principles in her story upon which later Christians can build their ministry? In order to examine these and similar questions, I have reviewed several books about women in the Bible. Each of them makes reference to Dorcas.

Edith Deen¹³ calls the chapter on Dorcas, "A Woman Full of Good Works." According to Deen, "Dorcas gave so generously of herself to others that her name today, almost 2,000 years later, is synonymous with acts of charity."¹⁴ Throughout the chapter, Deen presents Dorcas as a model of good works and charity and approvingly gives details of the good things Dorcas accomplished. The work of Dorcas is seen more as an example for those who will follow her and the author does not develop significant theological concepts. Even those who witnessed her coming back to life saw that as a sign of hope, but that hope was primarily for the present for "the same God who could lift Dorcas from the dead could also lift them from poverty and squalor."¹⁵

Joyce Hollyday¹⁶ applauds the work of Dorcas, but primarily emphasizes the story of Dorothy Day, founder of Catholic Worker movement, who used the example of Dorcas as a basis for beginning her work. Hollyday states that the home of Dorcas "was a center for mercy and hope,"¹⁷ and that the name of Dorcas "remains synonymous with generosity to the poor."¹⁸ Though Hollyday portrays Dorcas very positively, no significant development of theological principles becomes evident in the work of Dorcas.

Deen, in a later book,¹⁹ provides somewhat of a theological dimension to the work of Dorcas. In this book she sees the work of Dorcas within the context of the Gospel. The response to the new life Dorcas was given was belief in the Lord because those who saw Dorcas again "were so filled with wonder that they and many others 'believed in the Lord.'"²⁰ Later on, Deen

¹³Edith Deen, *All of the Women of the Bible* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1955), 218-221.

¹⁴ Deen, 218.

¹⁵ Deen, 221.

¹⁶ Joyce Hollyday, *Clothed in the Sun: Biblical Women, Social Justice, and Us* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 174-178.

¹⁷Hollyday, 176

¹⁸ Hollyday, 177.

¹⁹ Deen, *Wisdom from Women in the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978), 139-140.

²⁰ Deen, *Wisdom*, 139.

still emphasizes a spiritual dimension but moves away from the specificity of the gospel for the Dorcas story. She writes, help us “to see God moving through our lives in wondrous ways, enriching our concept of his universe.”²¹ The belief in the Lord that the writer first introduces is generalized by focusing on our concept of the universe.

Abraham Kuyper²², from the four sources examined, gives the most emphasis to the theological themes in the story of Dorcas. While Kuyper acknowledges the value of Dorcas’ work and the fact that her work has become the basis for the work of future Dorcas societies, he points out several theological themes throughout her life and work for the poor:

- The reason for Dorcas doing this work is not only a desire to help the poor. The basis is Christ, because “she seems to have been the first woman who was *inspired by Christ* to be active in such works of love.”²³ According to Kuyper, Christ’s words, “ ‘I needed clothes and you clothed me,’ ” (Matthew 25:36) “induced the human [e.i. Dorcas] heart to engage in such work of mercy.”²⁴ In other words, Dorcas’ motivation was more than providing clothing for the poor—it was to fulfill a Christ-given mission.
- Likewise, the resurrection of Dorcas takes on a theological dimension, for her resurrection means more than returning someone to life who was needed in order to help the poor. The miracle of raising Dorcas from the dead “placed His Divine stamp of approval upon the work of caring for the poor which Tabitha [Dorcas] introduced.”²⁵ The work of Dorcas is much more than providing for the needs of the poor—it is ministry.²⁶
- Finally, Kuyper sees poverty as more than just a social issue. In the work of Dorcas, Kuyper sees basic principles for Christian philanthropy. Her ministry “teaches us that the curse of poverty can be removed only in the name of Jesus.”²⁷ Thus, poverty has social dimensions, but the solution to poverty moves beyond social programs and taking care of the earthly needs of the poor. Kuyper’s concept that poverty can be removed only in

²¹ Deen, *Wisdom*, 140.

²² Abraham Kuyper, trans. Henry Zylstra, *Women of the New Testament: 30 Devotional Messages for Women’s Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), 78-81.

²³ Kuyper, 78. Emphasis supplied.

²⁴ Kuyper, 79.

²⁵ Kuyper, 79.

²⁶The concept of working for the poor as ministry will be developed in the section dealing with some of the undertakings in Australia by Seventh-day Adventists.

²⁷ Kuyper, 80.

the name of Jesus goes contrary to the philosophy advocated by those who see poverty only as a social issue that can be dealt with from a secular perspective.

The Seventh-day Adventist perspective on the needs of the poor

In the previous section we looked at the interpretation of the work of Dorcas from the perspective of several individuals. In this section we will examine three examples of how Seventh-day Adventists have viewed the needs of the poor and what they did to meet those needs. This section will reflect on both the theological implications and the implementation of various approaches to meet the needs of the poor.

Australia in the late 19th century

In a paper²⁸ presented at the Women & the Word Seminar, October 21-22, 2005, La Sierra University, Riverside, California, Burt Haloviak opened a window to look more closely at the needs of the poor and how the Seventh-day Adventist Church addressed them. His paper actually focuses on the issue of the function of women as ministers²⁹, but nevertheless is a rich source for the present study.

Haloviak's paper points out that dealing with the poor is based on biblical mandates. Four biblical passages seem to play a prominent role as to how the church should relate to the poor:³⁰

- Luke 4: In this chapter Jesus announces, among other things, that He was anointed to preach the Gospel to the poor and proclaim freedom to the prisoners. He also refers to a period of famine in the Old Testament and the experience of Elijah and the widow. The chapter ends with the healing of Simon's mother-in-law and others.
- Isaiah 61: In this messianic chapter emphasis is placed on preaching to the poor, freedom for captives, release of prisoners, and comfort for those who mourn.

²⁸ Burt Haloviak, "Ellen White and the Australasian Ministers, 1893 to 1901: An Analysis of the Documents," lecture delivered to the Women & the Word Seminar, October 21-22, 2005, LaSierra University, Riverside, CA.

²⁹ The role of women as ministers in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is still under discussion though Haloviak and others have pointed out that a century or so ago there may have been greater acceptance of ordaining women to ministry than exists today in at least certain parts of the world. A century ago, the Church membership was primarily in North America, Europe, and Australia, whereas today the majority of the membership is outside of those areas. That may be one of the reasons why, at the present, the Church does not ordain women into ministry. On the other hand, the Church makes provision for women to work as ministers by "commissioning," not ordaining them.

³⁰ Haloviak, 39.

Also, the Lord proclaims His hatred of robbery and iniquity and His love for justice.

- Luke 14: While eating at the house of a Pharisee, Jesus becomes involved in a controversy about what is lawful to do on the Sabbath. Without hesitation, Jesus proclaims that healing is appropriate on the Sabbath. In two parables, He points out the importance of inviting the poor, crippled, lame, and blind to the banquet—the implication that since God does that, we should do likewise.
- Isaiah 58: In this messianic chapter, Isaiah placed emphasis on loosing the chains of injustice, setting the oppressed free, and sharing food with the hungry. Those who give of themselves for the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed will be blessed by the Lord.

Isaiah 58 seems to have been the most cited biblical passage on how to relate to the poor. Ellen White, focusing on this chapter, wrote that “the work that the people of God are to do in Christ’s lines, is clearly set forth.”³¹ In a letter to H. W. Kellogg she acknowledged that we cannot, with our wills, push back the waves of poverty in Australia. Nevertheless she reminded him that “the Lord shall provide us with means, we shall break every yoke, and let the oppressed go free.”³² Her goal was not only to satisfy the immediate needs of the poor but to bring freedom as well.

In analyzing the work for the poor in Australia, Haloviak’s manuscript points us to several theological themes in connection with this work. In a May 21, 1895 letter from Australia to R. S. Donnell, president of the Washington Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist church, O. A. Olsen, president from 1888 to 1897 of the General Conference, maintains that there is a direct link between justification and the work for the poor. He writes that “To know the power of justification by faith is to live the life that Christ lived on the earth, to show forth the same interest in humanity, to put forth the same efforts for the salvation of souls, for the relief of the afflicted, for the helping of the needy.”³³ In the same letter he said that “Hereafter this branch of the work [working for the poor] will receive much more attention than it has in the past. This must be so, if we shall meet the mind of the Spirit of God.”³⁴ About two months before he wrote the letter to Donnell, he wrote to W. B. White, who at that time was president of the Nebraska Conference. He stated that too much emphasis has been placed on proselytizing and

³¹ Ellen G. White in Haloviak, 4. Ellen White was instrumental in developing the Seventh-day Adventist work in Australia from 1891 to 1900 when she lived there. She is also identified as one of the founders, along with her husband James White, Joseph Bates, and arguably John N. Andrews, as founders of the denomination. Adventists have also seen her as having a prophetic role within the context of the supremacy of the Bible.

³² White in Haloviak, 7.

³³ O. A. Olsen in Haloviak, 21.

³⁴ O. A. Olsen in Haloviak, 21.

instead we “should show in our lives as well as in our profession, the daily practice of Christian principles,—love, kindness, gentleness,—a care for the needy and the suffering,—a disposition to visit the needy, and to comfort them with the Christian comfort,—without directly bringing the arguments in favor of the Sabbath, the nature of man, and such questions . . .”³⁵ Thus, according to Olsen, justification is a personal experience but justification is not *only* an inward experience. The justified person’s life is different, and their motivation for service is not to earn anything, but rather to meet the needs of others.

Finally, the Australian endeavors help us realize that those advocating help for the poor saw this as a part of Christ’s gospel. During her stay in Australia, Ellen White wrote about the relationship of Christ’s work and the needy. “ ‘Love to Jesus will be manifested in a desire to work as He worked, for the blessing and uplifting of humanity . . .During the life of Christ, the sick and afflicted were objects of his special care. The Saviour devoted more time and labour to healing the afflicted than to preaching.’ ”³⁶ It’s worthy to note that Ellen White, as one of the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, was aggressive when it came to evangelism. She, along with others, advocated entering new territories and inviting people to get ready for the return of Jesus Christ. In fact, one of the reasons she moved to Australia (previously she had also spent some time in Europe) was to foster the work of evangelism in that country. Yet, this focus on evangelism did not deter her from pointing out that Christ spent more time healing than preaching. The work for the poor was not a sideline for the church—it was central to its mission. On another occasion Ellen White asked “ ‘Why has it not been understood from the Word of God that the work being done in medical missionary lines is a fulfillment of the scriptures.’ ”³⁷ For her, “medical missionary” work was much more than what we, today, consider as medical work because she followed the above quote with the story recorded in Luke 14:21 orated by Jesus in which the servant was told to go into the street and bring the poor, maimed, and blind.

A 1900 report of work in Melbourne gives us a glimpse into the close connection between the work for the poor and the gospel. In one year the “Helping Hand” mission in Melbourne held 360 meetings with the over 6,000 in attendance. During that time the team conducted 233 Bible studies with an average attendance of six and 66 individuals professed conversion. The report gives specific examples of help received by people: homes were found for four old men and a baby girl, 58 men have been found billets, and some 800 individuals were given medical treatment. The experience of one man is highlighted. He stated that ““Nine

³⁵ O. A. Olsen in Haloviak, 20, 21. Olsen mentions the Sabbath because Seventh-day Adventists worship on the seventh-day of the week, Saturday, and he mentions “nature of man” because the church does not accept that humans possess an immortal soul that, upon death, either goes to heaven or to hell for eternal punishment. Instead, the church believes that at death the deceased enters into a state comparable to unconscious sleep waiting for the resurrection or for a judgment of final death, but certainly not eternal punishment.

³⁶ Ellen G. White in Haloviak, 5.

³⁷ Ellen G. White in Haloviak, 19.

months ago I was a drunkard, my wife had left me, I was homeless. Today I am a Christian, sober man, and have my home restored.”³⁸

Asia in the early 20th century

In this section we will examine how the church implemented its mission for the poor in a number of Asian countries during the early part of the 20th century. The reports examined for this study cover a period from 1912 to the late 1920’s and the countries involved—China, Japan, Korea, Philippines, eastern Russia, and others—did not have a large Seventh-day Adventist (or, for that matter, other Protestant denominations) presence during that time. The work for the poor in that area will be examined from four different perspectives.

First of all, the reports examined make it clear that most of the work for the poor was done by women within the context of Dorcas societies. The *Asian Division Outlook*, dated January 1-15, 1919, gives a report on the work of the Church in the Philippines ending in 1918. As a point of interest, the baptized membership was less than 1,500 then, whereas currently there are more than 600,000 adult baptized members. The 1919 report covers various areas of the Church—membership, finances, literature distribution, missionary work, education, youth, and one section called “Women’s Work.” The report on women’s work states that it is comparatively new in the Philippines, but it was wise to start this work. The work is important, since the Bible considered the work of Dorcas important enough that God brought her back to life. The report then gives details as to the kind of work the Dorcas women do, but that will be covered in another section.³⁹

Mrs. Bogar from Honan, China, reported that there was “a good interest in the women’s work,” and that she organized “a Dorcas Society and held weekly meetings with the women in Yancheng.”⁴⁰ Another report came from the Philippines in 1924, six years after the first report referred to above. This report from central Philippines stated that “Dorcas societies have sprung up in many of the new churches . . .”⁴¹ This report not only referred to this as work by

³⁸ Haloviak, 19, 20. A similar report is given later in 1900 about the work for women. Among other accomplishments, the mission helped with 12 births, found homes for five infants, provided 8,994 meals, and the matron made 104 visits to the sick and poor. See Haloviak, 20.

³⁹ *Asiatic Division Outlook*, January 1-15 [1919], 13. The year 1918 is printed on the journal, but that cannot be so since it is dated January and yet gives reports on events that transpired in November 1918. In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, “division” refers to a unit of church organization that usually encompasses a number of countries. Division territories are often changed to reflect the work of the church, and the Asiatic Division existed from 1909 to 1918 at which time the territory was reconfigured.

⁴⁰ *Asiatic Division Outlook*, January 1-15, 1922, 4. It is interesting to note that the name “Asiatic” is still used even though the division was reconfigured in 1918.

⁴¹ *Asiatic Division Outlook*, January 1, 1924, 6.

women, but stated that this work is “working for and among the women in these lands.”⁴² The report then gave considerable details as to the kind of work being done by these societies.

In the next two sections we will explore the kind of work that the Dorcas societies did. First of all, it is clear that there was a missionary or evangelistic goal for the work. The church saw the real possibility that if help was provided for the needy, the needy would be more open to listening to the evangelistic message.

In the first issue of the *News-Letter for the Asiatic Division* report appeared on the work in Japan, a country that had and still has very few Christians. The report stated that there were 12 candidates in Kogothima ready for baptism and several prominent citizens are reading the Bible with a Brother Kuniya. This same Brother Kuniya noted “that the Dorcas Society helps greatly in interesting the Japanese women in the meetings.”⁴³ A little more than a year later, Brother Kuniya wrote that Mrs. Kuniya (presumably related to him and probably his wife) held cooking classes to which about 19 ladies came each Monday and also gave them an hour-long Bible study. Furthermore, he added that Mrs. Kuniya organized a Dorcas society. Evangelism, however, is one of the goals, for he wrote that “We hope to win some souls.”⁴⁴ In the final part of his report, Kuniya verified that because of Mrs. Kuniya’s health they employed a servant who expressed a desire to become a Christian. He ended the report with “We must work hard to finish the work in a short time. Everything indicates that the end is very near.”⁴⁵ Translating that from Seventh-day Adventist language, the Gospel must be proclaimed speedily so that Jesus Christ can return. In a report only a month later, Kuniya wrote about the Dorcas society in his area, indicating that the members of the society are not all church members, because “several asked me to give Bible readings at their home.”⁴⁶ He also referred to a man who has been a Christian for seven years and urged Kuniya to teach his wife about Christianity. These contacts have provided an opportunity to enter the homes of the people and present the gospel, but he feels that he and the members have a need. They feel “the need of the Holy Spirit to win more souls.”⁴⁷ Evangelism did not diminish the goal of providing help to the needy but certainly the church members saw an opportunity of witnessing to those who needed help.

While church members used their work for the needy as opportunities to evangelize, evangelism was not their sole purpose. From the Philippines, the report states that church members give one day a week for evangelism. They visit homes and both give and sell

⁴² *Asiatic Division Outlook*, January 1, 1924, 6.

⁴³ *News-Letter for the Asiatic Division*, April 1, 1912, 2.

⁴⁴ *News-Letter for the Asiatic Division*, April 1, 1913, 7.

⁴⁵ *News-Letter for the Asiatic Division*, April 1, 1913, 7.

⁴⁶ *News-Letter for the Asiatic Division*, May 1, 1913, 3.

⁴⁷ *News-Letter for the Asiatic Division*, May 1, 1913, 3.

literature. The writer states, however, that evangelism is not their sole purpose. Previously, the writer stated that the Dorcas societies give instruction on such topics as “child-training, home keeping [sic] or some other topic relative to home life.”⁴⁸

In the third and final section dealing with the Asian countries of the early 20th century, we will focus on the fact that even though evangelism was a part of the work for the poor, work for the poor, in itself, was a legitimate part of the gospel. In a letter dated January 17, 1913, with both the name of the writer and name of the city left blank (probably for fear of persecution), the writer stated that “Our sisters have started a Dorcas society; by this means they expect to help the people in heathen lands. We pray to God that we may bear good fruits for him.”⁴⁹ The second sentence seems to imply that the “fruits” may be converts, but within the context of the entire letter, that is not the implication.

From Shanghai, China, the publication city of the newsletter, a Mrs. B. Miller gives this report on the work of the Dorcas society:

We have a Dorcas band, and our sisters give money and cloth, and we gather every Thursday for work from one till three. After our sewing class we have our weekly prayer meeting. We find it very helpful to our sisters to do this work, and we have been able to help many poor people throughout our mission station with clothing. We hope that not alone in Shanghai, but also in many other places, we may soon be able to have more active work for our sisters.⁵⁰

The purpose of the prayer meeting was for the members of the Dorcas society, and in those days it was not usual to have such a meeting during what we consider today to be normal working hours. The group worked so that it could provide help to those who needed it. Such outreach to the needy was not unusual by the Seventh-day Adventist Church then or later.

Most of the Dorcas societies seemed to offer very practical help for the needy. The society in Iloilo, The Philippines, provided training on “child training, home-making, simple treatments, etc.”⁵¹ The same society posted a daily schedule that included an hour for each of the following: house work, marketing, cooking, teaching children, sewing, and cooking.⁵²

Just as the drunkard (his words) in Australia gave a testimony as how his life was changed by the work of the church for the poor, we find a personal example of how the health of a person was improved in The Philippines. The Dorcas group in Visayan used a medical book

⁴⁸ *Asiatic Division Outlook*, January 1, 1924, 6.

⁴⁹ *News-Letter for the Asiatic Division*, March 1, 1913, 2.

⁵⁰ *Asiatic Division Outlook*, July 1922, 12.

⁵¹ *Asiatic Division Outlook*, June 1, 1921, 11.

⁵² *Asiatic Division Outlook*, June 1, 1921, 11.

by a Dr. A. C. Salmon⁵³, which was translated into the local language. Mrs. G. Hugh Murrin, writer of the report, stated that they had many interesting experiences by putting to practice the principles advocated in the book. One of the members of the society was given an opportunity to demonstrate the principles of hydrotherapy that she had learned. A woman became ill with severe pains in the chest and lungs. The society member applied fomentations, and even before she finished the treatments, the patient fell asleep. By the next morning the patient greatly improved and the society member was delighted. By using such simple, but effective treatment, the writer concluded that the Dorcas workers can help the people by leading them “away from their habit of employing quack doctors with their death-dealing concoctions, and demonstrate to them God’s plan for treating the sick.”⁵⁴ Though this example refers to a health issue, it is similar to the “house poor” referred to in Reformation literature.

All of the work done by the members of the Dorcas societies—clothing production and distribution, health education, home visits, etc.—was done within the context of theological urgency. Christ is coming and the Church must do its part to prepare for the event. As we quoted Brother Kuniya from Japan, the members must work hard for everything indicating that Christ is coming soon.⁵⁵ Since is Christ coming back soon, all, including the poor, must be ready for that event. The poor would be easy to ignore, but that Church was determined to meet both their temporal needs and offer them an invitation to be part of Christ’s eternity.

A look at the contemporary situation

In the final section regarding the Seventh-day Adventist perspective on the needs of the poor, we will examine how the Dorcas movement is now being implemented. Most of the focus will be on the theology that drives the work with a brief section on the operations aspect of the movement.

Though the name “Dorcas societies” is no longer used universally (in North America, for example, the reference is usually “Adventist Community Services”), the scope of the work has broadened. While women still make up the majority of volunteers, men have joined in significant numbers. Also the type of services has expanded significantly and includes, in many areas, centers and programs that respond to disasters.

An outgrowth of the church’s response to the poor has been the establishment of the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA).⁵⁶ This agency has grown into a major NGO

⁵³ See “Selmon, Arthur Clifford,” s.v. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*. He was a physician and missionary to China (paid his own expenses for the first year), who later was health director of the W. K. Kellogg Company and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. It is interesting to note that some of his books are still for sale on the web.

⁵⁴ *Asiatic Division Outlook*, January 1, 1924, 6.

⁵⁵ *News-Letter for the Asiatic Division*, April 1, 1913, 7.

⁵⁶ “Adventist Development and Relief Agency International,” s.v. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*.

with a world-wide staff of more than 5,000 paid individuals and numerous volunteers dealing extensively with development projects (clean water, nutrition, health, AIDS, etc.) and also responds to various disasters.⁵⁷ In the early years of ADRA and its predecessors, it depended heavily on the work of local Dorcas societies and community centers for the clothes that were shipped to many countries. On a personal note, I recall that my parents and I spent many hours as volunteers at a warehouse in New York sorting and packing clothes that were to be shipped overseas.

With this brief introduction to the work for the poor, we will examine the theological basis for this work and how it is done within the context of theological urgency. For the purpose of this study, we will limit ourselves to the operating manual of the Adventist Community Services.⁵⁸

According to this handbook, foundational to the work for the poor is that “Jesus focused His ministry on the needs of the people. In Luke 4:17-19 He makes His first public statement of what His life and ministry is all about. Verse 17 records that ‘he found the place,’ so this was not an accidental selection.”⁵⁹ The writers of the handbook lament that “Often preachers ‘spiritualize’ this text, declaring that poverty is spiritual, not economic; that the prisoner and oppressed are under religious oppression, not physical bondage; etc. This is not an honest presentation of the text. The original language is very clear. Christ is speaking of real low-income people, real incarcerated criminals, real victims of disease and social injustice.”⁶⁰ In fact, the work for the needy is a defense of God for “The display of compassion for the hurting, the poor and the unjustly treated is testimony to the truth about God.”⁶¹ Even the Sabbath provides a basis for social action for “the Sabbath is a demonstration of the social justice God wants to establish throughout the earth every day of the week.”⁶² The handbook points out that in a book used extensively in the preparation of individuals to join the church, there was a chapter, “Our Duty for the Poor,” though editions of the book since the 1920’s do not include

⁵⁷ For a report on its work, see an interview of its key leaders by Nikolaus Satelmajer and Willie E. Hucks II, “You did not know us, but you loved us: An interview with ADRA,” *Ministry*, March 2009, 9ff. For a discussion of the philosophy and theology behind the work of the organization see, Charles Sandefur, “A little bit of the Second Coming now,” *Ministry*, July 2009, 21ff.

⁵⁸ Monte Sahlin, et. al., *Ministries of Compassion: A Handbook for Adventist Community Services, Inner City Programs and Social Action Projects*, 2 ed. (Silver Spring, MD: North American Division of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, 1994).

⁵⁹ *Ministries of Compassion*, 1.

⁶⁰ *Ministries of Compassion*, 1. It should be noted that no example is given how preachers “spiritualize” this text.

⁶¹ *Ministries of Compassion*, 1.

⁶² *Ministries of Compassion*, 2.

it.⁶³ Throughout the chapter that deals with the philosophical and theological basis for the work among the needy it is clear that such work is not an appendix to the mission of the church—it is a part of the mission.

What about the work for the needy within the context of Seventh-day Adventist theology of urgency—the urgency of Christ’s return? The opening sentence of the handbook sees no conflict between working for the needy and the return of Christ. The opening lines state that “Those who wait for Christ to return have been given a special purpose on earth. ‘I have sent them into the world,’ Christ declared as He prayed in the garden before His crucifixion” (John 17:18).⁶⁴ *And why is social action important to a people who believe Christ will come soon to rescue us from the problem we face*, asks the handbook? It responds that “Because it is a living witness to our soon-returning Lord. When we take a stand for justice, compassion, and healing, we demonstrate the values of the coming of the Kingdom.”⁶⁵ Thus, the basis for doing work of compassion has not changed from the time when the first Dorcas society was established, during the economically challenging years in Australia, when many Asian countries had a small Church membership, and to the present: Christ is coming and we need to help people so that their needs will be met and they will get a glimpse of what God’s kingdom is like.

Summary and Reflection

What comprises the basis of the Seventh-day Adventists’ work for the poor and does that work fit within the context of anticipating the soon return of Jesus Christ? What biblical and historical examples have influenced the Adventist leadership in deciding how the poor will receive needed assistance?

As has been shown in this paper, a number of biblical passages such as Isaiah 58, 61; Luke 4, 14; and Acts 9:36-42 have played a pivotal role in shaping the Seventh-day Adventist response to the poor. The story of Dorcas, Acts 9:36-40, has not only influenced the thinking of the church, but even the name “Dorcas” was incorporated into the work for the church. While these passages, and others, were used to show why the church needed to address the needs of the poor, no evidence of a debate within the church exists as to whether the church should engage in such work. That, in itself, is significant, since the Seventh-day Adventist Church, not possessing a creed to direct its development, engaged in ongoing discussion as to its mission and theology. Within the emphasis on the return of Christ, Seventh-day Adventists would agree with Samuel Torvend’s assessment of the judgment scene from Matthew 25. Torvend writes

⁶³ *Ministries of Compassion*, 3. The book referred to is Stephen Haskell, *Bible Handbook*. One wonders if the theological argument in the Unites States in the 1920’s made such a chapter seem unnecessary.

⁶⁴ *Ministries of Compassion*, 1.

⁶⁵ *Ministries of Compassion*, 2.

that “By invoking the judgment scene narrated in Matthew 25, Luther pointed to Jesus Christ, the gift of God and the exemplar for the Christian in his or her response to the hungry poor.”⁶⁶

Seventh-day Adventist theology and practice have been influenced by the reformers—Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Wesley, and others. The response to the poor by the church has also been influenced by the Reformation movements. The response of the Reformation to the poor was itself based on reflection of the biblical examples and reaction as to how the church responded to the poor since New Testament times. In a 601 example, Augustine corresponded with Pope Gregory about how the church should deal with the poor. At that time, it was customary for the church to divide its income into four parts—one part for the bishop, one part for the priest, one for the upkeep of the church, and one part for the poor.⁶⁷ By the time of the Reformation, at least in the west, a more personal relationship had developed between the rich and the poor—the poor in a sense became a spiritual asset to the rich. By helping the poor, the rich were in effect acquiring “insurance” for their souls. Or as Carter Lindberg writes, “Most of the authors of the time [during Middle Ages] appear to consider the poor to be in service to the rich, created for their salvific function.”⁶⁸ Luther’s understanding of Scripture eliminated the “salvific function” of the poor. In Luther’s view, the poor were the neighbors of Christians. Luther explained that “the complete person is made up of the inner and the outer,” and the outer person “puts on” the neighbor.⁶⁹ An examination of Seventh-day Adventist writings and practices about the poor shows that the Reformation perspective on the poor strongly influenced the response of the Church.

A significant difference, however, exists between the Luther and Seventh-day Adventist responses to the poor. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has never been a “national” church. Whereas we find Luther influencing government response to the poor and at times directing the establishing of specific programs,⁷⁰ the Adventist Church has focused much more on what it can do for the poor. The church has and still cooperates with governments and even uses government funds (most for international development), but the Dorcas type of programs have been church directed and funded.

Finally, *how does* the Seventh-day Adventist Church address the needs of the poor in the midst of theological urgency? The urgency comes from its belief in the immanent (though no time is set) and literal return of Jesus Christ. If Christ is coming soon, why bother with the

⁶⁶ Samuel Torvend, *Luther and the Hungry Poor: Gathered Fragments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 81.

⁶⁷ John R. H. Moorman, *A History of the Church in England*, 3rd ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1980), 14.

⁶⁸ Carter Lindberg, *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 28.

⁶⁹ Class Notes, Justification and Justice HCH 625G, The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, March 16-20, 2009.

⁷⁰ For example see Lindberg, 123 concerning the Leisnig Ordinance.

poor? Perhaps the poor can just be patient until Christ comes and recreates the world? What drives Seventh-day Adventist theology is a belief that *all* people—including the poor—are invited to be ready for the return of Christ. The poor, however, cannot even hear the invitation because of the pressing needs they have. Thus, the importance of helping the poor remains an important and continuing ministry. Additionally, Christ identifies the poor as our neighbors—He will ask how we treated them—so in order to fulfill the mission given by Christ, we need to help the poor.