Biblically Appropriate Functional Substitutes:  
A Response to Dual Allegiance  

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Introduction

Dual allegiance is not a recent mission problem. Since the very beginning when Satan successfully tempted Adam and Eve the devil has perverted the pure truths of God and deceived people so that they dabble in a syncretistic stew by constantly looking for the latest power source and mixing truth and error. In more recent mission history syncretism, dual allegiance, split-level Christianity, and Christo-paganism have become widespread among those who call themselves Christian. What are the causes, and how can the church effectively intervene?

Christian leaders have a growing awareness and concern about “the persistence of a two-tier Christianity around the world despite centuries of instruction and condemnation by missionaries and church leaders. Deeply committed Christians faithfully attend church services and pray to God in times of need, but feel compelled during the week to go to a local shaman for healing, a diviner for guidance, and an exorcist for deliverance from spirit oppression” (Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiénou 1999:15). This paper will briefly describe some of the underlying causes of syncretism and dual allegiance, followed by suggestions on how the church can effectively and appropriately respond in biblical ways.

Definitions

Syncretism—“Blending of one idea, practice, or attitude with another. Traditionally among Christians it has been used of the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements” (Moreau 2000:924).

Dual Allegiance—Double allegiance that occurs when adherents of Christianity find “little or none of the spiritual power they crave for the meeting of their needs for healing, blessing, guidance, even deliverance from demons” with the result that they continue in “their pre-Christian practice of going to shamans, priests, diviners, temples, shrines and the like for spiritual power” (Kraft 2005:361), or, “when people add to their Christian commitment a dependence on occult powers (e.g., Freemasonry, New Age, Easter Martial Arts, fortune-telling, astrology, horoscopes, psychic healing)” (Kraft and Kraft 1993:349).

Biblically Appropriate—Adventist mission is deeply committed to the Word of God so any response to conditions in a particular culture should be undertaken with the understanding that only those methods and approaches that are in harmony with biblical principles will be practiced.

Functional Substitutes—Biblically appropriate replacements for cultural ceremonies, customs, celebrations, and procedures that replace the pre-Christian practices in order to avoid creating a cultural void or cultural vacuum.
Causes of Dual Allegiance

Cultural Baggage from the Enlightenment

There are many causes for the development of dual religious systems, but an underlying problem has been the very different worldview of those who brought Christianity as compared to those who received Christianity. Two hundred years ago when Christian mission was just gearing up and beginning to take Protestant Christianity to Africa and Asia missionaries were largely coming out of cultures that had been influenced by the Enlightenment, by optimistic humanism, by the concept of the white man’s burden, and by the belief that the old animistic ways of the people they encountered were “primitive” superstitions that could be ignored or easily brushed aside.

The early missionaries of that age did not have many of the social science tools that modern day missionaries have. Insights concerning worldview values, premises, and assumptions were largely unknown. Too many of those pioneer missionaries did not spend the time or the effort needed to understand that in the host cultures they were going to, success in all areas of life was believed to depend on living in harmony with and ritual obeisance to deities, spirits, and ancestors. Neither did they understand the deeply held belief that rituals and sacrifices were needed to control the evil spiritual forces at work in society. Rather than sensing the importance of the old cultural practices and proscribing biblically appropriate functional substitutes they destroyed without replacing. Their approach to much of what they encountered was to label everything in the culture pagan and unfit to carry the gospel message (Hiebert 1985:184), so the missionaries set about to Westernize before they could Christianize. They substituted English, French, German, Spanish, and Portuguese for the languages of the people believing that through the process of teaching them a “superior” culture they would also produce Christians in the mold of Western Christianity.

However, in setting out to give the peoples of Africa, the Americas, and Asia a new language, culture, and religion, the missionaries, more often than not, did not take seriously the old animistic practices. They felt that if people dressed like them, worshipped like them, sang the same songs, read the Bible, and prayed like them, that the old ways had disappeared. But too often, the missionaries only succeeded in driving the old ways underground where they were practiced in secret (Hiebert 1985:184).

Excluded Middle

Hiebert in his article on the flaw of the excluded middle (1994:189-201) points out that missionaries and church leaders often do not talk about Christian responses to local gods, ancestors and ghosts, spirits, demons and evil spirits, or to magic and astrology, mana, charms, amulets and magical rites, the evil eye, or the evil tongue. Instead of meeting these practices head on and openly discussing them and sharing biblical ways of dealing with these issues, too often these subjects have been ignored in the hope that they will disappear. “Christianity has been presented as the answer to the quest for eternal life but offers little to provide protection, healing, and guidance for the present. This contrasts with the great concern for such things in the people’s pre-Christian faith, leaving voids in areas of great importance to them” (Kraft and Kraft 1993:349).
Not Enough Emphasis on Spiritual Power

Kraft also suggests that another cause of dual allegiance is an unbalanced emphasis on truth and allegiance to the exclusion of God’s power. In the early 1990s Kraft wrote “What Kind of Encounters Do We Need in Our Christian Witness?” (1991) and “Allegiance, Truth and Power Encounters in Christian Witness” (1992). In these two articles he suggested that there needs to be a balance between an emphasis on truth, allegiance, and power. The Adventist Church and many Evangelical churches stress the importance to giving allegiance to Jesus Christ and the importance of being grounded in the truth that is found in the Bible. Yet, these same churches often neglect to present much on biblical power. “A Christianity that talks about and promises spiritual power but leaves out the experiencing in this area . . . is a great disappointment to many. Such Christianity leaves itself open to the problem of dual allegiance” (Kraft and Kraft 1993:350). Yet power that protects from evil spiritual forces is one of the greatest felt needs in many animistic societies. Because Christian churches often present a powerless Christianity, members continue to seek out the old power sources to satisfy their fears and needs in this area.

Fear and Unwillingness to Discuss This Topic

Another factor that has led to the present situation is that most people trained in the ministry never receive any instruction in dealing with witchcraft, evil spirits, curses, and the power of the evil one. I remember the first time I came face to face with a demonized person. It happened early in my ministry in Japan when a troubled young girl with eyes that looked demonic hissed at me—“I am Satan.” I didn’t know what to do. I had never had a course or even heard a lecture suggesting ways to deal with demonized people. So I did what came naturally—I ducked and ran. As I backed away from the girl who needed to experience the freeing power of Jesus Christ, I said, “I’ll be praying for you.”

Too many Adventist pastors are ill-equipped to deal with the witchcraft, the curses, the fetishes, and the fear Adventist members bring with them into our churches. Too many Adventist leaders tolerate a dual alliance among members because they do not know how to deal with the demonic in biblically appropriate ways. Too often the only model Adventist pastors have is a Pentecostal model that falls short of following biblical principles in many important areas. As a result the issues of dual allegiance and syncretism in the area of evil spiritual powers is allowed to fester and grow until today it is becoming an almost accepted part of Adventist culture and church life in many parts of the world.

Cultural Void

Many missionaries and church leaders did not realize that when they forbade certain practices that were important in the old scheme of things but did not work equally as hard to replace the ceremonies, practices, and customs with Christian functional substitutes they created a vacuum or cultural void (Hiebert 1985:184). It is this void that is a primary factor leading to dual allegiance.

The rise and rapid spread of Traditional African Initiated churches is largely the result of a reaction against the cultural void created by Christian missions (Kraft and Kraft 1993:351). “The movement frequently is led by a prophet and may be messianic. Its motivation is to regain something believed to have been lost—taken away by the white man. This recovery is usually
expressed in a millenarian doctrine. Maybe some Christian elements are retained but the traditional will be uppermost. The result will be syncretistic; the very thing the missionaries tried to avoid” (Tippett 1987:200). The same cause that has led to the rapid growth of Traditional African Churches has also caused dual allegiance within Adventism.

Alan Tippett has written extensively on the relationship between the cultural void and dual allegiance. Whenever Christian mission did not replace the pagan elements with Christian functional substitutes a void was created, and the void led to split-level Christianity. “The failure to provide adequate functional substitutes in the newly planted church leaves a void. Voids create longings. Longings lead to unrest and unrest in time to violent reaction” (Tippett 1987:201). When Christianity did not meet the needs of the people in certain areas, the longing for answers led the people to continue the old practices in secret, leading to dual allegiance or split-level Christianity.

“The cultural void, like the intellectual and spiritual voids, is a danger spot because it always has room for the ‘wrong thing’ if the ‘right thing’ is denied. . . . I suggest that, in the newly planted church of animist converts, a direct relationship exists between the effectiveness of the functional substitutes and the possibilities of reaction against cultural voids. Cultural voids might be reduced by paying greater attention to any cultural institution rejected upon the acceptance of Christianity: what are its functions in society and what kind of Christian substitutes might be advocated?” (Tippett 1987:201). Bronislaw Malinowski in The Dynamics of Cultural Change suggests that societies organize their institutions, beliefs, and customs so as to permit the individuals in the group to cope with the everyday problems they face (1945:42). The changing of any of the institutions in a society causes ramifications in every other aspect of social life. However, one way to reduce the impact of the loss of an institution is to work at replacing its function in society with a new institution. “One kind of institution can be replaced by another, which fills a similar function” (Malinowski 1945:52). Christian mission and Adventist mission have not worked hard enough at such replacement.

The brief discussion above of some of the underlying causes for dual allegiance has suggested that the cultural baggage from the Enlightenment with its deistic overtones, high view of Western civilization, and a distain for the “primitive” peoples who held animistic beliefs was one of the factors at play in producing conditions favorable to allowing the development of a split-level Christianity. Worldview issues that are described by Hiebert as the excluded middle, the presentation of a powerless Christianity, fear and unwillingness to discuss openly matters of witchcraft and evil spiritual powers all contributed to create conditions where dual allegiance could exist. But the factor that has been most at play is the creation of cultural voids in the area of how to deal with the questions of everyday life that were of extreme importance to people with an animistic worldview.

**Responses to Dual Allegiance**

How should the church respond to the conditions found today? How can the weaknesses caused by the factors above be overcome? A starting point would be to insist on a serious study of local concepts of reality, beliefs, and values. Theological education must not only stress biblical understanding, but also needs to stress the importance of understanding the cultural context, the beliefs and values of those with whom the gospel is shared. Pastors and church leaders need to use anthropological and religious study literature to inform them of the deep significance of cultural practices. It would also be helpful if time was spent dialoguing with local
religious practitioners to more fully understand the impact of the old ways on people. All this should be done before starting the second step.

A second suggestion is to engage leaders and scholars in open discussions and analysis of the situation. The issue needs to be placed on the table and sympathetically and candidly talked about instead of treating it as something that is to be avoided. “Unless the church provides clear teaching on the subject of the spirit world and its practitioners, as well as providing alternatives to going to such practitioners, the problem will continue as it has in the past” (Henry 1986:94).

A third suggestion would be to teach a course on biblical responses to evil spiritual forces in order that the next generation of pastors would have the understanding and ability to deal biblically with the issue. Reuel Almocera has begun developing an Adventist theological response (Almocera 2000:16-22). But the bigger challenge remains the creation of biblically appropriate functional substitutes for the areas where Adventists feel compelled to go to a local shaman for healing or to seek out a diviner for guidance or to consult an exorcist for deliverance from spirit oppression. These are areas where the Seventh-day Adventist Church must work out biblically appropriate responses to people’s felt needs.

**Biblically Appropriate Functional Substitutes**

In those areas of the world where dual allegiance is practiced, many Adventists seek spiritual power and help in at least nine areas. Unless and until the church responds with clear teaching in these areas of importance there will be very little change. People seek help from the old system because of the cultural void created by the destruction of the old ways. When Christianity failed to provide biblical answers in response to the needs and fears that were widespread in many societies, people continued to revert to the old patterns of life, leading to dual allegiance and split-level Christianity. “Marriage problems, barrenness, sickness, business or crop failure, accidents, broken relationships are all seen as involving spirit activity. In addition, success, health, fertility of fields, animals and people, protection from danger, and the like are seen as requiring supernatural activity” (Kraft and Kraft 1993:349, 350). Below I suggest possible responses to these areas.

1. **Protection from evil spiritual powers.** In an animistic setting people are always looking for ways to ward off evil. In Cambodia most children wore a string around their neck, or belly or wrist with some charm or talisman to protect them from evil. When the Adventist Church made a conscious effort to teach about the indwelling Holy Spirit and His power to protect, and taught about guardian angels and their role and function, people were more willing to trust God’s power instead of the old ways (see Schantz 2007:74).

2. **Healing of diseases.** Prayer for the sick should become commonplace in Adventist churches so that those who are sick in our midst experience the healing power of Jesus Christ and feel the concern and compassion of fellow believers. One church in Cambodia developed the practice of having a time immediately after the worship service each Sabbath where the members would push their mats into a circle in the middle of the church, have anyone who was sick come and sit in the center, then several of the members would lay hands on them and pray for them in their area of need.

3. **Blessings for crops, finance, and success.** People in many societies follow the practice of appeasing the spirits or offering sacrifices to the spirits in order to ensure good crops and financial success. God’s Word says to “‘bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,’ says the Lord Almighty, ‘and see if I will not throw
open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit,’ says the Lord Almighty” (Mal 3:10, 11). As the pastors taught these concepts in Cambodia they encouraged their members to be faithful in tithing. Since the people were rice farmers and had little cash income the people were encouraged to tithe their rice harvest with the deacons selling the rice in the market and turning the money in to the church. Just one year after Mr. Ee had started tithing his rice crop the cut worms invaded the rice paddies and whole fields started to wither and turn yellow. Mr. Ee prayed for his rice fields, claiming God’s protection from the worms. His neighbors started coming to ask what kind of medicine he had put on his fields, because his fields were green and lush and untouched by the worms. He just pointed up and said that his God was protecting his fields.

4. Happiness and harmony in marriage (children). Barrenness is a major cause of disharmony in societies where children are the greatest wealth anyone can have. The biblical record is clear that God is in the business of opening barren wombs and blessing families with children (see Gen 18:10-14; Judg 13:2, 3; 1 Sam 1:2-20; 2 Kgs 4:14-17; Luke 1:7-15). Are Adventist pastors trained to pray for barrenness? Does the church encourage special prayers for childless couples? Some do, but many do not with the result that some church members revert to the old cultural practices in this area.

5. Death, funerals, and the next life. Roy Shearer discusses the challenges Christian missionaries faced in Korea in connection with funeral ceremonies and the struggle in knowing how to deal with the dead ancestors. Most missionaries had demanded that the people make a clear-cut break with the old ways of ancestor worship, but gave no biblical functional replacement for the old practices. Later, Korean pastors developed Christian memorial services that treated in biblical ways the heritage and blessing of previous generations (Shearer 1967:258-260).

6. The control of “bad” spirits. In animistic contexts the spirit world is real and the fear of spirits is real so that people expend much energy, time, and cost to ensure that evil spirits do not cause trouble or disruption in the family. How is a Christian to deal with evil spirits? What functional substitutes does the church teach as a means for new Christians to control evil spirit activity? Have we taught new Christians about who they are in Jesus Christ? Have we carefully taught on the indwelling Holy Spirit as a powerful protector? Have we taught them that they have authority over evil spirits (Luke 9:1, 2; Luke 10:9, 17; Mark 3:14, 15), not only for personal protection, but also authority in Christ to drive out spirits and set people free?

7. Knowledge of the future. In many Asian cultures the day to open a business, the day to be married on, the day on which to become engaged are all carefully researched and the help of a diviner sought in choosing the right day. How do we provide biblical substitutes in this area? It is not complicated, but when nothing is taught, a void is created that causes fear and concern that can lead new Christians back to their pre-Christian practices. Clear teaching that the Creator God makes each and every day a good day, that Christians can rejoice in each day and do not have to fear any day (Ps 118:24) goes a long way in dealing with this situation.

8. Dedication of houses and businesses, motorcycles and cars. Cambodian people followed a custom of calling the shaman to dedicate newly constructed houses. As Cambodians became Adventists the church was faced with the choice of either labeling the practice pagan, or developing a biblically appropriate functional substitute. I remember participating in the first such ceremony. A group of Christians walked the boundary of the property, singing and stopping at each corner of the lot, pausing to pray that God would make this property a light to the whole
community. Then, we proceeded to walk around the house, pausing to read Scripture at each corner of the house. Then we went into the house and prayed a dedication prayer in each room, asking God to guard and protect the family, asking the Holy Spirit to be present, and asking for God’s holy angels to give their constant care to the house, property, and family. The family was extremely grateful for knowing that their new God was so much more powerful than the spirits they had feared in the past. But too often the Adventist response has been to create a cultural void by forbidding a practice that has deep meanings for people without offering a biblical functional substitute.

Greater Emphasis on Spiritual Approaches to Life

Adventist teaching and evangelistic preaching have often been characterized by a strong emphasis on biblical truths. This is as it should be, however, if those truths are not encapsulated and lived out spiritually in the lives of the presenters and believers in an Adventist community rational propositional statements about faith will rarely hold believers from straying to other power sources. Adventist faith communities must continually demonstrate a living relationship with God. Prayers for the sick, intercessory prayer, anointing services, and teams of people ready and willing to minister to those who are harassed by the evil one would be vitally important elements needed to hold Adventists from seeking other power sources.

“Christianity can seem too abstract, too concerned with words, and not sufficiently able to meet the day-to-day needs. . . . For that reason, certain aspects of the old system will perdure, even for centuries, alongside Christianity” (Schreiter 1985:156). I believe that toleration of this type of condition for centuries is unacceptable. However, Adventists must admit that the problem exists and that dual allegiance has become an almost accepted part of Adventist church life in some parts of the world. Therefore, I recommend the following initial steps.

Recommendations

1. A series of Bible conferences should be held dealing with dual allegiance, functional substitutes, and biblical responses to the problem, led by the Biblical Research Institute and the church’s missiologists with meetings held for those unions where dual allegiance is a matter of concern.

2. Worker’s meetings should be planned where time is spent developing a list of local needs that drive people to seek out other power sources with additional time spent developing biblically appropriate functional substitutes as practical responses to each listed need.

3. More detailed Bible studies could be prepared in the format of question and answers to the types of questions that deal with the real life issues that have driven people back to the old ways. We presently teach doctrinal truths more from the perspective of rational, propositional statements. This can be part of the process, but unless and until practical application is made in ways to impact personal experience not much progress will be realized in the area of dual allegiance.

4. A college and seminary course should be developed that teaches Adventist pastors how to pray for the sick, engage in deliverance ministries, develop functional substitutes, and offer biblical, spiritual responses to the underlying factors that have driven Adventist members to seek help in pre-Christian ways.
5. When it is known that a church worker is tolerating split-level Christianity among members, discussions should ensue that would seek to give guidance on how to deal with the situation. In instances where a denominational worker engages in pre-Christian practices there should be a very low toleration for such actions.

6. Christians live in a wicked world where sickness, suffering, death, disease, and problems of many types afflict God’s people. When adversity strikes, when prayers and medication do not heal, when crops fail and businesses go under, Adventist members need to understand that the solution is not to search out an alternative power source, but to stand clearly on God’s side and say like Job, “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him” (Job 15:13). Adventists need to understand the issues of the Great Controversy so clearly that they will reply like “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up”” (Dan 3:16-18). Until Adventist members have this conviction the Church’s responsibility to teach, disciple, and nurture is unfinished.

Reference List


