

**KOHLBERG'S THEORY OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT:
A SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST INSIGHT**

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**KOHLBERG'S THEORY OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT:
A SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST INSIGHT**

Introduction:

What Kohlberg calls moral development in his theory, referred to as character development by some other authors, including Ellen G White, is a vital issue in christian life. The purpose of this paper is to analyze Kohlberg's theory from an Adventist perspective. It seeks to bring out some of the useful insights which can help christian teachers in general and Adventists in particular, in their study of the theory. The writer also discusses some of the limitations and shortcomings of the theory from a Seventh-day Adventist christian point of view.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT, TAKEN FROM THE BIBLE AND ELLEN G WHITE WRITINGS

The creation of man and his fall, as found in the Biblical narrative of the origin of man, and clearly explained in the writings of Ellen G White, is vital to an Adventist's understanding of man's character development in his sinful nature.

Seventh-day Adventists accept and believe the story of creation as the only authentic account of the origin of man. They believe that man was created by God. According to the Scriptures, ". . . God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness . . . so God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them." Gen.1:26,27. So man was created as a moral being.

Accepting the Biblical view of the creation and speaking about the first man, Ellen White says, "Man was originally endowed with noble power and a well-balanced mind. He was perfect in his being, and in harmony with God. His thoughts were pure, his aims holy . . .In his sinless state, man held joyful communion with Him."¹ She goes on to say that "man was to bear God's image, both in outward resemblance and in character."²

To Ellen White, "man was created a free moral agent."³ His moral nature includes the will and the autonomy - the power and freedom to choose and decide.⁴ Man's will power, his freedom to choose, and his knowledge of God's character are very essential for his character

development. This makes a clear and distinctive difference between him and other creatures.

Without freedom of choice, man's obedience to God would not have been voluntary but forced. There could have been no provision for character development, and this forced obedience would have been contrary to God's plan and His character as a God of love. Ellen White says that the will is the governing power in the nature of man - the power of decision, of choice. "Everything depends on the right action of the will."⁵ She clearly indicates that there is no power in the unaided human will to resist sin."⁶ But when man chooses to place his will on the side of God to cooperate with Him, "it becomes omnipotent."⁷

Though man was placed high at his creation, he misused his will and his power of choice; he disobeyed and sinned against God. As a result of this, he fell to a low level. His sinful nature explains the problems he is facing in his moral development. In White's writings, sin is understood to be a distrust of God's goodness, disbelief of His word, a rejection of His authority, a deliberate, willful disobedience to God's expressed will as revealed in His laws. These are at the foundation of every sin.

God has provided a solution to the sin problem in the redemptive blood of Christ. God has repaired the broken bridge and has made it possible for the image of God to be restored in man through Jesus Christ.

Fallen man is helpless and weak without god. He cannot develop his moral powers by himself. But God has made provision; a way has been made possible whereby man can be helped to grow if he willingly accepts the power of God.

To this, Ellen White says:

"Across the gulf that lay between, there could be no communion. But through Christ, earth is again linked with heaven. With His own merits, Christ has bridged the gulf which sin made . . .; Christ connects fallen man in his weakness and helplessness with the Source of infinite power."⁸

She adds:

"To restore in man the image of his Maker, to bring him back to the perfection in which he was created, to promote the development

of body and soul, that the divine purposes in his creation might be realized - this was to be the work of redemption."⁹

Ellen White is quite certain of the ultimate goal for man. "Higher than the highest human thought can reach is God's ideal for His children. Godliness - Godlikeness - is the goal to be reached."¹⁰ This clearly indicates that man by himself is not able to restore himself to the image of God. His moral development depends upon his willingness to accept the power of God which can enable him to develop his character.

WHO WAS KOHLBERG AND WHAT WAS HIS THEORY?

Lawrence Kohlberg was an American moral philosopher and child development psychologist, educated at the university of Chicago. He spent a few years at Yale and at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the behavioral sciences in California. He joined Harvard University when, along with his teaching and research, he became director of the University Center for Moral Education.

Kohlberg conducted a series of longitudinal and cross-cultural studies attempting to deal with the problem of moral development. He admits that the cognitive development approach was stated for the first time by John Dewey. Upon Dewey's studies of cognitive stages, Jean Piaget built and defined stages of moral reasoning. It was in 1955 that Kohlberg started to redefine and validate it, using his longitudinal and cross-cultural research instrument. His central concern was "How does man become moral?"

Kohlberg's method consisted of interviewing boys. To each respondent, ten moral situational ethics were presented. These comprised conflicting issues of obedience to laws with the logical needs of compelling necessities of other people. The interviewee was asked to choose which of the two conflicting moral dilemmas should be taken.

A classical example is the following story of Heinz as recorded in several writings on Kohlberg's theory:

In Europe a woman was near death from a very bad disease, a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to make. He paid \$200 for the radium and charged \$2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband,

Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get together about \$1,000, which was half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying, and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said, "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." So Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife.¹¹

Participants were asked as to whether Heinz should have done what he did and to explain why. They were to explain what the judge could have done if Heinz would have been taken to court and why? Kohlberg was not interested in a right or wrong answer to such dilemmas. His interest was in the reason given by the respondent in explaining why they answered the way they did.

As a result of his findings, Kohlberg developed his moral development theory divided into three levels of moral orientation, each level having two stages, thus making a total of six moral development stages. Taken from Kohlberg's writings they are presented below:

I Preconventional level

At this level the child is responsive to cultural rules and labels of good and bad, right or wrong, but interprets these labels either in terms of the physical or the hedonistic consequences of action (punishment, reward, exchange of favors) or in terms of the physical power of those who enunciate the rules and labels. The level is divided into the following two stages:

Stage 1: The punishment-and-obedience orientation. The physical consequences of action determine its goodness or badness regardless of the human meaning or value of these consequences. Avoidance of punishment and unquestioning deference to power are valued in their own right, not in terms of respect for an underlying moral order supported by punishment and authority (the latter being stage 4.)

Stage 2: The instrumental-relativist orientation. Right action consists of that which instrumentally satisfies one's own needs and occasionally the needs of others. Human relations are viewed in terms like those of the market place. Elements of fairness, of reciprocity, and of equal sharing are present, but they are always interpreted in a physical, pragmatic way. Reciprocity is a matter of "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours," not of loyalty, gratitude, or justice.

II Conventional level

At this level, maintaining the expectations of the individual's family, group, or nation is perceived as valuable in its own right, regardless of immediate and obvious consequences. The attitude is not only one of conformity to personal expectations and social order, but of loyalty to it, or actively maintaining, supporting, and justifying the order, and of identifying with the persons or group involved in it. At this level, there are the following two stages:

Stage 3: The interpersonal concordance or "good boy - nice girl" orientation. Good behavior is that which pleases or helps others and is approved by them. There is much conformity to stereotypical images of what is majority or "natural" behavior. Behavior is frequently judged by intention - "he means well" - becomes important for the first time. One earns approval by being "nice."

Stage 4: The "law and order" orientation. There is orientation toward authority, fixed rules, and the maintenance of the social order. Right behavior consists of doing one's duty, showing respect for authority, and maintaining the given social order for its own sake.

III Postconventional, autonomous, or principled level

At this level, there is a clear effort to define moral values and principles that have validity and application apart from the authority of the groups or persons holding these principles and apart from the individual's own identification with these groups. This level again has two stages:

Stage 5: The social contract, legalistic orientation. Right action tends to be defined in terms of general individual rights, and standards which have been critically examined and agreed upon by the whole society. There is a clear awareness of the relativism of personal values and opinions and a corresponding emphasis upon procedural rules for reaching consensus. Aside from what is constitutionally and democratically agreed upon, the right is a matter of personal "values" and opinions." The result is an emphasis upon the possibility of changing law in terms of rational considerations of social utility (rather than freezing it in terms of stage 4 "law and order"). Outside

the legal realm, free agreement and contract is the binding element of obligation.

Stage 6: The universal-ethical-principle orientation. Right is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency. These principles are abstract and ethical (the Golden Rule, the categorical imperative); they are not concrete moral rules like the Ten Commandments. At heart, these are universal principles of justice, of the reciprocity and equality of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons.¹²

Kohlberg's concept and definition of stages is that they are invariant and sequential, universal, consistent, and hierarchical. he explains these stage characteristics as follows:

1. Stages are structured wholes or organized systems of thought. Individuals are consistent in level of moral judgement.
2. Stages form an invariant sequence. Under all conditions except extreme trauma, movement is always forward, never backward. Individuals never skip stages; movement is always to the next stage up.
3. Stages are hierarchical integrations. Thinking at a higher stage includes or comprehends within it lower-stage thinking. There is a tendency to function at or prefer the highest stage available.¹³

INSIGHTS DRAWN FROM THE THEORY

Moral Development - A Biblical Concept

In the Old Testament, the psalmist compares spiritual life growth and development to a growing palm tree and likens it to the growth of a cedar of Lebanon. Psalm 92:12. This metaphore is maintained even in the New Testament, where the Bible speaks of those having new birth who accept the truth and Jesus Christ as their personal Savior.

Speaking of new converts, the apostle Peter says that they are "like new babies" in need of pure spiritual milk so that they "may grow up in their salvation." 1 Peter 2:2 NIV. Peter still admonishes christian believers that they should "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." 2 Peter 3:18.

The apostle Paul wrote about spiritual grownup believers including himself, saying, "We are no longer infants tossed back and forth by the

waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teachings and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is Christ." Ephesians 4:14, 15.

It can be rightfully concluded that the concept of moral development is Biblical and not foreign to christian believers and followers of the holy scriptures. Man grows not only physically but also morally; hence Adventists should not throw away Kohlberg's theory of moral development. However, we need to study the theory in the light of the holy writings with a willingness to draw lessons from it, and to consider its limitations as discussed later in this paper.

Biblical Insights

In this section of the paper, comments are made on the various stages of Kohlberg's theory.

Stage 1. Punishment-and-obedience orientation where motivation for behavior is to avoid punishment and to hope for a reward.

A question is often asked in Bible studies, evangelistic campaigns or school Bible classes as to whether God of the Old Testament is the same as God of the New Testament. Such a question is based on the fact that during the Old Testament time, God often displayed power, strength and authority. He passed immediate punishment to those who disobeyed Him and offered immediate reward to those who listened to His voice and obeyed Him, whereas in New Testament times, God appears to be calm and not giving immediate punishment and reward to individuals according to their deeds.

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God said to His people: "If you are willing and obedient you will eat the best from the land but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword." Isaiah 1:20.

In the book of Job we see another example of such a passage when God spoke of His people, saying that if they obey and serve Him, they will spend the rest of their days in prosperity ... but if they do not listen, they will perish by the sword. Job 36:11, 12

A look at Kohlberg's first stage of moral development with a view to

drawing spiritual insights from it, leads me to think that when God used avoidance of punishment and hope for reward as motivation for the behavior of the children of Israel during Old Testament times, He was trying to reach them at their level, in their spiritual immaturity as His people. After a long stay in Egypt, they were very young spiritually, hence the need for low-level motivating methods, appropriate for that particular time.

The God of the Old Testament is the same God in our New Testament times; He is "the same yesterday and today and forever." Hebrews 13:8. He uses different ways with different people and to meet different circumstances at various times.

Stage 2: The instrumental-relativist orientation.

"What motivates behavior is that which satisfies one's own needs and occasionally those of others." This step is somewhat similar to step one and yet it is a step further, because it is not based on fear, but on self-centeredness and selfishness. Dudley says that the predominant question in this stage is "What's in it for me?" He goes on to say that in religion it comes out as "It pays to serve Jesus." One may give a faithful tithe in order for him to prosper even when tornados or locusts are destroying the neighboring property and economic crisis is making others become beggars.¹⁴

Stage 3: The interpersonal concordance or "good boy - nice girl" orientation. "Good behavior is that which pleases or helps others and is approved by them." Dudley illustrates this religious application, saying that a person may give a large donation for a church building project or may minister to the poor, just to build up his reputation.¹⁵

Speaking of genuine christian love, the apostle Paul said "If I gave everything I have to poor people, and if I were burned alive for preaching the Gospel, but didn't love others, it would be of no value whatever." 1 Corinthians 13:3 (The Living Bible, paraphrased.)

The external act of giving may proceed from a very ill principle-self-centeredness. It is possible that a proud concept of merit may motivate a person to a large extent when he has no true love of God nor man. So when we give away much or even all of what we have, while we withhold the heart from God, it will not profit us spiritually.

The outward actions may be good and plausible, when the motivating factor is very bad and self-centered.

Stage 4: The "law and order" orientation. "Right behavior consists of doing one's duty . . . and maintaining the given social order for its own sake." At this stage, the divine or human law is important but it is applied with no respect for its effect on the people concerned. A classical biblical example is that of the Pharisees' reactions to Jesus' teachings and work. When the Lord healed a man on Sabbath and when the disciples picked up some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands and ate them, as we read in Luke 6:1-11, the Pharisees were angry with Jesus because to them such actions were a desecration of the Sabbath.

Stage 5: The social contract, legalistic orientation.

Right tends to be defined in terms of general individual rights and standards, agreed upon by the whole group or society. Members of the society are not under pressure or fear. They are free to agree and to make contract and this is the binding element.

As Dudley says, at this stage in Kohlberg's theory, laws or rules express the will of the majority. Moral behavior is viewed as that which is best for the majority of the people.¹⁶

Contrary to the preceding concept, the word of God and His law are the standard of God's people, as typified in Exodus 32 on the occasion when all the children of Israel asked Aaron to make a golden calf for them to worship. It was a free agreement of the whole society but it led to disaster because it fell short of God's standard.

In Romans 1:18-31 we see a vivid description of what happens to men when they ignore God's standard, set up their own, and follow what the majority agrees upon. The apostle indicates that the thinking of such people becomes futile and their foolish hearts become darkened. Although they claim to be wise, they become fools. Romans 1:21 NIV.

Stage 6: The universal-ethical-principle orientation.

As Dudley puts it, people at this stage do what is right according to their inner ideals, regardless of the reaction of others in their

immediate environment.¹⁶

From a biblical point of view, this would be the stage at which God's moral law would be in the hearts of His people. God expects us to be grown up spiritually and to have His law in our hearts. Speaking of the children of Israel, He said, "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts." Deuteronomy 6:6.

The sign of spiritual growth expected of God's people was still maintained in the New Testament where Paul speaks of the Jews, saying that the requirements of law were written in their hearts and that their consciences also bear witness of it, and yet they disobeyed God. Romans 2:15. Paul was reminding them that they were expected to behave like spiritual, mature people and that they had no excuse to do otherwise.

LIMITATIONS AND SHORTCOMINGS

Even though there are useful biblical insights that we can draw from Kohlberg's theory of moral development as dealt with in the previous section, there are also limitations and shortcomings in it, some of which will be presented and discussed in this section.

Kohlberg's theory has raised a great deal of discussion. Some of his critics have questioned his methods, saying that they were sex-biased because he interviewed only boys in his research. Others have challenged his cross-cultural claim. Such criticisms are not the concern of this paper.

I share the same opinion as Dykstra when he says that "One of the initial problems with Kohlberg's theory stems from the fact that he does not take human sinfulness seriously."¹⁷ He does not even allude to this.

A study of the theory easily leads one to conclude that to Kohlberg moral action is correlated with moral reasoning. This concept ignores the fact that among criminals are people whose reasoning ability may be quite high and yet who, unfortunately, use their God-given thinking powers to engineer a high level of immoral techniques. Based on this and contrary to Kohlberg's theory, we can safely conclude that moral reasoning, while it is good and necessary, does not always lead to moral action, and it is not conclusive for an individual who is a good

thinker to automatically be of a high moral character.

It is an obvious fact that because someone can think logically, does not imply that he will act morally. Yet the capacity for logical thinking is necessary in order to advance in moral reasoning.

To me, Kohlberg's theory seems to be mechanical and deterministic. This limitation is noticed in his definition of the stages where he says that they are structured, invariable, sequential and consistent, and that movement is always forward, never backward. It is not unusual to see a devoted christian who may seem to be grown up spiritually, backsliding and sinking low in his moral standards.

Berger was right in saying that "Kohlberg's moral stages over-emphasized rational thought and underrated religious faith."¹⁸ It is true that in matters of faith there is thinking but the fact here is that man's thinking level is not equated with his moral level.

Kohlberg takes the standard of moral conduct or goodness to be the judgment of persons individually. To him, a morally mature person sets his own moral norms. To this shortcoming, White fittingly said that "God has given us the rule of conduct which every one of His servants must follow. It is obedience to His law, not merely a legal obedience, but an obedience which enters into the life, and is exemplified in the character. God has set His own standard of character for all who would become subjects of His Kingdom."¹⁹

One would wonder at what level the thief on the cross was when he repented and received the promise of eternal life from Jesus while hanging on the tree.

If movement is always forward and never backward, as Kohlberg asserts, then man would develop and reach the highest level to the extent that he would not sin any more while still in this life. The theory puts man out of touch with God by placing him in a position where he becomes a self-centered actor who is on his own since, as Kohlberg puts it, what man thinks is right becomes the standard of his moral behavior.

According to Ellen White, this self-centeredness is where "sin begins so that man rejects God as the center of his life and makes himself the center, thus diverting God-given abilities to perpetuate self-interests."²⁰

The theory does not make room for the working of the Holy Spirit, the only Power that can make of a thief an honest man, of a murderer a friend, of a cannibal a christian; the only Power that can fill one with love instead of hatred, and can transform a sinner into the image of God. From a biblical point of view, no human being can become morally mature through the development of his own power.

God has given us His word, a revelation of Himself and of His character, which as Ellen White puts it "is the greatest instrumentality in the transformation of character." She adds that "the ideal of character is Christlikeness" and that "the life and spirit of Christ is the only true standard of excellence and perfection ... our only safe course is to follow His example."²¹

Kohlberg has been criticized for having developed an incomplete theory of moral development. In attempting to answer his critics, he, together with his associate, investigated and prepared a current formation of the theory which they called "a rational reconstruction of the ontogenesis of justice reasoning."²²

Admitting shortcomings of the theory, they stated, "we no longer claim that our work has succeeded in defining the nature of a sixth and highest stage of moral judgment. The existence and the nature of such a stage is, at this moment, a matter of theoretical and philosophical speculation."²³

Kohlberg and his associate conceptualized stage 7 as "a high soft stage in the development of ethical and religious orientations" known also as "ethical awareness."²⁴ Kohlberg claims that the stages of justice reasoning are hard stages of moral development extending through adulthood, but he acknowledges the fact that his stages do not provide a complete description of adult development after age 30. This is not a problem to Adventists for they know that character development goes on as long as a person lives, "it is the work of a lifetime."²⁵ The stage 7 known by Kohlberg to be a high soft one as discussed above is not considered by Kohlberg and his colleagues to be a strictly moral one. They say that they did not intend it to be understood as a hard stage of justice reasoning constructed beyond stage 6, even though they call it stage 7.²⁶ It should be kept in mind that it was brought about

in a response to the attack made by critics apparently to accomodate the vacuum that was pointed out and which could not be ignored by Kohlberg.

CONCLUSION

Kohlberg's theory of moral development has some useful and biblical insight to offer to Seventh-day Adventists. The concept of moral or spiritual growth is biblical.

God's people in the past and today can be sometimes identified as operating at some of the stages presented in the theory. However, it should be kept in mind that there are some limitations and shortcomings in the theory. Sholl fittingly said that "Kohlberg's humanistic developmental approach can be one-sided and misleading."²⁷ To avoid this delusion, the theory is to be read and studied in the light of the holy scriptures and christian daily experiences with God as revealed in the biblical narrative.

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