

# Toward an Understanding of UNITY

## Issues in the Current Debate

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century Seventh-day Adventist Church

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## **PREFACE**

What follows is the product of prayerful consideration over many months on my part. In the context of this document, I have tried not to listen to a plethora of external voices. I have not read every available opinion and none are cited here. If at some point such should become necessary, that information can be easily added. I am primarily writing for myself. However, others may wish to read over my shoulder, as it were, and with that I have no problem.

I am not one who considers himself to be a rebel or a rebel leader; my loyalties toward the Seventh-day Adventist Church have, to this point, never been seriously challenged. I love the church, admire the genius of its structure, and have had a lifelong appreciation for the message and mission of the church.

But to say the church has arrived and has no more truth to discover, no more need for structural adjustment or perhaps revision, no more room for growth in understanding would be dangerous, delusional and self-defeating. We are admonished by Ellen White to "...train young people to be thinkers and not mere reflectors of other men's thoughts." Many of our youth, along with older members, are intentionally doing just that. Consequently, "church life" has gotten rather messy.

In the end, this document may be of little more use than for my own development. But I pray to be—and to lead others—in the center of God's will for me, and for his church.

*“... [The] church of Christ enfeebled and defective as it may be, is the only object on earth upon which He bestows his supreme regard.” TM 15*

*“...The church may pass resolution upon resolution to put down all disagreement of opinions, but we cannot force the mind and the will, and thus root out disagreement. These resolutions may conceal the discord; but they cannot quench it, and establish perfect agreement. **Nothing can perfect UNITY in the church but the spirit of Christ-like forbearance.**” Manuscript 24, 1892.*

*“...You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Peter  
“...And on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” Jesus*

*Dedicated*

*to the next generation of Adventist girls and boys who will still need to hear the gospel of faith, hope, and love— to learn again that “perfect love casts out fear.”*

## ***INTRODUCTION***

It is no secret that in many minds today in the developed world the Seventh-day Adventist church is at a crossroads in its quest for successfully promulgating and completing its mission: "...as you are going, make disciples of all nations, baptizing, teaching..." The crossroads axes revolve around the concepts of unity/uniformity, authority/authoritarianism, hermeneutical consistency/pluralism, and governance/leadership. There are more polarities we could list, but these will suffice for now since this is a paper and not a book. These topics are significant in relation to the two phenomena that continue to unfold simultaneously in contemporary Adventist history.

**First:** The now 20-million plus member Adventist Church was birthed in the United States of America when America was not a world superpower politically, economically, socially, or militarily. It was largely a peaceful nation with a citizenry who shared broadly a common faith along the lines of Judeo-Christian worldviews. Most of those views remained unchallenged through the first 150 years of the nation's official existence and rise in the world's ranking of nations. While the government was constitutionally neutral with regard to religion in general, including denominational variants within Christianity, the appeal to "natural law," common sense, and practicality in governance issues generally reflected the Christian mindset of both various political leaders and voters alike—even while officially the nation's neutral stance toward religion was solidly maintained. No, the USA was not a Christian nation. But it was a nation largely made up of Christian citizens.

In that milieu, Adventist evangelism and mission in the so-called Christian West was largely a function of education. Since there was a fairly common appeal to the Holy Bible as a significant existential—for some even supernatural—authority, evangelism became a matter of taking believers of a given faith community and teaching them the doctrines of Adventism, and in due course baptizing them into church membership. Accordingly, growth was measured in baptisms, ratios of membership gains/losses with regard to death and/or apostasy, financial increases in projects and plans funded, and in institutional net assets.

Very little thought was given to the real words of the commission to make disciples. *Member* and *disciple* were generally regarded as synonyms. (However glibly we may converse about the terms they are *not* the same.)

In the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the above religious/politico/socio national construct came under significant and growing oppositional pressure from the rising core worldview we recognize as Naturalism. And by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Phenomenal Naturalism with its bedrock philosophy of Darwinism et al. had given rise to a whole new milieu in which the Christian norms of the earlier generations had been largely replaced by far more anthropocentric ones. The authority of the Bible, heretofore considered normative, evaporated and was replaced largely by a reliance on scientific authority rooted in philosophies other than those of Judeo-Christian or biblical heritage.

When the Adventist Church finally began to see Christ's commission as more than just educating other Christians in the ways of Adventism, evangelism became increasingly difficult in the West. With fewer biblically

literate Christians in the society toward which traditional Adventist evangelism is targeted, growth rates slowed dramatically. Evangelism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is obliged to move much farther upstream in confronting Naturalism, which currently reigns supreme in many Western cultures. Evangelism takes significantly longer in that setting, and requires a more broadly defined measure of success.

While making disciples by baptizing and teaching are clearly still expected by the gospel commission and expected by Adventist leaders and members alike, *disciples* are generally more thoughtful, deliberate, and authentic than the word *members* normally implies. Disciples also tend toward more independence of thought. While the former norms continue in some circles in the church, including some leadership circles, the member/discipleship paradigms constantly raise questions that on their face seem to challenge the church at both the governance level and even the more formulaic expositions of the church's message—to say nothing of policy issues.

**Second:** The real growth of the church in terms of numbers of members has increasingly moved toward the Southern Hemisphere and the Asian areas. While the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church were Americans with all that such cultural details may mean, most of today's church members are from Africa, South America, and Inter-America. Increasingly, church leadership reflects that membership growth. While those cultures are not without their own challenges to the gospel and the authority of Scripture, within those segments of the church there is generally a more compliant community with regard to traditional biblical interpretations. And certainly a greater level of unquestioned (or at

best lightly questioned) acquiescence to the proposals and pronouncements of those in leadership.

These two main factors—new evangelism paradigms and membership/cultural shifts—have resulted in a divide between the church in the Global North and the rest of the world. That divide does not result merely from some theological approaches brought on by cultural and social broadening, but also from the sheer numerical growth in the third world. In that third world context, the questions, and thus the answers, appear to be radically different than in the first world. Consequently, the concept of unity becomes more and more challenging.

But categorizing mindsets cannot be limited to ethnicities, language groups or races. When it comes to geographically diverse thinking patterns, no culture can be totally classified as one or the other. In the developed world there is a mixture of mindsets within the church, old and new. Within the developing world there is likewise a mixture of mindsets and both contain nuances within them. Unity in a global context looks like a tapestry of sometimes conflicting approaches to the presenting problems in the church.

The Global North, generally but not universally, sees unity as a sharing of purpose, mission, intentions, and a commitment to mutual respect and understanding. As such, many in that hemisphere often reject almost out-of-hand any and all pressure toward *uniformity* as the only, or even primary, expression of unity.

There are parts of the world where unity, both in theological matters and with regard to praxis, is expressed in a more uniform adherence to all policies and procedures listed in the *Church Manual* and the *Working Policy* of the General Conference expressed in divisional nuances. Such a uniform

approach is actually encouraged in the *Working Policy* as the “model constitutions” have an ever-growing corpus of required language for the organizing documents of all unions, conferences, and missions. The practice, however, in many world church entities falls considerably short of that allegedly desired uniformity.

Customarily, Oriental social groups tend to follow the directions or examples of the elders and will do so sometimes even to their detriment. African tribes are likely to follow tribal traditions and leadership, at times over their own convictions. Social groups that have had their traditions unwittingly modified by the culture-creating habits of the Roman Church over the centuries may find it almost impossible to decide anything contrary to the church. In contrast, Occidental societies often live as individuals more than as groups. Individual freedom is prized at all costs—sometimes even fatal costs. Inevitably, such social factors play a role, sometimes a decisive role, in how the church leaders and members in a given cultural geography interact and arrive at conclusions. Such differences in decision making and group processing certainly impact the Adventist Church in its world meeting every five years when these matters become starkly real.

Thus, today we stand at a crossroads. Our level of cultural understanding and how we define the terms will be significant. More significant will be how we treat each other. Ultimately, we may need a miracle of cosmic proportions. In any case, all sides will need a posture of humility and of worship of the church as we know it will not survive. No doubt something will survive. But it may be unrecognizable by many Adventists whose Protestantism with its five “solos” drives every part of the ministries.

## ***WHAT IS UNITY?***

Unity is a word frequently used with the assumption that all parties in the respective conversations understand what it means. It is a supposition of this document that when we hear the word, we hear it personally, culturally, and contextually. Therefore, we can't possibly all hear it exactly the same way.

Unity for an evangelist would likely be when a given church or group of churches all support his reaping event with their attendance, their prayers, and their financial means—without asking too many questions.

Unity for the pastor may mean the lion's share of church attendees will support construction projects financially and/or with work efforts, and certainly with verbal support, while not being critical of others in the church who hold different views.

Unity for the conference evangelism coordinator may be defined as all or most of the churches in the given territory holding reaping events at the same time. Synergy, it is assumed, is best built that way.

Unity for administrators of the larger levels of the church is often seen as smooth operations where no one rocks the boat and all are in compliance with the agreed upon policies—all at the same time and in the same way. In short, unity has to date been primarily recognized in the display of uniformity. In the presence of such uniformity, even the slightest variation can be (or at least appear to be) problematic.

In terms of policy compliance, behavior, and actions of the entity under consideration, is unity best defined by what it *is*, on the one hand, or *is not*, on the other? Or is it possible to define unity as mutual respect, respectful relationships, highly valued diversity of opinion, method, and language within a context of shared values, pursuit of a common mission, shared transparency, and shared reporting mechanisms?

In studies like this, appeal is early made to John chapter 17 where Jesus prays not for “unity” but for “oneness” among the disciples (NKJV et al). While the verbal nuance may only be academic and a matter of translator preference, the prayer itself is critical. The context is the last night of Jesus’ earthly and public ministry. Long before dawn he will have been arrested by the Jews, beaten, convicted of a capital crime, and sentenced to death. By early morning he will have been convicted of an unspecified capital crime by the complicit Romans, beaten repeatedly, and by mid-morning, hung up with nails on a cross to die in unspeakable agony by mid-afternoon. What he does as recorded in John 17 becomes critically important as it is nearly the last thing he will do before he reaches salvation history’s fulcrum in his death, burial, and resurrection.

Significantly, he does two things this evening before the cross. The two things are not in opposition but rather are highly complementary; indeed each is part and parcel of the other. Only for the sake of academic discussion can they be separated. First, he takes on the role of the slave and he washes the disciples’ feet. He demonstrates in relationship just how far his agape love will go in an effort to bring them into “oneness” with himself. Or perhaps better, bring the oneness of himself with his Father to and with his disciples.

How can that be? And yet the incarnational model that makes Christianity unique and makes it “work” in the world shows us over and over again how far the Divine is willing to go to both identify with humans and reach out to redeem them even while they are “yet sinners.”

And then he prays—a prayer that is both public in that the 11 disciples can plainly hear it, and private in that he pours out the aching cry of his heart. It is a prayer uttered perhaps quietly but clearly earnestly, almost viscerally. Among other things, he prays for oneness among his followers both immediate and down through the unnumbered generations to come. He does not pray to (idolatry and foolishness) nor even urge the disciples to find oneness among themselves and with him. His pleadings with them are over. Why? He has spent three years instructing them, chiding them, remonstrating with them over their endless individual quests for recognition in the new kingdom. “Who is the greatest?” became the conversation of choice or perhaps of habit until Jesus must have wearied of it all.

During those years they have revealed over and over their complete powerlessness against the temptations to self-aggrandizement and corporate ladder climbing. He realizes—and I believe we must realize—that oneness with the Divine or unity among and within fellow sinners is not possible within natural human hearts, even of those already on the faith journey. The oneness Jesus prays for is a direct **gift** from God. It is much more mysterious than we would like to admit; it functions on a far deeper level than we can imagine.

The divine oneness itself is the subject of 2,000 years of study, and yet with regard to the Triune Godhead and the divine/human nature of Christ and his pre-existence, we are reduced to a relatively cloudy understanding

at best. It is still a mystery. And as I read John 17, that divine mystery, that divine oneness, is a cosmic standard by which all the more pedestrian claims to unity must be judged, and against which all human ideals toward oneness will always come up short.

Nonetheless, this mysterious oneness Jesus prays for is possible and even probable, perhaps even guaranteed, because of its roots in Divinity. Such oneness is far more a God-activity and gift bestowed upon people of faith who may be as diverse as Jew and Gentile, free and slave, rich and poor, male and female, than something that is imposed upon them in the form of a thickening policy book; more than something they vote into existence upon themselves occasionally, perhaps even repeatedly, leaving whole segments of the church body outside the circle of acceptance.

Without the gift of God in granting oneness as prayed for by Jesus, it simply cannot be developed from within nor enforced from without upon Christian communities. Oneness in the church is always an expression of God's divine intervention and gifting.

Oneness then, as envisioned by Jesus in John 17, is not something to be achieved; rather it must be received. Anything else will be everything less than God's plan for his church.

### ***THE FIRST CENTURY CHURCH***

We next move on to consider the book of Acts. While the document is a unit, it makes the most sense to address the relevant passages in chronological sequence.

The disciples came away from Christ's ascension united as never before. And yet they soon faced their first challenge to that clearly divinely gifted oneness. What should they do about Judas' empty place at the table? The text says they "cast lots" which is a rather cryptic pair of words that occurs not rarely in the English translations of Scripture. And through that method they chose, apparently amid much prayer and conversation, a man named Mathias. There are those who assert aspersion toward Mathias because he is never heard from again. I would suggest that is an unfortunate interpretation from silence that cannot be substantiated by the text. With the exception of Peter, James, John, the other disciples/apostles are not mentioned after Acts 1 either. But my point here is that they had a perfectly good and respected process for ascertaining a way forward. That we don't know exactly how it worked matters little. They trusted the process. However, casting lots was not the only process.

A second pericope takes us to Acts chapter 6. The early church pooled their resources and had all things in common (a further expression of Divine oneness). From that pool, they cared for their widows and orphans and generally advanced their mission in the Jerusalem environs. But in the "daily ministrations" it seems as though the Hellenist widows were treated with less generosity than the Hebrew widows. In reporting the scenario, Luke does not dispute the allegation. It is accepted as a given. Upon hearing the complaint, even the apostles do not dismiss it as a mere perceptual problem but apparently accept the criticism as completely valid. And at that point, they called the "multitude together" and asked them to choose seven leaders (all of whom have Greek names) to oversee the daily distribution.

We are not told how the multitude settled on these seven, but they did. In expanding church leadership to include the newly selected deacons, these seven were the preferred solution clearly blessed by the Holy Spirit. In this case there is no record of casting lots or of any other delineated process other than prayer and a laying on of hands. No study committees or nominating committees are mentioned. There was a need and they prayerfully found a way to meet that need.

It must be noted that the apostles are not threatened by expanded and shared leadership, even leadership of a more Hellenistic cultural bent. Further, they are not threatened in any way by the powerful preaching of Stephen, whose only recorded sermon is one of the more cogently presented messages in all the book and indeed all the New Testament outside of the Gospels themselves. They rejoice in the success of Philip in going to Samaria and to the eunuch from the court of Candace in Ethiopia. In fact, it can be argued that Philip's work outside Jerusalem actually paved the way for Peter's acknowledgment of the legitimacy of a ministry to the Gentiles in Acts 10 and 11.

In these two stories we clearly have two very different solutions to the presenting problems. One was a prayerful casting of lots, and the other a prayerful opening of the need to the body as a whole and the body selecting from within their ranks seven people who heretofore are completely unknown to the Bible writers.

After the death of James, the narrative shifts in its focus to Antioch and to the ministry of the persecutor Saul, who becomes Paul upon his conversion—not in Jerusalem, but in Damascus. (That seems to me to be significant.) And as Paul's ministry unfolds with unprecedented success in

predominantly Gentile territories, questions of orthodoxy and praxis within the newly emerging Gentile believer groups inevitably arise: What to do about the law of Moses and the matter of circumcision as a sign of authenticity, or at least identity, within the Gentile demographic?

(As an aside, the book *Acts of the Apostles* suggests that the Pharisaical party saw this issue as a potential filter by which to limit the growth of the gospel among the Gentiles, thus preserving not only Judaism as a “co” part of the new Christian movement, but their own power as leaders within it. That the law of Moses/circumcision would be kept in place arbitrarily to actually impede the gospel’s progress is breathtaking when considered seriously in today’s context.)

Acts 15 is the answer in what we as Adventists affectionately and colloquially refer to as the first General Conference Session. Because this has become a commonly cited example for correct process in discussions involving disagreements, we need to briefly review it again.

After much dispute locally, Paul and Barnabas were commissioned in Antioch to visit the leadership at Jerusalem and settle once and for all the role of the law of Moses as it relates to Gentile believers. The process is radically different from Acts 1 and Acts 6. First of all, the leadership takes time to hear of the success of the gospel among the Gentiles. And they seem to be astounded by the reality that Gentiles in significant numbers can come to saving faith by believing in Jesus Christ. Then of course the challenge by the Pharisee party is brought into the discussion in verse 5. And the deliberations begin in verse 6.

Unlike Acts 6, the group reviewing this dispute is relatively small, namely, the apostles and the elders. It is not a large group when considered

in light of Acts 6 or perhaps even Acts 1. The discussion apparently drags on until Peter, as a major leader, takes a position in favor of Paul's contention that circumcision is not necessary for the Gentiles. While we know that Peter is not particularly doctrinaire in his position (supportive as it is of Gentiles but given his "backsliding" referenced in Galatians), he is clearly persuasive in his testimony. His speech largely appeals to practicalities in living the life of faith. James, the presiding officer, then speaks not only in favor of the position that rejects circumcision for Gentiles, he also makes a decisive statement that seems to end the discussion.

Further differing from Acts 6, which gives the decision to the body of believers regarding the ministry to widows, Acts 15 portrays a more representative kind of gathering with leaders from several significant churches (hence the first General Conference in Session). While there are some who contend that the group took a vote, the Bible does not say that. And the book *Acts of the Apostles* does not expressly say that either. Ellen White uses the word "vote" in this context to pointedly say that the entire body of believers was not given a vote. That may or may not imply a vote on the part of the gathered delegates. They clearly did not cast lots, which they could have done, and they clearly did not open it up to the world body either—which would have been difficult given the rapid spread of the gospel to distant parts of the Roman world.

When James speaks as he does in the first person singular ("It is my judgment..."), he is speaking for the group. The reports from Antioch and Asia Minor and Cyprus and Samaria were completely compelling to all gathered there. And while the Pharisee party does not "go away," the

decision is never rehashed. Why? Because the evidence of the success of the gospel among the Gentiles spoke for itself.

It should be pointed out that this discussion of circumcision and the law of Moses was ***not studied in isolation***. It was not a mere academic exercise. The successful outworking of the Holy Spirit through the ministry of Paul and Barnabas and others was evidence prima facie of what was happening. And there was little argument to be had from the Scripture itself. No vote was taken because no vote was needed. *Under the Spirit of God there was no decision to be made nor was any process enjoined that could or would divide the church into official winners and losers*—particularly when the Spirit did not reveal the correctness of the former position as the standard for the future. Circumcision was not to be a moral issue in the New Testament church.

It is fascinating to note that while the four required observances for the Gentiles recorded in Acts 15 come straight out of the *Torah*, the *Torah* itself is not mentioned nor cited as the authority. Only the Holy Spirit is described as prompting the decision. James does not write in his letter to Antioch, “It is recorded in Deuteronomy that ‘...’” Not at all. He says only “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...” Clearly, they do not set aside the Scripture. Yet the appeal to the authority of the Holy Spirit evidenced in the results of ministry to the Gentiles does seem to introduce another kind of authority into the discussion. (A study of the authority of the Holy Spirit is beyond the scope of this document.)

However, a closer examination of Acts 15 in light of the compelling report from Paul and Barnabas leads one to ask what options were available to James and company. It seems there were three.

First, in spite of the report—but with plenty of Old Testament textual firepower—James could have ruled in favor of the Pharisees. Results? 1. That choice no doubt would have been good for him politically, stationed as he was firmly in Jerusalem. 2. It would have been good for the church financially (at least initially) as the moneyed base for the church at that time was apparently still with the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. And 3. as noted above, the power base would have remained in Jerusalem for at least a few more years. **But**, spreading the gospel to the Gentiles would have been slowed. The Pharisees would have “won” and the Gentiles would have “lost.” Thus, the church would have lost.

Second, with little to no obvious Old Testament textual support, James could have ruled in favor of Paul and Barnabas so completely as to throw out the law and circumcision altogether. Given the geographical and political context, such a decision would have been unlikely, but still possible. Results of this choice? 1. Had James done so, he would have alienated not only the “Christian” Pharisees (which he probably did anyway), but a much larger group of still solidly Jewish followers of Christ. 2. The leadership pool would have evaporated as the church’s administrative base would have shifted northward much sooner. 3. The resulting loss of the financial strength in Jerusalem could have impacted the growth dramatically. 4. The remaining Gentile church would have struggled to understand the much larger theology of the entire Scripture without Jerusalem’s influence, and the potential for fragmentation among the neophyte Gentile disciples would have been greatly enhanced. In this option, it could be argued that the Gentiles would have “won” and the Pharisees “lost.” However, I would again suggest that the real loser in this scenario would have been the church as a whole.

The third option (the one chosen) was not an “either/or,” but a “both/and,” the results of which speak for themselves. Eventually, the Gentile church would eclipse the Jewish church by every measure—but not because of an unfounded fiat of an individual or small group, nor even a vote of a larger group, but rather because of the freedom the gospel fosters when the work of the Holy Spirit is celebrated. The results always testify for themselves.

The decision that resulted in a continued oneness within the now burgeoning church broadened rather than narrowed their understanding of the gospel itself, their approaches to leadership, and their understanding of the diversity that the Holy Spirit was bringing into the church. Further, it gave added energy to the mission itself.

We would not be here today discussing anything if the decision at Jerusalem had been made in any other way. That pivotal pronouncement enabled the gospel to advance *without winners and losers* and without setting up any mechanism by which to further internally judge orthodoxy among the believers or their leaders.

In examining how the decision played out over time in the historical development of the church, we need to remember that this council took place in Jerusalem about the year 50 AD. No more than 10 or 12 years later, Paul writes his first epistle to the church at Corinth and in chapter 8 (see also chapter 10) seems to take the matter considerably further. He basically says that since an idol is nothing it doesn't really matter if you eat food sacrificed to it or not—but don't let your freedom to eat such food become a barrier to the growing faith of the one whose conscience doesn't so allow. A significant segment of the four-part absolute pronouncement out of Jerusalem is set

aside by the great apostle himself and with no apparent negative repercussions anywhere, unless his later arrest in Jerusalem should somehow be linked to this. Scripture itself makes no such direct linkage.

This is the same apostle who a short time later writes of “one Lord one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of us all.” And yet he apparently has enough authority as an apostle, or at least enough personal cache, to set aside a major part of the supportive decision made in relation to his own issues back in Jerusalem. And the church *does not fragment* at all.

### ***WHAT ABOUT SUBMISSION?***

In recent times, much has been made of the vote in San Antonio regarding ordination and the expectations that the world church across all cultures must simply submit to the majority vote. That desired, or perhaps more accurately, *required* response rests upon several presuppositions that need to be examined. Recalling Acts 15, we must ask which group found it easier to submit to the “Holy Spirit and to us” statement from their leader James. The church at Antioch received almost everything they wanted; most of all, the setting aside of circumcision as a covenantal sign of belonging and commitment. The other prohibitions—no eating of food offered to idols, no blood, no food from a strangled animal, and no fornication—were much easier to tolerate, as they were less onerous. One could simply continue the Christian walk without much challenge since the right food was easily obtained.

On the other hand, those who had argued for the traditional position of circumcision and the law of Moses would have been hard pressed to submit to the decision because it ran counter to their deepest instincts for which they had no small history, tradition and even textual support. It is my contention that this lack of a submissive spirit on the part of the Judaizers and even the church leaders at Jerusalem led both to the huge problems in Galatia, and later to the actual arrest of Paul and the significant change to the trajectory of his ministry. For them to continue attempting to force their traditional views on the entire church belies the current statements from some that “everyone” submitted to the Acts 15 pronouncement. We know that is not the case. The Judaizers did not, and in the end as noted above in Corinth and also in Rome, neither did Paul. And yet the church survived.

Requiring submission presupposes a clear and unassailable argument for a given truth. And in the case of Acts 15, submission presupposes the authoritative body is acting within not only agreed upon policies, but even more so in good faith for the missional needs of the entire church. Those needs ***have never been the same*** universally across Planet Earth.

It could, and perhaps should, be argued that any action taken by the larger body against more local bodies must first of all flow from biblically clear mandates. In addition, actions taken by the larger body should not be made or used to limit legitimate, local missional endeavors, particularly in cases where the theological material is so clearly not agreed upon. In such cases, forced submission would limit the effectiveness of the mission, which would beg the question of obedience to the gospel commission itself.

Some have argued that submission must take place in order to achieve unity. By contrast, our earlier examination of John 17 reveals that submission to achieve unity misunderstands both unity and submission. A slave submits to his master, but is not united to him. A wife submits to her husband, but it may or may not be an indicator of healthy unity. A church member may submit to another member (Eph. 5:21), but if it isn't out of reverence for Christ, it may be nothing more than intimidation on the part of the more powerful personality. Submission does not equal unity, it may not lead to unity, nor reflect anything more than the acquiescence of one party to another. It may, in fact, be nothing more than the result of bullying.

In the case of the church itself, there is no room **ever** for intimidation to become part of the process at any level. And when it flows from the highest levels, it becomes an example of harshness that is all too often followed and in turns plays out with disastrous consequences in local contexts, be they ecclesial or institutional.

### ***THE CHURCH IN THE DARK AGES***

Over the centuries following the book of Acts with the slackening of persecution and the co-opting of the church by Constantine and the later Roman emperors, authenticity of faith suffered badly within the mainstream church, as we look back at it from our 21<sup>st</sup> century viewpoint. However, we understand that God has always preserved a people who do in fact “keep the commandments of God and have the faith of Jesus.”

Often times that “remnant” has been small and scattered, with little collaboration or even knowledge of similar groups around the world. The

fact that biblical truth continued to be lived and preached is a testimony not to the genius of human leaders but rather to the power of God and his amazingly persistent love for this world. Any unity or oneness that the scattered and struggling invisible church enjoyed through the 1,000 years of darkness speaks continually of God's involvement, and his plan to bring the gospel to prominence again before the Parousia. By all human evaluations and social constructs, the church should have died out in those dark centuries of obscurity and attack.

But then came Wycliffe, Tyndale, Hus, Jerome, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Knox, and Simmons, followed later by the Wesleys, Whitefield, Lacunza, Wolfe, and eventually Miller, Bates, the Whites, and the "little flock" that birthed the movement of which today we are a part.

It is clear that the churches coming out of the Reformation were not united. And if external persecution and legal/ecclesial prosecution were not enough, the Protestant groups frequently quarreled among themselves, even to the point of very bloody and lengthy warfare. Again, unity or oneness is a divine gift to be received far more than a level to be achieved. The reformation groups were apparently unable or unwilling to come together and build on their common ground and work together on their differences.

While each group of reformers' descendants contributed significantly to the re-emerging understanding of correct biblical theology, the Adventist self-understanding is that we (SDAs) have collected from them all (including Catholicism) and constructed a theological framework that begins to restore authentic New Testament Christianity as the message that prepares the world for the promised return of Jesus Christ in power and glory. Perhaps the oneness Jesus prayed for that is so clearly missing from the Protestant

groups of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries is brought into fruition not with ecumenical concessions, but rather with the playing out of the prophetic message and movement we call Seventh-day Adventism; not a softening compromise, but a deepening commitment to the whole of Scripture. But notice—deepening is **not** the same as narrowing.

In light of all the history, this Adventist self-understanding is not something of which to boast. Much more, it is something before which a posture of humility is demanded. It is a God thing, not a human thing, and in that we can only go to the Lord in worship and willingness. Like unity, such humility is a gift. And in today's church, it is a rare gift indeed. Remnant theology is far too often expressed in terms and with hubris that many hear as arrogant and prideful and sadly, even exclusive.

### ***APPLICATIONS FOR TODAY—LATE 2016 FORWARD INTO 2017 AND BEYOND***

The issue of ordination within the Adventist denomination has been with us in varying degrees of acuity since 1881 when the *General Conference in Session* voted a resolution to ordain women and passed the action to the GC Executive Committee to implement. It should be noted that apparently a “resolution” in 1881 was more of a recommendation than an imperative to be carried out. This was at a time when the prophetic voice of Ellen White within the church could have made a decisive statement one way or the other, but apparently did not. It should also be noted that the GC president at that time was G. I. Butler, who would go on to lead the church in rejecting the message of Christ our Righteousness later in 1888. As the

elected leaders failed (for reasons now perhaps unknowable) to seriously consider and practically process the 1881 recommendation, the matter lay dormant for nearly a century until in the 1970's and 80's various studies were under taken to determine if the church should move in a positive direction for female ordination.

In 1990 and in 1995 the topic was brought to the floor of the GC in Session. Both times the question of whether to ordain women was voted down as a matter of policy, but not found to be unbiblical in any official way. It can be, and frequently is, argued that the “winning” side in those sessions felt it to be unbiblical, hence their vote. But the biblical material was not the question put before the delegates.

Throughout the late 90's and into the early 2000's the matter lay inert again, as far as any publically official discussion was concerned. During the 2010 GC Session in Atlanta, voting delegate Ray Hartwell proffered a motion from the floor to establish a committee of seminary scholars to study and return with a truly Seventh-day Adventist Theology of Ordination for consideration by the world church in 2015. Since such a motion was not on the agenda, and leadership was unwilling to break with standard practice and open the agenda to items not vetted by the prior year's Annual Council, Hartwell's motion was rejected by the chair—but with a promise that administration would take up the matter. No intent was suggested or implied that any thought would be given to including the ordination of women in that study. Nonetheless, in the minds of many, women's ordination was present, at least in a shadow form.

The selection of the large Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC) is well known and will not be rehashed here. Suffice it to say that

with the committee membership constituted as it was, no one expected a consensus to be reached (barring a miracle of epic proportions). It appeared to some that GC administration may not have truly wanted a consensus, given the makeup of that group. Dr. Artur Stele chaired the group admirably and will have the undying respect of this author. With the process starting in 2011, the church moved forward inexorably to San Antonio.

It was widely known that both the Pacific Union and the Columbia Union in North America, and some others in Western Europe, had been wrestling for some time with what to do about officially recognizing women in ministry. When the Mid-America Union Executive Committee surprisingly voted in the spring of 2012 to “support the ordination of women in [its] territory,” the two NAD unions listed above called full constituency meetings and both of them voted to move forward with ordaining women. While General Conference administration spoke against the ordination of women in both cases, the will of the delegates was expressed clearly and overwhelmingly. (Incidentally, both unions have since held full regular quinquennial election sessions with resounding support for the leadership they have had for a number of years.) It was about that time that the Theology of Ordination Study Committee was asked to add a study of women’s ordination to the previously authorized more general theology of ordination. And with that added directive, consensus became even less likely.

Meanwhile, in the Trans-European Division similar movements were engaged in the Scandinavian (Norway, Sweden, Denmark) and Netherlands Unions, and in the (now) Inter-European Division the German Unions of the EUD were also looking for ways to more formally equalize the recognition of ministry for both men and women. The South Pacific Division has similar

leanings in several quarters, but (as of this writing) ordination has not yet become the burning issue that it is in the NAD, TED, and parts of the EUD. Interest in the SPD in this area though is growing and becoming more acute.

The actions taken by the PUC and CUC led to the Annual Council of 2012 voting a document that described said actions as a “serious mistake.” And with that AC vote, the drama we are now witnessing was set in motion. Twenty-four people voted against the “serious mistake” statement. At least one of those “no” votes was because of the judgment/opinion nature of the statement. One person’s serious mistake is another person’s courageous leadership. And who gets to decide which label will be applied?

Nonetheless, with the 2012 statement voted, a corner was constructed. And with the 2015 GC Session vote, General Conference leadership has painted the church into that corner with little obvious way out.

Delegates to the San Antonio GC quinquennial session were given not a motion to vote up or down, but a crafted question with two answers—either of which created the certainty of a winning side and a losing side. The question on whether or not to allow divisions to determine if women should be ordained was voted in the negative. However, since the ordination of women per se has never been determined definitively to be morally wrong, biblically forbidden, or otherwise detrimental to mission, nor to be out of harmony with the 28 Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventism, the confusion continues.

And the nub seems to be moving us inevitably toward the matter of authority.

## ***AUTHORITY AND AUTHORITARIANISM***

Throughout Scripture, authority among God's people has been a challenge on every imaginable level. That Moses was chosen by God and spoke with authority is not a problem for us today 3,500 years after the fact. It was a huge problem for Israel. He was constantly being judged, evaluated, and outright confronted by everyone from Pharaoh to Korah to Aaron and even Miriam. And so it was through the history of Israel. Even Jesus himself (perhaps *especially* Jesus) had his authority regularly questioned. Indeed, his authority was a major factor in his crucifixion.

It must be acknowledged that there is a role for properly exercised authority within any organization, including the church. Corporate structures like the church cannot hope to pursue mission successfully if the leadership has no authority. Yet in the church above all organizations, great care must be taken to avoid using authority in heavy handed, arbitrary or particularly punitive ways. As Jesus made clear to his disciples in a different context, the Gentile way is to lord it over those beneath them; but it "must not be so among you."

We have already seen that the church built by and on the foundational rock of Jesus Christ himself did things differently than did the Old Testament leaders. The new Christian leaders worked with collaboration, casting of lots, and general openness to the various meetings described earlier. Representative methodologies of governance entered the church in the first quarter century of its existence and have been with us in varying degrees of effectiveness ever since.

The Church Councils of the 2<sup>nd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> centuries continued the practice as the orthodoxy of Christianity was hammered out. Such divisive issues as the Trinity, the pre-existence of Christ, the human/divine nature of Christ, and much more resulted in a body of doctrine that has come to be largely accepted to this day. With communication across the Roman Empire fairly good by the standard of the day, the church was able to maintain a level of cohesion that only deteriorated with the decline of the empire itself.

In the vacuum of the weakening political structure of the empire, the church rose to fill not only spiritual/missional needs, but socio/political ones as well. With that assumption of a more governmental role, coupled with the trend toward ecclesial centralization amidst a declining infrastructure and escalating social chaos, church leadership became more isolated and less responsive to its rank-and-file members—to the point that the church from the 500's to the 1500's was much more in the business of governing than it was leading. And it governed everything it could, enforcing its encyclicals, its bulls, and its laws by threats of various kinds of torture up to and including death on the rack, at the stake, or by other lethal means—usually using the State to do the dirty work.

Since the populace had no recourse, the unchallenged authority of the church became authoritarianism at its worst. With the flow of truth only from the top down, and no one at the top listening to anyone but themselves, such absolute authoritarianism was the inevitable result.

Mention was made earlier of the line of reformers and the caravan of truth picking up more and more of the missing biblical depth in the 16<sup>th</sup> through 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. With that, the reversal of the authoritarian style of leadership in some circles began and continued into some point in the 20<sup>th</sup>

century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> in varying organizations. It was made possible by the freer flow of information due to Gutenberg's moveable type (and a more recent tsunami of technological marvels) coupled with a willingness on the part of Spirit-filled, biblically informed reformers to work onward even in the face of likely death.

Authoritarianism at the denominational/societal level was frequently replaced by a congregational model that centered a kind of authority in the trustees of a local church. While there was in many cases identification with a specific denominationally sanctioned creed, authority for defending that creed, hiring and funding paid clergy, and protecting church membership rolls fell to the local boards. Denominations provided some oversight and consultative services and in some cases start-up or bridge funding. They also provided educational facilities for training clergy and other humanitarian and biblical models of social mission that were larger than any one congregation could expect to support.

Authoritarianism in local churches, while not exactly rare, is often self-extinguishing since authoritarian leaders are easy to abandon in a society of some choice. However, local governance is generally (not always) limited in its missional scope, almost by definition. Hence, a model coupling locally oriented leadership with a global denominational footprint is highly to be desired. And when it works as designed, the results are wonderful.

### ***IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE***

There are currently two contending issues in Adventism that vie for a solution. The two are related only in that they are occurring at the same time

and in the same place. And one seems to “trigger” the other. The theological/social issue is the ordination of women. In its existential reality, the Global North sees the ordination of women as absolutely essential to the success of its mission for two reasons. A. The imperative of fairness and equality permeates those cultures. B. The evangelization of those cultures requires it. Finding no direct prohibition of women’s ordination within Scripture, they view it as necessary for missional success within their contexts. It has become fairly non-negotiable. At the same time, the rest of the world is not as sympathetic as those needing to ordain women may wish. Given their own internal social constructs, decision making processes, and their own superior numbers, those holding tightly to traditional views continue to resist ordination.

Unfortunately, there appears to be in some quarters of the world an attempt to use this matter as a backlash in reaction to the colonialism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. That the gospel work in other parts of the world would be impeded on anything close to this basis is truly sad.

The second issue is one of policy/power. Who gets to make what decision and enforce it on everyone else? Unfortunately, we don’t have the luxury of considering one issue in isolation from the other. Reliance on policy as its own trigger for enforcement is never the strongest position one can take. The old familiar parental argument-ender “because I said so” doesn’t work well in discussions at global and corporate levels.

Regrettably, authoritarian leadership is not a mere historical feature of the Dark Ages church and/or government. It can and indeed it will happen in any place and any organization and within any society that either cannot or will not maintain an openness to constructive, multi-layered conversation

among all the various and usually diverse constituencies. Isolation of the top from the bottom and middle—either by design or by neglect—will result in eventual authoritarianism, which will in turn lead to a serious decrease in the relevance of the organization’s leadership/hierarchy for both the mission (objectively) and the local disciples (practically).

It is my assertion that the objection toward women’s ordination in the Seventh-day Adventist church is much more than some kind of alleged and/or apparent misogynistic thinking on the part of those who stand resolutely against women in leadership, despite the clear, obvious, and well understood lack of consensus within the biblical material. This resistance belies both a spiritual recalcitrance and a wooden understanding of the history of the church and its traditions, to say nothing of scriptural interpretation.

The ordination discussion at top leadership levels seems to be facilitating a dangerous drift toward centralization of authority, which inexorably leads quickly to authoritarianism. Perhaps it is this drift that gave rise to the fears for the church expressed by Ellen White when she said that the church may appear about to fall, but it will not. Whatever she meant with the statement, such language clearly signals a crisis for the church.

Adventists have long understood that there will come a “shaking” of the church in the end times—when the love of many “will grow cold” while those that “endure to the end the same will be saved.” Traditionally, that shaking has been understood to be the result of external pressures to conform to national and/or international laws that inhibit the practice of biblical faith on the part of individuals within the corporate group, or deny the right of the corporate group to meet or even exist. A second cause would be

the preaching of the straight testimony that repeatedly points people back to Jesus and away from themselves as agents of salvation. To this author's knowledge, this eschatological shaking has never been taught within the Adventist Church as coming from within the church itself. Certainly it has not been presented as coming from leadership. Issues of ordination and denominational authority can hardly be classified as the straight testimony in anyone's thinking or rhetoric.

And yet, if perceived as punitive, disciplinary strictures brought to bear against whole and large entities within the church (or those who represent them) on the sole basis that they are "out of policy," "out of unity," or otherwise unsubmitive with regard to a voted action on the women's ordination issue, it may well appear to some as "the shaking" stemming from the highest levels of extant church authority—and this on an issue that still remains contentious due to a lack of clear mutual understanding of the inspired material, as has been previously stated. That the shaking may in fact come from the hands of well-intentioned leaders in setting themselves as over/against opposing but no less well-intentioned members and "lower level" leaders who in fact are still in touch with the rank-and-file has heretofore been unthinkable. Perhaps such is becoming more and more conceivable.

That the decisions and actions of the GC today are often not known, and even more often not perceived by the average church member as applying practically at least in the Global North (and elsewhere), should be a wake-up call to administrators to restore the communication apparatus across the board with a view to listening more than telling, with a view to

leading rather than governing and with a view toward the gospel over the policy book.

History demonstrates that a global church needs a global structure of some kind. But the leaders of the global structure need to keep in mind that generally the best missional decisions are made locally; that local missional endeavors demand various types of support from the larger administrative levels—spiritual, consultative, financial, as well as defensive support, but never authoritarian censure from the hierarchy. Those local decisions certainly ought to fit with the overarching vision and strategies of the world body. Yet at the same time, that overarching vision and strategy must be big enough to accommodate broad local expression.

It is difficult to imagine administrators at world headquarters knowing, let alone understanding, what is best in and for every micro-culture on the planet. Indeed, cultures vary greatly within a given local conference or even a local church. But that is why we have the levels we do. It is time we trusted the body to both inform and hold accountable administrators who complain that the local churches and institutions simply don't know what is going on at the "top" when in fact those at the larger level haven't truly listened to those at the "bottom" for quite a while now—and give no indication that such is going to change any time soon. Perhaps they have reduced themselves to selectively listening to those around them who agree with them, and even intimidating to silence those whose position differs.

Perhaps our only hope for true unity lies in a professional intervention by an impartial team of mediators who can reframe the conflicts and guide us through a process of discovering the best "both/and" solutions that include acknowledging that unity cannot be mandated, that we must listen to one

another with a heart toward understanding, that we must restore trust in our local entities to direct their ministries, and finally, we must initiate authentic, relevant communication through an integrative style of leadership.

May the Lord who established his church on the rock of Matthew 16 continue to keep the “gates of Hell” at bay as we—together—under the presence of the Holy Spirit sort out the way forward.

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