

Ecumenism and the Adventist Church

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Ecumenism has a history as long as the division of the Christian church. Unity of the body of Christ has been a prayer and a dream since the beginning. Jesus prayed for unity and the apostles struggled to maintain unity. In the history of every church, you will find unity being challenged. The history of the Christian church is a long and exhausting search for unity. And yet the Christian church has not been able to keep its unity. Those who left it formed new churches and had their unity challenged. Christianity today is divided into three main families: the Catholics, the Protestants, and the Orthodox. The Roman Catholic Church represents the major group with 1.2 billion members; the Protestants and the Orthodox altogether are close to one billion. The Orthodox are divided into two or three families, such as the Greek Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox. But this grouping does not count several important subgroups such as the Russian Orthodox, the Copts, the Ethiopians, etc. Among Protestants there are a multitude of churches and organizations. Five families are dominant: Lutherans, Anglicans, Reformed, Methodists, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals.

However, we have a problem with the statistics. The Evangelicals say they are five hundred million; the Pentecostals estimate their family as many as seven hundred million. The mainline Protestants are close to 320 million. Among these, there are also evangelicals and Pentecostals, such as the Presbyterians in South Korea. If you read the internal publication of each church, you will find a call for unity. We are no different. We also call our church to unity.

Jesus prayed for the unity of the believers, and the division of Christ's body is a great scandal. Christianity is divided into many organizations and divisions inside each division. So we have to be very optimistic to believe that Christians could be united again as they were in the first century. A few years ago as the ecumenical family celebrated the unity of two churches in a country, I spoke with a leader and asked him if the trends will continue. His answer was, "We have to make sure that the result of the unity of two churches is not three churches instead of one."

After the reformation came several tentative steps to rebuild unity. They failed. As a Lutheran leader said to me, today the division between Lutherans and Catholics is more important than during Luther's time. In the nineteenth century many ecumenical movements began as inter-religious or interdenominational organizations such as the Bible Societies and Missionary Societies.¹

After the First World War, Protestants and Orthodox had several major meetings to study the urgency of working for the unity of the church. Christians killing Christians was not acceptable, and that was the official beginning of the ecumenical movement. A theological commission was organized with theologians from different churches. Their purpose was to study the common beliefs and to see how differences could be overcome. It was the Faith and Order Commission.²

The Second World War stopped the development of the ecumenical movement. Once again, Christian countries led the whole world in an unprecedented slaughter. After the war, Christian leaders saw their responsibility in the tragedy and thought that the division of the Christian world had favored ideologies like Nazis and communism. Something had to be done and fast. The League of Nations, which failed to stop the war, was now reinvented as the United Nations. In 1948, the countries' members voted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which became a model to constitutions of many countries. The purpose was to promote human rights as universal values in order to avoid wars. Protestants and Orthodox followed the example and organized the World Council of Churches.³ The influence of the European National Churches was predominant. The purpose was to build a visible unity of the Body of Christ. How to do it? By encouraging the advent of one Christian Church. But the Catholics were not members.

The ideas of unity and ecumenism were understood differently in Rome. Roman Catholics conceived of unity as a return to the “mother” and “true Church.” For the leaders of the ecumenical movement, unity had to be built step by step as a process, as a journey with Christ who will lead His children. The achievement of the visible unity is more than going back to Rome. Everyone accepting being part of this journey with God should be ready to change according to the urgency of unity. It would be the condition.⁴ After Vatican II, the Catholic Church accepted being part of the ecumenical movement. But they did not join the World Council of Churches. Instead they organized their ecumenical office: the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.⁵

Given this brief historical overview, we ask ourselves a couple of questions: First, should Adventists be involved in inter-church relations? Second, is the Seventh-day Adventist refusal to become a member of the World Council of Churches an indication of opposition to Jesus’ prayer for unity?

These are most serious issues and deserve straightforward answers. Regarding the first question, it is important to keep in mind that the Seventh-day Adventist Church understands itself as a movement with a special message for the world. Although Adventists may appreciate what other branches of Christianity have done to spread the good news of the gospel, Adventists believe they have a distinctive message to prepare the world for the soon coming of Jesus. Thus full participation in the ecumenical movement and certain types of inter-church relations constitute a denial of our church’s distinctive message and mission. However, that said, I contend that Adventists should not retract from the world and live in a denominational cocoon, as some marginal groups have proposed. On these issues let me offer some brief thoughts.

Adventists should not shy away from opportunities to share the beauty of our distinctive message with other denominational groups. Some venues improperly labeled as “ecumenical” (in a pejorative sense) may become providential opportunities for Adventist pastors and leaders to share our faith, hope, and view of the Scriptures. Moreover, such encounters may provide a safe space to explain our Fundamental Beliefs, especially our distinctive doctrines, to people who otherwise would never listen to us. Our pastors and members should never miss opportunities to share the Adventist message with people of other faiths.⁶ As long as we keep our commitment to the Scriptures on which we base our Fundamental Beliefs, we do well in interacting with other denominations so that they may have a more accurate perception of who we are. In a context of publishing ministry, Ellen G. White penned an instructive statement that aptly applies to this reflection:

You may have opportunity to speak in other churches. In improving these opportunities, remember the words of the Saviour, “Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.” Make no denunciatory speeches. Clear-cut messages are to be borne; but restrain all harsh expressions. There are many souls to be saved. In word and deed be wise unto salvation, representing Christ to all with whom you come in contact. Let all see that your feet are shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace and good will to men (Review and Herald, Oct. 7, 1902).⁷

As for the second question—which seems to imply that by not actively participating in the ecumenical movement, the Seventh Day Adventist Church is at odds with Jesus’ prayer for unity—the following thoughts are pertinent. Seventh-day Adventists are not against unity and fully abide by Jesus’ prayer “that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me” (John 17:21). In the same vein, Seventh-day Adventists also hold as important that such unity, if ever achieved, must be based on the Scriptures—that is, it must be consistent with truth as it is revealed in the Bible. We should note that in the same context in which Jesus taught about unity, He also spoke about truth. Indeed, two verses prior to the petition for unity, Jesus said about truth: “For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth” (John 17:19). This reference to truth is consistent with Jesus’ statement elsewhere in the Gospel of John: “And you shall know the truth,

and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

To conclude, Seventh-day Adventists should not miss opportunities to interact with other denominations and show them who we are and where we stand as a Bible-believing community. We have a precious and unique message to share with the world, even with other denominations and ecumenical groups. In addition, although we as Seventh-day Adventists are not members of the World Council of Church and do not intend to become such, we are not against unity per se. We are for truth. Unity built on the foundation of biblical truth would be a marvelous accomplishment. But for now, let us keep in mind what Jesus said: “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:14–16).

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¹ William M. King, “Ecumenism.” In *The Encyclopedia of Protestantism*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (New York: Routledge, 2004), 182.

² See William G. Rusch, “Ecumenism, Ecumenical Movement.” In *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999–2003), 2:46–60.

³ Wilbert R. Shenk, “World Council of Churches.” In *The Encyclopedia of Protestantism*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (New York: Routledge, 2004), 821–826.

⁴ See W. J. Whalen, “Ecumenical Movement.” In *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, eds. Berard L. Marthaler, Gregory F. LaNave, Jonathan Y. Tan, and Richard E. McCarron (Detroit, MI: Thomson and Gale, 2002), 5:88.

⁵ *Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity*, accessed June 7, 2015, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/index.htm

⁶ See John Graz, *Issues of Faith and Freedom* (Silver Spring, MD: Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Department), 141–148.

⁷ Ellen G. White, *The Publishing Ministry* (Review and Herald, 1983), 306.