

# **The Church: Authority and Unity**

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## **Part 1**

### **Church authority: its source, nature, and expression**

As long as the Seventh-day Adventist Church exists in the world, it has work to do and tasks to fulfill. It must live to give glory to God (see Eph. 1:3, 4, 11-14), share the gospel of Jesus Christ with all humanity (see Matt. 28:19, 20), serve those who are in need of comfort and help, and to build up and provide for the spiritual well-being of those who are drawn into its fellowship by the Holy Spirit (see Eph. 4:16; Jude 20; 1 Cor. 14:26). It is not merely a gathering of people who come together to celebrate Jesus Christ and His teachings, but a people called together by God as part of His plan of redemption for humankind. The church does not exist for its own sake, but rather to accomplish the commission that was given to it by its Lord.

In the course of carrying out this commission, the church is constantly confronted by the issue of authority. Thus, while the gospel message remains unchanged, the expression of its claims can hardly remain unaffected by the historical and cultural nature of the various contexts, geographical and others, in which it is proclaimed and lived out. How is the church to know to what degree it is fulfilling the divine intention? How will it make sure that in its teaching and proclamation it has proved itself to be independent of the spirit and philosophy of the age, and that it is really allowing the gospel message and it alone to speak reliably and authentically? Where shall such authority be found, and how will it express itself? We are faced here with one of the most difficult and most challenging issues the church never ceases to face.

It is the purpose of this paper, first of all, to recall briefly the biblical view regarding authority as it relates to God, Jesus Christ, and the apostles; second, to indicate how and why, on that basis, authority is expressed in the local and in the universal church; third, to point out what I regard as major characteristics of the earliest Christian council that met in Jerusalem (see Acts 15) and its relation to church authority as well as to the charismatic nature of the church; and finally, to suggest how believers should respond to authority conceived by the New Testament writers as *diakonia*.

It is hardly possible within the brief space of this presentation to do more than suggest some of the more important issues that need consideration and a general way in which they might be addressed.

### **Authority as a person**

The concept of authority, in general, is largely influenced by the notion men and women have of the society in which they live or in which they wish to live. "Authority" is not an easy term to define, and there seems to be no limit to what it may mean. Yet there are components of the concept that one can ill afford to change.

Seventh-day Adventists share with all other Christians the conviction that God is the source and ground of authority for the Christian church. He alone is self-existent and supreme (see Ex. 3:14; Isa. 44:6; 1 Tim. 6:15, 16); He is Creator,<sup>[1]</sup> Redeemer<sup>[2]</sup> and Sustainer.<sup>[3]</sup> As Lord and King of all creation and history, He has the right to exercise authority over humanity. To Him the whole universe is accountable. Yet our knowledge *of* God must be a knowledge *from* God, for only as He reveals Himself does God make Himself known to us.

In revelation, we hold, God discloses Himself and shares His word with us. This divine speaking came to a remarkable expression in the prophets, who proclaimed God's word to His people (Heb. 1:1). Yet the supreme agency of God's self-revelation is Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God (John 1:1-3, 14; 1 Tim. 3:16) at once the locus and content of God's revelation (John 1:18; 3:31; 8:23). His incarnation is the culminating act by which God disclosed Himself (John 14:9; 2 Cor. 14:6). In Him divine revelation and authority find focus and finality. As both Saviour (Luke 19:10; John 3:17; Acts 13:23)<sup>[4]</sup> and Lord (Rom. 14:8; 1 Cor. 7:22),<sup>[5]</sup> Christ Jesus is the final authority as the ultimate Revelation of God. He is the divine Sovereign of all (Matt. 28:18; Acts 10:36; Rom. 9:5),<sup>[6]</sup> the King of His people (1 Tim. 6:15; 1 Peter 3:22; Rev. 11:15), the Word of God (John 1:1-3, 14). Declared "Son of God with power" (Rom. 1:4)\* by His resurrection, He is the Lord (Phil. 2:9-11). To Him "all authority. . . in heaven and on earth" is given (Matt. 28:18). All creation is subject to Him (Phil. 2:10), and He will sit on God's judgment seat (2 Cor. 5:10) to judge the living and the dead (see Acts 10:42).<sup>[7]</sup>

In other words, in the Christian faith the Word of God, which holds authority over us, is known first and foremost as a person, i.e., Jesus Christ. While on earth He revealed the Father to us, announced the kingdom of God, and proclaimed the gospel of reconciliation. He also chose a handful of apostles so that His word and testimony might be faithfully proclaimed and interpreted in later generations (Mark 3: 13, 14). They were not merely witnesses to the crucified and risen Lord, for this would aptly describe, as 1 Cor. 15:6 indicates, "more than five hundred brethren." Not only had the apostles seen the Lord (1 Cor. 9:1; Acts 22:6-8); they had *also* been commissioned by Him (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 2:1-4; Rom. 1:1; Acts 13:2-4; 22:21). They were the instruments of God's grace (1 Cor. 15:10; Rom. 1:5), and their primary task was the preaching of the gospel of salvation (see 1 Cor. 1:17).

### **The apostles and the spoken word**

In the narrowest sense of that flexible term,<sup>[8]</sup> the apostles were the twelve appointed by Jesus Himself (Matt. 10:1-4), Matthias replacing Judas, and Paul.<sup>[9]</sup> As the commissioned witnesses to the word of Jesus, crucified and risen, theirs was a unique position of authority. Their authority was not their own, an authority under their control but mediated authority, Christ's authority mediated through them. Their proclamation and interpretation of Christ was not an intrusion upon God's revelation in Christ but very much part of it. They were not correctors, but conveyors

of it.

As preachers and teachers they were endowed with a special anointing of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:18-20; John 20:21-23). Among other gifts they were granted an inspiration remembrance (to recall Jesus' life and teachings) and an inspiration of guidance (into new truth) (John 14:15-17, 26: 16:13, 14).

Their whole intention, writes John, was directed to proclaiming "that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled concerning the Word of life" (1 John 1:1). To them, explains Paul, "the mystery of Christ" had been "made known" "by revelation" (Eph. 3:3-5). "Whether by word of mouth or by letter" (2 Thess. 2:15; cf. 2 Peter 1:12-15), in obedience to Christ they announced the "word of God" (1 Thess. 2:13, NKJV), the "word of life" (Phil. 2:16), "the living and abiding word of God" (1 Peter 1:23), a word that lives and abides forever, as announced by the Old Testament writings, which they regarded as "Scriptures" and "the oracles of God" (Rom. 15:4; 3:1, 2; 16:26; 1 Cor. 10:11; 15:3, 4), given by inspiration of God (2 Tim. 3:16).

There is little doubt that from that perspective the apostles occupied a crucial and unique position in the transmission of God's word and the edification of the church. They embodied the authority of Christ and from that perspective had no successors. Having personally encountered the risen Lord and having individually been commissioned by Him, they became His representatives and assumed an authoritative position within the early Christian communities (Eph. 3:5; 2 Peter 3:2; cf. Jude 17). They were the founders and builders of the church (Eph. 2:20), and spoke with the authority which "the Lord gave" them (2 Cor. 10:8), for Christ was speaking through them (2 Cor. 13:3). And though their preaching came in words of human beings, it was "the word of God" (1 Thess. 2:13, KJV) and they expected the early believers to accept it as such-a command of the Lord (1 Cor. 14:37; 2 Thess. 3:14).

When under inspiration of the Spirit of God, the apostles put their oral message in written form, the latter carried the same authority as that attached to their spoken word (1 Cor. 14:37; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:14), an authority which, in Paul's case at least, Peter puts on a footing of equality with the Old Testament Scriptures (2 Peter 3:15, 16). Referring to his own writings, Peter explains that they were put in writing "to remind you," so that after his death, they would "be able" "at any time. . . to recall these things" (2 Peter 1:12-15). The apostolic message had found embodiment in the Scriptures. The Word that holds authority over us and is known to us primarily as a person, i.e., Jesus Christ, came to be known secondarily in the form of the spoken and written language of the apostles.

Is this, as some have suggested, throwing a book between the believer and God? Not at all. God is, and remains, the source and ground of authority for the Christian. The Scriptures are not a veil. On the contrary, they are a rent in the veil between man and God, for as God's revelation their function is to lead to Christ (Gal. 3:24). The Bible is not merely a testimony to revelation, but it is revelation itself. Christ, Revelation of God, is the supreme object of the witness of the Spirit and the supreme content of Scripture, which witnesses supremely to Him, the incarnate Word of God. Therein lies the authority of the Bible. In accepting the authority of the Scriptures, we are bowing not before the authority of a book, but before Christ's authority, for the only authoritative Christ we know is the Christ of the apostles. While they are "the standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reforms,"<sup>[10]</sup> the Scriptures are only a means to an end, that of bringing each believer under the supreme Lordship of Christ. In unity with the Father and the Holy Spirit, our Lord Jesus is our ultimate authority. God alone possesses authority for time and eternity, and as Seventh-day Adventists we accept unreservedly the authority of His revealed

Word, both incarnate and written.

Thus, under the leadership of the apostles, the earliest church consisted of a fellowship of mainly Jewish believers who recognized in Jesus of Nazareth, risen and glorified, the true Messiah of Israel, and who continued in Jewish religious practices and worship (cf. Acts 2:46, 47; 3:1; 5:12). They gathered together in homes (Acts 2:46; 4:23) for common meals and the celebration of the Lord's Supper (verses 46, 42), for praise and fellowship (verse 42), "devoting themselves to the apostles teaching" (*ibid.*). The apostles were their leaders (verses 14, 42; cf. 4:23, 32, 33), Christ's heralds and the authentic interpreters of the Old Testament Scriptures (Acts 2:14-36; 13:16-42, 44, 48; 17:1-3).

### **Of deacons and elders**

It appears that early in their history early believers recognized the need for proper administration, in order, to be precise, to further the proclamation of the Word. This need was first met by the appointment of the seven, who are generally regarded as the original deacons (Acts 6:1-6). It is noteworthy that they were chosen by the congregation (verse 3) and appointed by the apostles by the laying on of hands (verse 6) to superintend the distribution of food, thus freeing the apostles for their tasks of preaching and teaching (verse 4). That this office was widely recognized in the early church is clearly suggested by the list of qualifications as laid down by Paul (1 Tim. 3:8-13), as well as by the Philippians 1:1 statement.

Soon after, a group of elders appears in a leadership position in the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:30), probably chosen on the basis of the same process that led to the appointment of the seven to help the apostles in their leadership role.<sup>[11]</sup> A few chapters further we note that indeed the elders shared this role with the apostles at the time of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:2, 22). In a similar fashion, elders were chosen and appointed in the churches that Paul and Barnabas (founded in Asia (Acts 14:23)).<sup>[12]</sup>

Next to the apostles, elders (*presbyteroi*) and bishops (*episkopoi*)-the two terms were used interchangeably in the early days (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7; cf. 1 Peter 5:2)-seem to have consistently enjoyed the greatest authority in the local churches. One of their main functions was general pastoral care and oversight (Acts 20:17-28; 1 Peter 5:1-3), with special tasks such as visiting the sick (James 5:14), giving instructions in sound doctrine, and confuting those who contradicted it (1 Tim. 3:1, 2; Titus 1:5, 9). They labored among fellow believers and had charge "over [them] in the Lord" (1 Thess. 5:12), admonishing them clearly in positions of authority. Those who ruled well were to "be considered worthy of double honor," and more particularly so if they labored in "preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17).<sup>[13]</sup> Their permanent role is evidenced by the list of qualifications necessary for such leaders as found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 2.

### **The local church's authority**

Guided by the apostles, the church was gradually developing into a flexible but reasonably structured organization. As it grew in size and spread throughout the Roman empire, its organization became more involved and more clearly defined. Administrative and organizational functions were predominantly in the hands of the apostles, though in addition to them, elders and deacons served in various capacities as preachers, teachers, and administrators. Thus, while the early church continued to recognize the final authority of the apostles, much of the government of local churches rested in the hands of local congregations. We learn, for instance, that these local congregations exercised authority with respect to the selection of their local leaders, as mentioned earlier (Acts 6:1-6; cf. 14:23); they appointed messengers to be sent to other churches

(Acts 11:22) or to accompany apostles (2 Cor. 8:19), sometimes accrediting them by letter (1 Cor. 16:3). The church at Antioch appointed Barnabas along with Paul, "and certain others" to represent its views at the council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1, 2).

The local churches also bore responsibility for purity in doctrine and practice. Testing the spirits was part of their responsibilities (1 John 4:1), since every believer is anointed by the Holy Spirit (1 John 2:20) and thus is able to discern truth (verse 27). As early as in his first epistle Paul insists that the local church is to "test all things," and "to hold fast what is good" (1 Thess. 5:21, NKJV).

The same is true regarding the exercise of church discipline. All other means of reconciliation having failed, a matter under dispute between members of a congregation was to come before the local church (Matt. 18:15-17). Our Lord Himself refers to the authority of the local congregation in the following terms: "Truly, I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 18:18), a terminology all too familiar to the disciples who heard it on that occasion. In synagogal and rabbinic usage it meant primarily to prohibit and to allow something; next, to impose penalties, or excommunication, on someone or to acquit the same.<sup>[14]</sup> In other words, the local congregation is to settle the conditions of membership and the rules of the house.

### **The universal church, its oneness and unity**

Yet, according to the same Scriptures, it is evident that the local church does not live in isolation or in independence from other local churches. No church government, and therefore authority, that fails to recognize the reality and unity of the universal church is biblical. This is not to say that the local church would be merely a section of the universal church, for it is the church itself, fully present in each of its local assemblies. Nor is *the* church the total number of all local churches. Rather, as G. E. Ladd expresses it, "the local congregation is the church in local expression."<sup>[15]</sup> While most likely the relation between the two cannot be adequately verbalized, the fact remains that the church is one and indivisible. In Hendrikus Berkhof's words: "One cannot simply add up the local churches to get the church. It is not a matter of addition, but of multiplication in which *one* times *one* remains *one*."<sup>[16]</sup> This is clearly reflected in the way the word *ekklesia* is used in the New Testament.<sup>[17]</sup>

This oneness is expressed both in common faith and in practice as well as in cooperative actions. Time and again Paul points the churches to what is going on in other parts of the Roman empire. They are to be aware of the global relationships in which the gospel has brought them together (Col. 1:6, 23; 1 Tim. 3:16). Likewise, Corinthian believers are to see themselves united "with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ," who is both "their Lord and ours" (1 Cor. 1:2). There is "a common faith" (Titus 1:4; 2 Peter 1:1), "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3, KJV).

This spirit of unity is conveyed in greetings from church to church (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:19; Phil. 4:22) and is evident in the letters of recommendation sent from one church to another or from well-known leaders, commending God-given teachers to other churches (Acts 18:24-28; 2 Cor. 3:1; Rom. 16:1, 2; Col. 4:10). What happens in other congregations or parts of the world must have their full interest (cf. 2 Cor. 9:2-5; Col. 4:16). They are exhorted to participate in all that is being done elsewhere and to accept being guided by the same line of conduct (1 Cor. 16:1-4; 11:16). "This is the rule I lay down in all the churches," writes Paul to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 7:17, NIV), adding that "God is not a God of confusion, but of peace" (1 Cor. 14:33). Wishing to admonish them as a father, he sends them Timothy to "remind you of my ways in

Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church" (1 Cor. 4:17), and reprimands them for their independent attitude: "Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?" (1 Cor. 14:36, NIV). Evidently unity in the New Testament is not merely an end-time reality to be eagerly expected (Eph. 4:8-14), but very much a part of the church's present experience. United in their Lord in one body, of which Christ is the Head, all early believers were exhorted to remember that "there is. . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:4, 5).<sup>[18]</sup>

The desirability of this oneness and close interrelationship does not proceed merely from its practical helpfulness or the need for cooperation, mutual advice, or brotherly assistance. Its basis lies first and foremost in the very nature of the church, which is one. The use of *ekklesia* clearly underlies this, and the New Testament "body" metaphor reaffirms it (1 Cor. 10:16, 17; 12:12, 27). Christ does not have many bodies, but one, and that one body must manifest itself in the unity and closeness of the whole church, local and universal (Eph. 4:1-6).

### **The universal church, its authority**

What about the universal church and its authority? Some have wondered whether church order, or church law,<sup>[19]</sup> is not a contradiction in terms. Doesn't the Spirit blow where He wills? From a scriptural perspective, however, it appears that the Spirit is not so "spiritual" that He has nothing to do with order.<sup>[20]</sup> Paul reminds us that "God is not a God of confusion, but of peace" (1 Cor. 14:33), and that, therefore, all things should be done "decently and in order" (verse 40, KJV).

As a spiritual organism in which all constituent parts are vitally interrelated as the spiritual body of Christ, of which He is the head, it is to be expected that the church discloses this inner unity in a visible manner and seeks as much as possible to express it in some external organization. While a spiritual body, the church is, nevertheless, a tangible reality, the temple of the Spirit, a priesthood, and a holy nation. All these terms point to a visible unity.

Moreover, if indeed, Jesus intended His visible church to proclaim and share the gospel, one can hardly deny it the right to exercise a measure of administrative authority. It is probably in the realm of determining truths of revelation that the role of the church, as "pillar and support of the truth" (1 Tim. 3: 15), will be more particularly difficult and important. It is true that "the faith. . . once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3) has been fixed with the last witness of the apostles, yet it needs interpretation, a need made even more urgent with the passing of time.

### **The Jerusalem Council: Advisory or Binding?**

This is strikingly illustrated in Acts 15, which tells of the gathering of a large assembly in the city of Jerusalem. Here, following discussion and disputation in the church at Antioch over the role of circumcision in salvation (Acts 15:1-5), Paul and Barnabas, "and certain others" were urged to go up to Jerusalem, "to the apostles and the elders" about this matter (verse 2). They were, adds Luke, "sent on their way by the church" at Antioch (verse 3), as its representatives. As they made their way through Phoenicia and Samaria, telling everyone about the conversion of the Gentiles, their story gave "great joy to all the brethren" (verse 3). Clearly, early believers placed great value on solidarity among local churches. Far from being content to live in mutual isolation, they shared their experiences and sought reactions from each other.

As they arrived in Jerusalem, "they were welcomed by the church," along with the apostles and the elders (verse 4). The council gathered together (verse 6), and allowed "much debate" (verse 7), evidently giving each side an opportunity to argue its case. In seeking to arrive at the truth in this disputed matter, different perspectives were listened to, for all of the ones present

were sincerely committed to the gospel. Having listened to Peter's view (verses 7-11), they paid careful attention to the testimony of Barnabas and Paul (verse 12), followed by James' discourse (verses 13-21). It seems particularly significant that throughout the discussion, and in spite of the authority of the main speakers, appeals were frequently made to the authority of the Scriptures. Even James' concluding speech, however important, was essentially built on a combination of the prophets and Moses (Amos 9:11, 12; Lev. 17:8-16;18). The Scriptures held final authority. The council heard and listened to the authoritative Word of God and therefore acted and spoke with its authority.

A conclusion was reached, and a letter-decree was drawn up by "the apostles and the elders" with the concurrence of "the whole church" (Acts 15:22). As Luke tells it, the letter sent out mentioned that "it seemed good to us" in assembly (verse 25), literally, "with one mind and purpose," a common mind attributed in verse 28 to the Holy Spirit.<sup>[21]</sup> In other words, they had been seeking to grasp the intentions of the Spirit for the whole Christian community. Then follows the decision reached by the assembly, which went counter to the wish of those who wanted to require circumcision from Gentile converts, but it still imposed four regulations (verse 29).<sup>[22]</sup>

That this admonition would have been merely a recommendation and addressed only to Christian Gentiles living in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, as some have suggested on the basis of Acts 15:23, is hardly plausible. Acts 16, the very next chapter, indicates that during his second missionary journey, Paul, accompanied by Silas, came to Derbe and Lystra in Lycaonia, clearly west of Cilicia. On their westbound journey to the region of Phrygia and Galacia (see verse 6) "as they went through the cities, they delivered to them the decrees to keep, which were determined by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem" (verse 4, KJV). Notice the expression "to keep" in relation to the decisions reached by the Jerusalem council. As a result, adds Luke, "the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily" (verse 5). There is little doubt that the council's conclusions were regarded as binding upon the churches-and not merely those of Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia-as the sound interpretation and application of God's will.<sup>[23]</sup> Here we have a clear example of a major assembly that spoke not merely in an advisory capacity, but with binding authority.<sup>[24]</sup> Major assemblies, which address matters that pertain to the churches in general and concern the preservation of unity, therefore exercising authority of a broader and more extended scale, are unquestionably warranted by Scripture.

### **Lessons from the Jerusalem assembly**

To us Seventh-day Adventists, who read it in the light of our own experience, the conciliar process, as Luke portrays it in Acts 15, provides a most valuable apostolic model for the exercise of authority within the church at large. It also affords an exceptionally helpful paradigm for suggesting processes and methods needed to handle controversies that might arise within God's church. Obviously, a polarized church is a scandal, negating the very essence of God's church. If, in fact, the church is Christ's spiritual body, its members must show care for one another, and processes as well as structures must exist for achieving universal solutions to issues and problems that are universal. Just as decisions regarding local matters are to be handled locally, those affecting the church as a whole are to be addressed and resolved by those representing the church at large.

In any such assembly, believers of different perspectives should be included, and the cooperation of lay members is indispensable in arriving at decisions about the formulation of truths.<sup>[25]</sup> All decisions reached should be in submission to the Word of God in Scripture, for it

contains the normative and authoritative revelation in which the church is permanently rooted.

As Seventh-day Adventists, we hold that the representative form of government and teaching authority practiced among us agrees with the pattern found in the New Testament Scriptures.<sup>[26]</sup> In Seventh-day Adventism, authority and responsibility are vested in the constituency and shared by delegation with duly elected-or appointed-representatives who fulfill their representative tasks regarding matters falling under their jurisdiction. This representative form of church government and teaching authority operates in four steps, all familiar to us: the local church, the conference, the union conference, and the General Conference. The broadest authority, widest in extent, under God and the Scriptures, among us, is found in the body of the universal church as expressed in the decisions reached by the General Conference in session, composed of representative men and women from all parts of the earth, gathered for that purpose.<sup>[27]</sup>

The authority of such decisions depends, of course, on their faithfulness to the Scriptures.<sup>[28]</sup> Such pronouncements are authoritative, first by virtue of their agreement with the Bible, and second, on account of the authority of the council from which they proceed, i.e., inasmuch as the latter is an assembly set up on conformity with the pattern set by God to that effect in Acts 15.

This pattern includes a design that is representative and "conciliar" in character. Inspired by the scriptural model, we have labored at implementing it in the life of the church, and it seems to have worked effectively. The extent to which this conciliarity is achieved may vary, but conciliarity is what Seventh-day Adventists desire, profess, and, I hope, constantly seek afresh.

### **The charismatic structure of the church**

One should not forget that theological reflection on the church's beliefs and standards is, in its simplest terms, "faith seeking understanding." This task is first of all the business of the whole church and not merely of a small group of professionals. This implies that the teaching authority of the church cannot function properly without broad collaboration and consultation. To say this is not to negate the utterly essential task of the professional and administrative leadership in the church in helping the reflection and experience of the church to come to authoritative expression. It is only to put this task in better balance. More specifically doctrinal definitions and moral teachings, as the Scriptures show, are to be seen not as "directives from above"<sup>[29]</sup> but as the culmination of a reflective process that involves the whole church.

The universal priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:9) is the foundation that makes it possible for lay members<sup>[30]</sup> to participate in extended assemblies. As Adventists, we might even be willing to learn from those Christian communions whose conciliar bodies are *equally* divided between ministers and laypersons at all levels. Such inclusion should be urged not merely because we live in an age of democratic participation, but first and foremost because it is the outgrowth of what I hope is a genuine recognition of the scriptural doctrine of the charismatic structure of the church.

We misunderstand the nature of the charisms, or gifts of the Holy Spirit, when we think of them as limited to the apostles or restricted to extraordinary and sensational phenomena such as healing or speaking in tongues. For a while these special *charismata* get particular attention in 1 Corinthians 12-14, they are not mentioned at all among the gifts of grace listed in Romans 12 and Ephesians 4. The gifts of the Spirit are in no way limited to the spectacular, but they have been granted to the whole church for its renewal and expansion, for the implementation of its God-given task.

Nor are these gifts (as listed in Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:8-10; 28-30; and Ephesians 4:11) concentrated in a few persons, such as leaders or officeholders, thus supplying us with a



kind of leading class or officeholders that would stand apart from the community and rise above it to lord it over it. In the Scriptures the spiritual gifts do not fall under the heading of "official offices," but ecclesiastical offices do fall under the heading of "charismata," They are granted to all believers, for "to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:7), and "each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that" (1 Cor. 7:7). In Peter's words, "as each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10).<sup>[31]</sup>

In this sense one can, and indeed should, speak of a "charismatic structure" of the church, which embraces and goes beyond the structures of its government. These are God's gifts of grace, granted to individual believers in view of specific services within the community and the world wide field, including the ability to perform these services. More than "the fruit[s] of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22), which are given mainly for individual sanctification, the *charismata* are granted "for. . . the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ" (Eph. 4:12, 13; cf. 1 Cor. 14:12), and thus for the exercise of authority.

### **Informed believers and conciliar authority**

Informed believers should, therefore, be called to participate in church and conciliar affairs, as attested in the book of Acts, which tells us about the participation of such lay members in the deliberations and decisions reached at the Jerusalem Council.

This participation can express itself in two ways: either by direct representation-i.e., laypersons representing laity-or by *indirect* representation-ordained ministers being elected to represent the laity. It would not be fitting to declare the former mode of representation alone as legitimate. Still, in the light of the Acts 15 episode, greater attention should be given to the desirability of the first and obvious expression of this representation at all levels of our conciliar system.

There seems to be room for progress on this particular point. While it may be said that in our midst the local churches elect their representatives, or delegates, to the local conference constituency meetings, at which time local conference officers are chosen, the practice calls for delegates to union conference and General Conference sessions to be appointed by conference and union conference officers and committees, respectively. Whom do such delegates represent if not essentially those who appointed them? Shouldn't careful attention be given to the feasibility of adopting a pattern closer to a representative process at all levels? Why couldn't delegates be chosen, i.e., elected, rather than appointed at all levels? Elected by their local congregations, the delegates to local conference constituency meetings would elect delegates to union conference sessions as their representatives. The latter, in turn, would elect delegates to represent them at General Conference sessions. This seems to me closer to our convictions regarding the priesthood of all believers and a representative model, not to mention the intent of Ellen Whites advice.<sup>[32]</sup> In fact, the end result may not be significantly different, but a new sense of participation and involvement, which must have characterized the early church at the time of the Jerusalem assembly, would almost certainly pervade the church.

Where this representation is indirect, i.e., when ordained ministers or administrators speak and act for the laity, great care should be taken before articulating the faith of the church, not merely to listen to the testimony of the Word of God as found in the Scriptures but also to engage in as broad a consultation of the people of God as possible. Consultation, along with the gathering and

weighing of evidence, prepares such an authoritative body to make a twofold judgment: (1) that the matter at issue is true and in accord with revelation; (2) that there is a pastoral need to teach this matter with the authority of the church. This would also contribute to the necessary exercise of discerning between the *sensus fidelium* and voices of false prophets. Clearly, the teaching authority of the church has to be understood within the context of the whole church, in which the Holy Spirit is given to all and works through all.

### **The believer's response to authority**

If this is the case, what should we say regarding the believers response to the church's teaching authority, whether local or universal?

Earlier on I hinted at the fact that I conceive of authority in the church as concentric rather than pyramidal, and that the teaching function of the church cannot be implemented without broad collaboration and consultation. Against this background the proper response to the teaching authority of the church, as I perceive it, is not so much immediate obedience or assent as what I shall refer to as a basic religious docility<sup>[33]</sup> and deference- always on the assumption, of course, that authority has proceeded properly-especially when there may not be total agreement with the decision reached.

What I am referring to is no sheepish, spineless neutralism. It is, rather, a cast of mind that expresses itself in a succession of ways. First, it means a readiness to go beyond the privacy of ones own views and to open up to the persuasion of a broader wisdom. Next, it implies a willingness to reassess ones own position in the light of the church's decision. Third, it means a considerable reluctance to conclude right off that the church's decision is erroneous. Even after one may have concluded that the arguments and foundations used are far from convincing, I suggest, from having gone through that experience myself, that in genuine humility one adopt the attitude that for the time being the teaching of the church is doubtful rather than erroneous, precisely because, from the perspective of the charismatic dimension of the church, the wisdom of the entire church, instructed by the Scriptures, has gone into its formulation. This is not placid neutralism.

This attitude of respect will generally lead to assent, though assent, or even acceptance, may not be the immediate response. If eventually there is dissent, it should be the terminus of an arduous and willing attempt to understand and appropriate authentic teaching; in truth, an inability to assent.

It is unrealistic and romantic to pretend that the church, local and universal, has no need for an authoritative function. But ultimately this authority exists to one end only, as an aid to mission. As all the other means which the Spirit wishes to use and does press into service for equipping and building the church, authority is intended to serve for instructing, admonishing, and equipping the people of God, as well as for the effective direction and government of the church.

### **Authority as *diakonia***

As an expression of the Spirit's ministry among us, authority bears the characteristic of the supreme gift of grace, namely love. Like all functions of the church, the exercise of authority is a function of love, a *diakonia*, a service.

In fact, how can one overlook the striking fact that in the New Testament the usual governmental vocabulary in secular Greek for civil and religious authority is consistently avoided in connection with the offices and ministries of the church or with the latter's exercise of

authority? *Arche* (primacy, authority, power),<sup>[34]</sup> *time* (value, honor, respectability),<sup>[35]</sup> and *telos* (end, conclusion, total official power)<sup>[36]</sup> are ostensibly ignored, most probably because they express a relationship of ruler and ruled, which makes them unusable.<sup>[37]</sup> *Exousia* is used occasionally, such as in relation to the ministry of Jesus, the work of the apostles, and Paul's apostolic authority to build up the Christian community.<sup>[38]</sup> The word that is deliberately chosen carried no overtone of rule, dignity, or power. It was the word *diakonia*, service. This term, denoting service or ministry, is in no danger of being misinterpreted as synonymous of power and rulership.

As prescribed in the Scriptures, the exercise of authority within the church finds its roots and model in Jesus Himself, who conceived of His mission and authority in terms of service: "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve [*diakonein*]" (Mark 10:45); "I am among you as the one who serves [*diakonein*]" (Luke 22:27). Jesus insistently warned His disciples against any style of authority resembling that exemplified by the rulers of His own age (Matt. 20:25-28; Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:25-27).<sup>[39]</sup> His instruction to the disciples is explicit on this point. It reads, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant [*diakonos*] of all" (Mark 9:35).

This pattern for the exercise of authority within the church, to which some have been called by the Spirit and their fellow Christians, is unquestionably something of a paradox. Upon closer inspection, it can be seen to have been determined by the cruciform shape of the paschal mystery itself.<sup>[40]</sup>

### **By way of conclusion**

I have suggested various things that will have to be argued in detail on other occasions, and probably by others than myself. My aim is not to give an integral and flawless theory, but merely to project a kind of image of how authority operated in the early Christian church and how it might continue to function in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, even more successfully than in the past. As a theologian, I would hope that a great many would participate in this study, making their individual contribution-for theology is the task of the whole church-so that God's people as a whole will be able to fulfill its God-given mandate more efficiently.

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\*Unless otherwise noted, Bible texts in this article are from the *New American Standard Bible*.

[1]. Gen. 1; Ex.20:11; Neh.9:6; Isa.40:12; Jer. 51:15, 16; Acts 4:24; Rom. 1:20; Rev. 4:11; 14:7.

[2]. Ps. 111:9; 130:7; Luke 2:38; Rom. 3:15; Gal. 4:4, 5; Col. 1:20.

[3]. Gen. 28:15; Deut. 32:11-14; 47; Ps. 23; 55:22; 65:9-13; 1 Cor. 10:13; Acts 14:17.

[4]. See also John 10:7; 10; 12:47; Acts 4:12; Rom. 5:6-11; Eph. 2:13-20; 1 Thess. 5:9; 1 Tim. 1:1; 15; 2 Tim. 1:9-12.

[5]. See also 1 Cor. 8:6; Phil. 2:9-11.

[6]. See also Rom. 14:9; Eph. 1:20-22; Phil. 2:9-11; Rev. 12:10.

[7]. Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism II* (Oak Grove, Minn.: Winston Press, 1980), pp. 8 17-820, John P. O'Grady, "Authority and Power: Issues for the Contemporary Church," *Louvain Studies X*, 2 (1984): 122-140, esp. 130-132; Werner Foerster, "Exousia," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (1964), vol. 2, pp. 566-569 (hereafter referred to as *TDNT*).

[8]. Etymologically, an apostle is one sent with a special message or commission, one sent with authority to act on behalf of the one who sent him. The word is used in this sense in the Septuagint (1 Kings 14:6; Isa. 18:2), and in the New Testament (John 13:16). In 2 Cor. 8:23 and Phil. 2:25 trusted delegates sent out by Christian churches on special mission are called "apostles" or "messengers." They are not apostles in a technical sense. In Hebrews 3:1 Jesus is called "the Apostle and High Priest of our confession."

[9]. Several New Testament passages suggest that the apostles were a wider company than the original twelve disciples. Paul, not having been a disciple of Jesus in the days of His flesh, points to the signs and seals of his apostleship, evidenced by his missionary labors and their fruits (1 Cor. 9:2; 1 Cor. 12:12; Gal. 2:8). That there seem to have been other apostles besides the twelve and Paul is shown in the fact that the term also applies to Barnabas (Acts 14:4, 14), James (Gal. 2:9), and Andronicus and Junias (Rom. 16:7).

[10]. *The Great Controversy*, p. 595; cf. *Early Writings*, p. 278. Article No. 1 of *Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists* reads as follows: "The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written word of God, given by divine inspiration through holy men of God who spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In this Word, God has committed to man the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God's acts in history (2 Peter 1:20-21 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; Ps. 119:105; Prov. 30:5, 6; Isa. 8:20; John 17:17; 1 Thess. 2:13; Heb. 4:12.)"

[11]. L. Coenen, "Bishop, Presbyter, Elder," *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), vol. 1, p. 119. "It seems probable," comments Allan Richardson, "that the local *ekklesiai* were thus modeled upon the pattern of the Jewish synagogue throughout the world: a body of elders managed the affairs and charities of the local Jewish community, represented it in its dealings with the civil power and exercised oversight in matters of discipline and of the observance of the Law" (*An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* [New York: Harper & Row, 1958], p. 326).

[12]. On the origin and development of the elders functions in the Old and New Testaments, see C. G. Bornkamm, "Presbus, Presbuteros *TDNT*. . .," vol. 6, pp. 651-654; Coenen, pp. 188-201, esp. pp. 196-201.

[13]. In his earliest epistles already, Paul exhorts his Gentile converts to "esteem. . . very highly" (1 Thess. 5:13, KJV), those who "labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you" (verse 12, KJV). Although *proistamenoí* ("those who guide") is not the technical title of an officer, yet the persons meant seem to have been office bearers in the early church, probably the elders mentioned elsewhere. In view of the fact that the same term is used in the pastoral epistles of bishops (1 Tim. 3:4), deacons (verse 12), and elders (1 Tim. 5:17), it seems reasonable to conclude that the *proistamenoí* were elders, bishops, and deacons.

[14]. See F. Büchsel, "Deo (luo)," *TDNT*, vol. 2, pp. 60, 61; Oscar Cullmann, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), pp. 204-206.

[15]. G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 353.

[16]. Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 386.

[17]. In the New Testament Scriptures the word *ekklesia* usually refers to local congregations (Acts 11:26; 13:1; 14:23; 1 Cor. 14:5; Phil. 4:15). It is used in the plural to designate groups of churches (Acts 15:41; 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Cor. 8:1; Gal. 1:2, 22). The singular form can also apply to believers in a given place (Acts 5:11; 8:1; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1), as well as designate the church at large: .. the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace,

being built up" (Acts 9:31; Matt. 16:18; cf. 1 Cor. 6:4; 10:32; Eph. 1:22).

[18]. H. Ridderbos, *Paul. An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 478-480; R. L. Saucy, *The Church in Gods Program* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), pp. 117-119.

[19]. While Protestants, in general, speak in terms of "church order," the Roman Catholic Church has shown preference for "church law." Basically, the phrase refers to a set of rules and regulations intended to facilitate the task of the church, local and universal, and the work of its office bearers.

[20]. H. Berkhof, "The Church as Institute," *Christian Faith*, pp. 345-392. Till recently, to some extent at least, discussions related to the origin and legitimacy of church law were dominated by R. Sohm's *Kirchenrecht*, I (1892), whose thesis was that church law is incompatible with the essence of the church, that the true church, the church of Christ, does not know of church law. Emil Brunner showed some partiality for this view, though, more than Sohm, he acknowledged that the church needs an order, even structures, colored by the existing social relationships (*Dogmatik III* [Zurich: Zwingly-Verlag, 1964], chaps. I-IV). The German Confessing Church and the Barmen Declaration (1934) challenged Sohm's view by stating that the nature of the church requires specific scriptural rules and church order, an insight further developed by Erik Wolf, and more particularly by Karl Barth (*Church Dogmatics* [Edinburgh: T. & T Clark, 1958], IV, 2: The Order of the Community," par. 67:4 [676-726]). It is from the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the event of Christian worship, for instance, that Barth derives a certain number of normative elements of church order.

In more recent years the flexible and situational aspects of all church policies and their indebtedness to existing laws in each country have again been strongly underlined. At present, the emphasis is on the changeability of church order and on the continuous requirement to express in updated form the relationship between what is normative and what is situational (H. Berkhof, pp. 382-384).

[21]. The verse reads: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."

[22]. Four things are mentioned in the text from which all should abstain. First, meats offered in sacrifice to idols, followed by blood. Next, meat which had been killed by strangling; and finally, unchastity, variously understood as illicit sexual intercourse. For a more detailed discussion of Acts 15 and what follows in this section, see, for instance, F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), esp. "Acts 15," pp. 298-316; A. Dulles, "An Ecclesial Model for Theological Reflection: The Council of Jerusalem," in *Tracing the Spirit: Communities, Social Action, and Theological Reflection*, ed. James E. Hugh (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), pp. 218-241; I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 242-258.

[23]. There is evidence that the letter-decree reached churches far beyond this geographical area. Its admonitions seem to have been familiar to Christians of the Rhone Valley. As mentioned by F. F. Bruce in *The Book of Acts* (pp. 315, note 53), Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History V. 126*) reports one of the martyrs of Vienne and Lyon protesting, "How could Christians eat children when they are not allowed even to drink the blood of brute beasts?" From North Africa, Tertullian attests: "We abstain from eating strangled animals and those who have died of themselves" (*Apology 9*).

[24]. Ellen White refers to the Jerusalem assembly as a "general council" (*The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 190,197) or simply a "council" (pp. 190, 195, 196).

[25]. Note Ellen White's terminology when commenting on those who, though not from

Jerusalem participated in the council. In *The Acts of Apostles* she mentions that "the members of [Antioch] church, fearing that a division among them would be the outcome of continued discussion, decided to send Paul and Barnabas, with some responsible men from the church, to Jerusalem" (*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 190). There they were joined by "delegates from the different churches" (*ibid.*), also referred to as "brethren the various churches" (p. 191). The council, explains she, "was composed of apostles and teachers who had been prominent in raising up Jewish and Gentile Christian churches, with chosen delegates from various places" (p. 196).

[26]. Claims for the presence in the New Testament of a clearly defined and developed form ecclesiastical government are not warranted. Though some basic organizational principles are presented as part of the life of the New Testament church, the latter was a new work of God, and, as such, a growing and developing body. This, probably more than any other single element, explains why it is difficult to get the blueprint of a full developed pattern of church government in the pages of Scripture.

[27]. As problems arise, for the purpose of securing unity and efficiency, specific policies are adopted in areas where the Scriptures set forth merely general principles. Such decisions are gathered in the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* which deals with such matters as statements a belief, qualifications for church membership, the transfer of church members, duties of church officers, ministers' relations to the church, church elections, church organization, Gospel finances standards of Christian living, church discipline marriage and divorce, organization and disbanding of churches, the settlement of grievances, etc. As stated in the *Church Manual*, the church expects from every candidate for baptism a "willing acceptance of all the doctrines taught by Seventh-day Adventists and the principles of conduct which are the outward expression of these teachings" (*Church Manual* [1990], p. 43).

[28]. Recourse to apostolic guidance such as took place in Jerusalem is replaced by recourse to the apostles' inscripturated teachings as recorded in the New Testament.

[29]. Except if one has God in mind.

[30]. The terms *lay* and *laity* are not used here to convey any notion of distinction between orders of believers religiously different from one another. Ministry is a function of the whole church, distributed among its members according as God has given to each various gifts and capacities (1 Cor. 12:4-7).

[31]. As H. Ridderbos insightfully expresses it: "*Charisma* is everything that the Spirit wishes to use and presses into service for equipping and upbuilding the church" (*Paul*, p. 442).

[32]. In 1903 she wrote: "Every member of the church has a voice in choosing officers of the church. The church chooses the officers of the state conferences. Delegates chosen by the state conferences choose the officers of the union conferences, and delegates chosen by the union conferences choose the officers of the General Conference. By this arrangement, every conference, every institution, every church, and every individual, either directly or through representatives, has a voice in the election of the men who bear the chief responsibilities in the General Conference" (*Testimonies*, vol. 8, pp. 236, 237).

[33]. "Docility" is used here in its etymological sense of "teachability," a willingness to be taught.

[34]. *Arche* is found in the New Testament only in connection with Jewish and Gentile administrations (Luke 12:11; 20:20; Titus 3:1).

[35]. *Time* appears only in Hebrews 5:4 in reference to the Old Testament high priest, whose "honor" pertained to his divine calling.

[36]. *Telos*, which denotes the complete power of office, is nowhere used in this sense in the New Testament.

[37]. See Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), pp. 388-393; G. Delling, "Arche," *TDNT*, vol. 1, pp. 479-484; J. Schneider, "Time, timeo," *TDNT* 8:169-180; G. Delling, "Telos," *TDNT*, vol. 8, pp. 49-57; R. Pesch, "Structures des ministeres dans le Nouveau Testament;" *Istina* 4 (October-December, 1971): 438-443.

[38]. See, for instance, Matthew 9:6; 28:18; 10:1; Luke 9:1; 2 Corinthians 10:8; 13:10. *Exousia* denotes the possibility and right to do something, or the right over something. Thus it expresses the power of God displayed in nature and in the spiritual world (Revelation 16:9), Satan's authority and power in his own sphere of influence (Eph. 2:2; Col. 1:13). The word is important to understand the person and work of Christ, who has the right and the authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:10), for instance, and most aptly describes the impression made by Jesus on His contemporaries, especially by His teaching (Matt. 7:29). As imparted by divine commission, authority characterizes apostolic teaching and action (see 2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10; cf. Acts 8:19), the apostles' authority, and their right to exercise it as granted to them by the Lord (see W. Foerster, "Esousia," *TDNT*, vol. 2, pp. 562-574).

[39]. The Lukan parable about the servant appointed as steward by his master during the latter's absence (Luke 12:35, 36), a parable very much pointed toward those who hold authority among God's people (cf. verse 41), repeats the same lesson. The "faithful and wise steward" set over the servants must serve their needs without bullying them. For anything less than this total service, the steward will be held accountable by His returning lord, i.e., the *parousiac* Christ.

[40]. It is quite telling that in the pastoral epistles, which have been discussed at great length because of their institutional aspects, the living and practical context of service comes to light so very clearly. Those called to responsibilities of authority are urged to reflect the spirit of service of their Lord in their personal lives. Thus, the bishop must satisfy certain specific requirements (1 Tim. 3:2; 4:14; 6:11). There should be no "stumbling block" in his life that would hinder the exercise of his function and service.

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*The second part, "Unity and Tensions Within the Adventist Church," is based on a transcription of an oral presentation given in the Euro-Africa Division.*

## **Part 2**

### **Unity and tensions within the Adventist church**

We shall begin with the prayer of Jesus: "I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me. And the glory which thou hast given Me I have given them; that they may be one, just

as We are one; I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, that the world may know that Thou didst send Me, and didst love them, even as Thou didst love Me" (John 17:20-23).\*

### **A call to unity**

From the context it is obvious that Jesus was praying not just for those who were surrounding Him in the Garden of Gethsemane. He had in mind also all those who through the centuries would believe Him and to whom we shall refer as the church of God. He is concerned about the unity of the church. The Christian church is that body of people who have been reconciled to God and others. They are all members of the body of which Jesus Christ is the head. Reconciled to God, they are reconciled to His will, as well as to God's redemptive purpose for humankind. Reconciled to God's purpose, they consider it as their responsibility to share the gospel of Jesus Christ worldwide. Their goal is to bring people to be reconciled to God and to others.

Thus the life of a Christian is by definition a ministry, a *diakonia*. This is the characteristic not just of the ordained minister, but of every single member of the body of Christ. Each one has a special function to fulfill, so that the church may realize its worldwide mission. May I, to that effect, refer to 1 Peter 2:9. Here the apostle writes, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood." Note that he does not say you are several races. He insists that we are one chosen race, a holy nation, not several nations. "You are God's own people." Then comes the purpose: "That you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."

This is a considerable task. Still, God never asks us to do anything without providing us with the means to do so. He does not ask us to take up a burden without giving us a shoulder strong enough to carry it. Thus, in order to enable the church to exercise its ministry, he has endowed it with gifts of the Spirit- gifts of grace, as I like to describe them. Addressing the very issue of spiritual gifts, in Ephesians 4:11 the apostle Paul writes: "The gifts he gave were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers" (NRSV). For what purpose, some will ask. "For the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (verses 12, 13, NKJV).

The Lord has equipped His people for the work of ministry. Did you notice how clearly Paul's concerns relate to Jesus prayer? Consider it again: Father, "I do not pray for these [disciples] alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one" (John 17:20,21, NKJV). Notice *why* Jesus wants them to be one: "that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me. . . . That the world may know that Thou didst send Me" (verses 21-23). So "that the world may know," so "that the world may believe." Both verbs are part of Jesus request. Obviously, He wants His disciples to be one in a visible way. Why obviously? Because the world knows only through its own attitudes and dimensions. The world is broken and unregenerated. It cannot see spiritually, discern spiritual realities, as Paul clearly tells (see 1 Cor. 2:14). If the world is to see and to know, it must see on the basis of its own criteria. So it is not just a spiritual unity that can be only spiritually discerned, but a oneness that the unspiritual world can discern, a unity that an unregenerated world can see and touch. A unity that is tangible. That is the unity that Jesus had in mind. Besides, from what He tells us, it is not to be only a visible unity but one as close as the one that exists between the Father and the Son.

Even a cursory reading of the New Testament shows that from the very beginning the early



church was conscious of the importance of unity. It regarded it as one of its constitutive elements. The early believers understood that because of Christ's cross there was one flock and one Shepherd. Because of the cross there is one vine and many branches proceeding from it. Because of it there is one household, one family. There is one temple and one bride. The early church had a clear consciousness of the unity that God had in mind. It understood that it was not merely an eschatological unity, a unity to be reached at the end-time, but a unity that was to be realized now as well, so that the world may see and know and believe.

### **The paradox of unity**

This is where I discern a paradox, one of the fundamental paradoxes of the church. It is hardly a secret that while the church is one, this unity masks many tensions, at times enormous tensions. We Seventh-day Adventists have become aware, after years of insisting on unity, that tensions are there. We have come to realize the complexity of unity. However briefly, let us address these tensions.

What do we mean when we speak of unity, and more specifically of the unity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church? As we all know, any society shows some form of unity. Such unity exists because the members of that particular society pursue an identical goal. But the more complex the idea pursued, the more difficult it is to maintain that unity. Two thousand years of Christian history have shown that what is high tends to become low—that high ideals tend to be lowered, usually to accommodate as many as possible.

A careful look at the New Testament writings reveals that in those early days, from the very start, the unity of the church was a complex unity. It is not just a vague religious attitude, "I love Jesus, Jesus loves me," making little demand on its members. It is not merely adherence to a certain number of ritual forms, as some people like to think. Unity in the Bible is faith in mysteries that challenge and defy human reason. Let me just mention a few: the unity of God in the Trinity, the creation of the world in seven days. Both challenge human reason. God's incarnation, salvation by the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ, the physical resurrection of the body, the return of Christ in the clouds of heaven. Such mysteries seem to turn human reason upside down. It is not difficult to understand why the Christian message, from the start, has been a scandal to some and foolishness to others. And yet, according to the same Scriptures, this message is part of Christian unity.

Christian unity is not only a complex unity; it is also a demanding one. The Christian is not merely asked to *do* certain things; he is also called to submit to Christ the deepest longings and desires of his heart, his time, energy, and resources. What Christianity requires is a commitment that goes as far as martyrdom. Since the servant is not greater than his master, he ought to be ready to sacrifice himself.

These are some aspects of the unity that the Bible expects from us. It is the unity that God wants to see among us. It never ceases to amaze me that the Seventh-day Adventist Church, while proclaiming such a complex and demanding message, has been able to bring together so many millions of people dedicated to the mission that God has entrusted to the remnant people. In all humility let us confess it: We are a world church. We are the most international of all Protestant denominations. Ours is a church of all nations, no longer expanding on the basis of American or European exports. It is a world church, with a complex and demanding unity, a unity that is facing threats.

## **Theological threats**

Where are those threats to Adventist unity? Allow me to mention just a few, starting with the theological ones, those that strike us as the most important. There is little doubt that even our most distinctive doctrines could lead us to break up the unity of Christ's body. Our doctrine of the Sabbath itself could bring tensions among us, tensions leading to disunity. This is particularly true of the Sabbath's relation to Creation. Much depends on the presuppositions undergirding our views on that particular point. Whether one regards the Bible as a mere compilation of testimonies of faith or a volume containing statements of truths that God is sharing with us will very much determine our attitude on that particular topic. Did the prophets, guided by the Spirit, merely share their own spiritual convictions, or did they relate to us what God communicated to them? If some among us, on the one hand, would conclude that the Bible is a mere compilation of testimonies of faith while others would regard it as the record of what God did indeed reveal to its human authors, the conclusions that these two groups would reach regarding the teachings of Scriptures might, and indeed would, be significantly different and would unquestionably affect the unity of God's church. As far as the Sabbath and Creation are concerned, for instance, we would have to ask ourselves whether we still need to believe in the historicity of the first three chapters of the book of Genesis. Couldn't we keep the seventh-day Sabbath even if we no longer regarded these chapters as historically dependable, some will ask? Are there no other evidences in the New Testament, for instance, in support of the Sabbath?

Equally important questions could be asked regarding the validity of other doctrines we hold. What about the doctrine of the sanctuary? What about the teachings of Ellen White and the meaning of her ministry among us? What about Christ's return? These are not merely academic concerns on my part. I am not referring here to mere hypothetical issues. Several times the Christian church has seen its unity shattered on the basis of doctrinal divergences. This is how Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Catholicism broke apart. This is the basis on which the Reformation occurred. Can we simply close our eyes to the fact that the unity that Christ wants to see among us could be threatened by theological divergences? Though doctrinal oneness has thus far immensely contributed to our worldwide unity, who would claim that the inner tensions produced by theological controversies could not reach a critical point and break that unity?

## **Nontheological factors**

Yet this is not my major apprehension. There are other factors that I think need to be addressed with even greater care and that I would like to consider at this point. Because they are more unconscious and less striking than the theological issues we just mentioned, these factors can play an even greater role in disrupting the unity of the body of Christ. For lack of a better term, they are usually referred to as nontheological factors. Because they are, as I just mentioned, usually unconsciously present, they tend to obscure the real issue.<sup>[1]</sup>

Here again, the history of the Christian church underlines how true this is. A careful look shows that the breakup that occurred in Christianity between the East and the West around the year 1050, for instance, did not actually happen on the basis of theological issues as such. There were unquestionably theological divergences between the patriarch of Constantinople and the Roman pontiff. Yet they pale in importance in comparison with the nontheological factors. Consider even the Reformation in Germany, which occurred some 500 years later. Did it succeed merely on the basis of its theological merits? Much of the success Luther encountered was due to the help he received from the German princes, who were quite eager to help him. Did they do so out of theological convictions? Probably some of them. For most, however, Luthers message

seems to have provided them with an opportunity to set themselves free from the suzerainty of Rome and of the Holy Roman Empire. Here again, nontheological factors played a determinant role in bringing disharmony.

### **A few examples**

What are some of these nontheological factors that today threaten the unity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church? Allow me just to mention a few. I have no intention of providing you with an exhaustive list, but a few examples, which in my opinion rank among the most significant, should suffice. Let me start with one in which the theological dimension is probably more prominent. I shall call it the "code of conduct." It is possible to share common theological beliefs, to gather around a general doctrinal agreement—in our case, all of us to accept the 27 fundamental beliefs—and still not agree on what a Christian ought to do or not to do. As far as Adventist behavior is concerned, we are not unaware of the fact that there are rigorists and latitudinarians among us. In certain geographical areas of the Adventist world one will find insistence on a stricter code of conduct than in other parts. All strongly hold that there has to be abstention from certain things and patterns. But this abstention can be more or less inclusive in some areas. While all of us denounce smoking, for instance, some will insist on a more open-minded attitude toward dancing, card playing, or jewelry—even, from what I understand, the use of alcoholic beverages. The same is true regarding Sabbath observance. Even within the same country, areas in which evangelism is strong and that are undergoing a revival experience are more eager to impose requirements than other regions. Rightly or wrongly, this sharpens antipathies. It aggravates the problem of maintaining unity. At times the two factions seem to find it difficult to maintain a Christian attitude toward each other. The rigorists wonder if the latitudinarians are Adventists, while the latitudinarians regard the others as hardly human. The issue is not without its theological dimension. Far from it. Yet at the same time it is deeply rooted in nontheological factors. And as we all know from experience, it has the potential of becoming a major element of disruption in the church. There is also need to recognize that this is not a problem limited merely to one continent or to one geographical area, as, for instance, South America versus Europe. It happens even within a union, not to say within the limits of a local church. The code of conduct diversely understood runs the risk of aggravating tensions among us and could, if not carefully watched, lead to disharmony among us.

Allow me to give you another example: Sabbath worship. Adventists today travel a lot—not just those among us who are in leadership positions, but a large percentage of our people, and this in increasing numbers. We do so for various reasons, some for the mere pleasure of traveling, others for the purpose of improving their lot or to escape oppression. Our world is a global village, and our church is no exception. As they thus travel, our people discover new interpretations of the Adventist faith, sometimes disturbing. Sabbath worship can easily become one of those nontheological factors that threaten our oneness. Some among us value simplicity. Others appreciate an elaborate liturgy. Those who treasure simplicity are likely to feel ill at ease in an Adventist church that follows a more elaborate liturgy. An intricate form of worship confuses them and distracts them. They seem unable to see what for the other side is a very meaningful way of worshiping God. Those ritual forms are perceived as choking the spontaneity of the human soul. Those who follow them can hardly be Christians. The advocates of a ritual liturgy, on their part, wonder how stark simplicity will ever be able to mediate the beauty of God.

The next step is altogether too obvious. The advocates of simplicity and the lovers of ritual decide not to associate with each other any longer because there is too much misunderstanding

between them. Arguments pro and con multiply on both sides, and it does not take long before the cry of apostasy is heard. How much theology is involved here? There is some, to be sure, but how much? This is essentially a nontheological factor. Still, it threatens us as much as issues regarding Creation or the sanctuary.

### **Economic prosperity**

Let us consider a third example. Not only are our code of conduct and Sabbath worship patterns potential causes of disruption, but another factor is just as much of a threat as these—economic prosperity. It is amazing how powerful a role of disruption economic prosperity can play. Worldwide travels have a way of opening our eyes to this threat. This danger exists on the level of both the local and the universal church. I shall here illustrate it by referring to the worldwide Adventist Church. Sociologists have discovered something interesting about us. Usually, wherever the three angels messages are preached, economic prosperity follows. Within one or two generations one finds a prosperous constituency. This seems to be due essentially, though not exclusively, to the Adventist emphasis on self-worth and education. The preaching of the Adventist message has a way of resulting in prosperity. Yet, in turn, this economic prosperity tends to destroy the revival spirit and to bring apathy. Before long, education and prosperity tend to generate change. Changes in building, for instance. We long for more imposing and artistic structures. Changes in the music we listen to. Changes in our rituals, our worship service, and liturgies. Economic prosperity even causes changes in the kind of topics we preach on Sabbath mornings. It tends to alter our basic patterns of Christian lifestyle as well as our ethical values. None of us, I am sure, has failed to notice this.

At the same time, our people in those parts of the world that are not blessed by economic and social progress are deeply disturbed by what they see. When they come to us and spend time in our midst, they just do not feel at home anymore. They will tell you frankly that they feel out of place. We too, when we travel, miss the familiar emphases. Then complaints are voiced: The church in this or that part of the worldwide Adventist family is departing from the faith. The disenchanted consider withdrawing into small organizations where what they regard as the pure gospel is maintained. Theology has very little to do with it. It is essentially a matter of economic prosperity and status. The resulting estrangement is not brought about by theological divergences, though the latter remain a significant component of the whole phenomenon.

### **The issue of nationalism**

Allow me to deal with an ugly monster: nationalism. This is a deep-rooted factor that unquestionably threatens our unity in the foreseeable future. To make things worse, it is a phenomenon that is by no means limited to the level of a whole nation. It can also be a regional phenomenon, what we sometimes call "tribalism." It is true that tribalism is usually associated with Africa. But as we have come to know, it is developing also in the Western world. What is happening today in the former Yugoslavia is a sad illustration of what I am referring to. Nationalism has a very subtle and unique way of fostering division. To illustrate the issue, let me remind you of Jacques Ellul's statements. The celebrated French author, theologian, and philosopher writes that for the average French person, Lutheranism is a *German* church. Lutheranism *is* German. It is first and foremost German. At the same time, for the average German, Baptists and Mormons are *American* sects. The same is true of Seventh-day Adventists. Have you never been told in the exercise of your ministry that you belong to an American church, that your denomination is American? The phenomenon is well known. It is essentially an

expression of nationalism. And this nationalism is something that seriously threatens us as Seventh-day Adventists.

We are no exceptions. There is indeed a definite danger that our church might sometime be broken up into regional churches. This threat proceeds from our attachment to national patterns. This is where we feel secure. You may think that this is merely a theoretical possibility. But let me remind you that this danger has threatened just about every single Protestant denomination. You know, I assume, that we are the only Protestant church organized on a worldwide basis. Be aware of what happened to others. Being in Germany, let us start with the Lutheran church. There is the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany, the [Lutheran] Swedish Church, the Danish [Lutheran] Church, the American Lutheran Church, etc. Likewise, you have the Reformed Church of France, the Presbyterian Reformed Church in the U.S.A., the Dutch Reformed Church, or the Reformed Church of Geneva. There is also a long list of Anglican, or Episcopal, churches, such as the Church of England, the Anglican Church of Canada, the Episcopal Church of Brazil, the Episcopal Church in the U.S.A., etc. These churches are built on a national basis, usually limited to national border lines. This does not mean that they live in isolation or that there is no cooperation among national bodies within confessional families. You will find alliances, covenants, or associations among them, such as the Anglican Communion, the Lutheran World Federation, or the World Alliance of Reformed and Presbyterian Churches. They do cooperate among themselves and help each other. Yet they remain self-governing entities, each reaching its decisions independently from the others and organizing its debates or research on its own.

We find somewhat similar structures within the family of Eastern Orthodox or Greek churches, situated mainly in Eastern Europe. Probably better known among us are the Orthodox churches of Russia, Romania, Greece, and Albania, to mention just a few. Though all share the same faith and are in communion with one another, they too remain self-governing and independent in their internal administration.

In other words, what I am referring to here is no theoretical phenomenon. It is not inconceivable that we could end up having an Adventist Church of Europe, an Adventist Church of Africa, another of America, if not an Adventist Church of Germany, and one of France. This could very well happen. We would, of course, confess the same faith and show some cooperation. But how effectively would we under those circumstances work at our global task? How would we efficiently fulfill our worldwide mission? Sure, we could continue to share the same 27 fundamental beliefs, but in my opinion we would not be functioning in harmony with God's wish. A merely spiritual union in Christ is not enough. As we noticed earlier, if the world is to know and to believe, the world is to see. Truly, from what we can see around us, nationalism is an undeniable danger. All we need to do is to lose sight of the importance of the universal body of Christ and start comparing ourselves with others. We find pride in our achievements or in the size of our nation, if not of our native church. A few weeks ago I found myself in the Philippines, a nation in which there are approximately 600,000 Seventh-day Adventists. But what kind of Adventists? some will ask. Are they as solid, as devoted, or as enlightened as *we* are? Is it not true that Adventists in *my* part of the world are more up to standards and closer to genuine Adventism than in most other parts of the world? Consider *our* national achievements, *our* social successes. See *our* national traditions, and scientific achievements, *our* intellectual abilities. How do those from the other side of the ocean compare with our scholarly skills or our biblical methodology? Even the size of our financial

contributions to the church sets us apart. In all honesty, aren't such suggestions evidence of a contemptible and unbecoming nationalism that threatens the unity of God's church today?

### **The administrative side of things**

The last factor that I would like to bring in has to do with the administrative side of our church. There is little doubt that in order to fulfill God's given task, the early church adopted some form of organization. God's church today, entrusted with the three angels messages, has felt the need to organize itself to do the work fast and well. We have developed an administrative system that we like to describe as representative. As a result, the Seventh-day Adventist Church finds itself with administrative and financial structures. However, as soon as we adopt a particular system of church government, we cease to be a strictly spiritual body. When the church organizes itself, it takes the characteristics of an organization, and it does not take long before shortcomings appear. This is to be expected as long as we are on this side of the Jordan River. Such imperfections will lead some of us to set up a list of errors and mistakes, which is not difficult to compile. Next we start indicating that we do not agree with specific resolutions adopted by a General Conference assembly. It appears obvious to some that one of the most efficient ways to nullify such decisions is to alter the administrative structures. Why not get away from the representative system and adopt, for instance, a congregationalist approach to church government? We would not want to opt for an episcopal system; this would hardly improve the situation. But a congregationalist pattern, claim its advocates, would help to solve our problems.

To bolster our calls for administrative reforms, we draw attention to the way finances strike us as mismanaged. Besides, the current leaders seem increasingly remote from us. They don't seem to care about us, or what we say anymore. See, some argue, how hard they clamp down on dissenters. Others will complain that they did not come down hard enough. Lets change all of that.

Insidiously enough, this tendency is encouraged by the membership shift that is currently happening in our church. Let me give you a few figures and ask you to reflect on their implications. I will give you two sets of statistics indicating percentages of Adventist membership in the main areas of the world. They refer not to divisions of our church, but to geographical regions.<sup>[2]</sup> The first refers to 1945, when I became an Adventist; the second, to the year 1992. These figures will show you the shift that has occurred within my own SDA lifetime. In 1945 there were approximately 576,000 SDA church members around the world. Today we count more than 8 million. In 1945 Europe represented 15 percent of the church membership; today, 6 percent. Africa in 1945 amounted to 16 percent of the membership; today, 30 percent. Asia in 1945, 11.5 percent; today, 16 percent. Oceania stood for 4 percent; today, 3.5 percent. Latin America in 1945 held 16.5 percent; today, 35 percent. In North America-the U.S.A. and Canada-our membership moved from 37 percent to 10 percent.

The shift in membership is quite telling, appalling to some. According to experts, and assuming the same growth rate in each area of the world, we may expect some 12 million Seventh-day Adventists in the year 2000. In that same year Africa, Latin America, and Asia, those three together, will represent 81.5 percent of our church membership; Europe 2.5 percent, North America and Europe jointly will amount to 10.5 percent. Within the 50 years of my Adventist experience our church membership in Europe and North America has decreased from 52 percent to 16 percent. This has occurred during my own brief lifetime. So what do I hear? Again, lets bring in a few changes. Let's, like the other churches, accept these nontheological

factors and, adjusting to the times, adopt, among other things, new forms of church government as well as update our understanding of who we are and how we should fulfill our task.

## Conclusion

I have attempted to call your attention to theological and nontheological factors that threaten to disrupt the unity of God's church. There are others. Those I have retained should suffice to illustrate what I wanted to share with you. That tensions of the type I have mentioned have started to appear among us is not just some academic hypothesis on my part. It is a fact. They are slowly gaining importance among us. They are, to be sure, an expression of our sinful natures. Hence, the only power that can overcome them is the power of Jesus Christ. While our task remains that of preaching the gospel and the three angels messages to the various parts of the world, it devolves us also to take account of what threatens the visible unity that God has given to the church, so that the world may believe.

Satan has succeeded remarkably in breaking up historic Christianity into innumerable parts. Shall he encounter the same success with us? There is no reason that it be so. We are growing rapidly worldwide, in some parts of the world faster than in others. We who discern the signs of the times have come to recognize the dangers to our unity. Let us face them, aware of their implications, and address them. Let us also be deeply conscious of how sinful it would be to divide Christ's remnant people. No single part of God's church may live for itself alone.

What we need is a new awareness of the importance of the unity of the church. Like the early church, we must show deep concern for the oneness of the church. God has done wonderful things for us in the past. True, the challenges we are facing are enormous, the task gigantic. But not impossible, according to God's Word. I hope I have aroused your minds to some dimensions in the life of the church that we cannot afford to disavow. Let's ask God to help us address those issues. I believe it can be done.

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\*Unless otherwise noted, Bible texts in this article are from the *New American Standard Bible*.

- [1]. The issues and particulars retained in this paper have been drawn from G. W. Bromiley, *The Unity and Disunity of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), esp. chap. 2, "The Challenge of Disunity: Daniel Jenkins, "The Ecumenical Movement and its 'Non-Theological Factors," *The Ecumenical Review III*, 4 (1951), p.339 ff.; E. T. Clark, "Non-Theological Factors in Religious Diversity," *The Ecumenical Review iii*, 4 (1951). p.347 ff.; C. H. Dodd, G. R. Cragg, and Jacques Ellul, *Social and Cultural Factor in Church Divisions* (New York: WCC. 1952).
- [2]. Thus, for instance, the figures related to Angola and Mozambique come out under Africa rather than the Euro-Africa Division. These statistics have been prepared by Dr. F. D. Yost, director of the General Conference Office of Archives and Statistics. See his letter of March 15, 1994.

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