

## **The Church: Authority and Unity**

*Raoul Dederen*

### **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, let's 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.