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Adventists and Ecumenism

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For some conservative Christians, the term *ecumenical* has become a distasteful word. That attitude has all too often led to a doctrinal and relational intolerance in reference to other Christians. The resultant apathy and disinterest toward other Christians are justified on vague theological grounds, such as "standing for the truth" or "avoiding compromise." But, too many times, such apathy represents simply an unwillingness to move beyond the familiar and predictable of our comfort zones. Or worse, it can be motivated by a sense of elitism or even bigotry toward other Christians. To avoid these barriers to fellowship, we need to think carefully about our view of God's church in both its visible and invisible aspects.

Caution, however, is needed in approaching this topic. A careful study of our history and teachings will show that there is a positive ecumenism and a problematic ecumenism. The positive is about practical, on-the-ground, issue-oriented fellowship, support, and caring between Christians. The negative is a more formal, ideological search for doctrinal and institutional unity. Let us consider both.

A positive ecumenism

Many Adventists would be surprised to learn that our fundamental beliefs recognize the validity of the ecumenical church. The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that *ecumenical* literally means "universal," as in the *universal church*. Our statement of belief number 13, "The Remnant and Its Mission," begins as follows: "The *universal church* is composed of all who truly believe in Christ."[1] This statement recognizes that Christ has faithful believers in many places, including the spectrum of Christian denominations.

Many Adventists would want to be sure to add the lines that follow in belief number 13: "but in the last days, a time of widespread apostasy, a remnant has been called out to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus."[2] Indeed, we believe in a special role for a visible remnant with a special message and mission. But never have we taught that the reality of this remnant negates the existence of the ecumenical, universal, invisible church. To the contrary, our pioneers recognized that, as Ellen G. White put it, "[t]here *are* true Christians in every church, not excepting the Roman Catholic communion."[3]

Seventh-day Adventism and the ecumenical movement

A good argument can be made that the nineteenth-century Advent movement was one of the first truly ecumenical movements of modern times. William Miller was a Baptist, but he preached his Advent message in churches of many denominations. Initially, those who became Adventist did not leave these churches but, in many places, were eventually forced out.

As the movement grew, it had representatives from almost all American denominations—Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and those from the Christian Connection. After the disappointment of 1844, the Advent movement that became the Seventh-day Adventist Church was composed of former members of these churches.

Some hold the view that our founders sat in a room with a Bible and put together an entirely new set of beliefs and practices, rebuilding a New Testament church from scratch. The reality is that early Adventists took beliefs and worship practices from a variety of groups, pressed them through a biblical filter, and adopted and adapted those that met the biblical test. Indeed, some of our worship practices are not mandated or even described in the Bible but have been adapted from our Christian friends. These include midweek prayer meeting, Sabbath School, camp meeting, the order of the divine service, hymn singing, offering appeals, quarterly Communion, and many other factors affecting our worship and witness practices. Seventh-day Adventists are themselves the result of a truly biblical ecumenical movement.

The three angels' messages and ecumenism

Some would insist that with the preaching of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14, beginning in the late 1840s (including the second angel's message that Babylon is fallen), there can be no more association with other Christian

churches as they make up fallen Babylon. This was simply not the understanding of our pioneers. Rather, they were active in making common cause with other Christians on points of shared concern, most notably, antislavery, temperance reform, and religious liberty.

Ellen G. White spoke to her largest audiences in non-Adventist settings, speaking on behalf of temperance reform and prohibition laws to groups of Christians from various churches. She also spoke in the pulpits of churches of other denominations. Moreover, she used biblical commentaries and religious books written by other Christians after 1844, calling some contemporary non-Adventist commentaries among her "best books."[4]

Urging Adventist pastors to be involved in a personal, ecumenical work of common cause and fellowship, White wrote, "Our ministers should seek to come near to the ministers of other denominations. Pray for and with these men, for whom Christ is interceding. A solemn responsibility is theirs. As Christ's messengers we should manifest a deep, earnest interest in these shepherds of the flock."[5] Two points deserve to be particularly noted. First, we should pray "for and *with*" these other pastors. To say "with" shows concern not just for outreach but also for fellowship. Second, we should note her acknowledgment that these other ministers are "shepherds of the flock." This phrasing is a recognition that these ministers of other denominations are also watching over "the flock" of Christ.

How is this to be understood in light of the second angel's message about the fall of Babylon? The fourth angel of Revelation 18 indicates that Babylon has finally and fully fallen when it has made common cause with the commercial and civil powers of the world, and used civil force for religious ends. Ellen G. White and the pioneers understood the fourth angel's message to still lie in the future and that, in the meantime, Babylon, while falling, continues to house faithful Christians and churches with whom we can and should fellowship. Only when these Christians use the power of the state to persecute those with whom they disagree on spiritual matters is this point reached.[6]

If one studies it contextually, it is evident that, even in our day, the message of the fourth angel still resides in the future. In light of this, many Adventist pastors are involved, and more should be, in local ministerial associations and in visiting and praying with pastors from other denominations. These associations and relationships can also serve as the basis to work together on issues of community concern, such as religious liberty, creation and evolution, racial harmony, and issues of civil morality, such as family and marriage.

This underscores the point that practical ecumenism is a local matter, involving issues of social justice and concern. Social justice rooted in the light of the gospel and Christ's advent was the basis of historic Adventist ecumenical efforts. Antislavery, temperance reform, and religious liberty were efforts aimed at protecting and uplifting the poor, weak, young, and marginalized. Adventists need to be recalled and reinspired to this kind of issue-oriented ecumenical effort.

Negatives in ecumenism

There were also limits to early Adventism's ecumenism, particularly with the more formal ideological

ecumenism. One very vivid historical example of this reservation was the World Missionary Conference of 1910 in Edinburgh, Scotland. Adventists attended this event and participated in the meetings, but they were unwilling to join in the dividing up of the mission field between various denominations.[7]

This refusal to cooperate in missions may seem narrow, sectarian, and even arrogant, but we can hardly argue that the Lord did not bless the results. Without this refusal, it is unlikely that Seventh-day Adventists would become the most widespread Protestant denomination in the world, with more than 17 million members in more than 200 countries, running the most widespread Protestant educational and medical systems in the world. We humbly recognize that God's power causes small and weak things to accomplish much, and must be ever mindful of the warnings associated with boasting that we are "rich, and increased with goods" (Rev. 3:17, KJV). God has blessed in allowing us today to be the fastest growing denomination in North America, as Adventist emigrants from overseas continue to swell our ranks here.

This growth does not prove we were right, although a lack of growth would likely indicate we were on the wrong track. The important questions are, Why did Adventism resist this dividing up of the mission field? What principle caused, and might it also limit, our involvement in the formal ecumenical movement today?

The ideological ecumenical movement can be defined as an attempt to make visible the already existent, invisible, universal church of Christ. This is a profound theological and institutional project and one that Adventists find difficult to fully join.

The Sabbath and ecumenism

A foundational reason for this difficulty centers on our belief in the seventh-day Sabbath. The Sabbath provides practical, historic, prophetic, and theological barriers to our fully joining the modern ecumenical movement.

First, as a practical matter, our distinct day of worship creates a barrier to worshiping regularly with other Christian groups. Other Christians can tinker with liturgy, ritual, music, and homily and worship comfortably together. But a central commitment of our worship is that it takes place on a day when few others worship. In the short term, this could be finessed for special occasions. We could attend worship on both Saturday and Sunday for special events or others could join us on Saturdays. But it presents a real problem for longer-term fellowshiping relationships, as most people cannot afford the time to attend worship services on both Saturdays and Sundays.

Second, our keeping of the Sabbath has given us a great sensitivity to the plight of religious minorities who have been persecuted for holding beliefs outside the mainstream. Anti-Semitism has a long and unfortunate history in Europe and America, and often the target of that bigotry has included the practice of Sabbath keeping.

After the start of the Reformation, Lutherans, Calvinists, and Catholics united in their persecution and killing of Anabaptists for their minority beliefs. Some Anabaptists kept the seventh-day Sabbath and were targeted for persecution because of this practice. In late-nineteenth-century America, Adventists were fined and even jailed for violating Sunday laws.[8] It was believed that pressure could be applied to minority groups to embrace beliefs held by the majority, or perhaps to minimize beliefs not held by the majority. Given this history, when Christians begin to gather in groups and propose uniting on common points, Adventists become nervous.

Indeed, Adventists believe prophecy indicates that, at some point in the future, certain worship practices of the majority will be enforced through law. We are thus sensitive, maybe at times overly so, to projects that wish to seek unity by playing the game of doctrinal or theological minimization. We hold core beliefs, such as the Sabbath, that history shows to be vulnerable to being minimized.

Third, we find an inherent theological authority in the Sabbath. We believe that the Sabbath is not just a day of the week but also an expression of the loving authority of God. The Sabbath reminds us that He created us for love. And it reminds us, in a unique way, of His authority as Creator. How is the Sabbath a unique reminder of this authority? Some of the Ten Commandments are arrived at by civil society apart from the Bible, such as its laws against theft, murder, and adultery. But the seventh-day Sabbath can be arrived at only through the special command of God.

The science of physiology can tell us that humans function better and are healthier with a rest day out of every seven days.[9] But it cannot tell us that the best day to rest is the seventh day. Thus, in keeping Saturday holy, one carries a special mark of submission to God's loving authority. In the Sabbath, creation, love, and authority are brought together in one expressive worship symbol.

Adventists do *not* believe we are saved by keeping the seventh-day Sabbath. But we do believe that the keeping of it is a special acknowledgment of God's loving authority, in contrast to other human authorities, whether tradition, a magisterium, or the will of a majority. Formal ecumenism tends to say, at least in practice, that those things that are important to the majority should be important to everyone. Thus, the authority of the group tends to determine what the important doctrines are and how they are defined.

Is that not how all statements of belief are formulated? True, but at the Adventist table, there remains a commitment to treating Scripture as the ultimate authority, the norm by which all other claims of reason, history, and experience are judged. As we look at today's Christian denominations, we see a wide variety of approaches to doctrinal and teaching authority. There are different views on the role of tradition, the importance of a teaching magisterium, and Bible study methods,

such as the higher critical method, which Adventists place beneath the authority of Scripture.

For Seventh-day Adventists, the ultimate authority of God speaking in the Bible through the Holy Spirit to a community committed to keeping the weekly reminder of that authority, makes us unwilling to fully join with groups who would place ultimate authority either in tradition, creeds, a priesthood or magisterium, or some kind of majoritarianism within the Christian community.

Conclusion

The Millerite movement, as an example of a truly biblical ecumenical movement, we can applaud. It was based on a pursuit of biblical truth, with a commitment to its ultimate authority as worked out by the Holy Spirit in a community of believers. We believe that such a universal, ecumenical movement will recur before Christ's second coming and that it will encompass "every nation, tribe, tongue, and people" (Rev. 14:6, NKJV). We pray that my church, your church, and many other churches will have the humility and love to be a part of that movement. In the meantime, we should share our God-given gifts and insights with each other, not settling for a superficial or surface unity, but letting the Spirit guide us to a genuine, biblically based unity of His making.

1 *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 2006), 181; italics mine.
2 Ibid.
3 Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1946), 234; italics mine.
4 In his book *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1998), Herbert E. Douglass describes Ellen G. White's speaking career before non-Adventist audiences. In chapter 12, "The Sought-for Speaker," Douglass gives details of her speaking to audiences of tens of thousands of non-Adventists. In a section entitled "Non-Adventist Audiences," he documents her speaking in non-Adventist pulpits. In a letter to her son Edson White, written on January 1, 1900, she requested that he send to her in Australia "four or five volumes" of Bible commentaries written by Presbyterian expositor Albert Barnes, one of the most popular Protestant biblical commentators of the nineteenth century. In the letter, she describes these books as being among her "best books." See Ellen White, letter 189, 1900.
5 Ellen G. White, *Counsels for the Church* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1991), 313.
6 See Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1950), 603–605.
7 See F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), s.v. "Edinburgh Conference," and George Knight, introduction to *Historical Sketches of Foreign Missions* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2005), xviii–xxvi.
8 For Anabaptist Sabbath keeping and persecution, see George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2000), 272; Bryan W. Ball, *The Seventh-Day Men* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 37; W. L. Emmerson, *The Reformation and the Advent Movement* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1983), 73–75; for descriptions of Seventh-day Adventists in the nineteenth century being arrested, convicted, and imprisoned for their Sabbath-keeping convictions, see William A. Blakely, *American State Papers and Related Documents on Freedom in Religion* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1949), 457–512.
9 Neil Nedley, *Proof Positive* (Armore, OK: Neil Nedley, 1999), 504.

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