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### Adventists and Ecumenism: The Good and the Bad

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# Memory, Meaning & Faith

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February 03, 2012

## Adventists and Ecumenism: The Good and the Bad

By Dr. Nicholas Miller (Department of Church History, SDA Theological Seminary, Andrews University)

- This article renders the response of Dr. Nicholas Miller to Dr. M. Kinnamon's address "The Ecumenical Movement and Why You Should Be Involved" at the *Seminary Scholarship Symposium*, February 2, 2012 at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, in Berrien Springs, MI.
- M. Kinnamon is the former General Secretary of the *National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA*. A summary of Kinnamon's address can be found [here](#).
- N. Miller is professor at the *SDA Theological Seminary* and director of the *International Religious Liberty Institute*.
- Please note: Since Miller responded to Kinnamon directly, terms like "you/your" are directed at Kinnamon, not at the audience and not at the readers of this blog.

### Adventists and Ecumenism: The Good and the Bad

#### A Response to Dr. Michael Kinnamon

Thank you, Dr. Kinnamon, for your challenge to our complacent and even lazy thinking about interchurch fellowship. As Adventists, we all too often show apathy towards other Christians and their churches, and mentally justify it on vague theological grounds, such as "standing for the truth" or avoiding "compromise."

But all too often it is simply an unwillingness to move beyond the familiar and the predictable of our comfort zones. You have challenged us to think carefully about our view of God's church, in both its visible and invisible aspects. We need this challenge, because in many Adventist circles, "ecumenical" has become a dirty word.

Caution is needed on this topic, but too many of us throw the baby out with the bathwater. There is, I believe, a positive ecumenism, and a problematic ecumenism. I would like to explore both the positive and the problematic in reacting to your paper.

#### Positive and Problematic Ecumenism

First, the positive. I would call it a practical ecumenism that corresponds roughly to your points four, five, and six. It is about a practical, on the ground, issue-oriented fellowship, support, and caring between Christians.

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 with this line: "The universal church is composed of all who truly believe in Christ . . ." This statement recognizes that Christ has faithful believers in many places, including the spectrum of Christian denominations.

Many Adventists would want me to add the lines that follow in belief # 13, which go on to say that, "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."

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 White put it, “there are true Christians in every church,” including “the Roman Catholic communion.” (Evangelism 234.) There is even a good argument to be made that the 19th 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 “Adventists” did not leave these churches, but eventually in many places were forced out. As the movement grew, it had representatives from almost all American denominations, including Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and the Christian Connection. After the disappointment of 1844, the Advent movement that became our church was made up of former members from these same churches.

There is a view held by some 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 and put 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 mid-week prayer meeting, Sabbath school, camp-meetings, our order of divine service, hymn singing, offering appeals, quarterly communion, and many other things. Seventh-day Adventists are themselves the result of a truly ecumenical movement.

But 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, that there can be no more association with other Christian churches, as they make up “fallen Babylon.”

But again, this was simply not the understanding of our pioneers. They were active in making common cause with other Christians on points of shared concern, most notably, anti-slavery, temperance reform, and religious liberty. Ellen White herself, spoke to her largest audiences in non-Adventist settings, speaking on behalf of temperance reform and prohibition laws to mixed groups of Christians. She also used Biblical commentaries and religious books written by other Christians after 1844.

This personal, ecumenical work of common cause and fellowship she urged on Adventist pastors. She 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.” [561] – {Counsels for the Church, 313}

Two points especially impress me from this quote. The first is that we should pray “for and with . . .” these other pastors. To say “with,” is to show concern not just with outreach, but with fellowship. And also, that these other ministers are “shepherds of the flock.” This phrasing is an acknowledgement that these ministers of other denominations are also watching over “the flock” of Christ.

How is this to be understood in light of the 2nd Angel’s message about the “Fall of Babylon?” I would point Adventists towards Revelation 18, and the 4th Angel, that indicates that Babylon has finally and fully fallen. Ellen White and the Pioneers understood the 4th angel 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.

It is evident, if one studies it, that even in our day, the 4th angel is still in the future. In light of this, many Adventist pastors are involved, and more should be, in local ministerial associations, to visit and pray with pastors from other denominations. These relationships and associations 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 family health and morality.

This underscores, Dr. Kinnamon, both your points about practical ecumenism being a local matter, involving issues of social justice and concern. A social justice rooted in the light of the Gospel and Christ’s Advent was the basis of historic Adventist

ecumenical efforts. Anti-slavery, temperance reform, religious liberty, were efforts aimed at protecting and uplifting the poor, weak, young and marginalized. Adventists need to be re-called and re-inspired, as you have done, to this kind of issue-oriented ecumenical effort, which we have drifted away from.

But there were also limits to Adventism's ecumenism. This is where I move to talking about a more formal, ideological, in my view, problematic ecumenism, which I would identify as potentially flowing from your points one through three. Here, Adventists have distinct reservations.

One very vivid historical example of this reservation was the Missionary Conference of 1910 in Edinburgh, Scotland. Adventists attended this event, and participated in the meetings. But we were unwilling to join in the dividing up of the mission field between the various denominations.

This refusal to cooperate in missions may seem narrow, sectarian, and even arrogant, but it is hard to argue that the Lord did not bless the results. Because of this decision, today Seventh-day Adventists are the most widespread Protestant denomination in the world, with more than 16 million members in over 200 countries. We also have the most widespread Protestant educational and medical systems in the world.

I say these things with a humble recognition of God's power to cause small and weak things to accomplish much. We must be ever mindful of the warnings associated with boasting that we are "rich and increased with goods." But this God-blessed success overseas has also caused us today to be the fastest growing denomination in North America, as immigrants from overseas who are Adventists continue to swell our ranks here.

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

### **Ecumenical Movement - An Attempt to Make the Invisible Church Visible?!**

Here I begin to touch on the point that you made that the ecumenical movement is an attempt to make visible the already existent, invisible, universal church of Christ. This is indeed a profound theological and institutional project, but one that Adventists would have difficulty fully joining in the manner that the modern ecumenical seems to pursue it.

The main reason for this difficulty, I think, is our belief about the Seventh-day Sabbath. The Sabbath provides practical, historic/prophetic, and theological barriers to our fully joining the modern ecumenical movement. Let me close by briefly touching on these three points.

1. As a practical matter, our distinct day of worship creates a barrier to worshipping 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 almost no-one else worships.

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 relationship.

2. 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 the Catholics united in their persecution and killing of the Anabaptists for their minority beliefs. Some Anabaptists kept the Sabbath. In late 19th century America, Adventists were fined and even jailed for violating Sunday laws.

Given this history, when Christians begin to gather in groups and propose uniting on common points, Adventists become nervous. They believe that pressure could be brought to bear on small or minority groups to embrace beliefs held by the majority, or perhaps to minimize beliefs not held by the majority.

Indeed, Adventists believe that 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 minimalization. We have core beliefs, such as the Sabbath, that history shows to be very vulnerable to being minimized.

3. Finally, there is the authority inherent in the Sabbath. We believe that Sabbath is not just about a day. Rather, it is an expression of the loving authority of God. It reminds us that He created us for love. And it reminds us, in a unique way, of his authority as Creator.

How is it a unique reminder of this authority? Most of the Ten Commandments are actually arrived at by civil society apart from the Bible, such as laws against theft, murder and adultery. But the Sabbath can only be arrived at through the special command of God. In keeping it, one has a special mark, we believe, of submission to God's loving authority. In the Sabbath, creation, love, and authority are brought together in one expressive worship symbol.

Let me make clear, Adventists do not believe we are saved by keeping the Sabbath. But we do believe that the keeping of it is a special symbol of submission to God's loving authority, in contrast to other, human authorities, whether tradition, or a magisterium, or the will of a majority.

Formal Ecumenism, on the other hand, 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.

Now, you may respond that practically speaking, that is how all statements of belief are arrived at, even the Adventists'. But within the bounds of the Adventist community, there is a commitment to treating scripture as the ultimate authority, the norming norm by which all other claims of reason, history, and experience are judged.

As I look at the list of churches on the web-page of the NCC [National Council of Churches], I see a range of groups that have a wide variety of approaches to scripture as authority. Between Quakers, Swedenborgians, reformed Mormons, Baptists, United Methods, and Apostolic Catholics there is going to be a wide diversity of views as to the basis of doctrinal and teaching authority. There are different views on the role of tradition, the importance of a teaching magisterium, and different views of Bible study methods, such as some who would embrace the higher-critical method that Adventists are not comfortable with.

For us, the authority of God speaking in the Bible, through the Holy Spirit, to a community committed to its ultimate authority, as we are reminded of by our Sabbath, makes us unwilling to fully join with other groups who would place some ultimate authority, even partially, in either tradition, creeds, a priesthood or magisterium, or some kind of majoritarianism within the Christian community.

## **Conclusion**

To end, I would return to the Millerite movement as an example of an ecumenical movement we could 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 happen again before Christ comes. It is found in Rev. 14:6, and it will encompass every "nation and tribe and tongue and people." I pray that my church, and 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.

Posted by Angelika Kaiser on February 03, 2012 in Adventist Studies, Church and Society, Church History, Historical Theology, History of Interpretation, Missions and Ministry | Permalink

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## Comments

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I like this response, Nick! It would perhaps be better read in the context of the first presentation, but it stands well on its own.

I believe one point which would strengthen the point regarding Ellen White's commitment to working with other Christians where we have common goals would be her urging Adventists to support the Women's Christian Temperance Union at a time when the WCTU was advocating a national Sunday law. As you know, Adventists consider such a law to be implemented in connection with the mark of the beast, yet EGW advised to continue to support the WCTU in their main goal, prohibition.

I have a theory that the Sabbath is actually the Adventist version of ecumenism. We believe it is the day of rest given to all mankind, and that observance of Sabbath will, in the end times, be the visible mark of the invisible church. We also observe it in such a way that we expect God to work on the hearts of others to accommodate our observance, hence our religious liberty work. This would correspond to the ecumenical movements expectation that all should join. What do you think?

Posted by: [David Hamstra](#) | [February 03, 2012 at 07:42 PM](#)

Yes, I think you are on to something David. Dean Fortin and I both independently decided that the Sabbath was the key issue in relation to the ecumenical movement, and now you have nicely framed its connection to Ecumenism in a positive manner.

Yes, I thought of getting into the Wctu thing and Sunday laws, but I had too much to say otherwise, and that got cut. I will add it back as I frame this for an article for Ministry or the Review. Good thought, thanks for your kind words and sharing of ideas.

Posted by: [Nicholas Miller](#) | [February 03, 2012 at 08:05 PM](#)

A most excellent response!!!

Posted by: [Linda](#) | [February 03, 2012 at 10:54 PM](#)

Hmmm. Lots of things I could say. First, there's one issue where Adventists practice one of the key principles of the ecumenical movement: intercommunion. Many of the churches that are not members of the NCC and WCC are specifically churches that practice close or closed communion, e.g., the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod. We welcome all Christians to the Lord's Table, without questioning them on their positions on the so-called "testing truths." When it comes to the Lord's Supper, we practice that there is only one testing truth--confession of Jesus Christ as Lord.

We let our pastors marry members of other Christian churches (as long as neither of the parties is an Adventist). That's a curious position, based on our understanding of being "unequally yoked," and uniquely open to ecumenical hospitality.

We're not going to open our pulpits in our churches, and we've seen problems when we invite non-Adventists to our ministerial gatherings and seminary, it is true. But I think of Adventist leaders, like George Vandeman, who had very good relations with other Christian leaders (see especially George's book, "What I Like About...").

We've had Adventist observers at WCC events and Vatican 2. But one such leader, when I met him when I was an ELCA pastor, remarked snidely to me, "So you're a member of that church where you can believe anything you want." Not very graceful.

Adventists in chaplaincy ministries, whether in the military, hospital, or campus setting collaborate in many positive ways with our fellow Christians. It is an essential element of ministry in these settings. As a brigade chaplain in the Army (National Guard)--I supervise six chaplains of varying denominations. This happens all the time in the military and in hospital settings.

So there are lots of areas we could go with this discussion that are barely hinted at in this exchange. :-)

Posted by: [Bill Cork](#) | [February 03, 2012 at 11:28 PM](#)

I am SO thankful to GOD for illuminating your mind to give such an excellent response!!! :D It wasn't condescending, arrogant nor uncivilized. I believe with certainty that the Holy Spirit spoke through you to clarify the misinterpretations about Seventh-day Adventists. Praise the LORD! My heart is at peace now... Happy Sabbath! (:

Posted by: [Grisel Blanco](#) | [February 04, 2012 at 11:35 AM](#)

Here are a few things I found on the EG White Estates CD Rom that I thought might add to your response and may be an added help in your upcoming article in the Review.

Our laborers should be very careful not to give the impression that they are wolves stealing in to get the sheep, but should let the ministers understand their position and the object of their mission--to call the attention of the people to the truths of God's Word. There

are many of these which are dear to all Christians. Here is common ground, upon which we can meet people of other denominations; and in becoming acquainted with them we should dwell mostly upon topics in which all feel an interest, and which will not lead directly and pointedly to the subjects of disagreement.--Review and Herald, June 13, 1912. {Ev 143.5}

Ministers of the popular denominations of the day are acceptable preachers if they can speak upon a few simple points of the Bible. {2T 556.1}

#### RELIGIOUS SERVICES AT THE SANITARIUM

Sunday afternoon, at 4 P. M., there is a general Bible class in the Sanitarium parlor, for the benefit of the patients and boarders. The text used is the International Lessons. {1890, MBC90 7.3}

Sunday evening, at 7:30, divine service is held in the parlor, the chaplain usually officiating, but frequently the preaching is by ministers of other denominations. {1890, MBC90 7.4}

Posted by: Charles Possenriede | [February 04, 2012 at 04:29 PM](#)

Yes some good points:

Bill, thanks for the reminder on the open communion thing, that is an Adventist strong point that shows both our theoretical and practical openness to fellowshiping with other Christians. I suppose I'm a little less impressed with the marriage point, as it really cuts both ways, showing some openness, but also showing some exclusivity, though appropriately so, in my estimation. Also, the points about being observers at various ecumenical events was made both by the Dean and Dr. Kinammon, with them pointing out that we even participate at times, like serving on the Faith and Order commission to bring Adventist theology to bear on the larger discussion. Chaplaincy is also a good point, but not uncontroversial in some corners of Adventism, especially those who despise anything smacking of ecumenism.

Thank you, Charles, you have come up with some great quotes that will indeed inform some later version of this. Thanks for insights, all.

Posted by: Nicholas Miller | [February 06, 2012 at 10:49 AM](#)

Just to keep the use of the Spirit of Prophecy correct, the post by Charles Possenriede on February 04, includes a statement from Vol 2 of the Testimonies for the Church. Without further clarification which is the rest of the statement, it is seen to be misleading. It is not a statement allowing preachers from other denominations to preach in our churches. It is speaking of our own pastors and stating that in other denominations one may be qualified to speak if they can present a point or two from the Bible, but we must do better. Our ministers who are "spreading unpopular truths" and have to meet "opposers of every type, should know what they are about." Here is the statement in context from Vol 2.

"I was shown that ministers must be sanctified and holy, and must have a knowledge of the word of God. They should be familiar with Bible arguments and prepared to give a reason of their hope, or they should cease their labors and engage in a calling where deficiency will not involve such tremendous consequences. Ministers of the popular denominations of the day are acceptable preachers if they can speak upon a few simple points of the Bible; **but the ministers who are spreading unpopular truth for these last days, who have to meet men of learning, men of strong minds, and opposers of every type, should know what they are about. They should not take upon themselves the responsibility of teaching the truth unless they are qualified for the work. Before engaging in, or devoting themselves to, the work they should become Bible students. If they have not an education so that they can speak in public with acceptance, and do justice to the truth, and honor the Lord whom they profess to serve, they should wait till they are fitted for the position.**" {2T 556.1}

It can be seen from this full quote that our ministers are held to a much higher standard than many "ministers of the popular denominations of the day." It has nothing to do with these ministers from other denominations speaking in Seventh-day Adventist pulpits.

The last two quotes shared in the post by Charles Possenriede, do not give support to having non-Seventh-day Adventist ministers preaching in our hospitals. Our institutions are to be channels for bringing the truth to those who have not heard it. Let us walk in the light while we still have opportunity. Jesus is coming soon! He would have come long ago if we had been faithful in doing our appointed work. Let us redeem the time and heed to the call for revival and reformation within our church.

Posted by: [Richard Myers](#) | [March 18, 2012 at 11:42 PM](#)

"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."

Please could you tell me how I should read these sentences in light of what actually happened within Christianity under the Nazi regime. I would love, love love to understand how we were more of a remnant than the confessing church was. I would love to hear exactly why our aversion to ecumenicalism didn't contribute to our inability to discern what other Christians could.

Or, sounds great. Too bad that our past performance belies everything you just said!

Posted by: Johnny Ramirez-Jorge | [April 13, 2012 at 12:30 PM](#)

Things I appreciated about this article include,

1. The accurate representation of EGW's view of other Christians both in their place in God's end-time remnant and the importance of cooperation with other pastors.
2. I thought you were generous to other Christians and what they got up to in the 1910 conference. I would have used harsher language to describe the unseemliness of how they divided the mission field.
3. It's such a big deal that this guy was on the Andrews campus. That deserves major kudos.

Your excellent article doesn't discuss the history of Christianity under Nazi's so it's unfair to suggest that. However, I'd love it if you would!

To be fair, the confessing church frustrated both Barth and Bonhoeffer in their refusal to address outright the treatment of Jews but at least they objected to Nazi treatment of developmentally disabled Christians which is more than we can say.

In the spirit of other comments I'd like to add another area where Adventists are ecumenical. Education. As in, this event was ecumenical. ATS relates to the wider ETS crowd in a way that could be said to be ecumenical. Where Adventist theologians pursue postgraduate education could be said to be ecumenical. Thanks!

Posted by: Johnny Ramirez-Jorge | [April 13, 2012 at 01:50 PM](#)

Thank you for your comments, Johnny, especially your more moderate second set! (I know that my second attempt at a response is often more positive and thoughtful than my first.) But both sets of comments make good points.

I would agree that Adventism did not do well in Germany, but I think the whole experience rather supports my point, rather than denying it. First, it shows the kind of anti-semitism that has and is a problem in the West. Second, the German Christian church, which Hitler created to unite all German churches, was the "ecumenical" movement in Germany that the Confessing church was opposing.

The confessing church, in my view, represented the real remnant in Germany, because they insisted that the foundation of their unity must be scripture, and not scripture plus national socialism or German tradition. They insisted on commitment to scripture, and opposed the ecumenical movement urged by the state.

The SDA church's failure to join in with this scriptural remnant was, in my view, not so much their opposition to ecumenism, though that probably played a role, as it was their over-zealous devotion to certain scriptural truths, e.g., the Sabbath, at the expense of others, e.g., defending the poor, oppressed and marginalized. Certain members understood this, and stood up for their Jewish neighbors and friends, e.g., the Hasels and the Weidners, but as an organization the Adventist church did not do so well. This is a lesson we must learn from.

Posted by: Nicholas Miller | [April 15, 2012 at 01:49 PM](#)

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