Introduction

Urban cultures around the world share a number of common characteristics. They tend to be more technologically advanced than non-urban communities, which means they are more highly influenced by a developing global web-based culture which rejects institutionalism and demands decentralization of power and authority. Within this culture, individuals are inclined to find a direct path to what they want to accomplish, and traditional structures are often perceived as obstacles along that path. Therefore, the church, as a result of its conventionality, is not well positioned for optimum growth among urban communities. Yet the church, as a fellowship of believers, is commissioned by Christ to take the gospel to people of all nations, most of whom are now concentrated in urban populations.¹

In light of these current urban conditions, the mission of Christ requires a somewhat different approach from that which has been practiced for centuries; lay believer mobilization and believer empowerment (or more accurately, re-empowerment) must be scalable, unlike anything we have ever seen, to increasing levels of urbanization. Lay believers must be re-empowered to do all the work of disciple-making.

This paper will explore the age-old, yet still relevant question, “And who gave you authority to baptize?” (Mark 11:27-33; John 1:25). First, biblical authority will be examined regarding who is allowed to baptize. Second, the writings of Ellen G. White, as they relate to biblical

authority for baptizing, will be considered. Third, a counter-argument will be discussed. And finally, two baptismal tracks within the current conventional Adventist church system will be compared. This paper will conclude with a missional way forward that is faithful to Scripture, sustainable, scalable, and missionally effective in light of current cultural trends.

Background

A 2000-Year-Old Question

The question of who—or what—gives a person authority to baptize is at least two thousand years old. First century Jewish religious leaders asked this politically charged question: “Then the Pharisees who had been sent asked him [John the Baptist], ‘If you aren’t the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet, what right do you have to baptize?’” (John 1:24-25, NLT unless otherwise noted).

The Gospel of Mark records a similar dialogue between Jesus and church leaders:

Again they entered Jerusalem. As Jesus was walking through the Temple area, the leading priests, the teachers of religious law, and the elders came up to him. They demanded, “By what authority are you doing all these things? Who gave you the right to do them?”

“I’ll tell you by what authority I do these things if you answer one question,” Jesus replied. “Did John’s authority to baptize come from heaven, or was it merely human? Answer me!”

They talked it over among themselves. “If we say it was from heaven, he will ask why we didn’t believe John. But do we dare say it was merely human?” For they were afraid of what the people would do, because everyone believed that John was a prophet. So they finally replied, “We don’t know.”

And Jesus responded, “Then I won’t tell you by what authority I do these things.” (Mark 11:27-33)

In spite of the implied challenge, these verses raise a valid question: Who does give one the right or authority to baptize? Some would suggest that church leaders have the authority to grant permission and to vest in certain people the right to baptize; others would contend that a believer’s authority to baptize comes directly from Jesus Christ himself.
Current Church Practice Regarding Baptism

Most denominations today, including the Seventh-day Adventist Church, see themselves as holding the authoritative right to baptize through the vesting of pastors, lay pastors, priests, or other clergy.

The *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* states, “The pastor, with the assistance of the elders, is expected to plan for and lead out in all spiritual services, such as Sabbath morning worship and prayer meeting, and should officiate at the communion service and baptism” (Secretariat 2016:32).

This serves as one policy parameter. Another parameter is articulated as a provisional plan: “In the absence of an ordained pastor, an elder shall request the conference president to arrange for the baptism of those desiring to unite with the church. An elder should not officiate in the service without first obtaining permission from the conference president” (75, italics supplied).

This policy makes it possible for a conference president to authorize an elder to conduct a baptism. But it clearly states that an elder “should not officiate” unless authorized. This would also imply that non-elders should not officiate at baptisms.

To clarify this position the *Church Manual* continues,

Occasionally no one possesses the experience and qualifications to serve as an elder. Under such circumstances the church should elect a person to be known as “leader.”... A leader, who is not an ordained elder [ordained by the church], may not administer baptism, conduct the Lord’s Supper, perform the marriage ceremony, or preside at business meetings when members are disciplined. A request should be made to the conference president for an ordained pastor to preside at such meetings. (77, italics supplied)

Again, policy clarifies that permission-granting authority to baptize rests with the conference president. And to further prevent any misunderstanding, the *Church Manual* spells out:

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Deacons are not authorized to preside at the Lord’s Supper, baptism, or business meetings and are not permitted to perform the marriage ceremony or officiate at the reception or transfer of members.

If a church has no one authorized to perform such duties, the church leader shall contact the conference for assistance. (79, italics provided)

The Church Manual does suggest that the gospel commissioning is given to “us.” But note that commissioning is defined in such a way that it places disciple-making under the authority of the “chief committee” when it says,

_The Gospel Commission of Jesus tells us that making disciples, which includes baptizing and teaching, is the primary function of the church_ (Matt. 28:18-20). It is, therefore, also the primary function of the board, which serves as the chief committee of the church. When the board devotes its first interests and highest energies to involving every member in proclaiming the good news and making disciples, most problems are alleviated or prevented, and a strong, positive influence is felt in the spiritual life and growth of members. (129, italics added)

“Involving every member” is an attempt to engage believers in making disciples “which includes baptizing and teaching,” but only a few are authorized by the church leadership to do all the work of disciple-making, namely those who have received church approval—the pastors.

One can reasonably discern that church policy intends that church-approved pastors are allowed to baptize and the believers are not allowed to baptize.

**The Developing Crisis**

**A Changing Culture’s View of the Church**

Urban cultures around the world share a number of common characteristics. They tend to be more technologically advanced than non-urban communities, which means they are more highly influenced by a global, web-based culture that rejects institutionalism and demands decentralization of power and authority.

This was recently recognized by the General Conference Department of Adventist Mission in an article entitled “Adventist Leaders Tout House-Churches as Way to Reach Non-Christians,” published in April 2018. The primary reason for this “touting” was included in the article’s subtitle, “The house-church model is called important at a time when many view the traditional church negatively” (McChesney 2018).
Not only do many view the church negatively, but public opinion of pastors has been on the decline since 1985. “In 2013 the clergy received its lowest score ever. The number of people who believe clergy has very high or high levels of honesty and ethical standards fell below 50 percent for the first time. But this was no blip on the radar screen. After peaking at a high of 67 percent in 1985, the decline has been a pretty steady march downward” (Packard 2015:17). No matter how one explains the details, this is a developing crisis.

Cultural Mega-Shift

With increasing access to the Internet, there is a developing global culture that in many ways is eclipsing local cultures. No matter where a person lives, if one is connected to the Internet, one is being enculturated to accept Western views and values (Kellerman 2012:xix).

What are some of these views and values? Award-winning Harvard leadership lecturer Barbara Kellerman,3 in her challenging book, The End of Leadership, accurately highlights this cultural shift. She observes, “There is less respect for authority across the board—in government and business, in the academy and in the professions, even in religion” (2012:xviii, xix, 15, 25).

This suggests that the culture’s negative view of the conventional church is not necessarily the fault of the church or its leadership. A number of secular leaders as well as church leaders recognize the attitude toward the conventional church as just one aspect of a greater “mega-shift” in attitude toward conventionality in general. Policy-based systems are slowly being replaced by relational systems where people are more important than the survival and/or maintenance of the institution they once championed.

Power and control are being decentralized, top-down supremacy is losing influence, while grassroots relational infrastructures are gaining influence. There is “a shift away from traditional management systems in

3 Barbara Kellerman is the James MacGregor Burns Lecturer in Public Leadership at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government. She was the founding executive director of the Kennedy School’s Center for Public Leadership and served as its research director. She was ranked by Forbes.com among the Top 50 Business Thinkers in 2009, and by Leadership Excellence in the top 15 of 100 ‘best minds on leadership’ in 2008 and 2009. In 2010 she was given the Wilbur M. McFeeley Award for her pioneering work on leadership and followership. She is author and editor of many books, including, most recently, Bad Leadership, Followership, and Leadership: Essential Selections on Power, Authority, and Influence” (Kellerman 2012: “About the Author”).
which the leader is at the center, to new sorts of systems, in which organizations are self-run and self-governed” (Kellerman 2012:42, 43).

As people are looking for alternative ways to build meaning and value into their lives, a number of non-institutional systems are gaining market share. Here is a sampling of some well-known conventional systems with their grassroots counterparts.

**Institutional Systems**

- Encyclopedia Britannica
- Microsoft Office
- Garmin, Tom-Tom
- National currencies
- Conventional school
- Big box stores

**Institutional Systems**

- Wikipedia.com
- OpenOffice.com
- Google Maps, Waze.com
- Cryptocurrencies (i.e., Bitcoin)
- Home school
- CSA (Community Supported Agriculture)

As new grassroots possibilities give ordinary people ways to bypass conventional systems, people are less inclined to “ask permission” of those who see themselves as holding the authority to give permission. This challenges a fundamental assumption of institutional system thinking, specifically the belief that people will continue to ask permission.

**The Birth of a New Revolution**

Kellerman (2012) observes that “the idea that ordinary people use unbridled access to information to judge those who are more elevated—that is nothing short of revolutionary” (48). Kellerman correctly utilizes this revolutionary theme in several places throughout her book:

First, real revolutions are rare and distinctive events, which fundamentally alter the state or society within which they take place. Second, the intention of revolutionaries is generally to redistribute power, authority, and influence, by taking some, or even all, from those who have and giving it to those who do not (10).

In the last one hundred years, relations between leaders and followers reached a turning point, if not a tipping point. Leader power and follower power became the more equivalent. To be sure, hero-leaders (Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill) and monster-leaders (Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin) were still in evidence. But, increasingly, ordinary people joined forces to compel change the world over (16).

Nearly a decade and a half before the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, [the late educator and diplomat] Cleveland wrote this: ‘The
tidal waves of social change in my lifetime—environmental sensitivity, civil rights for all races, the enhanced status of women ... were not generated by established leaders in government, business, religion, or even higher education. They boiled up from the people, with the help of new, often young leaders who had not previously been heard from.’ (Kellerman 2012:46, 47)

Other researchers acknowledge this revolutionary theme and its impact on the church. In their landmark book Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are DONE with Church but Not Their Faith, sociologists Joshua Packard and Ashleigh Hope report on research they conducted which showed the impact of this revolutionary thinking on church-going. Within a sample of people who were of the same race but diverse geographically, socioeconomically, generationally, and with regard to gender, “The story that emerged from the data is that people with access to alternative ways of reaching their goals of community and social engagement are opting out of church” (2015:10).

Packard and Hope continue to emphasize: “To be clear, I don’t think this is generational. Our respondents spanned an age range from 18 to 84. The phenomenon of people walking away from congregation-based church has much more to do with how our culture has evolved over the years for everyone not simply for emerging adults” (76).

To reemphasize, the cultural mega-shift is not necessarily the church’s fault. “Technology continues to undermine the authority of the church, just as it undermines authority everywhere else” (Kellerman 2012:78; see also Shirky 2005).

This reality will call for new kinds of organization in general and a reevaluation of current institutional assumptions for those organizations that desire to stay relevant in this cultural mega-shift. John Kotter, author of books such as Leading Change and A Sense of Urgency, is widely regarded as one of the world’s foremost authorities on leadership and change. He insists, “The twenty-first century will force us all to evolve towards a fundamentally new form of organization” (2014:39).

This will also call for a new look at church organizational models and the assumptions, both spoken and unspoken, they are based upon. Christian author and researcher George Barna, after a careful analysis of church planting and financial trends in North America, in his 2016 Church Start-ups and Money report summary suggests a response to the data: “What would it look like to make a whole new model?” (2016:51).

Culture has changed around us, and with it, the culture’s view of church as we have known it. As we will soon see, the church is also changing from within.
The Church (the People) Is Changing from Within

“Predicting the future is a perilous activity. But if you look at enough data, you can see there are some trends pointing in a pretty clear direction” (Kotter 2014:173). The church is changing from within. Yet this change should not come as a surprise to Seventh-day Adventists. Ellen White and others have been sounding the warning for some time.

Before the final visitation of God’s judgments upon the earth, there will be, among the people of the Lord, such a revival of primitive godliness as has not been witnessed since apostolic times. The Spirit and power of God will be poured out upon His children. At that time many will separate themselves from those churches in which the love of this world has supplanted love for God and His Word. Many, both of ministers and people, will gladly accept those great truths which God has caused to be proclaimed at this time, to prepare a people for the Lord’s second coming. (White 1911b:464, italics supplied)

Notice what White says, and what she does not say: “Among the people of the Lord” is not limited to a specific denomination. It includes people of any fold, in any denomination, and it includes people outside of a recognized denomination. “Many will separate themselves from those churches in which the love of this world has supplanted love for God and His Word.” No denomination is exempt. “Many,... will gladly accept those great truths” does not say people will join or switch denominations; White simply says they “will gladly accept those great truths.” Accepting biblical truths may not necessarily mean becoming “members.”

In 1965 Billy Graham warned that

multitudes of Christians within the church are moving toward the point where they may reject the institution that we call the church. They are beginning to turn to more simplified forms of worship. They are hungry for a personal and vital experience with Jesus Christ. They want a heartwarming personal faith. Unless the church quickly recovers its authoritative Biblical message, we may witness the spectacle of millions of Christians going outside the institutional church to find spiritual food. (87)

Graham speaks about millions of people moving towards more “simplified forms of worship.” They are hungry for a vibrant relationship with God that goes far beyond religious forms.

In 2005 George Barna wrote, “Well over 20 million left the church to “go find God” (13). He goes on to say that
the Revolutionary mind-set is simple: Do whatever it takes to get closer to God and to help others to do the same. Obliterate any obstacle that prevents you from honoring God with every breath you take. Be such an outstanding example of the Christian faith that no one will question your heart or lifestyle—except those who see institutional survival as equally or more important than the alleged influence of the institution they defend. (39)

In their 2015 book entitled Church Refugees, Packard and Hope set out to understand the widespread phenomenon of church decline. They say that of the 318 million people in America, approximately 104 million4 (33%) have left the church (20; see also Barna 2014).

As our society approaches a post-institutional era, it’s entirely possible the near monopoly that the church has enjoyed over faithful expressions and religious connections may be coming to an end. The activities of the dechurched may be ushering in a new understanding of what religious activity means. If this trend continues, it will fundamentally reshape the way Americans experience organized religion. (Packard and Hope 2015:69)

As shocking as this research may be, Packard and Hope’s unique contribution is even more surprising. They reveal,

Our interviews indicate that the dechurched are among the most dedicated people in any congregation. They often work themselves into positions of leadership in an attempt to fix the things about the church that dissatisfy them before ultimately deciding that energies could be better spent elsewhere. In other words, the dechurched were the “doers” in their congregations. (23)

Yet Packard and Hope are quick to clarify that “the dechurched are walking away from church work, but not the work of the church” (55). They boldly suggest, “The structures that dominate most churches work well for the large segment of the congregation that is not particularly involved or interested in being involved. But these same structures are not only ineffective for the most active members, they are actually driving them away” (56).

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4 George Barna and David Kinnaman, in their 2014 book Churchless argue that the dechurched represent 33 percent of the American population. Furthermore, they claim that people characterized as dechurched are the fastest growing segment of the population.
Alan Hirsh, pastor, church planter, and former director of the Department of Mission, Education and Development for the Churches of Christ Victoria and Tasmania Conference, moved to the United States in the early 2000s. He believes that the church in North America will be a major determinant for the continued sustenance and future vitality of the church in the West (2018).

In a 2010 Verge Network video blog (Hirsh 2010), and later in Hirsh’s book, On the Verge: A Journey into the Apostolic Future of the Church (2011), he says that of the 318 million Americans, 200 million [about 60% and rising] are not interested in walking in the front doors of any conventional church. This means that all denominations combined are, at best, able to gain a hearing among only 40% (and decreasing) of the population. And it means that the other 60% are essentially immune to their methods of communicating the message. This constitutes a crisis for the church in Western cultures.

The church is not necessarily responsible for this crisis. But the crisis calls for a response from the church. How the Adventist denomination responds is yet to be determined.

Summary of the Crisis

The conventional church of Western cultures is in a state of crisis as a result of recent cultural shifts. Technology is disseminating both the culture and its crisis to urban centers around the globe via the worldwide web.

The culture around the church and the people within the church have changed. As the rules are changing, church leadership paradigms and the assumptions they embrace are being bypassed. A new revolution is quietly being birthed.

I believe there is hope for both the urban and the non-urban contexts. But to reestablish relevance at a time when “many view the traditional church negatively,” the church will have to change, and do so quickly without a self-preservation agenda or—paradoxically—it will continue to dwindle, specifically among Western cultures and among those in any culture who have embraced a developing global culture. Of all entities, the church is best poised to understand the counter-intuitive kingdom principle to lose one’s life in order to gain life (Matt 10:39). I also believe there

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5 There are some who would argue differently, offering only anecdotal evidence. https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/328546-church-in-america-dying.html.
is a way forward that will re-empower the believers to do all the work of disciple making, thus providing a vehicle for the wildfire-like spread of the gospel message in the New Testament era to happen in today’s urban context. But this way forward will require institutional assumptions of authority and permission-giving to change.

“And Who Gave You Authority to Baptize?”

While there are a number of key changes needed in the church in order for it to effectively achieve its mission in this new context, one change is readily within the church’s reach—and that change could prove an excellent help in spreading the gospel of Christ to the unreached masses.

The church is commissioned by Christ to reach the vast urban populations. The carrying out of this commission must be based on a solid, “Thus says the Lord” in order for his church to reap his blessings and for all believers to engage in all the work of disciple-making.

In her book, Desire of the Ages, White emphasizes that “the very life of the church depends upon her faithfulness in fulfilling the Lord’s commission. To neglect this work is surely to invite spiritual feebleness and decay. Where there is no active labor for others, love wanes, and faith grows dim” (1940:825).

**Biblical Foundation**

The Bible and the Bible Only

Adventism has a long-standing theology of upholding the Bible and the Bible only as the infallible authority. While this posture reflects reformation DNA, to truly apply this legacy of the infallible authority of the Word of God as one’s only rule of faith and practice may challenge current practices.

Ellen White upholds the principle of sola scriptura. Drawing from church history, she warns of a tendency to lose sight of this foundation. “The very beginning of the great apostasy was in seeking to supplement the authority of God by that of the church. Rome began by enjoining what God had not forbidden, and she ended by forbidding what he had explicitly enjoined. Many earnestly desired to return to the purity and simplicity which characterized the primitive church” (1911b:289-290).

The grand principle maintained by the Reformers—the same that had been held by the Waldenses, by Wycliffe, by John Huss, by Luther, Zwingli, and those who united with them—was the infallible authority
of the Holy Scriptures as a rule of faith and practice. They denied the rights of popes, councils, Fathers, and kings, to control the conscience in matters of religion. The Bible was their authority, and by its teaching they tested all doctrines and all claims. (1911:249, italics supplied)

In our time there is a wide departure from their [the reformers'] doctrines and precepts, and there is need of a return to the great Protestant principle—the Bible, and the Bible only, as the rule of faith and duty. . . . The same unswerving adherence to the Word of God manifested at that crisis of the Reformation is the only hope of reform today. (204)

These warnings serve to remind modern-day Adventist church leaders and believers that a clear understanding of one’s authority and a firm allegiance to Christ and his Word are paramount to avoiding the pitfalls of the past. With this background, the next section looks at the commission behind baptism.

The Gospel Commission

Matthew concludes his gospel with the Great Gospel Commission, Christ’s final charge to his disciples. “And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen (Matt 28:18-20).

As familiar as this may be to one’s ears, the scope of this commission is radically inclusive. To realize it, one must notice its parameters. Are there any limitations to the scope of the commission? In terms of territory? Time? Authority? The Bible alone must answer!

Jesus removed territorial limitations when He said, “Go ... and make disciples of all nations” (italics supplied). But was there a limit on time? Did the Great Commission extend beyond the lifespan of those who heard Christ speak it? The text itself provides an answer; Christ’s promise extends “even to the end of the age.” Thus, one is left with the question of authority.

Ellen White confirms this no-territorial lines approach in Gospel Commission work. She says, “Thus Christ sought to teach the disciples the truth that in God’s kingdom there are no territorial lines, no caste, no aristocracy; that they must go to all nations, bearing to them the message of a Saviour’s love” (1911:20, italics supplied; White 1940:823).
All Authority

In order to avoid moving forward on preconceived ideas and common assumptions, this discussion must take a closer look at whom the Great Commission authorizes. How does the Gospel Commission begin? Typically, people respond with, “Go.” But that is not where the commissioning begins. It begins one verse earlier: “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth” (Matt 28:18). This commission internally clarifies whose authority believers operate in as they carry out the Gospel Commission—namely, Christ’s unlimited authority.

The Commission was spoken to eleven disciples who were told to “go and make disciples.” The same commission which makes disciples also commissions disciples. And in fairness to the commission we must say that when a person is commissioned he is also authorized.

Ellen White on the Gospel Commission

Regarding the scope of the Great Gospel Commission, Ellen White’s commentary is also instructive.

Not upon the ordained minister only rests the responsibility of going forth to fulfill this commission. Everyone who has received Christ is called to work for the salvation of his fellow men. (1911a:110, italics supplied)

Those who stand as leaders in the church of God are to realize that the Savior’s commission is given to all who believe in His name. (1911a:110, italics supplied)

The gospel commission had been given to the twelve when Christ met with them in the upper chamber; but it [the Gospel Commission] was now to be given to a larger number. At the meeting on a mountain in Galilee, all the believers who could be called together were assembled. (1940:818, italics supplied)

In sweeping inclusiveness, Christ authorizes the unlikely and the undeserving. In the chapter entitled “Go and Teach All Nations” White wrote,

Those whose course has been most offensive to Him He freely accepts; when they repent, He imparts to them His divine Spirit, places them in the highest positions of trust, and sends them forth into the camp of the disloyal to proclaim His boundless mercy. (1940:826).

The Savior’s commission to the disciples included all the believers. It includes all believers in Christ to the end of time. It is a fatal mistake to suppose that the work of saving souls depends alone on the ordained minister. All to whom the heavenly inspiration has come are put in
trust with the gospel. *All who receive the life of Christ are ordained to work for the salvation of their fellow men.* For this work the church was established, and all who take upon themselves its sacred vows are thereby pledged to be co-workers with Christ. (1940:822, bold and italics supplied)

**A Pivotal Question**

Over the past 10 years I have worked with over five hundred church leaders around the world, primarily conference presidents and their administrative teams in Western countries, helping them understand and respond to the developing global culture through the development of missionary-focused house church plants. In the course of those dialogues, church leaders often asked, “So who is allowed to baptize?” Their question is uniquely appropriate as they seek to reconcile church policy with the Gospel Commission and with Ellen White’s comments.

The answer hinges upon another pivotal question: To whom was the Gospel Commission given? If the Gospel Commission was given only to church-approved pastors, then the whole work of making disciples belongs to the elite, which in turn could be seen as discrediting the work of the lay believers who give Bible studies, “teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:20).

If one accepts Ellen White’s perspective, then the Gospel Commission is given to all believers. Yet the fulfillment of one part of that commission, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19), directly conflicts with church policy, which states, “The pastor, with the assistance of the elders, is expected to plan for and lead out in all spiritual services, such as Sabbath morning worship and prayer meeting, and should officiate at the communion service and baptism” (Secretariat 2016:32).

It is interesting to note that of the over five hundred church leaders to whom this question has been posed, only one has suggested (though it was not his final conclusion) that the Gospel Commission was given solely to church-sanctioned pastors. While this represents church leaders who are seeking to be honest with the biblical text, it does not relieve the tension between Scripture and church policy. Before resolving this tension, let us possibly complicate it as we consider the following arguments in favor of ministers being the primary ones to baptize.

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7 [https://www.simplechurchathome.com/](https://www.simplechurchathome.com/)
A Counter Argument

Some would assert that White makes a case that believers should baptize only if “ministers are absent.” Two instances are worth noting.

I saw that these brethren [Bean and Evans] had not understood their work fully. God has not called them to give themselves unreservedly to the work. O no, they can assist in the work and do errands for the Lord, but they should not feel to throw themselves on the church as messengers or as called and chosen servants of Jesus to travel from place to place, or state to state, to labor and preach. Their time should not be occupied visiting the different churches; they do not [do] good this way in travelling from church to church. The churches generally are just as well off without them. They have a duty to do in case ministers are absent, to baptize or administer the ordinances. (White 1859, italics supplied)

One can correctly conclude that in 1859 lay believers were authorized by the church to baptize if ministers were absent. This implies that ministers primarily did the baptizing.

If there is a minister in reach, all right, then they should seek for the ordained minister to do the baptizing, but when the Lord works with a man to bring out a soul here and there, and they know not when the opportunity will come that these precious souls can be baptized, why he should not question about the matter, he should baptize these souls. (White 1896, italics supplied)

This statement concerns Brother Tay, a missionary to Papua New Guinea, who called for a minister from the States to baptize. White counselled him that he should not have waited for a minister, but should have done the baptizing himself.

One can correctly reckon that in 1896, ordained ministers were the primary baptizers, which is why Brother Tay called for one, and that if a minister was not available, then the discipling believer could—and should—do the baptizing.

Ellen White: An Application of Principle

One could simply accept, as policy, the recommendations made by Ellen White to believers in these two instances. But it is helpful to this discussion to investigate the principles she applied in making her recommendations. Her recommendations seem to indicate the following:
First, that she upheld the prerogative of the church to organize and delegate responsibilities for effective accomplishment of the Gospel Commission. In other words, she supported the practice which the church had in place to accomplish its mission, of delegating to pastors the responsibility for baptizing.

Second, she apparently saw no scriptural reason why lay believers should not baptize in certain circumstances. In fact, she saw reason why they must baptize.

Third, those circumstances which called for an exception to the rule that pastors baptize were situations in which waiting for a pastor would hinder the fulfillment of the Great Commission and jeopardize the advance of the gospel.

Although it is often difficult to discern the fine line between methods that accomplish the mission and the mission itself, Ellen White made that distinction in these two instances and then went on to recommend that method yield to mission, rather than the other way around.

In today’s Western culture (now globally disseminated by technology), physical accessibility to a pastor usually does not become a hindrance to the advance of the gospel. Today’s hindrances are different, but just as real. The previous pages have outlined social and cultural barriers which have become hindrances to the advance of the gospel in Western cultures and urban centers. Once identified, these can be approached using the same principles that Ellen White applied.

The times and circumstances in which God’s people take up the Gospel Commission differ widely. All must be aware of the circumstances about them. Principles help to inform the methods to be used in accomplishing what Jesus commanded.

A Base Line “Ordination” Given to All Believers

According to White, there is a base level “ordaining” conferred by Christ upon all believers for the purpose of fulfilling the Gospel Commission. Under the chapter title “Go and Teach All Nations” she writes, “All who receive the life of Christ are ordained to work for the salvation of their fellow men” (1940:822, italics supplied). Uniting souls with Christ through baptism is the work of lay believers, under the authority of Jesus Christ; and “all who take upon themselves its [the church’s] sacred vows are thereby pledged to be co-workers with Christ” (822, italics supplied). “Christ’s name is their [the believers] watchword,” says White, “their badge of distinction, their bond of union, the authority of their course and action, and the source of the success. Nothing that does not bear His superscription is to be recognized in His kingdom (1940:826).
There is another level of “ordaining” conferred by the church upon some individuals, typically pastors. This is the rightful domain and prerogative of a given denomination. Uniting people in membership with a denomination is the work of any person to whom a given denomination assigns this responsibility within the institution. This role, in a conventional denominational system includes the role of maintaining doctrinal purity at the point of one’s profession of faith as believers join the denomination. To clarify, church “ordaining” is for the purpose of delegating to certain individuals the responsibility for preserving denominational identity. It is not above, better than, or more desirable than the “ordaining” conferred by Christ upon all believers for the purpose of fulfilling the Gospel Commission. In other words, church “ordaining” does not take precedence over or trump the “ordaining” conferred by Christ upon all believers; church “ordaining” has a different and separate role. Undoubtedly, church leaders and believers are to work together. “Let ministers and lay members go forth into the ripening fields. They will find their harvest wherever they proclaim the forgotten truths of the Bible” (White 1903a). Yet, in working together, the believer’s “ordaining” from Jesus Christ himself is not to be negated by a church “ordaining.” Ordained pastors are, first and foremost, ordained lay believers, who are additionally hired and recognized by a given denomination to uphold the policies of the institution and advance its mission. Just one sentence before White states, “Christ’s name is their watchword,” she specifically clarifies, in the context of the Great Commission, “There is no place for tradition, for man’s theories and conclusions, or for church legislation. No laws ordained by ecclesiastical authority are included in the commission. None of these are Christ’s servants to teach” (1940:826). Ellen White understood the scope of Christ’s revolutionary inclusiveness in his commissioning of the believers to do all the work of disciple making—both teaching and baptizing, and she specifically warned church leaders from adding church legislation and human traditions with regard to the Great Commission. When church leaders add additional restrictions, which may actually cause believers to disobey their Gospel Commission, then the believer is faced with trying to reconcile the tension between church policy and Scripture.

Summary of Authority

Based on the authority of Jesus Christ himself, believers can confidently move forward as they carry out the Gospel Commission, doing all the work of disciple-making, both teaching and baptizing.
Using the principle of *sola Scriptura*, based on the authority of Jesus Christ himself, believers can confidently carry out the Gospel Commission, doing *all* the work of disciple-making. As we noted earlier,

> In our time there is a wide departure from their [the reformers’] doctrines and precepts, and there is need of a return to the great Protestant principle—the Bible, and the Bible only, as the rule of faith and duty.... The same unswerving adherence to the Word of God manifested at that crisis of the Reformation is the only hope of reform today. (White 1911b:204)

> “The very life of the church depends upon her faithfulness in fulfilling the Lord’s commission. To neglect this work is surely to invite spiritual feebleness and decay (White 1940:825). Therefore, whatever hinders the believers from disciple-making, hinders the fulfillment of Christ’s Gospel Commission, and to that extent invites “spiritual feebleness and decay.”

In light of the urban population explosion, the developing church crisis, and the cultural shift toward decentralization of power and authority, Christ’s authorization of all believers to “co-mission” with him is a divinely-inspired paradigm uniquely suited to the challenge. Believer mobilization and believer empowerment (or more accurately, re-empowerment) must become scalable, unlike anything we have ever seen, to levels of urban saturation.

But what about the pastors? What becomes of them, since all believers are authorized by Christ to baptize? Before addressing the biblical role and spiritual gifting of pastors, the next section looks at an existing baptismal ideology which may provide a way forward that can lessen the tension between the Bible and the *Church Manual*.

### Baptismal Practices

Within the Seventh-day Adventist denomination there are two tracks for becoming an official church member. One is to be baptized by immersion by a church-sanctioned Adventist pastor. This baptism is typically and automatically linked with church membership.\(^8\) The second option for those who have previously been baptized by immersion is to become

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8. “Baptism—A Prerequisite to Membership—Christ has made baptism the sign of entrance to His spiritual kingdom. He has made this a positive condition with which all must comply who wish to be acknowledged as under the authority of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (*Church Manual* 2016:43). This quotation is then qualified in the next three paragraphs of the *Church Manual* to weld together baptism and church membership.
members by a Profession of Faith—professing the Adventist beliefs. Setting aside the first option, I will focus on the second, the Profession of Faith.

**Profession of Faith**

According to the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, “A committed Christian coming from another Christian communion who has already been baptized by immersion as practiced by the Seventh-day Adventist Church” (2016:50) may choose to become an Adventist member by publicly professing the beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.

While the phrase, “as practiced by the Seventh-day Adventist Church” leaves some room for interpretation, it is arguable that in most cases of Profession of Faith, the only question regarding a candidate’s baptism is, Have you been previously baptized by immersion? If the answer is yes, then the candidate has already fulfilled church membership vow #12, as stated in the *Church Manual*: “Do you accept the New Testament teaching of baptism by immersion and desire to be so baptized as a public expression of faith in Christ and His forgiveness of your sins?” (Secretariat 2016:46).

Notice what kind of questions are not required by the *Church Manual* for Profession of Faith: Who can verify that you were indeed baptized by immersion? Who baptized you by immersion? Was this person an ordained, or otherwise church-sanctioned, member of the clergy?

Why are answers to these questions not required by the *Church Manual*? Because they do not matter biblically. Adventism understands this. In other words, the Seventh-day Adventist denomination recognizes that baptism by immersion without respect to church ordination of officiants is biblical.

The first membership track requires a church-approved officiant to legitimize the baptism while the second membership track does not require validation of any baptismal credentials of any kind, per the *Church Manual*.

**A Question of Trust**

What message does the Adventist Church communicate to committed Seventh-day Adventist modern-day missionaries who are fulfilling the Gospel Commission? Could it be that, with regard to biblical baptism, church leaders inadvertently communicate that they trust those whom they have never met more than they trust their own Adventist lay members?
By contrast, Jesus’ Great Commission, with its sweeping inclusiveness and unlimited authorization, entrusts to all of God’s people all of the work of disciple-making, both teaching and baptizing (Matt 28:18-20).

Ellen White’s commentary on Christ’s Great Commission recognizes the inclusiveness of it when, under the chapter title, “Go Teach All Nations,” she summarizes:

All the believers when Christ was on earth were included in His commission.
All believers in Christ to the end of time are included in His commission.
All to whom the heavenly inspiration has come are put in trust with the gospel.
All who receive the life of Christ are ordained to work for the salvation of their fellow men.
All who take upon themselves the sacred vows of the church are thereby pledged to be co-workers with Christ. (1940:822, bold and italics supplied)

Summary of Profession of Faith

Profession of Faith serves as one of two membership tracks for a person seeking official membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. As described in detail above, the Church Manual accepts into membership by Profession of Faith any person who states that he/she has been baptized by immersion, without further investigation of the officiant’s credentials. This indicates that the Adventist Church correctly understands that church-sanctioned ordination of a pastor is not a biblical requirement for baptizing and that Christ’s ordination of the believers is the only biblical prerequisite.

This clarity on the issue of authority as it relates to the Gospel Commission is indeed revolutionary, and it helps church leaders understand the beginning of a new revolution among the believers.

What Is the Biblical Job Description of a Pastor?

Revolutions are typically not initiated by an institution. As noted earlier, “They boiled up from the people, with the help of new, often young leaders who had not previously been heard from” (Kellerman 2012:46-47). It should not come as a surprise or an affront to pastors or church leaders that they are not necessarily the ones leading this revolution. Nor does it mean that the biblical role of a pastor is obsolete (although it may undergo some “de-celebritizing”). In fact, pastors have an important and unique contribution as they come alongside the other spiritual gifts.
A Pastor’s Job Description

If the believers are authorized by Christ to baptize, then what does a pastor do? Scripture does not leave one to wonder, guess at, or invent a job description. “Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ” (Eph 4:11-12, italics supplied).

Much has been written regarding this passage. One must read is Russell Burrill’s seminal dissertation called “Recovering an Adventist Approach to the Life & Mission of the Local Church,” written while Burrill was a professor at the Andrews University Theological Seminary.

For the purposes of this paper, it will only be noted that Ephesians confirms, first and foremost, that the spiritual gifting of a pastor is both relevant and necessary; and second, that these five-fold gifts share a common and crystal-clear job description, namely equipping God’s people to do the work of ministry for the building up of the body of Christ—in contrast to doing the work of ministry while the believers watch and/or participate at a token level.

Christ intends that his ministers shall be educators of the church in gospel work. They are to teach the people how to seek and save the lost. But is this the work they are doing? Alas, how many are toiling to fan the spark of life in a church that is ready to die. How many churches are tended like sick lambs by those who ought to be seeking for the lost sheep! And all the time millions upon millions without Christ are perishing. (White 1940:825)

Summary of a Pastor’s Job Description

In short, the biblical job description for a pastor or lay pastor becomes one of coaching, mentoring, praying, and inspiring/requiring the lay believers to be the doers of all the work of ministry. In other words, pastors are no longer the providers of the ministry. Instead, they re-empower the believers to become the providers of all the ministry, including baptizing.

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Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion Summary

In Jesus’ day, church leaders raised the question, “And who gave you authority to baptize?” The question is resurfacing today in the context of cultural change and missional need.

1. Current church practice regarding baptism follows denominationally-based job descriptions which state that only church-approved pastors and lay pastors are allowed to baptize. If needed, a conference president is allowed to authorize a local church elder to baptize.

2. According to Adventist Mission’s new release, it says that “many view the traditional church negatively” (McChesney 2018). The church is experiencing a tidal wave of cultural change both from outside and from within, all of which is brewing a crisis in which a new revolution—and opportunity—is being born.

3. As new grassroots possibilities give ordinary people ways to bypass conventional systems, people are less inclined to “ask permission” of those who see themselves as holding the authority to give permission. This challenges a fundamental assumption of institutional system thinking, specifically the belief that people will continue to ask permission.

4. The question of authority is at the heart of the new revolution, both in secular culture and in church culture. The long-held belief that church-appointed pastors are the only ones authorized to baptize is being challenged. Both Scripture and the writings of Ellen White can be used to substantiate Christ’s authority given to lay believers to both teach and baptize in fulfillment of the Gospel Commission.

5. Based on the authority of Jesus Christ himself, believers can confidently move forward as they do all the work of disciple-making, both teaching and baptizing.

6. Church leaders (“the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers,” Eph 4:11) can confidently embrace their biblical role of equipping God’s people to do his work as outlined in the Gospel Commission.

7. By way of precedent, the current church practice of Profession of Faith informs a biblically sound paradigm for discussing the question of who is authorized to baptize.

Recommendations

Before offering recommendations and a possible way forward for church leaders and pastors, an elephant looms in the room. Even if one
were to agree that believers can baptize according to Christ’s authority alone as given in the Gospel Commission, what would happen to institutional integrity, standards, and doctrinal purity if the Seventh-day Adventist Church “authorized” believers to baptize?

Before dismissing the following recommendations too quickly, one should remember that in this new cultural mega-shift the relationship between leaders and lay people has changed: (1) believers are no longer asking permission of church leaders, and (2) many believers are appealing directly to Scripture for their authority.

What Could Be Lost?

What if pastors and church leaders ignore the developments which have been described? It should not come as a surprise—or a threat—that the revolution will simply continue. Current trends show that people are re-assembling the church outside the walls of denominations.

Some believers may tentatively stay connected with their local churches in hopes of seeing revolutionary change. But Packard warns that 104 million (and increasing) “doers” have already left their local congregations.

When it comes to the question at hand—“And who gave you authority to baptize?”—what happens if pastors and church leaders choose not to uphold Christ’s authority of the believer’s commissioning, or to embrace White’s affirmation that Christ gives authority to believers to do all the work of disciple making, both teaching and baptizing? Could it be that the Seventh-day Adventist Church as an organization may forfeit the opportunity to cooperate in providing a vehicle for the wildfire-like spread of the gospel message in today’s urban context?

What Could Be Gained?

In practical terms: first, believers would continue to baptize people based on Christ’s authority given to them in the Gospel Commission.

Second, the Seventh-day Adventist Church would retain the right to examine those who wanted to become members, no matter who baptized them—a church approved membership track that is already practiced through Profession of Faith, as discussed above. It is at this point that the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s institutional integrity, standards, and doctrinal purity are preserved and maintained.

Third, the Profession of Faith membership track would be available to people who were baptized by Adventist believers.

As stated earlier, the church is not responsible for this shift in culture. But the revolution calls for a response, one which would send a loud and clear message.
A message of trust—Seventh-day Adventist church leaders hold the ability to send a message that they trust their own members to baptize new believers as much as they trust those who have baptized people becoming Adventists by Profession of Faith.

A message of being honest with Scripture—No matter what collection of Ellen White references one brings to the table regarding this and related topics, church leaders must show that White is subject to the infallible authority of the Holy Scriptures as our “rule of faith and practice” (White 1911b:249).

If one was to remove all extra-biblical references from this paper, the Gospel Commission still stands. In other words, although the extra-biblical context is insightful and helpful, it is not the final authority for answering the question, “Who gave you permission to baptize?” Christ’s authority is clear. It is the final authority, giving each believer a solid foundation for doing all the work of disciple-making.

Note again that authority: “Jesus came and told his disciples, ‘I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age’” (Matt 29:18-20). If this is followed, note the potential benefits:

A message of integrity—As noted above, modern Western culture no longer recognizes the church, and specifically its pastors, as people of integrity. This is not necessarily the church’s fault. As Adventist church leaders address the discrepancy between church policy and Christ’s authority given to all the believers, church leaders and pastors would and should be applauded for their uncompromising commitment to re-empowering (Eph 4:11-12) God’s people to do all the work of disciple-making.

A message of inclusiveness—in a world where the masses are hyper-connected via technology, people are desperate for belonging. In days past the church told people when they belonged. At the time of official membership, they moved from a “non-Adventist” status to a status of belonging. They became “an Adventist.” But in today’s culture, people decide when they belong (unless some well-meaning saint informs them that they really don’t quite belong—yet). A message of inclusiveness provides

10 Addressing this discrepancy would be considered counter-institutional, as systems development theory states that when a system (secular or sacred) institutionalizes, its primary mission is replaced by a new mission of institutional preservation. Systems development expert Clay Shirky addresses this phenomenon in his 20-minute TED Talk (https://vimeo.com/29343101).
a place where the *process* of discipleship is celebrated (as compared to celebrating membership “arrival”). A message of inclusiveness provides a place for truth seekers, both spiritually young and old, to journey together as they discover and “gladly accept those great truths which God has caused to be proclaimed at this time, to prepare a people for the Lord’s second coming” (White 1911b:464, italics supplied).

Inclusiveness means giving people a place to belong even though they are not ready to become card-carrying members—recognizing that some and possibly most may never become official members. They still belong while they grow in the everlasting gospel.

**Specific Recommendations for Division, Unions, and Conference Leaders**

Benefitting from what could be gained is much easier said than done. How could a world church, a highly complicated and sophisticated global institutionalized system, make such a significant transition?

As mentioned above, John P. Kotter is widely regarded as one of the world’s foremost authorities on leadership and change. Not only does he insist that “the twenty-first century will force us all to evolve towards a fundamentally new form of organization” (2014:39), but he is also successfully helping companies develop what he calls a “dual operating system” (DOS) to navigate this change. While his secular perspective does not inform the message or mission of the church, his contribution presents a helpful management paradigm for leaders to avail themselves of in view of the cultural mega-shift described throughout this paper.

Kotter emphasizes that “for mature organizations, the needed path today is not to shut them down or crush them. The way forward is almost ‘to the future’—but not all the way back to the time when firms were new and very small. The needed path leads to a new version of a stage that all successful organizations pass through. It is a stage in which they employ a dual operating system” (2014:73).

In short “this is not a question of “either/or.” It’s “both/and.” Two systems that operate in concert (12).
Figure 1. Dual operating system (Kotter 2014:12).

Let me be clear, I am not talking about ever more grand interdepartmental task forces, new strategy teams following new models, innovation councils, self-directed work teams, policies that give people time to work on their own creative projects, or all of the above together. These may help movement in the right direction, but they are still just enhancements to a single system. I am talking about a bigger idea, yet one with roots in familiar structures, practices, and thinking. (Kotter 2014:12, 13)

To fully understand how a “dual operating system” functions, church leaders convinced that change must happen on their watch would need to read, digest, and integrate Kotter’s book, Accelerate, which provides a time-tested paradigm to address highly complicated and sophisticated global institutionalized systems. To reduce his book to a short summary would oversimplify what is needed within the Seventh-day Adventist Church to successfully transition.

Specific Recommendations for Pastors and Lay Pastors

A few “next steps” are worth noting: First, using Accelerate as a guide, create a local dual operating system.
Second, create a local church culture where healthy organisms continually give birth to new organisms. In a local dual operating system, some of these new organisms will follow conventional church planting methods, and some may follow new methods. Either way, the message stays consistent.

Third, become a cheerleading equipper of the saints. In other words, stop doing ministry for the believers while they only watch and applaud. Teach and train the saints to preach, visit, give Bible studies, and baptize (Eph 4:12). Then let them do it.

Encouragement for All Believers

Based on the authority of Jesus Christ himself, you can confidently move forward doing all the work of disciple-making, both teaching and baptizing. Press on, trending heavenward.

White tells us that “upon all who believe, God has placed a burden of raising up churches” (1892:315). One hundred nineteen years later, Hirsh echoes this conviction, “Every believer a church planter, every church a church-planting church” (2011).

The great lesson here taught is for all time. Often the Christian life is beset by dangers, and duty seems hard to perform. The imagination pictures impending ruin before and bondage or death behind. Yet the voice of God speaks clearly, “Go forward.” We should obey this command, even though our eyes cannot penetrate the darkness, and we feel the cold waves about our feet. The obstacles that hinder our progress will never disappear before a halting, doubting spirit. Those who defer obedience till every shadow of uncertainty disappears and there remains no risk of failure or defeat, will never obey at all. Unbelief whispers, “Let us wait till the obstructions are removed, and we can see our way clearly;” but faith courageously urges an advance, hoping all things, believing all things.

The cloud that was a wall of darkness to the Egyptians was to the Hebrews a great flood of light, illuminating the whole camp, and shedding brightness upon the path before them. So the dealings of Providence bring to the un believing, darkness and despair, while to the trusting soul they are full of light and peace. The path where God leads the way may lie through the desert or the sea, but it is a safe path. (White 1958:290)
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