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ONE IN CHRIST: WHAT HAVE WE MISSED?

by Denis Fortin

IN THE AUTUMN QUARTER OF 2018, OUR *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* focused on oneness in Christ and unity in the church. I was the author of that guide, and the topic generated a lot of conversation from the start, with many wondering if it had been chosen by church leadership at a time when our church was going through so much conflict. I assured those who asked me about this possibility that in fact I had been asked to write this study guide back in 2012, and the manuscript was completed by April 2014. There was no conspiracy, but its timing was quite providential.

In 2017 and 2018, Adventists were bracing for the creation of General Conference “compliance committees” that would oversee teachers, church administrators, and church institutions in matters of orthodoxy and church policy. The proposal sparked heated conversations among church members and between administrators in various levels of our church organization.¹

During the week of the General Council Executive Committee in 2018—the gathering in Battle Creek at which the compliance committees were voted—the study guide contained a quote from

Ellen White’s *Prophets and Kings*. Many, including myself, were amazed by how providentially appropriate the quote was for that very day. The lesson for Tuesday, October 9, included a commentary on King Rehoboam and how he showed a lack of wisdom by not listening to his more mature advisors in making an important decision for the future of the kingdom. His rashness led to the breaking apart of the nation. Ellen White wrote, “In this unwise and unfeeling attempt to exercise power, the king and his chosen counselors revealed the pride of position and authority.”²

To many attending the Annual Council that day, it seemed a perfect description of what some General Conference leaders were attempting to do in their push to enforce compliance.

What Is Unity?

Since the beginning of our church organization in the early 1860s, we have framed our understanding of church unity in relatively simple ways. In everyday Adventist culture, unity is often perceived as getting along, as not fighting with each other. Unity is not rocking the boat. The cognate of this idea is that we tend to believe unity is manifested when we follow our leaders and remain faithful to our church organization and its policies and decisions. Such a view of unity, which is often agreed to unconsciously, is based on a hierarchical church structure.

Although this is all fine and good, it is lacking depth and needs a more solid biblical foundation. So, what is church unity really about?

What “Church” Really Means

The New Testament reveals a number of nuances of the word “church.” We often mean a building in which a congregation meets every week, but that is hardly the biblical meaning of the word.

In the New Testament, the word “church” (in biblical Greek, *ekklesia*, the called-out ones) means the congregation, community, or assembly of those who believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Most often it refers to the believers in Jesus in a specific geographical area: the church in Judea or in Galatia; the congregation in Antioch, Thessalonica, or Corinth.

More broadly, church can also mean the entire group of people who believe in Jesus: the universal church.

Often for us, however, the meaning of church is restricted to our denominational name: the Seventh-day Adventist Church. And when we restrict the meaning of the word to our denomination, we also restrict what Jesus and Paul tell us about unity in the church.

Local to Universal

Most of the lessons in that 2018 study guide discussed unity in the context of the local congregation. This involves brotherly love and reconciliation (Philemon; Matt. 18:15-17), conflict resolution (Acts 6:1-6), and unity in worship (Acts 2:42-47). Here we find lessons to help congregations find unity *within a local context*. More and more of our congregations are ethnically diverse, and our diversity of cultural heritage affects how we live our common faith. When conflicts arise, we need to be reminded of the unity we already have in Christ, a unity that should transcend all earthly limitations.

Other lessons looked at unity in the context of the church as an organized community of believers. Although the concept of a denominational entity is not found in the New Testament, when the church is larger than a local congregation, then unity must also be practiced at this level. A study of biblical images of unity (people, body, temple, etc.), as well as conflicts in the New Testament church (Acts 15:1-22) and unity in faith, provide needed insights.

Some of the lessons defined unity as a process for the entire *worldwide* community of believers. We find this idea in Jesus' prayer in John 17, Paul's key to unity in Christ throughout his letter to the Ephesians, unity in worship in the early church (Acts 2:42-47), and the final restoration of unity (Rev. 21:1-5). This understanding of unity transcends our cultural heritage and denominational boundaries. In Jesus, Paul says, we form one big family: the family of God and the body of Christ, irrespective of our denominational names.

That unity is a spiritual reality already given to all believers in Jesus is something many Christians don't understand. All who claim Jesus as their Lord and Savior are already experiencing a spiritual oneness in Christ, however imperfectly it may be lived in reality. It is a spiritual gift that should never be questioned. Whatever our internal struggles regarding women's ordination or the place of compliance to our own rules, we are one in Christ.

So unity goes beyond our own boundaries. Whatever our denominational names, whether Lutheran, Baptist, Mennonite, Pentecostal, or Seventh-day Adventist, our common relationship to Christ surpasses all human limitations in Christ.

Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Belief #14: Unity in the Body of Christ

"The church is one body with many members, called from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. In Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning, and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor, male and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship

with Him and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation. Through the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures we share the same faith and hope, and reach out in one witness to all. This unity has its source in the oneness of the triune God, who has adopted us as His children."

Please understand: this is not at all to downplay the crucial truths we believe and the identity markers that shape our end-time mission. But the fact that our unity is in Christ must frame our understanding of other Christian believers, and it must guide our speech about them. The most convincing proof of the beauty of the gospel is love and tolerance expressed toward all those who believe in Jesus.

I often weep over our evangelistic efforts and how they sow seeds of division through what is said about other Christians. Biblically, it is tragic to use eschatology to divide us from others, for in fact the ultimate description of unity among God's people is when John, in Revelation 19, sees a large banquet table and all of the redeemed sitting together to partake of this heavenly meal. It is in the realization of this blessed hope at last that all boundaries between people will have been removed.

Jesus' Final Wish

Unity was so important to Jesus that in his last prayer, recorded in John 17, he prayed for unity among his own disciples and among those who would later believe in him. That was his last wish, his final desire. If unity was so ardently on Jesus' mind at that crucial moment of his life, should it

also be part of our consciousness? Should Jesus' last burden shape the way we fulfill our mission? Should it guide the way we relate to each other in times of conflict? Should it shape the way our church leaders exercise their ministry? Should it guide what we pray about?

When I teach a segment on church unity in my seminary courses, I ask students to reflect on the meaning of Jesus' prayer for unity among those who would believe in him, and I ask them whether this prayer is a wish, a suggestion, a desire, or perhaps even a command.

As we approach our next General Conference Session, it is essential that we reflect on Jesus' prayer for unity among those who believe in him. It might also be good to remind ourselves that we have a fundamental belief on church unity, and we should seek to live up to it. **AT**

¹ Given the huge amount of opposition he received, the General Conference president later abandoned pursuit of the "compliance committees" and instead asked the GC Executive Committee, during Annual Council 2019, to reprimand union conference leaders for what he felt were infractions against the 2015 General Conference Session vote opposing the ordination of women.

² Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings* (1917), p. 90.