

## REVIEW ARTICLE: *PENSAR LA IGLESIA HOY*

FELIX H. CORTEZ

Berrien Springs, Michigan

Klingbeil, Gerald A., Martin G. Klingbeil, Miguel Ángel Núñez, eds. *Pensar la iglesia hoy: Hacia una ecclesiólogía Adventista. Estudios teológicos presentados durante el IV Simposio Bíblico-Teológico Sudamericano en honor a Raoul Dederen* (Thinking about the church today: toward an Adventist ecclesiology: theological papers presented at the fourth South American biblical-theological symposium, in honor of Raoul Dederen). Libertador, San Martín, Argentina: Universidad Adventista del Plata, 2002. xxxi + 524 pp. Paper, \$20.00.

A recent, growing interest in ecclesiology among Seventh-day Adventists is a result of a perceived change in the way Adventists worldwide—though more prominently those in the Western world—understand the nature, authority, and mission of the church. The forces of change are multiple and diverse, including, among others, the economic and structural pressures of a worldwide mission; the cultural diversity of a fast-growing international movement, whose membership majority has shifted from the Western to the Third World; theological stress caused by the apparent delay of the Second Advent; and, probably greatest of all, the “spirit of the age” or postmodernism that has redefined the world and truth itself. *Pensar la iglesia hoy* seeks to add the South American voice to this debate.

South American Adventist theological thinking has found a vibrant expression in the annual Simposio Bíblico-Teológico Sudamericano (South American Biblical-Theological Symposium) that, in four years of existence, has grown to more than 500 participants, 88 papers, and presenters from six different countries, representing fourteen institutions, seven of which were universities (ix). The Symposium has also produced a book on hermeneutics (M. Alomía, G. Klingbeil, M. Klingbeil, y J. Torreblanca, eds. *Entender la Palabra: Hermenéutica Adventista para el Nuevo Siglo* [Understanding the word: Adventist hermeneutics for the new century] [Cochabamba, Bolivia: Editorial UAB, 2000]).

*Pensar la iglesia hoy* offers a collection of thirty-five papers that “think the church” from an impressive array of biblical and nonbiblical disciplines, expertise, and geographical provenance. Its five sections include “Exegesis and Biblical Foundation,” “Theological Reflection,” “Historical Studies,” “Cultural Context,” and “Praxis and Application.” This structure witnesses to the broad focus of the book, whose main purpose is to give voice to the

biblical and theological thought of South America. The work is dedicated to Raoul Dederen, Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology at Andrews University, who has made the most significant contribution to the christological and ecclesiological thought of Adventists in that region and probably the world. In addition to the thirty-five papers selected for the book, there is a biographical sketch and a bibliography of Dederen's works, prepared by his former student and current colleague Miroslav M. Kiš, Chair of the Department of Theology and Christian Philosophy. The work closes with an appendix containing a voted declaration of the vision and theological conviction of the Symposium regarding the doctrine of the church (489-490), and indices of Authors and Biblical Passages, facilitating access to information in the book.

The majority of papers published in the book were prepared by scholars with expertise in the areas of biblical exegesis and systematic, applied, and historical theology. There are, however, several authors whose expertise falls outside the area of religion, but who have enriched the dialogue by "thinking the church" from the perspective of their own disciplines. Carlos H. Cerdá (D.Soc. cand., "Relación entre Laodicea y la Sociedad Posmoderna: Efectos en la Iglesia" [The relationship between Laodicea and the postmodern society: effects in the church]) analyzes the relationship between the church and its environment from a sociological perspective, showing the impact of postmodernism on Adventism as evidenced in polls and surveys. Chantal J. Klingbeil (M.Phil., "Iglesia y Cultura: ¿Amigas o Enemigas?" [Church and culture: friends or foes?]) studies the same relationship from a philosophical perspective and methodology. Mario Pereyra (Dr.Psic., "La Iglesia y el Mundo en la Escatología Apocalíptica, desde el Contexto Posmoderno" [The church and the world in apocalyptic eschatology from a postmodern context]) offers a psychological diagnostic of Laodicea and Babylon in John's Revelation, where the first suffers from narcissism and the latter of an antisocial personality disorder. Antonio V. Cremades (Dr.Cs.Biol., "El Valor de la Naturaleza para la Iglesia" [The value of nature for the church]) emphasizes the importance of nature for the church not only because of the stewardship entrusted to humanity at creation, but as an object of reflection and tool for study, discovery, and evangelism. Finally, René Rogelio Smith (D.Ed., "Educación y Apocalipsis en la Ecclesiología Adventista" [Education and the book of Revelation in Adventist ecclesiology]) finds in the three angels' messages of Rev 14 a historical-theological validation for Christian education. He suggests that the church has been called to invite the world to an alternate system of education that does not bear the marks of Babylon's system of error, as described in the book of Revelation.

The authors are also diverse in levels of expertise, from a fourth-year

undergraduate theology student to world leaders in Adventist scholarship. The majority of articles show a strong emphasis on high degrees of specialization: twenty-five of the thirty-five authors have doctoral degrees and five others are doctoral-degree candidates. The quality of the papers is also diverse. For example, a few papers resemble the transcript of the research process and work of the author rather than a concise and forceful presentation of research and publication results. As a consequence, these unnecessarily long papers, which contain information not directly relevant or essential to the topic, detract from the ability of the reader to stay focused and interested in the contributions of the book in general.

*Pensar la iglesia hoy* conveys, however, more than the voice of South America. The geographical provenance of its authors is also diverse. Although twenty-nine of the articles are written in Spanish, six are written in English, and at least seven of the authors are from outside South America. Finally, while the majority of the articles come from authors in the five Adventist universities of South America (Universidad Adventista del Plata, Argentina; Universidad Adventista de Bolivia; Centro Universitario, Brazil; Universidad Adventista de Chile; Universidad Peruana Union, Peru), the focus of the articles is not limited to the Adventist church in South America. The book is concerned with the Adventist church as a worldwide entity and includes contributions of foreign authors from institutions such as Andrews University, Southern Adventist University, the Biblical Research Institute, and the Seventh-day Adventist world headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Given the systematic nature of the book, I will evaluate *Pensar la iglesia hoy* from a matrix of three fundamental questions of ecclesiology: What does the book say about (1) the nature, (2) the mission, and (3) the authority of the church? The book is structured according to theological disciplines; however, in my opinion, the evaluation should be guided by the general aim of the book, stated in the subtitle: *Hacia una ecclesiología Adventista* (Toward an Adventist ecclesiology). Alberto R. Timm's essay "Seventh-day Adventist Ecclesiology, 1844-2001: A Brief Historical Overview" provides a helpful, brief history of Adventist ecclesiological thinking. Timm's article is probably the best place to start reading the book, and contains excellent introductory bibliographies in the footnotes.

#### *Pensar la iglesia hoy and the Nature of the Church*

The articles on the nature of the church gravitate around two important tenets of Adventism that are being challenged by *progressive* theological and cultural trends: the corporate unity (for a helpful bibliography in this regard, see p. 4 n. 4), and its self-identification as the eschatological remnant.

Regarding the corporate unity of the church, several writers point out

that Scripture contains a dialectical tension between individualism and collectivism. Gerald Klingbeil ("Entre Individualismo y Colectivismo: Hacia una Perspectiva Bíblica de la Naturaleza de la Iglesia" [Between individualism and collectivism: toward a biblical perspective of the nature of the church]) describes this tension in the OT. He notes that both modern and postmodern worldviews undermine the importance of the group and suggests that Adventists "renegotiate their culturization," following the OT's worldview. Efraín Velásquez ("La Tribu: Hacia una Eclesiología Adventista Basada en las Escrituras Hebreas" [The tribe: toward an Adventist ecclesiology based on the Hebrew Scriptures]), who argues in similar terms, explores the tribe as a model for ecclesiology. His article is a prime example of the dyadic culture described by G. Klingbeil. Velásquez suggests, without further elaboration, that the idea of a tribe-church is continued in the NT as the οἰκός-church (40). This suggestion deserves further study. Ekkehardt Müller ("Introduction to the Ecclesiology of the Book of Revelation") points out the same dialectical tension in the book of Revelation, in which the church is local and universal, militant and triumphant, visible and invisible. Merling Alomía ("Dimensiones Cósmicas de la Iglesia Reveladas en la Epístola a los Hebreos" [Cosmic dimension of the church as revealed in the letter to the Hebrews]) considers the cosmic and universal nature of the church in the epistle to the Hebrews. Unfortunately, however, he makes only fleeting mention of Heb 12:22-23, which not only gives the clearest expression in Hebrews of the cosmic nature of the church, but also connects the church to the major theological topics of the epistle to the Hebrews.

While G. Klingbeil, Velásquez, Müller, and Alomía emphasize collectivism, Juan Millanao ("Elementos Básicos para la Elaboración de una Teología Adventista del Sacerdocio de Todos los Creyentes" [Basic elements for the elaboration of an Adventist theology of the priesthood of all believers]) explores the other pole of the dialectical tension: the place of the individual. He proposes seven essential characteristics of an Adventist doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Far from undermining corporate unity, he concludes, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers helps to foster and maintain the cohesion of the universal church (210). One point in his biblical argument needs more precision. He argues that the books that speak of the Christian's priesthood (i.e., Revelation and 1 Peter) do not speak of Christ as priest, and the book that develops Christ's priesthood (i.e., Hebrews) does not speak expressly of the priesthood of believers (210). I would argue, however, that Hebrews does refer to the believers' actions in priestly terms. For example, believers have an "altar" (13:10), where they are invited to "continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God . . . for such sacrifices are pleasing to God" (Heb

13:15-16, NRSV; see also 9:14; 12:28-29; and John M. Scholer, *Proleptic Priests: Priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, JSOTSup, ed. David E. Orton, 49 [Sheffield: JSOT, 1991]).

Finally, Richard W. Medina's call to unity ("La Unidad de la Iglesia según el Salmo 133" [The unity of the church according to Psalm 133]) is ambiguous. While he criticizes the individualist tendency of postmodern culture, his definition of unity as "fellowship" provides room for a "postmodern practice" of ecclesiology, where it is the "experience" of brotherhood that remains important. Other authors also addressed the causes for an individualist/congregationalist trend in Adventism. Lael Caesar ("Una Nación Bajo Dios, Indivisible" [One nation under God, indivisible]) identifies the attitude of "being-better-than" as the greatest challenge to the unity of the Adventist Church. He warns that the church is not immune to this problem, as observed in the necessity to assign resources to confirm those deserving of recognition (232). George W. Reid's excellent article "Three Significant Changes Facing Today's Church" analyzes the powerful impact of postmodernism on the way Adventists think (he identifies a shift from objective truth to experience), understand unity (he identifies "fractures along ethnic, language, tribal, and economic social fault lines"), and define their identity (he identifies a "migration from a doctrinal to a relational platform" in defining the essence of Adventism). This insightful and provocative article also serves as an internal evaluation of the Symposium itself. Raúl Kerbs ("¿Cuál es el *Logos* de la *Eclesio-logía* Adventista?" [What is the *logos* in Adventist ecclesio-logy?]) studies three theological paradigms throughout history (classic, modern, and postmodern) and their impact on ecclesiology. He concludes that Adventists should not try to define their ecclesiology from any of these paradigms, but find its own paradigm in Scripture.

On the issue of individualism and congregationalism, however, there remain important questions that the Symposium did not address: Is the tension between collectivism and individualism, which is present in Scripture, appropriately reflected in the current organizational structure of the church; and do present policies give enough, too much, or too little authority and economical and political resources to the local church? It is evident that congregationalist tendencies represent a threat to the historic ecclesiological understanding of Adventism. However, are these congregationalist tendencies due only to the impact of postmodernism and the cultural diversity of the church, as the book seems to imply? Prominent Adventist voices, who suggest that this may not be the case, have called attention to the advantages of some structural changes in the church's organization (e.g., Robert S. Folkenberg, "Church Structure—Servant or

Master?" *Ministry* [June 1989]: 14-53; George R. Knight, *The Fat Lady and the Kingdom: Adventist Mission Confronts the Challenges of Institutionalism and Secularization* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1995)]. With regard to the political aspect, Raoul Dederen suggests that there is room for progress in policies dealing with the way local congregations appoint their representatives to the worldwide General Conference Session ("The Church: Authority and Unity: Its Source, Nature, and Expression," *Ministry Supp* [May 1995]: 2-16). The Symposium's silence on this aspect is significant.

A related omission is also significant: What are the signs of unity? In the Symposium, unity is emphasized more than it is sufficiently defined and explored. For example, the unity of the church is expressed both in visible organizational structures and in charismatic structures derived from the Holy Spirit through individual spiritual gifts. What is the relation of these two types of structures to each other? Do the present organizational structures allow enough room for the charismatic structures to function adequately? It is clear that the Adventist understanding of its worldwide mission requires a worldwide structure; however, this does not make the meaning and expression of unity obvious.

A tenet of Adventist ecclesiology that is being undermined by progressive tendencies is Adventists' self-identification as the eschatological remnant, which has often been misunderstood as an exclusive claim. Ángel M. Rodríguez ("The Remnant in Contemporary Adventist Thinking"), who identifies reasons for these undermining tendencies, lists the new proposals being made and provides a supporting bibliography in the footnotes. Rodríguez demonstrates that Scripture uses the remnant concept in several ways, and suggests how a healthy self-concept of "remnant" should account for them. His study brings to the fore the vital role of an eschatological perspective for Adventist ecclesiology.

David P. Gullón ("Exposición y Evaluación Crítica del Concepto de Iglesia, Israel y de su Papel Escatológico en la Concepción Teológica del Dispensacionalismo" [Exposition and critical evaluation of the concept of the church and Israel and their eschatological role in the theological conception of dispensationalism]) offers a critical evaluation of evangelical dispensationalism and its eschatological understanding of the nature of the church. The evaluation is good as far as it goes, but has a surprising omission: it doesn't offer an analysis of Rom 9-11, the importance of which is mentioned in the introduction and conclusion of the article, but is absent from its body.

Another important topic on which the Symposium is relatively silent is the relationship of Adventism to other denominations. Several articles mention the issue in passing, but do not really discuss it. For example, the

role that Adventism should play in ecumenical movements is not clear. This has been a hotly debated issue among Adventists and the cause of disaffection in some sectors. This silence about the church's relation to other denominations is also related to the little attention that the Symposium gives to the church as a visible and invisible entity, but which is touched on by Müller and Rodríguez.

### *Pensar la iglesia hoy and the Mission of the Church*

The Adventist understanding of the church's mission is inextricably tied to the debate over the nature of the church. *Pensar la iglesia hoy* affirms that this mission is *worldwide* in scope and unique because of its eschatological *timing* and its distinctive doctrinal *content*. The Adventist understanding that the scope of the church's mission requires a worldwide, unified organizational structure is the reason for the Symposium's constant call to unity.

The worldwide scope of the Adventist mission is emphasized by Efraín Choque ("Prioridades para la Misión en la Iglesia Primitiva Según Hechos 1:8: Un Modelo para la Iglesia Hoy" [Priorities for mission in the primitive church according to Acts 1:8: a model for the church today]) and Rubén R. Otto ("La Evangelización: Un Proceso Pre- y Pos-Bautismal" [Evangelism: a pre- and post-baptism process]). Ron E. M. Clouzet ("El Desafío de la Formación de Líderes en la Educación Teológica: La Lección de Eliseo" [The challenge of leadership formation in theological education: a lesson from Elisha]) offers a study on the formation of leaders for the fulfillment of this mission.

The importance of the historical timing of the Adventist mission is expounded by Enrique Becerra ("El Significado de una Misión Escatológica" [The significance of an eschatological mission]) and René Rogelio Smith ("Educación y Apocalipsis en la Eclesiología Adventista" [Education and the book of Revelation in Adventist ecclesiology]), who both affirm the eschatological nature of the Adventist mission.

The eschatological nature of the Adventist message is inseparably connected with its distinctive doctrines, such as the heavenly sanctuary and the preadvent judgment, which find an obvious basis in the eschatological books of Scripture without excluding the importance of Leviticus, Hebrews, Ezekiel, Psalms, portions of the Gospels, and other Scriptures to these doctrines. However, Héctor E. Urrutia ("El Mensaje del Remanente Final en los Libros Sapienciales" [The message of the final remnant in wisdom literature]) shows how these doctrines are also present in wisdom literature. Fernando Canale ("Hermenéutica, Teología y Remanente" [Hermeneutics, theology, and remnant]) goes a step further by identifying the hermeneutical

principles underlying the differing attitudes toward and understandings of the remnant in contemporary Adventism and their relation to its distinctive doctrines. He concludes that the current crisis is the result of an abandonment of the eschatological hermeneutics of early Adventism. In other words, since the distinctive doctrines of Adventism (e.g., Sabbath, the heavenly sanctuary, and preadvent judgment) were conceived to be a harmonious and comprehensive system of biblical truths essential to the world in the time of the end, the loss of an eschatological perspective would entail the loss of Adventism's uniqueness and *raison d'être*, with the result that the Adventist self-understanding as an end-time remnant would become untenable. Canale's article suggests other questions not addressed in his article or elsewhere in the Symposium: How can Seventh-day Adventism's fundamental beliefs be articulated to meet the challenges of postmodern and non-Western cultures? Does the Adventist message remain relevant to the twenty-first-century person? Though beliefs may remain unchangeable, is Adventism engaged in a continuous process of contextualization? These are questions that deserve further exploration.

### *Pensar la iglesia hoy and the Authority of the Church*

Roberto Pereyra ("La Autoridad de la Escritura y la autoridad de la iglesia organizada: ¿Absoluta/Relativa?" [The authority of Scripture and the authority of the organized church: absolute or relative?]) frankly addresses the issue of church authority and concludes that the church's authority originates from and depends on Scripture. The organized church has authority only to the degree that it remains obedient and faithful to Scripture. Miroslav M. Kiš ("Holiness of the Church") studies holiness as a characteristic and supreme vocation of the church, noting its implications for church discipline. The church was intended to be a "structure" that nurtures a life of holiness; therefore, it lives according to specific standards of conduct and makes discipline necessary. That discipline, however, must be preventive and redemptive in nature. Kiš suggests specific ways in which this can be achieved.

Miguel Ángel Núñez ("Cristo, Cabeza de la Iglesia: ¿Jefe, Caudillo u otro Significado?" [Christ, head of the church: chief, leader, or some other signifier?]) studies the concept of "head" in Scripture and its relationship to authority. He argues correctly that the concept of "head" in NT times did not convey the idea of authority—as it does today—but that of nurturing. He remains unconvincing, however, in the relationship between the concept of "head" as nurturer of the body and the instruction to submit. His assertion that "there is no passage in the whole New Testament that suggests that 'to be the head' of the church may suggest in the case of Christ a relationship of

authority" (249) is an overstatement. First, his study has not analyzed all the relevant NT passages that deal with the concepts of "head," "authority," and "Christ." For example, he omits 1 Cor 11:3, 10. Second, Eph 5:22-23 uses the relationship of head to body between Christ and the church as an analogy for the instruction to wives to submit to their husbands. In other words, the fact that the concept of "head" in the NT world conveyed the idea of "nurturing" does not prevent NT authors also from using the idea of "nurturing" in a relationship of submission-authority. Even leading feminist NT scholars, such as E. Schüssler Fiorenza, recognize this point (cf. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* [New York: Crossroad, 1983], 269; cited by Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC, 42 [Dallas: Word, 1990], 368). The issue is complex and deserves a less categorical conclusion.

Regarding apostolic succession and its relation to authority, Humberto R. Treiyer ("La Autoridad de la iglesia: El Dilema de la sucesión apostólica—Aportes de Elena de White y Hans Küng" [The authority of the church and the dilemma of the apostolic succession—the contributions of Ellen White and Hans Küng]) finds parallels between Ellen G. White and Hans Küng. He argues that both writers maintain that apostolic succession is not authority conferred on certain individuals, but a commission to engage in ministry to the world. Fernando Aranda Fraga ("La Metamorfosis en la Relación Iglesia-Estado a Partir de la Filosofía Política y Jurídica Premoderna de Ockham" [The metamorphosis in the relationship between church and state, starting from the premodern political and juridical philosophy of Ockham]) offers a historical study of the fourteenth-century political and juridical theories of William of Ockham. Ockham's definition of the state as a sphere distinct from the church, with its authority coming only indirectly from God and primarily from its people, led the way to a parallel understanding of the nature and authority of the church. Ockham's ideas were developed throughout modernity and lie at the heart of contemporary evangelical views on ecclesiology.

Several articles explore how the authority of the church may be appropriately exercised. Pfandl ("Independent Ministries") analyzes the challenges posed by some independent Adventist organizations, which often seem to be working at cross-purposes with the organized church. He explores the causes of their success and suggests appropriate responses. Within the discussion on ecclesiastical authority, however, three articles focused on the challenges of a postmodern worldview, and of applying the church's lifestyle standards in differing cultures. Chantal J. Klingbeil ("Iglesia y Cultura: ¿Amigas o Enemigas?") [Church and culture: friends or foes?] shows how

culture impacts both an individual's actions and one's understanding of the world. Carlos A. Steger ("Cristianismo y Cultura: El Dilema de las Instituciones Educativas Adventistas" [Christianity and culture: the dilemma of Adventist educational institutions]) explores the relationship between culture and church standards in the context of Christian educational institutions. Daniel Rode ("El Modelo de Adaptación de Pablo Según 1 Cor 9:19-23" [Paul's model of adaptation according to 1 Cor 9:19-23]) suggests a biblical model for adaptation to different cultures, following Paul's example. C. Klingbeil, Steger, and Rode provide an excellent beginning in their clarification of principles for applying church standards in diverse cultures, but there is still much more to do. The writers agree that there are core principles that remain consistent across cultures. However, what is included in that core? What should be the distinguishing marks that identify an Adventist lifestyle across cultures? While the task of defining Adventism as "culture" is difficult, it has been addressed. For example, William G. Johnsson ("Living as Adventists: Christian Lifestyle in a World Church," unpublished paper [1987], Center for Adventist Research, Andrews University) has proposed some characteristic elements of Adventism as a *supra*-culture.

In summary, the Symposium has clearly identified the challenges that postmodernism and cultural diversity pose to the church, but has been less explicit in identifying the opportunities they offer. Spiritual needs, moral values, God, and truth itself have not so much disappeared from the horizon of postmodern society as they have been redefined. The identification of challenges is important, even essential for survival, but it calls for a second step: the identification of strategies for confronting those challenges with success. With some significant exceptions, this book has remained reactive. It is time that the Adventist ecclesiological debate progresses from reaction to proaction.

*Pensar la iglesia hoy* remains, however, an outstanding contribution to the ongoing debate on ecclesiology among Adventists. As far as I know, a meeting and a work of this nature, totally focused on ecclesiology, are unprecedented in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Its authors engage the topic from surprisingly diverse perspectives and academic disciplines. Despite the varying quality of scholarship in its articles and some neglected issues as noted above, the book presents an informed and faithful picture of the current debate, and, in many cases, advances it to new stages. No study of Adventist ecclesiology can ignore this book and still claim to be informed on the topic.