

Adventist Ecclesiology and THE ONE PROJECT

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Introduction

Five years ago love for the church gave birth to an ecclesiological conversation, which has grown - and grown again - through the fellowship of something called THE ONE PROJECT. In this presentation I will, first and briefly, tell the story of this grassroots movement of Adventist Christians. Then, second, I will attempt an analysis of THE ONE PROJECT'S ecclesiological contribution and why this might be helpful for the church. Before moving on let me state the obvious: I am, as an actor in this particular story, in no way qualified to proffer a fully unbiased evaluation. I will, however, attempt a fair and even self-critical analysis.

Story of THE ONE PROJECT

In the autumn of 2009 I preached a series of sermons on the campus of Andrews University, where Pastor Japhet De Oliveira served as senior chaplain. There, in Berrien Springs, Michigan, I met Japhet for the first time, and we engaged in the first of what has turned out to be innumerable conversations. The theme of our dialogue: ecclesiology, the church. We discovered a shared passion and concern for our church. We acknowledged a mutual desire: that the church might enjoy a rich and meaningful future. And, in particular, we longed that emerging generations of young adults would fall in love with the church as we had.

The following year, in the summer of 2010, we invited three pastoral colleagues to join us for a mini-retreat in Denver, Colorado. We spent two days together: praying, talking, laughing, crying - but most of all, dreaming about the church. Ecclesiology had brought us together. But something happened in the Mile High City that we (or at least I) had not expected: we left not thinking about *ecclesiology*, but, rather, *Christology*. It seemed that over and over again as we mused upon the possibility of a bright future for the church, the conversation quickly turned to Jesus. (In fact, we celebrated communion before we dismissed our time together.) At the time, I'm not sure I could have articulated what had happened to us, and to our conversation. Later that year, reading the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, the meaning and significance of the Denver dialogue's direction came into focus for me. He writes:

The crisis of the church in present-day society is not merely the critical choice between assimilation or retreat into the ghetto, but the crisis of its own existence as the church of the crucified Christ. The question of ecclesiology, however unpleasant it may be for conservatives and progressives, is no more than a short prelude to

its internal crisis, for *only by Christ is it possible to tell what is a Christian church and what it not.*¹

These words clarified the not-so-subtle shift in our conversation: we had come to the conclusion that if our church was to have a life we needed, first and foremost, to shift the conversation to *The Life ... from church to Jesus*. Ecclesiology was never going anywhere good until we talked Christology. How could we sit inside the sanctuary of the church of Laodicea all the while Jesus was standing *outside* the building, knocking and calling to be let in? Church talk *before* Christ talk, we realized, is putting the theological cart before the horse. Jesus must be first.²

Let me speed the story along now. We left Colorado convinced this experience should not be hoarded, but shared. Six months later 172 men and women gathered in Atlanta as the first official THE ONE PROJECT gathering. Another year, now 2012, and we assembled as more than 700 in Seattle. In 2013 over 750 met in Chicago and then again, in 2014, even more, back in Seattle. Meanwhile, the conversations spread to England, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Holland, New Zealand, and a number of cities in both Eastern and Western Australia. 2015 gatherings are set for San Diego, California (in February) and Melbourne, Australia (in July). These events have spurred numerous requests for additional meetings and related resources. Several thousand people now receive a periodic electronic newsletter, interact in ongoing dialogue through social media, and utilize online archives of nearly 150 THE ONE PROJECT presentations.

I think it's fair to say that the founders of this movement did not anticipate a conversation so large, so global, and so lasting. The widespread interest in THE ONE PROJECT came as an unexpected, and at times, unwelcome surprise. While there are many who have participated in and applauded the experience and impact of THE ONE PROJECT, others have found themselves in opposition. At least two books have been written and distributed by Remnant Publications, which cast THE ONE PROJECT in a very dark light.³ Numerous blogs and other web-based missives have described THE ONE PROJECT as not only unhelpful, but dangerous. Some have argued THE ONE PROJECT is a tool used by the Devil himself - an instrument with intent to destroy the church. In October of this year (2014), an entire conference was held in Sacramento, California, dedicated *specifically* to opposing the work of THE ONE PROJECT and exposing its alleged heresies.⁴ THE ONE PROJECT, through its proponents, and perhaps even more through its opponents, has gained the attention of the church-at-large.⁵

¹ Jürgen Moltman, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Fortress Press, 1993), 2-3. (my emphasis)

² Revelation 3:20, New International Version

³ Rick Howard's *Meet It* and Dave Fiedler's *Tremble* were both published in 2014.

⁴ Presentations can be accessed at <http://new.livestream.com/saccentral/events/3378356> as of November 4, 2014.

⁵ Several private conversations have taken place between THE ONE PROJECT leadership and denominational church leaders. These interactions, regional, national, and international, have occurred upon request of denominational leaders.

So what is purpose of THE ONE PROJECT? What is being said about Jesus and the Church, about Christology and Ecclesiology? What impact might this movement have on the Adventist Church? What might THE ONE PROJECT contribute to the future of Adventism, particularly in the Global West? Let me now turn toward an analysis of THE ONE PROJECT.

An Analysis of THE ONE PROJECT'S Ecclesiological Contribution

I believe THE ONE PROJECT has basically made two contributions to the church: first, through what it has claimed, and second, through what it has modeled.⁶

First, THE ONE PROJECT has claimed, in numerous ways and through many voices, that the Adventist Church, in order to be healthy, wealthy, and wise, must be consumed with the life, the lessons, and the language of Jesus. This may seem an obvious and even uncontested point. After all, what church member would oppose the importance of Jesus? Well, apparently, there is more resistance to Jesus than we might assume. Dan Jackson, president of the Adventist Church in North America, made the following remark in October of 2014 to the assembled leadership of the church at year-end meetings in Silver Spring, Maryland:

The ultimate goal for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America is Jesus and His soon return. Jesus is everything! He is the reason for our existence and our focal point.... ***It is not a crime to preach about Jesus in our churches.***⁷

It is, to my mind, both curious and worrisome that Jackson would sense a need to publicly remind *Christian church* leaders of the legitimacy and legality of talking about *Christ* in the *church*! Is the President sounding a false alarm? Or might he be on to something? Elder Jackson's comment, I am unhappy to report, did not come as a surprise to me or to THE ONE PROJECT'S leadership. Our experience with THE ONE PROJECT leads us to this sad conclusion: Jackson is awake.⁸ Why this opinion? The following criticisms are representative of those directed at THE ONE PROJECT with some frequency.

- "If you are preaching Jesus this means you don't care about unique Seventh-day Adventist doctrine."
- "Preaching Jesus is on one end of the theological continuum and preaching doctrine is on the other."

⁶ I draw these two conclusions from personal observation of well over 100 public presentations at major gatherings, innumerable semi-private conversations related to THE ONE PROJECT content, and many more private ecclesiological conversations of THE ONE PROJECT leadership.

⁷ Accessed at: <http://www.adventistreview.org/church-news/nad-sees-challenge-as-number-of-new-members-dips> as of November 4, 2014.

⁸ See also his book, "Is Jesus Enough?" Available at <http://www.adventistbookcenter.com/is-jesus-enough.html> of November 4, 2014.

- “There needs to be a balance between preaching doctrine and preaching Jesus.”
- “Jesus is just one of many equally important doctrines.”
- “When are you going to move beyond preaching Jesus? This is an acceptable place to start but serious Adventists eventually move on to other things.”
- “A focus on Jesus is something all Christian denominations can agree on. Seventh-day Adventists have been called to a purpose greater than Jesus. Preaching Jesus is not unique, and therefore, it differs from a true, end-time remnant message. Catholics, Baptists, and the Emerging Church can preach Jesus; the Adventist church has a different mission.”

These perspectives (given the frequency we have heard them) seem to indicate, to me, the presence of a dangerous theological epidemic (or perhaps pandemic). I would call it, at minimum, a disturbingly popular Jesus Allergy. This apparently common hesitancy to embrace Jesus Christ as the ultimate expression and core substance of all church teaching and practice relegates Adventism to the diseased status as a Christ-less (or perhaps Christ-lite) religious group. Are we not, at that point, no longer a Christian church? Are we not dangerously close to an ecclesiastic construction absent Jesus as Chief Cornerstone?

The displacement of Jesus as the center and circumference of Adventist ecclesiological concern also places the church in jeopardy of unhealthy consideration of important contemporary challenges, such as church governance, sexuality, financial stewardship, liturgy, church structure, social justice, evangelism, ecumenical activity, congregational diversity, and remnant theology. How are we to think clearly - biblically - about these and other *church* issues if we do not first acknowledge *Jesus* as the one who “holds all things together”?⁹

THE ONE PROJECT convocation presenters over the years have intentionally blended talk of Jesus and Church, Christology and Ecclesiology. They have attempted to speak seriously about Jesus Christ and how such thoughts might impact how one perceives the reality and work of the church. Far from avoiding “other subjects,” presenters have addressed the paramount Christian query of how Jesus impacts thinking about salvation, doctrine, church history, evangelism, community, and personal relationships. Special attention has been given to Jesus as a necessary consideration *a priori* to an appropriate consideration of the unique mission of Adventism. THE ONE PROJECT’S simple mission statement, “Celebrating The Supremacy of Jesus Christ Through The Adventist Church,” argues for an indispensable connection between exaltation of Jesus and excellence in Adventist practice. Once again, *Christology* precedes *ecclesiology*.¹⁰

⁹ Colossians 1:15-20 (New International Version)

¹⁰ The upcoming theme in San Diego considers *The Sermon on the Mount* - with 14 presenters passing the baton for two-days through a verse-by-verse exposition of Matthew 5:1-7:29.¹⁰ The purpose of this particular gathering is to think seriously about an ethic for the church grounded afresh in the teaching of Jesus. Presenters include: Randy, Roberts, Japhet De Oliveira, Chris Oberg, Alex Bryan, Timothy Gillepsie, Laurence Turner, Ivan Williams, Michaela Jeffery Lawrence, Emily Whitney, Sam Leonor, John McVay, Manny Artaega, Dwight Nelson, and John Ortberg.

If the first contribution THE ONE PROJECT offers to the ecclesiological conversation is a *clear* and *redundant* statement about the essential role of Jesus in the Church, the second is what the very nature of the gatherings indicates about how the Adventist Church (particularly in the Global West) might survive and thrive in the days ahead. Simply put, I believe THE ONE PROJECT'S apparent resonance with many church members has demonstrated some important realities the church must wrestle with if it is to seriously consider its good future.

Let me enumerate four aspects of this claim.

1. THE ONE PROJECT is a grassroots movement inspired and powered by local church communities. While the group's leadership is comprised of both church employees and those who work outside the church, all who plan and produce the activities of THE ONE PROJECT do so without pay. The ministry does not function as a top-down, denominational ministry created by an administrative office. While it enjoys a very good relationship with various administrators, and is fully a part of the church, this ministry is inherently local. The flavor of gatherings reveals attentiveness to the local scene in ways that seem attractive and true to those who participate. Because the content and quality of gatherings is the product of local influence, I believe they are uniquely able to understand and anticipate the needs of those who attend. Simply put: the greatest advantage in these *global* gatherings may well be *local* roots. Ecclesiastic activity is not dependent upon the instigation or investment of denominational administration. In fact, ecclesiastic vitality can be decidedly local.
2. THE ONE PROJECT thrives within the happy condition of entrepreneurial freedom. Space to "try new things" is vast. Permission to do things with excellence, creativity, and beauty is granted. Experimentation is not crippled by political or organizational fear. THE ONE PROJECT has also been blessed with modest yet adequate financial resources (principally through the investments of local church members), which make meaningful ministry possible. The twin reality of ecclesiastic innovation fueled by financial investment is something the larger church should carefully consider.
3. THE ONE PROJECT has balanced the generally more privileged theological *monologue* with an inclusion, and even prioritization, of theological *dialogue*. Public presenters are not introduced as "gurus" in possession of regal résumés. Sermons, called "reflections," are limited to 18 minutes. Table conversations, called "recalibrations," are frequent and substantial, scheduled in response to the presentations. These conversations comprise the heart of THE ONE PROJECT experience. Attendees anticipate not only *listening* but *speaking* to the topics at hand. THE ONE PROJECT has with intentionality included a diversity of public voices: young and old, male and female, ethnic diversity, internationality, clergy and layperson alike. What

has been learned: ecclesiastic conversation engenders theological ownership and promotes corporate loyalty.

4. THE ONE PROJECT has, since the beginning, included contributions from Christian voices outside tribal Adventism.¹¹ The group's leadership believes Adventism gains strength through dialogue with other Christians. The tribe of Judah needed the tribe of Dan and the tribe of Dan needed the tribe of Levi. Each tribe maintaining its uniqueness - all the while supporting and enjoying support from sibling tribes. Ecclesiastic health includes Christological conversation beyond the borders of Adventism.

On that note, I will conclude with an observation from N.T. Wright, who nicely summarizes the importance of an ecclesiology well fed by the waters of a popular focus on Jesus - Christological thinking democratized. I think these words accurately describe THE ONE PROJECT'S attempt.

If church leaders themselves spent more time studying and teaching Jesus and the Gospels, a good many of the other things we worry about in day-to-day church life would be seen in their proper light. Church leaders find themselves spending countless hours at their desks running the Church as a business, raising money, or working at dozens of other tasks, rather than poring over their foundational documents and enquiring ever more closely about the Jesus whom they are supposed to be following and teaching others to follow. I believe that each generation has to wrestle afresh with the question of Jesus, not least its biblical roots, if it is to be the Church at all. We should discover more and more of who Jesus was and is precisely in order to be equipped to engage with the world that he came to save. And this is the task of the whole Church ...¹²

¹¹ Leonard Sweet, Andy Stanley, John Ortberg, and others, have blessed our conversations through their books or their physical presence.

¹² N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (IVP Books, 1999), 15-16.