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**Why Catholicity Matters:**

**Toward an Adventist Ecumenism**

**by Charles Scriven**

*“A Church is catholic or it is not the Church.”*

*—Karl Barth[[1]](#footnote-0)*

If “catholicity” is a difficult concept for everyone, it’s even more difficult for us: historically, Adventism is *anti-*Catholic, so what sense does it make to say that “catholicity” *matters*? Well, in any Christian context, and all the more so in ours, ecumenical reflection demands clarity about this slippery term. Already, it has appeared here with and without a capital letter, first as an adjective, then as a noun, then again as a noun with a different but related meaning. What is going on?

The word “catholic” has a history, and a very long one. Although it does not occur in the New Testament, it does occur in subapostolic writings, and in this earliest Christian usage denotes a quality of *individual congregations*. A “catholic church” is a congregation that is authentic in the sense of being “whole or well rounded…as opposed to being one-sided or partial”; a congregation, that is, whose whole way of life—belief, worship and morals—reflects Jesus Christ, the church’s one true “foundation.” Later, the word came to suggest all the churches “summed up as one,” the idea, that is, of Christian life in its entirety, “*fully extended* in space and time.” Still later—and here the capital *C* became commonplace—“Catholic” began to convey the idea of legitimacy: a community convinced of its own merit as authentic and all-inclusive would apply the word to itself and say communities considered heretical or inadequate by these standards were *not* Catholic. If the institution centered in Rome has thought of itself as *the* Catholic Church, other church bodies, such as the Eastern, or Chalecedonian, Orthodox Church, have embraced the word in making their case *against* Rome.[[2]](#footnote-1)

So the concept of “catholicity” carries with it three distinct but related senses: one is wholeness or authenticity in congregational life; another is the sum of all Christian congregations, or, as we might say now, the church universal, inclusive of all its varying streams;[[3]](#footnote-2) still another—again, the capital *C*—involves the claim by some party or other (such as the Roman Catholic Church) to meet a standard of legitimacy others fail to meet. Today, with Christianity so obviously divided, all three of these senses, and particularly the second, call to mind two key passages from the New Testament. One, John 17:21, reports Jesus’ prayer that those who believe in him “may all be one,” just as he and the Father are one. The other, Ephesians 4:3, 4, challenges believers “to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body,” the passage continues, “and one Spirit…, One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all…”

Both authenticity in congregational life and legitimacy as larger Christian parties or organizations would seem, judging from these passages, to necessitate commitment to a single, overarching “body” reflecting, both *in* and *between* its parts, the same unity that made Jesus and the Father one. But Christian communities have fallen short of this ideal, and at times have scorned it to the point of hatred and bloodshed. This disturbing fact compels fresh consideration of what to think and do. Given current reality among the churches, what might “unity” look like? Or is any such unity either too compromising or too difficult to have a present claim on our time and energy? If, on other hand, the obligation to pursue unity still holds, what might a path forward look like? Should we bring the first sense of “catholicity” to the fore and think of greater congregational wholeness as the most important strategy? Or should we focus on the third sense and work toward establishing a super-entity that would bring all Christian churches into formal union with one another?

My thesis is twofold: an *Adventist* approach, I will argue, ought to embrace struggle toward unity among all Christians; in such a struggle, I will argue second, the focus should be on greater congregational wholeness, or authenticity. But since the “ecumenical movement,” as it is called, has devoted long attention to catholicity and to the New Testament’s call to Christian unity, the defense of the thesis must pass through Adventist perspective (so far) on that movement’s significance. Progressive Adventists[[4]](#footnote-3) wring their hands over the church’s conventional distrust of—Reinder Bruinsma calls it “old-time fury against”—anything “Catholic and ecumenical,” and by contrast express interest, as Bruinsma puts it, in “interchurch cooperation.”[[5]](#footnote-4) The most conservative members, on the other hand, want nothing to do with ecumenism.[[6]](#footnote-5) For analysis by someone who was (at arm’s length) an actual participant in the movement, and whose work still carries the sanction of “official” Adventism, the best source is Bert B. Beach. He served a long tenure (until his 1995 retirement) as the Adventist church’s top official for Public Affairs and Religious Liberty, and was also its liaison with the World Council of Churches.

The General Conference Executive Committee has never, in fact, voted an official statement on the ecumenical movement. Nevertheless, a “study document,” written by Beach, appeared “in connection with” the church’s 1985 General Conference Session, and it continues to be available in the “official statements” section of the church’s website.[[7]](#footnote-6)

The statement, called simply “Ecumenical Movement,” is some ten pages long, and offers both description and perspective concerning the church’s relationship to contemporary ecumenism. The author had earlier, however, published a book-length treatment of the subject, entitled *Ecumenism—Boon or Bane?*[[8]](#footnote-7) The thinking in that 1974 volume is the backdrop for the website statement’s explanation of why Adventists, though respectful of other churches and open to some “cooperation” with them, cannot fully embrace contemporary ecumenism.[[9]](#footnote-8)

At the time Beach’s book came out, the movement was riding a wave of popular regard. Beach described the background, noting that the adjective “ecumenical” comes from a Greek noun that appears in the New Testament and refers to “the whole inhabited earth.” In post-New Testament usage, “ecumenical” came, however, to suggest the church as a whole, rather like “catholic” in the second sense earlier described.[[10]](#footnote-9) But with the uniting of church and empire after Constantine, it came to suggest Christendom itself: councils presided over by the emperor and involving leaders from around the Empire were now called “ecumenical” councils.

Centuries later, after the divisions that followed the Protestant Reformation, “ecumenical” began to evoke both the question of unity across lines of Christian separation and the subjective attitude of friendliness toward dialogue and cooperation among Christians. In the early nineteenth century inter-denominational endeavors such as Bible societies, missionary organizations and student and youth societies came into being.[[11]](#footnote-10) Interest in the formalization of unity among churches began to constitute an “ecumenical movement,” and with the eruption of “‘violent nationalism’” in the 1930s seemed to have increasing relevance.[[12]](#footnote-11) By 1948 the World Council of Churches had formed officially, and was bringing Christian communions into regular conversation toward mutual understanding and even the prospect of merger. Some 200 churches had become members by 1961. By the mid-60s even Roman Catholic leaders, influenced now by Vatican II, were showing interest in ecumenical discussion, though with the proviso, of course, that Rome would remain at the church’s center.[[13]](#footnote-12)

Under increasing pressure from secularism, Christian leaders, especially those in the mainstream Protestant churches, were more and more convinced that overcoming acrimony and (organizational) division among the many churches would strengthen Christian witness. Reflecting his Adventist heritage, Beach, of course, thought otherwise. He argued in his book that ecumenical orthodoxy compromises doctrinal purity, opens the way to syncretism, and fuels “indifferentism,” thus slackening concern for “evangelism and foreign mission.” He remarked on ecumenist passion for “peace, antiracism, economic development of the third world, human rights, and the struggle against hunger,” but took this to be distracting and “peripheral.” If the Hebrew prophets exhibited similar concern, it was under “theocratic” conditions that are no longer pertinent. Now the church’s main business is proclamation of the “salvific gospel” and conversion of individual souls.[[14]](#footnote-13)

Further reflecting his Adventism, Beach faulted mainstream ecumenism for giving only passing regard to eschatology. The Second Coming has little “operating influence” on the movement’s sense of mission, he said, and the movement therefore overlooks the “radical discontinuity” between the present age and the age to come. Neglect of eschatology makes it all too easy to lapse into “adaptation” to the wider world and to reflect “*current political opinion or social theory*” rather than “*the Word of God*.”[[15]](#footnote-14) Christian existence is “*exemplary existence*,” and takes its shape from the “normative authority” of Jesus. So when a 1966 WCC conference on church and society seemed to “accommodate violent revolutionary activities,” it was a kind of betrayal. “‘All violence,’” said Beach, quoting Jacque Ellul, “‘is a crime before the Lord.’”[[16]](#footnote-15)

The book’s last pages underscore the traditional vision of Adventism as God’s “divinely appointed” means for inviting people, in preparation for the Second Coming, out of compromised Christianity, or “Apocalyptic Babylon.” The Seventh-day Adventist Church is the bearer of “God’s last message.” To “cooperate conscientiously” with other Christians is acceptable, even to the point of sharing theological discussion: as yet, Beach allowed, “we have not fully plumbed the depths of Christian truth.” Still, we cannot formally join an ecumenical organization when so joining might cast an “equivocal light” on our prophetic witness. Adventists know from the “apocalyptic writings” that “the nearer the approach of the Parousia, the greater will be the resistance to Christ, even within the churches.”[[17]](#footnote-16)

The statement “released” for public consumption at the 1985 General Conference Session mainly reflects points Beach made in the book. Seventh-day Adventists bear the last message God will give. Union with “fallen” Christian communities would make us vulnerable to “doctrinal softness” and “eschatological blindness”; also to preoccupation with *“shalom*,” or “social peace and harmony,” instead of the church’s “primary” work of “proclamation.”[[18]](#footnote-17)

But two points of difference between the book and the statement bear on discussion that will follow. One is that the 1985 statement, but not the earlier book, quotes from a General Conference Executive Committee declaration first occasioned by questions about interaction with non-Adventist “missionary societies.” Appearing in 1926, long before ecumenism came to full flower, the declaration was later revised to address our general dealings with “other Christian churches and religious organizations.” Now an “official” expression of the church’s point of view, it says clearly that Adventism’s particular work is to bring the message of Revelation 14:6-12 “to the attention of all peoples everywhere”—including, presumably, men and women now belonging to other Christian churches. But it begins, nevertheless, with these words, quoted in full in the 1985 statement on ecumenism: “We recognize those agencies that lift up Christ…*as a part of the divine plan* for evangelization of the world, and…*hold in high esteem Christian men and women in other communions* who are engaged in winning souls to Christ.”[[19]](#footnote-18)

That is one point of significant difference between Beach’s book and the church’s 1985 statement. The second is a reason suggested, in the book, for theological discussion with other Christians: “…*we have not fully plumbed the depths of Christian truth*.”[[20]](#footnote-19) Here Beach intimates that from conversation with people not ourselves we may learn about, and perhaps even adjust, our own convictions, our own take on the meaning of the Gospel. It’s a suggestion that appears nowhere in the church’s official statement.

Beach’s work in both the book and the later statement, though quite conventional, contains substantial insight and at least, significantly, a modicum of humility. We should, he tells us, resist church entanglements that might compromise our distinctive witness, even as we cooperate with others when we can. We may engage in ecumenical conversation toward the deeper understanding *we ourselves need*. All this, I would say, opens doorways to the kind of catholicity envisioned in earlier-quoted New Testament calls for unity.

Contemporary theologians of the Radical Reformation, interpreting the very tradition that gave rise to Adventism,[[21]](#footnote-20) have been developing their own perspective on catholicity and ecumenism. What they say, it turns out, not only underscores our reservations about identity-threatening formal alignments and but also challenges our tendency, still evident among conservatives, to self-indulgent isolation. James Wm. McClendon, Jr., and John Howard Yoder, co-authors of one important essay, believe all Christians “have a fundamental duty to realize” the unity Jesus prayed for.[[22]](#footnote-21) They see no point, however, in establishing a monolithic super-institution that would signal unity but at the same time sweep away substantive differences among the varying Christian traditions.

To them, the path forward, as suggested by such passages as Matthew 18:15-20, all of 1 Corinthians 12, and 1 Corinthians 14:26-31, is dialogue toward reconciliation that takes place in settings of sufficient intimacy for deep understanding to occur. The earliest sense of “catholicity” was congregational wholeness, or authenticity. A focus here, say McClendon and Yoder, is the best strategy toward catholicity in the second sense, as the solidarity of all in the church universal, inclusive of all its varying streams.[[23]](#footnote-22) Bureaucratic shortcuts can only mislead and fall short. In a passage from *Witness*, the third volume of his systematic theology, McClendon elaborates as follows on this approach to Christian unity:

Let us all, congregation by congregation, local church by local church, Christian group by Christian group, seek to embody the completeness that is found in Christ Jesus and in his true saints ancient and modern. When we do that we shall of necessity come closer to one another.[[24]](#footnote-23)

The challenge of unity presents itself first in congregations, where members and pastors carry on their weekly struggle toward the ideal Jesus prayed for. But as the phrase “group by Christian group” may intimate, the challenge must be met in other settings, too, as when, say, associated congregations disagree, or Czech Brethren or Anabaptists begin to follow a disputed path.

Here the work of a more recent theologian of the Radical Reformation casts important light. In his *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists*, Curtis W. Freeman, of the Duke Divinity School, argues that “dissent” and “contestation” are a kind of lifeblood toward the all-embracing catholicity that makes the church universal a single faith under a single Lord. Unless we engage others, and especially others who challenge our complacency, we may read the Bible in self-serving rather than self-questioning ways, and so end up “‘warped and twisted,’” as William Faulkner once said of the intellectually impoverished churches in his American South.[[25]](#footnote-24) Authenticity requires humility, acknowledgment that God’s kingdom is greater than any of its manifestations, including the one we identify with ourselves. We exist, all of us, within the entire Christian tradition, going back to the early centuries and not just to the beginnings of our own “denomination.”[[26]](#footnote-25) We may all learn from all who share the Christian way, and for the sake of individual and congregational wholeness, we must.

As a theologian in the Radical Reformation stream, Freeman denies to any bureaucracy the right of “binding authority” over a local congregation.[[27]](#footnote-26) Still, congregations cannot thrive in isolation but must seek “association” with other congregations so as to meet and share perspective. In the end, they must open themselves to “ecumenical communion” so as to widen as far as possible the ties of Christian fellowship and the opportunities for constructive “contestation.”The picture offered up in Berea is the right picture: the faithful, here Paul and Silas, bearing witness, and the faithful welcoming and testing the witness they hear.[[28]](#footnote-27)

Such an approach offers no quick fix for Christian discord. Instead, as McClendon and Yoder say, “we each leave the other way to flourish alongside our own way, waiting to see which will in the long run lead to the mutually recognized goal.”[[29]](#footnote-28)

I mean all this as a proposal *toward* an Adventist ecumenism. Subjecting how we live and what we believe—including even our “distinctive” doctrines—to the test of conversation not only with one another but also with those not ourselves would push conventional Adventists into unfamiliar territory. But it’s a move thinkers in our own great stream of Radical Reformation faith find compelling. What is more, the move would reflect intuitions that come to expression, even if not fully formed, in the perspective of our church’s most influential scholar of ecumenism. Finally, it would drive us toward a confidence *enhanced by humility, not warped by self-satisfaction.*

A proposal *toward* an Adventist ecumenism is just a start, or another start, on discussion where questions loom up more readily than answers. But if Christians come from every time and place, yet are, as the hymn declares, “one o’er all the earth,” it’s a start worth making.

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4/1; trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 702. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Since Adventism has its roots in the Reformation’s left wing (as I here take for granted), I pursue my essay’s theme through a “believers church” lens, one, in other words, that is neither Roman Catholic, Lutheran nor Reformed but reflects instead the heritage of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists. For the analysis of “catholicity,” I rely on James Wm. McClendon and John Howard Yoder, “Christian Identity in Ecumenical Perspective: A Response to David Wayne Layman,” in Ryan Andrew Newson and Andrew C. Wright, eds., *The Collected Works of James Wm. McClendon, Jr.*, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 247, 248, where they cite 1 Corinthians 3:11, Paul’s reference to Christ as the church’s one “foundation.” These co-authors, in turn, rely on E. S. Abbott et al., *Catholicity: A Study in the Conflict of Christian Traditions in the West* (Westminster: Dacre, 1947), 11; and John Henry Newman in the 1878 third (Roman Catholic) edition of *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (ch. 1, I, 3 [57]) as cited in Stephen Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity: Theologians and the Essence of Christianity from Schleiermacher to Barth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 27. I have also consulted McClendon’s discussion in *Witness: Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2000),334-339, from which the phrase “*fully extended* in space and time” (author’s italics), is drawn. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. After McClendon, I think of church history as involving “streams” that were in place “before Catholic dominance suppressed most of the others.” The familiar “tree-branch” metaphor of church history does underscore the “biblical ‘roots’ of all Christian existence,” but misleadingly suggests that those committed to, for example, the believers church perspective may be “latecomers.” Here see James Wm. McClendon, “A baptist [small-b] Millenium?” in Newson and Wright, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 295. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. I reject the term “liberal” as having legitimate bearing on Adventist life; in the Christian setting, the term reflects a nineteenth century Protestant movement that was effectively accommodationist and secularizing and so seems incompatible with the announced views of any substantial sector in our church. Although I have long questioned the term “progressive” for seeming arrogant and self-indulgent, I now use it (reluctantly) for its implication of commitment to growth in understanding under the leading—see, especially, John 16:12-16—of the Holy Spirit. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Reinder Bruinsma, *Facing Doubt: a Book for Adventist Believers ‘on the Margins’* (London: Flankó Press, 2016), 57, 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. For one example, consider Walter Veith’s remarks on Reinder Buinsma, “Conspiracies: So Often Believed, So Rarely Based on Fact,” available at <http://archives.adventistreview.org/article/2812/archives/issue-2009-1525/conspiracies>, accessed November 1, 2016. Veith writes:  “I have shown in my lectures that the ecumenical movement is not from God and have consistently warned against involvement in this movement…” His own piece “A Response to Reinder Bruinsma’s Article,” is available at <http://pdf.amazingdiscoveries.org/A%20Response%20to%20Reinder%20Bruinsma.pdf>, accessed November 1, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. See <https://www.adventist.org/en/information/official-statements/documents/article/go/-/ecumenical-movement>, accessed October 17, 2016, and referred to hereinafter as “Ecumenical Movement.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Bert Beverly Beach, *Ecumenism: Boon or Bane?* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald, 1974). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. “Ecumenical Movement,” 8. The page numbers are from the ten pages of text as they came out of my printer. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. See McClendon and Yoder, “Christian Identity in Ecumenical Perspective,” 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. The description so far summarizes Beach, *Ecumenism*, 23-27; 70-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Ibid., 93, 95. The second phrase is taken from a remark by ecumenical leader W. A. Visser ‘t Hooft. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Ibid., 101, 254, 255; to be precise, 198 churches were WCC members by 1961. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Ibid., 127, 160, 162, 203, 213, 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. Ibid., 196, 197, 208, 218, author’s italics. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. Ibid., 211, author’s italics, 247, 245, 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. Ibid., 284-290. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. “Ecumenical Movement,” 1-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
19. Ibid., 8, italics mine. The full statement, tweaked somewhat since 1985, appears at <https://www.adventist.org/en/information/official-statements/documents/article/go/-/relationships-with-other-christian-churches-and-religious-organizations/>; what I have quoted reflects edits incorporated into the September, 2013, version, accessed October 25, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
20. Beach, *Ecumenism*, 290, italics mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
21. The link of Adventism to Anabaptism has become commonplace among Adventist scholars, if not yet among administrators and pastors. My own argument for such a link appears in Charles Scriven, “Radical Discipleship and the Renewal of Adventist Mission,” *Spectrum* 14 (1983): 11-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
22. McClendon and Yoder, “Christian Identity in Ecumenical Perspective,” 246 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
23. Ibid., 265, 266. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
24. McClendon, *Witness*, 336. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
25. Curtis W. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* **(**Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014**),** x**,** 51**,** [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
26. Ibid., 92, 138, 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
27. Ibid., 239. Freeman’s exact language is that no “association” may have such “binding authority.” [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
28. Ibid., 130, 290, 291 According to Acts 17:10, 11, Paul and Silas shared their message in the synagogue and the Bereans both welcomed and tested it by the light of scripture. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
29. McClendon and Yoder, “Christian Identity in Ecumenical Perspective,” 267. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)