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**Coming out of Babylon and Christian Unity:
Continuity and Discontinuity in the Adventist Discourse about Other
Christians**

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The theme for our meeting this year caught my attention when I read it: "Gates and Walls: Inclusivity and Exclusivity and the People of God". Notions of who is included in and who is excluded from the people of God have been discussed in Christianity for centuries and in Adventism for generations. Given the titles of other papers to be read tomorrow, I believe this topic still generates a lot of conversations and is very relevant for Adventists in the world in which we live today, a world that is becoming more and more diverse and flat, where tolerance of diversity is a key attribute of social peace and stability. One's discourse about the other has become an item of intense scrutiny in recent years. What we say about others matters a great deal.

During the last thirty years of my career as a pastor, professor and educational administrator, and as a doctoral student in a non-Adventist context for a few years in between, I have repeatedly pondered the question of who belongs to the people of God. The question intrigues me. How do I know who belongs to God's people? At times, the question itself troubles me. Can I really know who belongs to the people of God? It appears that Scripture gives some indications to help make this determination. But at times I'm puzzled by the way I approach various texts of Scripture on this topic and I'm also puzzled by the confusion and ambiguities, tensions and inconsistencies I see in the Adventist discourse toward other Christians.

It is also intriguing that we would discuss this theme in a venue like this one, where dozens of Adventist theologians have gathered from all over North America and many parts of the world, to rub shoulders with hundreds of other scholars, Jews, Christians, Muslims, and people of many other religious faiths, who also claim to be part of the people of God. The question of boundaries, of inclusivity and exclusivity regarding the people of God is a relevant question. In the broadest sense of the word this gathering is one of the most ecumenical gatherings held each year and our annual pilgrimage unassumingly fosters an ecumenical spirit of good will and cooperation in search for truth, or at least in search for wisdom. Here we experience diversity of religious expressions and beliefs, we witness tolerance and courtesy in our interactions with one another, we exhibit genuine honesty and friendship toward others who also claim to be part of God's people.

In this address tonight I'd like to share with you my personal reflections emerging from my journey as I seek to understand the boundaries of God's people. Our personal experiences shape our spiritual journey and how we understand God's will for our lives. In my case, some professional experiences I've had have caused me to ask myself some questions about these boundaries and how we got where we are as Adventists. I still don't have a well-thought through answer but I would like to offer some thoughts for the journey of others who like me wrestle with this question. The tensions and inconsistencies I see in the Adventist discourse about other Christians stem from the heart of our identity, from the

prophetic message itself that gives us our mission and focus. To do this reflection adequately I think one needs humility, candor and to a large extent a spirit of contrition.

I perceive that at the root of our tensions and inconsistencies is our understanding of the concept of Babylon and of church unity. For Adventists these two concepts appear to be antithetical. Our teaching about who forms the entity of modern Babylon has led us to a strong sense of separation from other Christians, at times allowing us to have a rhetoric of violence toward others. Yet, we have also attempted to establish good relations with other denominations through dialogues, and personal associations in local pastoral fellowships or various societies like here this weekend. The contrast between the two approaches has led to interesting ambiguities in our discourse about other Christians. At the same time I think we have not explored adequately the meaning of Christian unity.

The book of Revelation highlights the identity of a remnant people of God at the end of time, a people whose heritage goes back in time to the beginning of God's covenant with Adam and Eve, who are descendants of God's faithful people who through the ages have been faithful to God's covenant and have pursued the ideals of God's word, have preached the everlasting gospel, and have upheld his law and his Sabbath. This remnant people live in continuity with those who have gone before them. But the same book highlights also that at the end of time God's people will be found in various forms of religious expressions and will be called to come out of this confusion. We see the call to come out of Babylon as a call to break from teachings and expressions of religious faith that are not in harmony with God's word. This call highlights the discontinuity that is to exist between God's faithful people and the rest of the religious world, whether from a Christianity that has deviated from its original purpose or from other confused expressions of religious faith.

The Adventist message is caught in this tension between its connection with the past and at the same time with a requirement to be disconnected from the rest of the religious world. How do we reconcile this continuity and discontinuity? Who is included or excluded from the people of God?

My journey with the concept of Babylon

Perhaps no event in my career illustrates better the Adventist tensions and inconsistencies in our discourse toward other Christians than the reactions I received following the Swallen Mission Lectureship at Andrews University in April 2008.

Late in the fall semester 2007, one of my Seminary colleagues approached me regarding his suggestion to invite a speaker for the Swallen Mission lectureship the following April. He had given thought about a theme for the lectureship and who could be invited and he wanted to get my thoughts about it before proceeding. Through the years, our professors had had numerous contacts with missiologists of other denominations. It just so happened that in Chicago, there are two professors at a Catholic Seminary that he thought would be good speakers.

Honestly, I hesitated about inviting two Catholic scholars. But one question I always ask when considering giving an invitation to a non-Adventist scholar, whether it is for a doctoral defense or for a guest lecture, is, "Is this scholar friendly toward Adventism and our beliefs?" My colleague assured me that these two Catholic missiologists had known Adventists for years and were friendly toward us. In fact, my colleague pulled a book from his library, written by these two professors on the proposed theme of the lectureship, and invited me to read it. Over the following weekend I looked at the book, read sections here

and there, and became convinced that we could dialogue about what these two professors had written concerning methodologies to spread the gospel in non-Christian cultures. I thought that they would engage a good dialogue on mission strategies. So we went ahead with the invitation. I was so naïve.

A week before the event, in my weekly electronic newsletter, I announced the lectureship and its theme, gave the names of the two guest professors and where they work. That brief announcement got a life of its own. One of our students, opposed to this invitation to two Catholic scholars, created a clever media sensation. He created his own electronic document by taking part of the newsletter I had sent, found the website of the seminary where these two professors teach, cut and pasted their pictures and short bio, then inserted a couple quotes from Charles Spurgeon and Ellen White on the subject of separation from other Christians who don't uphold the truth (an interesting mix of Spurgeon and White who would probably have said the same thing about each other). To all this he added his own open letter to me, one letter to me from a North American Division department director and one from a Michigan Conference department director who also raised objections to this event. Then this document was sent all over the world.

And the emails started to arrive. Scores of them. Many people were simply asking me to clarify what had happened. So I prepared a response, an academic response, explaining the event and the purpose of such events for which we invite non-Adventist scholars. My response helped many people and most church leaders gave me their wholehearted support. They understood the purpose of a university and what we were trying to do. One church leader responded: "Dean Fortin, Thanks for your response and I applaud your leadership and response. As a lifelong SDA, I have noticed that too many Adventists operate out of fear and shun anything but one way conversations with non-SDAs--in effect they become SDA infomercials! Sadly, dialog is not in their vocabulary. I want you to know that I am not troubled by the seminary lecture series but how certain segments have grabbed on to this issue and are using it to step on a soapbox and wag a finger at the seminary. I think that is a sad testimony to the level of trust and confidence we hold within our community of faith."

But for scores of other people we had apostatized. Many emails I received were simply hate mail, filled with animosity toward Catholics and me for inviting two Catholic priests to feed the "wine of Babylon" to our students. Here's a sample of what people wrote to me.

From Africa, "You say [in your response] that people have been too quick to jump to conclusions about the visit of these 2 Catholic priests, but perhaps you have been taken by surprise because you did not expect the Seventh-Day Adventists to be still awake to the evils of the Catholic church and the intentions of Corrupt leaders like yourself who will compromise the truth for unknown reasons." Another person wrote, "I have read your letter of explanation and find that it is a spiritually-empty, long worded-excuse letter written to excuse an irresponsible action allowed by SDA leadership. ... A while back, there was an article in The Review and Herald Magazine where it was exposed that the Catholic Church has sent spies into our denomination and have held conference-level positions, which that in itself is frightening! A Jesuit Priest was exposed and he walked out "quietly". Did you not read that article? What is the matter? When the persecution comes, those spies would have gained access to the list of SDA world membership and their personal information. You created an open door to make The End of Time more dangerous!" One person from Portugal wrote, "Dean Fortin's answer is not based on the Bible or Spirit of Prophecy. Therefore if he is a man of faith he must resign."

I could go on for a long time but the worst letter I got arrived just three months ago. A concerned brother from Canada wrote, "Your 'encyclical' dealing with the Swallen Mission Lectureship of April 14, 2008 has just been handed to me for a response, by a concerned individual who fervently believes that you are the Devil incarnate. This person thinks the professors at the Seminary, administrators, pastors, teachers etc. supporting this type of mission are Satan's representatives too. And furthermore, that the Seminary at Andrews is being dragged along with the whole of the SDA Church into an Abysmal hell. ... "

Since receiving these emails, I've wondered about what could produce in our people such a rhetoric of violence, suspicion and hate toward others?

Few people know that I was raised Catholic and became Adventist in my late teens. My experience as a Catholic is a beautiful and positive one. Contrary to all we hear about Catholic priests and child abuse, my experience was never like that. I was raised in a nominal Catholic family. My mother never went to church and she despised priests and nuns. But my grand-mother was a faithful Catholic and after she came to live with us she would ask me or one of my siblings to take her to church on Sunday mornings. I also served as an altar boy for five years and loved it. I admired the priests who taught me the faith and how to serve the mass. By the time I had been an altar boy for four years, I was one of the most trusted and experienced of the group, and was asked to serve during the most meaningful services of the liturgical year, for Christmas Eve mass, Good Friday, Easter morning, weddings, funerals, and baptisms.

My family was poor and my mom did her best to raise us with the welfare money she received. Our meals were simple and our clothes were seldom new. Only now do I realize how much she struggled to make ends meet with the little she had. My local parish, Saint-Vincent de Paul, had wonderful people who helped families like mine and we benefited from food baskets and winter clothes. I have experienced nothing in my youth to say anything bad against the Catholic priests and people who worked in my parish. The ones I knew as a kid were all good people. Sometimes I wonder if I could find Father Chamberland, to thank him for his gentle care for me and my family. I think it was through his caring manner and mentorship that I first felt a call to ministry. I think he's the one who planted in my heart the seed of vocation to serve the church and God's people, a seed that was later watered by my first Adventist pastor, Daniel Rebsomen.

So this hate mail I received after the Swallen lectureship was a shock to me and to some extent still is. Not that I didn't know about conspiracy theories. What troubles me is the level of hate, fear and mistrust many Adventists have toward Catholics. That surprised me and deeply troubles me. For the first time, I came to realize that many people in my church have a problem with loving people who are not like us. This rhetoric of violence, of mistrust and fear many Adventists have toward other Christians, and particularly toward Catholics, is itself honestly anti-Christian and defamatory.

How do we reconcile this rhetoric of suspicion and hate with Christ's words about love for one another and for others who are different from us? Reflecting on these words leads me to sense more ambiguities in our discourse about other Christians and I sense also that these ambiguities are real, and they are deep. Basically, I'm thinking our discourse toward other Christians stems from our eschatological self-identity as a people.

The prophetic calls of Revelation 14:8 and 18:3¹ have been the dominant texts that have marked the contours of our relationship with other Christians. Still today the prophetic message to come out of Babylon is the DNA of our approach to other Christians. And we have not really changed our interpretation of this prophecy since Charles Fitch's sermon during the Millerite movement.

In the summer of 1843, Fitch made it clear that true Christians who remained in their churches—in these denominations or congregations that rejected the belief that Christ would return soon (within a year or so)—would suffer the consequences of the judgment of God when Jesus returned. Fitch's rhetoric was logical and persuasive:

To come out of Babylon is to be converted to the true scriptural doctrine of the personal coming and kingdom of Christ; to receive the truth on this subject with all readiness of mind, as you find it plainly written out on the pages of the Bible²

But I do say, if you are a Christian, come out of Babylon! If you intend to be found a Christian when Christ appears, come out of Babylon, and come out Now! Throw away that miserable medley of ridiculous spiritualizing nonsense with which multitudes have so long been making the word of God of none effect, and dare to believe the Bible.³

Come out of Babylon or perish. If you are a Christian, stand for Christ, and hold out unto the end. ... Not one that is ever saved can remain in Babylon.⁴

The logic of Fitch's rhetoric was final and demanded action: "Not one that is ever saved can remain in Babylon." The reason for this drastic message? Many churches were rejecting the biblically-based calculations of a specific date for Christ's return. As long as Millerites were preaching the soon coming of Christ, almost all Christian denominations could go along. In fact, many Protestant denominations benefited greatly from Miller's message and enjoyed the intake of new converts that filled their churches. But once Millerism began to advocate more radically the belief that Jesus would return in 1843, and then more precisely on October 22, 1844, denominations began to distance themselves from Second Advent preachers. "The more certain the Millerites became of their interpretation of the Bible, the more aggressive they became with others."⁵ And, in response, George Knight comments, "the opposition to the Millerites was neither genteel nor insignificant."⁶

The growing resistance toward the Millerite movement expressed itself when congregations forbade Millerites from holding meetings in their buildings, then disfellowshipped those who would not be quiet about their eschatological beliefs, and, finally,

¹ Revelation 14:8, "And another angel followed, saying, 'Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city, because she has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication'" (NKJV). Revelation 18:2, 4, "And he cried mightily with a loud voice, saying, 'Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and has become a dwelling place of demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every unclean and hated bird! ... And I heard another voice from heaven saying, 'Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive her plagues'" (NKJV).

² Charles Fitch, "Come out of her, my people" (Rochester, NY: J. V. Himes, 1843), p. 18.

³ Ibid., p. 19.

⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

⁵ George R. Knight, *Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993), p. 142.

⁶ Ibid.

expulsed preachers who accepted the advent doctrine.⁷ And this became the setting of Fitch's emphasis on Babylon.

While the vast majority of Millerite Adventists rejected their interpretations of the first and second angels' messages after the disappointment of October 1844, Sabbatarian Adventists with the help of Joseph Bates kept basically the same interpretation and expanded it to include the third angel's message.⁸

Ellen White also favored this interpretation but nuanced it to some extent. In the *Great Controversy*, White spends a good portion of her narrative on the events related to the Millerite movement and provides an interpretation of the events she personally experienced. In her chapter "A Warning Rejected" she relates how Christians and churches experienced the Millerite movement and gives her interpretation of the call to come out of Babylon. She understands that "in preaching the doctrine of the second advent, William Miller and his associates had labored with the sole purpose to arousing men to a preparation for the judgment."⁹

At the beginning of the Millerite movement, Miller and his associates had preached what they perceived to be the first angel's message of Revelation 14:6, 7.¹⁰ The intent of that message was to announce the hour of God's judgment and call upon men and women to fear and worship God. If this message had been accepted by the churches of her day, White believes the Spirit of God would have been manifested among them. The churches in the United States "would again have reached that blessed state of unity, faith, and love which existed in apostolic days."¹¹ For White the intent of the first angel's message was ecumenical. "If God's professed people would receive the light as it shines upon them from His word, they would reach that unity for which Christ prayed, that which the apostle describes, 'the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'."¹² This was the experience of those who accepted the first angel's message.

But since the churches generally did not accept this message, "they rejected the means which Heaven had provided for their restoration."¹³ This condition led to the preaching of the second angel's message about the fall of Babylon and the need to come out of it. "The second angel's message of Revelation 14 was first preached in the summer of 1844 [*sic*], and it then had a more direct application to the churches of the United States, where the warning of the judgment had been most widely proclaimed and most generally rejected, and where the declension in the churches had been most rapid." Writing 44 years later, in 1888, Ellen White commented that "the message of the second angel did not reach its complete fulfillment in 1844."¹⁴ Why not? Because "the work of apostasy has not yet reached its culmination" and because "the union of the church with the world" has not been fully accomplished yet. Hence, she concluded, "the great body of Christ's true followers are still to be found in their communion."¹⁵

⁷ Ibid., pp. 148-149.

⁸ See Joseph Bates, *Second Advent Way Marks and High Heaps* (New Bedford, CT: Benjamin Lindsey, 1847).

⁹ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911, 1950), p. 375.

¹⁰ Revelation 14:6, 7, "Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people—saying with a loud voice, 'Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water'" (NKJV).

¹¹ White, *Great Controversy*, p. 379.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 380.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 389.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 389, 390.

I find it intriguing in this chapter that Ellen White's description of what constitutes Babylon is not predominantly emphasizing apostasy from biblical truth, although she mentions this,¹⁶ but rather emphasizes the fact that churches had become part of Babylon because they also had become more affluent and had built "splendid churches," had adopted a friendship with the world and were departing from "the Bible standard of humility, self-denial, simplicity and godliness," accompanied by a worldly conformity evidenced in expansive clothes worn by church worshipers, high salaries given to clergy, and various fund raising schemes which are "the work of the devil."¹⁷

In 1888 and again in the last edition of the *Great Controversy* in 1911, Ellen White stated that the complete fall of Babylon is still in the future. However, in reality our discourse about other Christians indicates that instead we have believed that Protestant churches are already fallen and true believers in Christ should be asked to come out of these churches immediately to join the Seventh-day Adventist church as the end-time manifestation of the remnant people of God. Our logic has followed this reasoning: since the return of Christ is always in the near future (maybe 6 months to a year from now), and since Ellen White has predicted that the last events of earth's history will occur in rapid succession,¹⁸ it ensues that all Protestant churches, along with Roman Catholicism and, of course, all forms of non-Christian religious expressions, must already be fully and completely fallen. How else could we explain our evangelistic approach and presentation of the second angel's message? This is in part the reason for our ambiguous and conflicted discourse about other Christians. On the one hand we genuinely say and believe that there are true Christian believers in all denominations, yet at the same time we are forced by the logic of our end-time scenario to believe that these same denominations are currently part of Babylon and thus can no longer receive the influence of the Spirit of God—they are fallen. Consequently, if as institutions and agencies of God's plan of salvation, they are now fallen, why should we seek to learn anything from them or have relationships with them?

Our Adventist heritage from Charles Fitch and Joseph Bates helps to explain our ambiguous relationship with other Christian communities. Hence, at times, we find ourselves with a discourse of violence and hate dominating and preventing one of outreach and common engagement. While the requirement to come out of Babylon has dominated our discourse about other Christians and has often trumped any gestures of outreach to others, the attendant concept of the remnant favors continuity with Christian history and the heritage of other Christian communities. Here I see a hopeful pathway to alleviate or reduce discourses of violence towards others. Instead of emphasizing discontinuity from our Christian heritage I think we should focus on the continuity.

My journey with the concept of the remnant

Adventists believe that as a denomination they are the remnant people of God at the time of the end, before the second coming of Christ. The identifying marks of the people of God as stated in Revelation 12:17 and 14:12¹⁹ indicate that at the end of time God will have a remnant people who obey his commandments and have the testimony and faith of Jesus.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 384. Ellen White has also discussed apostasy from truth in Christianity in earlier chapters.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 385-387.

¹⁸ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), vol. 9, p. 11.

¹⁹ Revelation 12:17, "And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus" (NKJV). Revelation 14:12, "Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (NKJV).

In a time of widespread apostasy and immorality, with people worshiping gods of their own making and confused by a syncretistic religious faith, God will be served by a remnant people dedicated to him and his word. This biblical concept of the remnant hinges on continuity with the past.

I used to wonder why Ellen White wrote so many pages in her book *The Great Controversy* to go over Christian history up to the time of William Miller until it dawned on me what she was attempting to do. A major theme in her book is faithfulness to Scripture as the revealed will of God. The first half of the book tells the history of the Christian church from the destruction of Jerusalem to the time of William Miller because in these chapters, Ellen White describes how the cosmic conflict between good and evil played out in the lives of the early Christians, the Waldenses, Wycliffe, Huss and Jerome, Luther, Calvin, Wesley and many others. In her description of the events in the lives of these historical figures, she presents one common denominator: "the grand principle maintained by these Reformers [...] was the infallible authority of the Holy Scriptures as a rule of faith and practice. They denied the right of popes, councils, Fathers, and kings, to control the conscience in matters of religion. The Bible was their authority, and by its teachings they tested all doctrines and all claims. Faith in God and His word sustained these holy men as they yielded up their lives at the stake."²⁰

For White, the decision made by these heroes of the faith to uphold the authority of the Bible in all matters of faith and life is the crucial factor that brought about the Protestant Reformation and, in her day, the Second Advent movement. What they have in common is their faithfulness to God's word. And thus, she argues, the remnant people of God at the end of time stand on the shoulders of their spiritual ancestors. They also are faithfully obedient to God's commandments and follow the teachings of Jesus.

In her narrative of the great controversy, White explains that Satan sought to destroy these faithful servants of God through local ecclesiastical authorities because they loved God and wished to remain faithful to the teachings of the Bible as they understood them. She points out that it has been Satan's aim to eclipse the word of God and to reduce its appeal since those who don't know the Bible can be deceived more easily.²¹ Hence, people who cling to the Bible as their rule of faith and practice are the subjects of the devil's wrath and attacks. Ellen White also points out that at the end of time this conflict will be repeated in the lives of God's people who wish to follow unyieldingly the teachings of Scripture above human opinions and traditions.²² Then, as always, following the teachings of Scripture is the only safeguard.²³

While this concept of remnant implies continuity with the past and not a break from it, the standard Adventist interpretation of the concept emphasizes the break and discontinuity from the rest of Christianity, an interpretation that easily becomes exclusive of other Christians. Many Adventists believe that only Adventists have it all figured out. For many Adventists, the Christian church apostatized soon after the end of the first century only to reappear in the Adventist church in 1844. This discourse of discontinuity from

²⁰ White, *Great Controversy*, p. 249.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 593.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 594-595.

²³ See the chapter "The Scriptures a Safeguard," *Great Controversy*, pp. 593-602. Ellen White's *Great Controversy* is not a history book of Christian movements and the Reformation, as she says herself in the introduction (pp. xi-xii). Rather, it is an interpretation of history in which she shows the continuity between all these movements and God's people, between early Christians and the remnant at the end of time.

Christian history drives a rhetoric that considers others who claim to be Christians as basically non-Christians, that all other Christian communities are part of Babylon.

I remember an example of this type of discourse when I became Adventist. During a Bible study on the subject of prayer, someone made the comment that the warning in Proverbs 28:9, "If anyone turns a deaf ear to the law, even his prayers are detestable," implied that God hears the prayers of only those who obey all His commandments, including the Sabbath. Hence, God does not hear the prayers of those who break the Sabbath and worship on Sunday. I was told that more than any other teachings of Scripture the one on keeping the commandments of God and the Sabbath is the boundary marker of who belongs to God's people and who God listens to. I still cannot completely fathom the impact this teaching had on me in my journey with other Christians. Yet I have witnessed many times such a misplaced and misdirected exclusivity toward other Christians.

For about 13 years I have been a member of the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches. (The Seventh-day Adventist Church is not a member of the Council or the Commission, but we have been invited to send a representative to the Commission and I have served in that capacity since 1999.) I remember about 5 years ago or so at one of the Commission meetings that during a time of prayer at the beginning of our session we shared with the group our prayer requests. It just so happened that the day before one of my nieces had been admitted to the hospital because of extreme anorexia and that her life was on the line, in fact, we did not expect her to live. So I asked my group of friends to pray for her. And they did; not only during this meeting that weekend, but for days and weeks afterward. The next time we met, a few of them asked me how my niece was doing. I was surprised they remembered but delighted to answer that she was doing better and that maybe she would make it. (In fact, she did.) My Lutheran, Catholic, Quaker, and Christian friends had prayed for my niece and God had heard their prayers. They cared about me and my family and remembered me in their devotion to God. I was moved by their sincere and genuine commitment to be in communion with God. I believe that my friends on the Faith and Order Commission are part of the people of God and that God hears their prayers.

Another recent experience also makes me rethink how I see other Christians. A few months ago I participated in a dialogue between Adventists and Mennonites and listened to a professor tell us how Mennonites view themselves in the course of Christian history. This professor explained how God has always had a sincere and faithful people on earth, that after the first century, Christianity began to apostatize and to accept various non-Christian pagan beliefs. This syncretism introduced many beliefs and practices that are contrary to Scripture. Yet, in spite of this, there were always faithful Christians who placed the Bible above any other authority and who worshiped God according to their conscience. Through the centuries God's faithful people were seen through the influence of the Waldenses in southern France and northern Italy, John Wycliffe in England, Hus and Jerome in Prague, and the Anabaptists in Switzerland and Germany. She explained that today the Mennonites are the descendants of these people who stood by the Bible and with unyielding faith were willing to die for their love of God and his Word. What a commitment to God!

As I listened to this presentation, I thought I was hearing someone summarizing the first half of Ellen White's *Great Controversy*. (In fact, I made that comment and said it would be appropriate to give our Mennonite friends a copy of the *Great Controversy*, so they could see for themselves that Adventists share the same view of Christian history and of our respective place in this history.) This understanding of continuity with Christian history that Mennonites and Adventists share, that we are part of the same history and survival of God's faithful people, that we read Christian history with the same hermeneutical principles was

something refreshing to me. There's a sense that Adventists owe a lot to other Christian communities; their heritage has meaning not only for them but for us as well.

Understanding the concept of the remnant in continuity with the past should lead Adventists to emphasize the common roots they share with other Christians. All the beliefs that are shared in common with other Christians came to us through their witness and their heritage. Adventism did not appear out of the blue, in a vacuum. The concept of the remnant is in part a concept of continuity, that we have many beliefs and practices in common with other Christians. (Of course, the Adventist belief in a remnant people of God implies also belief in apostasy and falling away from God's intended purpose for his Church. The concepts of remnant and apostasy go hand in hand. There is a remnant people of God at the end of time because there is apostasy and falling away from what the word of God teaches.)

I wish our discourse about other Christians would be marked by this principle of continuity we find in our concept of the remnant. I see evidence of this in Ellen White's understanding of Christian history. Shouldn't we seek to replace fear of the other with engagement and dialogue? We have so much to share. Yet, I think there is one more hurdle for Adventists to jump over before this mindset of fear can be replaced with a mindset of engagement. The Adventist discourse about other Christians needs to wrestle with a few gospel narratives.

My journey with Christian unity

Part of the Adventist suspicion toward other Christians also stems from our attitude toward the ecumenical movement and any organization that seeks Christian unity.²⁴ Since 1948 many Adventists have seen the formation of the World Council of Churches as a direct fulfillment of prophecy as it sought to unify the various branches of Protestantism. Giving further credence to this interpretation has been the repeated efforts on the part of successive popes, particularly John Paul II, to foster Christian unity by appealing to what Christians share in common instead of what divides us. During the early years of the ecumenical movement, Rome did not want to be involved in the movement, but since Vatican II, it has been at the center of ecumenical dialogues and outreach and has made Christian unity and restoration of relationships its basis for interactions with other Christian communities.

Many years ago,²⁵ Adventists adopted a statement about our "Relationships with Other Christian Churches and Religious Organizations." In this statement, however, our concern at the time was simply to help us how to relate to Christian missionary agencies and we didn't really address the intrinsic spiritual legitimacy of other Christian organizations or denominations.²⁶

²⁴ An official statement on "Seventh-day Adventists and the Ecumenical Movement" is available at <http://adventist.org/beliefs/other-documents/other-doc3.html>.

²⁵ If I remember well, Bert Beach told me this statement was written in the 1920s.

²⁶ The statement reads, "To avoid creating misunderstanding or friction in our relationships with other Christian churches and religious organizations, the following guidelines have been set forth: 1) We recognize those agencies that lift up Christ before men as a part of the divine plan for evangelization of the world, and we hold in high esteem Christian men and women in other communions who are engaged in winning souls for Christ. ..." The statement can be found at <http://adventist.org/beliefs/other-documents/other-doc5.html>.

In the spirit of this statement, in the last 20 years, Adventists have attempted to build bridges with other denominations. Putting aside fear of the other, the General Conference has held official dialogues with the Lutheran World Federation, the Evangelical World Federation, the Salvation Army, and the Mennonite World Federation. (Representatives of the North American Division have held a dialogue with the Presbyterian Church USA and the Christian Reformed Church.) These dialogues or conversations have not produced any alliances between our denominations but have helped us to understand each other better, have removed walls of separation, and have created goodwill among us. Adventist church leaders are realizing that we cannot live in this world by ourselves, that we need to know each other better.

The basis of our conversations with other denominations has been our sense of continuity with them, not our discontinuity from them. Although points of beliefs that separate us are openly discussed, more often it is what we have in common that creates these important bonds of friendship and goodwill. As other denominations come to see us as part of the continuum of the Christian faith, they become less suspect of our peculiarities, and welcome us as brothers and sisters. Only on the new earth will we be able to know the magnitude of the positive effects these dialogues and conversations have had, how good contacts with others have helped Adventist brothers and sisters in other places attain a better life, escape persecutions, or be allowed to have an education, because someone knew that Adventists are good people and someone spoke a good word on behalf of an Adventist in a difficult situation. We cannot underestimate the good these conversations have produced.

I wish we were less afraid of other Christians and what they can bring to us. I think Jesus inferred this in a few gospel narratives. Our traditional emphasis on discontinuity has rendered us blind to other passages of Scripture that speak of continuity and fellowship with others. The many years I've been on the Faith and Order Commission have challenged me to relate my faith to these gospel narratives and they cause me also to reflect on their impact on the Adventist discourse about other Christians.

One of these narratives is in the gospel of Mark (9:38-41). After the Transfiguration, Jesus and three of his disciples (Peter, James and John) are faced with a case of demon possession. While Jesus was away, the other disciples had not been able to help a father and his demon-possessed son. Jesus casts out the demon from the young boy and returns him healthy to his father. Shortly thereafter, once they have arrived in Capernaum, Jesus asks the disciples what they had been discussing on the road. They had been arguing among themselves which of them is the greatest. To illustrate what discipleship is really about, Jesus takes a little child and states that whoever receives in his name one child like this one in fact receives him.

Then John has the temerity or naivety to make a strange comment, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we tried to prevent him because he was not following us." The attentive reader notices the sharp contrast between the events at the beginning of the narrative and John's comment. A day or so earlier, the disciples (plural) had not been able to cast out a demon (singular) from this little boy. And now, a disciple of Jesus states that he prevented someone else (singular) who did cast out demons (plural) in Jesus' name because this person is not following Jesus. The narrative begs the question: who is a true disciple of Jesus? The many who follow him and cannot cast out a demon? Or one who does not follow him but can cast out many demons in his name?

Jesus answers: "Do not hinder him, for there is no one who will perform a miracle in My name, and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us is

for us. For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of your name as followers of Christ, truly I say to you, he will not lose his reward." What does this say about my discourse about other Christians? It is obvious that there is more to be said about who belongs to God than what meets the eyes.

In another narrative, in John 10, Jesus reveals that he is the good shepherd and that his sheep will know his voice. And then he also states, "And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and they will be one flock and one shepherd" (10:16).

The gathering movement of this metaphor is from the exterior to the interior. "They will hear My voice" and come in to form one flock. Jesus implies that during the years of his ministry, there were people who were his sheep, out there in the world, but who had not yet heard his voice. But when they would hear it, they would come and join him. It is likely that Jesus may have had Pentecost in mind when he said this. Yet, when is this gathering to happen? Should Christians now seek to fulfill this wish of Christ and seek to gather all of God's people in one fold? Or is it more plausible that this statement has eschatological implications; it is at the second coming of Christ that all of God's sheep will form one flock.

In any case, this statement also challenges Adventists to think about Christian unity. What does this say about my discourse about other Christians? God has his people in areas and in groups (flocks) that we know nothing of.

Another passage particularly challenges me in my discourse about other Christians. Of all key ecumenical texts this one is at the center of the modern ecumenical philosophy. In his sacerdotal prayer before he was betrayed (John 17), Jesus prayed for himself, then for the twelve, and then for the other disciples who would come to believe in him. "As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth. I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I in you; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me" (17:18-21).

Who is Jesus praying for when he says that he prays for the unity of those who would come to believe in him because of the word of the disciples? Only the first generation of Christians? That answer does not seem possible. More likely, Jesus prayed for you and me, who generations later would come to believe in him through the word and testimony of myriads of other Christians who passed on the word of faith from one generation to the next. If that is the case, what does this imply for my discourse about other Christians? Should we today pray this prayer of Jesus for the unity of all Christians?

I remember some years ago being challenged by that question during one of the conversations on the Faith and Order Commission. "Do Adventists believe in church unity?" And by church unity it was meant the unity of all Christians. If the tenor of our discourse is based on discontinuity, then the answer is no, we don't believe in church unity because there is error in all Christian denominations (except ours), so why pray for church unity when we are called to leave Babylon. We must fear error and apostasy. If the tenor of our discourse is based on continuity, then the answer is yes, we do believe in church unity because God gave us his word as the basis of our unity (John 17:17) and we should study it together to find this unity in him. The truth has nothing to fear.

But our traditional application of this prayer has been to apply it to ourselves. In the words of Jesus "that they may be one", the "they" refers to Seventh-day Adventists. Not

seeing the broader context of this prayer, not being challenged by it, has weakened our witness in the world. Is the unity of all Christians something we should seek before the second coming of Christ? I deplore our self-centeredness at times, as if we are alone in the world to worship God and God only cares about us. This prayer of Jesus should challenge us and should shape our discourse about other Christians. But as I've said, our emphasis on discontinuity hinders us from even seeing this prayer.

Years ago, I had a church member who dreamed of ways to reach out to the Catholic community we lived in. In his misguided zeal he prepared a flier in which all the sins and false teachings of the Catholic Church were listed with appropriate quotes from the *Great Controversy*. On the front page was a photo of the most prominent Catholic shrine in the area. The basic intent of the flier was to clearly declare that the Catholic Church is an apostate religious organization and that people must leave it in order to be saved. I cringed internally when I saw the brochure, particularly at the thought that it would be distributed in homes near our church. My approach in sharing the everlasting gospel with Catholics had been to show them the beauty of the gospel and of all the teachings of the remnant people of God (salvation by grace in Christ, Sabbath, second coming of Christ, state of the dead awaiting the resurrection, Christ's ministry in the heavenly sanctuary), that truth attracts people with a sincere heart. There's no need to go on bashing the Pope, Mary or the sacraments. When people see the truth, the truth sets them free from false teachings.

I think there will always be some ambivalence in the Adventist discourse about other Christians. This ambivalence is due to the fact that we are so clear and consistent in our evangelistic discourse that Christians who become convinced of the message we preach should leave their "apostatized" denominations to join our fellowship. Many Adventists make this decision a matter of salvation since we have so clearly identified the remnant people of God with the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. We have concluded that since all God's people at the end of time will be part of the remnant people of God, then the logical conclusion is that those who don't are lost. Sometimes I think we have adapted Cyprian's statement to fit our self-perception: "Outside the Seventh-day Adventist church there is no salvation." I continue to be troubled by the fact that our discourse toward other Christians can sometime be so violent when we emphasize the discontinuity.

My personal experience in dialogues and associations I've had with other Christians and my journey through life as a student, pastor, professor and academic administrator have opened up new possibilities for me. I don't know that Adventists will ever resolve completely the tensions and ambiguities of their discourse about other Christians. In the secular and post-religious world in which we live there is so much resistance to religious ideas that it might be time for us to emphasize our common heritage with others, our genuine sense of continuity within Christian history, that we are part of Christianity and that we have a beautiful message of hope to offer to this divided and hopeless world. For a people who treasure the truths of Scripture, there will always be a need to speak of discontinuity and of Babylon, but I wonder if we might be heard a little more if instead we spoke more clearly the language of belonging and continuity.

