

Today's Authentic, Divergent Faces of Adventism

The Case for Big-Tent Adventism

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Adventism is today increasingly polarized, and my thesis is that this can be managed as a healthy tension or it can be allowed to morph into a divisive crisis. The present polarization over women's ordination should be accepted as natural in today's church and used as a step toward a more mature denomination. ¹

This paper begins with a primarily descriptive element—worldwide Adventism is increasingly diverse in both its demographics and in its understanding of the Bible and of Ellen White. Then I make two normative claims: first, that a widely diverse denomination is not just natural, but that this diversity is good, even God-ordained; and second, that our church can remain unified in diversity if we maintain twin, interrelated qualities that are highly prized in our religious tradition—a high view of individual conscience, with a concomitantly high view of church unity.

An Increasingly Diverse Church, Demographically

A hundred years ago Seventh-day Adventists were 150,000 members strong and mainly lived in New England, Michigan and California. Although sociologists of religion accurately call early Adventism a sect, today Adventism is struggling—sometimes against itself—to become a denomination with toward 20 million members. The membership is predominately in Africa, Latin America, and Asia—with only 9 percent of the church residing in North America, Europe, and Australia (and only .014% residing in the original Adventist strongholds in the U.S.).¹

World Adventism is young, vibrant, and growing exponentially. Today's 18 million² Adventists, compare to 5 million Bahia, over 13 million Jews, 15 million members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and 30 million Sikhs. In 2025 there will be an estimated 45 million members or 60 million people if affiliated relatives are counted. Members in 2005 were predominately found in Africa (35%) Latin America (33%, and Asia (21 %).³

North American Adventism is disproportionately immigrant, aging, and shrinking in relative size. In the United States immigrants constitute 12% of the population, whereas immigrants in Adventism are more than 31% of the membership. The largest blocks of immigrant members are Hispanic (a 100% increase from 1990 to 2008), and Asian/Pacific members (a 200% increase). Although relatively small in number, the multi-ethnic membership has risen from 1 to 4%, while Blacks (30% of the North American Division)—long a disproportionately large segment of the

NAD—have only increased marginally. Perhaps most interesting is that an American denomination that began near wholly White, has seen this segment markedly decrease—from 67% to now less than half in less than 20 years.⁴ The early emphasis on education is dramatically seen in immigrant members, with 23% saying their children “must” attain a doctoral degree (vs. 5% of native-born church members).⁵

The church in North America is increasingly grey-haired. The median age in the denomination is 51, compared to age 36 in the broader culture. Nearly half of *white* Adventist households are over 60 years of age. A Hispanic Adventist is likely to be under 44 years of age. Demographic shifts are matched by other significant change, as Church institutions have never been stronger, exemplified by the Adventist Health systems’ annual \$15+ billion revenue, and Loma Linda University and its associated medical entities having a total of over 15,000 students and employees. Nevertheless, the North American church is dramatically decreasing as a percentage of world Adventist membership (from 7% in 2005 to a projected 4% by 2020).

An Increasingly Diverse Church, Hermeneutically

Not only is the Adventist church becoming exceedingly diverse in its demographics, its theologians’ differences in Biblical interpretation are likewise prominent. However, it would be a gross mistake to conclude that the theological conservatives are in the less developed world and the liberals inhabit more developed lands. However, generally speaking more progressive Adventists are disproportionately found in Adventist populations that have greater education and wealth and have multi-generational members. Understandably, Adventist converts of limited education would perceive issues such as women’s ordination—in this paper, the urgent practical issue driving the theological attention—differently than life-long members of considerable education. However, differing views of the Bible and ordination are more complex than demographics would suggest.

I illustrate my point on clashing hermeneutical presuppositions by citing the Edwin Reynolds/Clinton Wahlen *Minority Report* on women’s ordination⁶ and Ron Osborn’s *Death Before the Fall, Biblical Literalism and the Problem of Animal Suffering*.⁷ All three Adventist scholars are church members in good and regular standing, and if one has a more distinguished denominational pedigree it is Osborn, whose family is related to the Wilsons who have given the church two General Conference presidents.

Osborn’s analysis of Biblical literalism is fair and insightful, although he opposes literalism and is a bit severe.

Osborn cites Andrews University Seminary’s philosopher of religion Fernando Canale as mounting an appropriate, sophisticated postmodern attack on Enlightenment universal reason, while failing to apply the same postmodern scrutiny to his own Enlightenment ideology—a thoroughly modernist notion on the

‘absolutely true’ Biblical view of life’s origin.⁸ Now, it isn’t that Osborn and Canale disagree on the Bible’s pivotal role in understanding life’s origin, rather it’s an issue of differing methods of Biblical interpretation. Osborn explains what he thinks is *really* foundational about biblical literalism: “It is *not* the authority of Scripture, which nonliteralists also fully accept, but rather belief in philosophical foundationalism itself as the unquestionable stage on which all hermeneutical battles must be played out.”⁹ Of course, Osborn wrote this prior to the *Minority Report*, but it surely applies to the way scripture is treated in that report.

If Reynolds and Wahlen ever read Osborn’s book, they might protest: “We’re not guilty of modernist philosophical foundationalism; that’s a post-modern construct, and we’re viewing the Bible as it’s been read by the faithful for 2000 years before modernity, and by most devout Christians yet today.” If Reynolds and Wahlen would give such a response, they’d be forgetting that the most influential theologians throughout Christian history (e.g., Origen and Luther) were not literalists. And further, Reynolds and Wahlen’s supposedly consistent Biblical literalism surely reflects the spirit of the Enlightenment’s enthronement of universal, a priori reason—except that it’s now the Bible that is the a priori. For Reynolds and Wahlen, the Bible—not Reason—is that which exists prior to and independent of experience or examination.

Reynolds and Wahlen fairly and accurately apprise an alternative to literalism—the “trajectory” perspective—but then reject it because it would necessarily rely on human reason for implementation, thus abandoning the Biblical a priori. The trajectory approach views “selected portions of Scripture as time- and culture-bound and, therefore, tinged with the individual’s or his community’s prejudicial views on such topics, rather than God’s thoughts which are valid for all places and all time.”¹⁰

Reynolds and Wahlen don’t grapple with their presuppositions, as does Osborn, but this inadequacy could merely be lack of time and space. Rather, they just dive into their topic, making modernist assumptions about the value and timelessness of Biblical assertions—except that they denigrate the “degenerate Western culture of modernism and postmodernism.” These authors appear to assume that if Bible readers are faithful and honest, the simple, literalist reading of scripture will ring self-evidently true.

Although Reynolds and Wahlen don’t explicitly identify themselves with Scottish Common Sense Realism/19th century Princeton Theological Seminary literalism, there are uncanny similarities. Scottish realism taught that ordinary experience assures the existence of real objects that can be felt and the existence of certain “first principles” upon which sound moral and religious beliefs can be based. This philosophy, criticized by critics as merely an attack on intellectual change, had considerable influence in Europe, and in America it influenced Thomas Jefferson and especially Princeton’s Charles Hodge.

Hodge's combination of Scottish realism and Biblicism resulted in a verbal, dictatorial view of inspiration. Hodge's Biblical literalism "was an innovation to meet the new 'scientific' standards of objectivity required in the minds of many in the modern age," writes Nicholas Miller.¹¹ Hodge defended slavery and his Princeton protégé Benjamin Warfield "believed that Paul's injunctions against women speaking in the churches were 'precise, absolute, and all inclusive.'"¹² If literalist Calvinism has influenced Reynolds and Wahlen, they are part of a grand Adventist tradition of learning from Methodists, Baptists, the Christian Connexion, and eclectic health reformers. Very different streams of religious and philosophical thought, on the other hand, influenced Osborn. (Certain passages in Ellen White's writings can be appealed to by both the literalist/traditionalist and by the nonliteralist/progressive; see Appendix A for examples.)

With more space in his book for methodological explanation, Osborn says that he follows the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, adding an Adventist twist: "I believe in the paramount authority of Scripture in matters of faith, illuminated though not bound by the interpretative traditions of the church across time, which must be continually tested in the light of both reason and experience to discern present truth."¹³

The primary issue in the Adventist church today is not whether the literalists or the nonliteralists are right, but whether both can appreciate a common heritage and love one another as sister Christians, with considerable allowance for conscientiously held differences. The major challenge for literalist members is to account for the intrinsic dynamism that is evident in Scripture and in Adventist history, and prioritize the "weightier matters of the law." The major challenge for nonliteralist Adventists is to guard against the secularist tendencies that a multi-faceted approach to truth allows, and hold to and develop central Adventist emphases that enrich post-modern members' lives and can contribute to the larger world.¹⁴

[The contrast between religious literalists and nonliteralists is particularly pronounced in Judaism. And it appears clear that today's Judaism—in any and all its forms—only survives because of the 2500-year, uninterrupted history of Torah (Orthodox) Judaism. Although there is a fundamental difference between Christianity and Judaism—Jesus Christ—literalist Adventism and Orthodox Judaism have at least three interesting parallels: Both adhere to a strict interpretation and application of religious beliefs, both adhere to some type of gender segregation, and both believe that their most sacred Scriptures were transmitted directly by God and are hence eternal and unalterable. See appendix B for a limited elaboration.]

Diversity—Natural, Good, and God-ordained

I now turn from a largely descriptive account of a disparate and changing worldwide Adventism to argue that our diverse denomination is as interesting as a lush

meadow—composed of flowers, grasses and, yes, weeds—in the High Sierra in the flush of spring.

Diversity is “in” these days, if what is being taught in our universities is any indication. For example, my own LLU School of Religion teaches a relatively new course, Health Care Disparities. My field of bioethics is a relatively new area of academic focus that arose precisely because of the growing plurality of moral views and an increased sense of self-determination; American society is no longer defined by Ozzie and Harriet families of four.

It’s one thing to affirm diversity and formally accept that people are different; it’s quite another to actually appreciate the deep-seated, fundamental difference that characterizes individuals and groups. I myself have formally accepted difference for a long time, but been superficial about genuine appreciation of true otherness. Two illustrations will suffice.

I was the young pastor at the Adventist church in Claremont, California in 1979 when *Spectrum* published excerpts from the 1919 Bible Conference transcripts—and I was spiritually and intellectually blown over. By the mid-1900s Ellen White had been elevated to paper-pope-like status in Adventism, and now we had transcripts of elite thought leaders, some close friends and colleagues of our prophet who had died four years earlier, acknowledging her human side and grappling with how to guide a membership with inflated ideas.¹⁵ I recall talking at length with a fellow young Los Angeles pastor, the late Ed Johnson, about putting together a traveling seminar for conference churches. Part of the genius of Adventism is “progressive revelation,” and “present truth”, and surely the 1919 Bible Conference transcripts qualify. Of course, church members everywhere would want to know! How naïve I was about human nature.

Similarly, when I was a junior professor of religion at LLU 30 years ago and cyclical concern for women’s ordination was again cresting, I with others fought for our world church to adopt women as equals in ministry. Hadn’t Gordon Hyde, chairman of Southern’s religion department in the mid-60s, predicted that the church was ready to take this step? But the denomination was changing demographically, with exponential growth south of the equator and near-stagnation in the NAD and Europe. Accordingly, I found myself fighting for increasingly smaller regions of the church, finally linking efforts with Penny Miller to help found the Gender Inclusiveness Task Force in Southeastern California Conference in January, 1989, only to have our multi-year efforts stymied by the sympathetic conference Lynn Mallory, who feared that then-GC president Robert Folkenberg would stage a special SECC constituency show-down.

When Folkenberg was deposed in January, 1999, and replaced by Jan Paulsen, Lynn Mallory was newly emboldened and on October 21 of that year the SECC executive committee voted a recommendation by Mallory and the Gender Inclusive Task Force “that equal credentials be granted to all [SECC] pastors, both male and female.” Now

elected conference leaders had ended gender discrimination within their own territory, leaving other conferences to recognize the legitimacy of these pastors as they would. At the time I thought, and I still think, that SECC did the right thing. Further, I thought that if all other church leaders prayed fervently about the issue they would come to the same conclusion. I now think I was wrong. My mind has changed (or, I'm attempting to change it), as I've learned more about human nature—particularly from the neurosciences. In a word, I'm now more modest about my belief that people can freely choose to change their minds merely because they hear even theologically and philosophically compelling arguments. We are learning that the human brain is incredibly complex, and its processes defy the popular conception of a more-or-less neutral weighing of evidence.

Cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker, in his Pulitzer prize-nominated *The Blank Slate* (2002), contends that we have a “moral sense,” and it's essentially rooted in our emotions.¹⁶ The emotions are inseparable from the social aspect, and humans are intrinsically social. We have long praised *rational* and castigated *emotional* decision-making, but neuroscience doesn't support this bifurcation. Psychopaths have a strong rational capacity, compared to their emotional sense. The fact that decisions are infused with both factual and emotional/social elements helps explain why equally smart and adjusted persons can have opposite moral positions on issues such as women's ordination. This occurs because emotional elements in one's history emerge early, long before one consciously *thinks* about gender equality/inequality. Those early emotions form a moral vector that the conscious mind will later clothe with language and argument. “Man is free to do what he wills, but he cannot will what he wills,” said Schopenhauer.

As important as the human brain is (more specifically the prefrontal cortex or PFC), neuroscience has shown that it's not an autonomous “moral center.” It is morally neutral (amoral), organized around endurance and success. Patricia Churchland, neuroscientist and philosopher, contends that our subconscious brains are initially in the pre-value process of “negotiating” their way through day-to-day social life.¹⁷ Cultural dos and don'ts, traditional practices, parental upbringing and role modeling, etc., are significant factors in forming the selves we become. Every decision we make and every experience we have contributes to the person we become.

Not only is our subconscious self formed by our life experiences—both emotional and factual—but our genetically derived neurochemicals are even *more* basic, a point driven home by Churchland's description of the peptide oxytocin, a chemical that helps bonding between mother and infant. Scientists have studied the contrast between prairie voles and montane voles: prairie voles mate for life, with the male sharing parental duties by licking and nurturing his offspring, and sometimes a neighbor's pups. In contrast, the montane voles do not mate for life, and the males do not actively care for even their own pups. Why? Prairie voles have more oxytocin receptors in the brain. However, if prairie voles' oxytocin receptors are blocked, they will *not* pair-bond. When Churchland learned about prairie voles'

oxytocin levels she was “stunned.” She’d always thought that pair-bonding was a conscious choice, perhaps guided by esoteric moral norms.¹⁸

Within the past 30 years neuroscience has shown that the main determinants of personal life lie beyond conscious control. Cognitive physiologist Benjamin Libet performed pivotal, path-breaking experiments in contemporary neuroscience in the early 1980s, demonstrating that the main components of personal choice lie in the unconscious. A person’s conscious sense of decision is preceded by at least 300 milliseconds (3/10s of a second), during which the unconscious circuitry is processing a decision that emerges in one’s conscious brain for final approval.¹⁹ Neuroscience researchers have found that the so-called Response Potential (the time from unconscious initiation to conscious awareness) can be as long as seven (7) minutes.²⁰ Sam Harris reports that one fMRI study shows Response Potential of 10 seconds.²¹

Most neuroscientists and knowledgeable philosophers conclude that such experiments are evidence for determinism and lack of free will, despite Libet’s denial that his experiment undercuts personal freedom. Sam Harris, always colorful, says: “From the perspective of your conscious mind, you are no more responsible for the next thing you think (and therefore *do*) than you are for the fact that you were born into this world.”²² Other thinkers, such as philosopher of science and religion Philip Clayton, contend that the widely recognized theory of emergence (emergent complexity) persuasively explains why the human brain is not reducible to its known component parts. In this regard Clayton and colleague Steven Knapp affirm that “persons really exist, ideas influence behavior, and it does make a difference that you strive to follow the Golden Rule and live in harmony with your fellow human beings.”²³

The debate over free will has undenied importance, and it wages on, but we’ve said enough for our purposes: regardless of our degree of free will, virtually all neuroscience scholars agree that humans are vastly more determined by nature and nurture than traditionally thought.

From the Adventist Christian standpoint today’s neuroscience has special relevance for understanding the differences that now rack our denomination—Biblical hermeneutics and women’s ordination. However, neuroscience need not weaken either literalists’ or nonliteralists’ firmly held convictions, but it *can* make us all more knowledgeable and humble about possible origins of our cherished positions, and it may make us more charitable toward those of opposing convictions.

All of us—from the most sophisticated to the supposedly naïve—“see through a glass darkly,” and therefore have good reason to be gracious toward our brothers and sisters whose worldviews are assembled differently.

We Adventist Christians possess two perspectives that can aid us in accepting

neuroscientific insights: a) our concept of nature as God's second book, and b) our view, along with historic Christianity, that pride, obsession with self, is a grave sin.

The human brain, with 86 billion neurons and 100 trillion synapses, is arguably the most complex and least well understood three pounds of matter in the known universe, with the issue of consciousness continuing to confound. But given the advances in all branches of science, including the science of the brain, it isn't surprising that conventional ideas are challenged. Regarding the brain, the challenge is to the traditional idea of unfettered freedom in choosing the right, good and true.

And Christians can particularly appreciate that the human "I" is not the center of the universe, even our little social universes—but is only one of many neuro loci in a society of persons who comprise this huge, wonderfully complex universe of which our world is but a small part. We aren't as powerful and decisive as conventionally thought. Our options are limited. We are part of a grand process covering generations and myriad influences—a part of God's created order. We can lament that we aren't more in control, or we can accept our limited control humbly—and thankfully.

James M. Gustafson, at the University of Chicago in the 1970s, was humbled by the advances of human knowledge on many fronts, and as a Christian made sense of it in his two-volume *Theocentric Ethics*: God is in control, and we work with our Creator as intelligent, responsive partners. As important as human life is—and important as church issues such as Biblical interpretation and women's ordination are—we ever live in the larger context this being our Creator's world. We are only here and now because the Transcendent One radically chose to create self-conscious beings. We must fight against self-absorption in praise to the creative Source of our very being. Yes, we should take ourselves seriously, but not confuse our often self-serving constructs with God's larger Plan, of which we—like Job—are largely unaware. In light of the human predicament, H. Richard Niebuhr, Gustafson's mentor, boldly declared that "*whatever is, is good*," affirmed by the power of being, supported by it, intended to be..." Our "relative" human ideas:

Will be made to fit into a total process producing good—not what is good for me (though my confidence accepts that as included), nor what is good for man (though that is also included), nor what is good for the development of life (though that also belongs in the picture), but what is good for being, for universal being, or for God, center and source of all existence.²⁴

Niebuhr is making a theological/philosophical statement about the universe and life as a whole; his "*whatever is, is good*," is a confession of faith and of ultimate trust about life itself. Niebuhr is *not* making an ethical judgment about how we are living our lives day-to-day.

One reaction to the further dethroning of Man from the center of the universe is fear of moral relativism—anything goes, because we are powerless puppies at the end of

our genetic/social leashes. Moral relativism, the idea that every person's or every culture's ethics are as good as others, is tempting in our postmodern culture, but such a position is contrary to the Christian tradition, to the consensus of the best of moral philosophy, and to contemporary neuroscience, as at least seen in the writing of Steven Pinker.

Pinker's basic point in his *The Blank Slate* is that humans possess "fixed human natures," as opposed to the popular notion of being blank slates.²⁵ He points to our "language instinct," allowing a baby to subconsciously learn the sound of words, their pronunciation, and their meaning.

And further, Pinker contends that we possess a "moral sense." "No creature equipped with circuitry to understand that it is immoral for you to hurt me," says Pinker "could discover anything but that it is immoral for me to hurt you. As with numbers and the number sense, we would expect moral systems to evolve toward similar conclusions in different cultures or even different planets.... [We possess] an intrinsic logic of ethics rather than concocting it in our heads out of nothing."²⁶

So the point of this excursion into human diversity—a diversity that is natural, pervasive and largely not chosen—is not to say that all ideas are equal, but to show how current differences are understandable and to be respected. My personal hope and belief is that as we conscientiously pray and think together as Adventists we will come closer and closer to the ideal in our divine creation.

A High View of Conscience

I now turn to the second part of my constructive argument, the first part being my contention that God has given us a big, wonderfully diverse world—and *church membership*—with individual initiative playing a beautifully minor role—by design. In this second part of the argument I contend that Adventism can remain organizationally together and united in Christ if we highly prize the interrelated concepts of individual conscience and communal unity.

The notion of conscience or conscientiousness is surely not unique to Adventists, or to Christianity. It is a distinguished concept in the history of ideas. The early axial-age thinkers reflected on conscience, as seen, for example, in the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Reference to conscience is seen in such diverse religious traditions as Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Confucism, Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Also ancient thinkers, thought to be more secular, spoke of conscience, as seen in the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius' reference to moving "from one unselfish action to another with God in mind. Only thee, delight and stillness." (*Meditations*).

Roman Catholic theologians have wrestled with the concept of conscience for millennia, and it was a major theme of Enlightenment thinkers such as Immanuel Kant. Kant began his *Critique of Practical Reason* with the well-know words: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more

often and steadily we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.” And Kant was joined by diverse thinkers such as Spinoza, Hegel, Lock and Mill in grappling with issues of how conscience is related to objectivity, disinterestedness, universality and consistency—to just scratch the surface. But it was Bishop Joseph Butler who cogently spoke of conscience as a “universal moral faculty,” and defined it as a “constitutional monarch.”²⁷ Butler drew upon the early 18th century development of psychology, a fledging discipline that viewed the mind as comprised of three “faculties”—those of reason, volition, and feeling—and his conception of conscience most clearly sided with the idea that through one’s reason one can distinguish right from wrong. But Butler, with all his Enlightenment theorists who were thoroughly modernist in their worship of reason, stand in contrast to B. F. Skinner’s behaviorism that viewed conscience functionally—as learned behaviors in reaction to certain stimuli.

Ellen White, a prodigious writer, was no stranger to discussion of conscience, with no less than 325 entries to this and related terms cited in the 3-volume *Comprehensive Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White*. White was not a philosophical theorist, but she understandably reflected the modernist “faculty” notion of conscience, except that she believed that God instilled it. References from the *Index* that reflect this view would include “preserve a [conscience], before God,” “awakened, at conversion,” “capable of hearing faintest whisper of Christ’s voice,” etc.

White, like so many religious and philosophical writers deals with conscience. However, her particular religious experience and the history of her fellow Adventist believers help to explain Adventism’s strong emphasis on conscience. The history of the Advent conscience begins with hundreds of faithful, Bible-believing souls responding to the preaching of William Miller, teaching that the end of the world was approaching.

Miller didn’t intend to begin a new denomination, and in fact he counseled his followers to remain in their original congregations until he was himself disfellowshipped from his church. Regardless, early Advent-believers founded their own denomination more from practical than purely ideological reasons, although the later emerged larger and larger. The practical concerns were accounting for funds given for church workers, identification of genuine preachers, and particularly ownership of the vital printing facilities. But also the special history of the Millerites who adopted the cleansed-sanctuary interpretation of October 22, made for a special bond among believers. This bonding led to Bible conferences, summer camp meetings, home Bible study groups, and eventually organized state conferences and the official General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in 1863.

The very idea of “organization” was traumatic for these early Adventists because their original congregational experience was similar to William Miller’s. And the pronouncement of George Storrs, an early Adventist preacher, writing in *The Midnight Cry*, would ring loud and clear for years, even decades to come: “No church

can be organized by man's invention but what it becomes Babylon *the moment it is organized.*"²⁸ The individual believer is saved by Christ alone, and no special doctrine or organized group adds to that—and often detracts. He described a full circle of persecuting sect to persecuting sect: first believers flee the original sect, then come organized conferences with their resolutions, which are successively advisory, dictatorial, and then penal—with disfellowshipment; the circle is complete. Four decades after Storrs' trumpeting of religious liberty, *Liberty* magazine was established in 1886 in the context separation of church and state for Sabbath protection.²⁹ There is a bold socio-spiritual thread from the 1886 founding of *Liberty* stretching back to the independent-minded New England believers who followed conscience in believing the 1844 truth though it meant sacrifice of dear family and church connections.

That thread of conscience that runs deep in Adventist blood is still strong. It is seen in church evangelists who appeal to believers in other denominations to follow individual conscience in studying the Bible for themselves. It is seen in the official statement of the General Conference on abortion, a short document citing "individual liberty," "personal freedom" and like ideas no less than a half dozen times in establishing the denomination's moderate view on the subject.³⁰

The idea of conscience arose at a panel discussion, "Good Science and Literal Bible: What Gives," at Loma Linda University, October 2014. A leading Biblical literalist who has his own Sabbath School class at the University Church, physician Paul Giem, was asked whether he thought that equally intelligent and educated Adventists who come to conclusions about such issues as theistic evolution should follow individual conscience. His final answer was that they should, but he added that following conscience in this case could and should lead one to leave Adventism, because such belief conflicts with established church doctrine. Had that line of reasoning been pursued by the panel, a further question could have been why a "present-truth," "progressive-revelation" Adventist should leave the denomination when at earlier times in church history the then-unorthodox anti "closed-door" and anti-Arian believers pointed the way toward more adequate Adventist positions. Further, if two Adventists are active members in good and regular standing, and equally steeped in and appreciative of the tradition, on what basis is one to judge which direction conscience should lead? The typical Advent follower in, say, 1849, believed that salvation was limited to the 1844 believers and that Christ was the first created being. As Adventism evolved, most all conscientious members abandoned the short-door view and, with a few exceptions, the Arian position. The point of a high view of conscience is that the conscientious member should be true to herself.

A High View of Church

The primary issue facing the Seventh-day Adventist church today is not women's ordination, just as the basic issue facing the New Testament church was not food

offered to idols, whether to circumcise, or the Cephas vs. the Apollos party. The root issue is how does God's Church deal with our differences?³¹

The primary message of the New Testament is what God has done for us: so loving us that He sent his Son to give eternal life (John 3:16). That is the gospel, the good news. It not only gives us hope for life beyond, but it puts meaning into our everyday lives—God, the God of the universe, loves you and me! Jesus not only personally proclaimed God's love, but according to Matthew he made provision for long-term proclamation—through his church. Hence we read: "I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it...." (16:18).

Our friends the Roman Catholics have taken this passage and based their church on it, making Peter their first pope. No group of Christian believers has taken the idea of church more seriously and raised the concept to unparalleled heights: Through the Eucharist the believer partakes of the actual body and blood of Christ and thereby enters into the communion of all the saints on earth, in purgatory and in heaven, comprising a spiritual solidarity of the mystical church body under Christ its head.

If Catholic theology has too high a view of the church, we Protestants risk taking too low a view—as though a personal relationship with Jesus (one-to-one) is all that matters. Given our Western, post-Enlightenment focus on the individual—with our free autonomy in the hospital, and our cherished civil rights in court—we may miss the importance the New Testament attaches to church: beyond Matthew's account of Jesus establishing the church, both the Revelator and St. Paul use marital language to describe Christ's relationship to his church—the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7; and Christ as head of the church, as a husband is head of his wife (!) (Eph. 5:23).³²

St Paul speaks of being "in Christ" no fewer than 216 times, and St. John uses the phrase 26 times. Being in Christ suggests spiritual rest and assurance, and although it is undeniably personal, being "in" Christ is inseparable from being "in" His church for Paul: "For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one of another" (Romans 12: 4,5). Talk about a spiritual union of Christ and individual members as church!

This spiritual union of Christ and members defines church—and because of the preciousness of this ideal Paul downplays the value of penultimate concerns that preoccupy too many believers. And the list of threatening, secondary, disputed issues is long, including: vegetables, unclean meat, food, drink, wine, festivals, new moons, Sabbaths, regulations and opinions, and human precepts and doctrines (Romans 14 and Colossians 3).

The apostle's counsel *for church unity through respect for conscience* could not be starker: "One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind.... But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God" (Romans 14:4-5,10).

A denomination that abandoned a shut-door view of the sanctuary, harbored Arian church leaders for years, and accepts polygamist African converts with multiple wives, can surely withstand the threat to organic division posed by an issue such as selective women's ordination. Christ is the core. We find our salvation and unity "in Christ."

Appendix A

Both Progressives and Traditionalists can find a basis in Ellen White's writings

Progressive Statements:

1. When new light is presented to the church, it is perilous to shut yourselves away from it.... To condemn that which you have not heard and do not understand will not exalt your wisdom in the eyes of those who are candid in their investigations of truth. And to speak with contempt of those whom God has sent with a message of truth, is folly and madness.... [the church's youth] are not to make up their minds that the whole truth has been unfolded, and that the Infinite One has no more light for His people. If they entrench themselves in the belief that the whole truth has been revealed, they will be in danger of discarding precious jewels of truth that shall be discovered as men turn their attention to the searching of the rich mine of God's word." *Counsels to Writers & Editors*, 51
2. The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented...God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen. 1 *Selected Messages*, 21
3. All who in that evil [last] day would fearlessly serve God according to the dictates of conscience, will need courage, firmness, and a knowledge of God and His word; for those who are true to God will be persecuted, their motives will be impugned, and their best efforts misinterpreted, and their names cast out as evil." *Acts of the Apostles*, 431
4. Every association of life calls for the exercise of self-control, forbearance, and sympathy. We differ so widely in disposition, habits, education, that our ways of

looking at things vary. We judge differently. Our understanding of truth, our ideas in regard to the conduct of life, are not in all respects the same. There are no two whose experience is alike in every particular. The trials of one are not the trials of another. The duties that one finds light are to another most difficult and perplexing. *Ministry of Healing*, 483

5. The necessities of life must be attended to, the sick must be cared for, the wants of the needy must be supplied. He will not be held guiltless who neglects to relieve suffering on the Sabbath. God's holy rest day was made for man, and acts of mercy are in perfect harmony with its intent. God does not desire His creatures to suffer an hour's pain that may be relieved upon the Sabbath or any other day. *Desire of Ages*, 207

Traditionalist Statements:

6. I have been shown that no man's judgment should be surrendered to the judgment of any one man. But when the judgment of the General Conference, which is the highest authority that God has upon the earth, is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be maintained, but be surrendered. 3 *Testimonies*, 492

7. Satan has taken full possession of the churches as a body. The sayings and doings of men are dwelt upon instead of the plain cutting truths of the word of God. 1 *Spiritual Gifts*, 189

8. The Bible is not to be tested by men's ideas of science, but science is to be brought to the test of this unerring standard. *Signs of the Times*, March 13, 1884

9. The general method of educating the youth does not meet the standard of true education. Infidel sentiments are interwoven in the matter placed in schoolbooks, and the oracles of God are placed in a questionable or even an objectionable light. Thus the minds of the youth become familiar with Satan's suggestions, and the doubts once entertained become to those who entertain them, assured facts, and scientific research is made misleading on account of the way its discoveries are interpreted and perverted. Men take it upon themselves to rein up the word of God before a finite tribunal, and sentence is pronounced upon the inspiration of God according to finite measurement, and the truth of God is made to appear as a thing uncertain before the records of science. *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, 328

10. Every truth that He has given for these last days is to be proclaimed to the world. Every pillar that He has established is to be strengthened. We cannot step off the foundation that God has established. 2 *Selected Messages*, 290

11. In every age there is a new development of truth, a message of God to the people of that generation. The old truths are all essential; new truth is not independent of the old, but an unfolding of it. It is only as the old truths are understood that we can comprehend the new. *Christ's Object Lessons*, 127

A Statement of Conscience that transcends both Traditionalism and Progressivism:

The greatest want of the world is the want of men—men who will not be bought or sold, men who in their inmost souls are true and honest, men who do not fear to call sin by its right name, men whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole, men who will stand for the truth though the heavens fall. *Education*, 57

Appendix B

Jews and Adventists—an analogy in support of literalist Adventism's constructive role in a United "Big Tent" Adventism.

Admittedly, it's a bit preposterous to suggest an analogy between a 3,000-year-old Judaism and 170-year-old Adventism. But there are a few striking similarities—both a people of "the book," distinctive beliefs, education, and both are outsiders. Of course, Judaism can point to a string of luminaries: Moses, David, Jesus, Maimonides, Einstein—and 194 Nobel Prize winners and 42 Pulitzer awards. And Adventism can point to Ellen White, our co-founder and most prolific writer, the only denominational medical school accredited in the U.S. and a burgeoning number of highly competent professionals. But, frankly, Adventism can't even begin the comparison game.

Contemporary Judaism in the U.S. has the same challenges as all its religious brethren: an open, free America of unbounded opportunity and the assault of historic and scientific scrutiny on traditional beliefs. But it was devout adherence to traditional beliefs—despite persecution and vast changes in societal ideologies—that sustained the Jews over millennia and made them thrive. Jewish success as a people in the U.S.—despite being only 0.2% of the population—is likely the result of at least three factors: a) endogamy, b) the benefits that accompany a sense of being a divinely chosen people, and c) the long-standing emphasis on learning. For example, Jonathan Rosenblum, a graduate of Yale Law, was dissatisfied with his life as a big-firm Chicago attorney, and traveled to Jerusalem to study with Hasidic scholars—finding that the study of Torah was "more challenging and rigorous than anything I experienced at the pinnacle of American academia"—as he related in his essay, "Ultra-Orthodox Bring Pride, Charity and Vitality Back to Jewish People" (<http://forward.com/articles/177438/ultra-orthodox-bring-pride-charity-and-vitality>)

¹ Although in many regards Adventism is a denomination, even in its United States homeland it retains significant sectarian traits, as indicated by Keith Lockhart and Malcolm Bull in their insightful *Seeking A Sanctuary*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007): a high rate of converts vs. low rate of retention of those born into the church; elevator effect of entering the church poor and exiting it with means; poor assimilation rates of new ethnic minorities of color; extensive growth but little societal influence; institutions still outweighed by revivalism; and prominence of high-tension doctrines. Cf. p 360 f.

² The Seventh-day Adventist church's official website's latest world membership cites 17,994,120 (June 30, 2013).

³ Most of the statistics used in this paper come from two of Monte Sahlin's presentations, "The Globalization of the Adventist Church," at Columbia Union College, November, 2007, and "Ethnic and Cultural Diversity: Colleagues or Competitors?" at Oakwood College in 2009.

⁴ Year 1990 to 2008 shifts in NAD percentages of members' ethnicities: Asian, 2 to 7%; Black 23 to 27%; Hispanic, 6 to 12%; White, 62 to 50%; and Multiethnic, 1 to 4%. The 2008 percentages of the Adventist membership compared to the US citizenship: Asian, 7 to 3%; Black, 27 to 12%; Hispanic, 12 to 10%; White, 50 to 67%.

⁵ Further, Sahlin's 2009 Oakwood report states that Adventists were asked about whether a woman who had even young children should have a career, and 67% of immigrant members said yes, compared to 38% of native-born members.

⁶ Edwin E. Reynolds and Clinton Wahlen, *North American Division Theology of Ordination Study Committee Minority Report*, November, 2013.

⁷ Ronald E. Osborn, *Death Before the Fall: Biblical Literalism and the Problem of Animal Suffering* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2014).

⁸ Osborn, 116.

⁹ Osborn, 45 (Osborn's italics).

¹⁰ Reynolds and Wahlen, 195.

¹¹ Nicholas Miller, "The Ordination of Women in the American Church," (<http://www.adventistarchives.org/nicholas-miller.pdf>), 10

¹² Miller, 11.

¹³ Osborn, 21.

¹⁴ A significant contribution to church retention/evangelism would be for a contemporary Adventist thinker to write a book with such a title as *Adventist Insights for Postmodern Consideration*, with perhaps four chapters: 1. You are not

just Intelligent, Cosmic Flotsam (Creation), 2. Hope is an Underrated Christian Virtue (Eschatology), 3. Healthy is Holy, and 4. Rest is Sacred (Sabbath).

¹⁵ The significance of this conference of the top administrative, theological and editorial leaders is underscored by the relatively small world membership at the time—178,239. That is less than the current number of members in the single state of California—190,900 (2013 figure)

<http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/ASR/ASR2014.pdf>

¹⁶ Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (NY: Viking, 2002), pp. 270-274.

¹⁷ Patricia S. Churchill, *Braintrust: What Neuroscience Tells Us About Morality* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Churchill. Oxytocin functions similarly in human brains, and Churchland indicates that oxytocin has a spillover effect that can extend to other kin, friends, and sometimes strangers.

¹⁹ Libet attached research subjects to an EEG, and asked them to watch a clock's "second hand" to record the instant they had the first inkling to perform an agreed upon act—such as flicking the finger. And he compared the clock-time with the EEG tracings that showed when the brain first registered the unconscious finger flicking activity. Libet's "clock" had a large red dot on the second hand that revolved once in 2.65 seconds, thus providing very accurate measurements. See Benjamin Libet, A. Gleason, E.W. Wright, and D. K. Pearl, "Time of Conscious Intention to Act in Relation to Onset of Cerebral Activities (Readiness Potential): the Unconscious Initiation of a Freely Voluntary Act," *Brain* (106, 3, 1983), 623-642, and Benjamin Libet, Anthony Freeman, and Keith Sutherland, *The Volitional Brain: Towards Neuroscience of Free Will* (Thorverton, UK: Imprint Academic, 1999).

²⁰ Brandon Keim, "Brain Scanners Can See Your Decisions Before You Make Them," (Wired News, April 13, 2008).

²¹ Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 103. Harris has furthered his argument in his best-seller *Free Will* (NY: Free Press, 2012), a book praised by many and criticized as misguided by even some of Harris's colleagues.

²² Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 104.

²³ James W. Walters, Philip Clayton, and Steven Knapp (eds.), *Confronting the Predicament of Belief: The Quest for God in Radical Uncertainty—A Loma Linda Dialogue with Clayton and Knapp* (Edmond OK: CrowdScribed, in press), Clayton and Knapp, "A Response to our Critics," 171; "The study of emergent complex systems, or what we called *emergence* for short, takes the barb out of the advances of scientific knowledge. If immunology is highly dependent on the unique history and features of a given organism, why would we think that the unique features of what it is to be an individual human being will be eliminated by the study of her brain's prefrontal cortex? Complex biological systems produce emergent properties that are unique to those particular systems and interactions. With the myth of full reduction now dispelled, we can study the amazing correlations across systems without worrying that the emergent properties of our conscious experience will turn out to be "nothing but" the firing of neurons, chemical reactions, or 'matter in motion'" 166.

²⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self, an Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (NY: Harper and Row, 1963), 125 (italics in the original).

²⁵ To drive home his point about an encoded slate, Pinker refers to the well-known phenomenon of identical twins, which displays similar traits in later life. He cites his favorite example: the pair of twins, one of whom was brought up as a Catholic in a Nazi family in Germany, the other of whom was brought up by a Jewish father in Trinidad. Nonetheless, when they met each other in the lab in their 40s, both walked in wearing identical navy blue shirts with epaulets. Both of them kept rubber bands around their wrist. Both of them, it turned out on questioning, liked to dip buttered toast in coffee, to flush the toilet before using it as well as after, and to pretend to sneeze in crowded elevators to watch the other people jump. (APA, 4)

²⁶ 192, *The Blank Slate*.

²⁷ Joseph Butler, "Sermons," in *The Works of Joseph Butler* (W.E. Gladstone, ed.) Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1896, vol. II.

²⁸ Quoted by Richard W. Schwartz, *Light Bearers to the Remnant* (Mountain View, Ca.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1979), 47.

²⁹ *Liberty* magazine has had a circulation as high as 500,000 in its long history.

³⁰ <http://www.adventist.org/en/information/official-statements/guidelines/article/go/0/abortion/>

³¹ In making this observation about controverted issues in both the New Testament church and Adventist denomination I am not dealing with the question of whether equality of women and circumcision are on the same moral plain. They are *not* morally equivalent! Equality of woman and man is a given, in my moral book. However, that is not how the NT writers or the great majority of 18 million Adventists view the matter, and I'm attempting to deal with world Adventism (itself reflecting diverse regional attitudes) where it now is on women's equality, and find unity at a more existential, personal level. Gender discrimination is wrong, but so is spousal abuse, racial bias, etc. The New Testament church not only treated women unequally, but it had many other grievous problems—yet Paul pleaded with the sinning saints to be one "in Christ."

³² In contending for a high view of the church I am making a theological, not an organizational, argument. I personally favor semi-autonomy for the divisions of world Adventism, as was argued for by Raymond F. Cottrell as part of an Association of Adventist Forums task force, and reported as "The Need for Structural Change," *Spectrum* magazine, October-December, 1984.