

Conflict and Reconciliation

The Church *Living* the Peace of Christ

by Charles Scriven

Fear and acrimony have long plagued the aspect of Christian life to which Jesus called attention when he asked us to love God with our minds.¹ These problems certainly endanger Adventist life, stoked as they are by current disagreements over ordination for women and the doctrine of creation, not to mention underlying dissonance with respect to the proper way, in any case, to read and interpret Scripture.

Disagreements such as these make for deeply-felt *conflict*. And most people familiar with the conflict would allow that prospects for *reconciliation* seem less than sure or even (what may be truer) forbiddingly remote. We may agree that God expects a response from us that engages the totality of personal life, heart and soul, might and mind. But precisely by engaging our minds we somehow stumble into persistent and injurious discord. A kind of fierce integrity comes into play—unbending, more redolent of the world than of the Christ who came to save it—and we lose at least some of our capacity to love others as we love ourselves.

The overall beauty of Adventist life remains. But the injury is real, and it cries out for healing. How can healing happen?

Here I argue that it can happen (if imperfectly) just when Adventists reclaim elements of their heritage that are too widely forgotten or repressed. As heirs of Anabaptism,² we may learn from the ecclesiology rooted in the Radical Reformation. As heirs of our own pioneers, we may learn from early expressions of Adventist self-understanding. Above all, we may learn from Jesus and from the first witnesses to the Kingdom he announced.

This latter, the centrality of Jesus, has always lived near the heart of Adventist identity. If the attentive hear God's call, the radically attentive, we say, hear God's call to be the *Remnant*, those who, against both complacency and threat, keep God's commands and maintain their testimony to Jesus.³ Writing to the Colossians, Jesus' most influential early follower drew out implications of all this that bear precisely on the problem of discord. Because Jesus, the now-

¹ See Jesus' evocation of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:5) in Matthew 22: 37 and parallels. Scriptural quotations throughout the essay are from the NRSV.

² See W. L. Emerson, *The Reformation and the Advent Movement* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1983). Emerson, who was born in 1901 (!), argues that the Reformation—in particular, the Radical Reformation—anticipates the vision that comes to full expression in Seventh-day Adventism. In the same year, I myself located Adventism's roots in Anabaptism in "Radical Discipleship and the Renewal of Adventist Mission," *Spectrum* 14 (December, 1983), 11-20. In *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), George Knight argues that the Radical Reformation is an important key to Adventist identity.

³ Revelation 12:17; note that 14:12 makes a "call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and *hold fast to the faith of Jesus*" (emphasis mine). Generally, scriptural quotations are from the NRSV.

risen Christ, is Lord, his followers, Paul declared, must “clothe” themselves with “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” They must “bear with one another,” ready always to forgive, fully embracing the “love” that “binds everything together in perfect harmony.” With “the peace of Christ” in their hearts, they must “teach and admonish one other in all wisdom” and with heartfelt “gratitude,” aiming always to “do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.”⁴ And as the whole Gospel declares, the Christian life is not only a giving and receiving of generosity and reconciliation; it is also a fearless going-forth into world-changing mission.⁵

In New Testament perspective, all this is adventure undertaken *together*. Christian existence is shared existence; Christian life is common life. And as Christ’s embodiment on earth, the community that shares this common life offers both service and wisdom to the wider world. The church is a living clue to the goodness, the revolutionary peace, that will come to fruition at Christ’s return. It is a signpost of the impending future. John Howard Yoder, the most influential, perhaps, of the Neo-Anabaptists, puts it this way: “The confessing people of God is the new world on its way.”⁶

Still, if this is the ideal—the vision that animates members and causes observers (sometimes) to marvel⁷—conflict remains. And the conflict was there, actually, from the start. After eighteen months in Corinth, Paul left to continue his missionary travels. A few years later, when he wrote his first letter back, the Christian community in Corinth was rife with lawsuits, sexual sins, and quarrels over doctrine, idols and food. God intended, Paul said, to overturn the present order through Christian witness, but it was difficulty inside the church that absorbed most of his attention. The whole letter may be read, in fact, as “an extended appeal for unity.”⁸

In making this appeal, Paul suggests a link, especially pertinent for communities focused on theological correctness, between the dissension at Corinth and the people’s sense of their own special “knowledge” (*gnosis*). Knowledge leads to boasting—it “puffs up,” Paul says, unlike love, which “builds up.” He declares further, again with a view to priority, that prophecy,

⁴ Revelation 14:12. Other quotes from Colossians 3:12-16; for a passage similar to the one in Colossians, see Ephesians 4:1-16, with its focus on humility, love and “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” and its sense that the purpose of the divine gifts is for “building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith” and “to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” (I realize that for both these letters, Pauline authorship is disputed. I treat Paul as the author without claiming to know for sure; assuming otherwise would not affect the substance of my argument.)

⁵ Two representative passages are Matthew 28:16-20 and 2 Corinthians 5:17-21.

⁶ The body metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12 backs the concept of shared Christian life. As for the church’s gifts to the world, consider that between the coming “near” of the Kingdom (Matthew 4:17), and Christ’s final victory (see Matthew 24), those who follow Christ are salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16). The Yoder remark is from his *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright, with a foreword by Richard J. Mouw (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 373. I first saw the term Neo-Anabaptist in James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern world* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). In chapters 4 to 6 of the book Hunter contrasts Neo-Anabaptism with what he calls the Christian Right and the Christian Left. On p. 109 he names as key Neo-Anabaptist figures John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey Murphy, Richard Hays, Craig A. Carter, James McClendon and Michael Cartwright.

⁷ Tertullian famously remarked that the church’s enemies say, “Look how they love each other...how they are ready to die for one another,” though on his telling this was said in contempt, so different was the church’s ethos from the one then dominant among pagans. Tertullian *Apology* 39.

⁸ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpreter’s Bible Commentary (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 9. For God’s intention in calling the church existence, see 1 Corinthians 1:26-28.

understanding and knowledge matter *not at all* apart from love. I may have these gifts, Paul remarks in chapter 13, but if I “do not have love, I am nothing.” The sort of love he has in mind is “patient” and “kind”; it is not “boastful or arrogant,” and “does not insist on its own way.” As for our knowledge, it is in any case “partial” and will “come to an end.” Love is like faith and hope: it will “abide.” It is, indeed, the “greatest” of God’s gifts.⁹

All through the letter, Paul puts Christ at the center: Christ is “the power and God and the wisdom of God,” and there is no other “foundation” than him. Eating the communion meal expresses our solidarity with—our “sharing in”—Christ’s life and mission. The body we join at baptism is “one,” without distinctions of status, and that one body is the “body of Christ.” Christ thus undergirds all that can be lived and said in Christian faith, not least the saying, offered to a divided church, that love is what we most need to “pursue.”¹⁰

This message bears a resemblance, of course, to what the Colossians read or heard. Letting “the peace of Christ” rule in their hearts was about generosity, reconciliation and the love that makes for “perfect harmony.”¹¹ Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians contains his sharpened perspective on one aspect of all this. God’s own reconciling love, he declares in that letter, shines through ours—*for the sake of the whole creation*. Reconciliation is the church’s ministry, its mission. But if his point here is that reconciliation heals more than the church itself, a reconciled, Christian community remains crucial to the process, and inside-the-community challenges are still on Paul’s mind.¹²

The letter to the Ephesians echoes these themes. Through the church’s witness God is communicating to the wider universe. Meanwhile, members must be reminded to live “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” The letter says, too, that God’s gifts are meant to build up the body of Christ “until all of us come to the unity of the faith . . . , to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” Christian existence is a matter, then, of *growing*, and growing, Paul goes on to say, requires “speaking the truth in love.” A kind and tenderhearted people *speak* to one another—out of a love that reflects the love of Christ himself.¹³

Paul nowhere says that ideas don’t matter, or that the gift of knowledge has no relevance. His point is that love, such as Christ himself expressed, must govern all of Christian life, including the struggle toward unity “in the bond of peace.” Just this struggle, it turns out, figured importantly in the teaching of Jesus himself.

The Gospel of Matthew contains five speeches by Jesus. The fourth takes up all of Matthew 18, and from beginning to end it addresses conflict and reconciliation. Although readers commonly associate Matthew 18 with church “discipline”—how to correct people who

⁹ 1 Corinthians 1:5, 10-17; 8:1-13; 12:31; 13:1, 2, 4, 8-13.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 1:24; 3:11; 10:16, 17; 12:13, 27; 14:1.

¹¹ Colossians 3:12-15; cf. 1:20. For illuminating perspective on “Paul’s Peace Interpretation of Jesus Christ,” see the chapter so titled in Willard M. Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 189-221).

¹² 2 Corinthians 5:14-20; see also 12:19, 20.

¹³ For the first point see Ephesians 3:10, where it is said that “through the church the wisdom of God” reaches “reaches rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” The direct quotes are from Ephesians 4:2,3 and 11-15. For the point about Christ’s love, see Ephesians 5:1, 2.

have done this or that to offend the community—this characterization pushes the real theme into the background. Jesus' principal concern, actually, is the practice of reconciliation—not punishment so much as the renewing of relationships. In this speech Jesus calls us to humility, care, truth-telling and forgiveness. And the point, to invoke language we met earlier, is maintaining “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

As Matthew 18 begins, Jesus' disciples ask: “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Jesus immediately beckons a child, and with that child in front of them all he says that “unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven.” The person who is “humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” But Jesus remembers that a child (as was especially the case in his day) is without status, so he feels compelled to add that anyone who puts “a stumbling block”—something to trip over—before “one of these little ones” would be better off dead.¹⁴

The discourse is unmistakably straightforward. Participation in the Kingdom requires a frame of mind both humble and welcoming. There has to be a self-emptying; there has to be a generosity toward people who lack status. These traits come into play when there is discord among disciples; they belong to the practice of reconciliation.

Next in the speech comes one of Jesus' most famous extended metaphors, the Parable of the Lost Sheep. Ezekiel has long before chastised Israel's leaders (see chapter 34) for inattention to the weak, the injured and the lost. Now that theme returns. A decent shepherd makes a search for one lost sheep even if ninety-nine of the original one hundred are accounted for. Is the lost sheep weak or injured? Is the lost sheep at fault for being careless or otherwise remiss? No matter. And when that sheep is found the shepherd will rejoice over it “more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.”¹⁵

Jesus' point is that what moves the good shepherd should move every disciple. So long as Adventists aspire to be disciples, the point is deeply relevant. If nearly all members of our church are “little ones” compared to the wider society's elite, some still enjoy the limited status that goes along with ecclesiastical position and influence. Other members may be “little ones” relative to them. And just these little ones, Jesus is saying, deserve our particular compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

All this is light in which to read the part of Jesus' speech that directly addresses the disagreements that erode the bond of peace within congregations or within the larger community, the actual disagreements that, when mishandled, give rise to fear and acrimony.¹⁶

So if a person feels harmed—sinned against—by another person, what must be done? The short answer is—talking must be done; words must be exchanged. The offended person first tries private conversation with the one who has given offense. If there is no real listening, the offended person asks one or two (knowledgeable) other persons to come along for further conversation. If there is still no progress, a larger group, the church (*ecclesia*) itself, addresses the discord, aiming for decision about what to think and how to proceed.

Just here Jesus brings in, from rabbinic discourse, the language of “binding” and “loosing.” John Howard Yoder has dealt with the meaning of these terms at length, arguing that in the culture Jesus is addressing they refer to the twin activities of discernment and forgiveness.

¹⁴ Matthew 18:1-7.

¹⁵ Matthew 18:10-14.

¹⁶ Matthew 18:15-20.

Facing disagreement, true disciples embrace discernment—practical, or situation-generated, moral analysis—as a necessary part of the journey toward forgiveness, or restored human relationships. Does the offense reflect real, or merely imagined, moral failure? Is the discord a sign that present moral measures need to be adjusted? Such questions belong to the healing process, and may lead toward, or away from, the conclusion that the offending party deserves censure. To “bind,” according to the usage of the time, is to censure; also, to require or forbid. To “loose” is to withhold censure; also to permit—to permit, that is, what did, in fact, offend but now, following attentive conversation, seems morally acceptable after all. The New English Bible translates the sentence where these words appear as follows: “I tell you this; whatever you forbid on earth shall be forbidden in heaven, and whatever you allow on earth shall be allowed in heaven.” Yoder approves.¹⁷

The practice of reconciling conversation may, of course, require long effort and painful openness of mind. So Jesus closes this part of his speech with a promise: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” He immediately underscores the relevance of the promise when Peter wonders how many times a person have to forgive a fellow believer. There is, Jesus says in effect, no limit on the number. He follows up with the story of the unforgiving servant, the one who receives forgiveness for a mammoth debt, then refuses to forgive a much smaller debt. The story, in which the unforgiving servant is handed over for torture, is a graphic—perhaps uncomfortably graphic—declaration that the person who wants to be forgiven must be ready always to forgive others. That frame of mind, though difficult, is an unvarying requirement of discipleship.¹⁸

In this speech Jesus envisions a community of conversation. There is no hint—neither here nor anywhere else in the New Testament—of a supervisory bureaucracy with authority to impose its control over what is going on.¹⁹ And as in New Testament contexts considered earlier, the community’s exchange of perspectives occurs in a context of compassion, humility

¹⁷ For my interpretation of Matthew 18, I have been relying on, for example, Gregory L. Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), xi-xvii, 16-27; and on commentaries by Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006) and David L. Turner, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008). John Howard Yoder’s essays on Matthew 18:15-20 include “Binding and Losing,” in *The Royal Priesthood*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright, Foreword Richard J. Mouw (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 323-358, where, on p. 327, the remark on the New English Bible appears; and “The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood: A Protestant Perspective,” in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel*. (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 15-45.

¹⁸ Matthew 18:21-35.

¹⁹ Some argue that Acts 15, on the Jerusalem Conference, may suggest something like centralized organizational authority. The Catholic (!) New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson, in his *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church: The Challenge of Luke-Acts to Contemporary Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 70, argues otherwise, saying that leadership in Luke-Acts is not hierarchical. In Acts, he says (this is, in part, a comment on Acts 15) we “find no sign of hierarchy.” An argument to similar effect appears in “Drift, or Adventist Ideals at Risk,” *Spectrum* 40 (Spring 2012): 3-4, where I suggest that the consensus of the Jerusalem Conference (against, for example,, eating food offered to idols) did not entail a drive for sheer uniformity. Paul shared the consensus with other congregations (Acts 16), but later felt free to say (1 Corinthians 10) that under the right circumstances believers could, without qualm of conscience, *eat anything set before them*. The spirit of the Jerusalem consensus—passion for unity amid diversity—remains pertinent today, as does Paul’s sense that consensus statements are not meant to be tyrannical or to rule out sensitivity to local nuance.

readiness to forgive and to grow. Jesus assumes that the knowledge disciples have is neither final nor complete. And what is just as important, he assumes that there will be a certain intimacy among the conversation partners. He does, of course, use the New Testament term “church” (*ecclesia*), but insofar as this term now evokes a worldwide, corporation-like organizational structure, it is misleading. In the New Testament itself, “church” refers typically to local gatherings or, as Yoder says, to “all of the Christians in a large city or even in a province.” Although Roman Catholicism came to assume otherwise, the word does *not* refer to a distant, overseeing bureaucracy. And Yoder emphasizes this point because the practice of reconciliation requires “conversation of a serious, patient, sustained, loving character. Only when people live together in the same city, meet together often, and know each other well can this ‘bearing of one another’s burdens’ be carried out in a fully loving way.”²⁰

We may think of this as the “principal of locality.” Just at the point of conflict and reconciliation, the key is conversation in a context of intimacy, where participants know, or may come to know, the human feelings involved, and the deeper complexities. Distant experts or church leaders may offer illuminating theory, but they cannot respond adequately to the reality of local nuance. That is why the reconciling discourse Jesus recommends, and promises to be present for, takes place groups as small as two or three in number.

As implied already, the community of conversation Jesus envisions seems also to operate under what we may call “the principle of shared authority.” Matthew 18 contains no hint of individualism or hierarchy. The Christian lives neither in independence of others nor in submission to a powerful elite. In the spirit of this principle, Paul tells the Corinthians, in comment on the worship experience in their house churches, that “each one” may bring a “lesson” or “interpretation.” And even when “prophets” speak, others must receive the opportunity to “weigh what is said.”²¹ Here the underlying value is what Yoder calls “open dialogue and consensus,” or what James Wm. McClendon, Jr., Neo-Anabaptism’s most accomplished systematic thinker, calls “consensus based on conversation.” A still deeper underlying value for shared authority is the “simple trust,” as Yoder puts it, “that God himself, as Spirit, is at work to motivate and to monitor his own” through “disciplined human discourse.”²²

Together these two principles—of locality and of shared authority—imply still another, what we may call the “principle of forbearance.” This is the willingness to accommodate some difference of understanding within the circle that includes all the *local* expressions of discipleship. Communities will vary as to knowledge and as to the shape and pace of change. The first baptism of Gentiles, according to Acts, takes place at the initiative of Peter, and with the consent of “some of the believers from Joppa” who accompany him to the home of Cornelius. Later in Jerusalem Peter is criticized for this, but the author of Acts does not take him

²⁰ Yoder, *Royal Priesthood*, 352. Yoder alludes here to Galatians 6. Paul reminds his readers that the Holy Spirit’s work involves restoring, “in a spirit of gentleness,” those who fall short. Here are verses 2 and 3: “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves.” The themes here (see also 5:26) are humility and sympathetic mutual support. Regarding verse 3 Herman N. Ridderbos, in his *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1953), 213, offers this telling summary: “[S]elf inflation is self-deceit.”

²¹ 1 Corinthians 14:26, 29.

²² Yoder, *Royal Priesthood*, 368. James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 8. The final quote is from Yoder’s *Priestly Kingdom*, 29.

to task. The initiative of this small band from the town of Joppa belongs to process of growth toward deeper understanding, and in Luke's perspective it is something to celebrate. Wider agreement will come in due course.²³

In the wake of recent action by several unions to ordain women to the gospel ministry before the church as a whole has reached agreement on the issue, world leaders at the 2012 Annual Council voted a statement of their dismay. The statement contained this sentence: "A course of action contrary to the will of the whole places the organization at risk." A year later, at the year-end meeting of the church's North American Division, participants recommended that, with respect to the ordination of women, the General Conference authorize church divisions (which serve culturally varied geographical areas) to proceed *by entity*.²⁴ The NAD recommendation embodies the principle of forbearance and seems more attuned to the spirit of the New Testament, including its clear acknowledgment of local nuance.

The three principles that help define an authentic Christian "community of conversation" correlate with virtues and methods the New Testament associates with reconciling discourse. The argument here is that, put together, all of this constitutes a New Testament strategy for healing in the face of conflict; and because conflict, well managed, facilitates growth in understanding, it also constitutes a strategy for building overall spiritual health. Application of these ideas to a large, international institution such as the Seventh-day Adventist church would, of course, be difficult; it would proceed, perhaps, by small increments, and would certainly disavow merely slavish imitation of a distant time and place. But assuming the argument succeeds, failure to attempt such application would amount to a willful scorning of the New Testament ethos.

The heritage of the Adventist pioneers offers perspective that could support movement in the New Testament direction. At its beginning, Adventism recoiled from locating determinative theological authority in any document voted by the leadership elite. During the 1861 organizing meeting of the Michigan Conference, the first of such entities, James White argued that an official creed, voted by meeting delegates, would block "new light" and stand in "direct opposition" to the "gifts" of the Holy Spirit. J. N. Loughborough said a creed "telling us what to believe" would be the "first step of apostasy..." And when Adventist leaders put forth a somewhat lengthy statement of their faith in 1872, it was merely informational: they were explaining themselves to the wider world. The preamble of the statement said it was to have no "authority with our people," nor was it meant to "secure uniformity among them, as a system of faith."²⁵

²³ See Acts 10:1-11:18; also Acts 15.

²⁴ The General Conference statement appears at www.adventistreview.org/article/5766/archives/issue-2012-1528/28cn-ac-satement-in-regard-to-ministerial-ordination (accessed November 7, 2013). For an essay generally similar in perspective, see Gerhard Pfandl, "Moving in the Same Direction: Some Thought About the Unity of the Church," in *Adventist Review*, Feb 14, 2013, 14-16. The NAD statement, to quote more precisely, recommends that each church division be authorized "to consider, through prayer and under the direction of the Holy Spirit, its most appropriate approach to the ordination of women to gospel ministry." It appears at <http://spectrummagazine.org/blog/2013/11/04/six-one-vote-nad-affirms-womens-ordination> (accessed November 19, 2013).

²⁵The Michigan Conference story is told in *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1996), 310. Another account appears in Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Years, 1827-1862* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald, 1985), 453,454. See <http://www.greatcontroversy.org/gco/orc/fb1872.php/>

The General Conference itself came into being a couple of years after the Michigan conference. Ellen White began to criticize goings-on there when one man, George I. Butler, the General Conference president starting in 1871, came to exercise what she considered to be excessive individual control. Later, toward the end of 1880's and in the 1890's, she protested what seemed to her like oppressive exercise of General Conference authority.²⁶ Although she respected General Conference leadership, she was also outspoken against abuses of its power. What is more, in the course of all this she offered arresting commentary on the Christian unity for which Christ prayed. In 1892, she said that Christian unity does *not* consist in having identical perspectives, or, as she said, thinking “in the very same channel.” Even when we interpret the Bible, our varying experiences, temperaments and gifts result in difference of opinion. In just this light she declared that the “church may pass resolution upon resolution to put down all disagreement of opinions, but we cannot force the mind and will, and thus root out disagreement.” We may try to “conceal” discord, but resolutions “cannot quench it and establish perfect agreement. Nothing can perfect unity in the church but the spirit of Christlike forbearance.”²⁷

With respect to the views of Ellen White, and also to what Adventist pioneers said about creeds in church life, a critic might object that the quotations cited here fit the argument but overlook a more complex historical reality that can be mined for evidence in support of greater centralized control as a means of assuring doctrinal unity. It is certainly true, in any case, that some Adventists find support—within our own heritage—for turning official statements of belief into something approaching doctrinal litmus tests enforceable from the top.²⁸

for the 1872 statement (accessed October 3, 2012). A brief account of Adventist statements of beliefs appears in Gary Land, *Historical Dictionary of the Seventh-day Adventists* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 107-108.

²⁶ A recent scholarly account of both early resistance to creeds and later criticism, by Ellen White, of General Conference abuse of power is Douglas Morgan, “Toward Oneness and Freedom: The Road from ‘Babylon’ to General Conference Organization,” *Spectrum* v. 41, no. 2 (Spring, 2013), 16-26. Ellen White’s comments on the General Conference range from the claim (written in 1875, *Testimonies to the Church*, vol. 3 [Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1885], 492) that the General Conference is “the highest authority that God has upon the earth” to the thought that regarding the General Conference as “the voice of God” is “almost blasphemy,” in MS 37, 1901, April 1, 1901. Another comment against the General Conference as “the voice of God” appears in the 1899 *GC Bulletin*, 74. I was first indebted to Bert Haloviak, now retired from the Ellen White Estate, for this information. Now key quotes appear at, for example, http://www.truthorfables.com/Gen_Conf_Highest_Aut.htm (accessed October 3, 2012).

²⁷ These words are from MS 24, 1892 (MS release #898), and are cited in Alden Thompson, *Inspiration* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1991), 307-308.

²⁸ In connection, for example, with the controversy over science instruction at La Sierra University, the current General Conference president, in an e-mail sent on March 23, 2011 (and revealed in court proceedings associated with a lawsuit), asked an associate to shape a motion for a meeting of the Adventist Accrediting Agency Board that would address the controversy. That motion, he said, should stipulate, that the university’s accreditation be “provisional” and say further that “La Sierra University faculty, with special attention to the Biology and Religion departments, who do not believe in and endorse the voted SDA belief in creation be released from service for La Sierra University.” This president regularly invokes Ellen White in explaining his approach to the leadership of the church.

The crucial point in any response to such an objection is that elements of our heritage noted above *align substantially with the spirit of the New Testament*. For disciples, Scripture trumps all other written authority, and that is why everything turns on the question of what Scripture teaches.

If the overall argument holds, this is what follows from it: just to the degree that Adventism's current trajectory bends toward top-down control of the sort that produces fear and acrimony, threatens open conversation and impedes spiritual growth, just to that degree the trajectory is misguided. For the sake of members who possess relatively little status in the church—a group that may continue to include women and certainly now includes (non-fundamentalist) scientists²⁹—a course correction of the sort suggested here would help to effect the healing of persistent injury. For all members, those with high status and those without, such a correction would re-appropriate the ideals of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience that sum up the experience of “the peace of Christ.” It would grant the primacy of love and the danger of self-inflating knowledge. It would embrace the practice of reconciling discourse set forth in Matthew 18. In all these ways, such a course correction would undermine fear and acrimony, and open doors not only to cooperation and spiritual growth, but also to the joy that accompanies authentic life together in the Lord.

Along with the Psalmist, we could sing: “How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sister live together in unity.”³⁰

²⁹ The Fundamental Beliefs Review Committee currently preparing for the next General Conference session is operating under a *mandate* to incorporate words about the doctrine of creation that were voted by Adventist leaders—overwhelmingly Adventist clergymen—at the church's 2004 Annual Council. The voted statement says that creation is “recent”; and happened over six “literal 24-hour days forming a week identical in time to what we now experience as a week.” A series Faith and Science Conferences had taken place between 2002 and 2004, with organizers reporting that their experience confirmed the importance of science, but not science that conflicts with literalist interpretation. But one motif in their report was that “some among us interpret the biblical record in ways that lead to sharply different conclusions.” There are “different theological interpretations among us regarding Genesis 1-11,” organizers wrote. The 2004 Annual Council's action was a response to all of this and appears, therefore, to be an effort marginalize non-fundamentalist scientists.

³⁰ Psalm 133:1. I have altered the NRSV, replacing “kindred” with “brothers and sisters.”