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Top Officers of the Adventist Denomination Respond to Election of a Woman as Conference President

By AT News Team, October 31, 2013

The top three officers of the General Conference (GC) of the Seventh-day Adventist Church issued a statement Thursday morning (October 31) expressing concern about the election of a conference president in the Southeastern California Conference "who is not recognized by the world church as an ordained minister." The statement was distributed without additional comment by the denomination's North American Division. "Ordination to the ministry is one of the criteria set forth for being a conference president," the statement said. It refers to a document voted a year ago at the 2012 annual meeting of the GC executive committee in response to a number of union conferences in which constituency sessions have voted to extend ordination without the gender discrimination that has traditionally been practiced. The statement says that the 2012 vote "strongly indicated that [the GC] does not recognize as ordained ministers individuals who do not meet the criteria outlined in policy." This is generally understood to mean ministers who are women, despite the fact that there is nothing in the Working Policy that specifically prohibits women from being ordained to the gospel ministry. Although the statement does not name the conference or the individual involved, it clearly refers to a historic vote by delegates to the regular constituency session of the denomination's Southeastern California Conference on Sunday (October 27) to elect Pastor Sandra E. Roberts as conference president. As reported by Adventist Today on Sunday, a total of 72 percent of the delegates from the local churches and denominational employees voted in favor of Roberts' election while only 28 percent voted against it, despite a request from the GC president to defer action as announced by the chairman at the session, Pastor Ricardo Graham, president of the Pacific Union Conference.

"General Conference administration is working with the North American Division administration as they deal with the implications of this local conference action," the statement this morning said. "By God's grace and through the Holy Spirit's guidance, the church will find its way through this challenging time. ... We urge all church members and leaders to pray that the Holy Spirit will unite us to fulfill Christ's promise that 'this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all nations and then the end will come.' (Matthew 24:14)"

The statement stressed the importance of Working Policy to denominational unity around the world, while acknowledging that "policy is not inflexible" and "it can be changed." It cautioned that "when personal convictions are placed ahead of the collective policy decisions ... troubling precedents are set." It made no reference to situations in which the "personal convictions" are moral stands taken by an overwhelming majority of duly elected constituency delegates. In fact, exceptions to the Working Policy have been voted on many occasions because of local legal requirements and cultural factors.

The North American Division executive committee has repeatedly voted amendments to its Working Policy to allow Commissioned Ministers to serve as conference presidents and thus sidestep this issue. The current GC leadership has specifically opposed this solution. The 2013 annual meeting of the committee begins this evening in Silver Spring, Maryland, at the denomination's world headquarters. Roberts has been appointed a member of the committee by name to assure that the Southeastern California Conference is duly represented at this meeting.

The statement was signed, "The General Conference Executive Officers." The GC constitution defines this as the top three officers, "the president, secretary and treasurer." Currently those individuals are Pastor Ted Wilson, president; Dr. G. T. Ng, executive secretary; and Robert Lemon, treasurer.
Another step in the current study of ordination in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination has been completed and the denomination's North American Division (NAD) will soon release a 240-page report from its ordination study committee. When the General Conference (GC) executive committee set up the Theology of Ordination Study Committee, it also authorized each of its 13 world divisions to pursue a similar study. At least five have done so. "Divisions" are regional offices of the GC that, according to the GC bylaws, answer to the same constituency as the global organization. In fact, when the nominating committee functions at the GC session every five years it operates in separate caucuses for each of the divisions, each made up almost entirely of members from within the division. The executive committee for each division consists predominantly of members from the union conferences in that division and each has a Working Policy crafted to the needs and practices within its territory. The 13 divisions include three each in Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe, and one for the South Pacific. Potentially the Theology of Ordination Study Committee may have to integrate 13 reports like this one. It is generally agreed that under such a circumstance, the reports will contradict each other. Adventist Today has been told that Pastor Ted Wilson, the president of the GC, has asked the NAD officers to block the NAD executive committee, which begins its annual meeting on Thursday (October 31), from voting to approve or recommend the positions taken in this report. Sources say that he is fearful that if divisions take official, voted positions it will make it more difficult for the Theology of Ordination Study Committee to come to a solution that will maintain "unity" in the denomination. The NAD report makes only two recommendations: (1) According to the Bible "ordination to gospel ministry" is to "be conferred by the church on men and women," although "because the Bible does not directly address the ordination of women, and because the principle-based evidence is neither complete nor irrefutable, it can be expected that differing conclusions may be drawn by equally sincere and competent students of God's Word." (2) The NAD should seek "authorization of each division to consider, through prayer and under the direction of the Holy Spirit, its most appropriate approach to the ordination of women to gospel ministry." This is essentially the same solution to the standoff on this topic that the NAD requested at the 1995 GC Session. At the time the majority of the delegates voted against the request. No further action was taken. The report's introduction states that "the recommendations ... represent the position of the overwhelming majority" of the study group, but "not all concur." In fact, two of the 14 members authored a minority report that is included in the document. There was "unanimous agreement" on one point: "We believe that an individual, as a Seventh-day Adventist in thorough commitment to the full authority of Scripture, may build a defensible case in favor of or in opposition to the ordination of women to the gospel ministry, although each of us views one position or the other as stronger and more compelling." The NAD study group was chaired by Dr. Gordon Bietz, president of Southern Adventist University, and a religion faculty member from his institution, Dr. Edwin Reynolds, served as secretary. Nine of the 14 are Bible scholars familiar with the Scripture in its original languages, four are pastors and one is an officer of the NAD. Four are women and half are from ethnic minorities. A GC staff member, Dr. Clinton Wahlen from the Biblical Research Institute, served as a member of the study group. Reynolds and Wahlen authored the minority report. The bulk of the report is made up of ten in-depth study papers, six authored by members of the group and four borrowed from the papers already released by the Theology of Ordination Study Committee. The report also reproduces the "Methods of Bible Study" paper voted by the GC in 1986. The group clearly states that it used standard, established Adventist hermeneutics in coming to its conclusions. The group also explored at length the "headship" theology which argues that the Bible prohibits women from exercising spiritual leadership in the church. "Others believe that biblical headship does not apply to church leadership roles but is limited in application to the husband’s role as servant-leader in the home," the report states. "Still others contend that headship is not even a biblical concept, but rather a relatively modern term, and that the original Greek word for head (kephale), denotes source, not leader. These argue that hierarchical position is not the point, and that correct interpretation of these challenging passages is dependent on understanding the context in which they were written. The majority of the committee does not view the issue of headship as a barrier to ordaining women to pastoral ministry." The report addresses the issue of "unity" with the observation that "unity must be differentiated from uniformity, which implies invariability." For the Seventh-day Adventist Church "our doctrines comprise the common ground upon which our Church denomination is organized [and] the 28 Fundamental Beliefs are the common doctrines. ... Other issues not unequivocally outlined in Scripture are subject to varying interpretations. Because a scripturally based, reasonable case may be made in favor of or opposed to the ordination of women to pastoral ministry, a worldwide mandate is neither practical nor necessary." The document points out that the GC "has established policies recognizing women in leadership roles: the ordination of deaconesses and elders and the commissioning of pastors" and "although these policies are not practiced in all regions of the world, the Church has remained a single, worldwide organization. It is the conclusion of the study committee that differences in opinion and practice on this issue do not constitute disunity in
Christ nor in the Church." A number of union conferences in North America and Europe have already taken action to begin ordaining women serving as pastors, and Adventists in China have done so since the 1980s. Several members of this NAD study group are also members of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee, but it remains to be seen how much of the thinking expressed in this report will be included in the report of the GC executive committee next year. Because there are an estimated 30 million or more adherents worldwide and the Adventist Church operates in hundreds of languages and many more cultural contexts, it will likely not be possible to find a position that satisfies all Adventists.

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Adventist Today

Noted American Scholar Harold Bloom Writes about the Adventist Religion

By Alexander Belisle

Coming out of the American Protestant revivalist movement of the mid 19th century, the Adventist movement can truly be called an “American Religion.” Harold Bloom is well-known as a literary critic and respected scholar, the author of The American Religion which centers on a particular Gnosticism he finds characteristic of faiths in this country, anchored in individual salvation and individual spiritual awareness. It is, I must admit, somewhat related to Paul's Gnosticism but in Bloom's narrative takes on a Gnostic quality of its own.

Bloom's working definition: “The Gnostics, in a narrow sense, were a proto-Christian sect of the second century of the Common Era, whose broad beliefs centered in two absolute convictions: the Creation, of the world and of mankind in its present form, was the same event as the Fall of the world and of man, but humankind has in it a spark or breath of the uncreated, of God, and that spark can find its way back to the uncreated, unfallen world, in a solitary act of knowledge.” (Kindle edition, locations 229-232).

Yes, Adventists can gain back that which was lost, one individual at a time working out their own salvation, another characteristic of the American Religion for which salvation is a personal journey, not a communal one. Do Adventists with their esoteric spiritual knowledge, lodged in the Spirit of Prophecy and the provincialism that is reinforced by being members of the “remnant church” know that they have access to this “solitary act of knowledge?”

Where Bloom really nails it in his description of Adventists, is with his focus on the Sanctuary, 1844, and the Investigative Judgment, which happens to be the focus of the Sabbath School lessons at the time of this writing. He also writes, “It is an American Religion of Health, crossed by the postapocalyptic dream of an end time never to be.” (Kindle edition, locations 2333-2334)

Bloom provides quite an telling summation, inclusive of that which keeps Adventist faith largely outside of the Protestant mainstream and that part of Adventist faith that is most relevant to our current post-modern society. Bloom further adds: “... the elements in Adventist theology that are unacceptable to traditional Protestantism ... include: the extra-Scriptural source of authority in Ellen White’s writings; a wavering on justification by grace alone, since later deeds can cancel out earlier sanctification; the Investigative Judgment, in which Christ counts up the good and ill deeds; giving the Mark of the Beast to those who do not keep the Seventh-day Sabbath; various limitations in Christ; an identification of the Adventist Church as playing a unique role in the Apocalypse, and as representing the remnant that can be saved.” (Kindle edition, locations 2318-2322)

These items plus the fact that if it weren't for the predominant immigrant and ethnic minority segments shoring up its membership rolls, the Adventist Church would cease to exist in America. “It is the final irony of the Millerite remnant that it can survive, whether at home or abroad, only through the apocalyptic yearnings of Africans and Asians, whose zest and zeal are the last echo of Ellen White’s patient and stubborn voice.” (Kindle edition, locations 2390-2392)

Just like Walter Martin who once saw the Adventist movement as a cult (notice I said “once”), Bloom sees Adventism as a cult due to the supreme importance it gives to Ellen White as prophetess, leader and spiritual guide even while morphing into just another Evangelical Protestant denomination. I myself feel that the desire for being a “peculiar people,” which I have heard since my early childhood, along with the constant reliance on the Spirit of Prophecy to be our working spiritual manual rather than the Bible alone (the position Ellen White herself taught), will always keep the Adventist church a hair breadth's away from cult status. While Ellen White sees Christ's ministry in the Sanctuary as a “cleansing of sins,” Bloom adds a very telling and perceptive insight: “This world did not end on October 22, 1844, but on that very day Jesus Christ entered the Holy of Holies up in heaven and started to scrub away our sins. Alas, after a hundred and fifty years he continues to clean up after us, so many are our sins . If the Adventists were to employ this vision as a prophetic witness against our contemporary America, then it would be to some purpose, but they have ceased to see it as a criticism of American life in terms of real injustices and amoralities. AIDS, crack, and homelessness are not cleansed by Christ, despite the Adventists’ abiding concern for their own health, and to some degree, for the health of the nation.” (Kindle edition, locations 2276-2281)

Clearly Adventist faith today as an American religion is short on social justice and only recently latching onto the political correctness of environmental concerns, seeing stewardship as more than money in the forms of tithes and offerings. Some Adventists even see as Bloom
does that the temple spoken of by Paul has taken on more significance with the health message than the literal reading of the cleansing of
the Sanctuary. Also, where some Adventists see the Investigative Judgment as elevating a theology of judgment over a theology of grace,
Bloom sees it as an investigation of “who's cooking the books?” Sarcastic for sure, maybe even humorous, but within that great controversy
between God and Satan, does God need to be an accountant as Bloom refers to Him, to get the accurate figures on repentance and faith?
“Ellen White's Jesus is more a defense attorney for mankind than he is the bearer of the Atonement.” (Kindle edition, location 2363)

On a humorous note of my own, I find that it's no wonder so few Adventists have read widely in Ellen White's writings since Bloom
himself, a genius who has put “Paradise Lost” to memory, found himself getting bogged down (in his words) trying to read her works. As
an admirer of Bloom's works as a literary critic, I find that he has weighed the Adventist religion in the balances and found it wanting in
some areas but interesting in others. For a non-Adventist, he did a fine job.

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Log In to Post a Comment. Log In  Register
Delegates to the regular constituency session of the Southeastern California Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church voted today (October 27) to elect Pastor Sandra E. Roberts as conference president. A total of 72 percent of the delegates from the local churches and denominational employees voted in favor of Roberts' election while only 28 percent voted against it. It is the first time on record that a woman has been elected to the office of conference president in the Adventist denomination, although women have served temporarily as the top officer on a number of occasions, even in the 19th century, and on many occasions as treasurer or secretary of a conference. And women who are ordained ministers serve in similar leadership roles among Adventists in China where the national church does not have the same relationship with the denomination that it does elsewhere. Denominational policy specifies that a conference president is to be an ordained minister, and Roberts is an ordained minister because a year ago the Pacific Union Conference in a constituency meeting established a policy ending gender discrimination in the ordination of clergy. She was the first of this new generation of ordained women to be nominated as a conference president. When the nominating committee report was presented to the delegates, the chairman of the session, Pastor Riccardo Graham, president of the denomination's Pacific Union Conference, shared with the delegates a request from Pastor Ted Wilson, president of the denomination's General Conference or world headquarters. Wilson had phoned at 7:30 the prior evening, Graham told the assembled delegates, and asked that the session not move ahead with the election at this time because the denomination's international governing body is currently studying the question of the Biblical basis for extending ordination to both women and men. If the delegates elected a woman as conference president they would be in "confrontation" with the General Conference, Wilson told Graham and asked that this be repeated to the delegates. A number of delegates went to the microphones to support the nomination of Roberts. Included were Dr. Randy Roberts, senior pastor of the largest congregation in the denomination, the Loma Linda University Church, and Dr. Randy Wisbey, president of La Sierra University. Both institutions are located in the conference. Very few delegates spoke against the nomination. Those who spoke against electing Roberts stressed the issue of "unity" and conflict in the worldwide Adventist denomination. One delegate mentioned Roberts' "lack of pastoral experience," but another delegates pointed out that she had served as primary pastor of the Corona, California, Church for a number of years, as well as in several youth ministry roles. The many speakers who urged the election of Roberts stated that discrimination against women in ordination and clergy leadership roles was wrong and unbiblical. It was pointed out that the Southeastern California Conference has been a leader in ending discrimination against women clergy for several decades and that this was a natural step. "There are times to move forward despite the hierarchy and this is such a time," stated one speaker.

In some ways this is a routine development. Roberts has served as executive secretary of the conference, the second-ranking officer, since 2004. When a conference president moves on or does not want to continue in office it is common for the number-two officer to be selected as the next president. Pastor Gerald D. Penick told the nominating committee at its first meeting on September 8 that he did not want to be considered for re-election. "Nine years is enough," he told the committee. Later he told one of the pastors in the conference that he did not want to retire yet, but had not made up his mind as to what he would do next. It is well known among veteran denominational employees that the work of a conference president is exhausting. For five years prior to Roberts' election as the second officer in the conference she was director of young adult ministries and she was pastor in Corona from 1995 to 2000. She served as chaplain for the church school in Loma Linda from 1992 to 1995 and prior to that as director of the conference's youth camp. She was called to the conference from Central California in 1987 where she was Bible teacher at Modesto Adventist Academy. She started denominational employment in 1982 as a teacher at Cedar Lake Academy in the Michigan Conference. Roberts has a master's degree from Andrews University and a Doctor of Ministry degree from the Claremont School of Theology. She is the daughter of Adventist missionaries and has spent considerable time traveling around the world. The Southeastern California Conference is the largest local conference in the denomination's North American Division (NAD) and one of the largest in the world, despite the fact that its territory only covers five counties east and south of Los Angeles, including the major cities of San Diego, Riverside and San Bernardino. It has more than 70,000 members and it is estimated that there are probably 300,000 Adventist adherents in the area. Its growth rate in the last decade has been about the same as the entire NAD. California has the largest number of Adventists of any state in the U.S., a total of nearly 200,000 or 17 percent of the total national membership. It includes four local conferences of which the Southeastern conference is the most southern. It includes 143 local churches and at least ten women pastors who are ordained ministers. Some have served in the ministry for decades.
Adventist World Statistics Evaluated by a Retired Missiologist

At the recent annual meeting of the General Conference executive committee G. T. Ng, executive secretary of the Adventist world church, told church leaders that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is approaching 18 million members. The report was published by the Adventist Review. I will quote a few lines from the extensive report and make some observations about each quote.

We ... “enjoy dramatic growth in Southern Asia, Latin America and Southern Africa, which has pushed worldwide membership to nearly 18 million … with the Adventist population booming in much of the southern hemisphere.”

In our global statistics and the spread of Adventism we have to take into consideration the immense areas where the main religion is Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism as well as countries where communism is unchallenged. About two billion people live in these places and are, for religious or political reasons, outside the reach of any Christian missions. The 18 million Adventist are largely located in other nations in Africa, Asia and South America.

Urban areas are the main focus of Adventist world evangelism these days. For our purposes an urban area is a city with at least 50,000 people. With this definition, more than half of the world’s populations live in urban areas. It has been estimated that in urban areas there are 555 individuals for each Adventist. For comparison purposes, these figures can serve as indicators of the Adventist presence on the globe: The 18 million Adventists in a world with about 7 billion people makes a benchmark of one Adventist for 396 individuals. In the Christian world with 2.3 billion Christians, belonging to 44,000 denominations, the statistics result in the indicator of one Adventist for 128 Christians. In the USA and Canada with a combined population of 346,670,000 and 1,135,000 Adventists there is one Adventist for 306 individuals.

“Some 6.6 million members live in Africa, 5.8 million are in Latin America, and 3.4 million are in Asia. …The report heavily emphasized statistics based on trends that emerged several years ago: Nations in the northern hemisphere are experiencing slow growth.”

These statistics reveal that in Africa with 950 million people and 6.6 million Adventist, there is one Adventist for each 144 individuals. In Latin America with 598 million inhabitants and 5.8 million Adventists it is one to 103. With the present distribution of membership and areas of the most rapid church growth some may claim that the Adventist faith is becoming a religion for the developing world with its strength moving from northern to southern continents. The GC report could suggest that this is the case.

The concepts in Revelation (1:12; 2:5), where the lamp stand is interpreted as representing Christendom, could serve as a fitting model. Christianity began in Palestine 2000 years ago. Then it moved north of the Mediterranean. With the Reformation, Northern Europe became the most important Christian continent. Then North America came on the world scene. However, it seems for the present that South America is taking over as the center of initiatives and missionary energy. It is predicted that in 50 years Africa will be the strongest Christian continent. And figures suggest that Asia may emerge as a future Continent with an impressive Christian population.

The Advent movement as revealed by the 2013 GC reports has to a great extent confirmed and followed a similar pattern. Of the 13 world divisions five are not able to report significant progress, while the five divisions where things are happening have the word Southern in their names. Of the 18 million members today, only 2 million reside in northern divisions. It is a decided change from 1900 when North America, Europe and Australia were the sole places where Adventist could be found.

“The 15 fastest declining unions are in the Euro-Asia, Trans-European and Inter-European divisions – not surprising given the population loss in the Eastern European nations, setback by a major economic crisis and high unemployment in and around the former Soviet Union.”

Secularism is no doubt the main reason for the decreasing memberships in Western Europe. The losses could in some places, as time passes, become a question of survival. The growth experiences of churches in many Eastern European countries after the decline of communism in 1989, have to some extend been exhausted. At the same time the rather relaxed European Union immigration laws have
made it possible for Eastern European immigrants to seek employment and move westward. One result is that Eastern European Adventists, together with sisters and brothers from Africa, Asia and South America, have made it possible for union conferences in Great Britain, France, Germany, Spain and Portugal to keep their statistics in a stable state and even report limited growth. Romania with 24 million people and 67,000 Adventists has the European record with one Adventist to 358 individuals. It is also through migration responsibility for the growth in Spain. On the other hand Adventist churches in Scandinavia were not to the same degree a goal for Adventist immigrants and have lost out in the area of transfer growth. For instance consider the unfortunate developments in Denmark. In 1973 Denmark had a population of 5 million with 4,000 Adventists. In 2013 with a population of 5.5 million the membership has fallen to 2,500 or a 38 percent loss. Add to this the fact that about half of the church members in Denmark are past 60 years of age. Today Denmark with a population of 5.5 million and 2,500 Adventist reports 2,200 persons for each Adventist. The state of affairs, in some of the other Scandinavian countries are perhaps a little more positive, but the general trend in all European Adventist churches is somewhat similar to the facts about Denmark.

"On the other end of the growth spectrum was the South Pacific Division, which reported a membership decline of about 5 percent. Division President Barry Oliver said the loss was expected because a comprehensive audit removed many members from church records. 'The growth rate suffered simply because we caught up on all the statistics to make them more accurate.'"

A few years ago while conducting in-service education on church growth for a group of experienced ministers, the students asked me each time I was dealing with statistics on Adventist memberships, whether my numbers were names on the list or active members. The report from the South Pacific Division and the words from the president, Pastor Barry D. Oliver, must have been a thought-provoking and perhaps not by all a welcome testimony. How do we count? How do we use numbers? How many of the 18 million are really Adventists in lifestyle and confessions?

At a meeting of church administrators where these issues were on the agenda, it was, in good humor, suggested by an executive that if you desire to have a long life, just move to a certain named field. "They have not reported any deaths over the last six years." Some years ago in my early missionary experience my pastors told me, a young and new president, that quite a few names on their membership lists could not be found. Some members were know to them to have passed away years ago, but were still counted.

In a conversation with my union president, I suggested that my field conduct a thorough audit of all church lists and get them up to date. It might result in a 20 percent decrease in membership statistics. The wise leader told me that this would be ideal and he would not stop me from doing it, however, it would possibly also mean that the appropriations from higher church units would be cut by 20 percent. For financial reasons we tried to be practical, and only dropped the names of the unknown and dead church members in step with new baptisms.

"While North America is considered slow growing, it still provides the single-largest amount of tithe, at $933 million. The next-closest tithe-producing division is South America, with more than $500 million."

Another interesting fact about faithfulness is in tithing. The report has it that last year $933,000,000 was paid in tithe by 1,135,000 North American church members. The average per capita income in the USA and Canada is estimated to be $45,000. Ideally the tithe would on average be $4,500 per year from each member. However, the report states that the average per capita tithe was only $822. Even taking into consideration that a number of church members are seniors, students, unemployed and so on, the figure is fairly low.

When we as a global Christian denomination publish encouraging reports on progress in various areas, would it be proper to also make room for the negative effect passive members have on the statistics? Perhaps it could be suggested that the example of the comprehensive audit undertaken by the South Pacific Division administration should be a model for the world church. This would no doubt result in a somewhat smaller global membership. However, a more honest report would have a positive influence on plans for evangelism, pastoral care, distributions of funds, approaches to administrations, the role of institutions and the deployment of missionaries.

Reporting based on actual facts should also report the increased numbers of “cultural Adventists” and members who have lost interest. By "cultural Adventists," I mean those secular or nonreligious individuals who still identify with Adventist culture due to family background, personal experience, or the social environment in which they grew up.

Numbers and statistics are important for the church. But in dealing with numbers, especially in evangelism, we must have in mind that big numbers are not necessarily a sign of special blessings. We must be aware of that in missiology circles, the term 'number game,' is used when a church’s progress and blessings are reported but the problems are not. Statistical progress should never be a goal in itself or used as a sign of special blessings.
There is nothing wrong in counting. Statistics are needed for good administration. However, the counting should also include the spiritual side of a Christian movement, the relationship of members to Christ and the church, as it is manifested in, among other things, church attendance and financial support of the cause. Reports on numbers should never be used as proof of special blessings of the Holy Spirit. They can be an indication of good evangelists and well planned approaches. However, in all cases humility should be shown.

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Adventist Leadership Openly Embrace ATS Fundamentalist Agenda

by Ervin Taylor
October 30, 2013

The Adventist News Service (ANS) recently reported that delegates to the 2013 Annual Council voted to approve a change in the wording of Adventist Fundamental Belief #6 which deals with the nature of Creation. This change had been developed by a group known as the Fundamental Beliefs Review Committee (FBRC). The current wording of Fundamental Belief #6 begins “In six days, the Lord made . . . “. It was voted to replace that phrase with one which states that “In a recent, six day creation, the Lord made . . . “. Unfortunately, the article did not inform readers if the vote was by secret ballot or by a show of hands that would identify those not adhering to the current party line of the Adventist Fundamentalist Movement (AFM), currently being advanced by the Adventist Theological Society (ATS). It also reported that there was support for including a phrase stating that creation took place within the span of “six literal days.” The ANS report tells us that “the word ‘literal’ closes what some Adventists have claimed is an interpretative loophole that could allow theological evolution to explain the Genesis origins account.” The ANS report of this action, which will appear in the Adventist Review, contains a smiling visage of the current General Conference president, Ted Wilson, looking down as if to bless this action by the Annual Council. The acceptance of this change in Fundamental Belief #6 will be presented at the 2015 General Conference (GC) Session in San Antonio, Texas, for a largely symbolic vote that will place this revised statement into the SDA statement of Fundamental Beliefs. There is little question that this change will be supported unanimously by Third World GC delegates from Africa and Latin America. Again, since balloting by secret ballot will certainly not be allowed on the floor in any GC general session, we will never know how many delegates from North America, Europe, and Australia would have voted against the motion if they were not afraid of recriminations that would come from the AFM. This action of the Annual Council represents one of the final steps in a long-term, well-coordinated and, most importantly, well-financed campaign which began more than two decades ago to retard and then reverse the evolution of the Adventist denomination from a fundamentalist sect-like religious body into a mature Protestant denomination. This campaign called for the implementation of steps that would force the Adventist Church back into a retrogressive, fundamentalist mold. It was advanced openly by the Adventist Theological Society (ATS) when it was organized in 1988. The fundamentalist theological agenda of the ATS was set out boldly in its constitution for all to read as well as in articles which described the reasons why and how the ATS was organized.1 The two most clear fundamentalist elements listed in the ATS statement of beliefs includes a commitment to the inerrancy of the Bible and a logical outcome of holding such a position, namely a belief in a “literal reading and meaning of Genesis 1-11 as an objective, factual account of earth’s origin and early history; that the world was created in six literal, consecutive, contiguous 24-hour days; that the earth was subsequently devastated by a literal global flood; and that the time elapsed since creation week is to be measured in terms of a short chronology of a few thousand years.” The use of the term fundamentalist to define the ATS agenda, and the subsequent efforts that have advanced its agenda, is here being used as a descriptive term and not, as many may allege, as a pejorative comment. The historic formal meaning of Christian fundamentalist and fundamentalism was set out in the defining documents that launched the fundamentalist reaction to modernist elements in Christianity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. One of the core elements of a fundamentalist approach to Christianity is the belief in the inerrancy of all biblical statements, i.e., that there are no factual errors in any biblical text. Thus, if the Bible says that God created the world in six days, it means that he created the world in six, literal, 24-hour days. If you add up all of the genealogies recorded in the Old Testament, that six-day creation must have occurred 6,000 to 7,000 years ago and certainly less than 10,000 years ago; and there was a worldwide flood in the recent past. According to that fundamentalist perspective as advanced in Adventism by the ATS, a “Bible-believing” Adventist must accept such a belief, even if such a belief is totally and completely absurd in light of a wide range of data from a vast array of scientific disciplines.

The success of the ATS in implementing its long-term objectives can be contrasted with the puzzling inability of the majority of Adventist theologians and scientists over the last 20 years to form any publically expressed, concerted effort to oppose the ATS campaign that seeks to return the Adventist Church to its fundamentalist roots. An interesting topic of discussion might be to consider why moderate and progressive Adventist scholars employed by the Church are so hesitant to address openly and in public the work of the ATS over more than two decades. ATS-oriented scholars who are employed by the Church are not bashful about publically advancing their retrogressive cause. What is it about moderates and progressives inside the Church organization who manifest an unwillingness to publically oppose the ATS agenda? Any and all suggestions to explain this state of affairs are solicited.

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A 1996 article by Richard Davidson entitled “The Story Behind the ATS: A Personal Reflection,” was originally published in *Perspective Digest* and now is posted on the ATS website. It sets out the original reasons and the founding mythic story behind the formation of the ATS. According to Davidson the originators “resolved to seek a venue through which scholars sharing the hermeneutical presuppositions of Bible-believing Adventism could gather” (as if other Adventist scholars were not “Bible-believing” Adventists). He then related how a group at Andrews University and Southern Adventist University had been thinking along similar lines and “that the Holy Spirit had been at work on both campuses prompting and leading. . . .” When the two groups first met at Southern, the “Holy Spirit took charge in a way that I can liken only to the meetings of the early pioneers of Adventism.” Charter members “recognized the need to course upon key biblical doctrines under attack within Adventism and the Christian church at large.”
A World View of World-views – Is It Possible?

By Chris Barrett, October 29, 2013

My “world-view” is essentially the way I describe or see the universe, the world, and life within it. Based on this I will hold, form, and accept or reject particular beliefs about what exists, what is good, bad, or otherwise. My world-view becomes the filter or glasses through which I see the world.

While our world-view is coloured by our personality, race, or genetics, at its core it is shaped by our immediate family, social, cultural, racial and geographic context. Imagine for a moment an indigenous tribesman living in a remote jungle where spirit worship and cannibalism are the norm (as once was possible to find). How would this person see the world, and what is good, bad, acceptable, etc? Now contrast this with a 20-year-old, Internet-connected, smartphone-carrying, university graduate Swede, (Sweden is predominantly atheist, and deeply secular)?

How would these two begin to understand one another?

Of course, the problem is not that far removed. On another AToday thread, Dr. Taylor had this to say about the repetitive clashing of world-views on this website:

“One is the world-view of a fundamentalist evangelical Protestant Adventist who rejects the outcome of the Enlightenment assumptions of the Modern world, and the other of a progressive Protestant Adventist who accepts the outcome of the Enlightenment assumptions of the Modern world.”

Regardless of which we contrast—an atheistic, university-savvy, smartphone-toting Gen Y’er with a cannibalistic, jungle-dwelling animist, or the theocentric world-view of a fundamentalist evangelical Adventist and that of a person who has accepted the outcomes of the enlightenment—profound problems exist either way.

Critical to this discussion is understanding that the underpinnings of world-views cannot be proven. This is the case with every possible world-view. Answers about ultimate reality, free will, human nature, and the associated beliefs about good, bad, etc. all rest on unprovable assumptions. That’s just the way it is. Sorry. This includes a theocentric world-view which builds on an assumption that God and or the spirit world exists, and that it has the authority to impose these “answers” on the hearers.

Now I frequently notice a solution offered: respect one another’s world-views and effectively “co-exist.” This sentiment of respecting, not
confronting, another's world-view is fine within a cozy environment where secular political structures ensure freedom to one's own world-view. We call it religious freedom, ironically brought about by, among other things, recognition of the plurality of belief and the need for tolerance and respect.

Let's look at history. Christian Missionaries set out deliberately to change the world-view of their target audience. They did this based on an authority external to both themselves and their listeners: God. Of course in most cases, both hearer and preacher were generally “theistic” in that their world-views included God, gods or spirits, etc. The commonality is that it was an external “authority” system. Adventists and Christians still use the word “Evangelism.” At its core, is not evangelism an effort to change or reshape the hearers world-view?

Widen the scope a little further, and we find that Islam, and most every other religious entity, remains underpinned by the same thinking. They want to change your world-view. We could say the same about other world-views too. The principle of being evangelistic demonstrates to me the shortcomings of this call for tolerance. All world-views should be challenged and tested.

This is important because there are some world-views that are positively dangerous for the well-being of humanity and this world today. You only need to briefly turn on the news to find new examples of proponents of religiously driven world-views destroying life in one place or another...all in the name of their God.

Sharia Law and the advance of fundamentalist Islam is a significant force! Brunei is the latest place to impose Sharia Law. Notice what the Sultan said to a legal conference about the change: "By the grace of Allah, with the coming into effect of this legislation, our duty to Allah is therefore being fulfilled."

This is the classic theocentric world-view underpinned by an external authority. Allah says it; we do it!

So how do we confront such world-views? Closer to home, how do we fairly evaluate our own world-views and resolve the constant clashing of symbols?

The number and complexity of the differing world views means they must be compared in other ways than to claim that either one or another is exclusively true. The big challenge is that world-views are often deeply emotional and cultural experiences. Often, logic is ignored, and facts are not agreed upon or are considered irrelevant.

There must be legitimate grounds available upon which to challenge any particular world view, including Islam, Christianity, or others. If there are no grounds upon which to do this, what is to be done about the advance of militant Islamists?

To recognize and understand world-views may lead one to no longer assume their own view is correct or true. This knowledge should lead a person to evaluate their own and other world-views with less bias! I think for the person who understands world-views and the fact that all rest on unproven assumptions, there is little reason to avoid respectful dialogue. They cannot justify an arrogant stance on assumptions by claiming they look through a different set of glasses! Awareness of other ways of seeing the world is a first step.

The only hindrance to open communication and understanding between world-views is that one or both parties hold their world-view with arrogance or dogmatism. Any person or culture that has a sense that “their” world-view contains “Truth” is at high risk of this attitude and
will have great difficulty adjusting their glasses!

Whenever a person grants authority to something or someone that does not have the potential to be common to both hearer and speaker, they will struggle to engage in meaningful dialog. Such dialogue will usually be conflicted, with each side asserting and buttressing personal claims to truth. Ending the default position of resting on assumptions which may not be held in common with your listener is essential.

To move beyond these levels, there must be legitimate and common ground available upon which to challenge any particular world-view.

Just as the evangelist takes his message with the voice and reason of an external authority, so too, I suggest, we must find, or accept, an external voice or authority to challenge and test all world-views. Obviously, that voice must not be “God,” for the moment we say it should be, we have the impossible questions of “Whose God?” or “Why God?”. We must ask, “Is there some other legitimate voice or authority? If so, what is it? And if it is found, how do we avoid having it just bounce off the emotionally plated armor of those encased and encrusted in their own world-view?”

Assumptions are things we presume to be true in the absence of evidence, but if you prod any person regarding the basis of their world-view, almost without exception, they will present evidence to support it. Very clearly, evidence matters; evidence carries weight. Unfortunately, more often than not, when the objective, measurable evidence fails to reach back to prove the basis of their assumptions, the emotional evidence kicks in. There is often a move from objective evidence to the subjective, usually without justification.

On the basis that ultimately all humans value objective evidence, I would propose that we need a World View of world-views, one that builds on common denominators within human reason, knowledge and science—a fact-based World View. Such a World View would require at least two criteria. First, it must offer the least assumptions. In other words, it would reach back the furthest, with the best evidence, before it is forced to make any assumptions. It would be based on objective evidence and depend least on emotional experience or subjective evidence. Next, it must be willing to be agnostic on many of the questions linked to the remaining, unavoidable assumptions.

Such a World View could appeal to the ethics and values common to humanity. It could and should have the right and authority to become the evangelistic voice of reason in this world.

I suggest such a World View could have a remarkable similarity to the “outcome of the Enlightenment [and] assumptions of the Modern world.”

The problem is that naïve and simplistic theories, such as certain faith claims, seem to survive the acquisition of mutually incompatible scientific data. Newer and better theories seem to be compartmentalized and simply coexist in the same world-view.

However, there is a global secularization taking place, and such a shift may well swell the tide towards a more robust world-view. I notice in the latest landmark survey of perceptions among Adventists, that this global secularization is reported with alarm. In a report on AToday, Trim noted:

“It’s a globalized society.... People are watching the same television programs, reading the same apps and websites on their phones and
computers, and secularization is a problem.”

No doubt the alarm expressed by such Adventist leaders is echoed by fundamentalist Islam as well. A rising tide floats all ships. Perhaps a growing militancy in both bodies reflects fear at the loss of power over people that results from such changes. World-views are not only resistant to change; they are also forms of power over people.

When one considers that this secularization is likely to be the same force behind the, sadly, failing Arab Spring, one would think that Churches would see the benefits these more secular world-views are bringing. Would it not be better, rather than resisting it, to add a positive contribution to the future shape it may take? Do we not see the benefits of such a world-view shift for the millions of Malala's out there?

From this backdrop, it seems to me both reasonable and helpful to challenge the logical, and too often illogical, inferences that otherwise intelligent humans draw and have drawn from the evidence that validates their particular world-views. I believe doing so from the perspective of such a World View can only make the world a better place, that is, unless man's perception of God gets in the way.

“Which God?” I hear you say. Excellent question. Unless you are assuming it should be “your” God, such a question spells the death of religious arrogance. At the moment you consider that assumption for what it is, you are ready to obtain reason from the world around you, and also from the ethics and values common to the human heart.

You are ready for a World View!

It is a view that exposes the cannibalistic tribesman in his jungle valley for the dark reality it is. It is a view that exposes narrow-minded fundamentalism for the dingy, life-sucking dungeon of the mind that I believe it to be, be it Islamic or some Christian form. It is a World View that could see an end to female genital mutilation. It is a World View that can see girls in school without guns to their heads for doing so. And the list could go on.

Such a World View will be both confident and humble—confident that its conclusions are based on the best possible objective evidence, and humble to the reality that as human knowledge grows, so too may the World View change.

Of course, for many the price of such a View is too high, thus we may be doomed to continue bumping along the rutted highways of conflict, argument and hypocrisy, embracing over and over again the tired, rubbery arguments that just never quite get past the assumptions required to ensure the comfort zones of the power players, who enjoy their optical isolation—or perhaps optical illusion—as they power their smokey, outdated WV's recklessly down the road.

Oops... car bearing down on me, I better get off the road!

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When Does the Questioning Stop?

By Mark Gutman, October 28, 2013

People would generally rather feel certain than uncertain. Other antonyms for “certain” are hesitant, unconfident, and insecure, and who enjoys feeling that way? We like the ease of certainty, and we are attracted to people who exude it. People who appear hesitant are criticized for waffling or being wishy-washy.

How much room does the church have for uncertainty? Some members believe that members should have 100% confidence in the same understanding of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs that certain leaders expound. Either have that same degree of confidence or keep quiet (or leave!)

Solomon Asch ran experiments a few years ago that publicized the phenomenon of conformity and peer pressure. Those taking part in the experiment looked at the flashcards pictured here and were asked to choose which line (A, B, or C) was the same length as the line on the other flashcard. When a control group was asked the questions, the participants answered correctly 99.3% of the time. But in the trials where participants first heard seven respondents answer incorrectly (because the respondents were confederates in the experiment), the research participants gave the same wrong response as the confederates 37% of the time. However, if one of the seven confederates answered correctly, the participant error rate dropped to around 8%.

Asch’s experiments dealt with answers that were “black-and-white,” and the participants were in a group with strangers. There is evidence that the pressure to conform is even greater when the answers are more subjective (or abstract or hazy), or the pressure to conform is from friends. One correct confederate answer strengthens the resolve of the participant to answer correctly. But some interpret the results differently when one breaks ranks. They see that one dissident can lead to a greater breakdown of the community.

If everyone in the church says the same thing, it will help to keep doubters in line. But if one doubter is allowed to voice his questions, some fear that he may raise or encourage questions among others, resulting in a breakdown of the community. Yet we know a risk of not allowing questions. “When no new questions are started by investigation of the Scriptures, when no difference of opinion arises which will set men to searching the Bible for themselves to make sure that they have the truth, there will be many now, as in ancient times, who will hold to tradition and worship they know not what.”

We encourage those who are not members of our denomination to investigate our teachings and see their reasonableness. Once the new folks have joined us, though, we sometimes get nervous about what they investigate. We would prefer that they get comfortable with our beliefs. That Bible study participant who we complimented for asking so many questions is now seen differently when she keeps asking questions after being baptized. We want her to ask questions, but... So where do we draw the line? Which questions are permissible and which ones are off limits?

The current situation in Samoa has raised a question. Adventists in that island country disagree over which is the correct day to observe as the Sabbath. Are the ones who worship on what is now called Sunday taking the easy way out? Or are they using common sense? The question is different from comparing the lengths of lines A, B, and C to another line. There is no unquestionably right answer. Some Samoan members immediately knew how they were going to relate to the change of days. Others weren’t so sure; they could see good reasoning for both sides. But we don’t blame the Samoans for raising the question. The government changed the calendar, and Samoan Adventists were unexpectedly confronted with a problem. So the question is permissible.

We can, though, blame people who hang around non-members or read certain unorthodox material. They should have stayed away from the forbidden fruit. If they don’t stay away, they should at least keep their doubts or questions to themselves. On the other hand, if we have the truth, we have nothing to fear from questions. Come to think of it, even if we don’t have the truth, we don’t need to fear questions. If I’m wrong, why not find out sooner than later? "If the pillars of our faith will not stand the test of investigation, it is time we knew it."
Some church members ask questions about the age of the earth or the length of time that human beings have been around. Some wonder if anything special happened in heaven in October 1844? Bad questions? Naughty questions? People who come up with “naughty” questions often stumble into problems with other church doctrines, so the safest approach is to stop the naughty questions before they develop. There’s plenty in the Bible to study without needing to get into the risky areas.

We praise a member of another denomination who ignores his pastor’s warnings against studying material of “that Adventist cult.” But once you join us, we form our own Index of Forbidden Books. You should only read material that is put out by the right publisher. Of course, the “right publisher” is determined by the Index compiler.

Some things are hard to prove beyond the possibility of doubt. Devout Bible-believing Christians can be found on both sides of most issues. A problem develops when we begin evaluating why someone disagrees with us. Since we are rational and Spirit-guided, we can assume that the other person simply doesn’t know all the facts. However, once we know that the other person knows what we know (which is itself quite an assumption), we are left to assume that the other person is either stupid or wicked. Unfortunately, you can listen to some radio and TV hosts of the right or left for examples of the thinking and belittling that has been known to occur in the church. As Kathryn Schulz puts it: “Our faith in our own reading of the facts undergirds our certainty that we are right, our shock when turn out to be wrong, and our willingness to deny the perspicacity, intelligence, and moral worth of everyone who disagrees with us.”

“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.” Some people more naturally question everything. Those who don’t question often benefit because of those who do.

Let people ask questions. It would probably help if questioners recognize the need to be discrete and tactful. But if we stop the questions of others, we limit their chance to contribute to our own growth even as they work on theirs. The urge to stop others from asking questions might give us pause to reflect on when we stopped asking questions and why. “There are no foolish questions, and no man becomes a fool until he has stopped asking questions.”

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1 See Solomon Asch, Social Psychology, but you can find the experiment described in many places.

2 Williams and Sogon 1984; I can’t locate a good reference, but their experiment is referred to in many places but not as widely as Asch’s experiment.

3 Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, Vol 5, p.707.

4 See atoday.org news item: Conflict Over Calendar Change Splits the Adventist Church in Samoa.

5 Ellen G. White, Testimonies to Ministers, p. 107.

6 Now if God had just done that in Lucifer’s case!


8 Kathryn Schulz, The Ministry of Healing, p. 483.

9 Attributed to Charles Steinmetz, as if it matters. See my column, “As Benjamin Franklin Said…” in Aug 2011.