Editorial: Working Together

Eugene Prewitt

When I was younger I was impressed by the title of one of Ellen White’s articles in Fundamentals of Christian Education, “Formality, not Organization, an Evil.” When we work together, sensible order brings extra power. Think “one, two, three, PUSH!” But when we systemize this sensibility (think “from now on whoever pushes before the announcer says the word ‘three’ will be denied the privilege pushing on the bumper”) we drain the order of its common sense. We stifle thought.

Prior to his decease in October of this year, our friend and fellowworker, Dane Griffin, captured the essence of this unity-induced power. In his article he explores the writings of Ellen White for gems of thought on a level of unity deeper than unity of action. He answers that rhetorical question, “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” Amos 3:3.

Some that are agreed yet fail to walk and work together. Since the early 90’s there has been a growing pattern of congregationalism in Adventist circles. In retreat from the order established in God’s church in 1901 and 1903, many congregations have set themselves up as their own final organizational authority. My article in this edition of Adventists Affirm addresses the theology behind this retreat and its current manifestations in some home-church movements.

And those that are trying to work together with the body sometimes find themselves stymied by the disinterest of their brethren. At our recent General Conference session some delegates, represented in this volume by Reno Paotonu, were surprised to find many of their fellow delegates to be absent from business meetings. Reno suggests steps that might raise the level of participation and thereby increase our togetherness.

“Would you work together with me?” If I asked you, you would likely respond “What are you doing?” Working together involves buying into a common mission. After reading Elder Skeete’s article it is easy to see that, generally, we have yet to buy into that mission. In the metaphor of Amos 3, we aren’t walking, and hence, aren’t walking together.

New authors to Adventists Affirm have contributed two fascinating articles. Read Dave Fiedler’s account of the General Conference sessions of 1901 and 1903. When a living prophet was around to help us work together, what did she have to say in regard to church order?

Then read Bob Pickle on how God used her to establish Madison, an early first self-supporting school. How did God intend that such institutions would be held accountable? And how should their modern counterparts (Adventists Affirm is a self-supporting organization) be answerable to church authority today? Pickle addresses these questions on the big picture of working together.

This edition’s theme has been inspired largely by the stellar model of executive leadership demonstrated by Ted Wilson’s General Conference sermon. That sermon showed that Elder Wilson knew that he had authority to teach. And teach he did. He charted a course for us and made it easier for willing persons to
walk together with power.

While many leaders, knowing that they have no legal authority to mandate a change in policy, have felt that there was little they could do to hold heretics (such as teachers of theistic-evolution) accountable, the Bible has granted them more power than they know. The authority to teach committees what they should do is a power that has everything to do with working together.

Where pluralism reigns, unity sags, mission suffers, and church becomes formality. It is formality, not organization, that is an evil.
Nothing in the universe, in the biological, physical, or spiritual realm—is more powerful than unity. At the molecular level, unity of action anchors atoms in their respective orbits and provides the building blocks of life in our diverse world, a world that demonstrates immense power, beauty, diversity, rhythm, and unity. “Give, and it shall be given you” is the theme of our interdependent world, where clouds and rivers, plants and animals connect, share, give, take, and create this earth’s biological economy. It all begins with unity—harmony—giving.

Unity, interdependence, and organization are “God” principles at the physical and spiritual level—they don’t occur by evolution, but by special creation.

Inorganic chemist Stephen Grocott describes the inability of man to create life, systems, and organization (i.e. unity) at the molecular level: “Sterilize a frog and put it in a blender—buzzz. Seal up the mixture and leave it in a sterile container and leave it as long as you want. You won’t get life in spite of the fact that you started with the best possible mixture…[These organic precursors]…would all decompose to simpler and simpler molecules and would mostly end up as common, lifeless, organic substances.”

In the spiritual realm, unity is as important as it is to our physical world. And you and I are part of the equation. Without “U” and “I”, unity melts to “n t y,” a meaningless brew of letters as useless as our soup of frog molecules. Without “You” and “I” working together with God, everything eventually falls apart. But when you (u) and I (i) are joined together by the promised indwelling of the Holy Spirit, then true Unity—powerful life!—bursts onto the scene.

Think about it for a moment. What is the purpose of the plan of salvation? Eternal life? Yes. To make victorious living possible? Yes. To reveal the wonderful, unfathomable love of God? Yes. But, consider this final passage in The Great Controversy on page 678:

“One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation. From Him who created all flow life and light and gladness throughout the realms of illimitable space. From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love” (Emphasis supplied).

Notice that highlighted line: “One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation.” Now, compare that with Paul’s inspired statement in Ephesians 4:13. After listing the spiritual gifts that God has given His church, Paul lists the reason why God gave them and how long they would remain: “Until we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”

Unity. That’s what sin broke in heaven. That’s what the Lord came—and the gospel was given—to
restore. When Lucifer was able to get one-third of the angels to doubt God’s leadership and authority, the unity of heaven was broken. And Satan knew that without unity, heaven, indeed, God’s government, could no longer function with efficiency and power. Satan understood that once a being questions or doubts a God-given chain of command, disunity cannot be far behind. And once disunity arrives, efficiency, effectiveness, and power soon exit.

Satan convinced many angels that God’s plan, His chain of command, was flawed. Why should Jesus receive so much attention when he, Lucifer, was so close to God and so involved in God’s plans? God was holding something back, Satan insinuated, He was keeping the angels from experiencing the power and position they deserved. And all the angels who held to that view had to be expelled in order for the unity of heaven to be reinstated.

Now, fast forward to the Garden of Eden. Satan’s plan worked so well in heaven, he used it again on earth. As Eve stood spellbound by the speaking serpent, he told her to eat the fruit because "God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." You can move up the chain, Eve, was the insinuation. God’s holding you back. Eat this fruit and you can establish your own chain of command—you can be in charge, just like God!

And, just like the angels in heaven, Eve bit the bait, she doubted God’s authority by showing her willingness to break His chain of command, and we’re living today with the results of her flawed choice.

This pattern can be traced throughout the entire great controversy. Satan understands the importance of unity, but he understands even better how to destroy it and the inevitable results of destroying it.

"(Satan) thinks to dissolve the unity which Christ prayed might exist in His church. He says, ‘I will go forth and be a lying spirit to deceive those that I can, to criticize, and condemn, and falsify.’ Let the son of deceit and false witness be entertained by a church that has had great light, great evidence, and that church will discard the message the Lord has sent, and receive the most unreasonable assertions and false suppositions and false theories. Satan laughs at their folly, for he knows what truth is."m

We can understand this concept more clearly as we study Jesus’ final prayer before the cross. Notice carefully what Jesus was praying for, what He asked God to do because of His approaching sacrificial death:

"Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are ... I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved Them as You have loved Me. Father ... 

Do you see the theme of Christ’s prayer? "That they may be one as We are ... that they all may be one in Us ... that they may be one just as We are one ..." Jesus knew that His death would not only provide salvation for His followers, but it would give the power of unity, of oneness with each other and, more importantly, with God and Jesus! But did you notice what that unity would ultimately accomplish? Look again at verses 21 and 23: "That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me ... I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me. Father ..."

The unity of a diverse, multi-cultural group of believers is proof to the world that God did, indeed, send Jesus to die and they are truly His disciples carrying His last-day warning message to the world! Without unity, the validation of our message of Jesus’ salvation is almost powerless. Ellen White validates that in Acts of the Apostles, page 91: "The proclamation of the gospel was to be world-wide in its extent, and the messengers of the cross could not hope to fulfill their important mission unless they should remain united in the bonds of Christian unity, and thus reveal to the world that they were one with Christ in God."

She also wrote: “It is the unity in the church that enables it to exert a conscious influence upon
unbelievers and worldlings.”5 She adds: “The evidence that the world cannot withstand and controvert, that God has sent Jesus into the world as its Redeemer, is in the oneness of the church. Their unity and harmony is the convincing argument. Satan is therefore constantly at work to prevent this harmony and union ...”6

How powerful is that unity? “Ten members, who were walking in all humbleness of mind, would have a far greater power upon the world than has the entire church, with its present numbers and lack of unity. The more there is of the divided, inharmonious element, the less power will the church have for good in the world.”7

"In unity there is a life, a power that can be obtained in no other way. There will be a vast power in the church when the energies of the members are united under the control of the Spirit.”8

This power was evidenced at Pentecost through a once-rag-tag team of 11 men who had experienced little power in their lives before that day. But the Bible says: "When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting ... And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit ...”9

What had changed? Rather than seeking power, position, and prestige, they were now humble, submitted to the will of their Master. Rather than seeking to be rulers of Christ’s kingdom, they were now satisfied to be servants. They were no longer divided in pride and opinion, but were "of one accord in one place." They were finally unified! And because of that unity Christ blessed them with the outpouring of His Holy Spirit.

What was the result? Peter preached one sermon, and "that day about three thousand souls were added to them."10 And after another sermon, the Bible says, "many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.”11 Imagine it! Two sermons. Seven thousand baptisms! Now that’s power! That’s church growth! That’s the power of unity. Truly, "Unity is strength; disunion is weakness and defeat.”12

God’s promise for us today is: "When we bring our hearts into unity with Christ, and our lives into harmony with His work, the Spirit that fell on the disciples on the Day of Pentecost will fall on us.”13

But, as we have read, while Jesus moves His church toward unity, Satan is hard at work to bring in strife and discord—disunity! Notice what happened just four chapters later in Acts 6:1: "Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.”

It’s interesting that inspiration directed Luke to point out that it was while “the number of the disciples was multiplying” that “there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists” about their widows. As the church became more “diversified” through the baptism of believers from different cultures, Satan used it to threaten the church. The language of the passage and actions taken by the apostles in response lend credibility to the idea that this was no minor dispute, but a potential threat to the church’s unity and growth.

Christ’s church faces the same situation today. With more than 16 million members, and thousands being added daily, we face an increasing challenge to maintain the church’s unity and power. It would be good, therefore, for us to remember that one of our most important “jobs” as Christians is “endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”14

Remember, Paul says, that no matter where you come from, what color your skin is, no matter what your previous culture was, no matter what your language is, when you’re converted, you become a member of one body, Jesus Christ, who is the head—or leader—of the body15 “that in all things he might have the preeminence.”16 Our old culture, our old ways, our old habits are laid aside, and Christ now has preeminence—He’s the ultimate authority. "Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth
glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.”

The body analogy is used many times in Scripture to talk about the church. In Romans 12:5 Paul wrote: “We, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.” In writing of this diversity and the differing talents Christ gives to church members, Paul said: “If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?”

In other words, all the parts of the body are needed to make the body function properly and thrive in safety: The feet taking the nose to where it can better assess the smell of that smoke; the eyes seeing the flames; the hands pouring the water on the flames; the adrenals giving the emergency energy needed to fulfill the task. Without all the parts working together in unity, as directed by the brain (the great head!), the different parts would all be killed in the resultant unchecked fire!

Ellen White put it this way: “The members of the church of God on this earth are as the different parts of a machine, all closely related to one another, and all closely related to and dependent on one great center. There is to be unity in diversity.”

But she also warned: “We are to unify, but not on a platform of error.”

Why? Look at the example of the physical body. When one cell becomes “rebellious” and begins to divide unchecked by the needs and commands of the body, what happens? Cancer! So it is in the church. We must adopt the paradigm of a “body-builder” mentality and leave behind us the “church-attender” mentality. A church-attender mentality asks, “How can the church better serve me; I need the church to do this for me so I can enjoy being here.” A body-builder mentality says instead: “What I want is secondary to what is best for the body, because as the body grows, so will I!”

“If church members would be doers of the Word, as they solemnly pledged themselves to be when they received baptism, they would love their brethren, and would be constantly seeking for unity and harmony.”

“Strive earnestly for unity. Pray for it, work for it. It will bring spiritual health, elevation of thought, nobility of character, heaven-mindedness, enabling you to overcome selfishness and evil surmisings, and to be more than conquerors through Him that loved you and gave Himself for you. Crucify self; esteem others better than yourselves. Thus you will be brought into oneness with Christ.”

But does diversity naturally lead to dangers of division and disunity? Consider this profound passage: “(God’s people) will not be at variance, one believing one thing, and another having faith and views entirely opposite; each moving independently of the body. Through the diversity of the gifts and governments that He has placed in the church, they will all come to the unity of the faith. If one man takes his views of Bible truth without regard to the opinion of his brethren, and justifies his course, alleging that he has a right to his own peculiar views, and then presses them upon others, how can he be fulfilling the prayer of Christ?”

You see, a body-builder mentality does not ask, “What’s good for me? What type of music do I want in the service? How do I want this or that done?” Instead it concedes: What’s best for the body? What will best preserve the body’s health, growth, and mission? What does Jesus, the Head of the body, want for His body?

That’s the principle Paul is teaching in Ephesians 1:22, 23: “(Jesus is) head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.” Jesus, not individuals, is the Head of the body, the final authority in the church. When a member of the body wants something done, the “head” must be consulted to make sure it is within His will and plan.

Does that mean church members will see eye to eye on every point and that there will never be disagreements in the church? No! Just look at what happened with Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:36-41. But, when, like Paul and Barnabas, members are striving for unity, submitting their case to the great

http://www.adventistsaffirm.org/article/258/previous-issues/volume-24-...
head Jesus Christ, differences will be settled and unity will once again be restored!

That’s why Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:1, 2: “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love.” What is our calling? To join the body of Christ, to be in submission to the Head, Jesus Christ—that’s walking “worthy of our calling!” Just as each part of a healthy human body moves and acts and divides only at the express command of the brain (the head), so it will be in a unified, healthy church body, a congregation filled with “body-building” mentality and submission. Self is dead. Christ and His will is all in all. What’s good for the body is best for the members.

"Those who are truly converted will press together in Christian unity."25 "Nothing can perfect a perfect unity in the church but the spirit of Christlike forbearance. Satan can sow discord; Christ alone can harmonize the disagreeing elements."26 "The members of the church must come into unity; and in order to do this, they must have less of self, and more of Jesus."27

Now, notice this serious admonition: "None who continue to cherish a querulous, fault-finding disposition can enter heaven; for they would mar its peace and harmony ... Nor should they be permitted to remain in the church to prevent unity and destroy its usefulness. Let them be reproved, and if they do not change their course, let them be separated from the church."28

"Instead of the unity which should exist among believers, there is disunion; for Satan is permitted to come in, and through his specious deceptions and delusions he leads those who are not learning of Christ meekness and lowliness of heart, to take a different line from the church, and break up, if possible, the unity of the church. Men arise speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after themselves."29

So, while a unified church will exhibit a Christlike forbearance, while it will not exhibit a harsh, judgmental spirit, while it with all lowliness and gentleness and longsuffering, bears with one another in love, it cannot retain members with a querulous, fault-finding disposition, for that is the spirit of Satan, the spirit that brings certain disunity.

We are counseled: "When self-will is renounced in reference to matters there will be a union of believers with Christ. This all should pray for and work for determinedly ..."40

When that unity Jesus prayed for happens in the church, what are the results? Members will no longer "be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, (will) grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love."31

So, if your church doesn’t have this unity, what should you do? Here are some inspired counsels: "The cause of division and discord in families and in the church is separation from Christ. To come near to Christ is to come near to one another. The secret of true unity in the church and in the family is not diplomacy, not management, not a superhuman effort to overcome difficulties—though there will be much of this to do—but union with Christ."32

"In the fourth chapter of Ephesians the plan of God is so plainly and simply revealed that all His children may lay hold upon the truth. Here the means which He has appointed to keep unity in His church, that its members may reveal to the world a healthy religious experience, is plainly declared."33

The counsel continues: "Amidst the general discord (of the world) let there be one place where harmony and unity exists because the Bible is made the guide of life."34 "(The angel) said, 'The church must flee to God’s Word and become established upon gospel order, which has been overlooked and neglected.’ This is indispensably necessary in order to bring the church into the unity of the faith."35 "To secure peace and unity (the Reformers) were ready to make any concession consistent with fidelity to God; but they felt that even peace would be too dearly purchased at the sacrifice of principle. If unity could be secured only by the compromise of truth and righteousness, then let there be difference, and even war."36 "While we are not to sacrifice one principle of truth, it should be our constant aim to reach this
state of unity”

What will "this state of unity" produce in the church? Note Peter’s words in 1 Peter 3:8, 9: "Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing."

Back to how to restore unity: "Unity is the strength of the church. Satan knows this, and he employs his whole force to bring in dissension. He desires to see a lack of harmony among the members of the church of God. Greater attention should be given to the subject of unity. What is the recipe for the cure of the leprosy of strife and dissension? Obedience to the commandments of God."

"We must bring our religion to the Bible standard. We must not place ourselves where we claim wisdom to welcome or reject God’s words at pleasure. Never let the world think that the Christian and the world are the same in mind and judgment. There is a line drawn between the eternal God and the church on one side and the world on the other. There is no unity between the two. One chooses the way of the Lord, the other the ways of Satan. There will always be found a necessity to contend for the faith once delivered to the saints ...."

What’s the great unifier? The Word of God and the principles and doctrines it teaches. When we deviate from the great principle of the Protestant Reformation, Sola Scriptura, "the Bible only,” we are on the sure path to disharmony and disunity. And just as it was in heaven, once we question God’s chain of command on earth (see 1 Corinthians 11:1-3), we are headed for certain disunity, loss of power, and loss of direction. When we accept new theories on Bible interpretation, disunity is the sure result. When we lower or ignore any Bible principle in attempts to grow our churches or to win more souls or to attract or retain more youth, disunity will not be far behind.

So, what’s the sign of a healthy, vibrant church? Regular baptisms? Filled parking lots? A large number of youth? Busy in community outreach? Active social programs? No. The sign is unity. A group of diverse, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic people who are united in their new culture of heavenly obedience; people who have "put off, concerning (their) former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and (have been) renewed in the spirit of (their) mind, and (have) put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness." People who ask, "What is best for the body?" not "What is best for me?" They’re body builders, not merely worshippers.

Unity. That’s what Christ prayed for in John 17. That’s the ultimate goal of the great plan of salvation. That’s what every true worshipper of God will be seeking for and praying for and working for. But, without You and I working together, we know what happens: Unity morphs to a mere string of powerless letters—nty—lying powerless, useless, and without purpose in a blender full of potential.

2 Genesis 3:5.
3 Testimonies to Ministers, page 409.
4 John 17:11, 13, 20-24. All Bible references are from the New King James Version.
5 That I May Know Him, p. 153.
6 The Upward Look, p. 63.
7 Testimonies for the Church, Volume 5, p. 119.
8 Testimonies for the Church, Volume 7, p. 236.
12 Testimonies for the Church, Volume 6, p. 292.
13 Counsels for the Church, p. 66.
14 Romans 15:5-6.
15 Ephesians 5:23.
16 Colossians 1:18.
17 Romans 15:5-7.
18 1 Corinthians 12:17.
19 Our High Calling, p. 182.
31. Ephesians 4:14-16.
35. *Early Writings*, pp. 100-1.
Evangelism: Favor or Duty?

Randy Skeete

Introduction

There is scarcely a subject more central to the remnant church than evangelism.* It is the very reason why Christ founded the church—not only the New Testament church, but also the church in the wilderness (Acts 7: 38).** Sadly and incredibly, many believers are unaware that evangelism is the purpose the church exists. The result is that many churches are mere strongholds of the status quo and of the spiritually dead. They have the form (maybe), no power and few, if any, baptisms. Others, a little less dead, have a summer season of evangelism at which time a public evangelistic “event” (which some members actually oppose) is held with much fanfare, then they return to their annual hibernation while all around people die without a saving knowledge of the everlasting gospel.

Is evangelism merely a seasonal activity or is it the very life of the church—corporately and personally?

If Christ’s mission on earth was “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19: 10), to call “sinners to repentance” (Matt. 9: 13), to preach “the glad tidings of the kingdom of God” (Luke 8: 1), and to give life “more abundantly” (John 10: 10), how can His church function differently when the church is His body, of which He is the head? (Col. 1: 18). Is not the body, any living body, led by the head?

The purpose of this article is to briefly highlight the role of evangelism in the Seventh-day Adventist Church (hereinafter referred to as SDA and the members as SDAs).

Obligation, Not Option!

Deathbed speeches or last words tend to be urgent and pointed. This is the case with the “last” words of Christ prior to His ascension. His famous “last words” are known as the Great Gospel Commission. One may just as accurately say the Great Good News Commission, or the Great Gospel Command! Failure to carry out this commission is blatant disobedience to a command of God, as verily as adultery is a violation of the seventh commandment! The disciple of Christ must understand that the commission to evangelize is not an option but a solemn life-or-death obligation.

Other than Christ, Paul probably had the clearest view of the urgent nature of evangelism. He wrote in 1 Cor 9: 16, “For if I preach the gospel, no glory is to me; for necessity is laid on me, and it is woe to me if I preach not the gospel.” Woe to me! I would be miserable. In this verse, there is neither hint nor tint of option. There is a tonnage of obligation, of responsibility. Paul had no choice: he had to preach the gospel! This is obligation!

Jeremiah wrote, “Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay” (Jer. 20: 9). This is obligation!

Peter and John replied to the Sanhedrin’s threat thusly: “Whether it be right in the sight of God to
hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye: for we cannot [we have no choice] but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (author’s emphasis). We have neither choice nor option! This is obligation! Woe, woe, woe to those who neglect this duty! Why?

Neglect Is Murder!

Ezekiel 33:2-8 plainly outlines God’s harsh response to those who fail to evangelize. The passage says, “When I bring the sword on it, on a land, and take one man from the people of the land, their borders, and set him for a watchman to them, and when he sees the sword coming on the land, and he blows the ram’s horn and warns the people, and the hearer hearing the sound of the ram’s horn, and does not take warning, and the sword comes and takes him, his blood shall be on his own head. He heard the sound of the ram’s horn and took no warning; his blood shall be on himself. But he who took warning, he shall deliver his soul. But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the ram’s horn, and the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes a soul from them, he is taken in his iniquity. But I will require his blood from the watchman’s hand. And you, son of man, I gave you as a watchman to the house of Israel. And you shall hear the Word from My mouth and warn them from Me. When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die; if thou dost not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand” (author’s emphasis).

What does God mean by, “But I will require his blood from the watchman’s hand”? The answer is simple. What did He mean by the same expression in Gen. 9:5: “And surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it; and at the hand of every man’s brother will I require the life of man” (author’s emphasis). “To require” is to search someone out and hold him liable!

Those who take life must pay with their own lives! Ellen White is very clear on this subject: “How carefully God protects the rights of men! He has attached a penalty to willful murder. ‘Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed’ (Genesis 9:6). If one murderer were permitted to go unpunished, he would by his evil influence and cruel violence subvert others. This would result in a condition of things similar to that which existed before the Flood. God must punish murderers. He gives life, and He will take life, if that life becomes a terror and a menace” (1 Bible Commentary, 1091.3, author’s emphasis).

A refusal to preach the gospel, or to evangelize, is willful murder and, if not confessed and repented of, will be punished by death ... the second death! This is surely part of what is meant by God requiring people’s (sinners’) blood (lives) at the hand of the watchman (church) who fails to blow (proclaim, preach) the warning trumpet (life-giving gospel).

Origin of an Obligation

Enoch had a commission to preach the gospel (Jude 14-15).

The commission also came to Noah, whom the Bible calls “a preacher of righteousness” (2 Pet. 2:5).

Abraham was to be a blessing (Gen. 12:2-3) and this blessing was the gospel (Acts 3:25-26) which God preached to him (Gal. 3:8).

Jesus commanded the disciples, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” (Matt. 28:19, 20, author’s emphasis).

Mark’s words are “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; and he that believeth not shall be damned” (Mark 16:15-16, author’s emphasis).

Luke, the beloved physician, offers this rendering, “And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem ... But ye shall receive power after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in
Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the **uttermost part of the earth**” (Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8; author’s emphasis).

Jesus preached the gospel on earth when He said, “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15). He ceremonially enacted the gospel by making and clothing Adam and Eve with coats of skin (Gen. 3:21).

**An Ancient Origin**

But Christ did not *ad lib* as He spoke in Genesis 3:15 nor *improvise* as He acted in verse 21. The details of the gospel were in place ages before sin blighted the world. Scripture calls this the **everlasting covenant** (Psa. 105:7-10; Heb. 13:20). It provided an all-sufficient atoning sacrifice, forgiveness of sins, regeneration of the heart, power to obey the broken law, the total removal of sin from the universe, and the restoration of all things to their Edenic splendor—even greater!

The existence of the gospel prior to sin is clear in scripture. Revelation 13:8 describes Christ as "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." Titus 1:2 and 2 Timothy 1:9 say, "before the world began." Romans 16:25 speaks of "the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began." 1 Peter 1:20 says, "Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world." This everlasting gospel Christ entrusted to the disciples just before His ascension.

**What and Where**

Two points stand out in this commission/command—the message and the scope of its proclamation. The message is the gospel or good news, and the scope is the world. There is a message God gave to Christ and that Christ gave to His disciples to be preached to the entire world. Carrying out this commission is called evangelism and is the clearest command the risen Christ gave to His infant church. It must be done before His return. Indeed, His return hinges upon the completion of this work (Matt. 24:14). Christ Himself obeyed this divine commission when He preached the gospel (Mark 1:14, 15) and when He sent the disciples on localized, pre-ascension preaching missions (Matt. 10; Mark 6:7-13; Luke 10:1-20).

Why is proclaiming the gospel (evangelism) such a heavy obligation? Why must the gospel be preached to the entire world? Why is neglect of the gospel a criminal act in the sight of God? Because the gospel is the life-saving good news this lost world needs urgently and has always needed since Adam sinned!

**Etymology**

A brief explanation of the word evangelism (the spreading of the everlasting gospel) is called for now. The word evangelism derives from the Greek word (euangelion) which means "good message." Euangelion is itself a compound word combining 'eu' (good) and (I bring a message). Euangelion is the word used overwhelmingly in the New Testament to translate the word "gospel." The gospel, therefore, is good news, or a good message. And those who proclaim this good news or good message are called evangelists, while the act of spreading the gospel is called evangelism. The word for the phrase "to preach the gospel" is (euaggelizō). The church is commanded to proclaim glad tidings (Isa. 52:7; 61:1; Luke 2:10; 8:1) to the world. The world needs the life bound up in these tidings! There is no other source of life.

**What Is This Good News?**

The angel Gabriel told the shepherds, "I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10, 11, author’s emphasis). The expression “bring you good tidings” is translated by the same Greek word for “to preach the gospel.” The good news or glad tidings is that a way of escape from sin and all its effects and consequences has been provided. That way is God Himself! God with us! Emmanuel! (Matt. 1:23). Through faith in Him, all may be saved. This message of life is for the world and it is to be proclaimed by those to whom it has been entrusted *in its endtime fullness*!

In his great treatise on justification by faith, Paul writes in Galatians 3:8, "And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In
Thee shall all nations be blessed." The great blessing was justification by faith and all the privileges bound up in that blessing. To justify someone is to declare that person innocent, or just, or in a right relation with God—which is a right relation to His great law.

Peter agrees with Paul by very clearly identifying justification by faith as the great blessing of the gospel... it is the gospel. He writes, "Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning everyone of you from his iniquities" (Acts 3:26).

The good news to humanity, and indeed the affected universe, is that the gracious God has provided an effective way to remedy the curse of sin, personally and universally, and to reunite the cosmos under the banner of His law of love as expressed in the Ten Commandments. The basis of all of this is the sacrifice of Christ. The world is dying for lack of this good news! The world is not dying for lack of preaching, it is dying for lack of the everlasting gospel!

**The Gospel True and False**

There is the gospel of Christ (Rom. 1:16; 2 Cor. 4:4) and there is the gospel of Satan (Gal. 1:8-9). These two gospels are similar and can be differentiated only by examining them through the prism of present truth. This is the solemn duty of SDA's!

The heart and soul of present truth lie in Daniel 8:14; Revelation 14:6-12; and Revelation 18:1-5. Therein lies the endtime fullness of the gospel: a fullness no one had, not even the Old Testament prophets nor the more enlightened New Testament evangelists! Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, etc., did not even understand what they wrote (Dan. 8:27; 12:4, 8; and 1 Pet. 1:10-12). But the Bible predicts that there will be a people in the end time described as wise (having understanding of deep things, able to instruct in these things) who will turn many to righteousness! (Dan. 12:3, 10).

Righteousness is the very opposite of sin (Gen. 18:23; Deut. 25:1); righteousness is obedience to God’s commandments (Deut. 6:25); righteousness is the only means of salvation (Gen. 3:21; Phil. 3:9); righteousness is the only protection from condemnation/destruction (Gen. 7:1; 2 Pet. 2:7, 8); righteousness is revealed in the gospel (Rom. 1:16, 17); righteousness is the law (Psa. 119:142, 44); Christ is our Righteousness (Jer. 23:6); and the new world will be a world of righteousness (2 Pet. 3:13). Then there must be a people in the last days, as required by prophecy (Dan. 12:3, 8), who proclaim a gospel of righteousness by faith in the righteous Christ who indwells the regenerated sinner so fully that that person chooses to live a righteous life, the genuineness of which is confirmed by the righteous law written on his heart (Isa. 51:7) the same way it was written on the heart of the incarnate Christ! (Psa. 40:8).

Who are these wise people who will understand what no one else understands? Who are these wise people who will turn many to righteousness (by faith)? Who are these wise people who will warn "many peoples and nations and tongues and kings" (Rev. 10:11) of a false gospel?

They are Seventh-day Adventists!

**Seventh-day Adventists: Then and Now**

God called Abraham to be a blessing; his seed (the Israelites) were to be this same blessing; the Jewish nation should have been that blessing; the apostolic church was that blessing; the church in the wilderness was that blessing; and the remnant church, theological descendants of the apostolic church, is to be that blessing today.

The gospel was to be preached to the world but it was first given or entrusted to a small select group. We repeat and enlarge: the gospel has always been given or entrusted to a small group but for the purpose of proclaiming it to the whole world. If the whole world had it there would be no need to proclaim it to the world; but the fact that the whole world needs the gospel preached to it proves that the whole world does not have the gospel. A small group today has what the whole world needs—the life-giving gospel in its endtime fullness!

Jesus told the infant church, "Ye are the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13) and "Ye are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14, author’s emphasis). He did not say ye and the multitude, even though the
multitude was nearby and overheard His sermon to the disciples. Jesus taught His disciples (Matt. 5:1, 2). He said also, "Ye shall be witnesses unto me" (Acts 1:8, author's emphasis). If they were to be witnesses for Christ they must have been witnesses to someone else. That someone else was the world!

Noah was called to preach to the world. The world needed what he had. Thus it is today! The world needs what has been entrusted to a small group—the SDA Church. Ellen White writes, "God has called His church in this day, as He called ancient Israel, to stand as a light in the earth. By the mighty cleaver of truth, the messages of the first, second, and third angels, He has separated them from the churches and from the world to bring them into a sacred nearness to Himself" (5 Testimonies, 455.2).

The SDA Church stands today in precisely the same position as Abraham stood relative to the heathen, as Israel stood relative to the surrounding heathen nations, and as the Jews stood relative to the Gentiles.

This is a stupendous honor with grave responsibilities, neglect of which carries frightening consequences. No people in any age have been given so much light as have SDAs. Ellen White elaborates, "Seventh-day Adventists have been chosen by God as a peculiar people, separate from the world. By the great cleaver of truth He has cut them out from the quarry of the world and brought them into connection with Himself. He has made them His representatives and has called them to be ambassadors for Him in the last work of salvation. The greatest wealth of truth ever entrusted to mortals, the most solemn and fearful warnings ever sent by God to man, have been committed to them to be given to the world (Last Day Events, 45.2, author's emphasis).

The seriousness of this statement intensifies in the light of Luke 12:48, "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more." The exalted privilege of the gospel is linked to the solemn burden of responsibility. The everlasting gospel, righteousness by faith, the third angel’s message "in verity": this is the treasure entrusted to the steward (SDA Church) to be given to others (the world).

No one else can do this work because no one else has been called and equipped to do it! Christ came into this world with virtually no one knowing because those chosen to prepare the world for this event neglected their duty, and so the world did not know. Like the Jews of old, SDAs have been chosen to prepare the world for the second coming of Christ. They must do it, not others, because God has never had two chosen people ... always one!

**Eternal Consequences**

Many are satisfied to leave evangelism to others. They feel no personal urgency to lead someone to Christ. They should carefully consider the following insight: "There will be no one saved in heaven with a starless crown. If you enter, there will be some soul in the courts of glory that has found an entrance there through your instrumentality" (Last Day Events, 282.3). Simply put, evangelism is the way to save one’s soul! Paul told Timothy, "Take heed unto thyself, and to the doctrine; continue you in them: for in so doing thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee" (1 Tim. 4:16). The person you lead to Christ is your "entrance ticket" to the kingdom, so to speak! None can enter alone! Dear reader, let us decide now to awake from our slumber and save ourselves and them that hear us! How? Evangelism!

In these waning hours of earth’s history God’s church must remember that heaven is waiting on it to do its duty in order that Christ may come to initiate the eschatological events connected to the final eradication of sin! For the church to delay this cosmic event through ignorance and/or neglect of evangelism is a disservice to heaven and earth. It is criminal behavior!

*"Evangelism" refers to all forms of proclaiming the gospel: one-to-one Bible studies, health lectures, tent meetings, radio, TV, Internet, etc. The method with which evangelism is most closely associated is public preaching.

**All texts are from the Authorized King James Version unless otherwise stated.
Going Forward, Not Backwards

A Reflection on the 2010 Atlanta General Conference Session

Samuel Koranteng-Pipim

Introduction

The 2010 General Conference session in Atlanta is now history. Although many significant decisions were taken at this session, this particular GC session event may, perhaps, be remembered for the very courageous and stirring sermon given by the newly elected GC president to the 60,000-70,000 people who filled the Georgia Dome. His clarion call to “Go Forward, Not Backwards” will echo and re-echo in the church for years to come.

Let me share some brief reflections on this 59th session of the General Conference.

I. Why Attend GC Sessions?

GC sessions are presently conducted every five years. Among other things, General Conference sessions are occasions for the worldwide church to take stock of how it is doing, elect new leaders, and set an agenda for the future.

It is a privilege to attend GC sessions, either as a delegate or as an observer. Converging at GC sessions is like Muslims attending their Mecca. Though we don’t have any holy ground, GC sessions can be spiritual high points for the SDA Church. You get to meet old friends and make new ones. You get to hear the exciting reports of church growth in different parts of the world. You learn from the successes and failures of others. And you get to see different expressions of modest Christian dressing (or the lack thereof).

The fact is, when you live in your own little Adventist ghetto in whatever region of the church you live in, you think Adventism is only circumscribed to your narrow area. At GC sessions you get to see Adventism in all of its diversity. And you get humbled by your parochial view of things.

Another reason why GC sessions are important is that it is a time to gauge the temperature of the church theologically and spiritually. From the theological implications of booth displays to the tenor of worship services, from mission strategies to election processes, I gain insights into the church’s health.

And by evaluating the reasons given for its actions, I get a sense of how the church arrives at its theological decisions: Is it through opinion polls, referenda, political action, subjective feelings, pragmatism, or through a sound reflection on inspired writings?

What I mean is this: GC sessions, in my opinion, constitute one of the highest experiences for the Seventh-day Adventist Church worldwide. And it is worth the effort, time, and money, even the millions of dollars needed to make it happen. Yes, sitting through the GC business sessions is at times boring...
and frustrating. But it is worth all the investment by the church and its members.

Thus, I have attended every single one of the past six GC sessions, serving as a delegate in all but the most recent one.

II. My Interests at GC Sessions

Although several issues are discussed at GC sessions—Church Manual, constitution and bylaws, auditors’ report, etc.—the issues that tend to interest me the most are theological issues. I’m sure you will appreciate it because my training is in systematic theology—a fancy phrase for the study of doctrines. My specialty is in biblical authority and interpretation (hermeneutics), and the doctrine of the church (ecclesiology).

My interest in theological issues also has to do with my Ghanaian educational background and my previous training in engineering. This background encourages serious thinking and reflection on issues, instead of the annoyingly shallow “sound bite” pop-theology that is pervasive in our “feelings-based,” poll-driven society. So at GC sessions I try to comb through the agenda materials that are passed out to delegates (or are freely available on the website), with a keen interest on the theological issues recommended in Church Manual revisions. Then when the occasion lends itself I try to speak to the issues clearly, pointedly, and sometimes vigorously.

This year (2010 GC session), because I had the luxury of not being a delegate I was also able to attend a few seminars, as well as observe trends and worship practices in youth and prayer ministries—two major areas that are engaging my attention in recent times because of the inroads within our ranks of emergent philosophy and contemplative spirituality. I wanted to gauge the extent to which these practices are subtly being purveyed to well-meaning members—all in the name of church growth.

III. Growth of the Church

Before talking about some of the significant issues (at least to me) that came up at the session, let me begin by noting that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is alive and well. I always leave GC sessions with this feeling. This year was no exception. Seeing and hearing the reports of the commitment and sacrifice of Seventh-day Adventists around the world was very thrilling and inspirational.

The report from the GC Secretary was one of the best and most comprehensive I can remember. It highlights the exciting growth of the church and some unique challenges it faces. Church growth has grown to 3,000 baptisms a day, but is dwarfed by 371,000 babies being born each day on this planet.

Another observation that deserves mention is that the Adventist Church is truly an international church: it is a worldwide church. The Advent movement began in the United States and quickly spread to the industrialized countries of Europe and Australia. Today, however, about 93% of Adventism is outside the industrialized countries of North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand.

Did you know, for example, that in the South Pacific Division (Australia and the islands of the Pacific), some 90% of church membership there lives outside Australia? Even in Western Europe, a majority of the members are from the developing countries. On the continent of Africa alone, there are over 6 million Adventists. Then think of Inter-America (over 3 million), South America (over 2 million), Philippines (over 1 million), etc.

The point is, the Adventist movement is now international, with an overwhelming majority living outside the typical industrialized countries which gave birth to our overseas churches and which have over the years supported the overseas fields with finances, prayer, and personnel. While some may be a little afraid or uncomfortable when they see the growth of the church in developing countries (and hence their large delegate presence and right to speak to issues at GC sessions), all God-fearing Adventists will rejoice that the church is truly a worldwide movement.

I personally look forward to the day when experts from the developing countries will also be asked to share the reasons for their phenomenal success. Without doubt, these lopsided growths may be attributed to the gracious blessings of the Lord. But could it also be that our people in the developing countries are doing things that we, in the Western world, need to take note of?
In my opinion, many of the outreach and church plant strategies or methods often presented by specialists in the industrialized countries simply don’t work. At the very most, these gimmicks have only limited results. Worse still, we have managed to convince ourselves that the simple proclamation of the Word of God cannot work in the Western world, unless we jazz it up with some questionable gospel gimmicks—clowns, puppets, drama, rock music, café worship centers, and all the latest fads from Hollywood or megachurches.

My point right now is that, on the whole, I’m really delighted by the growth of the church worldwide. The future is bright and full of promise—especially if we can mobilize every baptized member as a true missionary. Compare the figure of 7,326 total official missionaries with some 60,000 missionaries the Mormon Church sends out every year. And that is a church that doesn’t even have the biblical truth we have!

I don’t think it takes a neurosurgeon to realize that we cannot fulfill our mission as a church if we rely only on official church entities. The successful stories of organizations like ASI and GYC show that grassroots, lay-led, and church-supporting organizations (such as 3ABN, Amazing Facts, Gospel Ministries International, etc.) are a tremendous asset, not a hindrance. I want to believe that the oversight that left these unmentioned in the division reports was a genuine mistake, and not borne from petty spiritual jealousy on the part of the organized work.

At the 2010 GC session, the church unveiled its strategic plan for 2010-2015, aptly summed up as: "Reach Up, Reach Out, Reach Across: Tell the World.” We are to “reach up” to God through Bible study, prayer, Adventist Bible study guides, and the Spirit of Prophecy, so as to experience revival and faithfulness. We are urged to “reach out” to others in missionary service and community responsibilities. And we’ve been challenged to “reach across” the barriers that threaten to divide us as a family, by endeavoring to disciple, nurture, and involve every individual in the life and mission of the church. If we’re to succeed in meeting these strategic objectives in the coming five years, we cannot afford to ignore, marginalize, or even fight against supporting organizations.

IV. Major Issues at the 2010 Atlanta GC Session

Arguably, the 2010 Atlanta GC session will be remembered by the stirring Seventh-day Adventist sermon delivered by the newly elected GC president—a clear, unambiguous message that re-asserts our unique identity and purpose for existence as God’s remnant church. However, some issues also stood out at this session. These have to do with doctrinal issues that were addressed in the course of revisions in the Church Manual.

The need for these changes and actions arises from the fact that, in recent times, a certain segment of our church has been pushing the church step by step to embrace unbiblical teachings and practices. We are told that the church must create a "big tent" for all views. As a consequence, there is confusion in certain quarters of the church about the actual position of the church and the biblical legitimacy of its position. Against this backdrop, I will cite the following significant actions that were taken:

1. Creation

Given the recent discussions in the church about the promotion of theistic evolution in some of our institutions, it came as no surprise that the world church re-affirmed its belief in the historicity of Genesis 1-11, a literal 6-day, 24-hour, contiguous creation. The delegates did so in two important actions—namely, (i) approving a 2004 “Affirmation of Creation Statement,” and (ii) recommending to the Church Manual committee to incorporate essential components of that statement into our fundamental belief #6.

In the deliberations on the floor and in their vote for these two actions delegates essentially rejected the new views on Creation, arguing that theistic evolution: (i) undermines the authority and reliability of Scripture, (ii) attacks the character of God, (iii) overturns key aspects of the doctrine of salvation, (iv) overturns the foundation for morality, and (v) seriously erodes distinctive doctrines of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
By recommending to the *Church Manual* Committee a rewording of our current fundamental belief #6 to incorporate the essential components of the affirmation of Creation statement, the delegates were seeking to bring a definitive closure to the claim by some that theistic evolution is an option for Seventh-day Adventists.

2. **Clarifying the Definition of Marriage & Homosexuality**

Another subject that came up for discussion was the proposal to clarify the church’s definition of marriage by adding the phrase “between one male and one female” to the existing statement in the *Church Manual* that said, “Marriage, thus instituted by God, is a monogamous, heterosexual relationship.”

According to the new proposal, that statement would now read: “Marriage, thus instituted by God, is a monogamous, heterosexual relationship *between one male and one female.*” This minor, but significant, addition did not pass easily. It generated a heated discussion that lasted about an hour and a half—with all kinds of motions, amendments, and amendments to amendments.

The first amendment came from a delegate from one European division, who not only removed the new addition, but also dropped the original “heterosexual relationship” words. This individual suggested the following wording: “Marriage is a monogamous, loving relationship between two mutually consenting adults.”

This amendment, worded to avoid further alienation of the gay and lesbian community, was greeted with obvious disapproval by an overwhelming majority of delegates. Some delegates were quite surprised that some Adventist delegates even entertained the thought of using this occasion to slip into our *Church Manual* homosexuality as a legitimate form of marriage—all in the name of inclusiveness and grace.

In the end, after a series of amendments and motions to get back to the original proposal, and after a heated discussion, the delegates voted the approval of the suggested recommendation that was initially brought to the floor—namely, “Marriage, thus instituted by God, is a monogamous, heterosexual relationship *between one male and one female.*” I believe the proposal was supported by some 99.9% of the delegates.

By this unanimous vote, the church reaffirmed its position against homosexuality, making explicit what we have always believed.

3. **Ordination of Deaconesses**

Although, in my opinion this was really a non-issue, because of the ongoing agitation by a vocal and influential segment of the church for the ordination of women as *elders* or *pastors*, the proposal to ordain women as *deaconesses* became a very contentious issue. Folks debated this proposal against the backdrop of the calculated, step-by-step efforts by proponents of women’s ordination.

Up until the 2010 GC session in Atlanta, the *Church Manual* did not mention the ordination of deaconesses. But in Atlanta, delegates were asked to vote on a recommendation to allow women deacons “to be ordained in regions that favor it.” Some felt that this recommendation “affirms women in ministry,” others saw it as another subtle attempt towards laying a foundation for ordaining women as pastors.

In the ensuing discussion, the delegates (a) voted an amendment to the original motion that removed the line that would have left ordination of women deacons to the discretion of each region; (b) approved the ordination of deaconesses; (c) subsequently (on a later day) recommended to the *Church Manual* committee to set up a commission to set forth the church’s theology of ordination.

Because I have written extensively on the questionable reinterpretations of the Bible and SDA history to justify the ordination of women as elders/pastors, prior to and shortly after the GC session discussion on the "ordination of deaconesses," some of my friends asked me about what I thought about this proposal.
I responded thus to them:

(i) There is nothing wrong with ordination of deaconesses as such. Ordination is simply the act of the church in choosing, appointing, and setting apart through the laying on of hands certain individuals to perform specific functions on behalf of the church. Rightly understood, both male and female, through an act of dedication (the laying on of hands), can be commissioned to perform certain specific functions.

(ii) Accordingly, both men and women can be ordained to be teachers, literature evangelists, medical missionaries, deacons, deaconesses, etc. The debate over women’s ordination is not whether women can or cannot be ordained in this sense. The Bible, confirmed by the Spirit of Prophecy, suggests that both men and women may be commissioned to do certain assigned tasks on behalf of the church. (For a detailed discussion on this, see my online article: http://www.womenministrytruth.com/resources/articles-and-documents/articletype/articleview/articleid/1125/clarifyingthe-key-issues-on-womens-ordination.aspx).

I find it ironic, though, that after over 150 years of practicing ordination in the church, we now realize a need to study our theology of ordination. One would have thought that those who have been pushing the new practice of ordaining/commissioning women as elders/pastors during the past two or three decades would have called for a serious study before embarking upon these recent practices in certain quarters of our church. These questionable practices have the potential of seriously undermining our belief in the Word of God as the ultimate test for all beliefs and practice, and eroding confidence in the Spirit of Prophecy to inform our decision.

I sincerely hope that the commission that will be set up will not be ideologically driven, as was the pro-ordination Andrews University scholars who published the controversial book Women in Ministry, a work that has been soundly refuted by other scholars in Prove All Things (for more on this, see my online article, titled "The Campaign for Women’s Ordination," available at: http://drpipim.org/womensordination-contemporaryissues-46/64-0-the-campaign-for-womensordination-part-2.html).

Whereas it is easy to legislate error, it takes true repentance and revival to get back onto the path of truth. Unconverted human nature would not surrender to truth. It would do anything possible, including twisting scriptures, the Spirit of Prophecy, and our history to justify its darling ideologies. "Truth is straight, plain, clear, and stands out boldly in its own defense; but it is not so with error. It is so winding and twisting that it needs a multitude of words to explain it in its crooked form" (Early Writings, 96, emphasis mine).

V. Other Notable Issues

Besides the above major issues—Creation, Marriage and Homosexuality, and the Ordination of Deaconesses—there were other issues that I find worthy of mention:

(i) Transferring the Membership of Former Sexual Offenders

Another heated discussion was a Church Manual change, requiring that there be a written notification of the past actions of a former sexual offender who is transferring his/her membership to another church.

The debate boiled down to a possibility of character defamation versus the risk of exposing children to a former child abuser. Theologically, the issue was whether the forgiveness of sins necessarily removes consequences, and if not, how the church should weigh these consequences in the light of restoration of a sinner, the laws of nations, and the safety of children. Should the church allow presumably repentant predators to attend church and church-related events? What about former murderers, liars, thieves, adulterers, etc.?

In the end, the delegates approved the Church Manual change that requires a church to notify another congregation of a transferring member who has a record of sexual misconduct with minors. The delegates also voted to include in several chapters a statement requiring background checks and certifications for all church employees and volunteers who work closely with minors.

(ii) Union of Churches

The delegates at the Atlanta GC session also approved for inclusion into the *Church Manual* a new level of church governance structure called "Union of Churches." This refers to a group of local congregations in specific geographical areas, which instead of being treated as local conferences or missions, are now to be treated as "Unions"—at least as far as representation at the GC level is concerned.

Whatever the presumed advantages of these "union of churches," in my opinion, this action may encourage regions where the church is not growing to have undue advantage in representation at General Conference levels (e.g., Executive Committees and GC sessions). I can imagine a scenario whereby a country or region with about 10,000 members would intentionally form a "union of churches," so that, instead of being treated as a local conference/mission, it would now be treated as a "union" and thereby be granted the same number of representatives as would be given another region which has a membership of say 200,000.

**(iii) Representation of Young Adults**

At the last business meeting of the GC session, delegates also voted unanimously an amendment to the General Conference Constitution and Bylaws that states that the GC Executive Committee’s membership (currently about 300 members) shall include "not less than 15 and not more than 20 members . . . from laity including young adults."

I believe this vote was long overdue. Coming from a region of the world (Africa) where between 70-80% of the church membership are young people, and currently working with public university students in the USA, I was struck by the conspicuous scarcity of young adults (i.e., youth under 30 years) as delegates at the GC session. It is my understanding that out of a total of more than 2,230 delegates, less than 45 young adult delegates were registered at the session.

I believe there are qualified young adults who can effectively engage in the business of the church. I can point to many young people from our ministry to secular university campuses, GYC youth, and many other committed and capable young people around the world. The church can do a lot more to involve them in every facet of the church’s life.

But I hasten to add that we must resist the egalitarian ideology that mistakenly believes that young people should be given "a piece of the pie" simply because they are young. GC sessions and Executive Committees are not for just any kind of young people. Because these are venues where we make important decisions about the church, we need people who are demonstrably committed to the church and who are knowledgeable about the church’s teachings. It is the Bible that makes spiritual maturity a necessary requirement for church leadership (1 Timothy 3:1-7; cf. Titus 1:5-9).

We must find a biblically better way to involve or mentor the youth to be spiritual leaders than thrusting them unready into positions of responsibility. The kinds of young people we need are those like our Adventist pioneers. I always remind young people that in 1844, James White was 23 years old. Ellen G. White was 17. Hymn writer Annie R. Smith was 16. J.N. Andrews was 15. What set these youthful pioneers apart is that they were converted and studious Bible students. As such God used them to launch a global movement.

I am all for bringing to GC sessions and Executive Committee meetings young people who are godly, Bible-believing, mission-driven, brilliant, and talented. We must bring converted young people who are solidly grounded in the Adventist faith, and who have demonstrated they are effective soul-winners. In some cases, if we want to make the youth aware of how the church operates, they can come as guests and observers. But I will strongly caution against entrusting important responsibilities to young people who are spiritually immature and whose loyalty to the message and mission of the church is questionable.

**VI. The President’s Inaugural Sermon**

Without doubt, the most important message coming out of the 2010 GC session was the inaugural sermon delivered by the newly elected GC president, Eld. Ted Wilson. It was a bold, clear, unequivocal, and refreshingly Adventist sermon. A fitting message that stands in marked contrast to the fuzzy, ecumenical, people-pleasing, and non-convicting messages that often ooze from some of our pulpits.
Judging from the reaction by many attendees—and the buzzing responses by those who listened to the message via the TV and the Internet—the sermon could very well be the defining characteristic of the Atlanta GC session. It was, perhaps, the clearest message any church leader can give to an Adventist audience.

Titled "Go Forward," the new GC president began by highlighting the urgency of our times and the ultimate destiny of the Advent movement. Employing the experience of ancient Israel at the Red Sea (Exodus 14), he called upon church members to follow the path marked by God, however dangerous it might seem. He summed up the thrust of his message by pointing to the words of E.G. White when she described the great lesson from Israel's crossing of the Red Sea:

> "Often the Christian life is beset by dangers, and duty seems hard to perform. The imagination pictures impending ruin before and bondage or death behind. Yet the voice of God speaks clearly, 'Go forward.' We should obey this command, even though our eyes cannot penetrate the darkness and we feel the cold waves about our feet. The obstacles that hinder our progress will never disappear before a halting, doubting spirit" (*Patriarchs & Prophets*, p. 290).

Speaking as a fellow pilgrim in our journey to heaven, he spoke pastorally: "So, brothers and sisters, look to the Almighty God who can take you through anything you will face in the future. Never lose your full confidence and trust in Him. Always obey His command to 'go forward.'" Even when Satan tempts us to step backwards towards Egypt, we must still "go forward." And borrowing the words of E. G. White, the GC president assured the members of the church family: "The path where God leads the way may lie through the desert or the sea, but it is a safe path" (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 290).

After applying the lessons of the Exodus 14 passage to the personal lives of church members, the new GC president turned his attention to the corporate life of the church. He used the metaphor of "going forward" to mean faithfulness to our distinctive message and mission, and "going backwards" as a symbol of betraying the trust through the adoption of unscriptural fads.

Accordingly, he challenged the attendees to "be vigilant to test all things according to the supreme authority of God’s Word and the counsel with which we have been blessed in the writings of Ellen G. White." He was neither fuzzy nor ambiguous about what fads he had in mind. He said:

> "Don’t reach out to movements or megachurch centers outside the Seventh-day Adventist Church which promise you spiritual success based on faulty theology. Stay away from non-biblical spiritual disciplines or methods of spiritual formation that are rooted in mysticism such as contemplative prayer, centering prayer, and the emerging church movement in which they are promoted."

Eld. Wilson also urged members to adopt biblically legitimate worship styles:

> "While we understand that worship services and cultures vary throughout the world, don’t go backwards into confusing pagan settings where music and worship become so focused on emotion and experience that you lose the central focus on the Word of God. All worship, however simple or complex, should do one thing and one thing only: lift up Christ and put down self. Worship methods that lift up performance and self should be replaced with a simple and sweet reflection of a Christ-centered, Biblical approach. To define it too closely is impossible but when you read in Scripture of the holiness of God’s presence the Holy Spirit will help you to know what is right and what is wrong."

In this respect, the president set a good example when, right at the beginning of his message, he tactfully requested that there be no applause during the course of his message. Here, at last, is a leader who is not afraid of going against a crowd. Tastefully discouraging applause in a big sports stadium required courage and conviction to go against what was popular.

Very perceptively, he also cautioned against another danger—namely, succumbing to "fanatical or loose theology that wrests God’s Word from the pillars of biblical truth and the landmark beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Don’t be swayed with every little whim of ‘new’ theology or complicated
time chart purporting to carefully explain unusual or obscure concepts that have little to do with our overall theology and mission."

He couldn’t have said it better in a few words. This is because Bible believing Adventists are in constant danger of attracting, if not succumbing to, all kinds of bizarre, fanatical, and sensational theology.

Turning his attention to a contemporary challenge, he echoed the concerns of many delegates about the promotion of theistic evolution. The new GC president stated:

"Don’t go backwards to misinterpret the first eleven chapters of Genesis or other areas of Scripture as allegorical or merely symbolic. . . . [T]he Seventh-day Adventist Church both teaches and believes in the biblical record of creation which took place recently; in six literal, consecutive, contiguous 24-hour days. . . . If God did not create this world in six literal days and then blessed the Sabbath day, why are we worshipping Him today on this seventh-day Sabbath as Seventh-day Adventists?"

He pleaded with us to "read the Bible, live the Bible, teach the Bible, and preach the Bible with all power from on high." Against the dangers of higher criticism (the so-called "Historical-Critical method" of interpretation) he employed the words of E.G. White:

"When men, in their finite judgment, find it necessary to go into an examination of Scriptures to define that which is inspired and that which is not, they have stepped before Jesus to show Him a better way than He has led us. . . . Let not a mind or hand be engaged in criticizing the Bible. . . . cling to your Bible, as it reads, and stop your criticisms in regard to its validity, and obey the Word, and not one of you will be lost" (1 Selected Messages, 17-18).

And he strongly reiterated the church's belief in the Spirit of Prophecy.

There were many other themes covered in his one-hour sermon. When it came time for Eld. Ted Wilson to conclude his message, he did so by inviting the almost 70,000 members of the congregation in the Georgia Dome to pray for revival and reformation:

"I invite you to accept Christ’s marvelous grace in your life, to renew your commitment to Him and this great Advent movement, to proclaim God’s grace, and to ask the Lord to help this church ‘go forward.’ . . . I invite you to remain standing and now turn to the person next to you or behind you and in heartfelt, humble prayer plead with the Lord for revival and reformation so the Holy Spirit can lead God’s remnant church as we ‘go forward’ proclaiming God’s grace and the three angels’ messages. Please pray together."

I believe I speak for many people when I say that the GC president’s message was the defining characteristic of the 2010 GC session in Atlanta, Georgia.

**VII. Conclusion: Going Forward or Backwards?**

While the overwhelming majority of the church greeted Eld. Wilson’s sermon with joy and hope, the reaction of those who for decades have been pushing the church away from its message and mission was predictably negative.

One writer on a particular "progressive" website described the message as a call to "Retrograde Adventism," a call "backwards" to the 1950s or 60s. We would do well, however, to go all the way back to the first century—some 2,000 years ago.

Another "progressive Adventist" friend of mine caught up with me in one of the hallways of the GC session and remarked that the sermon was "a declaration of war" (to which I quickly responded: "No, it is not a declaration of war; the war has been raging for decades. The only thing that has changed is that the church has found a courageous captain who is not afraid to publicly state what our message and mission are.").

The reaction of the critics are shrill voices of an influential minority who have largely repudiated our
distinctive Adventist identity and mission. Cooped up in their parochial orbit, they are totally out of touch with where the real Seventh-day Adventist Church is.

Our church leader’s sermon from the Georgia Dome has reassured me of the church’s future. No doubt, the enemy will do everything in his power to mute the message and messenger of this inaugural sermon. The coming years will witness some major challenges—new and old. The new GC president, and his team of leaders at every level of church administration, will need our prayers. They need biblical discernment, courage, and humility as they lead our church to "Reach Up, Reach Out, Reach Across" in telling the world of the soon return of Christ.

Regardless of what will happen in the coming years, let us take confidence in the fact that the cause of God will ultimately prevail. Armed with this assurance, let us heed the call from the Georgia Dome of Atlanta: “Go Forward, Not Backwards.” For, in the words of E. G. White, “The path where God leads the way may lie through the desert or the sea, but it is a safe path” (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 290).