Racial Unity—Where to Start?

How can Adventists of different ethnic groups work together more effectively? Can we really overcome the prejudices of the past? Read these perspectives on regional conferences and racial divisions in the Adventist Church and add your thoughts.
Local Healing for a Global Church: 4 Practical Steps Toward Racial Unity
How to start change in your church instead of waiting for it to happen from the top down
Separate Conferences and a Lesson from Rwanda
A genocide survivor offers a key to progress in North America
Skeletons from the Past
Why God's end-time church must work toward racial healing

"I grew up in the church, and I'm still here" might not sound so lame after you read this.

Unity and Divisions: 5 Lessons From Acts 15
With a pivotal GC session coming up, is there a more biblical way to handle our disagreements?

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Local Healing for a Global Church

Dwain Neilson Esmond

This article is part of The Compass Magazine’s series on regional conferences and race relations in the Adventist Church. Past articles include:

What of Our Future? Contemporary Perspectives on the Role of Regional Conferences
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Update (04/02/15): The North American Division responds to requests to eliminate racially divided conferences.

A few days ago our nation remembered a grim day in its history. On Sunday, March 7, thousands from across the nation gathered in Selma, Alabama, to commemorate a Sunday 50 years earlier, one that would become known as “Bloody Sunday.” The events of that fateful day when police attacked hundreds of peaceful activists marching across the Edmund Pettus Bridge have been immortalized in the film Selma, which opened across the nation on January 9.

While old grainy clips from the march that sparked the Voting Rights Act of 1965 reminded us of a past we would like to forget, something else caught the attention of many—the embrace shared by Peggy Wallace Kennedy and Representative John Lewis. The lives of these two became intertwined 50 years earlier when George Wallace, the segregationist governor of Alabama and father of Peggy Wallace, unleashed his police force on the Selma marchers. Lewis, a young peace activist at the time, suffered a fractured skull that day. Fifty years later, a daughter was seeking to heal the breach opened by her father—something she has been doing for several years.

Don’t Blink

That wonderful moment on the Edmund Pettus Bridge was short-lived, however. Almost simultaneously the long shadow of racism returned when a viral video posted to social media on the same day began heating up the Internet. It was a clip of several University of Oklahoma students, members of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity, chanting a racist song containing the n-word. The song—its lyrics too offensive to include here—was sung with the kind of youthful exuberance that only college kids can muster.

While the boorish bigotry of frat boys should not be used to paint all Caucasians with a single brush, the opposite is also true. It would also be a mistake to conclude that African-Americans lack the capacity for racism. I know that to be false. But here we are. Our nation seems destined to forever carry the baggage of racial tension until Jesus returns.

Sadly, the reality of racism is not just confined to the secular world. It can be argued that the two most segregated days in our country are Saturday and Sunday, when believers around the nation go to church. But not all faith groups are taking our national racial paralysis lying down. Some have embraced the call to racial understanding and reconciliation within their ranks and the wider community. (More on that below.)

Is such an effort even required of God’s end-time church? I believe so, but our efforts will fail unless we admit our “issues” and become part of the healing process. By this I speak not of racial reconciliation writ large in our context—the merger of state and regional conferences within the North American Division (NAD). I am pretty pessimistic about that possibility ever becoming reality, short of a miracle.
That said, I believe that the group most empowered to heal the racial divisions in our denomination and in society at large is the members of the local church. The Apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:11-13 that the Holy Spirit has equipped the saints (the church) “for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (verses 12-13, NASB, emphasis supplied). Surely that work includes racial healing and reconciliation.

4 Steps Toward Racial Unity

So, let’s say a local church felt moved to wade into the murky waters of racial understanding. What practical things could they do to make a positive difference among fellow believers and the community at large? I am glad you asked. Here are four things local leaders and churches can do to start the healing process.

1. **Preach More.** Local pastors must preach the Christ-centered message of love and reconciliation more often. Church members of every hue need a steady diet of what it means to love God and love people (Matthew 22:38-39). The first component of this message is the creation of the family of God and that family’s fall from grace (Genesis 1-3). That message reminds us that sin lies at the foundation of all our problems—including racial prejudice. Courageous, thoughtful, love-filled ministers must share the “be reconciled to God” message of 2 Corinthians 5:20. This is the grace springboard from which we are able to heed Jesus’ call to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:39). These Scriptures are often preached, but rarely in the light of race-related issues. We must exalt God’s standard of love, especially as it relates to issues of race. And while we’re at it, let’s preach these messages year-round—not just in February.

2. **Meet More.** Local churches of every color should come together more often. I, like many of you, was moved by how Seventh-day Adventist churches worldwide mobilized for the Great Controversy project. Some state and regional conferences worked closely together to share hundreds of thousands of books. But how about trying something much more challenging—say, sharing a monthly potluck meal together across racial lines. Never underestimate the power of a good potluck—or the destructive capacity of a bad one. I suspect arranging such a meet-up might be more difficult than organizing a citywide evangelistic effort.

Yet the more connected we are to people of diverse ethnicities, the quicker our stereotypes vanish. One 1999 study titled “An Examination of the Effects of Residential and Church Integration on Racial Attitudes of Whites” found that “whites who attend interracial churches exhibit less social distance toward African-Americans and have a lower tendency to stereotype blacks.”[1] I suspect the same would be true if the study were reversed. Cultural and social separation is fertile soil for bigotry. Local churches can offer safe, regular opportunities for members—and the community—to talk, connect, and grow. We must share the gospel, and our lives as well (1 Thessalonians 2:8).

3. **Teach More.** This one will require the help of competent cultural communicators, but it is worth the effort to find them. Local church leaders should organize mini-summits on race-related issues. While doing research for this article I came across a website for “The Gospel and Racial Reconciliation” Summit being held this week, March 26-27. This regular gathering is sponsored by the Southern Baptist Convention and builds on the denomination’s historic Resolution on Racial Reconciliation issued in 1995 on its 150th anniversary. I urge you to read the resolution here.

Why can’t local churches band together to try something like the aforementioned summit, albeit on a smaller scale?
Dr. Paul Brantley, vice president for strategic planning and assessment for the North American Division, would love to help with such a venture. More cross-pollination among believers is a core initiative of the NAD. Carolyn Forrest, associate secretary and director of human relations for the NAD, has spearheaded division-wide diversity conferences and training programs. Both of them gave permission for readers of this article to contact them for information and ideas.

Other leaders at the conference, union, and division levels may also offer support. But whether that support comes or not, local churches should create opportunities to develop culturally competent members who can be deployed to help heal our divides and those of the communities in which we live.

4. Reach More. Finally, I believe in the healing power of selfless evangelistic effort, especially when done in concert with brothers and sisters of every shade. It was while the lepers in Luke 17 were obeying Jesus’ command to “go” that they were healed (Luke 17:14). Could the same thing happen to us? With God’s help our church may yet celebrate the day when Jesus’ prayer for unity (John 17:21) moves from possibility to reality.

Don’t expect this transformation to be global; it will be local!

Separate Conferences and a Lesson from Rwanda

Valmy Karemera

This article is part of The Compass Magazine’s series on regional conferences and race relations in the Adventist Church. Past articles include “What of Our Future? Contemporary Perspectives on the Role of Regional Conferences,” “…Not As I Do,” and “Skeletons from the Past.”

In the space of 100 days, more than a million Tutsi and moderate Hutu died during the bloody Rwandan genocide of 1994. In the aftermath of such horrors, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Rwanda faced the daunting task of helping church members forgive and reconcile with the killers, some of whom were church leaders. Was the church going to elect separate conferences based on tribes (race)? Or was the church going to focus on Christ and His power to heal broken and wounded hearts?

Under the leadership of the late Pastor Amon Rugelinyange, the church embarked on emphasizing the primacy of the gospel as the only antidote to the evils of this world. The power of the gospel needed to be lived and illustrated; otherwise the church would have ceased to be relevant.

Slowly but surely, the church emerged from the ashes of the genocide. With a 7.07% growth rate and more than 600,000 church members as of 2013, the church in Rwanda is one of the fastest-growing unions in the Seventh-day Adventist Church today.

Consider the Alternative

Given what had just happened in Rwanda, consider the outcome if the church had decided to have different conferences along tribal lines. What message would the church be preaching to other Rwandans today? Would such a message be in line with Christ’s call for unity in John 17? Would it be in harmony with the Three Angels’ Messages to preach to “every nation and tribe and tongue and people” (Rev. 14:6)? Clearly, the alternative would NOT have been anything close to the mission of the church.

Revisiting State and Regional Conferences in North America

As race issues continue to dominate the headlines in the U.S., it is a reminder of the darker legacy that slavery left on the consciousness of this nation. The North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church can choose to continue to reflect and perpetuate the dark history of the past, or it can courageously emulate the lesson of Rwanda. Yes, there will be the need to ask forgiveness and seek reconciliation as individuals and institutions.

A Rwandan widow of the late Pastor Sefuku is powerful example of what Christ can do for us. Here is how the Adventist Review put her story:

Sister Sefuku’s home was invaded one night by a group of young people baying for blood. Her husband, a Seventh-day Adventist pastor, was murdered in front of her, and she and her daughter were left for dead after having been savagely assaulted with machetes. Fortunately, both she and her daughter survived the ordeal, although both their faces were deeply scarred. As life eventually took its course, Sister Sefuku felt increasingly compelled to minister to the thousands of people who now sit in prison convicted of murder. One day, after she made an appeal for repentance to a group of prisoners, a young man in the audience got up and said: “You don’t know me, but I am the one who murdered your husband on that fateful evening. I am now asking for your forgiveness.”
Our sister was deeply moved, and in the spirit of Christ she decided not only to forgive him, but to see to it that he got a new life. She went to the prison authorities to appeal to them to release the young man. She promised to help him be reintegrated into the community by taking him under her own roof and supporting him as best she could. Today, he is married man and a transformed individual.

To her neighbors and friends who questioned her sanity, Sister Sefuku answered: “I know what I am doing. Christ has forgiven me for my sins; how can I not do the same! This boy took the life of my husband; God now gave me the life of this boy to be as my own son.”

Ponder the power of this story. The incredible power of the gospel.

As the chorus of the beloved hymn goes,

\begin{verbatim}
It is no secret what God can do
What He’s done for others, He’ll do for you
With arms wide open, He’ll pardon you
It is no secret what God can do
\end{verbatim}

Yes, it is no secret that He can forgive our past sins and our present prejudices for the glory of His kingdom.

What else can the church do to bring about forgiveness and reconciliation and end the race-based conferences in the North America Division? Please post your thoughts below.
Skeletons from the Past

Daniel McGrath

This article is part of The Compass Magazine’s series on regional conferences and race relations in the Adventist Church. Past articles include “What of Our Future? Contemporary Perspectives on the Role of Regional Conferences” and “…Not As I Do.”

Seventh-day Adventism in visible origin is a white, Anglo church. We see this by looking at its founders and early leaders. However, the theological foundation upon which the church was built is anything but Anglo; truth by nature is culturally blind. As this truth spread across cultural boundaries, the diversity of its believers increased.

In response, the church set up different institutions to handle this diversity. Broadview Swedish Seminary was founded in 1909, Clinton German Seminary in 1910, and Danish-Norwegian Seminary in 1911.[1] The purpose of the seminaries was not to separate immigrants from American-born church members or to single out ethnic groups, but to accelerate the immigrants’ assimilation into English-speaking America. By the 1920s these institutions had served their purpose and were each closed or merged.[2] The result was an increase of ethnic diversity in the early, nonsegregated Seventh-day Adventist Church.

We can see today that the Adventist Church has taken the gospel commission to heart, because no other denomination, except for Jehovah’s Witnesses, can match Adventism’s degree of inclusion. The church can claim a presence in practically every country of the world. Jesus Himself envisioned a church that was multiracial. He gave us the great gospel commission of Matthew 28:19 to “teach all nations, baptizing them.” The result of fulfilling His commission is a church made up of all ethnicities.

With men and women of more cultures joining the incipient Adventist church, however, a new problem manifested itself—racism. Unfortunately, during the early years of Adventism, racism was not just a sociopolitical problem. It was also rooted in the hearts of church members. Divisions over color have proven to be one of the greatest obstacles this church has ever faced.

For example, in 1906 a group of black students from Oakwood College, a denominational school for blacks, was invited to a small Adventist church in Alabama to share a Sabbath program with the predominantly white congregation. The students arrived at the church and found a roped-off section where they were to sit. But the section couldn’t hold them all, so some found seats among the white members of the church. This mingling created a major problem for the deacons, who tried to usher the students out. When the students refused to leave the church, an elder pulled out a gun. The minister’s wife tearfully proclaimed that despite the church members’ love for the black students, “we just don’t want you to sit with us.”[3]

By 1944, the African-American Adventist population stood at nearly 18,000[4] but was still virtually unrepresented in the administration and institutions of the church. Around this time, Lucy Byard, an African-American Adventist from New York, became ill. The Washington Sanitarium refused to admit her because she was black, and the delay in treatment led to her unnecessary death. Adventist hospitals were not the only discriminatory institutions, however; many Adventist schools segregated blacks, and others barred black students completely.

Demands for integration in Adventist medical, educational, and administrative institutions were not met. Instead, the General Conference offered a conference structure exclusively for blacks.[5] As a result, nine regional conferences now exist around the United States.

Not Just an American Problem
The American Seventh-day Adventist Church is not alone in suffering the effects of racism. Adventists in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Croatia have struggled with strong feelings of prejudice and racial and national pride and have bought into the solution of segregated conferences and churches so people of one race or color do not worship with their brethren of another.

South Africa after 1994 ended its segregation policy that had thrived under apartheid and merged its unions, conferences, and churches. Still, the old attitudes crop up at times.

In 2009, a group of black Adventist students attending a secular, predominantly Afrikaans university in South Africa were asked by their white counterparts to help run an evangelistic literature store near the institution. However, the white organizers never allowed the two races to work together but gave the black students different working days and hours. When the black students invited the same white students to their outreach activities on campus, the white students declined. As one student commented, "It seems the legacy [of apartheid] far exceeds the love of Christ."[6] Now non-Adventists on the campus are noticing and asking questions about the Adventist Church's practice of segregation. Racism and segregation are impeding the Adventist ministry at the university.

Today, American society has largely recovered from, though not eradicated, the problems of inequality confronted in the Civil Rights era. But what about the church? Are we working toward racial integration? Or do we continue to faithfully, unquestioningly separate ourselves in matters of worship? Is racism still a problem demanding separate conferences, or are we just clinging to the skeletons of past generations' mistakes?

Yes, racism is a problem, but segregation has not solved it. Separate conferences and churches that segregate worshippers based on the color of their skin are counterproductive to the gospel. Separate conferences do not exist because of differences in musical tastes, preaching methods, or worship styles. They exist because of the inequality and injustice in which the church passively took part.

Today the issue is perpetuated not only by the racism and prejudice of unconverted hearts but also by the organizational structure set up after 1944. Separate conferences have provided blacks with pastoral and evangelistic vocational opportunities that for many years had not been available. In addition, separate conferences have given them new opportunities for training and experience in ministry, leadership, service, and church governance and have afforded them eligibility for elected offices and ex-officio representation on boards, councils, and committees.[7]

Regional conferences have also experienced tremendous success and growth since their inception and contributed unprecedented financial support to the world church. Some in the past have pointed to this as evidence of God's providential leading and as a reason to continue the current structure.[8]

But are these pragmatic reasons enough to justify a system built on the foundation of sin? Is it possible that the church could have seen even more success and growth had we not been disunified in the first place? Dr. David Williams asks poignantly,"Is it ever right to sacrifice the truth of the gospel for the expediency of efficient evangelism? If we win persons by distorting and compromising the gospel, what have we won them to? Christians must move beyond that which is expedient to that which is morally right. Racially oriented evangelism can produce racially insensitive and even racially prejudiced congregations."[9]

**Small Steps Toward Unity**

So how can we help address this issue and bring about change within Adventism? How can we achieve racial unity and inclusiveness?

Adventism has a history of inclusion dating back to the early 1900s when American immigrants first accepted the Three Angels' Messages and joined the church. Why should the church accept anything less than the Biblical ideal now? When Christ prayed in John 17, He asked God to unify His followers. The phrase that is repeated five times in
these verses is “that they may be one” (John 17:11, 21-23).[10]

Some churches have been involved in “unity Sabbaths,” during which black and white congregations join together for worship. Change will not occur overnight, but when churches participate in these special Sabbaths, they help to facilitate an environment for change to take place. Ask your pastor if your church can be involved in a “unity Sabbath.”

Some have suggested writing letters to our leadership, asking them to reevaluate segregation in the church. The sacrifice and commitment of our church leaders, combined with support from the laity, are the fundamental forces that will bring about true racial inclusion.

Most importantly, it is time for church members to earnestly begin praying for the church. There is still much pain and sensitivity over this issue, and many do not know exactly what steps to take to unite racially divided conferences. Only by the direction of the Holy Spirit can we ever expect to achieve true reconciliation within Adventism. Prayer is the most instrumental tool in accomplishing any goal.

Have you participated in a cross-cultural worship experience? What did you learn from it? Please comment below.

Prejudice is a contradiction to everything for which the gospel stands; this is why the church must revisit the issue of segregation and facilitate racial healing among members of the body of Christ. Only then can we see Christ’s prayer for unity answered to its full extent. “Unity is a convincing proof that God sent His Son into the world to save sinners” (18MR 190). True Christian unity will tell in a powerful way “that those who possess it are children of God” (ST Feb. 7, 1900).

[5] Ibid.
[8] See “Actions of the Regional Advisory Committee in Miami, April 7-9, 1969,” reproduced as Appendix B in We Have Tomorrow, 365-366; cf. “Do We Still Need Regional (Black) Conferences?”
[10] Verse 23 uses the wording “that they may be made perfect in one’ (NKJV).
This article is the first of several perspectives on regional conferences that The Compass Magazine plans to publish. Please see our introduction to the topic by Senior Editor Michael Younker.

On April 10, 1944, The General Conference Committee held its Spring Meeting in the convention room of the Hotel Stevens in Chicago, IL. Gathered along with the committee were the North American Division’s local conference presidents, union treasurers and auditors, college presidents, and “colored representatives who were members of a large committee appointed to study the question of our colored work.”

GC President Elder J.L. McElhany gave the devotional thought that day. He read several passages from Testimonies to the Church, Volume 8, written by E.G. White, on “The Power Promised.” Here are some of the passages that he read:

God does not ask us to do in our strength the work before us. He has provided divine assistance for all the emergencies to which our human resources are unequal. He gives the Holy Spirit to help in every strait, to strengthen our hope and assurance, to illuminate our minds and purify our hearts. . . .

“With great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus; and great grace was upon them.” Acts 4:33. Under their labors there were added to the church chosen men, who, receiving the word of life, consecrated their lives to the work of giving to others the hope that had filled their hearts with peace and joy. . . .

To us today, as verily as to the first disciples, the promise of the Spirit belongs. God will today endow men and women with power from above, as He endowed those who on the day of Pentecost heard the word of salvation. At this very hour His Spirit and His grace are for all who need them and will take Him at His word.

Notice that it was after the disciples had come into perfect unity, when they were no longer striving for the highest place, that the Spirit was poured out. They were of one accord. All differences had been put away. . . .

So it may be now. Let Christians put away all dissension, and give themselves to God for the saving of the lost. Let them ask in faith for the promised blessing, and it will come. The outpouring of the Spirit in the days of the apostles was “the former rain,” and glorious was the result. But the latter rain will be more abundant. . . .

The presence of the Spirit with God’s workers will give the presentation of the truth a power that not all the honor or glory of the world could give. (p. 19-22)*

Elder McElhany added a short statement before praying to open the meeting: “As we take up the work of this council," he said, “as we consider the matters that are to come before us, let us make the things of first importance first in our thinking and in our praying. May we be led and guided by the Spirit of God.”

As I finished reading these words, I was left with a mixture of emotions. I was moved to go back and read the Testimonies passage again, along with the biblical references behind its inspiration, which stirred up a longing within...
me for that latter rain. Then, like an audience member watching a movie based on a familiar true story, my heart sank. All the hope and inspiration that was stirred up within me after reading this powerful passage was sucked out of me when I reminded myself of the facts: this was the date that the General Conference decided to recommend that “colored conferences be organized.”

After the prayer in the spirit of unity was given and a preliminary matter was voted on, the second order of business that day, entitled “Colored Work in North America,” was dealt with. Here are several of the measures that the committee recommended and virtually unanimously approved:

1. “that a school be established in the North where advanced training can be given to our colored youth.”
2. that a commission be appointed to study ways to provide medical and nursing education for “our colored constituency in the North.”
3. “that the Southern Publishing Association secure a colored editor for the Message Magazine.” (Message Magazine was the only Adventist publication “geared towards colored people,” yet it had not up to that point employed an African-American editor.)
4. that a small publication be created for the “colored constituency” that was “somewhat comparable to the Union Conference papers in size and style” and would give them church news and promotional information.

Then, in the spirit of the church’s “soul-winning endeavors,” the following measure was recommended:

WHEREAS, The present development of the work among the colored people in North America has resulted, under the signal blessing of God, in the establishment of some 233 churches with some 17,000 members: and

WHEREAS, It appears that a different plan of organization for our colored membership would bring further great advance in soul-winning endeavors; therefore

WE RECOMMEND, That in unions where the colored constituency is considered by the union conference committee to be sufficiently large, and where the financial income and territory warrant, colored conferences be organized.

This measure also included the following:

- Colored conferences would be administered by colored officers/committees.
- Colored conferences would have the “same relation to their respective union as do the white conferences.”
- Another committee would figure out how soon before or after the 1944 Autumn Council it would be possible to implement colored conferences.
- “The 1930 plan of colored organization for the Southern States” would “be adopted for all territories in North America with sufficient members, but where the constituency is not sufficiently large to warrant the organization of colored conferences.”

This wasn’t the first and certainly wasn’t the last of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s “do as I say, not as I do” moments. There was glowing talk of unity in the Spirit and oneness among brethren who share this common faith. Ultimately, in response to this picture of unity, we chose division. In the face of oneness we chose none-ness. We talked the talk, but we didn’t . . . you can finish the saying yourself.

How did we get there? How did we miss the clear message of unity that was and is supposed to drive our church when it was staring us right in the face? The inconvenient truth is that, instead of doing the hard work of dealing with
the race problem in our church, we took the easy way out under the guise of a “great advance in soul-winning endeavors.” We appeared to be so laser-focused on saving/cleansing the souls of the world whom we were supposedly trying to reach (emphasis on appeared) that we neglected to seek the cleansing of our own souls and the cleaning of our own house.

In order to understand where, by God’s grace, we need to go as a church, it is critical for us to analyze and understand where we were, where we are, and how and why we got here.

1889-1929

Most point to statements made by Elder Charles M. Kinney at the Southern Conference Campground in 1889 (where he became the first black ordained minister in the Adventist Church) as the first to broach the idea of colored (later regional) conferences. The camp meeting did not attract its usual white crowd to the Nashville, TN, campground in response to the mere presence of black members, and many in attendance began to grapple with this issue of race for the first time.

Elder Kinney made his comments in response to questions by Robert M. Kilgore, leader of the Adventist work in the South. While Elder Kinney did eventually propose the idea of separate conferences, he first made this appeal for unity:

> It is probable that my ideas may be a little different from what has been expressed by some…. In the first place, a separation of the colored people from the white people is a great sacrifice upon our part: we lose the blessing of learning the truth…. I refer to the separation in the general meeting; that is, for them [colored people] to have a different camp meeting. It would be a great sacrifice upon the part of my people to miss the information that these general meetings would give them; and another thing, it seems to me that a separation in the general meetings would have a tendency to destroy the unity of the Third Angel’s Message. Now, then this question to me is one of great embarrassment and humiliation, not only to me, but to my people also.

Elder Kinney then proposed four thoughts to be considered while finding a solution:

1. “The course that shall be taken shall be pleasing to God;
2. “A position will be taken that will not compromise the denomination;
3. “The position that is to be taken will be to the best interest of the cause; and
4. “A position will be taken that will commend itself to the good judgment of the colored people, that they may not be driven from the truth by our position on this question.”

After providing those considerations, he gave the following first solution to the matter:

> I am glad to state first that the Third Angel’s message has the power in it to eliminate or remove this race prejudice upon the part of those who get hold of the truth. Second, that the Third Angel’s message is to go to all nations of people; that it cannot take hold of them if there is some obstacle in the way, and that the truth of the Third Angel’s message will enable us to remove that obstacle. The colored-line question is an obstacle…. The very presence of the colored people in church relations and in our general meetings is an obstacle, is a barrier that hinders the progress of the Third Angel’s message from reaching many of the white people.
That last sentence foreshadowed every meaningful action taken on the topic after it was made. Church leadership developed a line of thinking that said it was too hard to do the work of coming together in unity. Not even the power of the Holy Spirit and the motivation of the Third Angel’s Message could overcome the reality that worshipping together would hinder the church’s ability to reach White people, and that was too high a price to pay.

The rest of Kinney’s remarks included the various ways that those in the “colored work” would try to not interfere with those laboring in the white conferences, due in large part to the fact that there were not any meaningful voices screaming for unity from the “other side.” Toward the end of his remarks he said:

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\text{In view of the outside feeling on the race question, and the hindrance it makes in accomplishing the work desired among the whites, the attendance of the colored brethren at the general meetings should not be encouraged, yet not positively forbidden. I would say in this connection that in my judgment a separate meeting for the colored people to be held in connection with the general meetings, or a clear-cut distinction, by having them occupy the back seats would not meet with as much favor from my people as a total separation. I am willing, however, to abide by whatever the General Conference may recommend in the matter, and advise my people to do the same. Christian feeling between the two races [should be] zealously inculcated everywhere, so that the cause of separation may not be because of the existence of prejudice within, but because of those on the outside whom you hope to reach.}
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In 1890 the Adventist Church began operating under the policy proposed to the General Conference by Kilgore, in which he said that the work in the South for the white population could not succeed unless Adventists set up separate congregations for whites and blacks. Previous attempts to ratify such policies had always been shot down because they were seen to be out of line with Scripture. But the General Conference voted to adopt this policy, stating that it was the most expedient thing to do.

Nothing substantive was done on the issue of separate conferences until 1929, when the General Conference appointed a commission of 16 constituents (11 white, 5 black) to discuss the issue of what should be done with the colored members of the Adventist Church in North America. Much had been said by African-American ministers and lay members in the lead-up to this moment. The majority of what they said focused on how the leadership of the GC and North American Division (NAD) could help facilitate better relations between black and white membership inside as well as outside of the church.

J.K. Humphrey, an African-American minister serving a prominent role in New York, was one of the constituents invited to serve on the commission. After the meeting concluded, Humphrey stated that the white members of the commission met separately and asked the black members of the commission to rubber-stamp their decision that establishing black conferences was not appropriate. Black leaders were told not to bring up the subject again.

Sadly, after years of resisting the urgings of former black Adventist ministers, Humphrey decided to leave the Seventh-day Adventist Church due to the lack of movement on this as well as other issues. This sad event brought back memories of Kinney’s 1889 plea that the church’s position on this issue would not drive colored people from the truth.

1943

In 1943 Lucy Byard, an African-American lay member of the Adventist Church, died of pneumonia as a result of being refused treatment at the Washington Sanitarium (Adventist hospital). In response to this and other inhumane and heinous racial practices of the church, a group of Washington, D.C., laypersons formed “the National Association for the Advancement of Worldwide Work Among Seventh-Day Adventists" geared toward addressing
the racial wrongs in the church and making a call for equality.

In 1944, these laypersons penned a protest document entitled: “Shall the Four Freedoms Function among Seventh-Day Adventists?” In outlining the purposes and goals for their document, they stated that it was written in hopes that colored people would be estimated as:

- “brethren”;
- individuals just as “capable of attaining eternal life as the white man;
- “travelers to the same heaven to sit down at the same table as the whites”;
- “worshipers of the same God” as the whites;
- people with talent, ability, quick perception, bright minds, and reasoning power.

They felt that the duty of the white Adventists in helping to achieve reconciliation was:

- “to repair as far as in their power past injury done to the colored people”;
- “to show ‘exact and impartial’ justice to the Negro race”;
- “to increase the force of colored workers”;
- “to throw their influence against the customs and practices of the world.”

The document then listed several of the injustices being conducted by the church, including the following:

- Colored people were not generally admitted to Adventist institutions/sanitariums as patients/students/nurses. (In contrast, they mentioned that an Adventist “colored girl” was pursuing nursing at Bellevue in New York City; Catholic University was accepting colored students; City College of New York, Hunter College, the University of Chicago, Harvard, Northwestern, DePaul, and Toledo all employed African-American professors; Johns Hopkins Hospital and Sandy Spring Hospital were accepting African-American patients; etc.)
- There was no “standard satisfactory creditable academy” for colored youth.
- Emmanuel Missionary College (later my alma mater Andrews University) assigned colored students to sit in the rear during worship at chapel and made them wait for their meals until there was a “quota” of colored students to fill a table.
- Among other differences in treatment, the Secretary of the Colored Department at the GC did not have enough administrative authority (in other words, none). In addition, the Secretary was segregated for his meals. (At this time in Washington, D.C., the document noted, white and colored people ate together daily without friction in the cafeterias of the Library of Congress, Union Station, the National Art Gallery, etc.)

The document listed several different organizational solutions for these problems (none of which included racially segregated conferences), but what stood out most to me were the spiritual solutions that they offered to solve this difficult problem:

> There [should] be no intimidation of our colored clergymen and workers supported by the conferences when they attempt to better the conditions of their brethren.... Campaigns for colored work [should] be given the prominence and dignity that are given to all other phases of the work.

We have discussed what came next. The Spring Council of 1944 led to the formation of colored conferences. Many of the first presidents of those colored conferences were told that they would come crawling back. In the face of that adversity, these conferences all pressed on, persevered, and have grown into an essential part of not just the North
American Division but the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a whole.

In spite of our lack of unity as a church, the Lord has used us across the world in mighty ways. But the painful reality is that the call to unity made by Kinney in 1889 and the D.C. laypeople in 1944 has remained unanswered.

As we all know, once the years start going by, the history starts getting revised and the story begins to change. Why is it important for us to discuss this? Is reconciliation even necessary?

Today

The conclusion of this article will not amount to another criticism of the recent sermon preached by Pastor Dwight Nelson. His January 17, 2015, sermon at Pioneer Memorial Church, as well as the related petition, has revived the never-ending debate on state and regional conferences. Some felt that the sermon and petition were merely a call to shut down regional conferences so that they can “come back home.” Others felt that there is really no need to tackle this issue since everyone seems to be doing fine (not sure what definition of fine is being used).

The issue at hand is much deeper and more significant than the perceived shortcomings or overstatements found in one sermon. While I did not agree with everything that Pastor Nelson said, I know for a fact that his heart is in the right place. He showed a lot of courage by saying what he said, where he said it (I lived in Berrien Springs from 1998 to 2013, so I do not say that lightly). All in all, we miss the potential in this moment if our discussion and thought stops there.

The solution that we need to this problem was presented in 1889 by Kinney, in 1944 by the D.C. lay members and even during the decision on April 10, 1944, to racially segregate the NAD: Jesus! The Spirit of God infiltrating our entire being is the only remedy to this problem. What we need to remember is that the Spirit of God will guide us into all truth (John 16:13). If we are not interested in dealing with this issue with honesty and full transparency, the Spirit of God will not come. He will have no part in half measures, half surrenders, half truths, and shaky commitment. God wants our all, not just in our doctrine, evangelism, and diets, but also in our love—His love.

There is freedom in truth. April 10 of this year will mark 71 years since we made an official acknowledgment of our division, but in truth the division among racial lines in our church predated that acknowledgement. If we don’t do the work—the hard, sobering work—of reconciliation to each other in Christ, we will gradually fade into irrelevance. We can make a symbolic move to join together under the umbrella of our choosing, but if we do not commit to and accomplish the real work, the only difference that will exist will be ceremonial. The youth in our church will grow tired of looking past the glaring holes and contradictions in our message as compared to who we are as people. They will either find Christ elsewhere or reject Him altogether.

The GC formally instituted the division because they did not want to do the work necessary to find a way to worship as a unified body while still reaching all of the different demographics of people in our world. Since we know now, and have always known, that Christ is the only solution, why don’t we take Him up on this offer: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32, ESV).

Everyone is so worried about how a unified church structure will look and the logistics of how things should happen. We need to focus on allowing Christ to heal and reconcile us, and then trust in His Spirit to lead us into the future that He has in store for the Seventh-day Adventist mission.

And He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, He has now reconciled in His body of flesh by His death, in order to present you holy and blameless
and above reproach before Him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister." (Colossians 1:18-23, ESV)

The words of Paul to the Colossians are calling out to us for such a time as this. We are united not just by our day of worship, our doctrines, and our customs, but primarily by our Christ. He will reconcile us to Himself and make peace among us by the blood of His cross. If we come together and consider what Christ has done for all of us as members of His body, we will start to see how much more complete His body looks when it works and functions together.

I call out to each and every member of this body: Let God examine your heart. Let Him reveal the dark places to you, and allow Him to replace them with His light. Before we can “continue in the faith” as Paul declares, we “who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds” must be “reconciled in His body of flesh by His death” so that we may be presented “holy and blameless and above reproach before Him.” After this we will become “stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that [we] heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven”!

Do you believe that racial reconciliation is needed in the Adventist Church? What can you personally do to facilitate it? Leave a comment below with your thoughts.

God’s word has made things clear. We will not be able to proclaim the Third Angel’s Message to “all creation under heaven” until we submit ourselves to His reconciliation. It has not happened yet, and it will not happen until we are serious about being obedient to His Word.

We have a beautiful message and picture of Christ that this world needs to hear and see. If what we say does not align with what we do, we are no better than the members of the GC committees that have gone before us—people from whom we strive to distance ourselves while standing silently on the foundation that they built. If we decide it is best to continue in that way, we’d better hope that foundation isn’t sinking sand.

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* Emphasis in all quotations is supplied by the author.
What of Our Future? Contemporary Perspectives on the Role of Regional Conferences

Michael Younker

In heaven, we the saints from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue will all stand together before the throne and before the Lamb, Jesus Christ (Rev 7:9; 5:9). We will be one kingdom of priests to our God.

Before that glorious day, however, we are still sojourners upon this earth, where borders and boundaries divide us into many different tongues, nations, and cultures. Perhaps the most difficult feature to understand that divides us, particularly as a family of common faith, is our so-called race, or ethnicity. Manifested through merely a part of our external features, our ethnic features are not in themselves a culture. In the United States and other places throughout history, one’s inherited phenotype has tragically been used to define the relative value of a person. The institution of slavery marks the cruelty with which one human can treat another.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church was birthed amid one of the largest civil wars in our world’s history, in large part owing directly to the issue of slavery and its relationship to one’s phenotype. As history would have it, the United States would shortly thereafter become the most powerful nation on earth, as well as the center from which the Three Angels’ Messages would emanate throughout the world.

In the ensuing years, even though the institution of slavery was officially abolished, it pleased the adversary of the saints to continue inspiring new ways to justify a permanent division among humankind on the basis of phenotype, or color. The theory of evolution represents one of these myriad ways, telling us that we don’t even have a recent common origin in an historical Adam and Eve and that we are not inflicted with a fallen nature, inclined toward sin and animosity toward one another.

For another 100 years after the Civil War, full legal equality was not yet granted or recognized throughout our country. Unfortunately, our Adventist church structure, developed in the aftermath of the American Civil War, would reflect the ethnic tensions that helped lead to the war in the first place. Neither most whites nor many blacks felt fully comfortable worshiping with each other in some parts of our country. Furthermore, and most importantly, irrespective of any given individual’s feelings, worshiping together became problematic when we attempted to reach out publicly to people in communities that held the strongest feelings. It was deemed necessary at the time, for pragmatic reasons, to organize separate churches to better reach out to a population that still harbored strong prejudices. Thus the regional conferences were born, and, in the eyes of most, did aid the early Adventist cause.

This week’s article here on Compass is the first of a sample of contemporary perspectives on the role and utility of the regional conferences. They touch on the history of how they came to be, as well as the purpose of ecclesiastical church structures. They also point toward some of the pragmatic issues that are involved in the question: “Should we step forward and unite now?”

There are different perspectives on the regional conferences, and whether they remain or not. Some possible futures have been charted for the Adventist Church in the United States in response to this question. Most of these futures indicate that unifying would be wise for the non-regional conferences in the North American Division (NAD)! At present, it appears that the membership of the regional conferences will overtake the “white” conferences within the next 50 years.

A recent town hall hosted by the Allegheny East Conference brought together a variety of viewpoints on this topic. Without detailing the issues here, suffice it to say that not all African Americans wish to abandon the regional
conferences, for a variety of pragmatic reasons. For example, whether or not American mainstream culture (or any given subculture) is more bigoted now than in past decades and centuries, the mere fact that the past 15 years have seen a rise in ethnic separation in our cities grants one pause. Whites and blacks were beginning to integrate, but that progress has slowed and even reversed itself. Thus, ethnic segregation is still a very real reality that evangelistic efforts must take into account.

Notwithstanding the pragmatic and structural elements standing in the way of unifying, it appears clear that the younger generation of Adventists and Americans (who are ever more diverse, both ethnically and culturally) see a problem with staying separate and have a strong desire to integrate. Some consider this a central issue demonstrating before the world the power of the gospel. Others do not. The question, then, is what of our future? It is the hope that these articles can spur forward conversation on this issue.
News Commentary: Adventists and Vaccines

Rachel Cabose

Vaccines have been in the news more than usual, thanks in part to the recent Disneyland measles outbreak, in which one person with the highly contagious disease started a chain that has sickened 142 people so far.

The incident has brought widely divergent viewpoints over vaccination into the spotlight. Though the vast majority of Americans vaccinate their children, a significant number (9 percent) think vaccines are not safe for healthy children, while another 7 percent aren’t sure. Passions run high on both sides: perspectives range from “Vaccines are deadly” to “People who refuse to vaccinate their children should be sued for endangering the lives of others.”

The Seventh-day Adventist Church waded into these turbulent waters with an official statement on immunization, which says that the church “encourage[s] responsible immunization/vaccination” but respects individual choices. The statement makes clear that church members who choose not to be immunized do so based on their personal beliefs, not church teaching.

The reaction from my Adventist friends on Facebook reflected a split on the issue that may be even more pronounced than in society at large. Some people applauded it: “So proud of my church,” wrote one. Others described the statement as “disappointing.” Still others thought the church should not have gotten involved.

In one particularly vigorous Facebook discussion on the topic, a person with concerns about vaccines quoted Ellen White’s statement that even “a particle” of mercury retains its poisonous effect on the body (Spiritual Gifts, vol. 4a, p. 139). (Concerns about mercury in vaccines are generally based on outdated information—in recent years mercury-containing preservatives have been removed from all vaccines except some flu shots.) Another person argued the opposite view by pointing out that White herself chose to be vaccinated against smallpox. (She also encouraged her helpers to do the same, as recalled by one of her assistants in Selected Messages, book 2, p. 303).

Unvaccinated Adventists

Some statistics indicate that opposition to vaccines may be more prevalent among Adventists than in the general population. In my home state, Michigan, parents can exempt their children from required vaccines for religious or personal beliefs as well as for medical reasons. Michigan ranks fourth in the nation for the percentage of kindergarteners with at least one nonmedical vaccine waiver: 5.4 percent, compared to less than 1 percent in several states.

But some Adventist schools (as well as other religious schools) in Michigan have a much higher waiver rate. At one Adventist academy 60 percent of kindergarteners have vaccine waivers. At another the number is 24 percent.

It is these pockets of unvaccinated people who are most likely to experience a disease outbreak, according to Cassandra McNulty, MPH, a church member who’s worked with childhood and adolescent vaccine programs for the states of Michigan and Tennessee.

Could an Adventist school be ripe for a tragedy like that of Faith Tabernacle Congregation in Philadelphia, a church that did not believe in vaccines or medical care? In a measles outbreak in 1991, six children from the church-run school died.

Why Vaccine Concerns Resonate with Adventists

Adventists’ reasons for not vaccinating mirror those found outside the church. Many are troubled by certain
ingredients in vaccines, worry about the small chance that serious reactions to the shots could cause disability or death, and suspect that greed has influenced vaccine manufacturers to present their products as safer than they really are. Younger Americans who have minimal experience with vaccine-prevented diseases are less likely to see these illnesses as a serious threat and may view vaccines as unnecessary.

The belief that we should use natural remedies rather than medical interventions (including vaccines) to prevent and treat disease is not unique to Adventists, but it’s a natural fit for some members given the church’s emphasis on a healthy lifestyle.

“If you are following God’s plan of eating healthy and getting proper nutrients, most diseases aren’t going to give you a problem,” said one Adventist parent I know whose children are unvaccinated.

McNulty affirms the value of healthy habits but disagrees with the conclusion that vaccines are unnecessary. “In this sinful and dying world, we have diseases that are so dangerous that no amount of healthy diet and hygiene will prevent them completely,” she said. “In simple terms, that's one of the reasons why vaccines were created.”

Adventists’ strong belief in freedom of choice and our opposition to government coercion in matters of religion reinforce another theme expressed by many people who choose not to vaccinate. The idea that no one should be forced to vaccinate was key to several of the Adventist Facebook posters who expressed reservations about the church’s statement on vaccines.

“When we hand over the reins of medical decisions to our government, we are in very dangerous water. There is no end to where that can go, and [it] absolutely affects religious liberties,” wrote one person.

I wonder if these individuals would use the same principle to oppose laws that require seatbelts and motorcycle helmets, prohibit drunk driving, and make certain drugs illegal. All these laws are meant to prevent people from harming themselves as well as protect others from the effects of their risky behaviors. But Adventists, like many other Americans, disagree over the extent to which government should regulate such behaviors.

The Adventist Health Message and Vaccines

Perhaps the split over vaccination reflects a broader ambivalence among Adventists about the best approach to health and wellness. On the one hand, the church has invested heavily in medical education and institutions. We run 175 hospitals and sanitariums and six medical schools worldwide. We've spent decades thrilling to the stories of missionary doctors, from Eric B. Hare and Leo and Jessie Halliwell to James Appel and Olen Netteburg. It's easier to find an Adventist college in North America offering a premed or nursing degree than a major in English or even elementary education.

At the same time, vegetarian cooking schools, wellness centers, and other lifestyle-based health programs form a key part of our outreach. Ellen White's emphasis on following God's laws of health and using natural remedies (as contrasted with the dangerous drugs of her day) informs that approach. The call to care for our bodies is affirmed in our fundamental beliefs. Our health message is a core part of our identity, even if we sometimes disagree on exactly what that message should be.

“"It is better to know how to keep well than how to cure disease" (Medical Ministry, p. 221).

Unless we take the approach that it is wrong to use any medication, anesthetic, etc., immunizations seem to me an odd target for Adventists' opposition. Of all the weapons in the arsenal of modern medicine, vaccines align most closely with Adventism’s preventive medicine mindset. Instead of waiting until people’s unhealthy habits make them sick and then dosing them with pills to cover up their symptoms, vaccines work with our bodies’ God-given defense
systems to stop diseases before they start.

On the issue of vaccines as well as in many other areas, Adventists may need to give more thought to the roles of lifestyle practices, medical treatments, and God’s healing power in our personal and corporate efforts to prevent and treat disease. Can all three complement each other? What is the appropriate use of scientific knowledge in relation to biblical revelation and the inspired writings of Ellen White? These are challenging subjects, but the time is ripe for such a discussion.

[Photo: child with chickenpox, from Wikimedia Commons]
The Most Boring Testimony

Joe Reeves

As a teenager I felt uneasy that many of our prominent Adventist evangelists were converts to the faith. Doug Batchelor, Louis Torres, John Bradshaw, and David Asscherick grew up anything but Christian. As young adults they were deep in the world when God dramatically arrested their attention. Their colorful conversion stories are told and retold to the glory of God.

None can be surprised that the ones who tasted the darkness of the world often become the most articulate and passionate advocates of light. Those who suffered the bankruptcy of this world know the value of Christ. They preach the beauty of Christ who once groveled in the pit of Satan.

But it was not their story that made me uneasy; it was my own. I grew up in the church loving God. And, well … I am still here, and I still love God. It's not that my story is entirely different. I also battle the flesh and struggle through severe hardships. My heart has often drifted, and my flesh has often failed. But my story begins on the other side of the spectrum from theirs. I was raised knowing God and have always desired to be with Him.

Sometimes I felt jealous of the converts’ testimonies. Their stories of transformation bolster my faith and courage. They love much because they were forgiven much (see Luke 7:47).

But somewhere along my journey I decided that I did not have to plunge myself into the world before realizing how much I need Jesus. I need Jesus as much as anybody, and I already knew it.

One Who Stayed

Most of the friends I grew up with in the church decided otherwise. They left the church, and when they left the church, they left Jesus. It still breaks my heart.

As friend after friend made an exodus away from the church and away from God, I began reexamining the reasons for my faith. Studying prophecy convinced me that our generation has stronger reasons to believe in God than ever before. Studying Christ at creation, at the cross, in the heavenly sanctuary now, and in the clouds of heaven soon persuaded me that our generation has more compelling reasons to love God than ever before. I felt that if ever there was a time to love and obey God, it is now.

Without God’s direction I might have become an evangelist who always told the stories of others. I do not know when I first realized that God also needed my story told. It may have been in California when that teen coming from the gangs and drugs of the city told me he would not become a Christian unless he first met some young people raised in the church who stayed in the church. I had to agree with his sentiments when he asked, “What would that say about the church if everybody growing up in the church left?”

Thankfully, I was not the only young man he met who grew up in the church and still loved God. After deleting dozens of dark songs that he himself had composed, my new friend decided to be baptized as a born-again Seventh-day Adventist Christian. I could see like never before why God needed my story too.

Keeping the Faith

My story is about keeping the faith more than it is about obtaining the faith. But, after all, whole books of the New Testament (e.g., 2 Peter and Jude) are dedicated to the warning that many obtain the faith while only a few keep the faith. If keeping the faith is a theme God inspired the prophets to write about, maybe God is also calling you to testify...
about keeping the faith.

It comes as a commission from God. Go out and share your testimony, no matter where you come from. If you believe in God, tell people why. If you love God, show them why. Tell about those difficult moments in your life that God brought you through. Tell them about the fork in the road where you decided to risk something for God. Tell them why you chose God and why they should too.

No matter how boring you think your testimony is, go testify to the world about why you are keeping the faith in this faithless age. God needs your story of faith today while the world is spiraling into unprecedented times of doubt and uncertainty.

Jesus posed the question, “When the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8, NKJV). As that moment draws closer, I pray He finds faith in my heart and yours. And I pray that our faith is solidified by the confession of our own testimony. "Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32, 33, NKJV).
Today the Seventh-day Adventist Church is facing issue after issue. In light of Acts 15, what lessons can the church learn for handling controversial issues?

Acts 15 comes at the heels of Paul and Barnabas’s first missionary journey. During this first journey, these men went from Antioch to Cyprus. From there they traveled to the lands of Galatia: Perga, Antioch in Pisidia, Lystra, Derbe, Iconium, and Attalia (Acts 13-14). Upon returning to Antioch, “they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27, NIV).

Amidst this exciting church report, Acts 15 opens with this line: “Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.’ This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them” (Acts 15:1, 2, NIV). Seeing this divide, the church of Antioch appointed Paul, Barnabas, and other church leaders to go to Jerusalem to lay the matter before the entire church.

As church members awaited the council’s decision, Ellen G. White aptly notes, “All controversy was to cease until a final decision should be given in the general council” (Acts of the Apostles, 190).

Regarding the way this controversy was handled during the council, we can observe the following:

1. **The council consisted of delegates from different parts of the church** (Acts 15:2). There should be an even representation from all parts of the church at the church’s major meetings, such as General Conference sessions, annual councils, etc.

2. **The issue was vigorously “debated,” and each side was allowed to present its case** (vv. 5-7, NASB). Instead of settling an issue without debating it, it is far better to debate an issue even if there is no consensus at the end!

3. **Peter gave the testimony of his experience with Cornelius**—see Acts 10 (vv. 7-11). God had prepared Peter for Jerusalem Council! Men of experience in the work of God led the way in seeking to resolve the issue. Failure to speak up is in itself taking a side. The pen of inspiration warns, “If God abhors one sin above another, of which His people are guilty, it is doing nothing in case of an emergency. Indifference and neutrality in a religious crisis is regarded of God as grievous crime and equal to the very worst type of hostility against God” (Review and Herald, Sept. 30, 1873).

4. **James, the presiding elder, appealed to the authority of Scripture—“as it is written”** (vv. 13-21). This point cannot be emphasized enough. The Bible and the Bible alone should be the rule and guide in matters of moral decisions and salvation. Never should we appeal to other sources of authority when deciding ecclesiastical matters.

5. **Finally, the “whole church” agreed to the wisdom of the council and the authority of Scripture** (v. 22). It is significant to note that the “whole church” decided. It was not the local church, conference, union, or division going solo against the collective wisdom of the “whole church.” When such decisions are made by the body of Christ, reflecting “the judgment of the brethren assembled from all parts of the field,” as Ellen G. White writes elsewhere, “private independence and private judgment must not be stubbornly maintained, but surrendered. Never should a laborer regard as a virtue the persistent maintenance of his position of independence, contrary to the decision of the general body…. God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority” (Testimonies for the Church, 9:260, 261).
The church at study is the church at its best. From the observations above, we can gather invaluable lessons on how to deal with divisive issues facing the church today. The inspired record of Acts 15 is a perpetual reminder that issues will always arise, even after Pentecost. However, the Holy Spirit is ever ready to guide the “whole church” on how to resolve controversial issues. He is able lead the church into all truth (John 16:13).

[graphic: The Jerusalem Council, from Free Bible Images]