ADVENTIST LEADERSHIP: Our First Value is God
By Bertil Wiklander

How do we give to God the central place in the church organisation we lead and are responsible for? When I say “God”, I think of the triune God that we believe is the true God and revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We may answer in various ways. My answer is that we may give God the central place in the Church by being converted to God, by being found by him and living in him, by making God our first value in life and work.

The international Seventh-day Adventist Church has launched an emphasis on “Revival and Reformation”. Revival and reformation will positively impact our lives and actions as leaders in the Church, if it makes God our first value.

Remember the deeply biblical definition of “Church” that guided the Adventist pioneers! Ellen White wrote in The Acts of the Apostles (p. 9):

“The church is God’s appointed agency for the salvation of men. It was organized for service, and its mission is to carry the gospel to the world…[I]t is the repository of the riches of the grace of Christ; and through the church will eventually be made manifest…the final and full display of the love of God.”

Revival and reformation in the Church means change—not change of our purpose or who we are, but change in our faithfulness to God. It means growth in our faithfulness in (a) bringing his salvation to men, in (b) our ministry/service to other people, in (c) carrying the gospel to the world, in (d) receiving and keeping the riches of the grace of Christ within our church fellowship, and in (e) manifesting the love of God to the world.

How can we grow in faithfulness to God? Does it not imply a change of us, the leaders of the Church? Does it not mean spiritual change that comes from being more closely related to God? Ellen White wrote in 1902, shortly after the whole General Conference had been reorganised and both the union conferences and the church departments had been introduced:

“A revival and a reformation must take place under the ministration of the Holy Spirit. Revival and reformation are two different things. Revival signifies a renewal of spiritual life, a quickening of the powers of mind and heart, a resurrection from the spiritual death. Reformation signifies a reorganisation, a change in ideas and theories, habits and practices. Reformation will not bring forth the good fruit of righteousness unless it is connected with the revival of the Spirit. Revival and reformation are to do their appointed work, and in doing this work they must blend.” (Review and Herald, February 25, 1902)

Revival of dead and powerless spirituality results in a reformation of how we lead the Church. It changes our mind and behaviour. Do we need it? Yes, we do—not because the General Conference has voted to say so, but because Jesus Christ says so.

Peter said in his second epistle that “the divine power [of Jesus our Lord] has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him” (2 Peter 1:3).

Jesus Christ began his ministry by calling spiritually dead people to change by the power of God. He could have used the terms “revival and reformation”, because that was what he meant, but he used a verb, he said metanoiete, which can be translated “repent”, or, “change your mind”, “change your way of looking at life”, “be converted”, “turn around”:

“…‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!’…” (Mark 1:15)

The kingdom of God is near! Repent and believe the good news! What “good news”? That the kingdom of God is at hand, even upon us! It is now possible to relate to God in a new way! And Jesus’ disciples continued this message. Peter proclaimed it after the resurrection in Jerusalem’s temple:

“Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you— even Jesus.” (Acts 3:19-20)

Repentance means turning to God and opening the heart to the coming of God’s kingdom. It results in an immediate act of God, the “wiping out of our sins”, and in (a) the coming of times of refreshing from the Lord, and
Finding God, or, rather letting God find us, is our first work. Why? Because we are hiding from God and are spiritually dead, but revival means to stop hiding from Him.

How do we hide from Him? In numerous ways! And I will let Weatherhead help us out here. He lists several doors that we keep shut, stopping Him from finding us.

See what you recognise here and include it in your daily prayer. As a church leader, I know that hard work, stressful work, disappointing work, tends to keep me at a distance from God without whom I cannot live. But even more than that, it is only by a divine revival of our spiritual life that we can bring it to pastors, members, teachers, students, and, above all, to people in the world for whom we are dying and for whose salvation we exist as a church. How easily we forget that we cannot give to others what we don’t have!

One of Weatherhead’s points is that we hide from God because we refuse to repent, often because we are not clear on what repentance really means:

(a) Repentance is not remorse, although it may contain remorse. But remorse has no power in it to set us on the right road. It is a mental torture leading to a new way of looking at life that inspires us and changes us.

(b) Repentance is not merely self-reproach. If that is what your repentance looks like, you’d better know that it is a subtle form of self-pity with no power of change in it.

(c) Repentance is not fear of consequences. This may result in sleepless nights over what our friends might say if they really knew what we were like. This fear may make a temporary difference in our way of living, but it does not change life’s direction.

(d) Repentance is not the mere sense of sin. Our conscience may say “That is right” or “That is wrong”, leading to a sense of being sinful, but this has little power to change the current of our lives. We just continue as before.

(e) Repentance is not to be measured by feeling. Deep feeling may play a part in true repentance, but you can have true repentance without deep emotion and deep emotion without true repentance. Again and again we respond emotionally to various influences and experiences, but we do not repent, i.e. we do not change our way of looking at life.

Then, what is repentance? It is first of all changing our way of looking at life. It is steering under a new star and bringing the whole life into subjection. It is not only giving up this sin and that. It is a new, positive change of direction which affects the whole life, the use of our time, our money, our leisure, our talents, the way we do trivial things and the way we react to other people. It is to think again and in new ways.
Thus, repentance, which is so often thought of as an experience full of tears, is primarily marked by a sense of deep joy. Repentance should be manifested by a joy in which, Jesus tells us, the very angels of heaven share. Finding God is our conversion to him:

- We feel that a hand is suddenly put upon our life.
- We are halted and turned round and sent forth in a new direction, where the purpose and glory of God instead of self-interest are the greater motives.
- We feel that the truest end of life is being caught up into the will and serving him in our daily work.

At such a time, there is a tremendous sense of inner serenity, revitalising energy and a deep sense of well-being which quite often brings to the body a new sense of health. But he who truly finds God is not content with this. He is seeking and finding God in everything, and life can never be the same again. Nor does he ever end his seeking, for always there is more and more to find.

If we want more faithfulness to God and his mission in our work, let us pray that God will find us and, while we pray, let us open the closed doors that we have shut for him. Stop hiding from God! Open up and go out and meet him! And his kingdom will come, first into your heart, and then into your world, and then into others’ world, and then into the whole world. And when God decides it’s time, Jesus Christ will come and bring us to God in eternity.

As the Christmas season draws near and we may find time off from work in the company of family and friends, may we say like those who prayed in Bible times: “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you” (Psalm 73:25). May this be a time when we focus on God in our life and daily work, so that we can share him with others based on a true and genuine communion with him. And let us, then, begin the new year with a new commitment to our first value, our God, his will and his mission.

“Let us therefore kneel before him and turn our hearts towards him.”

It is not easy to do this, as we are all facing the tests and trials of life. But it is possible if we have faith and trust in God. The theme of the book is that to be born-again, one must have a change of heart and a change of mind. This is the message of the book “True Revival: The Church’s Greatest Need” by Ellen G. White.

Sections of Ellen White’s writings have been collected here under ten headings: Calls for a Revival, Conversions—Fake or Real, How to Be a Born-Again Christian, God Has Rules Too, The Balance between Faith and Works, Saved Only “in Christ”, Beware the Counterfeits, It’s Still a Fight, Safeguarding the New Experience, and Special Appeals in Public Ministry. It was prepared by the White Estate as a companion book to Steps to Christ and combines the booklet A New Life (originally published as Revival and Beyond) with chapters on revival and reformation taken from Selected Messages, book 1 (pages 12-152).

The theme is welcome and readers will be built up and encouraged in their faith. However, this type of collection of statements made in numerous different times and situations always runs the risk of obscuring the particular case at hand in a specific historical situation. It would have been helpful if the editors had inserted some comments and explanations on the context of each statement.

What Ellen White has to say about spiritual revival is of great value. She corrects any flaws that may be found in the current “popularisation” of revival and reformation in our church. For example, in the chapter on “How to Be a Born-Again Christian” (pp. 29-37), she underlines that salvation is by God’s grace and by faith and trust in his goodness: “No one can be justified by any works of his own”. She then goes on to correct misunderstandings of revival: “Repentance is thought to be a work the sinner must do for himself in order that he may come to Christ” and some have erroneously thought that “the sinner must procure for himself a fitness in order to obtain the blessing of God’s grace”. Against this, she emphasises with force that “the very first step to Christ is taken through the drawing of the Spirit of God; as man responds to this drawing, he advances toward Christ in order that he may repent”. She dismisses that human effort has anything to do with revival: “No man of himself can repent, and make himself worthy of the blessing of justification”. And her final point is that “repentance is no less the gift of God than are pardon and justification, and it cannot be experienced except as it is given to the soul by Christ.” In other words, when it comes to revival, Ellen White is thoroughly theocentric. This means that, as we embrace the emphasis on revival and reformation, we as leaders have a responsibility to call the church to a humility before God that replaces any human hypocrisy or erroneous notion that the church, or even church leaders, are “doing revival and reformation”. This is all God’s work. Let us therefore kneel before him and turn our hearts towards him.

With revival comes reformation. Ellen White says in the same chapter that salvation embraced by a sincere heart will lead to transformation by the work of the Holy Spirit. She underlines that “God works in the heart [the fruits of faith], and man surrenders his will to God, and cooperates with God, he works out in the life what God works in by the Holy Spirit, and there is harmony between the purpose of the heart and the practice of the life”. This is how the life of the believer becomes a walk in the footsteps of Jesus, like that of a disciple, who develops and grows into the likeness of the Master. This work cannot be done, unless Christ “is with us all days until the end of the age”.

As a daily devotional book, True Revival will be a blessing to many. It may also raise a desire for more. A good follow-up would be The Acts of the Apostles which defines the church and demonstrates how the first Christians lived out their faith in a society not very different in some ways from ours—filled with paganism, moral depravity and hostility to the gospel. Ellen White concludes this lengthier book with a wonderful ideal for Adventist leadership which I have transformed into bullet points (p. 600):

“Christ has given to the church a sacred charge:

- Every member should be a channel through which God can communicate to the world the treasurers of His grace, the unsearchable riches of Christ.
- There is nothing that the Saviour desires so much as agents who will represent to the world His Spirit and His character.
- There is nothing that the world needs so much as the manifestation through humanity of the Saviour’s love.
- All heaven is waiting for men and women through whom God can reveal the power of Christianity.”

As we come to the end of year 2010, looking to a new year and thus being aware of the passing of time, I leave you, the readers of LDN, this vision of what the church is and what we as leaders need to do. May God bless you!
CLOSE TO THE HEART OF GOD

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. James 4,8.

When Samuel first heard God’s voice, he was “in the tabernacle of the Lord where the ark of God was” (1 Samuel 3,3). That was a good place to be, because that location was as close to the presence of God as a person could be in those days—unless, of course, he were the high priest who entered the Holy of Holies once a year.

Close to God is where every leader belongs. That doesn’t mean you have to be in a place of formal worship; it just means you need to have an attitude of worship wherever you are. It’s a posture of the heart.

That’s a lesson I learned while in college and then took into the ministry. When I was attending Circleville Bible College, I used to go out to a deserted house after my classes and spent time with God every afternoon. It became my special place I visit to listen to God.

If you want to become the kind of person that others listen to, then get better acquainted with God. Connect with Him on a consistent basis, and you will greatly increase the likelihood that you will connect with others.

Dear LDN Readers!

Esti and I are privileged to serve you through LDN. We want to thank you for your interest in LDN and many encouraging words shared with us in the past year. Now, as 2010 comes to an end, we wish you all a blessed seasonal break, a merry Christmas, and a blessed, good new year! As leaders in the Church we long to see good fruit of our efforts and experience growth both personally and in the organisations we lead. May the new year be filled with all these things for all of us by the grace of God! May He add His special blessing to all that we are and do!

Esti and Bertil

Dear Young Scholars, Colleagues and Board

I made an attempt on this, my last day as Principal, to drop by your offices or gathering places to express a personal farewell. Although I was blessed to speak with some of you, there were many I missed and so I am sending this note.

Several years ago the Los Angeles times reported on a Chinese asylum-seeker to the US. He and the others who had risked the journey in an un-seaworthy vessel were captured and held in a Los Angeles jail until such time as the government could determine how most fairly to dispense justice.

As the time of their confinement lengthened from days into months and then stretched into years, most of the asylum-seekers despaired, a few ended their own lives. But there was one among the group whose response differed dramatically from the rest. He gathered cardboard from inside toilet rolls which he used to make art objects including a most amazing bald eagle, the national symbol for what he believed would be his new homeland.

His craftsmanship captured the imagination of the guards, one of whom informed the director of the local art museum. The museum curator, in turn, contacted the border agency requesting to sponsor this one asylum-seeker, gaining his release.

This story made a profound impact on me at the time and does so each time I recall the incident. It challenges us to remain hopeful in all situations, to put to best use those seemingly meaningless moments and to believe in miracles. This is my heartfelt prayer for each one of you.

With sincerest regards
Jane

(Cont’d from page 3:)

Letter from Dr Jane Sabes

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Esti and Bertil

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