

An Adventist Response

TO "THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS
AND THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT"

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RAOUL DEDEREN

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I find Professor Cosmas Rubencamp's attempt to understand the ecclesiological self-understanding of Seventh-day Adventism and its ecumenical relationships with other Christian churches very unusual. His is a genuine effort to get "inside" the concerns of Seventh-day Adventists. Naturally a Roman Catholic will not fully succeed in such an attempt, any more than an Adventist can fully succeed in giving a comprehensive picture of Catholicism "from the inside." But some attempts come closer than others, and Professor Rubencamp handled this difficult task with admirable judgment and honesty. His is the most accurate and objective statement on Seventh-day Adventist self-understanding and ecumenical theology I have ever seen from a writer not of our faith.

Two things stand out in this Catholic reassessment of Seventh-day Adventism: (a) its genuine willingness to acknowledge that Seventh-day Adventists are not just another strange sect holding fantastic theories and unscriptural doctrines, but are truly Christians in respect to the great fundamentals of theology; (b) the evidence it provides of an increasing recognition in some theological circles that the concern of the founding fathers of Adventism was a genuine (even if "misguided") attempt to recover the rightful prophetic heritage of Christendom. Naturally, the way in which early Adventists went about denouncing the "Roman apostasy" seems mis-

guided to a Roman Catholic such as Professor Rubencamp, and to stem from "a vast ignorance of Catholic theology." But for him to have been able to bring the discussion to this stage is to have overcome what seemed to be an unbridgeable chasm. A new day has assuredly dawned when a Roman Catholic theologian can recognize that Seventh-day Adventism has a justifiable reason for existing as a part of the Christian Church.

In my opinion Professor Rubencamp would have come even closer to understanding the stance of Seventh-day Adventism vis-a-vis the ecumenical movement if he had grasped fully that Seventh-day Adventists understand themselves, preeminently, as a people of prophecy. They recognize that God has led in the revivals and reformations of the past. They also believe that God prophetically ordained that in the last days there would arise a religious movement that would warn the world about the imminence of earth's transcendent event — the second coming of Christ — and seek to prepare men for the day of God by turning them to paths of full conformity to the teachings of the Bible.

Adventists believe that the prophecy of Revelation 14:6-12 began to be fulfilled in the rise of the Advent movement of the 1840s.

Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and tongue and people; and he said with a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the fountains of water."

Another angel, a second, followed, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of her impure passion." And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If any one worships the beast and its image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also shall drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever; and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name."

Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.

This passage of the Apocalypse announces a prophetic movement that would carry a prophetic message to the whole world. Adventists like to describe it as a special message for a special time, indeed the last message that will ever come from God, for John describes it as culminating in the coming of the Lord. It is a message which proclaims the Gospel of the love of God in Christ, the unavoidable necessity of obedience to the revealed will of God, and declares both the certainty and the imminence of final judgment.

Adventists make this identification of themselves with this passage of the Apocalypse in a spirit of humility, recognizing the tremendous implications of their interpretation. Nevertheless they say it unqualifiedly and ardently, believing that the message they preach is the true measure of the significance of their movement.

Prophecy, here, is not merely the inspired depiction of the great controversy between good and evil. It is fundamentally the portrayal of the redemptive activity of God centered around and demonstrated in the first and second advents of Jesus Christ. Throughout their history, Seventh-day Adventists have been occupied with proclaiming this distinctive message which, in its highest sense, is the "everlasting gospel" (verse 6). Yet although they believe that Revelation 14:6-12 in a special sense points to the experience and work of their church, they do not believe that they alone constitute the children of God. Professor Rubencamp is fair and correct when he reports that Adventists hold that God has a multitude of earnest, sincere followers in all Christian communions and even beyond the walls of Christianity.

Part of this message is the declaration of the mighty angel: "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great," followed by the warning, "Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues." By setting forth the view that "Babylon" refers to the Roman Catholic church, the early Adventists were continuing what Protestantism had taught since Reformation times. Adventists continue to make this identification to the present day. The fact that "Babylon" has been made to refer not only to the Roman Catholic church but also to the great body of Protestant Christendom is no evidence, as Professor Rubencamp suggests, that for Adventists the Babylon question has remained unresolved. The fact is that at the peak of the second advent awakening in the early 1840s there occurred an increasing ecclesiastical opposition to the emphasis on an imminent second advent among the larger Protestant bodies, particularly the Methodists and the Congregationalists of New England. It was specifically in response to this cold reaction to the doctrine of a literal coming of Christ or to its spiritualization that Adventists left their respective churches. Babylon, therefore, with her "daughters" involved all Christendom. Adventists today still believe the phrase is rightly interpreted in this manner.

Adventist objections to the churches they describe as "Babylon" are concerned not directly with people as individuals, but with structures, ordered systems of social relationships, the institutions which embody such relationships, and the attitudes which result from these structured relationships. It is correct that in condemning such social structures Adventists condemn the

deliberate work of men. But they do not find it necessary to apportion blame or to condemn individuals. Specific examples of wrong attitudes and actions must be cited to illustrate what is being denounced, but the responsibility of individual persons is left as an affair between them and God.

This is the way in which an Adventist looks at the Christian world. This is the way he thinks. It may not be convincing to a Catholic — or to a Protestant — who will use different categories and different methodologies, but one is not likely to object to Professor Rubencamp's remark that, on the basis of their own principles of interpretation, Adventists have been consistent when they have refused to participate in the ecumenical movement.

Seventh-day Adventists heartily agree with the leaders of the ecumenical movement that the endless divisions in Christendom are a tragedy. Although they do not believe that the problem of unity is the central issue facing Christianity, they do believe that by their divisions Christians impede the progress of the Kingdom of God. They profess that a movement resulting in the union of all Christian churches has been foretold as one of the "signs of the times." But at the same time they do not know what particular part today's ecumenical movement will play in the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, and therefore in the closing events of earth's history. A few, now and then, have succumbed to the temptation to claim more wisdom than they really possess. They have offered dogmatic forecast as to how and when the World Council of Churches, for instance, or the leaders of the Roman Catholic church are going to fill in the details of prophecy. Confessing to a lack of the gift of prophecy, most of us don't think it wrong to hold that the ecumenical movement as we know it today *might* so evolve in the days ahead as to fit the descriptions found in the thirteenth and seventeenth chapters of the Apocalypse.

As mentioned earlier, Adventists agree that it is laudable to seek to remove the divisions that separate Christian churches. They doubt, however, the wisdom of the methods followed by the ecumenical movement in its quest to secure it. They firmly believe that true unity is possible only in terms of Bible truth. When, for instance, the National Council of Churches was founded in 1950, Adventists refrained from uniting with it because they felt that membership would impair their autonomy. They regarded the Council as being under the influence of theological liberals who magnify the implications of the gospel to the disparagement of the gospel itself. There also are developments in the ecumenical movement, in its organizations and programs, which have given anxiety to Adventists on the ground that the central task of evangelism was being obscured or distorted by pre-

occupations with social and political affairs. The preoccupations of ecumenism lack the splendor and awe of that conception of human destiny which is inseparable from the eschatological hope on which Adventists have set their eyes.

Separatism is alleged to be a wrong-headed, wrong-hearted sin against humility, unity, and charity. But I think that there are conditions under which separatism is neither schism or heresy. The officials of the ecumenical movement have tried to make clear that they do not demand a union based on diluted doctrine and the acceptance of the lowest common denominator. Yet owing to circumstances not under their control, ordinary people are often confused to believe that this is their demand. The World Council of Churches has explicitly repudiated the suggestion that a church would have to surrender its claim to uniqueness in order to join the Council, but striking statements made by some renowned ecumenical representatives can — and have — set up mental associations between “ecumenism” and “theological latitudinarianism.” I believe that Adventists would not be asked, upon joining the Council, to surrender any doctrine they hold, but I also believe that if they joined and walked along the path toward actual unity, they would ultimately find themselves having to give up distinctive beliefs for the sake of unity.

Doctrinal matters are of the highest importance for us who believe the advent message to be from God. It is precisely in the area of doctrine that from the beginning we have been most definitely at variance with other Christian churches. The doctrine of the sanctuary, the return of Christians to seventh-day sabbath observance, and sensitivity to Christ’s second coming are only three evidences of our theological distinctiveness. With such wide divergence from the great body of Christendom, coupled with a deep conviction that our belief on these matters is in harmony with Scripture, how could we possibly come into any kind of genuine and lasting unity with other churches? In such circumstances membership could easily become an occasion for mutual embarrassment.

Perhaps as important in our decision not to identify ourselves with the ecumenical movement are the limitations involved in comity agreements on mission fields. Since their inception the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council have taken as one of their aims a lessening of the scandal caused by competing missionary activities in nonchristian lands. They have attempted to achieve this goal largely through comity agreements which have divided territories among the missionary agencies. Seventh-day Adventists on the other hand, with their conviction that they

have been called to transmit a special message to the entire world, consider it impossible to restrict their witness to any limited area. At the same time the Adventist official "Statement of Relationship to Other [Missionary] Societies" adopted in 1926, has interested more than a few members of the World Council of Churches because of its close resemblance to the provisions concerning proselytism put forward at the New Delhi Assembly in 1961.

The attitude of the Seventh-day Adventist church toward the ecumenical movement is based, in my best judgment, upon the charity of true wisdom. Its stance cannot be dismissed (as some have thought) as a haughty aloofness. Rather, it has been guided by principles, sometimes unknown, more often misunderstood. I entirely agree with Professor Rubencamp's observation that this position of the Adventist church "is based on a conviction springing from its attempt to be faithful to its witness-responsibility to the churches and to the world." The very logic of our belief demands that we seek to persuade men to accept the message we preach and to join the advent movement, and help it accomplish its worldwide task. How could we, with any sincerity or enthusiasm, join hands with the ecumenical movement? We think it would be hypocrisy for us to do so.

After all that I have just said, it now remains to be emphasized that it is with no small regret that Adventists find it impossible, as an organization, to be more closely associated with others who profess the name of Jesus Christ. We have been happy to accept individual invitations to meet with groups of ecumenical leaders and there represent the Seventh-day Adventist point of view. Further, although we are not members of the National Council of Churches, we hold consultative membership in certain Council committees that are mainly concerned with evangelism. Such memberships permit us to cooperate in certain areas of activity where it has been thought the Seventh-day Adventist church could make a useful contribution to the Council, and at the same time obtain information and contacts that would assist us in our world work.

Before concluding I wish to make it clear that our decision to remain out of the ecumenical movement is not to be explained on the grounds offered by certain Christian groups who have repeatedly charged that the ecumenical movement is Socialistic, even Communistic, in its trends and goals. Our failure to join is not because we think that the Protestant leaders of the National and World Councils are agents of the evil one, in league with Rome. We need never question the sincerity of others' motives in order to prove the sincerity of our own. We believe that these men are sincere, while at

the same time we hold that sincerity on our part prevents us from joining with them in their ecumenical endeavors.

The ecumenical movement has brought a clearer perception that the unity which Christ willed for his Church is a recognizable unity. It has also made it necessary for every denomination to reevaluate its historical position and its reason for existence. By bringing members of widely different churches together the ecumenical movement has driven many Christians to seek a deeper understanding of the distinctive positions of their own churches. Paradoxically — but quite understandably — the growth of the ecumenical consciousness has led to a widespread revival of denominational awareness. This conversation within the Christian Church, accompanied as it has been by some conflicts, has made many Seventh-day Adventists reflect on the power and significance of their mission and discover their own distinctive witness anew. It has greatly added to their conviction of truth and to their confidence in their mission.

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At the same time, churchmen of all nationalities and communions have embarked on the serious business of attempting to know one another's minds, of entering with deeper knowledge and sympathy into traditions and usages other than their own. As a result it is no longer a sign of being a "bad" Roman Catholic to be informed about Seventh-day Adventism, nor vice versa. It is, on the contrary, a very necessary part of being a responsible Christian in the the world of today. Professor Rubencamp is correct when he concludes that, in this context of ongoing dialogue, "the real problem for immediate attention is the overcoming of the barrier of widespread misunderstanding of why Adventists feel that they have a reason for existing." He himself has gone a long way toward that recognition. Perhaps the invitation I received from the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* to write an Adventist response to Professor Rubencamp's article is another indication that the gulf separating the Roman Catholic understanding of Adventism and the Adventists' own understanding of themselves is narrowing.