

The World Council of Churches and Seventh-day Adventists

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An interview in which Eugene Carson Blake, the father of modern ecumenicism, talks about the World Council of Churches and its relationship to certain areas of interest to Seventh-day Adventists.

When I went to work as a secretary to the associate pastor of the Pasadena Presbyterian Church in 1971, I learned that this was the church where Eugene Carson Blake, World Council of Churches leader, had been a pastor for eleven years. Many members remembered him with great affection. The church was proud when Dr. Blake became one of the first Christian leaders to take a stand for racial justice in the United States. On December 4, 1960, in Grace Cathedral (Episcopal) in San Francisco, Dr. Blake gave the sermon that contained his famous proposal for Christian unity and earned for him the name "the father of modern ecumenicism." In 1966 he became general secretary of the World Council of Churches in Geneva. He retired from this position in 1972.

I talked with Dr. Blake in my office at the Pasadena church. He was a large, broadshouldered man with an easy smile, and I soon relaxed. I explained to him that my questions would be limited to those of particular interest to Seventh-day Adventists, and our interview proceeded.

Are you aware that Adventists have been talking with the World Council of Churches?

Yes, I have known Mr. Beach for a long time, and I was involved in the planning of the first talks.¹ We have had some important discussions in

which we got acquainted and discussed the theological points of ecumenism.

Have you had any contacts with Adventists outside this?

Yes, but I have forgotten many names. An Adventist doctor took good care of me in Addis Ababa when I became ill there about two years ago. He was a fine doctor and Christian witness. I have seen Adventists in various places.

I am sure you have been asked this question many times. What are the goals of the WCC? Is it to be a superchurch?

No. That is the “organizational” question. What we are really saying is that there must be a *visible community of Christians* — which requires some form of organization of that community. Some people are worried about centralization, uniformity, and other negative aspects of organization. But the point is that no church taking itself seriously accepts the idea that it is merely a religious club. Each church feels that it is a part of the Church of Jesus Christ. In the past, some churches have taken the position that there aren’t any other real Christians. But generally speaking, very few do that any more. They recognize that we all belong to Jesus Christ — rather than Jesus Christ belonging to any particular church.

In the past there has been a distortion of the division between churches, particularly with regard to evangelism. People outside our separated churches look at us and say, “But you are not a community in Jesus Christ; you are a group of competing churches.” Unity will not solve all the problems of Christianity, and I would like to emphasize that we do not propose love at the expense of truth. Rather, the ecumenical movement really consists of people who believe that the various churches need each other in order to fully understand God and Jesus Christ. It is mutual enrichment rather than compromise.

What is the relationship of the World Council of Churches to governments? Would they use governments?

This varies from place to place. Because we are a *world* council, we are close to many of the activities of the United Nations — not so much its political activities as its work in education, with refugees, and in similar areas. We would cooperate with government institutions rather than be a structural — or coercive — part of government. The major point of the whole Christian Church is that now we see something Adventists have always seen — that service in the name of Christ and for humanity, rather than the

domination of people in the name of Christ is what is important. Certainly the WCC would not use governmental power to control or dominate.

Your stand on aid to schools, tax exemption for church businesses, and prayer in public schools has been strongly based on church-state separation, hasn't it?

On the whole it has been, yes. I think that Protestants ought to begin to discuss the difficult problem faced by the Roman Catholic church and other churches that support parochial education. I don't know any solution to the problem that is in harmony with separation of church and state, but we should take the problem seriously. That is one topic I hope I can spend my retirement time on.

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In a recent article you mentioned that you thought President Nixon had compromised some of these separation of church and state concepts to buy certain religious votes. Is that right?

I'm not sure. I may have been quoted as criticizing the church services in the White House. The President has emphasized his positive relationship with the Roman Catholic church and the so-called evangelical conservative wing of Protestantism and has ignored the mainline Protestant churches. It is obvious why he did this. They were critical of his Vietnam position and such internal policies as equality for all races in housing and employment.

You mentioned the influence of the conservative evangelical wing, which seems to be in a position to influence the government, right now at least. Would you see this as more of a threat to church-state separation than the ecumenical movement?

I don't think that is a great danger. Churches tend to want to have good relations with the government; and if they believe they have some insight into the morality of an issue, they will try to be heard. There is no reason the President should listen less to them than he listens to others. But I do think it is dangerous if a government makes its main religious concern how to get votes from these groups.

Such a danger seems to enter into the eschatological concerns of some churches, doesn't it?

The danger of taking a premillennial position, it seems to me, is that we tend to apply things only as if the particular time were the end of time. And throughout history it has turned out that such times were not the end times. I don't know the inside of the Adventist position. Donald G. Barnhouse, a

conservative Presbyterian, examined Adventist beliefs and thought we ought to be much closer to them than we had been.² But it seems to me the danger is that people will put on their white robes and wait for the Second Advent rather than do what I think the New Testament teaches — work.

What is your position on the growth of the occult and spiritualism today?

I am against spiritualism or spiritism, because I think that proving the existence of spirits and other phenomena tends to be unlikely, or at least difficult. Of course, it is impossible to prove that it doesn't exist. I remember that my sainted mother warned against spiritism by reminding us of Saul in the Old Testament and arguing that you always got into trouble when you went to mediums or witches.

Do you see spiritism as something that does not exist?

Well, I am never able to say that something does not exist — but I was born in Missouri and I am skeptical. I believe skepticism on this kind of thing is important. It is a very difficult thing to prove. Many of the people mixed up in it have discovered afterward that they are not quite so sure as they were at the time.

Do you see this as related in any way to the emotional appeal of many churches today? I am thinking of the miracle workers, the faith healers, and so on.

That is a different category. We do need to recognize the relationship of spirit and substance. Most of us tend not to have clear answers about health and that sort of thing. I would be a good Adventist concerning the effectiveness of good medical work with prayer and service. That is what I believe the Christian position should be.

What would be the Council's attitude toward minority churches that would not join the WCC if in the future all other denominations were to do so?

If you are talking about a concrete church union, you will never get 100 percent of the churches to join unless it is a coerced decision — which, of course, is unacceptable. Let me take an example from history. In 1907 there was a union of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in the United States. It was all legal, but a third of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church did not agree with the union. They did not like the way their assembly had entered into the union. It caused a good deal of heartbreak for many years, particularly in the South, but the Cumberland

Presbyterian Church still exists. In 1957 I was invited as the official officer of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America to the General Assembly of the Cumberland Church. We had much in common, and perhaps someday there will be a complete union. We are not enemies of those who disagree conscientiously. But neither can you give a small group veto power over the judgment and conscience of the majority.

You don't see a time when all churches will unite?

There I would speak eschatologically. I think that one must work toward it. Of course I do not agree with some interpretations of Revelation. But I do take seriously the fear of some WCC critics who see us in terms of the antichrist. This is serious — mainly because the higher you aim, the more dangerous you are in terms of biblical understanding. Satan was a fallen angel. Therefore, we should examine very carefully what we do so that we are truly followers of Christ and not of the antichrist. This applies to everybody — not only to those who are uniting churches.

In this regard I would like to put to rest a rumor I understand appeared in print. You are purported to have made a statement to the effect that if minority churches in the United States would not join the movement, they should be charged with heresy and punished. Is this true?

No, that is entirely false.

Does the influence of the new humanism in churches present a possible barrier to serious merger? Might humanism make members believe that union is not necessary or important?

All churches have some members who are less than faithful, but most churches do not give people theological examinations regularly. If people say they are following Jesus Christ and want to be a part of the Christian fellowship, they are accepted. They vary greatly in terms of piety, knowledge, and so on; but they do not have to be brilliant theologians to be Christians. A Christian is one who responds to Christ as a person. If there are humanists in the church, I would say that they probably divide the way the rest of the church does on being pro-union or con-union. In general, I believe American Christians are ready for more unity than the leaders of the churches have yet been able to produce. I do not believe that all American Christians are denominationalists and are going to live or die what they were born. Many people who are fifty years old have been in more than one denomination during their lifetime.

In one article you stated that "no body has treated the Bible more seriously, centrally, and attentively than the WCC." How do you bring into agreement the goal of embracing all of Christianity in a large organization with the New Testament teaching that the church will suffer a falling away and God's people be a small remnant?

As I commented before, I do not accept this interpretation of Revelation. I know that some people are quite sure they know the stages of history and the future from the Book of Revelation. I don't think they do.

Would you say, perhaps, that Revelation sounds this way to people who do not have the theological background that you do?

It is not as simple as that. Most persons who are unsophisticated in theology would not make any sense of Daniel and Revelation at all. I think you will find that most of us read the books with some interpretation in mind and one explanation is that apocalyptic writing is meant to be taken literally. Another explanation would be that it was a way to say things that are hidden, not right on the surface. You cannot understand Daniel and Revelation if you take them literally in the English translation. The interpretation is of a very complex kind. These books are much more difficult to understand than the rest of the Bible. I think the apocalyptic writings can be overemphasized. (There are other apocalyptic writings, nonbiblical, that we can compare them to.) You find this especially when there seems to be no hope in history and when people have a very great fear of disaster.

Should the apocalyptic writings be ignored?

No. On the other hand, I think that you are not understanding the biblical view of salvation if you do not take eschatology seriously.

Couldn't this be one area in which we could learn from each other?

This is what I am really saying about the WCC and what we have been doing for many years. Some of our conversations with the Adventists have been this kind of discussion. We want to know what the Bible says to you, how you interpret it, and why you interpret it this way rather than another way. Because the WCC is international and many of its members do not speak English, English translations are not the only ones studied. The Germans are not impressed with even the best English translations. Thus the WCC is often forced to study the original languages of the Bible. Some of our critics insist that we do not know the Bible. I wonder if we may not know it better than some of them.

Do you ever consider the possibility that God might send a prophet in this modern age as he did in Old Testament times?

What do you mean by *prophet*? If you mean has God sent anyone since biblical times who speaks his truth, I say yes. But to say that this person is a prophet of God is claiming too much, according to some people. However, every preacher who stands up on Sunday morning to preach, if he is serious, is a prophet in the sense that he is saying, "Thus saith the Lord."

How do you test these prophets?

Well, a good way is to read in the Old Testament about false and true prophets. Merely bearing an official title does not make a person right; or the fact that one is attacking the official positions of the churches does not make him right. I think that only by prayer and study can one come to at least a partial understanding of truth. No one has the truth *in his hands* — he is seeking truth.

Which of the two sections of the WCC plan of union — "faith and order" or "structural" — has met greater opposition?

The WCC has always been interested in being an instrument through which the churches can express the unity they do have, but it has never thought of itself as the ultimate organization. It is almost ridiculous — the idea that it should ever become a superchurch. It has no ecclesiastical power. The only power it has is its influence on the leaders and the people of the churches. In some areas it has influenced the churches; for instance, the ministry of the laity is now a common idea in all churches. That grew out of the ecumenical movement rather than out of any particular church.

You don't see the WCC in any respect as a powerful religious organization such as the Vatican once was?

No. It does not have any ecclesiastical power at all. I am a Presbyterian, and I had more ecclesiastical power in my former job as the stated clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church than I had as general secretary of the WCC. Again, people are afraid of unity because everyone is always afraid of bigness, organization, uniformity, and centralization. These are always dangers, and the only way to meet them is to structure against them so that there is decentralization — pluralformity rather than uniformity — and a spirit of love within the brotherhood and community. This is really what the church is — people in relationship to each other through Jesus Christ.

I have worked in different denominations and I am impressed how much alike people are — they are not so “peculiar” or different as they like to think. Their “fruits” depend more on how well they know Jesus Christ than on their denomination, although there is a difference in knowledge in some areas. I would hope they could be more tolerant and consider the possibility that others may have something to contribute also and that God has his people in all denominations. What could the WCC do about this?

This is most important. It even carries out into the whole new thing of dialogue with people of other faiths. When preaching a sermon in Indonesia not long ago, I used the word *God* many times, and it was translated “Allah.” When you hear that you begin to think: Is Allah of the Moslems the same Person as God? Does the French *Dieu* mean the same thing as the English *God*? Then you begin to see that the most important thing is that we belong to God — not that God is in our camp and belongs to us. We are able to listen to, and maybe learn about, God from people we had always been taught were wrong. Then sometimes we learn they were not so wrong about some things as our own background taught us they were.

Do you think it possible that some organizations or groups have more information than others? Isn't this logical?

Some do, I'm sure. That is the reason you don't take the secular view that it doesn't make any difference what you believe, since we all go to the same place anyway.

But do we all have something to contribute?

This is what I have been saying. The ecumenical movement believes that we need each other. That means you don't need a million-member church ten times as much as you need a ten-thousand-member church. You need them both.

Does this necessarily mean that a group has to join the WCC to work with them?

The WCC is an important instrument at the world level for certain limited objectives, but it does not solve all the problems of the world in all the places of the world. I would conclude by saying that I am convinced that sectarian Christianity — the idea that a group has a monopoly on God — is a thing of the past.

At this point in our interview my cassette tape ran out, and I concluded my visit with Dr. Blake. The following evening at a banquet in his honor,

Dr. Blake further elaborated on his definition of *sectarian Christianity*. My impression was that by this term he refers to a self-righteous mentality that sees itself as God's only chosen — in other words, a people who believe that God belongs only to them and uses no other method of communication to the world. When a church joins the WCC, however, it does not lose its identity as a church, its traditions, or its sense of history. It does not need to change its theology.

Needless to say, my visit led me to have an enlightened impression of how the WCC sees itself. Many of the rumors I had heard about the WCC and the ecumenical movement do not appear to be correct in the view of someone who presumably should know. The danger of the WCC seems to lie in its naiveté rather than in any threat of power. Its service to humanity in relief and medical work is beyond reproach. Its social concern is commendable. Because the WCC does not attempt to coerce others into accepting common beliefs, it is difficult to see it as a powerful organization in any sense.

The WCC does dare to criticize governments on moral issues — to stand up and be counted. For this reason it does not endear itself to the established governments in many cases; therefore, its goal does *not* appear to be popularity or a close, powerful union with the state. (One might question the possibility of its being used by other camps.) There is even a question as to whether the WCC is really uniting Christianity at all. The current charismatic movement seems to be a more unifying factor among peoples of various denominations — and, I might add, more acceptable to the established powers in many cases.

NOTES

- 1 Bert B. Beach, educational secretary of the Northern European Division.
- 2 For reading related to Donald G. Barnhouse's doctrinal study of Seventh-day Adventism, see Walter R. Martin, *The Truth about Seventh-day Adventism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House 1960).