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# Christian Brotherhood: The Foundation of the Church

by Kent D. Seltman

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Lynn called me late one night. The dormitory curfew had long passed. From the sound of swiftly moving cars, I knew that she was not calling from her room. Her message was calmly desperate — “You asked me to call before I did anything drastic, and that’s why I’m calling.” I asked for more details. She had her car, she said, and was intending to ram the bridge at a hundred miles an hour before the night was over. Later, finally trying to fall asleep that night, I couldn’t forget Lynn’s desperate claim of a few days before, when she had said, “Jesus is my only friend.” Her phone call that evening had proved the obvious — Jesus was not enough.

The sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross is, of course, enough to save us from our sins. But by itself — apart from friendship with the concrete flesh and blood members of His earthly body — it is only abstract soteriology and not enough to make life worth living. The earthly church must cultivate a sense of community, a sense of Christian brotherhood among its members. To neglect this duty is to deny the foundational act of the Christian church, that of Christ’s death on the cross. Christ died, after all, that we might live, and life without a network of friends — bonds of love between parents and children, neighbors and citizens, husbands and wives

— is not life at all. As Aristotle put it, “Without friends no one would choose to live though he had all other goods.”

Even though we will all agree that friendship, like motherhood and apple pie, is good, it, like so much that is vital in our lives, is widely neglected or distorted. The treatments of friendship that we find in the secular world today are largely commercial. Hallmark Cards probably prints more words on friendship than any other publisher. Relationships between people are typically not treated in the traditional terms of brotherhood, but in terms of manipulation. On the one hand, we have the manipulation for practical gain in such works as *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, and on the other, the manipulation for personal pleasure in the tradition of *Playboy* and *Playgirl* magazines.

Ironically, the Adventist Christian community self-consciously uses the terms “brother” and “sister,” but actually talks about friendship and brotherhood very little. In all the Adventist hymnals — *Hymns and Tunes*, *Christ in Song*, and *The Adventist Hymnal* — one can find only one hymn on the topic of brotherhood. In my 39 years in Adventist congregations, I do not ever recall singing this single hymn, “In Christ There Is No East and West.” Perhaps our religious terminology of “brother” and “sister” serves primarily as a social leveler, not as a sign of our sense of community. Or worse, it may be a means of actually condescending to others when we reprove or evangelize them.

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Kent Seltman, chairman of the English department at Pacific Union College, is a graduate of Union College and the University of Nebraska.

In the church, friendship is used as an evangelistic tool. In other words, we use friendship for practical gain. Thus, the “friendship issues” of the *Adventist Review* are designed for giving to our unbelieving friends. If I recall correctly from my childhood, on the designated Friendship Sabbath each year we were expected to bring a non-Adventist to church.

Uncle Arthur Maxwell’s 1950 book, *Your Friends the Adventists*, is prefaced with these words, “We have tried to tell you the story of your friends the Adventists — to help you understand something of their faith and their message and, above all, to let you know that they are indeed a friendly people who want to be friends with you.”<sup>1</sup> However, he subtly reveals the conditions of these evangelistic friendships in the last paragraph of his book, “You need not travel alone; for this is the hope of your friends, the Adventists. This is the land of their dreams. They are going to the self-same place. Why not go with them? They would love to have your company.”<sup>1</sup> Notice that it is the neighbor who is expected to come along with the Adventist, and the Adventist friend will not realize any change in the experience of friendship. Thus, the invitation is not for a full, reciprocal friendship. It is a condescending friendship. The invitation is from the superior Adventist to the inferior, unbelieving neighbor.

I trust that we agree that conversion is not the culmination of the religious experience. After the conversion comes fellowship with Christian brothers. Being a Christian is the process of a lifetime whereas conversion is that of only a moment. And yet, the theology of brotherhood is mightily neglected in our communion.

If the evangelistic thrust of Adventism were the primary cause of this neglect, the problem would not be too serious. Unfortunately, that is not the case. The greatest impediment is our passion for doctrinal purity. We are guilty of overly minute examination of structural pillars, but never stepping back to view the temple built on the foundation of Christian love.

Consequently, in recent times, some of us

seem aligned with the tradition of militant Christianity, where being right is more important than being kind. We are told that we may have to die for our faith. Traditionally, this has meant that the believers would also kill. True, we do that today in a somewhat more civilized fashion than was done during the Reformation. Since burnt human flesh is out of fashion in religious circles, we avoid harming physical bodies, but wage war on reputations and careers. Rather than torches and stakes, our weapons are labels and innuendo. The camaraderie of soldiers standing as watchmen on the walls of Zion is substituted for fellowship with Christian defenders of the traditional faith. Both those intent upon changing the faith and traditionalists seem to share the passionate need of being proved right.

Readers of SPECTRUM should not feel smug. They may neglect Christian brotherhood even more than the general membership of the church. The Adventist Forum and its publications are marked by intellectually critical examinations of issues significant to the church. We deny ourselves fellowship in the body of Christ to the extent that we feel bitterness about the objects or the results of this critical study. Interaction among individuals is necessary for friendship and brotherhood. Thus, the man with whom I maintain a bitter quarrel is not my friend or spiritual brother. If we only quarrel with our church, we will never experience Christian brotherhood in it. We may find temporary refuge in the fellowship of those similarly embittered, but that avoids confrontation with the philosophical and theological basis of brotherhood.

I do believe, however, there are solutions to the present problems I have identified in the Seventh-day Adventist community.

While the hierarchy of friendship mentioned earlier puts friendship for personal pleasure and practical gain below full friendship, the legitimacy of the lower levels of exchange should not be denied. In fact, full friendships always begin as friendships for personal pleasure or practical gain. My first relationship with my wife, for instance, was purely for personal pleasure. I dated her as I did several other young women in order to

share a basketball game, a concert, a meal, or a day's skiing. A full friendship grew from there. The church also needs to nurture relationships based upon pleasure or utility so the relationships can expand into full brotherhood within the community of Christ. Our apocalyptic emphasis on the shortness of time blinds us to the need for planting or cultivating the seeds of brotherhood. Our Millerite focus on an impending crisis makes

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such activity seem meaningless or unnecessary.

The problem is really theological. In an attempt to emphasize the peculiar, sectarian nature of Seventh-day Adventism, important though that is, we forget that the most important doctrine in Scripture is the doctrine of Christian love. Christ did not die on the cross for doctrinal purity but for human beings. He expected his friends and followers to be willing to do the same:

. . . Love one another, as I have loved you.

There is no greater love than this, that a man should lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends, if you do what I command you. I call you servants no longer; a servant does not know what his master is about. I have called you friends, because I have disclosed to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me: I chose you. I appointed you to go on and bear fruit, fruit that shall last; so that the Father may give you all that you ask in my name.

This is my commandment to you: love one another. (John 15:12-17, NEB)

The mark of the Christian is not possessing doctrinal purity but a willingness to die for a

friend. Certainly, nothing is said here about killing or destroying. Rather, we are invited to become full friends with Christ.

The tragedy of Christ's death was heightened by the separation He experienced shortly after demonstrating the height of brotherhood in the upper room. In Gethsemane, His dearest friends failed to reciprocate in His moment of agony. They slept rather than sympathized. Later, one friend betrayed Him, and another denied Him. The ultimate separation occurred on the cross when Christ, in a moment of utter despair, cried, “My God, My God, why have *you* forsaken me?” In that moment of total loss of hope and meaning, He experienced the worst that any human being can. He died alone.

Those of us who know anger and bitterness in our experience with the brothers and sisters of our community can come together in the spirit of brotherhood. The formula is suggested by the Quaker scholar, Paul Lacey, who suggests self-knowledge is the first step. We must recognize that when we are indignant with others — even righteously indignant at their errors — we are cultivating a monster in ourselves with which we attack the monster of errors in others. When we recognize both behaviors as monstrous, we are ready to see a brother where before we saw an enemy. For most of us, this self-knowledge is not enough. We have to see *more* than the monster within us. This deeper insight, Professor Lacey testifies, is Christian love. “For what is needed to break free of the bond of hatred is to be able to see one's self as a *monster* and a *child of God*, as both in need of forgiveness and having received forgiveness. . . .”<sup>3</sup> This deep Christian experience permits us to discard the *them* and *us* mentality. Instead of adversaries and monsters, it permits us to see brothers *like us* needing and receiving the accepting love of Christ.

**H**uman friendship tends to be exclusive.

We cannot have a very large circle of intimate friends. The demands of time as well as psychological protection do not permit us to share our intimate gift of friendship too widely. However, Christian brotherhood is

not merely an extension of intimacy but an extension of the other traits of full friendship: feeling concern and acting for the good of another. Thus Christian brotherhood is *inclusive* rather than *exclusive*. Christ's love extended beyond the circle of His close friends to those He had not met — those centuries of humans who had already died and others not yet born. None of us would betray a dear full-friend, but until we can extend that same ethic to those we do not know and will not meet, we do not know the meaning of Christian brotherhood.

Christ died to save us from our sins, but that fact alone does not make human life bearable. My own moments of deepest pain have come when I have lost my friends. The manipulation, militancy, and bitterness that divide us from our brothers in Christ also divide us from Him. But happily, we have Christian brothers who can personify, and hence make real, the love that Christ has for us. And even more happily, we have our Brother Christ, who persuades us by His life that Christian love is the foundation which supports the pillars of our faith and life.

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1. Maxwell, Arthur, *Your Friends the Adventists*, (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association), p. 4.

2. Maxwell, p. 96.

3. Lacey, Paul, "Hating the Sinner," an unpublished paper, p. 8.

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# The Church as a Prophetic Minority

by Jack W. Provonsha

One of the barriers Adventists face in their attempt to bring "the truth" to their non-Adventist Christian brothers derives from their use of such terms as "the truth." To many non-Adventists, this and such Adventist expressions as "God's people," "God's church" and "the remnant church" are likely to seem perverse and arrogant.

General Conferences are occasions that heighten a denomination's sense of uniqueness. For example, at the Vienna General Conference, a reporter for *Christianity Today*

noted that at the meetings "terminology tended to be esoteric."

When Adventists spoke of God calling us "to be truly one in Christ Jesus," it meant unity among Adventists. "The remnant church" and "God's people everywhere" referred to God's Adventist people everywhere. "Lands untouched by the Gospel" were those which had not heard the Adventist message. Adventists spoke as though they were tackling world evangelization single-handedly. Many other utterances echoed that of Vice President W. Duncan Eva: "God has committed to the Seventh-day Adventist Church the last task to save the world. We have God's package deal. . . the Gospel from beginning to end."<sup>1</sup>

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Jack Provonsha, professor of philosophy of religion and Christian ethics at Loma Linda University, studied medicine at Loma Linda and Christian ethics at the Claremont Graduate School. He is the author of *God Is With Us*.