
Is a Dissident an Apostate? A Pastor Looks at Church Discipline

by James Londis

One of my responsibilities is to preside over the most painful of all meetings in the church—a business session to disfellowship a member. Since these business meetings are usually attended only by members of the church board, most church members escape the agony of expelling someone from the congregation. But for those who are there, it is a sad moment when the church—created by Christ to incorporate sinners into its saving fellowship—places someone outside of that fellowship. The sadness is never more pronounced than on those rare occasions when the member in question is—or has been—an ordained minister.

During the theological controversy of the last few years, the number of ministers surrendering or losing their credentials has increased. While some may have behaved irresponsibly, others have felt that their integrity would not allow them to continue preaching what they no longer believed. A small number of these former pastors have

asked that their memberships in the church be withdrawn, but many are still church members in good and regular standing. Whether or not they realized it, those ministers who were disciplined came under the section of the General Conference Working Policy that deals with the disciplining of ministers, a section not particularly well-known. However, the revision of the policy at the 1982 Annual Council has attracted the attention of both clergy and laity. Beginning with the issue of a minister's credentials and ending with the status of his church membership, the new policy, entitled "Safeguarding Credentials—The Integrity of the Ministry," delineates the reasons for discipline and the forms it should take.

The first application of the policy to a minister's credentials was made by the General Conference in February 1983. This does not mean that the policy is fixed, however. All policies are continually reviewed and revised to be more beneficial to the world church. For that reason I will analyze the way the new policy goes beyond the previous version, identify the theological reasons why the policy should be restudied, and make some suggestions that would ensure the fairness of the discipline procedures.

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1982 Policy Change

The 1978 working policy (see the non-italicized print in the accompanying text) begins with a statement about jurisdiction over ministers (L 60 05) and the importance of maintaining the integrity of ministerial credentials for the sake of the world-wide work of Seventh-day Adventists (L 60 10). It then specifies one major reason for voiding one's ordination to the sacred office of the ministry: the violation of the commandment on adultery (L 60 15). In a later section—almost as an afterthought—apostasy is also mentioned as a basis for discipline.

When either immorality or apostasy occurs, the form of discipline proposed is: withdrawing the minister's credentials, "annulling" his ordination—with concurrence of the next highest church jurisdiction—ending his denominational employment, and notifying the local church where the former minister has his membership that the committee has taken these actions. Upon notification, the policy states: "It shall be the duty of the church to administer discipline as provided for in the *Church Manual* in the case of moral delinquency on the part of church members."¹ Added to the local church's discipline (which would be censuring or disfellowshipping) is the proviso that the minister should plan to "devote his life to some other area than the gospel ministry, the teaching ministry, or positions of denominational leadership and prominence." Though implicit, this statement is nevertheless clear: once removed from the ministry and subsequently disciplined by the local church, a person may never serve in the ministry again.

In 1982, the Annual Council in Manila expanded the policy adopted four years before. To moral fall and apostasy as reasons to discipline ministers, the Annual Council added the category of dissidence. Also, the Annual Council made explicit the non-eligibility of a former minister/member for re-employment in the ministry.

Theological Considerations

Underlying all church policies are theological beliefs about God, the church, human beings, sin, and salvation. While policy statements cannot—and perhaps should not—include the theological rationale behind them, one way to make a policy more effective in the life of the church is to show its roots in the church's theology.

Let us look first at the theological significance of the language in the document. If they are going to be helpful, terms like "dissident," "subversive," and "apostate" need to be used with some precision. A dissident is someone who disagrees with the prevailing opinion or belief in the church, but—initially, at least—he disagrees at a level and in a way that poses no real threat to the community. He merely exercises his right to pursue truth, even when it carries him on a collision course with either the leadership or the majority of the members. He is not interested in undermining the church but in changing its theology or practice.

To be labeled a subversive, one would have to intend to overthrow established church authority. Unlike the dissident, who wants to strengthen the church, the activity of the subversive undermines it. One wants to change it while the other wants to control it. Only when the dissident feels he cannot change the church is he tempted to resort to subversion. Both the dissident and the subversive, in their own ways, "care" about the church.

By contrast, the apostate rejects the church *in toto*. He no longer believes in or cares about the church. He wants neither reform nor control; he wants divorce. He is in rebellion against God. While the dissident may be in error intellectually, the apostate commits a sin of the will. The dissident's disagreement and the apostate's rejection

are not at all the same, nor does dissidence necessarily lead to apostasy. Dissidence is a matter of opinion; apostasy is a question of relationship. An individual should not be called “apostate” for simply disagreeing with the church, nor is someone who will not change his mind at the urging of the church “unrepentant” in the sense of obstinacy against God. Even “continued and unrepentant dissidence” is not necessarily evidence of rebellion or loss of love for the church; it may indicate integrity of belief.

In this regard, the policy would gain balance and strength if this distinction between a dissenter and an apostate were made. The result would be to stress the importance of free expression and individual dissent. Without that emphasis, the impression is wrongly given that the church expects utter conformity. There may be times when dissident teachings do threaten the life of the church and the community must protect its life in Christ. But this dissent needs to be contrasted with the kind of dissent that invigorates the church. The contrast would sharpen our understanding of the Christian church as a community following the truth at all costs, even as Jesus did.

Consequently, it seems to me that a dual affirmation of the principles of freedom and responsibility needs to be made in the new policy. Without that dual affirmation, the nature of the church is open to serious misunderstandings. Whatever social entity one belongs to—whether a club or a family—the relationship between the issues of freedom and responsibility defines the ethos of that group. Tilted too far in the direction of freedom, the group may become amorphous and chaotic; tilted excessively towards responsibility, the group may become constricting and authoritarian. Furthermore, if the church is indeed perceived primarily as a club, one feels that institutional and organizational criteria dominate the church’s self-understanding. It is less likely to point its members to the freedom available in a family. On the other hand, if the model of the family largely

defines the church’s nature, it will convey a sense of both freedom and responsibility in love that the organizational emphasis inevitably lacks. It is clear that the church is not, strictly speaking, an organization; yet it is not without organization. Settling this ecclesiological issue about the nature of the church—as an organization, or a family, or a synthesis of both—is necessary if the policy for disciplining ministers is to engender enthusiastic support from the ministry itself.

Separating a disfellowshipped member completely from the congregation is such a deafening word of “law” that the sound of grace cannot be heard. For him the church as organization eclipses the church as fellowship.

Even the tone of the language in the policy seems devoid of fellowship. Here again is the tension between organization and fellowship, club and family. The model the church adopts shapes not only the nature of church discipline but even the language in which the policy is couched. When one violates the rules of membership in an organization, one might be readily expelled. But we do not easily disown even the most difficult members of the family. In a variety of ways, we may discipline and censure sisters and brothers, daughters and sons, even mothers and fathers, but we do not ordinarily “disfellowship” them. And for good reason. We sense that precisely at moments of censure they need “superfellowship”: then they need us more than ever.

These are reasons why some pastors think that while the church may sometimes disfellowship, it may need more steps available to it before it imposes that ultimate sanction. They believe that the existing categories of “censure” and “disfellowship” are inadequate.

One sees the organization-family dichotomy even in the language the policy uses to address the local church. It recognizes local congregational authority in matters of church membership, but the policy does not convey the idea of the local church as a community/family strongly enough. If instead of “it shall be the duty of the local church to administer discipline,” the policy read, “the local church shall be notified of the conference committee action,” the members would more likely feel that the church is not only an organization but also a caring fellowship.

Another example of the lack of clarity about ecclesiology is the policy’s discussion concerning the revocation of the ministerial credentials and ordination. Adventists have always believed that there is a dialectic of the divine and human in the calling of a minister. This means that when the church votes to call an individual to the ministry, it is tacitly affirming that person’s conviction of being called by God to this work. However, while the church initially issues a ministerial license, it does not issue the credentials until the moment of ordination. In that act, the church declares that the licensed minister has demonstrated within the life of the church—not just in college or seminary—that he or she is called of God. Ordination is the community’s symbolic way of giving special authority to some of its members in order to equip other members for their ministries in the church. Therefore, if one removes a minister’s credentials, one removes that person’s authority. Ordination cannot remain in force when the credentials are revoked any more than the spirit can live when the body has perished, or wedding bands can keep people married when they are legally divorced. If we do not insist on this unity between the credentials and the ordination, we will lapse into a mystical understanding of ordination that implies that the act of the laying on of hands

provides something more from the church than the credentials do. Such an understanding would give the church a power it does not possess. Someone might argue that ordination invokes the blessing of the Holy Spirit in a way that the credentials do not. If so, then there is greater reason for the policy to speak only to the issue of the ministerial credentials, for we should not presume to judge the Spirit’s relationship to a formerly credentialed minister any more than we should make pronouncements about a disfellowshipped member’s relationship to Jesus Christ as Lord.

An adequate understanding of the church would also recognize that sin can affect even the most prayerful decisions of conference committees and church business sessions. We ought to indicate an awareness of the church’s fallibility and proneness to pride in its policies concerning discipline. Such an indication would do two things: first, it would allow the church to acknowledge

Policy on Discipline

■ Safeguarding Credentials—The Integrity of the Ministry—Policy Revision

VOTED, To revise GC L 60, Safeguarding Credentials—The Integrity of the Ministry, as follows:

L 60 05—No change.

L 60 10—No change.

L 60 15, *Reasons for Discipline of Ministers*—1. *Moral Fall/Apostasy—Discipline shall be administered to an ordained/licensed minister in the following circumstances:*

a. *In the case of a moral fall in violation of the seventh commandment, including those violations involving sexual perversions, he has, by that transgression, made void his calling and/or ordination to the sacred office of the ministry.*

b. *In the case of apostasy whereby he falls away to the world, or identifies himself with, or gives continuing support to, any activity subversive to the denomination, and/or persistently refuses to recognize properly constituted church authority or to submit to the order and discipline of the church, he has, by such disloyalty, proved himself unworthy of a place or part in the gospel ministry of this church.*

2. *Dissidence. Discipline may also be administered in the case of a minister who openly expresses significant dissidence*

that subsequent events or later evidence might prove its judgment wrong; and second, it would help to minimize the abuses of power all of us are tempted to employ. Especially when we sit in judgment, we must be humble. No one must ever receive the impression that Seventh-day Adventists assume infallibility in matters of discipline.

I am fearful, however, that insisting that no minister who has ever lost his ministerial credentials or ordination can ever minister again conveys that very impression. The policy takes for granted that the reasons a minister would lose his credentials or license are adequate reasons to censure or disfellowship him, thereby making his readmittance to the ministry impossible. In this regard, the policy diverges from the *Church Manual* which assumes that there may be occasions when one's credentials might be lifted without affecting one's membership.² In my opinion, the *Church Manual* is right and the policy wrong.

Consider questions about disciplining a person who is guilty of a "moral fall." How often is it the case that there is only one "guilty" party in an adulterous situation? What about adultery that is known only to one's spouse and one's conference leader? If it is clear that this is a case of "entrapment" by the third party, that it is the pastor's first indiscretion of this kind and that he and his spouse have repaired their relationship, are we to assume that—as the policy indicates—the mere act of adultery "voids" one's call to the gospel ministry? What about an immoral act that happened many years ago and is only now coming to light? And even if the minister's credentials are lifted, would it be true in every case that he should be censured or disfellowshipped?

The distinction between removing the ministerial credentials and disciplining at the local church level should also be observed in cases of "dissidence." Let us suppose that a minister is disciplined over the

Adopted at 1982 Annual Council

regarding the fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Continued and unrepentant dissidence may eventually be seen by the church to be apostasy and identified as such by the minister's administrative organization after counseling with the next higher organization.

L 60 20, *Steps in Discipline of Ministers*—When discipline must be administered in the case of a minister, four aspects of his relationship to the church may be affected: his credentials/license, his ordination, his church membership, and his denominational employment. The discipline and corresponding procedure for administering such discipline in relation to each of these aspects is as follows:

1. Credentials/license. The credentials/license of a minister who experiences a moral fall or apostatizes shall be withdrawn permanently by his employing committee, after consultation with the next higher organization. His credentials/license may also be withdrawn in the case of dissidence as defined in L 60 15-2 above, after consultation with the next higher organization, but such withdrawal shall be reviewed by the committee after a stipulated period/periods which shall be determined at the time of withdrawal.

2. Ordination. a. A minister who experiences a moral fall or apostatizes has made void his ordination. This changed relationship shall be recognized and recorded by his employing organization with the approval of the respective

union committee (General Conference or division committee in the case of a General Conference/division institution). He shall be ineligible for future employment as a Seventh-day Adventist minister.

b. A licensed minister who experiences a moral fall or apostatizes shall be ineligible for future ordination or employment as a Seventh-day Adventist minister.

3. Church Membership. The organization which has withdrawn a credentials/license permanently and, in the case of an ordained minister who has made void his ordination, has recognized and recorded his changed relationship, shall inform the local church of which the offending minister is a member. It shall be the duty of the church to administer discipline as provided for in the *Church Manual* in the section "Reasons for Which Members Shall Be Disciplined."

4. Denominational Employment. It is recognized that a minister who has experienced a moral fall or has apostatized has access to the mercy and pardoning grace of God and may desire to return to the church. Such an individual must be assured of the love and good will of his brethren. However, for the sake of the good name of the church and the maintaining of moral standards, he must plan to devote his life to employment other than that of the gospel ministry, the teaching ministry, or denominational leadership.

doctrine of revelation and inspiration because his views are out of harmony with the church. He accepts the authority of the Scriptures and Ellen White, but his understanding of the basis of that authority makes it difficult, if not impossible, for him to defend the current thinking of the Seventh-day Adventist church. If he loses his credentials as a teacher or preacher, does that mean his membership should always be in jeopardy? Let us further suppose that, on the particular point that he has differed with the church, the church later revises its position. Would the former minister not be eligible for re-instatement as a member and possible re-appointment as a minister? If we allowed each case to be evaluated separately and revised the policy so that it contained no references to the permanent non-employment of ministers, the church would powerfully affirm that it was a “forgiving community.”

As a pastor I have learned that it is almost impossible to disfellowship a church member and at the same time convince him that the community still cares about him as a person. Separating him completely from the congregation is such a deafening word of “law” that the sound of grace cannot be heard. For him the church as organization eclipses the church as fellowship. How to properly combine these two characteristics is difficult. It is true that discipline is designed to both uphold the good name of the church and awaken the member to repentance. Still, I believe that unless the policy expresses more compassion, ministerial discipline will sound vindictive rather than regretful. The last word in the Bible is always the word of forgiveness. Should the last word of this policy be otherwise?

Procedural Recommendations

In no place is the compassion of a disciplinary policy more visible than in the procedures that accompany it. Fair treat-

ment for an accused minister requires the church to agree on just procedures. Who is to decide the truth of the allegations and how is it to be decided? The silence of the policy concerning due process—other than stating that the appropriate conference committee must make a decision at some point—permits each jurisdiction to create its own version of just procedures. Such a situation does not protect either the minister or the administration. There is little to protect the church leadership from criticism when procedures vary from conference to conference. A standardized procedure can deflect such criticism as well as ensure that the accused does not feel “lynched.” If the process is fair, an accused minister may not agree with the decision that has been reached, but he will feel that he has been in the hands of Christians.

I have been working with a General Conference committee growing out of Theological Consultation II that has addressed these very procedural points. Drawing from the work of that committee, I believe that good procedures should include the following: (a) The first person to speak about discipline to a minister should be his immediate superior, who, in most cases, is the conference president; (b) If the accused denies the charges against him, the conference president should immediately inform the conference committee who should create a hearing committee. The composition of the hearing committee should include several conference committee members, representatives from peers of the accused, and representatives from the union conference, and, if theological issues are involved, members from the theology department of the college within the union. Instead of the conference president, someone such as the union ministerial secretary should chair this hearing committee; (c) The accused has a right to know his accusers; (d) When the hearing committee has concluded its work, it is to send a recommendation to the conference committee; (e) If the accused is dissatisfied with the committee process or decision, he has the right to an appeal to the

union committee. It then should establish its own hearing committee along the same guidelines established for hearings at the local level. As in the case of the local conference, the union hearing committee would make its recommendations to the full union committee. The appeal procedure would terminate at the union level. If church policy either included or made reference to such procedures, it would be immeasurably more helpful to the church and reassuring to its ministry.

When persons are disfellowshipped, they are missed, terribly missed. The names may be gone from the records, but the persons are still real in the life of the congregation.

Individuals who lose a limb feel that limb for many months after the amputation. They have used that arm or that foot for so many years that their brain—and in that sense their entire being—is etched with that limb. Its importance and meaning remain even after it is gone.

When a member—ordained or not—is removed from the church, the congregation continues to feel his or her presence. Such an excruciating experience deserves to be limited as much as possible by policies based on careful theological reflection, expressed in compassionate language, and specified in just procedures. We must never forget that the body that suffers is the body of Christ.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. "Among the grievous sins for which members shall be subject to church discipline are the following:

1. Denial of faith in the fundamentals of the gospel and in the cardinal doctrines of the church or teaching doctrines contrary to the same.
2. Open violation of the law of God, such as worship of idols, murder, adultery, fornication and various perversions, stealing, profanity, gambling, Sabbath-breaking, willful and habitual falsehood, and the remarriage of a divorced person, except of the innocent party in a divorce for adultery.
3. Fraud or willful misrepresentation in business.
4. Disorderly conduct which brings reproach

upon the cause.

5. Adhering to or taking part in a divisive or disloyal movement or organization. (See p. 240, 'Self-appointed Organizations.')

6. Persistent refusal to recognize properly constituted church authority or to submit to the order and discipline of the church.

7. The use, manufacture, or sale of alcoholic beverages.

8. The use of tobacco.

9. The misuse of, or trafficking in, narcotics or other drugs." From the *Church Manual*, 1981, pp. 247-248.

2. "A minister may be relieved of his office as a minister by conference committee action, without his standing as a church member being affected." *Church Manual*, 1981, p. 189.