
A Reformer's Vision: The Church as a Fellowship of Equals

by Lorna Tobler

Having been brought up an Adventist, I have always taken seriously the doctrine of "the priesthood of all believers" as a statement of an ideal honestly professed, if not perfectly practiced. I learned to respect Bible scholars and the clergy and to seek out their views. But their statements were simply valuable opinions to be seriously considered—certainly not to be treated as the "teaching authority of the church." I learned from the *Mission Quarterly* that authoritarianism in other religions caused the honest in heart to turn to Adventism for "the truth that shall make you free." At junior camp, I learned to be a "Berean," and to search the Scriptures myself rather than too quickly accept the preacher's word.

Since I was not only sincere, but reinforced in all these attitudes by my experience in denominational employment and church activities, I was totally unprepared for the assertion of clerical authority over "lay members" as the defense for discriminating against women. Friends with whom I had worked for many years suddenly assumed an alarmed air of injured pride when

Merikay Silver and I seriously proposed that men and women be treated equally on the job.

The Hierarchy Is Not the Church

This revelation of the will to power among so many conference officials was something I had never heard justified in any Sabbath school quarterly, college Bible class or church paper. Now, for the first time in my life, Adventist ministers told me boldly that clerical authority was more important than justice. No one ever attempted to tell me that sex discrimination itself was a good thing. They merely said that it was more important to support the authority of those who practiced sex discrimination than to question its justice.

This argument was presented to the federal court as a defense not only of sex discrimination, but of any practice in which the newly minted hierarchy chose to engage: "The church claims exemption from all civil laws," they argued in the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. "The church is free to ignore, even to flout, measures which bind all others" [EEOC vs. PPA (1982), Brief for Appellants; July 6, 1975, pp. 77, 78].

At the General Conference Session in Vienna in 1975, a General Conference vice president asked me, "How do you feel about the way the church has treated you?" Of

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course, he knew that I had been involved in a decade-long litigation with the management and board of directors of Pacific Press over the issue of sex discrimination. The vice president asked his question immediately following a well-organized attempt during the session to push through a new method of mandatory disfellowshipping, where denominationally employed church members could be disfellowshipped upon the request of their employing managers.

That attempt did not succeed, due largely to the skilled and conscientious resistance of some of the delegates who knew that that maneuver was aimed specifically at defeating the rising objections to sex discrimination. I had been warmed and heartened by this unexpected support from church members I had never met. They had nothing to gain from their efforts but the approval of their own hearts. Therefore, I told this General Conference brother that I felt wonderful about the way the church had treated me.

Clearly he did not understand. It then occurred to me that what he meant by "the church" was that very group of individuals who had tried to transfer control of church membership from the congregation to the institutional managers. I asked him who he meant by "the church"—the General Conference Committee? "Oh, no," he replied, "there are only two or three of us who know about this problem." In other words, for him "the church" was comprised of people who wielded, or attempted to wield, power over their fellow members. In short, a hierarchy.

Although I have been an Adventist all my life, I have never had a relationship with a hierarchy. I realize there are differences of opinion as to whether Adventists have a hierarchy. But I venture to say that the term *Adventist hierarchy* never appeared in print before the Pacific Press litigation. The very phrase has a ring of irony. The fact that some people act like hierarchs does not make them hierarchs. That term, whenever Adventists use it, has a pejorative rather

than deferential connotation. This is made clear in the *Adventist Encyclopedia*, the *Church Manual*, the writings of Ellen White, and in every other Seventh-day Adventist reference source available to the scrutiny of church members—who obviously believe that they themselves constitute the church.

Not only did this instant hierarchy claim to have ascendancy over civil magistrates, more to the point, it claimed to have authority over fellow church members—in contradistinction to "the form of church government which recognizes that authority in the church rests in church membership," as is stated in the *Church Manual*.

One General Conference religious liberty department leader told me: "The authority of the church over its members is more important than justice." In a sworn affidavit, a General Conference officer stated:

In order to achieve the purposes and mission of the church and to deal with personnel and all the activities involved, it is absolutely essential for the church to establish its authority in the community of believers. . . the church must determine what is best. . . individual judgment must be surrendered to ecclesiastical leaders (Affidavit of Neal C. Wilson, president of the General Conference, dated Nov. 27, 1974, pp. 6-13, EEOC vs. PPPA, *supra*).

Thus the new "hierarchy" declared itself exempt from civil law and sought to establish its authority in the community of believers. If the court had accepted that assertion of total civil and religious control by an Adventist hierarchy, there is little question but that those who argued for it would have subsequently urged it on church members as "duly constituted absolute authority" from which there could be no appeal.

It is not with this hierarchy, but with the church—Adventist church members individually and collectively—and other Christians as well, that my relationship has been strengthened and enhanced through this

trial of my faith. I have been disappointed in what I consider a terrible failure of witness on the part of men whom the church trusted with leadership. But then, haven't I also frequently been disappointed in my own witness?

The fact that others may need my forgiveness reminds me that I also need theirs, and that we are all daily in need of God's redeeming forgiveness. So the answer to the question of how my struggle with perceived injustice by church members affected my relationship with the church is that my relationship to the church has been strengthened and matured by increased understanding, patience, and commitment. In addition, I returned to my Berean training and "searched the Scriptures daily" for answers to the question of church authority. This is what I found in the gospel:

How Jesus Related to the Powerful and Powerless

When the Pharisees rebuked Jesus for allowing his disciples to gather corn on Sabbath, Jesus was direct: "If ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless" (Matthew 12:7). This retort was no mere sarcastic reflection on the Pharisees' biblical literacy. Jesus here pointed to the clear aim of their pompous assumption of false authority—to condemn the guiltless.

At his trial, Jesus responded to the high priest who interrogated him and "when he had thus spoken, one of the officers which stood by struck Jesus with the palm of his hand, saying, Answerest thou the high priest so?" They were not interested in what Jesus had to say, but in establishing their own authority. To this "Jesus answered him, If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil: but if well, why smitest thou me?" (John 18:22, 23). Even in the most extreme circumstances, and on pain of direst conse-

quences, Jesus would not assume a false position merely to support a claim of "duly constituted authority." He put honest witness above support of those in authority.

Earlier, Jesus had described in electrifying terms the self-serving nature of this type of authority: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayer" (Matthew 23:14).

When his disciples, always ambitious themselves for posts of authority, wanted to know who was the greatest, "Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, and said. . . Except ye. . . become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. . . . Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 18: et seq.).

Here the disciples had just heard the greatest leadership course ever given. To be great leaders, they must give priority to the powerless. To fail in this is disastrous, since these apparently powerless "little ones" have a personal representative in instant audience with God. Even politicians should be able to understand the dynamics of that.

Jesus was constantly illustrating this lesson. When he and his disciples encountered the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus not only socialized with her, an outcast, to the scandal of his disciples, but discussed theology with her and revealed to her, before all others, that he was Christ, the promised Saviour.

His acceptance of the Samaritan woman so transformed her that many in that city believed in him because of her testimony. But all this was over the head of the disciples, who were busying themselves with food. (Notice the role reversal—men bustling about with food, while a woman discussed theology with Jesus.) But the lesson was not ultimately lost on the disciples. Almost all of them were also from the uneducated classes, and they too were empowered by

Jesus to turn the world upside down with the force of their testimony.

Jesus' sermon "to the multitude, and to his disciples" recorded in Matthew was a call to eschew the example of the religious leaders in authority, who loved to be addressed with terms of deference. "Do not call anyone master," he said, "and do not call yourselves masters." "The princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion," he had earlier cautioned, "... and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you" (Matthew 22:25, 26).

We are to make ourselves useful to others, as he did, who came to serve, not to be served, who took the form of a slave, and gave his life for others. This model of leadership is the antithesis of the traditional male model of leadership based on ascendancy.

But by advancing selfless service as the principle of leadership, Jesus did not imply passivity. To the moneychangers in the temple, who were taking financial advantage of the faithful and intimidating them, Jesus minced no words in telling them what they were doing. He also took action and put a stop to it. He not only told them they were stealing—he also overthrew their tables. The chief priests and elders wanted to know where he got the authority to do that—who had appointed him to look after people who were under their jurisdiction? In his response, Jesus dispensed with all subtlety: "Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you" (Matthew 21:31). In their relentless quest for authority, the priests and elders were overtaken by their most despised parishioners seeking the kingdom of God.

When children were brought to Jesus, the disciples, after all they had seen and heard, still had everything in reverse; they "rebuked" the powerless. Patiently, Jesus corrected them. Hadn't he told them to beware of offending one of these little ones, because each had a personal envoy before the Almighty? To Christ, these powerless people were the important ones in the kingdom of heaven.

The disciples, not unlike the chief priests and elders, were obsessed with earthly power and authority. Jesus' priorities were just the opposite. In the kingdom of heaven, power and authority, as we know it, have no place. In the parable of the laborers, Jesus showed that he understood that the desire for pre-eminence and seniority is universal. The wail of the workers who had "borne the burden and heat of the day" was, "Thou hast made them equal unto us." Were they grateful for their opportunities, or concerned with the unemployed? "Is thine eye evil, because I am good?" Jesus asked. The answer, sadly, was yes. They resented God's affirmative action for the disenfranchised.

How the Powerful and Powerless Responded to Jesus

The chief priests perceived that he spoke of them, and they sought to lay hands on him, restrain him, entangle him in his talk—kill him. For them, power and authority were more important than justice. They equated their own power and authority with "the nation," or, as we might say, "the church." Better that one die than that the whole nation perish. This man was exposing their dirty linen and so, they reasoned, endangering the whole church. They were not concerned with the moneychangers. They objected to Christ's methods of reform. To them, it was a question of authority.

The common people heard him gladly. Nevertheless, right after Jesus had observed the widow offering her farthing and had declared that she, rather than the head elders who made great ostentatious offerings, had done far more than anyone—right after that the disciples pointed out an impressive church building. Jesus had hardly finished commenting on how this had been built by robbing widows' houses. The common people, too, were often impressed with power and authority and their trappings.

When on the Sabbath Jesus healed the man born blind, and so was criticized for breaking the Sabbath, the Pharisees interrogated the poor man. This man may have been powerless, but he was also fearless. He said unequivocally that Jesus was a prophet. When the blind man's parents evaded answering the Pharisees' questions, because they feared them, and so sent the Pharisees back to their son, he responded again: "One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see."

The man showed plenty of spirit—too much for the insecure egos of the chief priests—and they cast him out. "Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when he had found him, he said unto him, Dost thou believe on the Son of God? He answered and said, 'Who is he, Lord, that I might believe on him?' And Jesus said unto him, Thou hast both seen him, and it is he that talketh with thee. And he said, Lord, I believe. And he worshipped him. And Jesus said, *For justice I am come into this world*, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind." (John 9:35-39, emphasis supplied).

The powerless know fear and hopelessness, but Jesus gave them vision and hope. The powerful fear loss of their power, with good reason. Jesus promised them that the first would become last. Consider, however, that the moment they lose power and authority, they become one of the powerless to whom Christ gives hope and sight.

What Response We Can Expect From the Powerful and Powerless

“Ye shall be hated . . . for my name's sake. The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of his household?” (Matthew

10:22-25, emphasis supplied). Here Jesus was talking to his disciples in the midst of his own people to whom he had come. The persecution he described was not necessarily to come from gentiles or the government. The persecution that Jesus and his disciples experienced was from their own leaders whose abuse of power he had rebuked.

Again reversing the priorities of power as we know them, Jesus declared, "He that loseth his life for my sake shall find it. He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me" (Matthew 10:39, 40). Those who have renounced the will to rule, those to whom Christ has given sight to see their true relationship to the one Master and their true equality to their *Geschwister*, their brothers and sisters, these will respond to his message of release and empowerment today the same as did the man whose sight Jesus restored. They will believe. But they may not be so quick as he to find their courage. There are many Nicodemuses among those who believe.

A Fellowship of Equals

Many people point out the need for authority in the church, as in business and government, for the sake of order. They like to quote Paul about diverse gifts, and they usually rush to the defense of Martha ("What would we do without Marthas?"), without precisely contradicting Jesus' clear statement that it was Mary, rather, who had discovered the true relationship to Christ.

What we must beware of is the leaven of the Pharisees. We must not vest the organization, by which we accomplish tasks, with spiritual authority. It is merely an instrument and does not constitute a relationship. Of all our edifices, not one stone will be left upon another. Not one conference president will be honored as such in the kingdom of

heaven. The first shall be last and the last first.

What, then, is the nature of our relationship to the church? Where is the locus of spiritual authority?

“I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.”

“Henceforth *I call you not servants*; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but *I have called you friends*; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you.”

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“Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. *This* is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

“These things have I spoken unto you,

that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full” (John 15, emphasis supplied).

Love is the authorizing principle of our relationship to the church, to Christ, and to one another—the love that forgoes power, the will to rule, and the desire for hierarchy.

That kind of spiritual authority comes from “the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, *with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit*, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones” (Isaiah 57:15, emphasis supplied).

This is why the little ones, the powerless ones, make up the kingdom of God—and why we had better take heed how we treat them, because they have a direct connection with the Almighty. He who inhabits eternity dwells also with them.

If we recognize that spiritual hierarchy is a fiction, that God has made them all “equal unto us,” and, having made himself our servant, he now calls us friends—then we will truly have the joy that he desired might remain with us. The Seventh-day Adventist Church that I continue to cherish is just such a fellowship of friends.