



*Laypersons and church leaders debate church authority and reorganization as well as ordination of women.*

## Athal Tolhurst: Susan Sickler Gave False View of GC Commission

Some clarifications are in order regarding the recommendations made by the Commission on World Church Organization. It was by a majority vote that the recommendations were accepted by the General Conference Committee at its 1994 Annual Meeting (and 1995 Spring Meeting). It was not without speeches on both sides of the issues and one interruption by ovation; however, the majority recognized the honorable motives behind the recommendations and voted in their favor. This, in a General Conference Committee where 75 percent of the 320 attendees were North Americans.

The General Conference officers believe that the work of the Commission on World Church Organization is valuable to the church and ought to be correctly represented and understood. For this reason, they have asked me to respond briefly to the report entitled "Dispatch From the Governance Wars" (*Spectrum*, Vol. 24, No. 4). Unfortunately, that report gives a false view of the rationale and motives behind the decisions of the commission, and indeed incorrectly represents the honesty and integrity of those charged with the responsibility of recording the commission's actions and of presenting them to the General Con-

ference Committee.

For example, it is quite untrue to say the "denominational administration . . . took certain items from the general discussion [of the Commission] and turned them into recommendations in the final report without an authorizing vote of the commission."

The official minutes, as recorded by Maurice Battle, show that all 36 of the commission's recommendations were approved by vote of the commission. It is just as certainly untrue, as was reported in the last issue, that "the commission adjourned its last meeting without ever having voted any of the linkage proposals." There are, in fact, six linkage proposals recorded in the official minutes of the commission as written by Maurice Battle. These, and only these, were presented to the General Conference Committee.

There are numerous other mistakes and biases in the "Dispatch" that give a false view of the work of the commission and of the character of its members. It is regrettable that readers are sometimes prevented from seeing good where good abounds. The commission produced good recommendations; and for those readers who wish to understand them correctly, let me direct your at-

tention to the June 1 issue of the *Adventist Review*, North American Edition, where a comprehensive report of the commission, its processes and recommendations

appeared as a special insert.

Athal Tolhurst  
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## Gordon Bietz: Sickler Sees Thorns Where There Are Roses

Susan Sickler and I both served on the two governance commissions that she refers to in the article "Dispatch From the Governance Wars" (*Spectrum*, Vol. 24, No. 4). However, our observations and perspectives of those meetings are significantly different.

I do agree with much of her general philosophy, especially when she talks about the importance of leadership maintaining a diverse church in unity, as compared to attempting to maintain that unity through top-down control. Also, concerning the final report, I agree with her that it was not tied into a neat package, as was the report of the first commission we served on together. That was a mistake. The commission should have been called together again to review and approve the final product.

My disagreement with her relates to the general picture of the Commission on World Church Organization that she paints. Most of the evidence that she marshals to support her belief that there is a top-down power grab are issues that were voted down by the commission. I would hate to think that the final product of a commission's work was to be judged by the issues that were discussed and discarded during the meetings. A lot of things were discussed that were not in the final report.

I am concerned that she tars the

entire report with the "power-grab" brush. The fact is there are many things in the report that follow the principles we voted when we first got together. Principles such as:

- "Delegate authority so that it may be exercised at the lowest appropriate organizational level."
- "Ensure that the decision-making process is participatory, informed, effective, and efficient." (See *Adventist Review*, April 27, 1995, pages 16 and 17 for a full list of the principles.)

Consider also that the commission recommends:

- That the General Conference Committee be more reflective of our world church (31 percent drop in size with a 69 percent rise in field representation with the General Conference paying for all members to attend);
- That more elections of division personnel occur at division level instead of at the General Conference level (72 people will be elected at the General Conference Session, instead of hundreds);
- That all departments need not be represented at each level of the organization;
- That formal, periodic evaluation be instituted to enhance accountability;
- That the smaller General Conference Committee now constitutionally mandates more lay representation. (About 10 percent are now mandated, whereas in the

past it was at the will of the nominating committee.)

What are the things that were recommended that might concern Susan?

1. "The officers of a higher organization are members *ex officio* of the executive committees of a lower organization," but are never to make up more than 10 percent of the membership. It doesn't seem to me that that smacks of authoritarianism. If we intend to maintain a world-wide church, this kind of "linkage" seems appropriate.

2. The division presidents' credentials are held by the General Conference, and it was voted that it be the same for the secretary and treasurer. Their credentials would be held by the organization that elected them. The same holds true for union missions and conference missions. Those officers are elected by the higher organization and would receive their credentials from that organization. Again, it seems to me appropriate that the electing organization would hold credentials.

3. If there is a major problem with the president, for instance, of a local conference, the union executive committee cannot remove the president, but working together the conference and union executive committees can call a conference constituency meeting. This is simply requiring the president to be responsive to the constituency that elected him.

4. Susan's major concern was that higher levels of church structure can merge or dissolve lower levels. The higher level that brings an organization into existence has the authority (through its constituency) to dissolve the same organization to which it gave birth. For example, the conference brings a church into the fellowship of churches and can also remove the church from the fellowship. The conference executive committee

can't do that, but the conference constituency can. It is the same as you move up the organization. A union executive committee can't dissolve a conference, but the union constituency that gave birth to the conference could. To bring an organization into being and then have no authority over it doesn't seem reasonable.

In the end, the result of the World Church Organization Commission is a net positive for the organization of the church. I really think Susan is seeing thorns where there are roses.

Gordon Bietz  
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order to see the strength of the overall trend to centralize authority at higher levels. To me, the idea that the most far-reaching reorganization of our church in almost 100 years would not be closely examined and *all* of it voted on by the General Conference in session is a serious mistake. I pray that wiser heads will prevail and that the original report that went to Annual Council will be made available to each delegate at the General Conference Session. I hope that all proposals will be carefully considered and either voted or rejected in a proper manner by the only body that should have jurisdiction over such a major decision.

I would call readers' attention to an error in the article by Elder Tolhurst on church reorganization in the June 2 *Adventist Review*. He states that only constituency sessions should vote to merge or dissolve organizational entities. Yet the policy voted at Spring Meeting allows for a union to be merged or dissolved by a decision of an executive committee at the division or General Conference level. I am experiencing major stress over all of the leaders insisting that this reorganization report in no way centralizes authority at higher levels. Either they think that if they keep saying this enough times we will begin to believe it or else they honestly don't see what they have done. I can't decide which of these two explanations is the more frightening.

**Gordon Bietz**

Reading Gordon Bietz's clear, articulate prose reminds me again of how much I wish he had written the report in question. I agree wholeheartedly with him about both the principles we voted to guide our work and the value of Dr. Dederen's excellent paper. I just wish we had followed the

## Sickler Responds to Tolhurst, Bietz: There *Is* a Power Grab

One good reason to subscribe to *Spectrum*—where else in SDA publishing circles can one engage in such open debate?

**Athal Tolhurst**

After reading Athal Tolhurst's comments I requested and received a copy of the minutes of the final meeting of the commission. Still perplexed, I consulted with several persons who are far more knowledgeable in the area of General Conference culture than I am. Finally, light began to dawn. It seems that there can be an honest difference of opinion as to what is meant by the term "voted." I innocently assumed that it meant that someone made a motion, someone else seconded it, there was discussion, and then the chair called for a formal vote. It seems that there is also another version where a topic is discussed, and if there is no significant opposition, especially from the more powerful people in the room, it is considered passed. To their credit, these items have usually been marked "recommended" rather than "voted." Several of the items referred to by Athal Tolhurst are in this category, which explains our differing views of what happened. The commission also referred some items to the

secretariat for further work that most of commission members assumed we would see again, for either our approval or disapproval. Alas, this was not to be. I was pleased to see that Athal Tolhurst does not attempt to claim that the report as a whole was ever voted by the commission.

Elder Tolhurst says the report was voted by the entire Annual Council. He neglects to mention that when two of the linkage recommendations were significantly weakened on the floor of Annual Council, the General Conference Officers pulled the most controversial recommendation—the merger/dissolution proposal—and referred it to the Spring Meeting of the General Conference Committee. I have asked a number of church employees who attend Annual Council on a regular basis if they think the merger/dissolution proposal would have passed Annual Council intact, and the unanimous reply has been "no way."

What I did not realize at the time that I wrote the original article is that the report was divided up into items voted as "policy" at Annual Council or Spring Meeting and items going to Utrecht. The more controversial "linkage" proposals were voted as policy. It is necessary to see the entire report together in

guidelines and the paper. I was pleased to see that *Ministry* magazine has published Dr. Dederen's paper in its entirety. I highly recommend it to all *Spectrum* readers. I don't think I have ever seen a circumstance where people's hearing of an oral presentation was so selectively based on their personal biases as occurred when Dr. Dederen presented his paper to the commission. I am grateful that David Newman has set the record straight by publishing the paper.

Unfortunately, the commission went directly contrary to Dr. Dederen's recommendations in two key areas. He advocated that more laypersons and pastors be selected as delegates to General Conference Sessions to counterbalance the oversupply of delegates from administration. We came up with only small numbers of each. He also recommended more direct election of General Conference delegates by local constituencies. The commission recommendation, as presently worded, goes in exactly the opposite direction. It recommends that the General Conference Session delegates should be chosen by divisions rather than by unions. Since the division is just a branch office of the General Conference, the General Conference could name the delegates to the General Conference Session that is supposed to hold them accountable. Cozy, huh? Our system of checks and balances on power is weak now. The proposal would destroy it completely.

I approve of reducing the size of the General Conference Executive Committee and making it more representative of the world field. However I think it needs fewer administrators on it and more pastors, teachers, and laypersons. Also, all members not ex officio by reason of the office they hold would be chosen either by the General Conference Executive Committee (which really means the adminis-

tration, since the committee tends to rubber stamp names submitted by administration), or they would be recommended by the divisions. We need to keep one fact front and center here. The division is the General Conference. So, essentially, the General Conference would be choosing all of the non-ex officio members of the General Conference Committee, the committee that is supposed to hold its officers accountable. This is representative democracy? I don't think so. I would suggest that the entire committee be chosen by the General Conference Nominating Committee from names recommended by the union executive committees, taking into consideration the need for a good cross-section of the membership, including young people, women, and others.

Contrary to what Gordon Bietz might think, I do not have a major problem with some officers of the next higher organization being members of the executive committee of the next lower organization. In general, I have always found their advice to be valuable. There recommendations are not always approved, but their comments always well worth factoring into the decisions at hand. However, the document being proposed to the General Conference Session does not limit representation to just the next higher level of structure. In the case of a local conference, the document adds not only union representatives, but also division and General Conference people as well. Enough is enough! Conference officers are not members of local church boards, so why the big push at higher levels?

I also support the right of the next higher level of organization to be able to call a constituency meeting of the next lower level. That is an appropriate check and balance. I favor anything that broadens the

base of the decision. Unfortunately the merger/dissolution proposal, as voted at the Spring Council meeting of the General Conference does not meet that criteria. Had it been brought to Annual Council, it might have been amended enough to make it as palatable as several other items were. Alas, the larger body never got that chance with this item.

My objections here fall into two main areas. First, the process for who decides what information is pertinent to the proposed merger or dissolution is not clearly spelled out. If, as a union committee member, I were to hear a proposal to merge or dissolve one of our conferences, I would want to be absolutely sure that I have *all* of the information on both sides of the issue. In my experience, it is unreasonable to expect administration to present in an unbiased way the opposing side of something they want you to vote.

Second, if only a constituency session can vote a union into existence, then only a constituency session should be able to vote a union out of existence. The constituency session above the union level is the General Conference in session, not the North American Division year-end meeting. With divisions there seems to be an attempt to have it both ways. Are they or are they not a separate level? The answer seems to depend on which is more useful for the current argument. However, one thing is clear. In order to broaden the base for a decision, you must take it to a constituency meeting. Moving it to the North American Division Executive Committee or the General Conference Executive Committee puts the decision higher up the hierarchical ladder, but it does not broaden the base of people who are likely to be knowledgeable about the issues involved. Also the General Conference Executive Committee can meet

with as few as 15 persons constituting a quorum. That is not my idea of broad-based decision making. This entire merger/dissolution issue raises legal issues of ascending and descending liability that have not been adequately explored and that concern many of us.

One issue that I did not understand at all well when I wrote the original paper was the extent to which the proposed method for selecting delegates to a General Conference Session gives control of those delegates to the General Conference. I am indebted to my African-American brothers for my education in this area. I support a cap on the total number of delegates chosen for a General Conference Session. However, in a

representative democracy it is far more important who chooses the delegates than how many are chosen. In the proposal of the commission the General Conference would control the selection of an astonishing 74 percent of the total number of delegates to each future General Conference Session. Needless to say, this is the polar opposite of what Dr. Dederen suggested in his paper on church unity. Checks and balances would cease to exist. Gordon Bietz denies that there is a power grab going on here. Pray tell, how else can you describe this?

What these men do not seem to comprehend is that at least in a country that claims to have a democracy the authority of the governing body is directly related to

how representative it is of the overall group it governs. The end result of this proposal, once people catch on to what has actually happened, will be to destroy the authority of the General Conference in session. Where then will be our precious unity?

As to my not appreciating the roses, *au contraire*, Gordon. I love roses, but when I pick them I always wear sturdy gloves to protect my hands from the thorns. Does anyone know where we can get a great price on 2,600 pairs of gardening gloves for the delegates to the General Conference Session in Utrecht?

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## Burton: Don't Compare Ordaining Women to Freeing Slaves



While the title of Gary Patterson's article ("Let Divisions Decide When to Ordain Women," *Spectrum*, Vol. 24, No. 4) would lead one to believe that he is proposing ecclesiastical congregationalism at the divisional level of the church, the lion's share of his discussion is dedicated to promoting grounds for his bias in favor of the ordination of women. As I read his argument, I couldn't help but feel that Patterson was treading on dangerous ground as he attempted

to obscure the relevance of biblical authority in his defense for the ordination of women to the gospel ministry. Furthermore, when pushed to the extreme, the logic behind his arguments proves to be flawed.

The major question that Patterson raises is chiefly concerned with interpretational method. I would be the first to admit that everyone does not inherit an automatic capability for understanding the Word of God. However, I do feel that those of us who have made the study of the Word of God our life's work should be able to lay down some ground rules under which to operate in the arduous task of interpretation.

Patterson is right in his recognition that an exegetically based translation provides a literal and indisputable reading of the text. The problem with interpretation, however, has to do with how this text is

to be understood in 1995. I believe that most would agree that the first task in interpretation is to determine the audience situation of the original text. When one takes this approach, it is obvious that the penalties attached to violating the Sabbath in Exodus 31:12-17 (which Patterson raises) pertain to Jewish civil law and have nothing to do with Seventh-day Adventist Sabbathkeeping in 1995.

It is also obvious that the Pauline restriction against women speaking in church in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2, is not a universal rule, but a Pauline *halakah* that served a specific purpose in the churches of Asia and Europe in the first century. Patterson seems to be saying that we either have to interpret the entire Bible literally or figuratively, and leaves no place for contextual hermeneutics. If Patterson does anything in his argument, it is to betray those historical-critical presuppositions that place the individual's experience as authoritative in the interpretational quest.

The person reading Fatterson's argument for the first time would think that the massive protest against the ordination of women rests solely on the prohibition of 1 Corinthians 14. I would be the first to admit that it is easy to discredit an argument that is based solely on this text. However, many who seek biblical counsel in finding a solution for this problem, base their conclusions on other biblical passages; particularly those that establish the principle of male headship. Patterson and his supporters may call this principle culturally motivated, but the interpretational trajectory of the teaching finds its starting point at Creation.

Would Patterson's view of inspiration accommodate the charges of Phyllis Bird and Mary Daley that the Bible is a product of male chauvinists and is culturally biased? Would Patterson have us believe, like David Scholer, that both male and female were created at the same time and were designed for the same roles? Does Patterson hope that we will adapt Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza's androgynous interpretation of Galatians 3:28?

One point that is raised by Patterson exposes a gaping hole in his thesis. In his discussion about the ministry of Philip, Patterson admits that Philip's evangelistic efforts had nothing to do with his ordination as a deacon. If this is the case, then why push the issue for women's ordination if they can function without being ordained? Based on his reasoning, ordination is obviously not the stamp of approval for a spiritual gift.

The point at which I see the biggest hermeneutical flaw is when Patterson brings up the issue of slavery. While his agenda is concealed, it is obvious to me that he is trying to gain the sympathy of those of us from the African Diaspora. However, in his statement, he falls victim to the same naive and

fundamentalistic reading of the text with which he accuses others. Unlike the biblical role distinctions between male and female, slavery was *never* in God's original plan and is not a part of the Creation order. Responsible biblical hermeneutics demands that each equation in the *haustafel* must be understood in its own cultural and theological context, and cannot be grouped together. (What surprises me is that if Patterson feels so strongly about the church's stance on slavery and other social justice issues, why does he not address the racist attitudes of the church administration toward our brothers and sisters in Zimbabwe and throughout non-Western [Eurocentric] Adventism?)

What Patterson's approach really does is raise the question about how one ought to approach

the interpretation of Scripture. I feel that rather than view every comment and situation as culturally motivated, it behooves us to set up standards whereby we can intelligently distinguish between culture and revelation. That which has been revealed by God is not subject to scrutiny or culturally motivated modifications. If it is truth, it will always be truth. While we do see through a glass dimly, it is not in our best interest as seekers for truth to cloud the glass even further by releasing our personal steam on the face of the glass. I invite Patterson to lay aside his interpretational biases and take another look through the not-so-misty glass.

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## Patterson: All Scripture Is Written in a Cultural Setting

That I am for the application of ordination equally for men and women is no surprise to those who have followed the flow of this argument in recent years. However, I resist the word *bias* used by Burton as being a pejorative term. I am not biased in this matter. Rather, I am persuaded by Scripture, by reason, and by fairness to take the stance I have taken. Burton is welcome to come to other conclusions, and to disagree with me. But to call my position a "bias" is a comment I reject as judgmental.

In my arguments, there is no "attempt to obscure the relevance of biblical authority" as Burton suggests, but rather an attempt to lead us to see the inconsistencies in our methodologies—inconsistencies that are all too often convenient escapes from the reality of what the

text says. Burton rightly observes and discovers the point of the argument when he states, "What Patterson's approach really does is raise the question about how one ought to approach the interpretation of Scripture." Indeed, this is the nub of the matter. It is the purview of the community of the church to do this work together. That is what ecclesiology and hermeneutics are all about.

Burton seems to suggest dividing Scripture into separate sections, some of which have higher authority than others. These divisions he calls "culture and revelation." But I ask, who is to say what is in which category? Is not all of Scripture written in a cultural setting? Does not every writer have a perspective? Or are we to believe that some of it is normative and some

ignoreable?

In this context, Burton maintains that punishment for violating the Sabbath and silence for women in church “pertain to Jewish civil law and have nothing to do with Seventh-day Adventist Sabbath-keeping in 1995. It is also obvious that the Pauline restriction against women speaking in church . . . is not a universal rule.” Obvious to whom? While I may agree with his conclusion on these matters, it is yet the work of the church to make such decisions. That is what biblical interpretation in the community of the church is all about. And this is exactly the point of the article. How do we make such decisions? Odd as it may seem to Burton, what he sees as “obvious” is not obvious to everyone else.

It is not my intent to suggest that the whole matter of women in ministry rests on the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14. Indeed, there are many other passages that must come into the discussion. It is cited only as an example of the interpretive work that must be done if we are not going to follow explicitly what the text says. And if not, then how do we relate to other texts in question? If we glibly write off certain texts as “cultural,” then we

are on rather shaky ground when we wish to enforce others that seem to support our favored positions. Truth is not found in the quoting of scriptural particulars that support our favored positions, but rather, is derived from the whole of Scripture. There are not some portions that we write off as “cultural” and others that we claim are “revelation.” Even if this notion were true, who would decide which texts are in which category?

Burton assumes a “Creation order” as if it is an accepted tenet of faith or scriptural fact. Indeed, it is neither. The Genesis account is quite explicit in its equality. “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” There is no order here. Both male and female are in the image of God. And actually if one assumed a “Creation order” to be valid, it would be obvious that the whole of Creation moves from the inanimate to the animate, with the higher orders being created later and the Sabbath as the final act of Creation. This being the case, women would be higher in the Creation order than men, having been created later in the order.

Finally, I do not take lightly the

accusation that I would play politics with a matter so morally imperative as slavery. Moreover, my resistance to this evil is not so narrow as to be merely in the context of the “African Diaspora.” Slavery is an evil that goes far beyond any racial or territorial limit. In fact, Burton shows evidence of his own cultural influence as he attempts to fog the issue by bringing in unrelated matters of “other social justice issues.” He suggests we explore the “racist attitudes of the church administration to our brothers in Zimbabwe and throughout non-Western (Eurocentric) Adventism.”

To make such implications without support or verification of the charges in the context of this discussion of women in ministry serves only to obscure the matter. What “racist attitudes” and what “church administration” is he referring to? That these matters need to be clarified and discussed, I have no doubt. But it would be a tragic conundrum if the matters of one social injustice were allowed—or even worse, deliberately used—to obscure the need for justice in another.

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