



Photo by James Reeder

Corporate Confession

It Isn't Easy to Say "We're Sorry" as a Church, but It Is Important

By Charles Teel Jr.

There have been times in recent years when the Adventist Church has apologized—or at least tried to. In October 1999, North American Division President Alfred McClure apologized to African Americans at the Race Summit (see p. 31).

In 1997, the Southern African Union of Seventh-day Adventists voted a statement of confession to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (see p. 30).

In a unique form of an apology to two individuals, on June 14, 1998, the president of Pacific Union College shook the hands of Ted Benedict and Alice Host—faculty members in 1950s, who were terminated by the board of trustees in the early 1960s—congratulating them for having been awarded honorary professor emeritus titles. But only for those who had eyes to see and ears to hear did this act offer a hint of being a corporate confession, because there was no mention of wrongdoing.

Confessions of failure are difficult for religious organizations. And not just for us. When Pope John Paul II apologized for Catholic sins in March, the story made front page news around the world, with some reporters noting that this was the first time in almost 2,000 years of Christianity that a Roman Catholic pope had asked forgiveness. His apology was met in some quarters with extreme reservation.

Personal sin and personal confession we understand. But the notion of sin enmeshed in social institutions—particularly ecclesiastical institutions—can be difficult to acknowledge and even more difficult to change. We assume sin and salvation to be personal rather than social terms. We look for confession and restitution from

individuals rather than from corporations. We describe our task as being to change hearts of individuals rather than to presume to change laws of nations.

Scriptural Call for Corporate Responsibility

The Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are chock full of commands that call humankind to corporate/communal accountability no less than individual/personal responsibility.

The Creation story—with its interchangeable use of the Hebrew word *adam* referring equally to “Mr. Adam” (personal/individual) no less than to “human-kind” (social/communal)—communicates obligations of a social and corporate nature no less than a personal and individual response. The covenant code signals norms for a plethora of social institutions—and demands that society build into its corporate structures a “safety net” that provides for the marginalized. The wisdom literature includes psalms and proverbs plaintively noting that the greatest punishment for an individual is to be cut off from the community, the polis, the social whole. The Gospels bespeak of *koinonia*—community—as basic to living out the Christian vision. The Epistles urge responsibility of individual believers to the whole. And the Apocalypse celebrates righteous and faithful remnant communities that stand against evil Babylonian social institutions—including those political and economic structures in which slave ships carry human cargo and deal in “the souls of men.”¹

Point: the gospel is always personal, but never private. The individual and the institutional are—as ethicist James Luther Adams was fond of declaring while tugging both sides of his vest—“of one piece.”

Raised as a preacher’s kid in Loma Linda during the 1950s, I learned a fair bit about church and confession, but some years passed before I learned that the call of the rugged Hebrew prophets to enact the Covenant—to do justly, love mercy, walk humbly, and provide for the poor, widow, orphan, and resident alien, as Yahweh provided for you when you were poor, widowed, orphaned, and resident aliens in Egypt—was a call echoed by prophets from Amos to Martin Luther King Jr. I would discover, further, that the social institution of slavery was condemned by Ellen White and her colleagues not merely as “bad public policy” or “inept social planning,” but also as “a sin of the darkest dye.”² If the inhabitants of Loma Linda during the 1950s had forgotten that sin is corporate no less than personal, the founders of Loma Linda certainly had not.

Issue of Race Leads to Social Ethical Questions

More than any other issue in the North American experience, the issue of race has forced our society to recognize that a personal ethics code is only a righteous starting place—a beginning step that must find transfer to a social ethics code that affects public policy. It is no small rebuke to a religious movement to discover that God’s world heard and heeded the Divine voice speaking in the present tense on the issue of social segregation and institutional racism long before “God’s Remnant Church.” Eleanor Roosevelt and Harry Truman worked to integrate the armed forces some years before the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists integrated its dining facilities. (We must be reminded, further, that with regard to gender justice and equality in remuneration, the Divine voice was heard by the courts and justice commissions of God’s world before such was heard by God’s Church—a confession that the Church I love has yet to articulate.)

The hesitancy of Church leaders to talk about social sin or to engage in the task of corporate confession is illustrated in a 1970 constituency meeting of the Southern New England conference in South Lancaster, Massachusetts. At issue was a document initiated by academics and endorsed by conference administrators. It was entitled “Southern New England Conference Declaration on Race Relations.”³ A motion to accept this document, which included a statement on corporate confessions, was read to the assembled body, affirmed by the conference president, and placed before the floor for discussion. Two negative responses were immediately registered by ex officio delegates, the first by the General Conference representative and the second by the union conference president.

The initial reaction consisted of a grave admonition: “You people in southern New England can’t speak for the Church, speech on these matters such is initiated from headquarters of the world Church.” The second response was posed in an equally grave manner: “This business of corporate confession could get picked up by the press—an eventuality that would bring harmful publicity to the Church.” Happily, the regular voting members overruled these two ex officio representatives by a near-unanimous vote after arguments were advanced against both objections. That the 1970 General Conference session in Atlantic City a few months later framed a “Document on Human Relations”⁴ for the

world Church modeled on this Southern New England Conference document suggests that the efforts of the Southern New England constituency bore fruit and that corporate sin was something the Church as a whole might appropriately contemplate.

A contemporary example of corporate confession by the institutional Church is the "Statement of Confession" presented to South Africa's Truth and Reconcilia-

tion Commission (see page 30, below). This document masterfully employs nineteenth-century Adventist "pillars" and "landmarks" language and applies the same to "the heresy" of apartheid. As with the Southern New England declaration, this document leaves no doubt that personal ethics apart from recognition of social evil and corporate confession falls short of the call to God's Kingdom.

Just Say It

Two Pacific Union College faculty members who were dismissed in the 1960s and then honored in 1998 as honorary emeritus professors explain what it means to be forgiven.

Alice Holst: I do not blame Pacific Union College, as an institution, for my unfair dismissal after fifteen years as a department chair. Nor did I blame the college board members, because they were told false information. The person or persons who were responsible for the untrue reports about me were either misguided or they deliberately hurt me. In either case, it was necessary for me to forgive them because otherwise I could not put my life back together again and would suffer more severely for many years. I tried to show my support for PUC during the years after my dismissal in a number of ways.

The honor awarded in June 1998 was greatly appreciated and meaningful for several reasons:

(a) I became again a member of the PUC family—a great privilege because it is a college I love.

(b) For many of my former students, all of my family and close friends, and a number of my acquaintances, the honor helped to restore confidence in the integrity of PUC.

(c) Since Ted and I were never told why we were dismissed, there were many false rumors flying around regarding what wrongs I had committed—actually fifteen of which I became aware. The public awarding of an honorary professorship could, hopefully, dampen some of those, because they were still being repeated thirty-five years later.

Ted Benedict: I do feel honored by the award, especially when I have heard that the decision to grant it involved the initiative of Dr. Malcolm Maxwell, discussion by the faculty of the college, and a decision by the current board of trustees. The decision was, apparently, not whimsical, nor was it made to encourage philanthropy. I was honored, and I accept the gift with appropriate humility. I'm not going to give it back. It is a privilege to rejoin the teaching faculty of my beloved Pacific Union College.

However, the event has a broader significance than my personal reaction. . . . We were told on June 14, 1998, what the honor represented. It was given in recognition of our professional accomplishments. Those accomplishments have been significant, but this justification doesn't go far enough; there is more to be said if the demands of ethical institutional responsibility are to be met.

So what still needs to be said? Simply, that in 1963 a serious mistake was made by the people leading the college. The people who made that mistake are no longer here. But the people now leading the college recognize that mistake, apologize for it, and ask for forgiveness. Complete restitution is impossible, but we want to do what little we can, which is to restore you to your lost place in our faculty by granting you honorary emeritus professorships, and we, in turn, would be honored if you would accept. Some human being, representing the corporation, needs to restore health and integrity by flat out saying it.

In human affairs, relationships cannot be nurtured or restored until certain key statements are articulated. If, for example, a romantic relationship is to develop at all, someone has to say "I love you," and then all kinds of exciting things can happen. And occasionally, someone has to say unambiguously, "I'm sorry," and then life can go on to better things. . . .

My response, thus far, has seemed to deal with the 1963 event that involved Alice Holst and Ted Benedict. But the issue is universal and generic, not personal. It appears in such practical questions as these: What responsibilities do persons who are elected or appointed as leaders, or who are members of committees, departments, or boards, have for corporate sin, guilt, apology, forgiveness, and restitution? Are those responsibilities reduced or eliminated if the sins were committed before their own tenure? Is there a statute of limitations in corporate morality? Are the attributes of spiritual maturity different from the different members of the body of Christ? On the pragmatic level, what would be the consequences for church growth, evangelism, and member retention if we could bring ourselves to face these matters honestly?

That the Southern New England Conference waited until 1970 to speak out against corporate evil (the Montgomery Bus Boycott had sparked the national consciousness and birthed the civil rights movement fully fifteen years earlier) hardly qualifies this declaration as prophetic. Likewise, the framers of the South Africa confession explicitly fault themselves and their Church for a Johnny-come-lately stance, a response acknowledged to fall far short of deserving a prophetic mantle. To embrace a righteous movement only after it has been granted respectability and achieved *de jure* status does not qualify as a prophetic act.

What is the Function of Corporate Confession?

In light of the fact that corporate confession is often less than a prophetic act, what functions are served by such confessions? Should these endeavors be written off because they result in too little, too late? Do such confessions offer a social ethics escape into anonymity rather than a personal ethics confrontation with the self? Does corporate confession too easily offer an opportunity to confess others' wrongs for them? In this vein, William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* seems to be calling would-be confessors to avoid placing themselves in a context

Where passions have the privilege to work
And never hear the sound of their names.⁵

I believe that there is a place for acts of corporate confession and that they must be engaged in with reluctance. Corporate confessions, I think, when entered into cautiously, can serve several key functions:

First, they state in emphatic terms that the Church understands sin and salvation are mediated not only through individual hearts, but also through institutional structures. Such confessions counter the tendency toward arrogance and triumphalism, which often characterize institutional religion and, as with prophets of all centuries, serve to remind the Church it is a frail vessel that falls short of the grace God would bestow upon it. Further, these confessions not only have the capacity to save/salve/salvage institutions, they also—even if belatedly asserted—have the capacity to save/salve/salvage individuals who have both wronged and who have been wronged.

Which brings us back to Pacific Union College and Ted Benedict and Alice Holst receiving honoree emeritus titles. This symbolic act constituted a precious

moment in the lives of two individuals sorely wronged. However appropriate the act, it fell short of being a corporate confession—no words referenced the manner in which a board dominated by ecclesiastical types ran roughshod over two academics who, in spite of such maltreatment, have given lifetimes of service to their church. And while the wronged have long since forgiven the Church in their hearts, the Church has yet to articulate its wrongs and to ask for forgiveness.

Such confession enables systems and institutions to acknowledge corporate sin and to take initial steps toward saving/salving/salvaging both the victim and the perpetrators of injustice.

Corporate bodies may help people—in mediating truth, justice, and righteousness—and institutional entities may function as members of God's called remnant. Corporate bodies may hurt people: When structures become agents of injustice, oppression, or power mongering, they function as Babylonian beasts on the prowl trading in the souls of men and women.

The Apocalypse tells of a remnant people that calls others out of Babylon—a people who keep the commandments of God, exhibit the spirit of prophecy, bear witness to Jesus. Such a people—it stands to reason—will be no less ready to make corporate confessions on institutional sin than to formulate corporate confessions of shared belief. For such a remnant people, creating righteous structures will be no less important than articulating right beliefs. As such a body increasingly discovers the infinity of God—and the smallness of humankind in wielding power and excluding persons on the basis of categories that range from race to gender to theological understanding—the confession of such unrighteous practice is good for the collective soul.

To confess corporate sin and to create just corporate structures is not too much to ask of a people who purport to be about the task of creating a community in which they invite enlightened Babylonians to share.

Notes and References

1. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, 4th ed. (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948), 254.
2. *Ibid.*, 359.
3. "A Christian Declaration on Race Relations," *Spectrum* (spring 1970) vol. 2, no. 2, 53–55.
4. For a copy, see the General Conference Archives.
5. *The Prelude or, Growth of a Poet's Mind*, book 11, lines 230–31, in Wordsworth, *The Complete Poetical Works* (London: Macmillan, 1888).

Charles Teel Jr. is professor of religion and director of the Stahl Center at La Sierra University. Cteel@lasierra.edu