



## The Fallacy of Hierarchy | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

Where will obliviousness about Christian leadership (and misleadership) take the Adventist Church? These stories speak for themselves.

A letter writer (responding to an article on creation and evolution in the *Adventist Review*) says that a literal interpretation of Genesis 1 “gives us our Creator, our seven days, and thus our Sabbath”; she says further that any Adventist who allows for evolution should be “weeded out.” The magazine publishes the letter.

Someone else says in a letter (not from me, by the way) that for “the special benefit of young Adventists” who could be misled, it is important to note that “the identity of the Sabbath is immovably secured by the resurrection of Jesus”; that the identity of the Sabbath does not depend on any one “version of natural history.” This letter’s effect is to raise questions about the current General Conference agenda regarding creation and evolution, and the *Adventist Review* elects *not* to publish it.

An independent organization approaches an Adventist healthcare entity about a gift for a project. For most of the decade previous, a similar request to similar entities has been met, in every case, with a generous response. This time, however, word comes back that a gift would be imprudent because the requesting organization has fallen out of favor with General Conference leadership.

Two General Conference employees receive a high-level mandate, by e-mail, to “eliminate” (presumably from church meetings or publications or both) any favorable references to “the subject of ‘spiritual formation.’” The e-mail says that henceforth only criticism of “spiritual formation” should appear. By way of justification, it declares that the concept of “spiritual formation” can be “connected with mystical beliefs and practices” and with “the emerging church and the emergent village.”

Finally, this (now-familiar) story: The Adventist Accrediting Association (AAA) authorizes a visiting committee, chaired by the president of Andrews University, to evaluate La Sierra University’s faithfulness to the ideals of Adventist higher education. The visitors conclude that the university is offering “high quality Christian education, with a Seventh-day Adventist character.” But when their report reaches the AAA board at church headquarters, members declare, against the visiting team’s conclusion, that La Sierra has “deviated” from Adventist educational ideals. They reject the visiting team’s recommendation of a full five-year re-accreditation, ruling that accreditation will be extended only to the end of 2012. Between now and then, the university must “implement changes.”

In each of these four stories someone takes for granted, or at least cooperates with, the notion of top-down control of the church’s life and thought. I myself assume, of course, that church leaders, certainly including those in Silver Spring, deserve our heartfelt attention and respect. They love the church. They have thought at great length about its work. They have shown the ability to make a difference. Still, the Hierarchy Principle (as I will call it) is a mistake. If you believe that high-level leaders, or high-level church entities, have a duty to control what people in more local, and less prestigious, settings think, you are veering toward a papal account of doctrinal authority and departing from key channels of Christian wisdom.

I need not belabor the point about Roman Catholicism. Rome’s highest officer has substantial authority over those beneath him, including the authority to speak *infallibly* regarding points of doctrine. If the exercise of this latter authority is rare, and if papal authority is to some degree shared with the church’s bishops, what remains is this: in Roman Catholicism, high position confers teaching authority *over* the ordinary faithful.

Protestants (when they are at their best) democratize authority, noting, with 1 Peter, that *all* the faithful are a priesthood. The leadership function does, of course, set certain persons apart, and gives them greater-than-average persuasive authority. But no council or committee, and certainly no individual, deserves our ultimate allegiance. God alone is God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously resisted the idolatry of Nazism. But he also resisted the spell of religious hierarchy. He had said in a radio address in 1933 that the leader becomes a “mis-leader” just when he falls short of “continually” reminding his followers that the leader’s own task is “limited.” True leadership teaches followers to seek their “own maturity” and to grasp their “own responsibility.” So when the German Lutheran “church regime” (as he once called it) began to muzzle pastors who criticized its Anti-Semitism and fawning obeisance to the state, Bonhoeffer protested. He participated, too, in the 1934 conference that produced the famous Barmen Declaration. This statement of faith said that the established German church had lost its legitimacy through deference to “alien principles.” The statement proclaimed that true faith makes Jesus Christ the single authority we are called to “trust and obey.”

The point was simple enough. But in the context of 1930s Germany, it was electric. The Barmen Declaration was immediately published in the *London Times*, and it gave rise to an organized movement of spiritual resistance that became known as the Confessing Church.

But does a critique of the Hierarchy Principle entail that anything goes? Does it mean that individual Christians may decide on their own what it means to follow Jesus?

These questions bring to mind another crucial channel of Christian wisdom. No less an eminence than George Knight, the church historian, has affirmed that Adventism’s roots lie in Radical Reformation soil. And just this soil, I believe, has produced the best account of the meaning and place of “authority” in Christian life.

Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 14 are two of the account’s key passages. Here, radically summarized, is the argument:

The New Testament rejects anything-goes individualism. When disagreement happens, the *community* attempts to resolve it; the individual must respond to the wisdom of others. The point of this effort—the point of the conversation that takes place—is reconciliation and the building up of the household of faith. Certainly the point is not religious theory abstracted from daily Christian existence; it is the concrete, moral meaning of life together in the faith.

Just for this reason, New Testament authority is *local*. Disagreements require decision-making by persons who are close to what is going on; close enough, that is, to be in touch with the human feelings involved and the deeper complexities. As Jesus puts it in Matthew 18, “[W]here two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

The New Testament thus has, after Jesus, no teacher-masters; it has no “magisterium,” no official teaching authority. Leaders and theologians, traditions and creeds, matter for their persuasive influence; they deserve attention and respect. *But they have no coercive authority.* (In 1 Corinthians, Paul treated the question of food offered to idols *differently* than the Jerusalem Council did.)


Behind all of this is the premise, as John Howard Yoder writes, of “simple trust that God himself, as spirit, is at work to motivate and to monitor his own” through “disciplined human discourse.” So from this standpoint, the Hierarchy Principle, with its assumption that top-down control is a necessary bulwark, gives expression to *lack* of trust.

Our leaders seem oblivious to this. And to the degree that the rest of us go along, or lapse into funks of resignation, so do we. I do not assign blame. The tide of hierarchy came in before most of us were born. But I do want to assign credit where it is due. In 1872, for the benefit of non-members and for the first time ever, Adventist leaders published a statement, or “synopsis,” of their faith. The first paragraph said that it was not to have “any authority with our people,” nor was it meant to “secure uniformity among them, as a system of faith.”

The statement was not, in other words, an instrument of top-down control. The pioneers of Adventism still knew what it was to *trust*. ■

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**Charles Scriven** chairs *Adventist Forum*.



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