



Going Forward While Going Backward | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

In spirit and language alike, Ted Wilson's leadership evokes another era, one older Adventists can still recall. In key respects he is the second coming of Robert Pierson. So, like Pierson, he speaks (very properly) of revival and reformation. But with respect to his fears, Elder Wilson is also redolent of that era: he is ill-at-ease with the sort of ferment that was heating up in the 1970s. He is ill-at-ease, indeed, even with the *orthodoxy* of the 1980s, and wants to revise, in a fundamentalist direction, the Statement of Beliefs that dates from the beginning of that decade. As for the dynamism of the Adventist pioneers—the energy, the self-questioning, the constant shifting of views—he is, at least in his spoken discourse, a stranger to it.

It's a safe bet, unfortunately, that this frame of mind will not bring wholeness to Adventism. In the older strongholds, much of the beauty of Adventism persists, but we are also broken by factions and disunity. The brokenness cries out for fixing, but Elder Wilson's perspective leaves it, I'm afraid, ever more entrenched.

Toward the beginning of October, world church leaders had an opportunity to repair some of the brokenness. Meeting for Annual Council in Silver Spring, they considered a change that would help open a new door in two world church Divisions for women.

Church policy continues to distinguish between "ordained" and "commissioned" pastoral ministry. The former (except in parts of China where the distinction goes unrecog-

nized) is a status granted exclusively to men. But around the world women "commissioned" for pastoral leadership are serving as church pastors or even as conference officers. Under current world-church policy, however, no woman may be a conference president, since that role requires male-only ordination.

Two Division leaders, Dan Jackson from North America and Bertil Wiklander from the Trans-European Division, proposed that the Annual Council grant a "variance" from the "model constitution" used in Division policy books. The variance would allow their respective constitutions to state that "commissioned" ministers may serve as conference presidents. The variance would apply only in their Divisions, where constituents seem ready for it.

As discussion began, Elder Wilson left the chair so that, from the floor, he could oppose the variance. He did not mean, he said, to denigrate anyone's spiritual leadership. But policy dictates that "commissioned" pastors may not "organize churches" or "ordain elders and deacons," and persons in "top spiritual leadership," he argued, should be able to do so.

He said, too, that embracing the variance would violate the unity of the church. The church has agreed that ordination be "recognized around the world." Adventism is not the church "in America" or in any other division; it is one community. "We are," as he put it, "a worldwide church." The implication was that the proposed variance would be inconsistent with Adventist unity. "I would encourage you," he said, "to vote against the motion."

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Elder Wilson then returned to the platform as meeting chair. After lengthy discussion, the proposal was defeated; 117 voted Yes and 167 voted No.

Some men serve as commissioned ministers. But none of them is excluded from ordination for biological reasons. Women are. They are grateful, I expect, for the proposers and speakers who came to their defense at Annual Council, risking public disagreement with the General Conference president. But they also feel, no doubt, the way I would if, for reasons having *nothing to do with my abilities or character*, the General Conference declared me (once again!) ineligible for a role my near-at-hand colleagues might actually want me to occupy.

That the question of women in leadership should go on and on—as least since 1881, when the General Conference Committee first considered the ordination of women—signals brokenness. And because leaders could resolve it, and don't, it also signals moral failure.

Every knowledgeable church leader knows that a good scriptural argument for the full equality of women and men can be made. Each one knows, too, that it is legendarily hard to express a knockdown version of the argument. The fundamentalist mind and heart can easily resist what it wants to resist.

One form of such resistance is appeal to a bloodlessly abstract version of the church's unity in Christ. Here, as in Elder Wilson's remarks, unity is bureaucratic; it is uniformity. On this view local need seems not to matter. To put it another way, here unity has far too little to do with the concrete meaning of love. But just that kind of love constitutes the "new commandment" God gives to us in Christ. Its absence makes us nothing more than noisy gongs and clanging cymbals.

For many who have a long devotion to the church, all this seems, and feels, tragic. But it was not the whole story of October, 2011. Toward the end of the month leaders of the North American Division, gathered in Silver Spring for year-end meetings, considered what the General Conference had said—and *re-affirmed their commitment to allowing "commissioned" (not just "ordained") ministers into the conference presidency*. The narrative is a touch complicated, but that is the gist of it, and it meant that in this Division women as well as men are now eligible to lead a conference. Even though a discriminatory view of ministerial ordination still holds sway, opportunity for NAD women has advanced.

Adventism, like all things good and beautiful, stands on the razor edge of danger, and these days the sense of precariousness may seem particularly keen. But there are shining moments when movement forward faces backward movement down. This was one of them.

A wooden obsession with bureaucratic (and doctrinal) uniformity looms large as an obstacle to love. Unity that transcends uniformity—transcends bloodless abstraction—is an expression of love, not an obstacle to it. In October NAD leaders gave evidence of understanding this.

Love of this kind reflects not only the New Testament story but also, I think, our own *historic* identity. In 1872, for the benefit of non-members and for the first time ever, Adventist leaders published a statement, or "synopsis," of Adventist belief. The publication of the statement satisfied both bureaucratic and doctrinal needs. (These needs, of course, do matter.) But the first paragraph said that the statement was not meant to "secure uniformity" among Adventists. It was not, in other words, to be an instrument of oppressive unity.

Why is such wisdom often scorned today, or at least ignored?

I don't know. But inside of faith, hope outlasts despair. It is the gift that enables us to kick sand into the great tide of human pain and disappointment even when the odds against success seem overwhelming. Now and then, the tide actually weakens. It just did.

Do we have a shot at making love the winner in the great battle between the essence of faithfulness and its bureaucratic distortion? Can we take steps toward shaking off obsessive fundamentalism? Up the divine sleeve, perhaps, are even more surprises. Why not?

Recently my wife and I saw a new play about Martin Luther King called *The Mountaintop*. Although I walked toward the exit with mixed emotions about the play itself, my feeling about a T-shirt the theater had for sale was anything but mixed: I loved it. On the front, in huge letters, were these words: "Can I get an Amen?"

Gospel witness tries our patience. But we must never lose hope or shrivel into silence. Like many at the October Annual Council, and most at the NAD year-end meetings, we must bear our witness. We must continue to bear our witness.

Can I get an Amen? ■

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