



A New Kind of Adventism | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

What good is a state of denial? So let me just say it: if we don't shift toward a new kind of Adventism, our church will go out like a spent candle. It's a matter of time, but it will happen.

Apocalyptic sects stand athwart the tide, battered by the dominant cultures they challenge and pray to God to redeem. New Testament Christianity was itself an apocalyptic sect and it did manage, against great antagonism, to stand tall; down the centuries its flame continued to shine. But New Testament Christianity never swerved from the sense of ultimate mystery. The wonder of grace kept pride—kept self-satisfaction; kept fundamentalism—substantially at bay.

What is more, New Testament Christianity never surrendered the responsibilities of the “two or three who gather in Christ's name” to a centralized, authoritarian bureaucracy. Typically, problem solving addressed local need by way of local energy and imagination. If Paul's mission to the Gentiles could be endorsed by a gathering of leaders in Jerusalem, that was only after Peter, without the sanction of an authoritative hierarchy, had *already* started baptizing Gentiles. If Paul could later become the most important leader in the church, his influence was never coercive. His advice was *advice*, his authority *persuasive*.

On these points, however, our community seems to have lost touch not only with the New Testament but also with the Adventist pioneers. Now the most powerful Adventist

leaders, oblivious to mystery, want to make a fundamentalist version of the Bible's Creation teaching into enforceable dogma. And despite the clear and crying need (at this stage) for local nuance on gender and ordination, these same leaders have been fighting to press Adventists everywhere into a single mold.

If these leaders get their way, it will surely put the church at new risk. The risk may be invisible to most, at least in the short run, but it will be real. Apocalyptic movements so tone-deaf to mystery and so reconciled to top-down control eventually go away.

Is that what we want for our church? What, then, will keep it from happening?

One thing is the deep meaning of our heritage; another is the will we may muster, by God's grace, to explore and renew it.

Consider Jesus Christ. For all Adventists, Jesus—the Messiah, the risen Christ—is the center of faith. We take Jesus to be God's human face, the “image” and “exact imprint” of the invisible divine; he is the Desire of Ages, the embodiment of grace. And as such, he is meant to become, through God's Spirit, the focus of our trust, the wellspring of our deeds and very lives.

Now consider that unlike either Lucifer or Adam, Jesus did not aspire to be God but instead, as Philippians 2 puts it, “emptied himself”—“humbled himself”—in order to live a life of service. It was just by reason of this humility that God “exalted” him to be the fitting object of our loyalty. And it was just by reason of all of this that Paul wrote, “Let the same

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mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5 NRSV).

Unless Paul was wrong, this *entails*, does it not, that we fully commit ourselves to humility. Cocksure pronouncements, contentious hyperorthodoxy, loathing of others just because they differ from us—all these trappings of fundamentalism we must disavow and overcome. Our leaders must do so. And whether we live at the center or on the fringes of church life, so must all of us.

In conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus himself acknowledged the limitations of religious speech. In a famous parable, he made compassion, not orthodoxy, the test of true discipleship. Seeing resentment and jealousy in his closest followers, he rebuked their disdain for people outside their own circle of belief. And with a view to disagreements inside the church, he authorized a polycentric understanding of community: problem solving would be local, where "two or three are gathered in [Christ's] name" (Matt. 18:20). Neither an arrogant individual nor an overweening bureaucracy could have the last word.

Both our understanding and the relationships shaped by this understanding suffer when the heart is proud. Human excellence is fine: many early Christians were accomplished and well off; most of the best-known Reformers were university professors. But the sense of a monopoly on truth or virtue is for—the self-deceived. The sense of a right to dominate or "lord it over" is for—the doubly self-deceived. The mind of Christ exudes humility, and true humility bends toward service.

What might the mind of Christ mean for the church?

Humble acknowledgment of mystery and humble devotion to service would delegitimize self-indulgent doctrinal speculations, and would stamp a question mark on efforts of centralized control. Christ's teachings say nothing, after all, of heroism in acrimonious disputation; they call us to heroism in character. They make no case for standardization of practice and conformity of thought, except to invite us all into the love of God and neighbor as exemplified by Christ.

Under this liberating regimen, we would embrace the whole Bible story and be drawn together into the joyful honoring of God in Christ the Son. We would restrain our collective and personal egotism. We would shape our teachings into instruments of love and peace. In both our saying and doing, we would be responsive to human

need and local nuance; and all the while, we would be open to growth in mind and heart alike. By God's grace, our self-emptying would drive away the fear that makes us watch our backs and leaves our scientists mute with consternation. In our life together we would find acceptance, purpose, and ever-renewing energy.

How would we pursue our mission? How would we bear our witness?

Humility is not acquiescence. A new kind of Adventism would still be Adventism, still preach the gospel to the whole creation. Where deviant religious cultures veer toward inhumane obsessions—with personal prosperity, with the enshrinement of self, with violence in God's name—we would proclaim the love and peace of Christ. Where secular culture veers toward indifference to truth, or turns science into religion, or makes work and frivolous distraction the whole meaning of life, we would proclaim the love and peace of Christ. Where relationships break down from disdain for commitment, or where the strong lord it over the weak, or where blame and reproof excuse cold disregard, we would proclaim the love and peace of Christ.

We would bear a big-issue witness. More important still, we would *live* what we say. Witness involves words, but words—or at least religious words—have no power apart from their embodiment in lives. Except as there are Christ-like people, "love and peace" is a hollow slogan, a sounding of brass and a tinkling of cymbal.

We would still be a people of hope, naming emptiness and evil, announcing possibility and promise. And we would still call our neighbors not only to faithfulness, but also to those lovely Sabbath retreats that strike down routines and distractions by which we might otherwise fritter our lives away.

And we would still be a city set on a hill, a complex political as well as spiritual reality. This is no call for disorganized religion, nor am I forgetful of the good and generous work done by those who lead us. But in both 1861 and 1872, once at an organizational meeting and once in a statement of our belief, the Adventist pioneers said no to enforced uniformity. Later, in 1901, they said no to "kingly power." A new kind of Adventism would not only honor Christ; it would also honor them. ■

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