



The Heresy Trap | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

If it weren't for actual Adventist congregations and the gifts they bestow, I might drown my sorrows—and myself—in a vat of chocolate. It would be time, let me tell you, for a truly diverting indulgence.

Right now what I will call the Heresy Trap is gravely damaging our church. This trap has fear as a consequence and truth for a victim, and it is driving the love out of Adventism. Especially for employees and laypersons engaged in the church's conversation, we are fractured. We have become a low-trust, adversarial community.

But congregations! Here and there such embodiments of welcome, generosity, and hope! They all proclaim impossible ideals and take in the fallible and fallen, with results not always easy to appreciate. But I have repeatedly felt in them the wonder of shared life, and of Sabbath rest that comes like the "caress" of which Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel spoke, assuaging sorrow and sowing joy.¹

I am so grateful. I will mention three such congregations in a moment. But now a truth less sunny.

In early July, a man long employed by the church for his writing and editing skills posted on *Spectrum's* website an essay called "Top Ten Things I Wish I Could Change About the Adventist Church."² But it began as follows: "Up front, let me say that this isn't something I'd ever have risked writing while on the church payroll!"

The remark distracted from the substance, at least at the beginning. Adventist websites attract not a few participants with no investment in the church's life except to tear it down, and some of them weighed in: What sort of church would be so intolerant of honest conversation, or put such fear into the hearts of its employees?

Then a reader expressed surprise that the author was dismayed over the church's discord, its "increasing polarity." After all, the "shaking" is on the way, and discord is "to be expected." Another reader chimed in. We should look to becoming "more polarized," he said; as we edge toward "the conclusion of human history," it's "unavoidable."

At this, those who speak disdain and little else were no doubt feeling vindicated. A church fear-ridden and divided, and *people OK with it*—what could be more futile?

But if mutual respect would improve on mutual disdain, why are so many of our leaders and outspoken members determined to enforce doctrinal uniformity when that effort is bound to be divisive? It's true that disagreement hurts. But isn't there a more peaceable way of dealing with it than the attempt to coerce? The price of *insisting on one's own way* is low-trust, adversarial relationships—why does it seem worth paying?

The answer is the Heresy Trap. In the New Testament period and for years after, doctrinal disagreement led to conversation—strong words, too!—but not to a congealing of thought decreed by a clerical elite. The familiar concept of "heresy" was unknown. There was no creed, no determination to impose uniformity of belief, no punishable deviance from hierarchically established orthodoxy. Instead there was confidence that God's Spirit, present in the intimacy of shared life, would assist in the living out of agreements and working through of disagreements. Despite the complexity and messiness of human interaction, God's Spirit would somehow assure a direction consonant with the divine will.

But when Constantine began to preside over

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discussions of doctrine (he hosted and hovered over the Council of Nicaea), an imperial mindset infected not only the church's institutional life, but also its theology. As deviance from policy preoccupies emperors, deviance from orthodoxy now preoccupies church leaders. Now hierarchical authority would compel (or try to compel) doctrinal uniformity.

Thus heresy—deviance from *official* doctrine—came to be. The ideal of addressing difference through conversation among equals (equals in status if not influence) drifted out of sight. Nonclerical, or low-status, members mattered less. Nor did truth itself do well. With leaders that were heresy obsessed and lay people less engaged, no one noticed that Constantine had become an idol, or that festering anti-Semitism was a betrayal of Christ.

These developments hardened into a replacement for the New Testament ethos, and the replacement became dominant. Although our pioneers resisted it (see the first paragraph of the 1872 Statement of Adventist Beliefs), the dominance of the imperial twist on church life remains overwhelming, and today most Adventist members and church leaders seem unaware of the heresy story and forgetful of our own pioneers.³

So the price of doctrinal uniformity—low-trust, adversarial relationships—seems worth paying because we're feeding off, and bewitched by, a story not our own. It's the story of the Constantinianization, or Romanization, of the church. The result is that we're now *trapped* by the concept of heresy—trapped, that is, into an ethos of top-down control and distrust. If you are reading these remarks you know, from one angle or another, how this feels.

Still, the best of congregations continue to heal and inspire.

When I visited the Church of the Advent Hope in New York City a few months ago, remarks of welcome from a young Asian woman nearly brought me to my feet like one of those overwhelmed talent show judges on TV: so winsome she was, and so full of thankfulness *for her congregation*. Then a layperson, a brilliant young attorney, gave one of the most arresting sermons I have ever heard. (My wife and I loved the potluck, and became guests for a Sabbath afternoon visit to the Bronx Zoo.)

In early May, I spent a weekend with Adventkirken Betel in downtown Oslo, Norway. The prayer and song and conversation—and friendships new and renewed—were as bracing as the scent of the sea. Questions bespoke a life-affirming curiosity. There was again shared food, and in the body of Christ there was joy and purpose. I felt

myself made whole by the good company.

At the end of June, I spoke for Communion at the Los Angeles Chinese Seventh-day Adventist Church. My hands washed a brother's feet and his washed mine. I received the bread and Communion wine from one of many participating young people. The potluck was a whole-church affair, Asian, healthy, and good. The pastor's school-age son sat across from me, making me laugh.

Earlier that day, a Sabbath School class had discussed the book of Malachi, and the phrase I fastened onto was "covenant of life and peace." I thought: If bickering is futile, what could be more fruitful than life and peace? Who *doesn't* want life and peace? And if these are the core of God's intention, why shouldn't they be the core of ours?

Statements about a church's beliefs are a record of current understanding. But the Heresy Trap really is—a *trap*. So perhaps no one should be blamed for forgetting the suggestion in our 1872 document that God-fearing leaders may act on our behalf, but may *not* close off conversation through top-down control. Once we remember that document, however, and once we remember that the story of heresy itself is deeply heartbreaking, we have no excuse.

It would be a course-changing strategy if we *empowered* congregations and other near-to-the-issue bodies, like conferences and boards, to work through their disagreements—with help from other leaders, but without authoritarian provocation. Christ is present in small groups (Matt. 18), and through the Father and the Spirit, Christ protects our fundamental unity (John 14–17). If we could trust again, and if the jaws of the Heresy Trap could fall away, life and peace would have a better chance in Adventism. ■

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References

1. Heschel writes, "The Sabbath comes like a caress, wiping away fear, sorrow, and somber memories." Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).
2. Ken McFarland, "Top Ten Things I Wish I Could Change About the Adventist Church," *Spectrum*, accessed July 2, 2013, <http://spectrum-magazine.org/node/5365>.
3. Uriah Smith, *A Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by the Seventh-day Adventists* (Battle Creek, MI: SDA Publishing Association, 1872), cited in Jerry Moon, "The Adventist Trinity Debate," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 41 (July 2003): 113–129, accessed July 16, 2013, <http://www.sdanet.org/atissue/trinity/moon/moon-trinity1.htm>.