



What's Better Than a Fight? | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

Adventist fundamentalists—and those who are not—meet at a perpetual crossroads: the local congregation. There they deliberate together in Sabbath School classes, pray and sing in collective worship, share potluck duty in the fellowship hall. Some of them return for board meetings on weekday evenings. They are bound together by ample, even energizing, solidarity. When these perspectives collide divisively, the occasion is often educational or bureaucratic, in settings where the disagreeing parties neither sing nor eat together. Both participant and onlooker commentary ramps up, and sharp-edged words fly here and there like shrapnel. Always, it seems, some of us care more about (our version of) doctrinal correctness than about Christian life humbly shared, even across lines of disagreement.

The New Testament ideal of *koinonia*—fellowship, life in common—presumes a moral vision that ought, when we are quarreling, to bring us up short. In true Christian fellowship, Paul wrote to the Philippians, we embrace humility instead of conceit. Putting others' interests ahead of our own, we serve, even suffer, for the good of all, and think of others as "better than" ourselves (Phil. 2).

Humility, not toadying subservience. Both Paul and Jesus stood up for what they believed; against strong opposition, both advanced controversial visions of human authenticity. New Testament *koinonia* is fully compatible, then, with intellectual integrity in the face of disagreement. Still, genuine intellectual integrity acknowledges human limits—allows that we know, in part, that

we hold our treasure in earthen vessels. Such integrity allows, too, that love matters more than knowledge—that the only thing that counts is faith working through love. Love is the one indispensable sign of our having passed from death to life.

So intellectual integrity is one thing, but intellectual self-indulgence is another. The latter consists in bloated and inconsiderate conviction of one's own rightness, and it is vice pure and simple. Self-indulgence, as Paul suggested in Galatians 5, renders the *love of neighbor* null and void, and gives expression to "desires of the flesh" that oppose the work of the Holy Spirit. These desires generate a whole catalogue of depravities, among them "enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions. . . ." Paul went on to say, by contrast, that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness and self-control."

Just now there is considerable pressure in Adventism to conform to an official—and highly detailed—doctrinal standard. There is great preoccupation with eliminating loopholes from the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs, great determination to sharpen the boundaries of acceptable conviction. But if we had a New Testament perspective on "revival and reformation" (a cliché but still a worthwhile goal), wouldn't we think twice about pushing too hard for uniformity of thought? How can a community of the finite shed all disagreement, or even all substantive disagreement? Who is privy to the God's-eye view?

Every student of the Adventist pioneers knows that we first saw creed-like statements of
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