

that we humans can't get along?

I will save you the drama of wondering if I am saying such a scandalous thing. I am saying this scandalous thing. But I am not all that fearful in saying it, for the fact that God is the original source of the division that convulses the world is actually a fact well established by the Bible. And the Bible also tells us why He did it. [Quotes Genesis 11:1–9, the Tower of Babel.]

Today I want to take a risk similar to the one Jesus took in Matthew 23, of speaking directly against a mentality and way of thinking that many think to be right. The text for consideration is Matthew 23:13–39, a passage commonly known as “The Woes to the Pharisees,” where Jesus finally lays everything on the line and directly confronts the subtle and not-so-subtle sin at the heart of the religion of the scribes and Pharisees. It's a make-or-break moment, after which the Pharisees will either have to repent or see to it that Jesus is destroyed. And it is not many days after that Jesus, at their instigation, is crucified. It is a passage worthy of deep contemplation leading to repentance, for we too can fall into many of the attitudes and behaviors that Jesus describes.

Yet it is not Jesus' specific words from this passage that have inspired me today, but instead it is His example that compels me. What example? His willingness to take a risk and say what needs saying, even in a time when such a saying might not be very well received. And so, with considerable fear and trembling, I hope to do just that—say what needs saying.

There are two contexts to which I want to speak today, and I am likely to trouble many who hear me with either the first or the second contextual application. I want to speak to you about fallen humans, and the grave perils of unity, and our desperate dependence upon division. I suspect I will be misunderstood by some, but it seems to me to be a risk worth taking.

A Babylon of division

I suggested that I believe the divisions we see in the world, and that indeed cause us so much pain, are a blessing given to us by the

God who loves us. And I suggested that the reason God gave us division is found in Genesis 11, specifically in the story of the Tower of Babel. We need to go there again, but we dare not stay too long, just long enough to learn a quick lesson about fallen humans, the perils of unity, and our desperate dependence upon division.

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, “Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth” (Gen. 11:1–4).

In case you have forgotten, the building of the city and the tower mentioned in Genesis 11 is recorded to have occurred after the flood, a biblical event of global impact, absurdly parodied in the current movie, *Noah*, and pretty much, without exception, dismissed by nearly all the so-called learned of this age, yet an event for which nearly all supposedly isolated cultures of the world seem to have a legend.

I find it more than just interesting that the Mesopotamians, the Greeks, the Mayans of Central America, the Ojibwa of North America, the Muisca of South America, and the ancient peoples of the Indian subcontinent all have flood narratives. Could the reason for this fact be what the Bible says next? “But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. The Lord said, ‘If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them’ ” (Gen. 11:5, 6).

Now, one could mistake the saying in verse 6 as a positive in that the united humans, who were seeking to stay together, were, by merit of their unity, able to do wonderful things.

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Yet the action the Lord takes because of this fact is not one that suggests God considered the almost limitless capacity of a world of united humans was in fact a good thing. Instead, it seems God thinks quite the opposite: “‘Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other’” (Gen. 11:7). And on that day, division was born: division by the design and by the hand of God.

“So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth” (Gen. 11:8, 9).

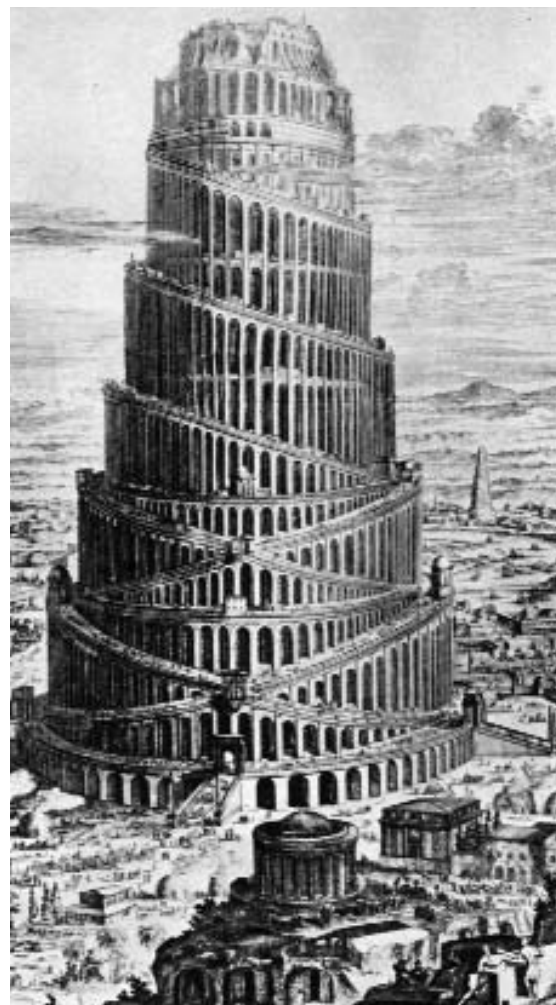
So, why did God divide us? Why, if when we are united, we are so much more efficient, so much more effective, so much more able, why would God step in to divide us in the first place, and, if current reality is any indicator, continue to allow us to remain divided? Based on this story, here’s why I believe He did it: God had to divide us in order to save us.

When fallen humans were united, it was a unity of great strength, but it was also a unity of rebellion and defiance, one that would have led to our total destruction. And so God divided the kingdoms of fallen humans and made us weak. Setting us each against the other so that later we would be unable to mount a united resistance against Him when He would invade the earth with Jesus and with the Kingdom of God.

Remember, a house divided against itself cannot stand. Therefore God set the houses of the kingdoms of men against each other so that our kingdoms of rebellion would one day fall, and the reign of Jesus would begin.

But something bad happened on the way to the Kingdom: the Kingdom people got united, and then by being united, nearly destroyed the Kingdom they claimed they were trying to build. And this is where our thinking today begins to become quite dangerous, for from

here, the chances of offending become legion. Yet we can’t stop now. We haven’t yet made it back to Matthew 23. So, Lord willing, we must press on.



FR. ATHANASIOS KIRCHER, RECONSTRUCTION OF THE TOWER OF BABEL, XVIITH CENTURY

The divided early church

After Jesus, God established His Church on earth to be the keepers and proclaimers of Jesus’ story, announcing the Good News of salvation by faith for all fallen humans who will believe, and declaring the great hope of the resurrection of the dead to life in a world made new.

But there were divisions, conflicts, false teachers, and deceivers. For you see, the earth was still full of fallen humans. And soon enough, so was the church.

To be fair, it has always been that way, full of fallen humans, even from the earliest days, like when the church in Jerusalem was nearly

torn apart by a cultural conflict regarding aid to widows, or like when Paul and Barnabas disagreed so violently about Mark that their ministry partnership collapsed, and they went their separate ways with different ministry partners.

And division was certainly already present in Corinth, where one group claimed to be followers of Peter, while another group claimed Paul, a third was loyal to Apollos, and a fourth tried to pass themselves off as only following Christ.

Not even the happy-clappy church in Philippi was able to escape divisions, as Paul had to specifically write: "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord" (Phil. 4:2).

And so what does this teach us? That as long as fallen humans are a part of the church, the church will have to confront divisions. And since everyone who is a part of the church is a fallen human, I guess it is safe to say that the church will never escape this dilemma fully.

So it is not so much the existence of divisions in the church that in the long run becomes the problem, for indeed, what other option is there? Rather, it is in how the church deals with the inevitable divisions that the true danger lies, and it was in its desperate effort to be united that the church nearly destroyed itself.

The story goes like this: As long as the apostles were still alive, the church had access to living authorities who could, and usually would, resolve the inevitable conflicts that arose simply by deciding who was right and who was wrong. But after they were gone, what now? It's not like the divisions went away. In fact, if you study the history, the divisions increased.

Yet, there they were, the church in desperate need of unity in order to fulfill the God-given purpose of proclaiming salvation to all through Christ.

And so they did what they thought they could: for the sake of unity, they appointed elders in their local churches for the purpose

of leadership and conflict resolution. Then when the churches in the towns came into conflict, they appointed overseers in the towns to settle the conflicts between the churches. But when divisions formed between the overseers of one town and the overseers of another (such as the bitter rivalry that developed between Antioch in modern-day Syria and Alexandria in modern-day Egypt, ironically two places where it is difficult to find any Christians today), the churches tried calling councils of overseers together to try to resolve the problems.

It kind of worked, but eventually the overseers who couldn't get what they wanted from one council of overseers would then call together a rival council of overseers and seek to overthrow the rulings of the other. In the end, for the sake of unity, there was really only one option left: choose someone to be the final word on all church matters so that we can finally, once and for all, put down all these divisions and rebellions and finally be united.

The intent was good: this individual would be a good and faithful man of God who would rule from love for his fellow men and divine insight from God. But somehow, these things just never seem to work out in the long run.

Sad history of "unity"

What I am suggesting to you today is troubling: it was primarily a high-minded drive for a practical unity amongst the believers that produced the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages:

- For the sake of deliverance from the discomfort of interpersonal divisions, the believers slowly sacrificed their individual and local responsibilities and freedoms in Christ for the simplicity of the inerrant rulings of a remote, external judicial authority.
- For the sake of clarity in doctrine, they gave up their solemn duty to search out the truth for themselves, choosing instead to trust the latest mandates from their chosen doctrinal authoritarians.

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- For the sake of functional unity, they gave up their functional divisions, thereby cutting themselves off from the only defense that has ever saved fallen humans from the disasters that happen whenever they finally get united.
- This very day, Venezuela writhes in the aftermath of “unity” under Chavez.
- And in North Korea, an absurd man named Kim Jong Un kills his starving people in an effort to keep them “united,”



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Make no mistake, the church of the Middle Ages did manage to achieve a “unity,” in that everyone who would agree with what the church said could be united, but everyone who would not had a rather short list of possible outcomes, most being very unpleasant: excommunication, economic persecution, physical torture, death.

This list, or one very much like it, has always been where fallen humanity’s drive for unity ends up, because eventually you have to have some way of dealing with heretics. I mean, pick your ideology and pick your era of human history:

- The Roman Empire’s “unity” had to persecute Jews and later Christians because they refused to be united.
- We already listed the wretched abuses inflicted in the name of Christian “unity.”
- In the last century, millions died in Russia in a struggle for “unity” under Joseph Stalin.
- And millions more died as a result of German “unity” under Hitler.
- Long has Cuba suffered under the “unity” of Castro.

while to his south, people of the same ethnic make-up prosper strikingly by laboring to live in a society that accepts divisions as essential to survival.

So am I saying that unity is bad? No, I’m not. What I’m saying is that unity for fallen humans is dangerous. And because it is so dangerous, we must always be on our guard against those who call us to compromise our freedoms or our convictions for the sake of unity.

The bishop and the pope

It is true enough that a house divided against itself cannot stand. But then, whoever said every house that currently stands needs to keep standing? Some houses need to fall, especially the ones that maintain their standing through tyranny, or the ones that seek to establish their tyranny by playing upon the ignorance of the people.

All of which brings me to a quite remarkable event that took place in February of this year [2014]. At a gathering of Pentecostal ministers hosted by noted Pentecostal televi-

sion celebrity Kenneth Copeland, a most unexpected presentation was made by a man named Tony Palmer. Bishop Palmer, as he is referred to, was noted as a leader in the Communion of Evangelical Episcopal Churches, Celtic Anglican Tradition, meaning he wasn't actually Anglican, but rather from a group that departed from the Anglican Church.²

It turns out that Bishop Tony Palmer was friends for years with a certain Jorge Mario Bergoglio, who might be better known to you as Pope Francis, the recently elected head of the Catholic Church.

Kenneth Copeland invited Bishop Palmer to address the gathered Pentecostal ministers, and he came with a rather startling proclamation: The Catholic Church has changed its position on atonement and reached an agreement with the Lutherans on the matter. Therefore, the protest of Luther is over, and there should no longer be such a thing as a Protestant, for the protest is over. We can all be united again as one church under Jesus, the way God intended things to be.

Now you have to admit, if you weren't already skewed to think against any such thing, the notion of Christian unity might sound pretty good, right? And if you are largely ignorant of what the Bible says about salvation, and that the Protestant Reformation was about way more than just one simple issue of atonement, but you know that society is always beating the drum around you, calling for the "tolerant unity of all humankind," and that somewhere the Bible must say something about love and unity, it would be very hard to not welcome this as potentially good news. I mean, Christian unity—what could be better than that, right?

It was intriguing to note the rather stunned responses coming from the gathered ministers. Yet, sadly they soon enough figured out they were supposed to be all in for this, and began to applaud and cheer quite raucously after what in another context probably would have seemed to them some pretty crazy things to say.

And then the whole scenario got even more strange when Bishop Palmer cued the AV team to play for the ministers a personal video message from Pope Francis. The message was seemingly shot on the spur of the moment by Bishop Palmer on his iPhone, just days before when he had been visiting the pontiff in Vatican City.

And, boy, does Pope Francis ever come off as a totally sincere God-follower who loves the poor and longs that the body of Christ be reunited. And in truth, I'm not even sure I would be bold enough to claim he isn't just that. For all I know, his motives might actually be pure.

But here's the thing: it doesn't matter what his motives are, because if the unity he speaks of were to be achieved, it wouldn't be to the glory of God. We've been down this road already, and one doesn't need to be an Adventist to know where it ended up last time.

But back to the event: if you thought the whole thing couldn't get any more bizarre, then you didn't watch long enough to see and hear Kenneth Copeland get up and, after expressing what a miracle it is and how thrilled he is and how much he just loves the pope, then proceed to lead the room in a prayer in tongues that the pope would prosper.

I have to tell you, rather than being inspired or frightened by it all, I found myself almost having to laugh at the absurdity. First you hear the sharp, biting, staccato cadence of Bishop Palmer, speaking terse, demanding phrases in his South African accent. Then you hear the Spanish/Italian accent of Pope Francis, delivered plaintively, appealingly, almost more grandfatherly than fatherly. And to wrap it all up, there is Kenneth Copeland with his good-ole-boy southern Christian drawl.

There is Palmer with his pseudo-theology declaring the end of the Protestant Reformation, Francis with his call to reunion based on the willingness of us all to share the blame for the tragic divisions the Reformation caused, and Copeland with his "the Spirit done told me this is good" attitude that blows by all chance for rational dissent by suggesting,

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without saying it, that “anyone not in agreement with me just can’t be very spiritual, now, can they.”

It leaves me with this thought: the only two things the three of you are actually united on

While the call for unity may sound high-minded, and may in fact be well intended, and in principle to be greatly desired, still I am very wary of it.



is the absurd notion that you are united and the potential benefits each of you might gain by promulgating this illusion of unity.

And so, gentlemen, I have to say to you, I cannot be united with you, for the only unity you can call me to is unity under the authority of fallen man. And no matter how much unity might sound good to me, it’s not worth that. So you will have to count me out. I think I’ll stick with division for now.

Issues in our ranks

But this is just the first case we must consider today, for while we may be well enough predisposed to stay away from any tyrannical unity involving the Charismatics and the Catholic Church, are we equally as vigilant to the tyranny that can arise from calls for unity within our own ranks? Or did you think the dangers of unity only applied to everyone who wasn’t one of us?

In the event you hadn’t noticed, let me just say, the past couple of years have exposed significant division and strain within our own spiritual community, the Adventist Church, divisions that have seemingly coalesced into sustained strife between our own versions of ancient Antioch and ancient Alexandria. Both “sides,” to use a less-than-ideal word to describe them, have developed to a greater or lesser degree their own networks of support and communication, and each has its favorite leading voices and events.

Divisions aren’t fun. Instead they are always stressful and sometimes downright painful. And for a church like ours, where we place an extremely high value on the specifics of both our theology and our practice, divisions of the nature and extent we currently see frighten us.

Because divisions can be very painful, and because we are a people called by God to the mission of proclaiming the soon coming of Jesus, the appeal to unity at any cost is compelling, because how can we ever finish the work if we are divided?

And so for many years it has been the appeal of the leaders of the Adventist Church that we as a worldwide communion of faith do all we can to stay united in purpose, united in theology, and united in practice. And while I agree in principle with the intentions of such a call, to what ends should we go to answer it? And while worldwide unity sounds wonderful, could the drive to achieve this lofty dream not in fact prove to be as perilous to us as it was to the believers fifteen centuries ago? And to what extent does division actually serve us?

Rather than being the only thing holding us back from the successful fulfillment of our mission, is it possible that, in truth, division is the main thing that keeps us from tyrannical apostasy, either on the left or on the right?

No issue has pushed our primary division like the issue of the recognition of the role of women in pastoral ministry in the Adventist Church. And while I might easily forgive a bias on this issue against the role and recognition of women in someone from a small church where no woman has been a pastor, or the bias of someone from a culture where women have not been given the chance, I must admit I am hard pressed to see how someone from this church could regard the contributions of Bernie, or Mark, or Delwin, or me³ to be worthy of greater organizational acknowledgement than those of Sabine or Barbara⁴ (excluding Patty only because her training is in education, and pastors always discriminate against them).

But we have, I believe, in the name of unity, created a real mess for ourselves. And because this mess has become so messy, we are starting to hear a very dangerous call, the call to set the demands of unity above conviction. The argument goes this way: maybe it is OK to ordain women, and maybe it isn't. The voices are strong on both sides. But since we can't all agree, for the sake of unity, you must adopt the decision of the majority, even if doing so violates your conscience. Nothing matters more than unity.

To which I say no, I cannot be united with you on this, for this is a call to unity under fallen man. And forced unity on that basis never ends well. And while the call for unity may sound high-minded, and may in fact be well intended, and in principle to be greatly desired, still I am very wary of it, for despite the fact that division is inefficient and disconcerting and sometimes very painful, history has not shown that the greatest of the dangers to fallen man lie in our divisions, but instead it is the unity of fallen man that has resulted in the worst of our sins.

What I cannot do

And so I have to say, not just to Bishop Palmer and Pope Francis and Kenneth Copeland, but to my own family of faith as well, it is not the discomfort of our open-minded division that I fear, but instead it is the peril of a coerced, blind unity under fallen man that unsettles my soul. And whenever you call me to sacrifice conscience for unity, I will have to respectfully say no, no matter who you are.

I cannot, for the sake of deliverance from the discomfort of interpersonal divisions, sacrifice my individual and local responsibilities and freedoms in Christ just to gain the simplicity of an inerrant ruling from a remote, external, judicial authority. To do so is to take a step toward Rome and toward tyranny under fallen humans.

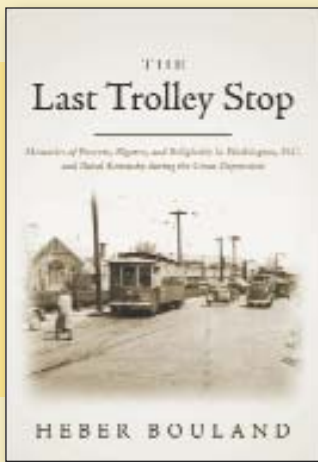
I cannot for the sake of clarity in doctrine give up my solemn duty to search out the truth for myself. Truth is not established by majority vote, and I cannot sacrifice my solemn individual duty to seek truth to any council, no matter how righteously it might be formed. To do so is to take a step toward Rome and to tyranny under fallen humans.

And I cannot, for the sake of functional unity, give up the intentional, functional divisions built into our church structure to protect us from unity gone wrong. To do so is to take a step toward Rome and to tyranny under fallen humans.

Any rightly constituted body of the Adventist Church, be it local church, conference, or union that sacrifices, in the name of unity, its God-given decision-making responsibility to the next organizational level is by the act abdicating its sacred duty to protect us from runaway unity and leading us one step closer to Rome.

I'm not saying we can't agree. What I'm saying is that we can't agree to agree before we know for sure what we are agreeing on, for the hearts of fallen humans are deceitful, even the hearts of mostly righteous, God-appointed humans. And we must never come, against con-

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science, either willingly or under coercion, under the tyranny of the unity of fallen humans.

There is only One to whom we must give final allegiance: His name is Jesus. Make no mistake. He does call us to unity. But it is unity under His wings. And here finally we find our way back to Matthew 23, and to these words: " 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing' " (Matthew 23:37).

Jesus is calling us to unity, but not to unity under fallen man. Rather only to unity in Him, a unity that will only come in fullness when Jesus comes again.

It is not wrong for me to be united with other humans. Indeed, it is essential. But I must never sacrifice my primary allegiance to Jesus to that of any institution or organization of fallen men, even if I know their intentions to be good. And not only must I live with divisions, I must also recognize my desperate dependence upon divisions as my primary protection against the perils of unfettered unity. And I must fight against the efforts of any who would seek a coerced union.

It might seem, from this, all is danger and there is no hope. But to believe this is to admit our hope is in the houses of fallen man rather than in the everlasting Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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References

1. This article is adapted from a sermon delivered at the Forest Lake Seventh-day Adventist Church on April 12, 2014. Some oral elements of the presentation have been retained.
2. Tony Palmer died in a motorcycle accident in the UK on July 20, 2014.
3. Male pastors of Forest Lake Seventh-day Adventist Church in Apopka, Florida.
4. Female pastors of Forest Lake Seventh-day Adventist Church.