Toward a Theology of Unity | BY JOHN BRUNT

DISCUSSED | unity, diversity, ανακεφαλαιωσασθαι, the great "un-Babel," eating with Gentiles

The Basis for Unity

If you go to a synagogue service you will be sure to hear the following words sung, probably more than once: *Shema Yisrael adonai elohenu, adonai echad*. "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." This is the central affirmation of the Jewish faith, found in Deuteronomy 6:4.[1]

The "oneness" of Yahweh is the basis for unity, for, unlike other ancient religions where the national god was seen as one of many gods, each of whom ruled over its own nation, the Hebrew Scriptures teach that Yahweh is not only Israel's God, but is the God of all and the Creator of all. If God is one, and the creation is one, God's universe should be a perfect unity.

According to the Scripture, however, the unity of God's creation was disrupted by human failure and rebellion against God. Human sin led to alienation and violence, as seen when Cain murdered Abel. The disruption of unity is portrayed in the account of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. In their pride and arrogance, the people tried to build a great tower to make a name for themselves. God chose to scatter them, as we read in Genesis 11:5–9.

> *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. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."*
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> *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.*

The Hebrew Scripture is largely the story of God's faithfulness in the face of human failure. God formed a special covenant with the descendants of Abraham, yet there was no question that the whole world was still in God's view. Notice Exodus 19:4–6, where God instructs Moses to tell the people,

> *You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.* Although the whole earth is mine, *you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*

God is God of the whole earth, but Israel was chosen to be a kingdom of priests who would mediate God's love and will to the rest of the world. God's goal was the reunification of all people and of all things so that the entire creation would again express the oneness of God and the harmony of creation. Over and over again, human failure got in the way of this purpose. Throughout the history of God's dealing with Israel the vision continues to reappear. God wants to restore the unity of creation.

The Mystery of Reunification

When it appeared that God's plan would never come to fruition, for the people of God were ruled by Rome and were in disarray, Jesus Christ, God's only Son, came to unveil the "mystery" or "secret" of God's plan. In the language of the New Testament the term "mystery" is not something that cannot be known, but is known only to those who are in on the secret. Ephesians 1:8–10 lets the world in on God's secret, revealed in Jesus Christ:

> *With all wisdom and insight, he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (NRSV)*

The word translated "to gather up" is one of the longest words in the Greek New Testament (eight syllables) and is difficult to translate in a way that captures the full beauty of the term. The Greek word is ανακεφαλαιωσασθαι (*anakephalaiosasthai*). It is a combination of the preposition *ana*, which in combination means "up" or "again," and the word for "head." Literally it means to sum things up under one head. The word's only other occurrence in the New Testament comes in Romans 13:9, where Paul says that all the commandments are "summed

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up" under the one word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." God's secret plan, now made known in Christ, is to unify all things in the universe, both in heaven and on earth, in Jesus Christ. This includes both the human world and the natural world, as Paul emphasizes in Romans 8:20–23:

> *For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.*

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.[2]

The rest of the book of Ephesians gives witness and detail to this plan of unification. In the early part of chapter 2 we find that not only is Jesus Christ seated in the heavenly realms, but we, too, are there with Him. The latter part of chapter 2 proclaims that the walls that stood between peoples, especially Jew and Gentile, are now shattered in Christ, who has become the "peace" that brings both groups together (2:11–14).

In chapter 3 Paul prays that all Christians will be able to grasp the seemingly incredible dimensions of God's love in Christ.

Chapter 4 begins with the admonition that Christians live a life worthy of this amazing good news, which means being humble, gentle and patient with each other. Then Paul tells Christians to make "every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond peace" (Ephesians 4:3). The word translated "unity" (*henoteta*, ενοτητα) is only used twice in the New Testament, here and ten verses later in verse 13. It comes from the word for "one" and simply means "oneness." According to verse 13, it is in coming into unity that believers reach maturity, which is nothing less than the full stature of Christ.

Verses 4–6 of the fourth chapter set forth the essential elements of unity in the church: one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God over all. Here we find that theological unity is clearly an aspect of this oneness. The New Testament presents different perspectives. Witness the difference between Paul and John's use of the term "flesh," or James and Paul's use of the word "faith." Yet a core of beliefs is essential to Christian faith. For example, Paul speaks of how dangerous it is to deny the resurrection of Christ and of the believers (1 Corinthians 15), and John shows the danger of denying that Christ has come in the flesh (2 John 7). Theology is important because ideas have consequences. "One hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God over all" draws the church to theological unity in these essentials.

In chapters 5 and 6 we discover that unity also has implications for how Christians live in individual households. They are to be mutually subject to each other out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21). This mutual subjection includes husbands and wives, parents and children, as well as slaves and masters.

Throughout Ephesians we find a variety of metaphors and images to help communicate the shape of this unity.[3] In Ephesians 2:19–22 the church is compared to a family or household; to a building, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ as the chief cornerstone; and to a temple in which God comes to dwell, where members are the individual stones in the structure. All these images imply unity. Unity is also the focus in the metaphor of the body of Christ where each member serves as an indispensible part of an organism whose head is Christ (Ephesians 4). This image is worked out in more detail, of course, in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12.

One might get the idea from Ephesians that this idyllic portrait of unity in Christ came easily and naturally in the early church. We must remember, however, that Ephesians is one of the least "occasional" letters in the New Testa-

Perhaps he felt that this voted policy was not necessary for all time or for all places or for all situations.

ment. When we turn to Acts and the letters that are more specific in addressing real life problems within individual churches, we find that unity came through struggle. It was forged amid conflict, controversy, and compromise at both the local and worldwide level.

The Struggle for Unity

Worldwide Unity

The post-resurrection experience of the early church begins with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in Acts 2. In a sense, this is the great "un-Babel." The Spirit works to undo the disunity of Babel. As God confused the languages in Genesis 11, the Spirit now allows the message of good news to transcend the various languages so that all can understand, whatever their language might be. The Spirit brings unity to a diverse collection of nationalities gathered in Jerusalem.

This unity, however, was not easily achieved in the new church. It would have been quite possible for early Christianity to divide into two totally separate communities, one of Jewish Christians and the other of Gentile Christians. No one was more committed to holding these two together than the apostle Paul, as we find both in his letters and in Luke's account of his ministry in the book of Acts.

Paul's fundraising activity provides a particularly vivid example of his work to hold the Jewish and Gentile Christians together in unity. Over a period of years he took up a collection throughout the Gentile churches to help the financially disadvantaged church in Jerusalem. He collected funds in Galatia, Macedonia, and Achaia, and was not above using the example of giving in one place to encourage Christians in another place not to be outdone (see 1 Corinthians 16:1–4 and 2 Corinthians 8).

In Romans 15, we discover what this collection represented to Paul. According to verses 23–26, Paul's plan when he wrote from Corinth was to travel to Spain, via Rome. But first he was taking a little detour to Jerusalem to deliver personally the money he had collected. In other words, he was going 780 air miles in the opposite direction (and he didn't fly) for the sake of this collection. That's how important it was to him. And it was important not only because Jerusalem needed the money. It was important as a theological symbol of the unity of the church, as we see in verses 25–27:

> *At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things. (NRSV)*

Through a kind of financial interdependence, Paul sought to hold the Jewish and Gentile Christians together in one body. This is evidence that for Paul unity meant more than local fellowship. He envisioned a worldwide unity that embraced all Christians from Jerusalem to Asia Minor to Greece to Rome and, as he hoped, even on to Spain. The financial collection provided a tangible symbol of this worldwide unity.

Earlier in this same chapter (Romans 15:7–13), Paul reveals the clue to the origin of this vision for unity. It goes back to his reading of the Scriptures. Through the patriarchs, prophets, and psalmists, God revealed the plan for unifying all creation by including the Gentiles. Within the flow of this passage, Paul quotes from 2 Samuel 22:50, Psalm 18:49, Deuteronomy 32:43, Psalm 117:1, and Isaiah 11:10, all of which shout to him that God's plan for unity was not a recent novelty, but was revealed through the Scriptures to anyone who read with eyes of faith. Paul says,

> *Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on*

The Hebrew Scripture is largely the story of God's faithfulness in the face of human failure.

behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

"Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles,
and sing praises to your name";

and again he says,

"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people";

and again,

"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples praise him";

and again Isaiah says,

"The root of Jesse shall come,
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;
in him the Gentiles shall hope."

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (NRSV)

"One hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God over all" draws the church to theological unity in these essentials.

This vision of unity between Jew and Gentile drove Paul in his evangelistic activity, his theological reflection, and his practical action. Unity between Jew and Gentile was so vital that Paul was willing to travel close to 2,000 miles out of his way for it. He was willing to stand up and refuse to allow Titus to be circumcised for it (Galatians 2:3–5). He was willing to rebuke no less than the apostle Peter, face to face, to preserve it (Galatians 2:11–14). He was willing to endure the hardships of beatings, stonings, shipwrecks, and prisons for it (2 Corinthians 11). He was even willing to accept James and the elders' suggestion that he go to the temple and sponsor a vow when he went to Jerusalem, even though he knew the danger, and ended up being arrested and spending the next five years as a prisoner (Acts 21:24).

Local Unity

Although Paul's vision of unity in Christ had a worldwide perspective, it took particular shape in the nitty-gritty of daily life at the local level, where Christians of diverse backgrounds welcomed each other by worshiping together, praying together, and eating together in peace and joyful fellowship. Unity in Christ broke down all the barrier walls that separated people and inhibited the joy of mutual fellowship. Christ brought a new equality that sought to include all people in one new reality in Christ, the *anakephalaiosasthai* of Ephesians 1. It included Jews and Greeks, men and women, slave and free (Galatians 3:28), as well as Scythian and barbarian (Colossians 3:11). It was for "all" who believed (Romans 1:16). Each one cared for the other so that when one suffered all mourned and when one was honored all rejoiced (1 Corinthians 12:26; Romans 12:15).

This fellowship was important from the very beginning of the church. According to Acts 2, the first believers met in the temple daily, not only for prayer and worship, but also for fellowship. Paul uses this word (κοινωνια, *koinonia*) no less than a dozen times in his letters. This unified fellowship is directly tied to mission as well. We read in Acts 2:47 that as believers met in unified fellowship, their numbers grew and many were added to their number daily. Unity is vital for mission.

Diversity within Unity

Some, if not many, in the early church believed that the only way to hold the church together and achieve this unity was to have complete uniformity of practice in all areas of Christian life for the entire body of diverse early Christians. If some Christians were circumcised, for example, all had to be circumcised. Peter, Paul, and James opposed this view at the Jerusalem Council, recorded in both Acts 15 and Galatians 2.[4] The Council agreed there could be one church that embraced both Jew and Gentile, but allowed Jews to continue practicing circumcision and Gentiles to become Christians without circumcision or becoming Jews first. It is hard for us in our culture to comprehend what a huge decision this was and what far-reaching implications it brought. *It achieved unity by allowing for diversity.* It maintained unity of purpose by allowing for

diversity of practice. In other words, it achieved the unity of inclusive fellowship by allowing for diverse practices that took into account the ethnic, cultural, and geographical diversity of the early church. Had the early church demanded unity in all practices and policies, it probably would have meant at least two different Christian churches, separate from, if not at odds with, each other.

For Paul, this allowance for diversity was not merely a pragmatic decision, however. It was a well-thought-out theological conviction. It had to do both with his ecclesiology and his theology of mission. He sets it forth in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, in the middle of a discussion about food offered to idols, which we will view in detail later.

> *For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.*
>
> *I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings. (NRSV)*

Paul is not saying, "Anything goes." What comes in the parentheses is vital. Allowance for diversity does not mean really being under the law, on the one hand, or being lawless toward Christ, on the other. Diversity does not mean that all is relative.

One way to give shape to this interplay between unity and diversity is to look at several case studies within the New Testament where Paul and Peter deal with controversies and threats to unity. How do they come to grips with them? What does this teach us about unity and diversity?

Threats to Unity—Case Studies

Inclusive, egalitarian fellowship was then and is now a fragile thing. Threats raised their ugly heads whenever Christians acted in ways that failed to embrace fully inclusive fellowship in Christ. Inclusiveness and egalitarian fellowship were absolutely essential ingredients in God's vision for unity. Whenever they were threatened, globally or locally, Paul was stirred to action. He could not stand idly by whenever real-life fellowship, acceptance, and welcoming of each other gave way to a prejudice that made any Christian, in any way, a second-class citizen.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the occasion in Antioch when Peter was eating with Gentiles, but then withdrew when certain people came from James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem. Paul says they did this for fear of the "circumcision." Eating with Gentiles could have made life difficult for Jewish Christians, who might find it awkward to continue table fellowship with their non-Christian relatives. It was probably a complex situation for many of them. For Paul, however, the issue was clear. Peter's refusal to eat with Gentiles, and Barnabas' decision to follow suit, was, for Paul, "hypocrisy" (Galatians 2:13), and Peter "stood condemned" (Galatians 3:11).

Peter's actions went against the important "all" of Romans 1:16. The exclusion of any from that "all" threatened the very heart of the gospel. That is why Paul was willing to say that anyone who preached a different gospel, even if it were an angel from heaven, was "anathema" (Galatians 1:8–9). The "different gospel" was condemned because of its existential implications, namely the disruption of inclusiveness and egalitarian fellowship.

We see the same kind of concern in Paul's treatment of divisions in the church in Corinth. In the first chapter of 1 Corinthians he speaks of the various factions that divided the church, and in chapter 11 he gives us a hint as to what this factionalism meant in the lived experience of the community. Again, it involved a lack of table fellowship. Each fac-

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Shema Yisrael adonai elohenu, adonai echad.

"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One."

tion ate separately and refused to share their food, so that some had plenty and others were hungry (1 Corinthians 11:21). This breakdown in Christian unity was so abhorrent that Paul calls it "contempt for the church of God" (1 Corinthians 11:22).

That this unity did not mean uniformity of all practices is demonstrated when Paul tackles a question put to him by the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 8–10). What about eating food offered to idols? In the first-century world, meat markets were generally adjacent to pagan temples and portions of most of the meat had been a part of pagan sacrifice. Paul's answer to their question was neither a "yes" nor a "no," but an "it depends." He takes three chapters to work out the factors upon which "it depends." Only at the end of chapter 10 does he get down to the specifics.

In the first part of chapter 10 Paul makes an important caveat. Christians are never to participate in the idolatry or the sexual immorality of pagan worship (1 Corinthians 10:1–23). This would violate God's law. No amount of "it depends" would ever justify such behavior. However, Christians didn't need to worry about what was sold in the meat market. They could eat it. And if invited to a non-Christian's house for dinner, they didn't need to ask questions about whether the food had been offered to an idol. But if a sensitive host pointed out that they might not want to eat certain food because it has been offered to an idol, out of sensitivity to the host, one should avoid it. And if eating would be a stumbling block and hurt another person for whom Christ died, the Christian with knowledge, in the position of power, should be willing to give up even legitimate rights for the sake of that more vulnerable person who might be injured.

Paul's allowance for diversity on this issue is especially remarkable because, according to Acts 15, the Jerusalem Council, in which he participated, voted to forbid eating food that had been offered to idols, without offering any exceptions (Acts 15:20, 29). Surprisingly, Paul never mentions the Council or its decision in this three-chapter discussion, even though 1 Corinthians was definitely written after the Council. The issue is complicated, but it appears that Paul was willing to go against the voted action of the Council. Perhaps he felt that this voted policy was not necessary for all time or for all places or for all situations. In this case, for Paul, good sense appears to trump adherence to voted policy.

When Peter followed the prompting of the Holy Spirit in Acts 10 and baptized the uncircumcised Cornelius and his household, Peter also had to know that this was hardly within the established practice of the early church at that time. This was before the Jerusalem Council. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Peter received criticism, as we see in Acts 11:2–3:

So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."

Peter seemed to convince the critics, however, that his actions were justified when he told them (in verse 17), "Who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?" He heard the Spirit speaking and felt compelled to follow, in spite of the current practice of the church.

Paul's viewpoint is seen in another discussion involving food, found in Romans 14–15. Here there is no reference to food offered to idols, but to the fact that some eat only vegetables and some eat meat.[6] There is also some kind of dispute involving days, perhaps fast days.[7] In Rome, people seem to be arguing about what to eat and when to eat it.[8]

Paul refused to give a single "right answer" to these Christians, but allowed for diversity of practice. He says that believers should be fully convinced in their own minds (Romans 14:5). Probably some would have been concerned that this was precisely the problem. The Roman house churches needed Paul to tell them what practice was correct. They needed him to give them the "right" answer; to get

them all doing the same thing; to bring them into "unity." But he didn't do it. He told those who were "more strict" (probably the meaning of "weak" in his context)[9] to stop judging the "less strict," and he told the "less strict" not to look down with scorn on the "more strict." Each could continue their own practice. In fact, those who were "more strict" were not to violate their convictions and do what they did not believe was right. And the less strict were not to act in a way that hurt the "more strict." This diversity of practice was not to be a deterrent to unity, for unity did not mean everyone doing it the same way, but it did mean welcoming each other even when they acted differently.

Paul's commitment to freedom of conscience was too great for him simply to give a "right answer" for everyone. Convictions were important and Christians needed to be free to follow them. The key word in the discussion is "welcome" (προσλαμβανω). Paul begins in 14:1 by commanding, "Welcome each other." In verse 3, he proclaims that God has welcomed them. At the end of the discussion in 15:7, he concludes, "Welcome each other as Christ has welcomed you." They need not have all the same convictions. They need not have the same practice. But it was vitally important that they have the same welcoming spirit of fellowship and mutual caring.

According to Paul, Christians must be free to follow their convictions, as long as those convictions are within the framework of God's will. Idolatry, adultery, bigotry, and prejudice are never within that framework. But the framework could include a significant diversity of practice as long as love, mutual respect, and reverence for each other prevailed. As he says in the middle of this discussion,

> *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval. (Romans 14:17–18)*

Of course, there were limits to inclusiveness within the community as well. If a person stubbornly and willfully flouted God's law and even the standards of the pagan world, such as the man who was living with his father's wife in 1 Corinthians 5, the community needed to cut off fellowship. But this was an extreme exception, and was for the purpose of awakening the individual and bringing him back to his senses.

In the normal experience of the church, however, the mystery of God's plan for unity was actualized and became reality when Christians welcomed each other, respected each other, and ate with each other, even when practice, policy, and preference differed

Conclusion—Toward a Theology of Unity

The elucidation of a full theology of unity is beyond the scope of this paper. But we should note several elements that this study concludes must be part of any theology of unity.

First, a theology of unity must give witness to the unity of God and all of creation. God created a unified world filled with diverse life forms who lived harmoniously within one ecosystem, and although this unified world was disrupted by human failure, the story of God's continuing faithfulness that permeates all of Scripture, both Old and New Testament, must be at the heart of any theology of unity.

Second, a theology of unity must take into account the New Testament teaching about God's mysterious plan to unite all things in Christ, as well as Jesus' desire to see His disciples united as one.

Third, a theology of unity must attempt to understand Paul's principled conviction, outlined in 1 Corinthians 9, that true unity could only be achieved by allowing for diversity. This is a great irony. Paul knew that trying to force all Christians, both Jew and Gentile, into one mold would ultimately destroy any real chance for unity. It would cause separation. A theology of unity will maintain this ironic tension.

Fourth, a theology of unity must take account of the actual, lived experience of the early

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church. How were these early Christians able to live together even when policies and practices differed so widely? And what were the kinds of issues that threatened to destroy their living together in peace? How were these threats overcome? Good theology is never merely theoretical. It learns from real experience.

Fifth, a theology of unity needs to include the analysis of our present life together in Christ. What are the elements that threaten our unity? What elements in our culture are analogous to issues like idolatry and adultery where Paul does not allow for diversity, and what elements are analogous to issues such as circumcision and food where he vigorously defends diversity?

Sixth, a theology of unity must explore the concept of freedom in Christ. Paul admonishes the believers in Rome who have different behavioral standards not only to welcome each other, but also to allow each to follow their own convictions. He teaches that it is wrong to violate one's convictions or to attempt to force others to violate their convictions. A sound theology of unity will also include a theology of respect for freedom of conscience.

Seventh, a theology of unity will struggle with the tension between individual integrity and communal identity. How do we live together in unity, uphold the community's identity, and maintain our own integrity? Perhaps stories from our own Adventist history can help us reflect on this dilemma.[10]

Eighth, a theology of unity should explore the relationship of financial interdependence to unity in the church. Paul gave high value to the collection of funds from the Gentile world for the poor in Jerusalem. Is financial interdependence still important today, and if so what forms should it take?

Finally, a theology of unity will benefit from exploring the many metaphors for the church found within the New Testament. These rich images speak to a part of us that goes deeper than words and should help us intuit the depths of Christian unity.

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Each of these issues would warrant a paper in itself (if not a book). They are presented in the hope that this paper will be a catalyst for future study.

As we reflect on all these elements, we must always remember two verses:

> *Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One (Deuteronomy 6:4).*

And:

> *With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to* anakephalaiosasthai *all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Ephesians 1:8–10).*

A Final Story

Since I'm a preacher, I have a hard time concluding without a story. Please indulge me this pastoral quirk.

When I pastored the Azure Hills Church in California we had the largest Adventurer Club in the North American Division. Over 200 four to nine year olds. Can you imagine taking all of them along with their parents camping? Our leaders did it twice every year. One annual weekend trip was to a beautiful campground on the beach about three and half hours' drive from the church. A group of 300 to 400 would camp from Friday through Sunday.

I couldn't go for the whole weekend but, when I finished preaching on Sabbath morning, I would hop in the car with a sack lunch and drive in time to be there for supper, sundown worship, and s'mores around the campfire.

Families in the group had quite different convictions about Sabbath activities for the kids. Before I came to the church they had worked out a plan. They decided that everyone should be able to follow their convictions, and no one should be judged, scorned, or pressured. They agreed that there would be options on Sabbath afternoon, and parents would

decide which option their family would follow. Some would go down to the beach and let their kids go into the water. (The beach was down a cliff from the camp and not immediately visible.) Others would go on a hike. Others would play active Bible games. Every family could choose its option. No one would criticize anyone for the option they chose. And at the end of the afternoon, they all came together for supper, and ate together in joyful fellowship.

The people worked all this out among themselves. They did it without pastoral involvement. And it worked. It has continued to work over a period of almost twenty years. I can't help but wonder, might the broader church organization learn from the wisdom of these faithful people in the local church? ■

References

1. Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version* unless otherwise noted.

2. For a comprehensive and insightful treatment of the theme of the significance of the natural world in Paul's thought, see Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Letter to the Romans: Paul among the Ecologists* (Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2016) in the Earth Bible Commentary series.

3. For an exhaustive study of the metaphors and images used for the church in the New Testament see Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, forward, Leander E. Keck (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004). For an excellent Adventist treatment of the subject see John K. McVay, "Biblical Metaphors for the Church and Adventist Ecclesiology," *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 2, (2006): 285–315.

4. Some scholars hold that Acts 15 and Galatians 2 refer to different events. This is unlikely, but such a position would not detract from the point we are making if we (and I do) accept Acts 15 as a reliable account. There is one intriguing question, however. In Acts 21:25, why does James seem to tell Paul about the Council as if he had never heard of it?

5. This nuanced approach to the question about food offered to idols showing that the answer "depends" on various factors that influence its moral significance seems to have been lost completely in the early church, as I attempt to show in: John Brunt, "Rejected, Ignored, or Misunderstood? The Fate of Paul's Approach to the Problem of Food Offered to Idols in Early Christianity," *New Testament Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (January 1985), 113–124.

6. Several factors seem to preclude the idea that Paul is again addressing the question of food offered to idols as he did in 1 Corinthians 8–10. None of the specific words for food offered to idols occurs in Romans. There is also no warning about the problem of idolatry or the sexual immorality of pagan worship. Nor do the Corinthian slogans such as "all things are lawful" and "we have knowledge" appear.

7. For evidence that Paul is referring to fast days rather than worship days, see Raoul Dederen, "On Esteeming One Day Better Than Another," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 9:1 (1971): 16–35, and Max Rauer, Die "*Schwachen*" in *Korinth und Rom nach den Paulusbriefen. Biblische Studien* (Freiburg: Herder, 1923).

8. For a series of articles on whether or not Paul is addressing a specific situation in Rome, see Karl P. Donfried, ed., *The Romans Debate: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 1991). I am convinced that Donfried is correct and Paul is addressing a specific situation.

9. There is a story in Horace, *Sermones* 1:9:60–78, where the phrase "somewhat weaker brother" seems to be synonymous with "more scrupulous."

10. Numerous examples of interesting stories can be found in Gilbert M. Valentine, *The Prophet and the Presidents: Ellen White's Influence on the Leadership of the Early Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Nampa Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2011).

Paul's commitment to freedom of conscience was too great for him simply to give a "right answer" for everyone.