

Unity by Authoritarian Means | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

I'm a troublemaker, and perhaps to no avail. I bawl, whimper, raise my voice, and point fingers in print. And because the tide I am now fretting over is ferocious, I know that a single sandbag—or a dozen or a hundred—amounts to little. By the thousands and the tens of thousands, Adventists must now, every one of us—*resist*.

Can you please lay off the overheated rhetoric?

No, and here is why. Our church's leadership is becoming more and more authoritarian and is thereby threatening the very soul of Adventism. I don't mean conference and union presidents, who do what they can to buoy up the lay leaders and church pastors who mind and encourage our local congregations. I mean Adventist leadership at the *top*. Instead of leading us to reformation and revival, it is blending slipshod spirituality and shameless heavy-handedness into a lethal venom it wants to pass off as good medicine. The danger is real—resentments, complacency, piety without substance—and it's getting worse. One resource against this danger is the scriptural vision and our pioneer perspective on it; another is church members who persist in loving their heritage and strengthening their congregations. But unless we make the most of these resources, our church will slip (whatever its membership) into decline and irrelevance.

What comes down from the top may be well-intended; I ascribe no mean-heartedness to anyone. But all who put even a modicum of energy into understanding and appreciating the Christian story know this disastrous turn must be challenged—with kindness, as we may hope, and also with unstinting resolve. This is no time for rose-tinted glasses.

The first siren call rang out on July 3 at the 2010 General Conference session in Atlanta. One theme of the new president's Sabbath sermon was "the unchanging Word of God." It is true, of course, that Jesus Christ is

the same yesterday, today and forever. It is true as well that the text of Scripture remains (but for scholarly discoveries concerning some details) essentially unchanged and unchangeable. Still, the Bible teaches that the *living* Word of God—the actual message of God to actual human beings—*does* change. The prophets say repeatedly that God will tell us "new" things. According to John, Jesus himself declared that the Holy Spirit—his own living presence in the church—would one day say what was then too hard for his disciples to bear. By the ultimate authority of Christ, the living Word would continue to speak and minds continue to change. The sermon in Atlanta overlooked these points.

Here Christian consensus in condemning slavery provides classic illumination. Slavery was nowhere condemned in Scripture, yet under the pioneering influence of Gregory of Nyssa, in the fourth century, church leaders came to condemn it. Christian tolerance of slavery persisted, actually, into our own era, but now, and well-nigh universally among Christians, slavery is both denounced and proscribed.

The living presence of Christ brought this about, and there is no reason to doubt that Christ's living presence has still more to teach. Ellen White says discernment of "new light...will continue to the end" (T5:706). So, it was disturbing when the sermon in Atlanta called us to a settled version of Adventism. The church's early doctrinal dynamism had come under threat with the passing of the pioneers. Official statements of Adventist belief had become longer and were now, all too often, a weapon against fresh perspective. All this was underwriting mutual distrust and feelings of exclusion. The Atlanta sermon, a *mélange* of suspicion and indignation, made matters worse; it warned against new interpretations of "landmark" beliefs and spoke darkly of church members holding their pastors and educators "accountable" for

**The danger
is real—
resentments,
complacency,
piety without
substance—
and it’s
getting worse.**

interpreting scripture in officially sanctioned ways. One passage even demonized “contemplative” prayer. At that point a young woman sitting next to my wife and me began to sob.

All this suggested an authoritarian frame of mind at the top. Worries evoked on that day in Atlanta have often seemed warranted, as when General Conference leadership has sought to control thought on Adventist college and university campuses, or to manipulate gender-equity conversation toward the outcome it prefers. Now, as controversy with respect to gender continues to fester, the church’s top leader has published, over two issues of *Adventist World*, a point of view on church unity first expressed in February at the General Conference Global Leadership Summit in Lisbon, Portugal.

The argument in Part 1, which came out in April, is that the “merging of purpose mission, and duty” to which Scripture calls us is compromised by “any difference of opinion.” The “humility” proper to church unity entails “submission to the entire church as it makes decisions.” If there is any uncertainty about what this latter might mean, Part 2, published in May, clears it away. These remarks repudiate both “independent opinions” and failure by church entities to adhere “strictly” to General Conference *Working Policy*. The church is governed by the Holy Spirit’s “leading.” What is more, “submissiveness” to God’s leading as expressed in “the will of the entire body” is required of all organizations. Anything less amounts to “working against God’s wishes for a church united in mission.” Appeals to the value of “diversity” must give way to “compliance” with policies taken by “the General Conference in session” or by “the General Conference Executive Committee functioning as God’s remnant church...” This latter phraseology is stunningly inappropriate to Protestant sensibility and, on any but the most superficial reading of Scripture, has no backing whatever from the written Word of God. Yet it appears now in an official publication.

A few weeks ago, the current president’s in-

ner circle posted on the Adventist News Network a statement it had not even bothered to share with the General Conference Executive Committee. Fraught again with suspicion and indignation, the statement was, in effect, a request for orthodoxy oaths from independent ministries within the church. It presented seven questions on topics about which Adventists are widely known to disagree, and asked for public answers that would meet with this inner circle’s approval. As to whether this more resembles Rome or Wittenberg, I need not even remark.

For more than twenty years I bore administrative responsibility, and I sympathize with the ideal of adherence to institutional conviction and policy. But when, within a church, unadulterated authoritarianism aims so completely to stamp out conscientious conviction of which it disapproves, we have reached a point of *crisis*. We know now that the threatening tide really is ferocious, and that Christian integrity really does summon us to (kindly) resistance.

The spiritually mature realize that our quest for deeper understanding may meet with complexity that is all but irreducible. Then complete agreement just eludes us, and it is the better part of wisdom to permit a plurality of outlooks. Communities with real identities cannot, of course, allow any conviction at all to take hold. Surely no Christian group could now, in good faith, permit support of slavery. But in these matters no rule establishes exactly where and when to draw the line. Responsible communities must simply prepare for a certain amount of disagreement, and learn to handle it with grace. Our pioneers thought so—Ellen White was disturbed by lack of “difference of opinion” (5T:707)—and a certain amount of disagreement appears, of course, even in the Bible.

Authoritarians prize uniformity, but as an ideology, uniformity is poison. Surely it’s time to drink from another cistern. ■

Charles Scriven chairs Adventist Forum.