

Confounding Conundrums

A Response to Mark Finley's "Mystical Myths" Article

Editor's note: For the sake of clarity, quotes from Mark Finley's article appear in bold.

BY RANDY HARMDIERKS | OCTOBER 26, 2018

On October 9, I published an analysis of what I believe was a problematic question-and-answer article from the General Conference communication department regarding the compliance document then soon to be voted at Annual Council.

Since the document passed on October 14, several more equally problematic articles have come out. On October 17, the GC communication department released two such articles on the Adventist News Network website: "Harmony with the World Church and Questions on the Document Voted at #GCAC18." Then, on October 23, Mark Finley released his own, called "Mystifying Myths: Facts and Fiction about the General Conference's Compliance Document."

All three have significant issues, but I've chosen to focus on Finley's article because I found it more troubling than the others. Below is a point-by-point analysis. I want to remind you that what follows are my personal views; I don't speak for my conference or its leadership. Finley opens his article by saying:

If a myth is repeated often enough and loud enough a lot of people will accept it as reality.

For centuries people believed the earth was flat, and the sun revolved around the earth. Even reputed scientists and scholars of the day taught and repeated the myth. A myth is a myth no matter how loud it is trumpeted and no matter who shouts it.

Myths are running rampant on social media about the document, "Regard for and Practice of General Conference Session and General Conference Executive Committee Actions," recently voted at the 2018 Annual Council.

Before I get into my issues with this, I want to point out how amazingly ironic it is that Finley would bring up the fact that people once believed the sun revolved around the earth. The Catholic Church, in fact, taught this.

In 1613, Galileo Galilei wrote a letter explaining how the idea that the earth actually revolved around the sun wasn't unbiblical. The church wasn't ready to hear that, and it ordered Galileo not to continue this teaching. Galileo complied for seven years because of his devotion to the church, but in 1632 he published his research advocating for the theory. Inquisition proceedings began, and Galileo was pressured to recant under threat of torture. He would not. He was branded a heretic and spent the rest of his life under house arrest. The church was eventually forced to recognize they had been wrong all those years, and in 1992 Pope John Paul II expressed regret for how Galileo was treated by the church. (Are there any lessons here for us?)

Now let's look at why Finley's article is so problematic.

Look, there's a lot of debate about the structure of the Adventist Church, the roles each entity within the church has, what authority is granted to each based on their respective constitutions, as well as the role of policy in solving these issues. While that debate has intensified in the last few years, it has been going on long before this latest compliance document and, I suspect, will continue for a long time to come. Though I believe Finley profoundly misunderstands church structure, my aim here isn't to refute his views so much as the manner with which he frames them.

What is especially troubling, besides his unfortunate decision to use a word like myth to describe views that differ from his own, is how he parallels those differing views with falsehoods so obvious that to most rational people (sorry, flat-earthers!) they seem, well, silly. Of course the earth is

round! Of course the sun doesn't revolve around the earth! Everyone (err, most everyone) knows that! (Even though the church didn't for centuries...)

The conclusion Finley wants you to draw is: Of course the GC and this document are right! Everyone knows that! To believe otherwise is silly. This is both another form of demonizing (i.e. those who disagree with the GC are spreading false teachings) and classic gaslighting (manipulation by psychological means to cause one to question their own sanity).

Please hear this! There are equally dedicated Adventists who see matters of structure and authority—and women's ordination—differently. It doesn't help matters when we demonize one another.

I believe God calls women, but I've not said those who disagree are evil or insane or that they must not be serious Bible students.

I believe GC leadership has a flawed view of church structure and God's government, as well as their role in keeping the church together. I've said and supported statements that claim this compliance document moves us toward a papal system. What I've not said is that those who view things this way are obviously being led by Satan. (By contrast, I invite you to listen carefully to Elder Wilson's prayer appeal leading into Annual Council.)

I'm disheartened that Finley, a prominent church leader with significant influence—an icon of Adventism—so easily dismisses the heartfelt concerns of a multitude of Adventist members and leaders in various parts of the world who happen to disagree with the direction the church is headed.

Finley continues:

Some claim the General Conference desires to control what happens even on the local church level and no one is safe from its tentacles of control. The document has been called “papal,” “anti-prot-estant,” and “unbiblical.”

Let's consider seven common myths and the facts of the document.

Myth #1: The document is an overreach by the General Conference to centralize power.

Fact #1: The document actually states, “Planning for and ensuring compliance shall initially be entrusted to the entity closest to the matter” (p. 1, line 25).

The intent of the document is to allow the entity closest to the issue of non-compliance to handle the matter. Rather than a centralization of power, it encourages the opposite. It urges all issues of policy non-compliance to be solved at the local level. If that is not possible the next highest level of church organization may become involved. For example, if a local conference has a challenge with non-compliance that it cannot or will not solve, the Union Conference/Mission can become involved in working out a solution. This is true for each level of church organization.

If there is non-compliance of a General Conference Session or Executive Committee voted action, the GC Executive Committee may become involved.

Policies that had already been established for decades called for the entity nearest the matter to deal with issues of discipline. That's not new, and it's not some act of patient benevolence on the part of the GC. Those existing policies didn't allow for the GC to step in at any point. Why? Because church discipline isn't their role. Local churches are (were) to hold their members accountable. The sisterhood of churches in a given territory—the conference—is (was) to hold their sister churches accountable. The union's role is (was) to maintain the work already being done in specific regions of the world and to serve as a resource for the sisterhoods of churches within their borders. The GC's role, then, is (was) to move the mission forward into unreached areas.

This document flips that all on its head. Now the GC is diverting energy away from advancing mission to maintaining mission. They have been empowered to hold all other levels accountable to itself, and leaders at every level are expected to comply with policy, even if it means violating their own consciences or the collective consciences of the constituencies that elected them. Keep in mind, conference and union leaders are not employees of the GC. They are elected representatives of the

constituencies that govern their territories. This was done intentionally to decentralize power. By making leaders and entities accountable to the GC and not to their own constituencies, power is most certainly being centralized once more.

Myth # 2: The document uses a non-biblical method of coercion.

Fact #2: The document does just the opposite. Here is what the document states, “Administrators dealing with any matter of non-compliance shall exercise Christian due process which will include much prayer and dialogue” (p. 2, line 35).

The document is designed to be redemptive, not punitive. It provides for a process of dialogue, prayer, and counsel to determine how best to solve the matter of non-compliance. It follows the Scriptural pattern of reconciliation and resolution as outlined in Matthew 18.

Prayer and dialogue are great. But those words are meaningless if the actions that follow stray from a biblical approach. Those who have asserted the document is coercive aren't talking about the aspects that call for prayer. They're talking about the aspects that call for public reprimand and the threat of removal from the GC executive committee. They're talking about the reprimand being extended to leaders of compliant entities who are part of a larger noncompliant entity in order to place additional pressure on the noncompliant entity.

Using Matthew 18 here presumes the noncompliant leader has “sinned” against the GC and that the GC, then, is even rightly in a position to apply Matthew 18 principles. There are two major problems with that: 1) As it pertains to women's ordination, for example, noncompliant leaders—and the majority of their constituents, as reflected in their voting themselves out of compliance—believe they would

be sinning against God by complying with the GC, and 2) Matthew 18 says that if the erring party refuses to listen, they are to be treated as a pagan or tax collector—in other words, left to their own devices—not forced to comply. To properly implement Matthew 18, then, would require the GC to let the actions of the noncompliant entities stand or fall by their own merits. In other words, if the unions' actions are of human devising, they will fail, but if they are of God, who can stop them?

Myth #3: The document is a heavy-handed authoritarian approach to problem solving.

Fact #3: The document provides for tolerance. It allows the administrators of the entity that is perceived to be out of compliance a 60-day period to further dialogue and offer solutions to the challenging situation (p. 2, line 14).

The due process provisions in the document encourage discussion and prayerful consideration on how to solve non-compliance issues. Rather than a heavy-handed dictatorial mandate, the document assures a process of collaboration and seeks to find solutions to problems of non-compliance.

The proposed “warning” and “reprimand” are designed to enable entities to think of the seriousness of non-compliance to voted actions of the world church, and to encourage them to come back into harmony with the world church. Any warning, reprimand, or other consequences must be voted by the General Conference Executive Committee with worldwide representation.

It's easy to understand why “Do what we say or face the consequences” might be interpreted as a heavy-handed authoritarian approach.

A sixty-day window might be sufficient to work through an unintentional area of noncompliance that requires little correction, but I think it's fair to assume the primary issue of noncompliance on everyone's mind is women's ordination. It took less than a week following this document's passing for the Pacific Union to issue a statement that they have no intention of going backwards on this issue. Others will certainly follow.

If a noncompliant entity believes they are doing what God requires of them, no warning or reprimand will cause them to turn back. The only purpose for public reprimand is to hurt someone and diminish their standing in the group.

Finley's assertion that the document is bathed in a spirit of tolerance is betrayed by the fact that ADCOM activated the compliance committee tasked with dealing with ordination before the Annual Council vote even took place, completely disregarding the first three steps of their own suggested process. Actions matter so much more than words.

Myth #4: The final vote of authority regarding consequences rests in Silver Spring, Maryland, with the GC Administrative Committee.

Fact #4: The document clearly states, "If, after the organization closest to the matter has been unable to resolve a compliance issue and the General Conference Compliance Review Committee has recommended consequences, only the General Conference Executive Committee and/or the General Conference in session has authority to implement the recommendation" (p. 3, lines 27-30).

This is really an argument about de jure vs. de facto (what practice is legally recognized vs. what is practiced in reality). Yes, the document clearly states that only the GC executive committee or GC in session have the authority to implement a recommendation, but ADCOM will get to

determine what recommendations come before them. The compliance committees were formed by ADCOM. They will report directly to ADCOM. The areas of noncompliance they will focus on were selected by ADCOM. The very members of the committee were selected by ADCOM. Is it really all that farfetched to suggest this makes ADCOM "a" if not "the" de facto authority regarding compliance issues?

Myth #5: This document changes the culture of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and inhibits freedom of conscience.

Fact #5: What will change the culture of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is if the votes of the General Conference in Session and its Executive Committee are not respected. If each entity from the local church to local conferences, Unions and Divisions do not respect the decisions of the corporate church, the church will be led into

organizational chaos, fragmentation, disunity and congregationalism.

The issue before the church is whether it desires to remain as a united worldwide body, valuing the collective decisions of the General Conference in Session and its Executive Committee or whether it will become a loosely connected body of organizational entities.

This is a strawman argument. It sets up hierarchy as the model we currently have (it isn't) and the only viable alternative to anarchy (it's not).

In truth, the Adventist Church is not a hierarchy. We have a representative form of church governance that has worked well for over 150 years without requiring enforcement of policies to hold us together. Like I've stated above, churches hold their members accountable, not the

Finley's assertion that the document is bathed in a spirit of tolerance is betrayed by the fact that ADCOM activated the compliance committee tasked with dealing with ordination before the Annual Council vote even took place, completely disregarding the first three steps of their own suggested process.

GC. Sisterhoods of churches (conferences) hold their sister churches accountable, not the GC. A sisterhood of conferences (unions) hold their sister conferences accountable, not the GC. Leaders are elected by their constituencies and are held accountable by the constituents and the constitutions that govern them, not the GC.

Also, what about China? The work in China is exploding and being led by women, with ordination being a governmental requirement. Why is no one saying they are in rebellion? Why do they get a variance from policy? Why is their variance from policy not seen as a move toward chaos, fragmentation, disunity or congregationalism?

Myth #6: The General Conference does not have any entity to oversee its activities and actions.

Fact #6: The General Conference is answerable to the GC Executive Committee. This is why regular reports are given during the Spring Meeting and Annual Council.

In addition, the General Conference is regularly audited for financial compliance by the independent and well-respected auditing firm, Maner & Costerisan.

During the 2018 Spring Meeting, representatives from Maner & Costerisan, reported that the General Conference was in compliance with GC Working Policy regarding financial matters.

Also during the 2018 Spring Meeting, as part of the financial reports, GC Finance presented the “Accountability for Use of Tithe” report.

This, along with the report from Maner & Costerisan, can be read in the May 2018 GC Executive Committee Newsletter.

I’m not sure where this “myth” comes from. Perhaps there has been some confusion caused when various entities

use the term “General Conference” interchangeably for several different things (i.e. the entity located in Silver Spring vs. GC officers vs. GC ADCOM vs. GC EXCOM vs. the world field vs. delegates from the world field gathered in session). In the context of this document, some may argue it sets up a system in which “lower” entities are to be held accountable to a “higher” entity but that the “higher” entity has no one left to be held accountable to. Regarding the 2015 session vote and subsequent executive committee votes that agree with the session vote, this “myth” appears to be true.

Myth #7: The document is not biblical. It places policy above Scripture and therefore is contrary to the Protestant Reformation in that it violates freedom of conscience.

Fact #7: Church organization is a fundamental principle of New Testament teaching. The church is held together by the Holy Spirit through a common commitment to Christ, a

shared belief in Biblical teachings, a passion for mission, and a worldwide church organization. If any one of these is subtly undermined, the entire church is in danger.

The policies of the church never dictate or supersede the individual’s conscience. Every believer is free to follow the dictates of their conscience. There will be times when honest people see things differently. Policies are agreements about the way the church will operate. They determine how an international, global family will function.

Here is the point. Policies do not dictate what we believe but they should govern the actions of church leaders. Church leaders have an ethical responsibility to abide by the decisions made jointly by the representatives of the world church at a General Conference Session.

In truth, the Adventist Church is not a hierarchy.

We have a representative form of church governance that has worked well for over 150 years without requiring enforcement of policies to hold us together.

Policies are not unchangeable biblical teachings, and should never be elevated above biblical truth. They are operating principles that delegates to a General Conference Session or Executive Committee can change and at times have changed. If change to any policy passed by the General Conference in Session or to Executive Committee actions is made, it should be made by the same body where it was voted.

Yes, it's true that organization can and does create a framework that makes "going into all the world" and "teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you" much easier. But...

If the church is held together by the Holy Spirit, why don't we trust Him to do that? When did we start to trust policy more than the Holy Spirit and where did we get the idea He needs our help to keep the church together?

What if the worldwide church organization subtly undermines the other things mentioned here? If one or more of those things must be subservient to the others, which should be supreme? History testifies of what can happen when a worldwide church organization determines preservation of the organization must be supreme.

Are leaders themselves not free to follow the dictates of their own conscience? Are they really ethically bound to disregard their own consciences or the collective consciences of entire constituencies in favor of policy compliance? Doesn't that elevate policy over Scripture? What if decisions made by the GC in session are wrong? What if obedience to policy means disobedience to God?

Where the Battle Isn't

Myths never serve us well. They lead us to operate from fear in a world of illusion. Worst of all, they deter us from the mission of the church to live and preach the gospel to fulfill the mission of Christ.

Believing myths causes us to fight where the battle isn't rather than focusing our spiritual energies and attention on reaching lost people to prepare men and women for the coming of our Lord.

May the living Christ so fill our hearts and guide our thinking that we focus on the thing that really matters: souls saved eternally for His kingdom.

There are people on both sides of the policy debate who operate from fear. Finley suggests, for example, that the result of noncompliance will be organizational chaos, fragmentation and congregationalism. Is God not able to bring us through this without our intervention? Are we putting our faith in policy and not in God Himself?

It seems the policy debate, particularly as it concerns women's ordination, is a hill both sides are willing to die on. To suggest it's merely a distraction from mission ignores the fundamental reasons people are willing to die on that hill. It's also a convenient cop out. I wonder if Finley would disregard these issues as distractions to mission if the church were forcing policies on the world field that disagreed with his personal views.

Many, like myself, believe settling this matter is essential to mission. If God calls women to serve in all roles, including pastoral—and I believe He does—then the church's refusal to get out of the way is an affront to God. Either God calls women or He doesn't. If He doesn't, we shouldn't have policies that allow them to fill that role. If He does, we need to get out of His way.

Whether you agree with what I've said here, or not, I hope you'll join with me in praying that God's will be done with whatever happens next, that He brings true unity to our church and that we will put our faith and hope in Him and Him alone.

Whether you agree with what I've said here, or not, I hope you'll join with me in praying that God's will be done with whatever happens next, that He brings true unity to our church and that we will put our faith and hope in Him and Him alone.

RANDY HARMQUIST is communication director for the Iowa-Missouri Conference. This article originally appeared on the conference website. It is reprinted here with permission.

November
2018

YEAR-END MEETINGS CONVENE

Each division holds its own year-end meeting after Annual Council. Actions taken by the General Conference Executive Committee in October are reviewed at the regional level with the (General Conference's) expectation that they will be ratified. The Compliance Document voted in October did not meet with universal approval. Displeasure with the document in North America spawned an energetic conversation about how the division should respond. Two specific actions were taken by the NAD Executive Committee: a vote to bring down the amount of the division's tithe that goes to the General Conference, so that it would be at parity with other divisions; and a vote to request that the Compliance Document be rescinded. The South Pacific Division asked that women's ordination be again placed on the agenda for the General Conference Session in 2020.

Lay-member reactions to the ongoing controversy included a video, produced in the Southern United States, supporting the General Conference action, which was posted to the General Conference YouTube channel. In the Pacific Northwest, some lay members formed the World Church Affirmation Sabbath to also support the General Conference. However, the Upper Columbia Conference Executive Committee voted to ban the WCAS activities in their conference, calling their agenda divisive.