

NOTEWORTHY

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Part VII: Time to Start Over

THE QUEST FOR COMMUNITY: CHURCH LIFE RE-IMAGINED

BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

Imagine you are at sea in a boat with leaks and other structural problems. You have tools and materials for addressing the problems, but the shore is far off; you'll have to stay afloat in the boat even as you try to re-build it.

This is a famous analogy for how challenging it is to make genuine advances in knowledge and understanding.¹ All of us are caught up in already existing ways of life, so when it comes to perspective and know-how, we never begin from scratch. There's no unbiased objectivity, only making do from a given starting point, only making adjustments toward deeper truth while we are in the midst of the journey.

The Bible knew nothing, of course, of modern theories of knowledge, but when you think of the ark, or of Jesus and the disciples on the Sea of Galilee, you realize that boat images, with their suggestion of difficulty and risk as well as protection, have resonated among the people of God. Over six previous essays during the past year, I have argued that the ship of Adventism is at sea and in theological distress. I have argued, too, however, that

divine generosity has granted us the tools and materials for needed repair. On a sea of graceless, self-indulgent cynicism (whether religious or secular), truth, hope, and Sabbath rest remain, all as crucial as bread, each a gift beyond price.

But if we have the right tools and materials, do we have the will?

We can all think of pastors, teachers, and others who are eager for the repair of church life. They are hungry for Christian authenticity; they believe our community, however imperfect, can be a renewing home and bear a healing witness. We know others who are either committed to the status quo or resigned to it. But if the ship is distressed, the status quo, uninterrupted, means disaster, and those who consent to it—or worse, *insist upon* it—are themselves a danger. Nevertheless, on a boat at sea, all must be ready to forgive all, and move on. Self-satisfaction and sheer disdain, like bowing to the way things are, can only destroy.

Many challenges confront Christianity. The most

dangerous, perhaps, is fundamentalism. This is the fearful, rigid interpretation of the Christian tradition that boiled up in reaction to cultural upheaval—not least the rise of science and secularism—that came to a crisis with the Great War of 1914–18. Christians felt beleaguered. Many, led by conservative Presbyterians, set out to protect their heritage by focusing on interpretation of the Bible.

The written Word, they said, must be read just the way it was before science came on the scene—as having, all the way through, a plain meaning that supersedes merely human knowledge. It is all God’s truth or none of it is—God helped human authors deliver wholly accurate information. They argued, too, that the Bible itself supported them; its claim to “inspiration” (2 Tim. 3:16) was proof. The metaphor of “inspiration” indicated not just divine influence but such control over the authorial mind as to produce biblical “infallibility.”

This was fundamentalism, and the whole effort was defensive; it was response to an *attack* on convictions fundamentalists held dear. The persistence of a defensive posture meant that the movement was always watching its back, always looking to protect current beliefs. Such a preoccupation meant, furthermore, that fundamentalism forgot, or effectively forgot, the teaching function of the Holy Spirit (John 16). Instead of welcoming guidance into fresh understanding, such guidance was resisted. In fundamentalist hands, the Bible became, contrary to its own spirit, a weapon *against* fresh perspective, a *sanctifier* of the status quo. So, in the American South, for example, fundamentalist upholders of Scripture long remained fully at home with segregationist Jim Crow laws, just as earlier Christians had long remained fully at home with slavery.

Michael Campbell has shown that at Adventism’s 1919 Bible Conference, the Church’s divided leadership finally settled on a perspective that reflected the fundamentalist

turn. The Church has been hobbled by that perspective ever since. Influential White leaders—two editors of the *Review and Herald*, for example—resisted the Civil Rights Movement; worldwide, many leaders, no matter their color, still resist full equality for women.

The point I now want to insist upon is this: *just to the degree that we sanctify the theological status quo we not only assure spiritual failure, we assure the ultimate demise of the Church, at least as a substantive prophetic force.* A witness of this sort may last for a time, perhaps a long time. Someday, though, it will peter out. It is unfaithful and certain to become irrelevant, so how could it be otherwise?

Scripture itself knows nothing of intellectual frozenness, let alone sheer doctrinal uniformity. In the spirit of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament envisions ongoing conversation (Matt. 18). New light is not feared but expected. It does not, moreover, await official declaration but grows out of the intellectual *engagement* of ordinary members in ordinary congregations. At the church’s beginnings, no supervisory body with authority to regulate Christian speech even existed. The faithful



This image of the *Archipel I* creates memories of adventure in a way that images of the ark spoke of safety in biblical times.

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instead counted on the presence and oversight of the Holy Spirit.

So, if the ship is distressed—crippled by a turn toward fundamentalism—what shall we do?

In both testaments of Scripture, remember, God gives so we may act. Grace generates *covenant partnership*. Under God, therefore, it is *our* responsibility to repair the damage. What I propose is that the key to exercising such responsibility is re-imagining *church life*. How can we become newly *engaged* in learning and acting toward renewal? Everything hangs on empowerment through Christian community *rightly conceived*.

As a people for whom baptism is voluntary commitment to a way of life, Adventists belong to the Radical Reformation, whose progeny includes Mennonites, Baptists, and Brethren, along perhaps, though less directly, with Methodists. One leading scholar in that stream has argued—arrestingly—that *koinonia*, the Greek word for fellowship or sharing, denotes the characteristic form of love in post-resurrection faith.² God has “called us into the fellowship,” or *koinonia*, of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:9). Again, our walk with Christ is a “fellowship,” or *koinonia*, with one another. Participation in the communion meal, moreover, is a “sharing,” or *koinonia*, in the blood and body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16). Generous acts are themselves a “sharing,” or *koinonia*, in the work of Christian ministry (2 Cor. 8:4).

God, it turns out, sets travelers on their Christian journey *in equal relation to one another* (Gal. 3). Radical Reformation thinkers have suggested that this relation may be thought of as “solidarity.” Christian life, or *koinonia*, is life together; each must *watch* and *care*, just as God does. In Sabbath gatherings, shared meals, and service together, in readiness to give and receive counsel, to offer and accept forgiveness, to listen and contribute to the Church’s dialogue, we must ourselves embody God’s own “watch-care.” Only by so loving one another do we fit ourselves for a resurrection journey that in the end serves all others, even our enemies.

How, then, would fresh embrace of *koinonia* entail a church life *re-imagined*? Here are just two ways.

First, it would *end* the hegemony of the status quo. Fear and complacency would metamorphose into the courage and spiritual hunger to which Christ calls us. To the degree, moreover, that the Church’s administrative

arm now fosters a “hierarchy-knows-best” approach to theological dialogue, that emphasis would shift into full embrace of the Holy Spirit’s perpetual teaching function, a gift to all, not a privileged or favored few. Top-down control of conversation, so often attempted after the fundamentalist turn, fortifies the status quo instead of resisting it.

Hierarchical treatment of Desmond Ford may be the paradigm case of top-down overreach. We need not think that Ford had the last word on Paul, nor even that his own efforts were blameless in every way, to acknowledge that this episode of attempted control was both cruel and disastrous. Embrace of *koinonia*, with its emphasis on caring as well as watching, on forgiveness as well as truthfulness, would surely have prevented much of the suffering and discord that ensued.

The point is not to disparage administrative structure. A structure true to the *koinonia* ideal could surely help us function as a worldwide movement. It could surely promote a vision, surely exhort and exemplify growth into deeper spirituality. But it could *not* claim theological authority over the rest of the Church. Leaders who make such a claim are misleaders. Even if the New Testament reports leaders from a range of communities consulting together and coming to persuasive consensus (Acts 15), it still authorizes local dialogue and local resolution of conflict (Matt. 18.) There is no permission to override either of these.

Now the second thing: fresh embrace of *koinonia* would open the door to unabashed Christocentrism. The 1919 fundamentalist turn, with its defensive, backward-looking tendencies, blinded Adventism to Radical Reformation hallmarks that twentieth-century historians began to uncover. With so much of that movement’s early spiritual and intellectual leadership silenced by persecution and martyrdom, these hallmarks had substantially faded from memory. One thing the new scholarship brought to light was that Radical Reformers stressed the ultimate authority of Christ. Even Scripture (by Scripture’s own witness, they said) was subject to Christ’s authority. That point was overlooked in Reformation and later fundamentalist accounts. Our own official doctrine of Scripture—belief no. 1 in the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs—contains no reference, nor even allusion, to Christ. Nor does it acknowledge the several New Testament passages

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(Gospel Transfiguration stories, Matthew 28:18, Hebrews 1:1–3, etc.) that give unequivocal expression to Christ’s overarching authority.

As of 1919, we effectively became, with respect to the Bible, Seventh-day Fundamentalists. To this day, conventional Adventism, oblivious to its true Reformation heritage, ignores or even resists the biblically unassailable doctrine that Christ is the measure of Christian truth. By the Bible’s light, Scripture in all its parts can (and must) illuminate Christ’s authority. No piece of it, however, may *compete* with that authority. Still, key texts did compete with it when Christians were comfortable with slavery or segregation or Hitler’s agenda for Germany. And key texts do now compete with it when Christians insist that women are second-class in their potential for spiritual leadership.

The idea of *koinonia*, or solidarity with Christ and one another, overcomes all this, and can still overcome it. But efforts to this end continue to be resisted, sometimes by refusal even to acknowledge the point at issue. The General Conference Biblical Research Institute’s recent volume on biblical interpretation, nearly 500 pages long, gives no consideration, let alone rebuttal, to the New Testament claim of Christ’s final authority, even relative to Scripture. In 2015, leaders of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies invited members (mostly religion teachers and scholars) to consider what then seemed an auspicious motion. The 2015 General Conference session had ended with an indication that in the upcoming quinquennium top leaders would pay new attention to biblical “hermeneutics.” So, would ASRS members throw their weight behind a recommendation that further General Conference consideration of hermeneutics explicitly invoke the authority of Christ? The members, whether from conviction, deference to hierarchy, or fear of reprisal, declined to say Yes. In no society business

meeting since has that decision been reconsidered.

Adventism is theologically distressed, and the status quo is still winning.

Jeremiah (chapter 30) portrays a God so exasperated by the Judean people as to exclaim that there is “no medicine for your wound, no healing for you.” But soon comes a strange “therefore.” God continues: “Therefore . . . I will restore health to you, and your wounds I will heal.” It’s not so much the “therefore” of logic as the “therefore” of solidarity; God cannot help but watch and care, cannot help but speak hope to brokenness.³

Perhaps Jeremiah’s reading of God can be medicine for us. It’s hardly plausible, after all, that official Adventism will soon reverse its tragic turn toward fundamentalism. But biblical hope defies the odds. So, if some foci of Adventist energy—some congregations, some institutions, some truth-telling visionaries—persist like Jeremiah in covenant partnership with God, cannot some good fruit come forth? If some persist, cannot the hegemony of the status quo begin to wear down? If some persist, cannot Christ, along with the Spirit who bears ever-surprising witness on his behalf, yet become, unmistakably, our one true center?

Endnotes

1. My debt is to Willard Quine.
2. James Wm. McClendon, Jr.
3. Here I learn from Walter Brueggemann.



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