

A Unified Church

How it stays together--or how it is divided

Part 4 (of 4)--What members can do when things go astray

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Studying God's Word we see that pluralism of belief and practice are rejected. The Bible does not support the notion that conflicting theological views are legitimate and must be allowed to cohabit in the church. In studying the sacred scriptures, unity of faith and practice is clearly seen. This, in contrast to today's counterfeit unity that opens doors to theological pluralism.

Those advocating this spurious unity are actually dividing our churches and creating confusion in others. Yet they adopt an ingenious mode of operation to silence dissent, accusing anyone who opposes their agenda as being divisive, negative, legalistic, or controversial. Fear of being so labeled has intimidated many church members to back off and be silent, or to acquiesce to error. Others, discouraged by the resulting confusion and joining of truth and error, are tempted to leave, considering the church to be Babylon.

This is not the direction we want to go. In this great Advent Movement we must follow the lead of Jesus and those who were called to start the Christian church. Their unity was seen in faith and practice.

Unity of Faith:

In the early church, the believers understood that they did not exist independently of God's order, so that each congregation might choose to go its own separate way, believing its own unique doctrines, caring only for its own local interests. Rather, believers saw their congregations as God's special family, comprised of all the Christians in every region of the Roman world.

Sometimes the unity was encouraged and maintained through greetings from church to church (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Philippians 4:22). This was a reminder to them that they belonged to a global network. This spirit of unity was also seen in letters of recommendation sent from one church to another, commending God-given teachers to sister churches (Acts 18:24-28; 2 Corinthians 3:1; Romans 16:1, 2).

On one occasion, there were in the Corinth congregation those who cherished a spirit of independence. Thus the Apostle Paul wrote that he had sent Timothy to remind them of "my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church" (1 Corinthians 4:17). He also reprimanded them for their independent attitude: "Did the Word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?" (1 Corinthians 14:36).

In order to preserve the "unity of the faith" (Ephesians 4:13), the apostles urged believers to engage in sound teaching (1 Timothy 6:20; 2 Timothy 1:13) and counteract false teaching and false teachers (1 Timothy 1:3; 4:1, 6; Titus 1:9-11). They occasionally exposed the false teachings of certain individuals (1 Timothy 1:20; 2 Timothy 2:17; 4:19), and Paul commended the Christians in Berea for subjecting his teachings to the scrutiny of scripture (Acts 17:11).

Thus, it is evident that New Testament believers embraced a unity of faith and doctrine. Were they living today, they would reject proposals and notions for theological pluralism.

This understanding of unity is the theological basis for the church's requirement that all Seventh-day Adventists--including our pastors, church leaders, teachers in our institutions, publishers and editors of our church publications--must adhere to all 28 Bible-based beliefs. Wherever and whenever the Biblical teachings summarized in our Fundamental Beliefs are questioned or challenged, the result is always pluralism in beliefs and congregationalism or offshootism in church polity.

Unity of Practice:

The New Testament also teaches that unity of faith and doctrine should not remain at the intellectual level. It also extends to practice, as in cooperative action and lifestyle.

For example, the apostle Paul repeatedly pointed the churches to what was going on in other parts of the Roman Empire. He reminded the believers of the common gospel that unified them (Colossians 1:6,23; 1 Timothy 3:16). The apostles taught that what happened in other congregations or parts of the world must have their full interest (2 Corinthians 9:2-5; Colossians 4:16). They exhorted the believers to participate in all that was being done elsewhere and to accept the guidelines that were offered for all the churches (1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 11:16).

From this theological understanding, Seventh-day Adventists have sought to uphold their worldwide unity through such means as reading the same mission stories and reports, studying the same subjects in Sabbath School, giving mission offerings to finance specific projects, and respecting the *Church Manual* and other church policies that have been agreed upon to govern the operation of the church at its different levels.

In the New Testament we see basic differences and disagreements as we do today, but for the most part there was amazing unity and uniformity. That is, oneness prevailed in faith and practice. Churches that do not understand this, or who choose to ignore these things tend to lack a global vision, tend to be inward looking, and tend to be suspicious or disrespectful of our unique system of church governance. The result is always the same: rebellion and gravitation toward congregationalism or offshootism.

While we must always embrace and support decisions that are in harmony with our Biblical teachings, there are times when a member may be discouraged because of unbiblical teachings and practices introduced into or imposed upon the church.

There are examples of challenging practices and teachings. In 1975 and 1984 political decisions came to ordain women as local church elders. One can also point to the year 2000 Toronto General Conference session which widened the grounds for divorce to include “abandonment by an unbelieving spouse” but left undefined the meaning of that fuzzy expression.

Today, there are decisions by union conferences going against the world church and voting to ordain without regard to gender. Examples such as these lead conscientious church members to ask, What will come next?

How can church unity be preserved in such instances? What should church members do in situations in which a church board or a conference (or even a union conference, a division, an Annual Council, or the General Conference in session) makes what they feel to be an unbiblical decision? What if the collective decision is actually the decision of a small hand-picked group motivated by some ideological or political agenda? How should we respond when chosen representatives buckle under the pressure of pragmatic considerations such as finances, political lobbying, or the desire to be part of the latest thing in popular culture?

Here are some suggestions:

1. Consider your own thoughts and motivations. Take much time in prayer to discern where you are at in the situation of challenge. "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted" (Galatians 6:1).
2. Remember that God is in control. God who created the universe and who sent His only begotten Son to redeem us from sin, is well able to handle any situation that is out of line. I have found this statement to be reassuring: "There is no need to doubt, to be fearful that the work will not succeed. God is at the head of the work, and He will set everything in order. If matters need adjusting at the head of the work, God will attend to that, and work to right every wrong. Let us have faith that God is going to carry the noble ship which bears the people of God safely into port" (*Selected Messages*, vol. 2, p. 30).
3. Stay with the church. Since we believe that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is God's end-time remnant movement according to Bible prophecy, we must make the commitment ahead of time that nothing, not even failure of our fellow church members, pastors, teachers, scholars, leaders, or councils, will cause us to leave the church. "Although there are evils existing in the church, and will be until the end of the world, the church in these last days is to be the light of the world that is polluted and demoralized by sin. The church, enfeebled and defective, needing to be reproved, warned, and counseled, is the only object upon Earth upon which Christ bestows His supreme regard" (*Testimonies To Ministers*, p. 49).
4. Respect and Pray for Leadership. King David set an example for us when he said, "The Lord forbid that I should stretch forth mine hand against the Lord's anointed . . . For who can stretch forth his hand against the Lord's anointed, and be guiltless?" (1 Samuel 26:11, 9). We must pray daily for our church leaders. They face constant pressures and challenges from different quarters. It is not easy to be courageous. Send them words of encouragement every now and then, and let them know that you are counting on them to hold high the banner of Bible truth. We do not show a responsible Christian spirit when we claim that the church is God's remnant and profess to be its loyal members, if at the same time we proceed to defy, disrespect, blackmail, rebel against, or undermine the church's authority. To do so, is misguided, if not hypocritical.
5. Strive for unity, not separation. "Some have advanced the thought that, as we near the close of time, every child of God will act independently of any religious organization. But I have been instructed by the Lord that in this work there is not

such thing as every man's being independent" (*Testimonies For The Church*, vol. 9, p. 258).

6. Use Judicious Procedures. Remember that the Seventh-day Adventist church has a representative form of governance. It has judicious procedures to address situations that get out of kilter with God's Word. Even with questionable decisions from sessions at the Conference, Union, Division, or GC levels, churches can direct their concerns through these levels requesting that issues be revisited. We may be confident that questionable decisions and policies can and will be overturned at future sessions as God's people prayerfully come together.
7. Don't Be Intimidated. As we suggested earlier, those pushing counterfeit unity are the ones who are actually dividing our churches and threatening our worldwide unity. Yet they often accuse anyone opposing their unbiblical teachings and practices of being divisive. Ironically, many consider the resulting cohabitation of truth and error to be true unity. But can we afford to remain silent when error is being taught and practiced and when truth is being undermined? No. We must not back off or soft pedal truth or be irresolute in our Biblical convictions just because people with certain agendas mislabel us as divisive. "If God abhors one sin above another, of which His people are guilty, it is doing nothing in case of an emergency. Indifference and neutrality in a religious crisis is regarded of God as a grievous crime and equal to the very worst type of hostility against God" (*Testimonies For the Church*, vol. 3, p. 281). We must courageously and kindly stand for the grand truths given us, and not let unbiblical ideologies and practices go unchecked.
8. Prayerfully Work for Change. Let us ask the Lord to grant us wisdom on how to best effect Biblical changes through our witness by voice, pen, or example. While praying for courage to stand for truth, let us ask the Lord to help us to be humble and courteous at all times.

Let us determine that when others choose to go the path of rebellion against God's truth, by His grace we will remain faithful, regardless the cost. We will stand united in faith, doctrine, and practice, till that great day when Jesus comes to redeem His own.

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