

God's End-Time Church is to be an Organized Church

Kevin Paulson, Larry Kirkpatrick. October 10, 2016

Introduction

“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 no such thing as every man's being independent” (*Testimonies*, vol. 9, 258).

Claim #1: It has been suggested that early Adventists, under the direction of James White moved “from a literalistic hermeneutic that held that the only things permissible were those specifically spelled out in Scripture, to one in which everything was permissible that did not contradict the Bible and was in harmony with common sense.”

Response

White was not suggesting a change in hermeneutics, but that the church should further “perfect” upon the biblical order already established in Scripture (cf. *Acts of the Apostles*, 88-92).

Scripture gives some direction concerning church order and organization:

Members - 1 Corinthians 12:27 / 1 Peter 2:5

Churches - Titus 1:5

Small regions - Acts 9:31

Larger regions - 1 Corinthians 16:1; 2 Corinthians 1:1

Continents - 1 Corinthians 16:19

Input by all through representation - Acts 15

“Living stones”

“Every City”

“Judea” “Galilee”

“All Achaia”

“Asia”

The Entire Church

The claim ignores the context of James White's comment. He was discussing things that could enhance order (having a weekly church paper, a publishing press) which, while not specifically spelled out in Scripture, is not “opposed by the Bible, and is approved by sound sense” (James White, “Yearly Meetings,” *Review and Herald*, July 21, 1859, p. 68, col. 2). The further “perfecting” of organization included the holding of “yearly conferences, and systematic action of the entire body” (ibid).

Claim #2: It is claimed that the actions of the General Conference (GC) today, as in White's day, modeled “kingly power,” that Ellen White indicates that it did not represent the voice of God on earth, and that unions were put in place to protect against possible misguided leadership from the General Conference.

Response

Nothing could be further from the truth. It is the duty and responsibility of the GC to carry out the voted actions of the world church. Such accusations fit the category of “evil speaking” and remind one of the tactics used by Lucifer in his rebellion. The claim's context is ignored. Ellen White is clear that “at times, when a small group of men . . . in the name of the General Conference, sought to carry out unwise plans and to restrict God's work, I . . . could no longer regard the voice of the General Conference, represented by these few men, as the voice of God.” The instructions for reorganization were to correct this, which is why we have unions. Ellen White continues: “But this is not saying that the decisions of a General Conference session, composed of an assembly of duly appointed, representative men from all parts of the field, should not be respected. God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority. The error that some are in danger of committing, is in giving to the mind and judgment of one man, or of a small group of men, the full measure of authority and influence that God has vested in His church in the judgment and voice of the General Conference assembled to plan for the prosperity and advancement of His work” (*Testimonies*, vol. 9, 260, 261).

In this age of enhanced communications and rapid travel, the church is a global community where what is done in one part of the body can be experienced in real time in many parts of the world. For this reason, unified action concerning many aspects of ministry is necessary if mission is to move forward effectively. Certainly the selection or replacement of leaders is one such area where unified policy is needed, particularly after years of study and deliberation.

Claim #3: Some claim that ordination is not supported by Scripture or the Spirit of Prophecy and thus should not even have been discussed at the General Conference session. They say that the General Conference in taking action concerning ordination, went beyond its proper jurisdiction. They desire that both the setting of criteria and the selection and setting aside of leaders should take place at the Union level.

Response

The world church has never considered such a position to be biblical. The “Consensus Statement on a Seventh-day Adventist Theology of Ordination,” voted by the 2014 Annual Council, shows the Biblical basis for our understanding of ordination, that the TOSC study commission “did reach a high degree of accord concerning a biblical theology of ordination,” indicating that “Seventh-day Adventists understand ordination, in a biblical sense, as the action of the Church in publicly recognizing those whom the Lord has called and equipped for local and global Church ministry.” (<https://www.adventistarchives.org/consensus-statement-on-a-seventh-day-adventist-theology-of-ordination.pdf>).

The action taken by the world church in session (including conference and union presidents and laypersons) differs from this claim, because it was voted based on the delegates “thorough study of the Bible, the writings of Ellen G White, and the reports of the study commissions on ordination...” (<http://www.adventistreview.org/assets/public/news/2014-10/statement.pdf>)

Whatever one’s view concerning who should be ordained, “The danger to our unity lies not primarily in who we ordain, or what credentials we issue to them. The chief danger lies in accepting the possibility of unilateral action. That has potential implications which go far beyond this immediate issue. Yet if we were to sacrifice the overarching principle of representative, collegial, consensus-based decision-making—if we were to accept that organizational units can act unilaterally—then our whole ecclesiastical polity and system of church governance would be in danger of breaking down (“A Study of Church Governance and Unity,” Secretariat, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists September 2016 p. 41).

If the Church accepts the confused notions now being offered by some, what in the future would prevent conferences and unions from promoting unbiblical views regarding prophetic authority, creation, tithing, the investigative judgment, or same-sex behavior? The door will be opened for beliefs and practices enormously destructive to Adventist global gospel proclamation.

Claim #4: It is feared that we will lose our young people if we don’t address the issue of ordination and church structure in the manner advocated by some.

Response

This same scare tactic was used when the sanctuary doctrine of the church was being discussed. Membership was then 4 million. The issue was met head on. There were some losses, but membership is now nearly 20 million. Standing for truth draws young people; it doesn’t drive them away.

Claim #5: Supposedly, the GC session vote against allowing divisions to make their own decisions concerning ordination practice is exhibiting “kingly power and top-down authority,” adopting and replicating “the most serious mistakes of Roman Catholicism.”

Response

This desperate charge is clearly false. The interdependent nature of the Adventist church is more diverse and representative today than ever before. Decades of study and deliberation at all levels throughout the world field led to the decision in 2015, and the decision to be made in 2016 must evidence our commitment to collective decision-making.

The Choice Is Clear: The Unity document prepared by the Secretariat is a powerful and outstanding appeal for respect toward the collective actions of the church, church unity, and organization. It is sound biblically and in accordance with Spirit of Prophecy counsels. The choice is no longer about women’s ordination, but whether our church structure will remain interdependent or be forced into congregationalism.