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## What Can Adventists Learn From the Rest of the Christian World?

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# What can Adventists Learn from the rest of the Christian world?

Compiled by  
Dr Barry Oliver

*This was a panel discussion, the members of which were Pam Ludowici, Kerry Hortop, Barry Oliver, Gary Christian and Lyell Heise. The discussion is not reproduced here but Dr Barry Oliver has set down his thoughts on the topic. Dr Oliver (pictured here) is a lecturer in theology at Avondale College.*



The following is a miscellany of materials that may be contributed to the discussion. They have been drawn from a number of sources as indicated and footnoted, or from my own thinking and research. I have divided the materials into two sections: an historical perspective, and a contemporary perspective.

## SOME HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

### 1. CHURCH ORGANISATION

At the time when the organisational structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church was being established, most ecclesiastical structural forms were variants of one of the three basic categories of church government or polity: episcopal, presbyterian, and congregational. Some denominations take over selected specific elements from each of the categories and incorporated them within the structural form which met their specific needs. All denominations attempted, to a greater or lesser degree, to find a structural form which was theologically-based and pragmatically feasible. Therefore, the chosen form was usually a function of theological rationale, liturgical processes, the need for office and authority in the church, the decision-making processes, and in many cases, an attempt to facilitate missionary expansion.<sup>1</sup>

### Episcopal Forms of Church Government

Episcopal church order was an early form of church government that has been practised in many Christian denominations. In Episcopal churches the chief ministers were bishops. Subordinate ministers were presbyters (or priests) and deacons. A threefold ministry was the identifying mark of the episcopacy. When the Orthodox Church in the east separated from the Roman Catholic Church in the west, both maintained their commitment to apostolic succession and episcopacy. The Orthodox Churches adopted a form of episcopacy which featured a federation of self-governing churches, each with its own presiding patriarch. The episcopacy of the Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, became more centralised, its bishops being appointed by one head bishop. Its centralised episcopal governance enabled the western church to more easily maintain its catholicity in doctrine and form.

With the Reformation came other variations of episcopal form. The Anglican Church, for instance, rejected the primacy of the Pope and Roman hierarchy but maintained historic succession. Some of the Lutheran churches adopted a Protestant episcopal system but did not retain historic succession.

A special case of episcopal governance was that followed by Methodist denominations in the United States. The Methodists did retain the episcopacy. But their bishops were elected by representatives of the church—min-

istry and laity—and not by a first bishop or other bishops. At the same time, the church was organised into conferences which were to deal with matters of administration. Like the bishops, the conferences derived their authority from a constituency and not from the bishopric itself as was the case in most episcopal forms of governance.<sup>2</sup>

### **Presbyterian Forms of Church Government**

Based largely on the model established by John Calvin of Geneva, Presbyterianism emphasised the importance of elders or presbyters. Although not holding that their form of polity was the only one allowed by the New Testament, it was understood by Presbyterians that the essentials of their structure were scriptural. The basic presupposition of Presbyterianism was the headship of the risen Christ. As sovereign Lord, He ruled His people by His Word and Spirit, directing believers as a whole. There was no concept of an elite group which had received extraordinary powers or authority through direct revelation or by laying on of hands. Those who governed the church were chosen by all the church members, who recognised that God had given those officers gifts and abilities to teach and to direct the church in its life upon earth. Presbyterian churches were independent of one another, but they had a common commitment to creedal statements embodied in the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Westminster Confession.

The local congregation was governed by a board which comprised the elders and local minister. All who governed were chosen by the church members themselves. Each congregation appointed two representatives—an elder and a pastor—to the presbytery, which comprised local congregations within a given geographical area. Each presbytery then appointed two individuals—likewise, an elder and a pastor—to the next level of government, the synod. The synod in turn appointed an elder and a pastor to the General Assembly.

In contrast to the episcopal system, the minister in the Presbyterian

system was not “a delegate of a bishop” but carried out his ministerial responsibilities “as representing the congregation.” On the other hand, he was not an employee of the congregation, as were pastors in congregational churches.<sup>3</sup> There was no hierarchy or threefold order in the Presbyterian ministry. In contrast to the sacramentally based ordination of the episcopacy, all Presbyterian pastors shared in an ordination which was communally based.<sup>4</sup>

“The basic presupposition of Presbyterianism was the headship of the risen Christ”

### **Congregational Forms of Church Government**

Local church autonomy was the hallmark of congregational governance. Its scriptural foundations were the headship of Christ and the priesthood of all believers. Each congregation acted democratically, choosing its own officers and minister. Corporate action, especially with regard to education and mission enterprises, was made possible only on the basis of delegated authority derived from local congregations. District or general organisations tended more often to be advisory in nature and dependent on the local congregations for executive and decision-making mandate.<sup>5</sup>

There were numerous small, independent congregational churches in the United States. There were also larger denominational churches which had adopted a modified congregational order. The largest of these were

the Baptist churches. Baptist congregations were strongly principled and believed that their form of governance was that which adhered most closely to that of the New Testament Church.<sup>6</sup>

The late 1890s saw a rising interest in charismata in the established denominations. Originating in the holiness movement, Pentecostalism did not originally have any separatist ambitions. Rather, its goal was to call Christians everywhere back to the apostolic (Pentecostal) faith. “Everywhere the work was to be under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which in practice meant the control of visiting evangelists.”<sup>7</sup> Although Pentecostal teachings received increasing opposition, particularly by holiness groups who saw Pentecostalism as an undesirable aberration of their holiness doctrine, most were not forced to form their own denominational organisations until after the turn of the century.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Shape of Seventh-day Adventist Organisation**

Seventh-day Adventist organisational structure incorporated, but adapted, elements from episcopal, congregational and presbyterian forms of governance. For example, its president was given administrative powers akin to those of a bishop. Further, the president was elected by the constituency as were bishops in the Methodist episcopacy. The Methodist conference system was also adapted to the needs of the denomination. From congregational governance it adapted the broad-based authority of the constituency. From presbyterian governance it adapted the committee system and the concept of representation. There is little evidence that the early Seventh-day Adventists intentionally set out to construct an organisation which drew together such diverse elements. That such occurred was more by accident than by design. Even so, awareness of the denominational backgrounds of those involved in organisation would indicate that such an accident may have been somewhat inevitable.

### **2. THE IMPACT OF THE STUDENT VOLUNTEER MOVEMENT**

One cannot properly discuss American mission at the turn of the

century, nor the composition and dedication of the missionary band itself, without reference to the Student Volunteer Movement For Foreign Missions, its influential leaders, and the watchword which expressed the aim of a whole generation of American missionaries. The Student Volunteer Movement was founded in a year which has come to have great significance for Seventh-day Adventists—1888. Numerous references to the movement, its leaders, conventions, and watchword are found scattered through Seventh-day Adventist denominational literature and committee minutes between 1889 and 1903. In 1893, for example, it was voted that the General Conference secretary should attend the second convention of the movement.<sup>9</sup> In 1891 Uriah Smith's son Leon, who, although not listed among the official delegates, was obviously at the first Student Volunteer convention at Cleveland, Ohio, in that year, enthusiastically recommended:

It is hardly necessary to add that the Student Volunteer Movement is one which merits the full sympathy and cooperation of Seventh-day Adventists. Unselfish, unsectarian (so far as concerns Protestant sects), animated by a pure zeal and devotion to the cause of Christ, and seeking only to bring the sound of his gospel to the millions whose ears it has never reached, it is a part of the great gospel work which God is doing for the world in this last generation of its history, and in which it has pleased him to assign us so wonderful a part.<sup>10</sup>

Again in 1898, Seventh-day Adventists were admonished not to hold themselves "aloof from" the student movement.<sup>11</sup>

The two most influential leaders to emerge from the Student Volunteer Movement were John R. Mott and Robert E. Speer. Both were able administrators, and both wrote extensively—Speer being the more prolific of the two. Mott's particular strength was his ability to see mission in its world-wide perspective and promote the formation of strategies which would optimise the potential that was being created by the Holy Spirit. As such he was one of the first to place emphasis on strategic planning for the world as a whole. His idea was to

develop a comity arrangement whereby each mission agency would be responsible for specific unreached regions and classes of people.

Speer was a systematic thinker whose strength lay in mediation and clarification of all sides of a particular issue or task to be performed. He gave a good deal of attention to the needs of the young national church, its right to organise in its own way, its responsibility for evangelisation in its own

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sphere, and its ability to express its faith according to its own cultural setting without domination or intimidation from the West. He wanted the younger churches to be self-administering and in control of their own financial resources.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Watchword of the Student Volunteer Movement**

Both Mott and Speer were staunch defenders of the watchword of the Student Volunteer Movement: "The evangelisation of the world in this generation." Mott asserted in 1902 that the watchword had "in the case of a large and increasing number of Christians ... enlarged vision, strengthened purpose, augmented faith, inspired hopefulness, intensified zeal, driven to God in prayer, and developed the spirit of heroism and self-sacrifice."<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the watchword was not so well appreciated by all, and it received continuous and sometimes vitriolic criticism.

Some maintained that the watchword was too closely tied to

premillennial views and was therefore inappropriate for the missionary enterprise as a whole.<sup>14</sup> Others charged that it did not do justice to Jesus's commission to make disciples. Making disciples involved baptising, organising, instructing, edifying, and a whole host of other tasks which better fitted a mission policy directed towards organising churches, developing a competent indigenous ministry, and encouraging responsibility and self-propagation.<sup>15</sup>

While such objections were not sufficient to discredit the popularity of the slogan, they did serve to call attention to what Hutchison has called "ambiguities" in the watchword's key term, "evangelisation." In response, Robert Speer insisted before a Student Volunteer Assembly in 1898 that "we do not predict that the world is to be evangelised in this generation," but in the same speech he reported statistics which would easily lead the listener to "begin to feel that perhaps the evangelisation of the world in this generation may not, after all, be such a dream."<sup>16</sup>

Others tried to explain away the apparent demand of the slogan by claiming that "evangelising," in fact, meant "contacting" potential Christians and exposing them to the gospel. But when results were being reported, no one seemed satisfied merely with statistics of contact. Both practitioners and supporters of mission were not at all indifferent to results expressed in terms of conversions.<sup>17</sup>

The watchword of the Student Volunteer Movement was of vital interest to Seventh-day Adventists—so much so that when a department which was designed to cater to the needs of youth, was formed by the General Conference in 1907, they adopted it and adapted it to their particular perspective. The "aim" of the "Missionary Volunteer society"—the formal name given to youth-oriented societies within local congregations—was "The Advent message to all the world in this generation."<sup>18</sup>

### **3. Adventist Prophetic and Doctrinal Understanding**

I quote the opening paragraph from the seminal work of Leroy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*.

Throughout the ages godly men have seriously sought to understand and to interpret the prophecies recorded in God's Holy Word. They have sought to know where they were in the unfolding of the divine plan of the ages—and what was coming hereafter in God's scheme of things. An earnest endeavor has here been made to trace this quest of man back through the centuries by systematically gathering and analysing the essential records of all leading expositors of Bible prophecy from apostolic days down to the twentieth century; yes, beginning in fact with Jewish expositors prior to the Christian era.

Steven Daily in his book *Seventh-day Adventism for a New Generation* has listed a series of points which demonstrate our indebtedness to various religious traditions.<sup>19</sup>

#### From the Judaeo-Hebrew religious tradition:

- Creation theology;
- Covenant/Remnant theology;
- Sabbath rest;
- Wholistic<sup>20</sup> human nature;
- Immortality—God's exclusive possession;
- Death=sleep;
- The prophetic spirit;
- Normative nature of the Ten Commandments.

#### From the Reformation

- The authority of God's word, through Christ alone;
- Salvation through faith in God's grace alone;
- The priesthood of all believers.

#### From Puritanism

- Dependence on biblical authority;
- A history of dissent in relation to established religions;
- Believer's baptism by immersion;
- The high priestly work of Christ in heaven;
- Obedience to the Ten Commandments;
- Faithful Sabbath observance;
- Mortalism, annihilationism, and a wholistic<sup>20</sup> view of human nature;
- A literal, imminent, pre-millennial second advent;
- The importance of the prophecies of *Daniel* and *Revelation*.

#### From Wesleyan Methodism and Its Associated Movements

- The need for simplicity;
- The need for gospel order;
- The need for practical holiness;
- Identification with the poor and oppressed;
- A prophetic relationship with the religious establishment;
- Religious enthusiasm and openness to God's Spirit. ●

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#### References

1. For consideration of four denominational systems; Presbyterian, Episcopal, Baptist, and Methodist, and their possible influence on Seventh-day Adventist structural design in 1863, see Mustard, "James White and Organization," 233-63.
2. Methodists in the United States and its mission retained a general superintendent. John Wesley never accepted the idea that these general superintendents should be called bishops. See Nolan B. Harmon, *The Organization of the Methodist Church* (Nashville, Tenn.: Methodist Publishing House, 1962); idem, "Structural and Administrative Changes," in *The History of American Methodism*, 3 vols., ed. E. S. Bucke (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), 3:1-58; Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism: A History of the United Methodists and Their Relations* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1974); William W. Sweet, *Methodism in American History* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1933); Jack M. Tuell, *The Organization of the United Methodist Church*, rev. ed. (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1973). Speaking of the contemporary organization in the United Methodist Church, Tuell has said: "President Harry Truman used to have a motto on his desk which read, 'The buck stops here.' There is really no single desk in United Methodism which can appropriately display that motto. If it can be placed anywhere in the church, it would have to be on the eight hundred or so desks of the delegates to the General Conference during their approximately ten-day session every four years. They have the authority to eliminate every structure, board and agency within the entire church except those with constitutional status, such as the episcopacy, the district superintendency, the conferences, and the Judicial Council" (ibid., 126). Andrew Mustard has concluded that the administrative structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as it was originally designed in 1863 is indebted more to Methodism than to any other organisational system. He bases his assertion on three criteria: (1) both

- Methodists and Seventh-day Adventists were governed by a General Conference; (2) the sectional divisions of the denominations were conferences (in 1901 the sectional divisions of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination became the union conferences); and (3) both were characterised by a pragmatic approach to administration and cited effectiveness as evidence of the superiority of the system. Mustard, "James White and Organization," 258. For further discussion of parallels between Seventh-day Adventist organization, as it was established in 1863, and Episcopal, Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist polity, see ibid., 233-63.
3. G.D. Henderson, *Presbyterianism* (Aberdeen: University Press, 1954), 162.
4. See W.S. Read, "Presbyterianism," *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (1974), 801; James A. Gittings, "The Presbyterians: Structure and Mission," *Christianity and Crisis* 46 (1986): 181-86.
5. For a description of contemporary congregational governance, see Gilbert W. Kirby, "Congregationalism," *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. J.D. Douglas (Zandervan: Grand Rapids, 1974), 251-53.
6. See Dale Moody, "The Shaping of Southern Baptist Polity," *Baptist History and Heritage* 14 (July 1979): 2-11.
7. Robert E. Clouse, "Pentecostal Churches," *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (1974), 764.
8. The Assemblies of God Church was founded in 1914; The Church of the Foursquare Gospel was organised in 1927; the leader of the Church of God in Christ (currently the largest Black Pentecostal denomination), Elder E.P. Jones, received the baptism of the Holy Spirit while visiting Los Angeles in 1906; the Church of God (Tomlinson) started as a Holiness Church in 1886 but did not turn Pentecostal until after the turn of the century.
9. Foreign Missions Board Proceedings, 17 December 1893, Record Group 48, General Conference Archives. Other references to the Student Volunteer Movement in Seventh-day Adventist literature and board actions between 1889 and 1903 are available.
10. Leon Smith, "The World's Convention of Student Volunteers," p. 69.
11. Cornell, "The Volunteer Convention," p. 175.
12. Robert E. Speer, *Missionary Principles and Practice*, 59, 63-64; idem, *Christianity and the Nations* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910), 73-76, 113-76; idem, *The Gospel and the New World* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1919), 203-24.
13. John R. Mott, *Addresses and Papers of John R. Mott*, 6 vols. (New York: Association Press, 1946-1947), 1:82; quoted in C. Howard Hopkins, *John R. Mott, 1865-1955: A Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 232.
14. Edward A. Lawrence, *Modern Missions in the East; Their Methods, Successes and Limitations* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1895), 35-36.
15. Chalmers Martin, *Apostolic and Modern Missions* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1898), 52-63.
16. Robert E. Speer, "The Watchword of the Movement: The Evangelisation of the World in This Generation," in *The Student Missionary Appeal: Addresses at the Third International Convention of the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, Held at Cleveland, Ohio, February 23-27, 1898* (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1898), 210.
17. See Hutchison, *Errand to the World*, 19.
18. The watchword was not the only thing that Seventh-day Adventists "borrowed" from the Student Volunteer Movement. In 1908 the "Morning Watch" was introduced to the "Young People's" societies. That had also originated with the Student Volunteer Movement. See Cornell, "The Volunteer Convention," 175. Also, the name given to the youth organization—"the Missionary Volunteer society"—was most likely derived from the name "Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions."
19. Steven G. Daily, *Seventh-day Adventism for a New Generation* (Portland, OR: Better Living Publishers, 1992), 56-62.
20. For centuries we managed to get along without this word but it has surfaced in the last decade or so. The trouble is that we haven't yet decided how to spell it. The Oxford Dictionary (1987) does not recognise *wholistic* but accepts *holistic*. However, as this is a direct quote, we do not correct the spelling of this illegitimate child of the language and would welcome its early demise. Would not the word *complete* suffice? Ed.