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THE GENUINE CHURCH

How to Distinguish It From Skillful Counterfeits

One Sabbath afternoon a guest accused me of being an “organization man.” My mistake? In response to his criticisms, I had pointed out some positive aspects of the church. I plead guilty as charged. You see, I believe a Christian is someone who loves the church because Jesus does. To be loyal to Christ, then, is to be loyal to his church. When one wars against the church, it is not Christ who is motivating him, but rather it is the “dragon,” that old serpent called the devil and Satan, who, says John, is “enraged with the woman [the church] and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring” (Rev. 12: 17, NKJV).¹

That the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the object of Satan’s supreme wrath is evident, for he

attacks the “offspring” of the church that keeps “the commandments of God” and has the “testimony of Jesus Christ” (Rev. 12:17).

That “testimony” gives us a glimpse of the devil’s hatred and strategy: “I saw that Satan bade his angels lay their snares especially for those who were looking for Christ’s second appearing and keeping all the commandments of God. Satan told his angels that the . . . ‘sect of Sabbath keepers we hate; they are continually working against us. . . . As they appoint meetings in different places, we are in danger. Be very

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vigilant then. Cause disturbances and confusion if possible. Destroy love for one another. Discourage and dishearten their ministers, for we hate them.”²

Satan hates the church because she is Jesus’ bride (Matt. 25:1-13). He gave his life for her (Eph. 5:25). And he is the Rock on which the church is built and to which we cling. Some would make Peter the rock, as Pope Leo I did about A.D. 445, but the psalmist knew who it really is: “Oh come, let us sing to the Lord! Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation” (Ps. 95:1). Paul says that Christ is the Rock (1 Cor. 10:1-4), and so does Peter (1 Peter 2:4-8).

A Seventh-day Adventist, then, is

someone who believes that Jesus is the Rock on which the Seventh-day Adventist Church is built and who knows that the gates of hell will not prevail against it. He should know, however, that the conflict will be severe, and the attacks will be three-fold: against the church’s authority, its unity, and its universality. Let’s examine these attributes of the church and how the enemy commander assaults them.

AUTHORITY

All genuine religious authority finds its source in God.³ He is above all authority and over all rulers (Dan. 2:20-22). God delegates authority to whomever he wishes.



He has given authority to his Son (Matt. 28:18), to the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16), and in a limited sense to the church (Matt. 16:19).

The Church Under Scripture

Christ is the head of the church, and the church as his body is subject to him (Eph. 4:22-33). But when he became one of us, he submitted himself to Scripture, as we must do. When tempted in the wilderness, he responded with an "It is written." When confronted by the Sadducees, who challenged him about the resurrection, Jesus said, "You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God" (Matt. 22:29).

As one might expect, Jesus did not leave his disciples in doubt about the parameters within which the church is to exercise authority. "I will give you," he said, "the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:19). Some understand this to mean that whatever the church would decide, heaven would do. But the Greek is better read: "Whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." The church must make decisions in harmony with Heaven, not the other way around.

Though Christ gave authority to

the apostles, it was not limitless. And though their authority extended beyond the local congregation to others they had founded, they always recognized that the ultimate authority anywhere was the inspired Scriptures. Not with any human being or group of beings. Not even with those who were used by the Holy Spirit to write Scripture.⁴

The Roman Catholic Position

Two words describe it: Inverted. Perverted. Within a few centuries after the apostles, the Roman Catholic Church assumed authority over Scripture, the position it holds today.

George Johnson, writing in the 1995 issue of the Catholic journal *Crisis*, explains it: "So far as we know, . . . [Christ] never wrote a word (except on sand). . . . Who, then, decided that it [the New Testament] was Scripture? The Catholic Church."⁵ The 1994 edition of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is still more explicit: "The Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, 'does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.'"⁶ "This living transmission, accomplished by the Holy Spirit, is called Tradition, since it is distinct from Sacred Scripture, though closely connected to it."⁷ The

Catechism continues: "The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ."⁸

The Protestant Position

Though Protestants protest the Catholic Church's claim to authority over Scripture, they, with a few exceptions among the evangelicals, have exchanged their belief in *sola scriptura* (the Bible and the Bible only) for *prima scriptura* (the superiority of the Bible together with other sources of authority). So have a few Adventist scholars, who argue that a proper hermeneutic must take into consideration not only the authority of Scripture, but also of tradition, natural reason, and experience.⁹ But we must ask, By what authority are tradition, experience, and natural reason to be tested? From what source do they derive their authority?

A few Adventist scholars also suggest that more authority be given the "community of faith"—i.e., the church. Doctrines, one author explains, are not so much right or wrong as they are more-adequate or less-adequate expressions of religious experience. Each new generation of believers should study the Bible and reformulate doctrines.¹⁰

The late Gerhard Hasel pointed out: "The Protestant principle of the 'Bible only' (*sola scriptura*) involves the supreme authority of the infallible Holy Scriptures to the exclusion of all human authority as regards 'the standard of character, the revealer of doctrine, and the test of experience.'¹¹

Ellen White didn't stutter: "Human teaching is shut out. There is not place for tradition, for man's theories and conclusions, or for church legislation."¹²

Officially, Adventists have long held that the "Bible and the Bible only" provides the supreme authority to determine faith, doctrines, reforms, and practice.¹³

UNITY

Church unity has three dimensions: unity in faith, service, and Spirit. Let's look at each, giving special attention to how the devil seeks to "help" churches achieve it.

Unity of Faith

Writing to the Ephesians, Paul said "there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all" (Eph. 4:4-6). This unity is rooted in the gospel (vss. 11-14), the law (Isa. 8:20), and in Moses and the prophets (Luke 24:25-27).

Through the centuries, some

How does the devil work to fracture this unity of faith? One prominent approach of today is called “pluralism,” which accommodates diversity of beliefs. Within Protestant churches. . . pluralism characterizes not only peripheral issues but also the very core of biblical faith.

Christians have fractured this unity by departing from these sources, adding such doctrines as infant baptism, meritorious works, grace-dispensing sacraments, immortality of the soul, and a Sunday “Sabbath.”

Unity does not, of course, equate with uniformity, nor does diversity spell independence. But unity does mean commitment to the core values of the New Testament Church. Core values are essential for a strong and vigorous faith. These can be summarized as Christ’s (1) virgin birth, (2) sinless life, (3) crucifixion, (4) resurrection and ascension, (5) intercession and return—all of which Seventh-day Adventists hold as verities. In addition, Adventist faith includes (1) Christ’s second coming, (2) the Ten Commandments, including the Sabbath, (3) the sanctuary, and the prophetic “pointer”—the 2300-day prophecy, (4) spiritual gifts, including the gift of prophecy, and (5) the state of the dead, springing as it does from the non-immortality of the soul.

In the days of the apostles, unity of faith came through the power of

the Holy Spirit, who directed the church by enlarging its concept of mission (Acts 15). In the history of Adventism, unity of faith comes through the power of the Holy Spirit directing the church in the formulation of its special mission.

To Each His Own

How does the devil work to fracture this unity of faith? One prominent approach of today is called “pluralism,” which accommodates diversity of beliefs. Within Protestant churches—themselves the splintered remnant of the Reformation—pluralism characterizes not only peripheral issues but also the very core of biblical faith. It was adopted with the best of intentions—to enhance the mission of the church. Has it done so? The United Methodist Church provides a case history.

In 1972, delegates to the United Methodist Conference wrestled with such questions as ordination of homosexuals, abortion, and use of sexist language in worship services. They decided that the church needed to be less judgmental, more tolerant.

However, the church's Theological Commission on Doctrine found it impossible to agree even on which doctrines constitute the core of the church's beliefs. So they agreed to disagree: Each person, each board, would have to hammer out their own understanding of faith.

So the United Methodist Church voted to adopt pluralism as official policy. It was seen as a promise of a new beginning. The church revitalized would be alive with dialogue. Members would be freed from the restrictive rules that were the product of church doctrines. The result: They would be stimulated to vital worship and celebration, as well as to significant, evangelistic outreach. Has pluralism delivered?

In his book *The Problem of Pluralism*, Jerry Wells points out that the 20-year-plus official era of pluralism actually undermined the kind of unity needed for outreach and ministry. It has not contributed to the growth of church institutions. Rather, its most distinctive contribution to the church suggests chaos and disintegration.¹⁴ Somewhat enlightened, the church has begun to modify its experiment. However, they're on a slippery slope: Pluralism didn't just happen; it was the result of years of gradual erosion of adherence to biblical authority. Nothing short of a wholehearted return to the verities of the New Testament church would seem to suffice, for the

evidence says that pluralism erodes a church's identity, unity, and mission.

Organizational Unity

The church (*ekklesia*) is called out, summoned to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and to proclaim the gospel to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people (Matt. 28:19, 20; Rev. 14:6, 7). The church is a new body, but not without continuity with the Old Testament people of God. It is also the kingdom of God on Earth; its members, through grace, are heirs of the kingdom of glory to come.¹⁵

Throughout the Book of Acts the leadership of Christ and the Holy Spirit are evident. After Paul's conversion on the Damascus road, Christ sent Ananias to direct him into the city, to a street called Straight, to the house of a man called Judas, and there to make contact with the church (Acts 9:1-19). Placing Paul in connection with his church surely sanctioned an organized body of believers. And throughout his ministry, Paul, who had been taught personally by Jesus, ever recognized the authority vested in the body of believers, and to bring matters of importance to the church.

This has been the course followed by our church. "When, in a General Conference, the judgment of the brethren assembled from all parts of the field is exercised, private independence and private judgment

must not be stubbornly maintained, but surrendered. Never should a laborer regard as a virtue the persistent maintenance of his position of independence, contrary to the decision of the general body.”¹⁶ “The stars of heaven are all under law, each influencing the other to do the will of God, yielding their common obedience to the law that controls their action.”¹⁷

Some have suggested that as we near the close of time, every child of God will act independently. Actually, in order that the Lord’s work may advance as He wishes, “His people must draw together.”¹⁸

Unity of Spirit

In his prayer for unity, Jesus said to his Father: “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, . . . that the world may believe that You sent Me” (John 17:20, 21). In response, the Father sent the Holy Spirit (John 16:7). The result: The early Christians “had all things in common” and were of “one accord” in worship and service (see Acts 2:44-46). Unbelievers will believe that God can change their lives when they see that God’s power brings people into cooperative union in

HYMNS OF THE LUKEWARM CHURCH

The Lukewarm Church has announced publication of *Church Songs*, a title chosen, said the editor, “because we didn’t want to turn anybody off with threatening words that no one understands anymore, like *worship* or *hymn*.”

The editor explained: “People in today’s society get kind of uncomfortable with too much talk about things like ‘commitment’ and ‘dedication.’ They’d much rather have a religion that they can turn on or off at will. Our book seeks to meet that need.”

Sample contents:

“A Comfy Mattress Is Our God”

“Joyful, Joyful, We Kinda Like Thee”

“Above Average Is Thy Faithfulness”

“Lord, Keep Us Loosely Connected to Your Word.”

Etc.

spite of national and cultural differences.

Ellen White spoke to all Adventists when she said: "I am instructed to say to Seventh-day Adventists the world over, God has called us. . . to be a peculiar treasure unto Himself. He has appointed that His church on earth shall stand perfectly united in the Spirit and counsel of the Lord of hosts to the end of time."¹⁹

UNIVERSALITY

The goal of the Good Shepherd has ever been to bring all his sheep into one fold. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. . . . And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:14-16). Christ envisions his sheep bound in a global unity, yet each individually known by the Shepherd, and they know him.

The New Ecumenism

Also envisioning one fold under one shepherd is the Roman Catholic Church, which sees herself as the "Mother Church," calling erring children back into the fold. As former Lutheran Richard Neuhaus says of his new church: "Ecumenism is not a program of the Catholic Church; ecumenism is the nature of being the Catholic Church." He speaks of the "irrevocable pledge of

the Catholic Church to take the lead, as only she can take the lead, in striving for the fulfillment of the prayer of our Lord that they may all be one."²⁰

The role of the Catholic Church in seeking a union of Christendom is indeed found in Scripture; but not in Christ's prayer; rather in the union predicted by the Revelator (13:1-18). Against this vision of coerced unity stands the self-chosen ecumenism of the remnant (Rev. 12:17; 14:1-5), based on commitment to the authority of Scripture and total submission to Jesus Christ (see Ephesians 4:4-6).

The Roman Catholic Church and the Seventh-day Adventist Church are the only two global organizations that operate in more than 200 countries under one central authority. But the source of authority differs: In the Catholic Church, authority is exercised from the top down; in the Adventist Church, it comes from the bottom up. For example, even the Adventist General Conference has no authority to disfellowship a dissident Adventist! Only the local church can do that.

True Universality

The children of God, world around, are one family. When Ellen White was told, "You do not understand the French people, you do not understand the Germans. They have to be met in just such a way,"

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she responded, “Does not God understand them? Is it not He who gives His servants a message for the people? . . . Though some are decidedly French, other decidedly German, and other decidedly American, they will be just as decidedly Christlike.”²¹

We are a universal church. There is not an American Seventh-day Adventist Church, not a French, German, Mexican, Japanese, African, or Russian Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is the Seventh-day Adventist Church in America, France, Germany, Mexico, Japan, Africa, Russia. Whatever our culture, race, or country, we are part of the universal body of Christ. We all belong to Jesus Christ, who is the head of one undivided body. This is true global oneness, true brotherhood, true universality.

Conclusion

We’ve examined three aspects of the church—its authority, unity, and universality—as the Bible reveals them and the substitutes offered in their place by the master counterfeiter. And we’re back to “Organization Man.” Still unapologetic. Still proud to plead “guilty as charged.”

Still believing that a Christian is one who loves the church because Jesus does.

When I was baptized, I gladly responded to all 13 questions of the baptismal vow. Included was the question, “Do you believe in church organization? Is it your purpose to support the church by your tithes and offerings and by your personal effort and influence?” I suspect you answered “Yes,” as I did. Then we were baptized—an ordinance the Scripture likens to marriage. We did not take this marriage vow lightly. We made a covenant to be faithful to Jesus and to his church forever.

I suspect that both you and I have been on our knees to confess we’ve fallen short of the commitment we intended. And we’ve had to review just what this covenant promise we made means—

- It means to stand up for what Jesus, through the inspired Word, has taught our church.

- It means to stand up for the church in spite of its shortcomings and human inconsistencies, however disappointing we may find these to be. When a brother or sister has problems, we remind ourselves that we’re “family.”

• It means to stand for truth, when “some. . . trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ” (Gal. 1:7). Paul continued: “Even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed [anathema]” (vs. 8).

• It means that we will ever seek to retain our “first love” for Jesus (Rev. 2:1-7). And our confidence that he is able to do “exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us.” “[T]o Him,” Paul continued in his letter to the church in Ephesus, “be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Eph. 3:20, 21). □

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¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible texts in this article are quoted from the New King James Version.

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³ Frederick Sontag, *How Philosophy Shapes Theology* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971), pp. 219-227.

⁴ D. A. Carson, “Church, Authority in,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984), p. 228.

⁵ George Sim Johnston, “Scripture Alone,” as part of “Catholics vs. Evangelicals” by Mary Jo Anderson, *Crisis* (October 1995), p. 27.

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Article 2 “The Transmission of Divine Revelation” (Liguori, Mo: Liguori Publications, 1994), No. 82, p. 26.

⁷ *Ibid.*, No. 78, p. 25.

⁸ *Ibid.*; “The Magisterium of the Church,”

No. 85, p. 27. In Article 9, “I Believe in the Holy Catholic Church,” Par. 4, No. 1.

⁹ David R. Larson, *Beyond Fundamentalism and Relativism: The Wesleyan Quadrilateral and the Development of Adventist Theology* Philadelphia, Penn.: Adventist Society for Religious Studies (Nov. 17, 1995), p. 9. Larson misunderstands John Wesley’s use of the word *experience* for understanding the Bible.

¹⁰ See Richard Rice, *Reason and the Contours of Faith* (Riverside, Calif.: La Sierra University Press, 1991), pp. 88-98, for an example of attempting to make *prima scriptura* to be understood as *sola scriptura*.

¹¹ Gerhard F. Hasel, *Understanding the Living Word of God* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1980), p. 72.

¹² White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 826.

¹³ Hasel, p. 73.

¹⁴ Jerry L. Walls, *The Problem of Pluralism, Recovering United Methodist Identity* (Wellmore, Kentucky: Good News Books, 1986), pp. 3-9.

¹⁵ G. W. Bromiley, “Church,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1979), Vol. 1, pp. 693, 694.

¹⁶ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 9, p. 260.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

¹⁸ See Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, p. 489; and *Selected Messages*, Book 3, p. 422: “There are men who will receive the truth, and these will take the places made vacant by those who become offended and leave the truth. . . . The ranks will not be diminished.” Several other sources also indicate that the majority of God’s children are still in the other churches.

¹⁹ White, Letter 54 (Jan. 21, 1908), _____, *Manuscript Releases*, Vol. 1, p. 155.

²⁰ Richard John Neuhaus, “That They May All Be One” (The Pope’s 12th Encyclical), *Crisis* (September 1995), p. 27.

²¹ White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 9, p. 180.