

# **Catholic or Adventist: The Ongoing Struggle Over Authority + 9.5 Theses**

## **By George Knight**

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. This year the Protestant world is celebrating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that event. On May 8 General Conference president Ted Wilson, addressing the faculty of Middle East University, cited Ellen White who predicted that Seventh-day Adventists would carry that Reformation on until the end of time. Beyond that, he quoted 1 Timothy 1:7: “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”<sup>1</sup> With that good advice in mind, we will begin our study of the history of authority in Adventism with Luther and his struggle with the Roman Church.

Given my topic, many people would expect me to deal with the theme of the development of ecclesiastical authority in Adventism. But the authority of the church in the denomination is contexted within Adventism’s understanding of the authority of the Bible and that of Ellen White. As a result, I have divided my presentation into three parts: Adventism’s approach to biblical authority, Ellen White’s thoughts on authority, and the development of authoritative structures in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

### **Adventism’s Historical Approach to Biblical Authority**

Adventism has historically viewed itself as a child of the Protestant Reformation. As a result, it is crucial that we recognize that the Reformation was not primarily about indulgences or even justification by faith. At its heart the Reformation was about the issue of authority. “What is new in Luther,” Heiko Oberman writes, “is the notion of absolute obedience to the Scriptures against any authorities; be they popes or councils.”<sup>2</sup> That thought is evident in his testimony before the Diet of Worms: “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Holy Scriptures or by evident reason--for I can believe neither pope nor councils alone. . . . I consider myself convicted by the testimony of Holy Scripture, which is my basis; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus I cannot and will not recant, because acting against one’s conscience is neither safe nor sound. God help me. Amen.”<sup>3</sup>

Ellen White’s comments on Luther in *The Great Controversy* are helpful. Luther “firmly

declared that Christians should receive no other doctrines than those which rest on the authority of the Sacred Scriptures. These words struck at the very foundation of papal supremacy. They contained the vital principle of the Reformation.”<sup>4</sup> Again she penned, the Romanists “sought to maintain their power, not by appealing to the Scriptures, but by a resort to threats.”<sup>5</sup> Finally, we read that “in our time there is a wide departure from their [the Scriptures’] doctrines and precepts, and there is need of a return to the great Protestant principle--the Bible, and the Bible only, as the rule of faith and duty. The same unswerving adherence to the word of God manifested at that crisis of the Reformation is the only hope of reform today.”<sup>6</sup>

At this point it is important to realize that Adventism’s primary Reformation heritage is not Lutheranism or Calvinism but Anabaptism or the Radical Reformation, which in essence held that the magisterial reformers had not been consistent in their Bible-only approach. For the Anabaptists it was wrong to stop where Luther, Calvin, or Zwingli did theologically. As a result, they moved beyond such teachings as infant baptism and state support of the church and toward the ideals of the New Testament church.

Perhaps the best representative religious body in the spirit of Anabaptism in nineteenth century America was the Restorationist movement, for which there was no creed but the Bible itself. Their drive to get back to the Bible set the stage for Adventism. Both Joseph Bates and James White came to Adventism from the Christian Connexion, a branch of Restorationism. For White, “every Christian is . . . in duty bound to take the Bible as a perfect rule of faith and duty.”<sup>7</sup>

In summary, Adventism at its best in 2017 stands on a firm platform of the Bible only as the rule of faith and practice. One of the unfortunate features of Roman Catholicism and many other Christian movements in history is that when they could not establish their claims from the Bible they were tempted to use threats and force backed up by ecclesiastical authority.

At this point in our discussion of biblical authority we need to briefly examine two passages: the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 and the binding and loosening function of the church in Matthew 18:18. Those passages have become important due to their use in recent documents produced by the General Conference. In those documents a favorite passage is Acts 15. A September 2016 document notes that “what is often called the ‘Jerusalem Council’ is

significant almost as much for its process as for the theological decision that resulted.” The decision of the Council “was regarded as binding on churches everywhere.” And, we read, “in sum, the lesson of the Jerusalem Council is that, in the Church, *diversity of practice can be allowed, but only after a representative body has agreed to allow some variation.*”<sup>8</sup>

As we will see, those are very interesting conclusions when viewed from the perspective of what has actually taken place in recent Adventist history. But before doing that it will be helpful to examine Ellen White’s remarks on the Council. In *Acts of the Apostles* she notes that “it was the voice of the highest authority upon the earth,” a descriptor she would later apply to General Conference sessions. Those words are also found in *The Story of Redemption*, where the section on the Council has the editorial title of “*The First General Conference.*” The section notes that the Council was called because the Jews did not believe that God would authorize a change from traditional practices. But, she concludes, that “God Himself had decided this question by favoring the Gentiles with the Holy Ghost” to demonstrate the need for change. In short, God had given the Spirit to the Gentiles in the same manner that he had to the Jews.<sup>9</sup> Thus unity in diversity was approved.

The point about the Spirit settling the matter is an interesting one since at the 2015 General Conference session there was no testimony from female pastors regarding how the Holy Spirit had blessed their ministries in the same way as that of males, the very type of testimony that had led to breaking the deadlock over accepting Gentiles in Acts 15 (see vv. 8, 9) and had reinforced many members of the General Conference appointed Theology of Ordination Study Committee to approve by a strong majority the concept of allowing those divisions that desired to ordain females to move forward. In that sense the decision-making process of Acts 15 was not followed.

A further point to note is that in Acts 15 all of the decisions had a clear biblical base. The same cannot be said of the 2015 General Conference session vote, as we will see in our treatment of Adventism’s ecclesiological authority.

Several other points should be made in relation to Acts 15. First, Paul later opted not to follow the Council’s decision of Acts 15:20, 29 in regard to abstaining from food sacrificed to idols. That is evident from 1 Corinthians 10:23-30,<sup>10</sup> where in verses 25 and 27 he claims that it is permissible to eat meat offered to idols if it does not offend anyone, a ruling that goes directly against Acts 15 with its categorical prohibition. So we find Paul adding conditions and

making exceptions based on cultural context. What Paul could have done was to announce that the first General Conference in session had passed a universal rule and that he had a copy of the letter to prove it. That would have solved the problem and saved Paul a lot of ink and explanation. In actuality, we do not find Paul in any of his letters referring to the Acts 15 Council, even though it could have been helpful to him.

A second point that should be noted is that the Seventh-day Adventist Church does not follow the “universal” rulings of Acts 15:29, 20 in that it does not prohibit the eating of blood by requiring flesh eaters in its midst to eat only kosher meat that has been killed in the proper way so that the blood is drained completely from it. So we find the Adventists being similar to Paul in interpreting and discarding aspects of the ruling largely based on cultural considerations.

With those facts in mind, it can be argued that the real lesson to be gained from Acts 15 is one of unity in diversity, with Jewish and Gentile Christians having freedom to follow differing paths because the Holy Spirit fell in the same way on both groups.

Regarding Matthew 18, the September 2016 documents produced by the General Conference Secretariat claim that “Seventh-day Adventists believe the authority granted to the Church by Jesus enables Church leaders to make decisions that bind all members.” Such leadership decisions, the documents note, are made “at GC Sessions and Annual Councils.”

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That is an interesting perspective, especially in the light of the Roman Catholic Church usage of that passage and its parallel in Matthew 16 to teach that whatever the church votes on earth is ratified in heaven. But the Greek in the verse actually says that “whatever you bind on the earth will have been bound in heaven.” (cf. NASB). *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* has it correct when it notes that “even here Heaven’s ratification of the decision on earth will take place only if the decision is made in harmony with the principles of Heaven.”<sup>12</sup>

The *Commentary*’s remark on the parallel passage in Matthew 16:19 is even clearer. Namely, the binding and loosening function of the church is “to require or to prohibit whatever Inspiration clearly reveals. But to go beyond this is to substitute human authority for the authority of Christ . . . ; a tendency that Heaven will not tolerate in those who have been appointed to the oversight of the citizens of the kingdom of heaven on earth.”<sup>13</sup> Ellen White

makes the same point when she notes that “whatever the church does that is in accordance with the directions given in God’s word will be ratified in heaven.”<sup>14</sup>

What is most interesting in the General Conference’s repeated use of the binding and loosening verses is that it consistently uses Matthew 18:18 and neglects Matthew 16:19. That is understandable since Matthew 16:18, 19 not only sets forth the binding function of the church but also contains Christ’s remark about Peter and the rock upon which Christ will build His church and the keys of the kingdom, making it the foundation of Roman Catholic ecclesiology. With that in mind, it is easier to see why the General Conference documents emphasize Matthew 18:18 but avoid the parallel passage. There is not much to be gained in using Catholicism’s favorite passage even if it makes the same essential point. But a fascinating aspect of the use of those verses is that both the Adventists in their recent documents and the Roman Catholics have misread the text in the same manner for similar ends.

One interesting point related to the General Conference’s use of Matthew 18 is that it is not the church that calls pastors but, according to Ephesians 4:11, God. All the earthly church can do is bind or ratify God’s decision through commissioning or ordaining. That is biblical, as is the laying on of hands in recognition of God’s call. What is not biblical is ordination as we know it. In fact, our English word “ordination” does not derive from “any Greek word used in the New Testament, but from the Latin *ordinaire*.”<sup>15</sup> As a result, modern translations tend to use such words as “appoint” or “consecrate” where the KJV uses “ordain.”<sup>16</sup> *The word “ordination” as Adventists use it is not a biblical teaching but one that finds its roots in the early and early- medieval church.*<sup>17</sup> *From that perspective, the distinction between ordaining and commissioning is a word game of no biblical substance.*

### **Ellen White’s Historical Approach to Authority**

At the very heart of Ellen White’s understanding of religious authority was the place of the Bible. “The Bible,” she wrote, “must be our standard for every doctrine and practice. . . . We are to receive no one’s opinion without comparing it with the Scriptures. Here is divine authority which is supreme in matters of faith. It is the word of the living God that is to decide all controversies.”<sup>18</sup> That thought undergirded Ellen White’s theology throughout her long ministry.

In regard to her own authority, she (as did the other founders of Adventism) regarded it as derived from the authority of Scripture and subservient to it. She pictured her relation to the Bible as “a lesser light to lead men and women to the greater light.”<sup>19</sup>

In many ways the most enlightening episode regarding Ellen White’s position on authority took place in relation to the 1888 General Conference session.<sup>20</sup> At that event she had to confront those pushing traditional Adventist perspectives at several levels of human authority. One approach was General Conference president G. I. Butler’s self perception of having “the highest position that our people could impose” and his claim of special rights and responsibilities in settling theological issues in the church. Ellen White made short shrift of that approach. Soon after the 1888 meetings she wrote that Butler “thinks his position gives him such power that his voice is infallible.” “No man is to be authority for us,” she penned.<sup>21</sup>

A second approach she had to deal with was the attempt to use Adventist tradition to solve the biblical issues. She responded to that tactic by writing that “as a people we are certainly in great danger, if we are not constantly guarded, of considering our ideas, because long cherished, to be Bible doctrine and in every point infallible, and measuring everyone by the rule of our interpretation of Bible truth. This is our danger, and this would be the greatest evil that could ever come to us as a people.”<sup>22</sup>

A third category of human authority she had to face in the 1888 era was the drive at the Minneapolis session to solve the theological and biblical issues by establishing the denomination’s official position through a formal vote of the General Conference in session. As usual, Ellen White had words for the denomination on that topic. “*The church,*” she penned, “*may pass resolution upon resolution to put down all disagreement of opinions, but we cannot force the mind and will, and thus root out disagreement. These resolutions may conceal the discord, but they cannot quench it and establish perfect agreement. Nothing can perfect unity in the church but the spirit of Christlike forbearance.*” W. C. White expressed his view regarding an official vote to settle the disputed issues by declaring to the Minneapolis delegates that he would feel compelled “to preach what he believed, whatever way the conference decided the question” at hand.<sup>23</sup>

Unrelated to the 1888 event, but intimately connected to the problem of churchly authority is Ellen White’s statement in *The Great Controversy* that “*the very beginning of*

*the great apostasy was in seeking to supplement the authority of God by that of the church.”<sup>24</sup>*

A second major topic related to Ellen White’s historic view on authority has to do with the General Conference as God’s highest authority on earth. That topic will be treated in the next major section of this paper, which deals with ecclesiastical authority in Adventism.

But before moving to that topic we need to examine briefly Ellen White’s perspective on ordination. We noted earlier that ordination as practiced by the church is not a biblical issue. But according to Ellen White, it did become an important issue in the history of the early church. In treating the laying of hands on Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13:3, she writes that God “instructed the church . . . to set them apart publicly to the work of the ministry. Their *ordination was a public recognition of their divine appointment.*” They “*had already received their commission from God Himself, and the ceremony of the laying on of hands added no new grace or virtual qualification. . . .* By it the seal of the church was set upon the work of God. . . . *At a later date the rite of ordination by the laying on of hands was greatly abused; unwarrantable importance was attached to the act, as if a power came at once upon those who received such ordination.*”<sup>25</sup> In speaking of the same event in another place she says much the same thing, but adds that their ordination by the laying on of hands “was merely setting the seal of the church upon the work of God--an acknowledged form of designation to an appointed office.”<sup>26</sup>

By speaking of abuse of the term “ordination” in the church, Ellen White is undoubtedly referring in part to the sacerdotal approach to the authority of the priesthood conferred by ordination that gave them such power as to transform the bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ. But more to the point is the hierarchical power of the higher clergy, in which excessive authority has traditionally been granted to bishops with special headship function as fathers of the church. Such power is conferred through the “sacrament of holy orders or ordination.”<sup>27</sup>

Given the amount of heat generated in some Adventist circles on the topic of ordination, one might surmise that somehow power and authority is being transferred to the ordained. While that might do for Roman Catholic theology, it does not hold up in either the

Bible or Ellen White. To the contrary, just as baptism does not erase original sin but is rather an outward symbol of a changed heart, and just as the bread and the wine are not magically transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ in the sacrifice of the Mass but are rather symbols of what Christ accomplished on the cross, so it is that the laying on of hands in what has come to be called ordination does not confer power but is symbolic in recognition of the power already conferred by God in the calling and empowerment of a pastor. *What counts is not the act of ordination but the calling of God.* And the Seventh-day Adventist Church has for many years recognized that God calls both men and women to pastoral ministry. The only difference is that the church has opted to call one ordination and the other commissioning. Such non-biblical verbal gymnastics must lead the angels to scratch their heads in bewilderment. However, it all seems to be clear in Adventist policy.

But at least Ellen White is forthright on the topic. No power or authority is transferred in ordination. That is a product of the history of the church. And, in the words of the Revelator, much of the Christian world seems to be following after the beast (Rev. 13:3, NKJV) on the understanding and importance of ordination.

### **Historical Issues in Adventism's Approach to Ecclesiology**

So far this paper has examined Adventism's approach to biblical authority and Ellen White's historical approach to authority. Thus the stage has been set for an examination of the denomination's struggle to find and be faithful to a balanced and biblical view of ecclesiastical authority.

#### **The Earliest Adventists and Ecclesiastical Authority: 1843-1863**

Looking back at early Adventism, no one could have predicted that by mid-twentieth century Seventh-day Adventism would be the most highly structured denomination in the history of Christianity, with four levels of authority above the local congregation.<sup>28</sup> The plain fact is that the earliest Adventists feared structured churches. And with good reason. That fear is nicely expressed in the October 1861 meeting that saw the establishment of the first local conference. Part of the discussion at that historic meeting had to do with developing a formal statement of belief. John Loughborough took the lead in the discussion and laid out five

progressive points that nicely express the attitude of most of his audience.

- “The first step of apostasy,” he noted, “is to get up a creed, telling us what we shall believe.
- “The second is, to make that creed a test of fellowship.
- “The third is to try members by that creed.
- “The fourth to denounce as heretics those who do not believe that creed.
- “And, fifth, to commence persecution against such.”<sup>29</sup>

James White also expressed his fears. “Making a creed,” he wrote, “is setting the stakes, and barring up the way to all future advancement.” Those churches that had set up creeds “have marked out a course for the Almighty. They say virtually that the Lord must not do anything further than what has been marked out in the creed. . . . The Bible is our creed. We reject everything in the form of a human creed. We take the Bible and the gifts of the Spirit; embracing the faith that thus the Lord will teach us from time to time. And in this we take a position against the formation of a creed. We are not taking one step, in what we are doing, toward becoming Babylon [as oppression].”<sup>30</sup>

Those points are informative to those of us who live 150 years later. While White feared a backward looking rigidity that would inhibit the progressive dynamic in what the early Adventist’s thought of as an ongoing present truth, Loughborough expressed fear of persecution for those who did not line up with official positions.

And the participants in that 1861 meeting had good reasons to fear organized religious bodies. Fresh in their memories was the persecution of Millerites in 1843 and 1844 as pastors lost their pulpits and followers their memberships because of their belief in the Bible’s teaching on Second Advent. They had come to see organized religion in terms of the persecuting Babylon of the books of Daniel and Revelation. It was no accident that Millerite George Storrs wrote in early 1844 that “no church can be organized by man’s invention but what it becomes Babylon *the moment it is organized.*” In the same article Storrs asserted that Babylon “is the *old mother* and all her children [the Protestant denominations]; who are known by the family likeness, a domineering, lordly spirit; a spirit to suppress a free search after truth, and a free expression of our conviction of what is truth.”<sup>31</sup> Charles Fitch had been of the same opinion in his famous sermon calling Millerites to come out of Babylon, the fallen

denominations.<sup>32</sup>

It was the fear of Babylon as persecuting churches that kept any of the six major groups that came out of the Millerite movement from organizing before the 1850s and 1860s. And none but the Sabbatarian Adventists would ever organize above the congregational level.<sup>33</sup>

The fear of organized denominations as persecuting Babylon stands at the foundation of early Adventist attitudes in regard to organizing as a church. But in the 1850s James White began to emphasize an alternate biblical meaning of Babylon. In July 1859 he let it be known in the most descriptive language that he was sick and tired of the cry of Babylon every time that anyone mentioned organization. “Bro. Confusion,” he penned, “makes a most egregious blunder in calling system, which is in harmony with the Bible and good sense, Babylon. As Babylon signifies confusion, our erring brother has the very word stamped upon his own forehead. And we venture to say that there is not another people under heaven more worthy of the brand of Babylon than those professing the Advent faith who reject Bible order. Is it not high time that we as a people heartily embrace everything that is good and right in the churches?”<sup>34</sup>

It is impossible to overestimate the force of White’s redirection of the emphasis from Babylon being primarily seen as persecution to that of confusion. That new emphasis went far toward paving the way for the Sabbatarians to organize as a religious body, legally own property, pay pastors on a regular basis, assign pastors to locations where they were needed, and develop a system for transferring membership. In the end, developing church organization had one major end. Namely, to expedite the mission of the denomination. But the redefinition of Babylon was only one of the transformations that allowed the Sabbatarian Adventists to organize. A second essential transformation had to do with moving beyond the biblical literalism of White’s earlier days when he believed that the Bible must explicitly spell out each aspect of church organization. In 1859 he argued that “we should not be afraid of that system which is not opposed by the Bible, and is approved by sound sense.”<sup>35</sup> *Thus he had come to a new hermeneutic. White had moved from a principle of Bible interpretation that held that the only things Scripture allowed were those things it explicitly approved to a hermeneutic that allowed for developments that did not contradict the Bible and were in harmony with common sense. That shift was absolutely essential to moving forward in the creative steps in church*

*organization that he would advocate in the 1860s.*

That revised hermeneutic, however, put White in opposition to those who maintained a literalistic approach to the Bible that demanded that it explicitly spell something out before the church could accept it. To answer that mentality, White noted that nowhere in the Bible did it say that Christians should have a weekly paper, a steam printing press, build places of worship, or publish books. He went on to argue that the “living church of God” needed to move forward with prayer and common sense.<sup>36</sup>

Without the radical shift in hermeneutical principles there would have been no organization among the Sabbatarians above the local congregation. But the new hermeneutic allowed them not only to organize but to create a structure that made it possible to take their unique message to the ends of the earth. Mission, we must note again, was always behind the Adventist mentality as it sought to dynamically move forward on the basis of a hermeneutic that allowed those things that did not contradict the Bible and were in harmony with common sense.

With the new hermeneutic and the new definition of Babylon in place the Sabbatarians were in position to develop the non-biblical concept of local conferences in 1861 and the equally non-biblical concept of a General Conference in 1863. That last move was “for the purpose of securing unity and efficiency in labor, and promoting the general interests of the cause of present truth, and of perfecting the organization of the Seventh-day Adventists.”<sup>37</sup>

### **Ecclesiastical Tensions and the Creation of Unions: 1863-1903**

As might be expected, tensions eventually developed between the authority of the local conferences and that of the General Conference. In August 1873, for example, in the context of a lack of respect for General Conference officers, James White noted that “our General Conference is the highest earthly authority with our people, and is designed to take charge of the entire work in this and all other countries.”<sup>38</sup>

Then in 1877 the General Conference in session voted that “the highest authority under God among Seventh-day Adventists is found in the will of the body of that people, as expressed in the decisions of the General Conference *when acting within its proper jurisdiction*; and that such decisions should be submitted to by all without exception, *unless they can be shown to conflict with the word of God and the rights of individual conscience.*”<sup>39</sup>

That vote seems clear enough and both of the Whites accepted it. Please note, however,

that it did highlight limitations related to the “proper jurisdiction” of the General Conference and “the rights of individual conscience.”

Interestingly, Ellen White on several occasions questioned whether the rulings of the General Conference were always the voice of God. In 1891, for example, she wrote that “I was obliged to take the position that there was not the voice of God in the General Conference management and decisions. . . . Many of the positions taken, going forth as the voice of the General Conference, have been the voice of one, two, or three men who were misleading the Conference.”<sup>40</sup> Again in 1896 she noted that the General Conference “is no longer the voice of God.”<sup>41</sup> And in 1901 she wrote that “the people have lost confidence in those who have management of the work. Yet we hear that the voice of the [General Conference] is the voice of God. Every time I have heard this, I have thought that it was almost blasphemy. The voice of the conference ought to be the voice of God, but it is not.”<sup>42</sup>

An analysis of those negative statements indicates that they refer to occasions when the General Conference did not act as a representative body, when its decision-making authority was centralized in a person or a few people, or when the General Conference had not been following sound principles.<sup>43</sup>

That conclusion lines up with Ellen White’s statements across time. In fact, she specifically spoke to the point in a manuscript read before the delegates of the 1909 General Conference session in which she responded to the schismatic activities of A. T. Jones and others. “At times,” she told the delegates, “when a small group of men entrusted with the general management of the work have, in the name of the General Conference, sought to carry out unwise plans and to restrict God’s work, I have said that I could no longer regard the voice of the General Conference, represented by these few men, as the voice of God. But this is not saying that the decisions of a General Conference 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.”<sup>44</sup>

The second round of organizational refinement took place between 1901 and 1903,<sup>45</sup> when several major changes were made. The two most important were the replacement of the autonomous auxiliary organizations (such as those that controlled education, publishing, medical, Sabbath school, and so on) with the departmental system and the development of union

conferences to stand as intermediary administrative units between the General Conference and the local conferences. Both of those innovations had been experimented with in South Africa and Australia before the 1901 session. And both of them had been developed in response to regional mission needs. And both were developed in opposition to General Conference pronouncements and procedures.

General Conference President O. A. Olsen thought he saw “elements of danger” in the departmental systems and told A. T. Robinson in South Africa not to develop departments.<sup>46</sup> But it was too late. Because of the large amount of time it took to communicate from North America, Robinson had instituted the program and found out that it worked.

It is of interest that the General Conference leadership also opposed the creation of union conferences.<sup>47</sup> But W. C. White and A. G. Daniells, president and secretary of the Australian field, moved forward in spite of counsel from headquarters. Years later Daniells reported that not everyone was happy with the union conference idea. “Some of our brethren thought then that the work was going to be wrecked, that we were going to tear the organization all to pieces, and get up secession out there in the South Sea islands.” But in actuality, he observed, the result was quite the opposite. The new organizational approach greatly facilitated the mission of the church in the South Pacific while the new Australasian Union Conference remained a loyal and integral part of the General Conference system.<sup>48</sup>

*Here we need to remember an important lesson in the history of Adventist organization. Namely, that both of the major innovations adopted by the 1901 General Conference session were in response to regional mission and both were developed in opposition to General Conference counsel. But they worked. The major lesson is that without the freedom to experiment Adventism would not have its present system of organization.*

Ellen White was overjoyed with the development of union conferences. In calling for reform on the first day of the 1901 session she noted to the delegates that “God has not put any kingly power in our ranks to control this or that branch of the work. The work has been greatly restricted by the efforts to control it in every line. . . . If the work had not been so restricted by an impediment here, and an impediment there, and on the other side an impediment, it would have gone forward in its majesty.”<sup>49</sup> At the 1903 session she declared that “*it has been a necessity to organize union conferences, that the General Conference shall not exercise*

*dictation over all the separate conferences.*”<sup>50</sup>

On the basis of those and other comments, the late Gerry Chudleigh has argued that the unions “were created to act as *firewalls* between the GC and the conferences, making ‘dictation’ impossible.” He buttressed his firewall image with two major points. First, “each union had its own constitution and bylaws and was to be governed by its own constituency.” And, second, “the officers of each union were to be elected by their own union constituency, and, therefore, could not be controlled, replaced or disciplined by the GC.”<sup>51</sup>

“To put it as bluntly as possible,” Chudleigh wrote, “after 1901, the General Conference could vote whatever it wanted unions and conferences to do, or not do, but the unions and conferences were autonomous and could do what they believed would best advance the work of God in their fields. The GC executive committee, or the General Conference in business session, could vote to fire a union president or conference president, or vote to merge a union or conference with another one, but their vote would change nothing: the union or conference would still exist and the member delegates could elect whoever they wanted as president.”<sup>52</sup> A case in point in contemporary Adventism is the Southeastern California Conference, which has an ordained female president, in spite of the wishes of the General Conference.

The situation looked good in 1901 with the union conferences in place. But the push for both unity and uniformity by the General Conference over time would erode the accomplishments of 1901. The most significant move along that line, as we will see, took place at the 1995 General Conference session.

The erosion of the ideal of unity in diversity had, unfortunately, already begun soon after the 1901 session. The following two years would witness a major struggle for the control of Adventism between General Conference president A. G. Daniells and J. H. Kellogg, the powerful leader of the denomination’s medical work.

Ellen White back in 1894 had set forth “unity in diversity” as “God’s plan,” with unity being achieved by each aspect of the work being connected to Christ the vine.<sup>53</sup> In 1901 and 1902 Daniells had championed that ideal, noting in 1902 to the European Union Conference that just “because a thing is done a certain way in one place is not reason why it should be done in the same way in another place, or even in the same place at the same time.”<sup>54</sup>

But that ideal began to give way by late 1902 as the Kellogg forces sought to unseat

Daniells and replace him with A. T. Jones, who was by that time in the doctor's camp. In that struggle the Kellogg/Jones forces pushed for diversity. That dynamic impelled Daniells to emphasize unity as he moved toward a more authoritative stance. Thus the delicate balance between unity in diversity lost out soon after the 1901 session. And, as Barry Oliver points out, unity at the expense of diversity has been the focus of the General Conference leadership ever since the 1902 crisis.<sup>55</sup>

The only significant development in Adventist church structure since 1901/1903 took place in 1918 with the creation of world divisions of the General Conference. But it should be noted that the divisions are not conferences with their own constituencies but parts of the General Conference administration that represent the central body in various parts of the world.<sup>56</sup>

An ongoing temptation of the General Conference throughout its history has been to overstep the bounds of its authority. General Conference president George I. Butler generated one of the boldest moves in that direction in 1873. "Never," he penned on the first page of his little book titled *Leadership*, was there a "great movement in this world without a leader. . . . As nature bestows upon men a variety of gifts, it follows that some have clearer views than others of what best advances the interests of any cause. And the best good of all interested in any given object will be attained by intelligently following the counsels of those best qualified to guide." Butler had no doubt that James White had played a role akin to that of Moses, and that in all matters of expediency in the Adventist cause it was right "to give his [White's] judgment the preference."<sup>57</sup> The 1873 General Conference session officially adopted Butler's ideas. But both of the Whites eventually felt uncomfortable with the document and wrote against many of its principles.<sup>58</sup> As a result, the 1875 and 1877 sessions rescinded the endorsement, especially those sections dealing with leadership being "confined to any one man."<sup>59</sup>

Kevin Burton in his recent MA thesis on Butler's *Leadership* did an excellent job of demonstrating that Butler wrote with James White as the leader he had in mind. But the self-imposed scope of Burton's research did not allow for the demonstration that Butler's style and claims in the 1873 document mirror his own style and claims in the 1888 conflict.<sup>60</sup> On October 1, 1888, Butler wrote a long letter to Ellen White repeatedly emphasizing that he had "the highest position" in the denomination and should have the rights that go with that

position. She replied to him on October 14 that he did “not understand [his] true position,” that he had “false ideas of what belonged to [his] position,” that he had turned his “mind into wrong channels,” that he had “not kept pace with the opening providence of God,” and that he had mingled his “natural traits of character” with his work. *Most serious of all the charges was that he was seeking to manipulate the information that would come before the 1888 General Conference session.* Speaking to the General Conference president and Uriah Smith (the secretary), she wrote that “you must not think that the Lord has placed you in the position that you now occupy as the only men who are to decide as to whether any more light and truth shall come to God’s people.” She noted in this letter and others that Butler’s influence had led other session delegates to also “disregard light.”<sup>61</sup>

A broad study of the 1888 crisis indicates that the most serious problem troubling the Minneapolis meeting was the high-handed assertions of position and manipulation of data by the president and his colleagues.<sup>62</sup> It should be noted in passing that the theme of Butler’s 1873 *Leadership* was “union” and “order.”<sup>63</sup> Unity was the goal in that document and the same preservation of unity would be Butler’s goal in the manipulation of data in the 1888 period.

Butler, as we know, lost the 1888 struggle. He had sought to impose not only unity but theological uniformity on the denomination. But Ellen White pushed against him with the alternate ideal of unity in diversity. She was, the General Conference’s newly elected secretary reported in 1890, not so much interested in theological unity as she was in the unity of having a Christ-like spirit built on brotherly love.<sup>64</sup>

The major lesson to flow out of the 1888 crisis is unity in diversity. That same principle would undergird the reform of church structures in 1901. As we saw earlier, the unity in diversity ideal had begun to run into major difficulties in 1902 when Daniells began to assert his authority as General Conference president in his struggle with Kellogg. At that point, diversity began to take a back seat to unity and Ellen White in 1903 had to warn the reforming General Conference president that he could not “exercise a kingly power over [his] brethren.”<sup>65</sup>

### **Removal of the Union Conference Firewall: 1980-2016**

In spite of Daniells’ temptation to wrongly use the power of his office, the balance between unity and diversity institutionalized by the creation of union conferences fared tolerably well for most of the twentieth century. In his summary of that period, Gerry Chudleigh notes that

the constitutions and bylaws created and voted at the 1901 session for the first unions “contained no requirement that the unions adopt or follow GC policies, procedures, programs, initiatives, etc.”<sup>66</sup>

But that would begin to change in the legal documents of the denomination in the 1980s and come to a climax in the 1990s and the first two decades of the twenty-first century. The 1980s witnessed the development by the General Conference of a “Model Union Conference Constitution and Bylaws.” In 1985 the *Working Policy* stated that the model should be “followed as closely as possible.” But by 1995 the same section would note that the model “shall be followed by all union conferences. . . . Those sections of the model bylaws that appear in bold print are essential to the unity of the Church worldwide, and shall be included in the bylaws as adopted by each union conference. Other sections of the model may be modified.” In 1985 the model stipulated that all “**purposes and procedures**” of the unions would be in harmony with the “**working policies and procedures**” of the General Conference. By 1995 General Conference “**programs and initiatives**” had been added. And in 2000 all “**policies**” was included. All of those additions were in bold print.<sup>67</sup> Thus between 1985 and 2000 the *Working Policy* not only erased the 1901 model of unity in diversity set forth for unions in the Ellen White led drive for decentralization, but had become progressively more engineered toward centralization of authority in a drive for unity with less and less diversity.

The challenge for the General Conference in the mid-eighties was to get existing union conferences to adopt the new model. In that, they succeeded in some unions and failed in others. The case of the North Pacific Union opens a window into the dynamics. In September 1986 it rejected the model. But perhaps the most significant event connected to that rejection was the reading of General Conference president Neal Wilson’s letter to the delegates. Wilson made it clear that the General Conference was the “highest authority in the church” and that it had the authority to create subordinate organizations. He then chastised the North Pacific Union for having two years before created its own constitution that was not in harmony with the model. He also threatened the noncompliant union, claiming that he saw “the only other option” to be an investigation “to determine whether [the] union . . . is operating within the spirit and guidelines established for union conferences, with the understanding that appropriate action will be taken in the case of organizations that do not measure up to the standard.”<sup>68</sup>

That unvarnished threat indicates that the type of actions threatened by the General Conference in 2016 have a history. And that history is solidly rooted in the tightening up of the relationship between union conferences and the General Conference in the modified *Working Policy*.

The 1990s would witness the move by the General Conference leadership to centralize its authority move into high gear. Robert Folkenberg, the new General Conference president, faced with the important but daunting task of maintaining order in a massive world church, established in 1991 the Commission on World Church Organization, which met several times until its work was completed in 1994. The successful aspects of the Commission's work went to the 1995 General Conference session. Others fell by the wayside. All of them were aimed at the centralization of authority.

Among those that fell by the wayside was an attempt to take away the exclusive right of local congregations to disfellowship members. The stimulus for the move was the fact that Des Ford of Glacier View fame and John Osborne of Prophecy Countdown still held church membership in sympathetic congregations that would not disfellowship them. Osborne's case is interesting since, although he lived in Florida, his membership, being threatened there, had been rescued by the Troy, Montana, church where he had never lived. At that point those in the General Conference who wanted action threatened to disband the church. I still remember getting a late evening phone call from one of the congregation's leaders telling me that they had an ultimatum: either disfellowship Osborne or face dissolution as an Adventist church. The congregation was disbanded, but Osborne's membership had been rescued by the Village Church in Angwin, California. Interestingly enough, it was the Pacific Union College Church in the same city that held Ford's membership. Neither congregation responded to the call to disfellowship the men. But the solution seemed obvious--give higher levels of the church structure the prerogative of disfellowshipping local church members.<sup>69</sup> Ideally, the idea ran, the same sort of logic could be used to remove ministerial credentials and disband congregations. Thus the "higher" levels would have more control over situations that they believed the lower levels were not handling correctly.

Bert Haloviak, General Conference archivist at the time, notes that he, Paul Gordon of the White Estate, and a member of the Biblical Research Institute were summoned to Folkenberg's office and each asked to write a paper with the "hidden agenda" of supporting

some of the General Conference's initiatives. The Institute's paper was written by Raoul Dederen of Andrews University. All, three papers, although written independently and from different perspectives, concluded that the General Conference did not have grounding to do such things as disfellowshipping members. I recall Dederen, a colleague of mine at the time with specialties in ecclesiology and Roman Catholic theology, having remarked at the Cohutta Springs meeting of March 1993 that some of the proposed initiatives were in essence the revival of medieval Catholicism.<sup>70</sup>

The most successful aspects of the Commission's recommendations saw passage at the 1995 General Conference session. That session not only witnessed a further tightening of the control measures embedded in the model constitutions, but also passed legislation that allowed for noncompliant unions, conferences, and missions to be disbanded if they did not come into line with General Conference policies and initiatives. Since 1995 the *General Conference Working Policy* has contained a new section titled "Discontinuation of Conferences, Missions, Unions, and Unions of Churches by Dissolution and/or Expulsion."<sup>71</sup> Utilizing the ever-more centralizing requirements of the model constitution, the new section (B 95) proclaims the power to disband any union, conference, or mission that is out of harmony with General Conference policy. With what has become policy B 95 in place, the General Conference had arrived at the point where it could threaten the existence of two North American Division unions in September and October 2016.

Meanwhile, the measures attempted in the early nineties had met a fair amount of resistance both in committees and at Annual Council meetings. Susan Sickler, as a member of both the Governance Commission and the General Conference executive committee, saw it as a "huge power grab," while Herman Bauman, Arizona Conference president, said that the essence of the commission report could be spelled "with the letters C-O-N-T-R-O-L." One General Conference staffer quipped in a private conversation that "What the Catholic Church took 300 years to achieve, we are doing in 150."<sup>72</sup>

Folkenberg, on the other hand, "kept saying this was in no way a centralization of power." In response, one NAD union president noted to the Commission that "if it walks like a duck and it quacks like a duck, it probably is a duck." Neal Wilson, who had his own issues with his successor, aggressively supported those who saw the issue as centralization.<sup>73</sup>

Ted Wilson, then president of the division encompassing Russia, was reported to have

said at a commission meeting that he would have difficulty getting some of the recommendations accepted in a country that had just exited communism.<sup>74</sup> That, needless to say, was a pertinent insight that might have meaning in 2017 for those who understand the significance of the Protestant Reformation.

One final point needs to be made in regard to the Governance Commission. Namely, that some person or persons “high up” in the General Conference apparently manipulated the data so that the final form of the commission report did not line up with what was voted. Folkenberg did not indicate “how and why it came into final form without discussion and a vote from the commission.”<sup>75</sup> The manipulation of data would reappear in 2015.

We now move to the 2015 General Conference session as a final building block that led up to the noncompliance threat issued at the 2016 Annual Council. The major event of the 2015 session, of course, was the vote to not allow divisions the option of ordaining female pastors. That action is clear enough. But the way it took place leaves open the question of whether the action represents a “voice of God” vote enacted by the General Conference in session.

To grasp the significance of that issue we need to go to the early presidency of Ted Wilson when he established the Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC). This worldwide panel of over 100 scholars and non-scholars who had a burden on the topic met in 2013 and 2014 with the aim of informing the church on ordination issues at a scholarly level so that an informed vote could take place in 2015.<sup>76</sup> The study cost the denomination hundreds of thousands of dollars. As the General Conference Secretariat noted, “voices from around the world from all sides were heard; the arguments and supporting documents of all perspectives were made freely available online. . . . The process was unmatched in both breadth and depth.”<sup>77</sup> All those points are true and were included in a document that suggested penalties for those unions that had not come into line with the 2015 vote. All of this is forcefully outlined in a document entitled “A Study of Church Governance and Unity” developed by the General Conference Secretariat in September 2016.

But, unfortunately, the “Study” in actuality set the stage for disunity in that it inflated the document’s value for its own purposes but did not report the findings of TOSC. That maneuver is merely the tip of a nasty iceberg.

As impossible as it seems after having spent so much money and time on the project,

the results of TOSC were never clearly presented to the General Conference session at the time of the vote. And for good reason. Apparently, TOSC's consensus did not support the desired conclusions of certain individuals at the top of the denominational power structure.<sup>78</sup> Thus the 2015 delegates were not informed that a super majority of 2/3 (62 for and 32 opposed) of the members of TOSC was in favor of allowing divisions to make the choice on whether to ordain female pastors.<sup>79</sup> In addition, the delegates were not informed that at least nine<sup>80</sup> of the 13 Divisions of the church in their TOSC reports were favorable toward letting each division make its own decision on female ordination. Nor did the final TOSC report present that data. It did, however, present the positions of three distinct groupings of delegates that developed during TOSC's two year journey. But the delegates at the 2015 session were not explicitly informed that two of those orientations were in favor of each division making its own choice.<sup>81</sup>

Had the actual findings of TOSC been reported, the vote, in all probability, would have been different. After all, a 10% shift in the vote would have changed the outcome. The final tally at the General Conference session in San Antonio was 977 (42%) in favor of flexibility in ordination to 1,381 against, a remarkably close vote considering how the process was handled.

Not the least of the problems associated with the vote was the non-neutrality of the General Conference president, who reminded the session delegates on voting day that they knew his position on the topic (which was clearly understood to be against the ordination of women). That non-neutrality was bad enough, but it was stated with the full knowledge that a significant majority of TOSC, a committee that he had authorized to solve the problem, had concluded to recommend that divisions should have the right to ordain females if they chose to do so.<sup>82</sup> And in a world church in which the vast majority of the delegates come from tribal and Roman Catholic cultures, a word from the denomination's top administrator has significance. The Norwegian Union Conference made an important point when it suggested that if unity was high on the agenda of the General Conference president he could have clearly reported the findings of TOSC and called for a solution in line with its results.<sup>83</sup>

At this point the widespread "disgust" expressed by a significant number of the TOSC membership at the reversal of the General Conference president should be noted for the record. At the beginning of the meetings, when it apparently looked like the carefully selected participants would come up with the "correct" conclusion, he spoke to the committee on the

importance of their work, that it was not merely another investigation into an much studied topic but that their findings would make a difference. But when the majority recommendation went the other way, he intimated at the final meeting that it was largely a North American committee and that if it had been a world committee the decision would have been different. He was reminded publicly that although many of the members were working in North America, they were in fact from around the world. But to no avail. The findings of the committee seem at that point to have become not so important and were marginalized at the 2015 session.<sup>84</sup>

There were also serious irregularities in the 2015 voting, but this is not the place to discuss them.<sup>85</sup> On the other hand, it should be pointed out that no matter how the vote turned out or how it could have turned out, the procedure itself suffered from the suppression and manipulation of data. This is a serious charge to make, but there is no alternative in the face of the handling of the TOSC findings and the ongoing misuse of them in General Conference documents, which trumpet the importance of the study without reporting its results.<sup>86</sup>

William Johnsson, retired editor of the *Adventist Review*, has pointed out that 2015 will go down in history as the most divisive General Conference session since 1888.<sup>87</sup> And he is correct. What is interesting is that in both sessions, top people in the General Conference manipulated data. In the 1888 era it was president G. I. Butler, who Ellen White faulted for his desire to decide what information came to the delegates.<sup>88</sup> One can only guess who decided to suppress and manipulate the reporting of the findings of TOSC in 2015, but the only possibility is a few people near the top of the General Conference structure.

The significance of the manipulation and suppression of crucial data that had been produced at immense expense for the purpose of informing the church has vast implications, especially since Ellen White, as we saw earlier, repeatedly claimed in the 1890s that she no longer held that the General Conference was the voice of God because it's decisions were really the decisions of a few men. That is exactly what we find in the events leading up to the vote in San Antonio. A few people decided what information went to the delegates. Even the General Conference's "Study of Church Governance and Unity" document pointed out that Ellen White was upset when "two or three men" tried to control the church's mission or when "merely a half a dozen' at the world headquarters" sought "to be a ruling and controlling power." The "Study" document was correct in its use of that inspired material. But it was dead wrong when it claimed that what happened in the late 1800s "is a world away from the situation today."<sup>89</sup> It

was actually the same situation and dynamic, with a few people in their decision-making capacity controlling information and events. As a result, from the perspective of Ellen White's writings, we do not have a voice of God vote from the world church in 2015. Instead, we have the same old manipulation and kingly power approaches that she detested in 1888 and the 1890s.

And the manipulation was not merely of data, but also of process. Here one example must suffice. The General Conference documents uplift the Acts 15 conference "almost as much for its *process* as for the theological decision that resulted," but that appreciation was not evident in San Antonio. For one thing, the General Conference documents do not describe the Acts 15 process. Rather, they infer that the process was voting to be followed by mandatory obedience.<sup>90</sup> But Acts 15 outlines not only the actual process but also the essential tipping point in that

process. The breakthrough in Acts 15 truly was based on process and came when Peter was able to demonstrate that the Holy Spirit made no distinction between Jews and Gentiles but came in the same way to both groups (Acts 15:8, 9). Without that evidence there would have been nothing but ongoing divisiveness. But with it there was healing and unity. What would have happened in San Antonio if the process utilized in Acts 15 had been used on the day of the vote. There would have been testimonies from people put on the program that demonstrated that the Holy Spirit fell upon the pastoral/evangelistic ministries of women in the same way as for men. Such testimonies were important in the final TOSC meeting and helped lead to a significant majority of the participants, despite their personal position on women's ordination, to approve flexibility in the practice of ordaining women.<sup>91</sup> But the few people who set up the procedure in San Antonio chose not to follow the Acts 15 model even though the "Study of Church Governance" documents cite that passage to bolster the General Conference's authoritative position.

Much more could be said about the manipulation of data and process in the events related to the 2015 vote. But the illustrations are many and my time is short. The final conclusion is that the vote settled nothing. But it did divide the denomination in ways that are tragic. Here some wisdom from James and Ellen White would have helped. James had written in 1874 that "creed power has been called to the rescue [of church unity] in vain. It has been truly said that 'The American people are a nation of lords.' In a land of boasted freedom of

thought and of conscience, like ours, *church force cannot produce unity; but has caused divisions*, and has given rise to religious sects and parties almost innumerable.”<sup>92</sup>

His wife was of the same opinion. “The church may pass resolution upon resolution to put down all disagreement of opinions,” she penned in 1892, “but we cannot force the mind and will, and thus root out disagreement. These resolutions may conceal the discord, but they cannot quench it and establish perfect agreement.”<sup>93</sup> From her perspective, only the clear word of Scripture could bring true unity.

Christ made a pertinent point when He proclaimed that he who has ears needs to “hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 3:22, RSV). I once heard a very wise man say that those who like to quote Ellen White should listen to all she has to say and not just use her to get across their own goals. Here are two selections that have been relevant throughout Adventism’s ongoing struggle over authority. In 1895 she penned that “*the high-handed power that has been developed, as though position has made men gods, makes me afraid*, and ought to cause fear. *It is a curse* wherever and by whomsoever it is exercised. *This lording it over God’s heritage will create such a disgust of man’s jurisdiction that a state of insubordination will result.*” She went on to recommend that the “only safe course is to remove” such leaders since “all ye are brethren,” lest “great harm be done.”<sup>94</sup>

Another fascinating insight comes from the *Testimonies*. “One man’s mind and judgment are not to be considered capable of controlling and molding a conference. . . . The president of a conference must not consider that his individual judgment is to control the judgment of all. *Many, very many matters have been taken up and carried by vote, that have involved far more than was anticipated and far more than those who voted would have been willing to assent to had they taken the time to consider the question from all sides.*”<sup>95</sup> In that quotation we find some excellent advice for Adventist decision makers as they approach the 2017 Annual Council.

## **So Where Are We in 2017?**

Since the problem that has developed in the past few years is over women’s ordination, I should briefly comment on the topic.

- It is not prohibited in the Bible
- It is not prohibited in Ellen White's writings.
- The General Conference *Working Policy* does not stipulate a gender requirement.<sup>96</sup>
- It is not a settled issue because of the suppression of information and the manipulation of the process in 2015.
- Its practice will not stop because there is no biblical evidence for doing so.
- Its prohibition cannot be settled by a vote alone. Adventist leaders need to refrain from seeking to use policy as if it were Catholicism's Canon Law. We need to remember that Adventism is post-Reformation.

It is true that in 1990 the denomination officially voted not to ordain women to the gospel ministry because of "the possible risk of disunity, dissension, and diversion from the mission of the church."<sup>97</sup> That vote, we should note, did not claim that the practice was wrong. It was not a theological vote, but one based on the practical grounds that it might cause disunity. That was 27 years ago and the denomination has discovered that unity can be fractured in more than one direction. The plain fact in 2017 is that the church is seriously divided on women's ordination. But it probably would not be if the conclusions generated by the TOSC committee had not been suppressed at San Antonio, if the process in Acts 15 had been utilized at the session, and if the General Conference leadership would have used the findings of TOSC as a tool to bring unity and healing to the church.

But that healing approach did not take place. As a result, a small group at denominational headquarters decided to exert what it believed to be its authority in September and October 2016, months that witnessed the apex of the evolution of Adventist ecclesiological authority and the continuation of the problematic results that both James and Ellen White had predicted from the use of such authority. The initial September recommendation, formulated in the presidential offices, utilized the *Working Policy* rulings developed in the 1980s and 1990s to centralize authority. Especially important was B 95, voted into policy at the 1995 session, which authorized the "dissolution" of noncompliant union conferences that were not in harmony with General Conference policy. That initial document, whose basic content was leaked to *Spectrum*, urged the disbanding of the offending unions and reconstituting them as missions attached to the General Conference. That way the union leaders could be removed

and replaced and constituency meetings could be called to reverse the ordination votes.<sup>98</sup> My sources, many of whom requested confidentiality in the present intimidating and threatening denominational climate,<sup>99</sup> tell me that the initial proposal, which did not have widespread input, was withdrawn and all copies were collected by the General Conference president.

What eventually came out of a complex process was the document generated by the Secretariat titled “A Study of Church Governance and Unity.” This is not the place to critique that document,<sup>100</sup> but its existence points to an interesting paradox. Namely, that the move by General Conference headquarters in Silver Spring to correct the noncompliant unions is out of harmony with the General Conference’s own policy. Mitchell Tyner, retired Associate General Counsel to the General Conference, brought that issue to my attention. He points out that the denomination’s top administrators in September and October 2016 set about to approve a policy for dealing with noncompliant union conferences in spite of the fact that such a policy already existed. According to B 95 15 all such moves in regard to noncompliant unions are to be initiated by the division. And “if the” division executive committee determines that a union conference/union of churches with conference status is in apostasy or rebellion and should be expelled from the world sisterhood of unions, the division shall refer the matter to the General Conference Executive Committee.<sup>101</sup>

With a clear procedure already in the *Working Policy*, Tyner, with his legal training, wondered out loud why anybody would want to create a new policy. The most likely answer, he points out, “would seem to be that B 95 wasn’t exactly what the initiator(s) of this episode wanted to do.”<sup>102</sup>

*To put it bluntly, the General Conference presidential offices, had to step outside of policy to make its case for punishing those it deemed to be outside of policy. After all, the Working Policy spells out in unmistakable language that dissolution of unions must begin at the division level. But if the division is not likely to come up with the “proper” answer, alternatives must be used. The selected alternative, in this case, was for presidential to step outside of policy to accomplish the task. So we have a case of blatant noncompliance with the Working Policy to punish noncompliance.*

Obviously, what is needed is a new policy that allows the General Conference president to initiate actions against anybody deemed deserving of such attention. Such a policy, of course,

would be a major step toward papalism and unrestricted kingly power.

Tyner points out that General Conference officers “more than once have chosen to ignore policy if it seems the best thing to do, as though policy is optional, not mandatory. *This is a bit like Richard Nixon’s position that if the president does it, it isn’t illegal.*”<sup>103</sup>

That rather pregnant thought brings us to 2017, during which the Annual Council is to act on the fate of those lower rungs in the organization who are to be dealt with for their own noncompliance on women’s ordination. To put it mildly, the leadership of the General Conference has backed itself into an extraordinary situation in the evolution (or revolution) in Adventist authority.

Perhaps at this point in our story we might benefit from a word from the originator of Adventist church structure, who claimed in 1874 that “organization was designed to secure unity of action, and as a protection from imposture. It was never intended as a scourge to compel obedience, but, rather, for the protection of the people of God.” Interestingly, James White published that exact statement at least twice, but with different comments each time. In 1874 he added that “church force cannot press the church into one body. This has been tried, and has proved a failure.”<sup>104</sup> And in 1880 he added that “those who drew the plan of our church, Conferences, and General Conference organizations, labored to guard the precious flock of God against the influence of those who might, in a greater or less degree, assume the leadership. They were not ignorant of the evils and abuses which had existed in many of the churches of the past, where men had assumed the position which belongs to Jesus Christ, or had accepted it at the hands of their short sighted brethren.”<sup>105</sup> And if we need a bit more from his wife, we should recall her statement that the church should think through all the possible consequences of any voted action before legislation is enacted.<sup>106</sup>

With those thoughts in mind we need to remember that the medieval Catholic Church never viewed itself as persecuting anybody. It was just making sure that people were in line with Canon Law, its version of the *working policy*.

It has been a long journey, but this paper must be brought to a conclusion. A little bit of history demonstrates that Adventism’s ideas on church authority have come a long way in 150 years. James Standish, formerly of the religious liberty department of the General Conference, has written that “as a movement, we are drifting very dangerously into the

hierarchicalism, formalism and dogmatism that our pioneers explicitly rejected.”<sup>107</sup>

Along that line, we need to remember that part of James White’s strategy in getting Adventists to organize in the first place was to help them see that the biblical use of the word “Babylon” not only signified persecution, but also confusion. White sold them on the second meaning. But it appears that the denomination is now intent on resurrecting the first. Of course, given the noncompliance of the General Conference with its own policy, perhaps both meanings are in evidence in 2017.

In the spirit of Luther Year and the General Conference president’s call to be faithful to the principles of the Reformation, I am offering my own 9.5 Theses (I do not have time for 95). But first I want to point out that there are times for soft words. But there comes a time, as Martin Luther discovered, for firm ones. Like Luther, I love my church and hope for its reformation. I believe that Luther wrote his propositions with love in his heart. And I can assure you that I do the same. I really desire to see healing. Here are my 9.5:

### **9.5 Theses**<sup>108</sup>

1. The only basis for Christian unity is Scripture, trust, and the love of God.
2. The *Church Manual* makes it clear that the General Conference is the “highest authority” for the world church, “*under God*.”<sup>109</sup>
3. It is God who calls pastors. All the church can do is to recognize God’s call by the laying on of hands
4. Ordination is not a biblical topic. (The passages using the word in the KJV generally mean to appoint or consecrate.) From the position of the Bible there is absolutely no difference between ordaining and commissioning.
5. For Adventists the Bible is the only source for doctrine and practice. An appeal to policy is not an appeal to the Bible. A vote by a General Conference session is not equivalent to Bible evidence.
6. On issues not definitively settled in the Bible, James White utilized the only possible way forward in unity of mission when he moved from a hermeneutic that stipulated that practices must be expressly spelled out in the Bible to a hermeneutic that held that practices were permissible if they did not contradict Scripture and were in harmony with common sense. (The new hermeneutic made it possible for the Sabbatarian Adventists to

organize as a denomination.)<sup>110</sup>

7. The so-called noncompliant unions are not out of harmony with the Bible.
8. Adventism has moved at times from being a church based on Scripture to one based on tradition and ecclesiastical pronouncements.
9. The General Conference leadership in 2017 is coming dangerously close to replicating the medieval church in its call for the serious discipline of large sectors of the church on the basis of a non biblical issue.
  - 9.1. The recent General Conference documents and procedures do not reflect faithfulness to the Bible's teachings in Acts 15 or Matthew 18.
  - 9.2. Due to the suppression of data and the manipulation of the events surrounding the voting process, I do not believe that the 2015 vote on women's ordination indicated the voice of God.
  - 9.3. One of the important functions of the ancient Hebrew prophets was to confront priests and kings over their abuse of authority. One of the functions of Ellen White was to confront conference presidents for similar reasons. And, if there were a prophet in modern Adventism, that prophet would find plenty to do.
  - 9.4. The current atmosphere of confrontation in Adventism has not been brought about by the unions, but by the General Conference leadership and its non biblical and manipulative tactics.
  - 9.45. The October 2017 meetings may help the worldwide Adventist Church decide whether it wants to move more toward an Adventist Ecclesiology or toward a more Roman Catholic variety.
  - 9.5 The so-called nonconforming unions must stand together, come into line with General Conference demands, or go down one by one. Martin Niemöller, a leading German Protestant pastor during World War II, has written a thoughtful piece: "First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out--because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I didn't speak out--because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak out--because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me--and there was no one left to speak out."

In closing, two historical recollections are important. First, Peter's words in Acts 5:39: "We must obey God rather than men" (RSV). Second, Luther's words at the Diet of Worms: "I cannot submit my faith either to the pope or to the councils, because it is clear as the day that they have frequently erred and contradicted each other. Unless therefore I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture . . . *I cannot and I will not retract*, for it is unsafe for a Christian to speak against his conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other; may God help me. Amen."<sup>111</sup>

## Notes

1. "Lebanese University Encouraged to Reach Middle East through Medicine," *Adventist News Network*, May 9, 2017.
2. Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New York: Image Books, 1992), 204.
3. *Ibid.*, 39.
4. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 126.
5. *Ibid.*, 161.

6. *Ibid.*, 204, 205.

7. James White, “The Gifts of the Gospel Church,” *Review and Herald*, April 21, 1851, 70.

8. Secretariat, General Conference of SDA, “Summary of *A Study of Church Governance and Unity*,” Sept. 2016, 5; Secretariat, General Conference of SDA, “A Study of Church Governance and Unity,” Sept. 2016, 13.

9. Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 196; Ellen G. White, *The Story of Redemption* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1947), 304-306, 308-309.

10. Paul also raises the issue in 1 Cor. 8 and most likely in Rom. 14, but 1 Cor. 10 is the most explicit passage on the topic.

11. Secretariat, “Summary,” 6, cf. 4; Secretariat, “A Study,” 12.

12. Francis D. Nichol, ed. *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1953-1957), 5:448.

13. *Ibid.*, 5:433.

14. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 7:263.

15. Russell L. Staples, "A Theological Understanding of Ordination," in Nancy Vyhmeister, ed., *Women in Ministry: Biblical and Historical Perspectives* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1998), 139; see also Darius Jankiewicz, "The Problem of Ordination: Lessons from Early Christian History," in Graeme J. Humble and Robert K. McKiver, eds., *South Pacific Perspectives on Ordination: Biblical, Theological and Historical Studies in an Adventist Context* (Cooranbong, NSW: Avondale Academic Press, 2015), 101-129.
16. See, e. g., Titus 1:5; Mark 3:14; John 15:16; Acts 1:22; 14:23; 16:4.
17. See E. G. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 161-162.
18. E. G. White to Brethren who shall assemble in General Conference, Aug. 5, 1888.
19. Ellen G. White, *Colporteur Ministry* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1953), 125. For more on this topic, see George R. Knight, "Visions and the Word: The Authority of Ellen White in Relation to the Authority of Scripture in the Seventh-day Adventist Movement," in Robert L. Millet, ed., *By What Authority? The Vital Question of Religious Authority in Christianity* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2010), 144-161.
20. For a fuller treatment of the authority crisis in the events surrounding the 1888 General Conference session, see George R. Knight, *Angry Saints* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2015), 121-140.

21. G. I. Butler to E. G. White, Oct. 1, 1888; E. G. White to Mary White, Nov. 4, 1888;

E. G. White to M. H. Healey, Dec. 9, 1888; Cf. E. G. White to G. I. Butler, Oct. 14, 1888.

22. E. G. White, "Light in God's Word," MS 37, 1890.

23. Minneapolis *Tribune*, Oct 18, 1888, 5; E. G. White, "Love, the need of the Church," MS 24, 1892; Minneapolis *Journal*, Oct. 18, 1888, 2; italics supplied.

24. E. G. White, *Great Controversy*, 289-290; italics supplied.

25. E. G. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 161-162; italics supplied.

26. E. G. White, *Story of Redemption*, 304.

27. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church: With Modifications from the Editio Typica* (New York: Image, 1995), 433-437; Jarislav Pelikan, *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1959), 84, 124-125; Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, study edition (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1981), 558-559, 846-847.

28. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, only has two levels of authority above the local congregation.

29. Joseph Bates and Uriah Smith, "Doings of the Battle Creek Conference, Oct. 5 & 6, 1861," *Review and Herald*, Oct. 8, 1861, 148.

30. *Ibid.*

31. George Storrs, "Come Out of Her My People," *The Midnight Cry*, Feb. 15, 1844, 237-238.

32. Charles Fitch, "*Come Out of Her, My People*" (Boston: J. V. Himes, 1843).

33. See George R. Knight, *William Miller and the Rise of Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2010), 228-250.

34. James White, "Yearly Meetings," *Review and Herald*, July 21, 1859, 68.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

37. John Byington and Uriah Smith, "Report of General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists" *Review and Herald*, May 26, 1863, 204-206.
38. James White, "Organization," *Review and Herald*, Aug. 5, 1873, 60.
39. "Sixteenth Annual Session of the General Conference of S. D. Adventists," *Review and Herald*, Oct. 4, 1877, 106; italics supplied.
40. E. G. White, "Board and Council Meetings," MS 33, [no date] 1891.
41. E. G. White to Men Who Occupy Responsible Positions, July 1, 1896.
42. E. G. White, "Regarding the Southern Work," MS 37, April 1901.
43. Barry David Oliver, *SDA Organizational Structure: Past, Present and Future* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1989), 98-99.
44. E. G. White, *Testimonies*, 9:260-261.

45. For the best treatment on this reorganization, see Oliver, *SDA Organizational Structure*.
46. O. A. Olsen to A. T. Robinson, Oct. 25, 1892; see George R. Knight, *Organizing for Mission and Growth: The Development of Adventist Church Structure* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2006), 78-80 for the sequence of events.
47. General Conference Committee Minutes, Jan. 25, 1893.
48. *General Conference Bulletin*, 1913, 108.
49. *General Conference Bulletin*, 1901, 26.
50. E. G. White, "Regarding Work of General Conference," MS 26, Apr. 3, 1903; italics supplied.
51. Gerry Chudleigh, *Who Runs the Church? Understanding the Unity, Structure and Authority of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (n.p.: AdventSource, 2013), 18; italics supplied.

52. *Ibid.*

53. E. G. White to the General Conference Committee and the Publishing Boards of the Review and Herald and Pacific Press, Apr. 8, 1894; see also E. G. White, *Testimonies*, 9:259- 260.

54. A. G. Daniells, *European Conference Bulletin*, 2, cited in Oliver, 320.

55. Oliver, 317 n. 2, 341.

56. See Knight, *Organizing*, 133-140.

57. George I. Butler, *Leadership* [Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press, 1873], 1, 8, 11, 13.

58. See, e. g., [James White] in a series entitled “Leadership” that ran in the *Signs of the Times* from June 4, 1874-July 9, 1874; E. G. White, *Testimonies*, 3:492-509.

59. James White and Uriah Smith, “Proceedings of the Fourteenth Annual Session of the

S. D. Adventist General Conference,” *Review and Herald*, Aug. 26, 1875, 59; James White and

A. B. Oyen, “Sixteenth Annual Session of the General Conference of S. D. Adventists,” *Review and Herald*, Oct. 4, 1877, 106.

60. Kevin M. Burton, "Centralized for Protection: George I. Butler and His Philosophy of One-Person Leadership," MA Thesis, Andrews University, 2015.

61. G. I. Butler to E. G. White, Oct. 1, 1888; E. G. White to G. I. Butler, Oct. 14, 1888.

62. See Knight, *Angry Saints*, passim.

63. See Burton, 60.

64. E. G. White to the General Conference Committee and the Publishing Boards of the Review and Herald and Pacific Press, Apr. 8, 1894; D. T. Jones to J. D. Pegg, Mar. 17, 1890; D.

T. Jones to W. C. White, Mar. 18, 1890.

65. E. G. White to Elder Daniells and His Fellow Workers, Apr. 12, 1903.

66. Chudleigh, *Who Runs the Church?* 31.

67. Stanley E. Patterson, "Kingly Power: Is It Finding a Place in the Adventist Church?" *Adventist Today*, Sept.-Oct. 2012, 5; Chudleigh, *Who Runs the Church?* 32-33; *Working*

*Policy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists*, 1999-2000 edition (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 125-126.

68. Rosmary Watts, "North Pacific Reasserts Constitutional Independence," *Spectrum*, February 1987, 29-33. Wilson's letter is found as an appendix on pages 31-33.

69. "Church Leaders Favor Model Constitutions," *Adventist Today*, May-June 1995, 19; "Administration Seeks Greater Control," *Adventist Today*, Nov.-Dec. 1994, 23, 26.

70. Susan S. Sickler to George R. Knight, Feb. 27, 2017; Bert Haloviak to George R. Knight, Mar. 7, 2017; "Administration Seeks Greater Control," 26.

71. Designated in the *Working Policy* as B 45 in earlier post-1995 editions but now as B

95.

72. Susan S. Sickler to George R. Knight, Feb. 27, 2017; "Administration Seeks Greater Control," 23, 26.

73. Susan S. Sickler to George R. Knight, Feb. 27, 2017; "Administration Seeks Greater Control," 23, 26.

74. See "Administration Seeks Greater Control," 26.

75. *Ibid.*, 23; Susan S. Sickler to George R. Knight, Feb. 27, 2017.

76. “General Conference Theology of Ordination Study Committee Report, June 2014,”

3-7. An examination of the committee membership list reveals that a large portion, if not the majority, were not scholars.

77. Secretariat, “A Study of Church Governance,” 41; Secretariat, “Summary of *A Study*,” 14.

78. As will be noted below, many of the TOSC participants were disillusioned when the General Conference president reversed his opinion on the importance of the committee from its first meeting, when it looked as if it would come up with the “proper” answer, to its last, in which the majority voted against his position.

79. TOSC “Report,” 12.

80. This point needs further investigation into the 13 division reports. Nine divisions in favor of diversity is the lowest number I have come across. Some sources report 11 and others 12 divisions in favor of flexibility.

81. TOSC “Report,” 122, 123.

82. *Ibid.*, 12, 122, 123.

83. Norwegian Union Conference, “A Response to ‘A Study of Church Governance and Unity,’” Oct. 4, 2016; See William G. Johnsson, *Where Are We Headed? Adventism after San Antonio* (Westlake Village, CA: Oak and Acorn Publishing, 2017), 153-161 for a published version of the document.

84. Recollections of several participants who wish to remain anonymous.

85. See, e.g., George R. Knight, “The Role of Union Conferences in Relation to Higher Authorities,” *Spectrum* (44:4, 2016), 40.

86. Secretariat, “Summary of *A Study*,” 14; Secretariat, “A Study,” 40, 41; see also Barry Oliver to George R. Knight, Feb. 20, 2017.

87. Johnsson, *Where Are We Headed?* 1.

88. E. G. White to G. I. Butler, Oct. 14, 1888.

89. Secretariat, “A Study,” 34.

90. Secretariat, "Summary of *A Study*," 5; Secretariat, "A Study," 13; italics supplied. See also Mark A. Finley, "United in Message, Mission, and Organization," *Ministry*, April 2017, 14.
91. Recollections of several participants who wish to remain anonymous.
92. James White, "Leadership," *Signs of the Times*, June 4, 1874; italics supplied.
93. E. G. White, "Love, the need of the Church," MS 24, 1892.
94. Ellen G. White, *Special Testimonies: Series A* (Payson AZ: Leaves-of-Autumn, n.d.), 299-300; italics supplied.
95. E. G. White, *Testimonies*, 9:277-278; italics supplied.
96. See *Working Policy*, L 35, L 50. The sexist language in these sections is not a voted policy, but an editorial decision in the 1980s. See Knight, "The Role of Unions," 41; Gary Patterson, untitled critique of the Secretariat's paper on "Unions and Ordination," 1.
97. "Session Actions," *Adventist Review*, July 13, 1990, 15.

98. See, e.g., Bonnie Dwyer, “General Conference Leadership Considers Takeover of Unions that Ordain Women,” Sept. 29, 2016, <http://spectrummagazine.org/print/7661>.

99. Most of my sources have requested confidentiality, given the intimidating atmosphere in the General Conference building, in General Conference institutions, and among other denominational employees who have hopes for a future in the upper realms of the denomination. In fact, intimidation and threats in matters related to finances and funding have been in the “air” emanating from Silver Spring. It is no accident that no professors from Andrews University or its theological seminary are participating in this conference. “Kingly power” is alive and well. It is fortunate that those of us who are retired are beyond that intimidating authority.

100. For one perceptive critique, see Norwegian Union Conference, “A Response to ‘A Study of Church Governance and Unity,’” Oct. 4, 2016.

101. Mitchell Tyner, <http://spectrummagazine.org/article/2016/10/10/analysis-use-general-conference-working-policy-case-unions-ordain-women>.

102. *Ibid.*

103. *Ibid.*; italics supplied.

104. James White, "Leadership," *Signs of the Times*, July 9, 1874, 28.

105. James White, "Leadership," *Review and Herald*, June 17, 1880, 392.

106. E. G. White, *Testimonies*, 9:278.

107. Quoted in Johnsson, *Where Are We Headed?* 74.

108. Even a casual reader will discover that, like Luther, I have had a bit of a challenge keeping the number of theses from expanding--thus the 9.1 and 9.2 maneuver, so that I could maintain the 9.5 symbolism.

109. *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 16<sup>th</sup> ed. (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 27; italics added.

110. See George R. Knight, "Ecclesiastical Deadlock: James White Solves a Problem that Had No Answer," *Ministry*, July 2014, 9-13; George R. Knight, "James White finds the Answer," in John W. Reeve, ed., *Women and Ordination: Biblical and Historical Studies* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2015), 113-120.

111. E. G. White, *The Great Controversy*, 160.