Seventh-day Adventist Polity: Its Historical Development

Andrew G. Mustard

Introduction

When the 20 delegates from six conferences assembled in Battle Creek, Michigan, for the first General Conference Session of Seventh-day Adventists on May 20, 1863, they represented 3,500 members. Virtually all of them lived in the northeastern or midwestern United States.[1] Thirty-eight years later (1901) delegates from around the globe, representing 78,188 members in 57 conferences and 41 mission fields, convened for what turned out to be the last General Conference Session held in Battle Creek. Growth of membership and institutions, along with geographical expansion, had made the structures established in 1863 inadequate. In response to Ellen White's call for reorganization, those attending the 1901 session engaged in the only major restructuring the Seventh-day Adventist Church has effected to date.[2]

As the fifty-fifth session of the General Conference convened in Indianapolis on July 5, 1990, over 2,500 delegates registered from nearly 180 countries, acting on behalf of more than six million members.[3] From a most unpromising beginning after the disappointment of 1844, "the little remnant scattered abroad"[4] has become a world church.

In this chapter we wish to discuss the Seventh-day Adventist Church from an organizational point of view. Our study naturally involves three areas of concern. In the first, we will examine the religious milieu out of which Sabbatarian Adventism emerged in order to determine to what extent the thinking of our pioneers on matters of organization was molded by the religious ideologies prevalent in North America in the first half of the nineteenth century. In the second, we will trace the historical development of the Seventh-day Adventist organization from its infancy in the 1840s to the time that the present organizational patterns were introduced and consolidated at the 1901 and 1903 General Conference Sessions.[5] Finally, we will examine the biblical and theological rationale developed in support of the church's polity and will reflect on the implications of these historical, biblical, and theological backgrounds for present Adventist concerns about church structure.

---

[1] A record of the proceedings of the 1863 session may be found in "Report of General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists," *Review and Herald*, May 20, 1863, 204-8.

[2] On the 1901 General Conference, see the *General Conference Daily Bulletin* (Battle Creek, MI: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1901).

[3] See the statistical report presented at the 1990 General Conference session by F. Donald Yost, "A Panorama of Blessings," 1-4, and supplement.

[4] This term was first applied to the small group of believers in a "broadside," published in April 1846, entitled, "To the Little Remnant Scattered Abroad." It contained an account of Ellen White's first three visions.

[5] Two studies of the development of the Seventh-day Adventist organization have been published, both by Andrews University Press: Andrew G. Mustard, *James White and the Seventh-day Adventist Organization: Historical Development, 1844-1881* (1988); Barry Oliver, *Principles for Reorganization of the Seventh-day Adventist Administrative Structure, 1888-1903* (1990). See also Richard W. Schwarz, *Light Bearers to the Remnant* (Mountain View, CA, 1979), chaps. 6, 10, 17, 23.

The World in Which Adventism Began

The first half of the nineteenth century was a time of social upheaval and religious ferment in the United States. The new American nation faced the future with great optimism, even a sense of destiny, convinced that they were a people established and preserved by God, far removed from the sectarian squabbles of Europe from which they or their forebears had fled.[6]

Social Changes

Scientific advances and the growth of knowledge facilitated travel, communication, and the industrialization of society. The impact of the industrial revolution in the early nineteenth century brought about great shifts in population from rural to urban. Moreover, between 1790 and 1860, due mainly to immigration from Europe, the population increased from nearly four million to 31 million.[7] This created enormous social problems as these largely unskilled people were exploited by their employers in the cities or struggled to establish a new life for themselves in the opening territories of the West. A good proportion of these immigrants were Roman Catholics. Their presence brought about religious tensions among the Protestant populace who regarded the United States as a Protestant country.[8]

The Second Great Awakening

Parallel to these sociopolitical developments, a great upsurge in religious vitality occurred in what has become known as the Second Great Awakening. The beginnings of this revival are usually identified as the 1790s, but it reached its peak through the revivalistic preaching of men like Charles G. Finney in the decade following 1825. The impact of Finney and other revivalists upon American religion was felt in many ways, the most obvious being a marked increase in church membership in the first third of the nineteenth century from approximately one in fifteen of the total population to one in eight.[9]

There is no need to describe in detail the rich and varied tapestry of religious life at the time of these revivals.[10] Our particular interest is in the effect that the Second Great Awakening had on believers' views of the churches and ecclesiastical organizations.

The revivalism of the first half of the nineteenth century placed primary emphasis on the individual's conversion experience. People who flocked to the camp meetings and other services from all denominational backgrounds found the vitality of these gatherings standing in contrast with the formalism of the established churches. Consequently, the Second Great Awakening tended to break down the barriers between denominations, to place emphasis on lay leadership and preaching, and to encourage the growth of pietistic groups such as the Methodists and Baptists, which proved more adaptable to the volatile situation that often prevailed. Thus the Methodists, who prior to 1784 had not even been a church but only a religious society, had

---

[6] See Alice F. Taylor, *Freedom's Ferment* (Minneapolis, 1944), 1-22.

[7] Clifton E. Olmstead, *History of Religion in the United States* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1960), 32-22.

[8] Ray A. Billington, *The Protestant Crusade*, 1800-1860 (New York, 1938), 203-276.

[9] Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America* (New York, 1965), 129-30. The need for such revivals is indicated by the fact that probably less than 10 percent of the population in 1800 were members of a church congregation (Robert T. Handy, *A History of Churches in the United States and Canada* [Oxford, 1976], 162).

[10] This has been vividly depicted by Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment*; Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York*, 1800-1850 (New York, 1965); Bernard A. Weisberger, *They Gathered at the River: The Story of the Great Revivalists and Their Impact Upon Religion in America* (New York, 1965).

become the largest denomination in North America by 1820.[11] The Baptists, too, "multiplied with astonishing rapidity," especially in the period after the Revolution until 1800.[12]

In spite of interdenominational participation in revival efforts, the religious awakening resulted in a multiplicity of religious sects. This was partly a result of the stress placed on individual conversion but also due to the unstructured nature of church life on the frontier. Thus, a Christian leader, if disillusioned with the spiritual state of his church or believing that he had discovered some new teaching, could always opt to start a new movement if the religious establishment failed to respond positively to his calls for reform.

Many of the revivalists of the Second Great Awakening looked with anticipation for the inauguration of Christ's kingdom. In harmony with the optimism of the age, most Christians believed that they were on the threshold of the millennium, which would be heralded by the conversion of the unbelieving, maintaining the standards of behavior of church members, and improving the condition of society at large through various campaigns of social reform.[13] The majority of revivalists, therefore, were active in supporting such campaigns as temperance and antislavery. They looked upon the improvement, even perfecting, of society as an essential prelude to the ushering in of a temporal millennium.

The Millerites and Church Organization

By the 1830s, some of the impetus of the Second Great Awakening had begun to wane. The optimism of the earlier period had also diminished in the face of stubborn social ills that refused to go away and economic problems that increased during the decade. In contrast with the predominant postmillennialism of the age, William Miller appeared proclaiming the imminent Second Advent as the only possible solution to this world's predicament.

Miller and his associates, however, were not totally at odds with the revivalists of the time. As Ruth Alden Doan has rightly pointed out, "Millerites not only fit into evangelicalism, they also played a significant role in revitalizing it."[14] While Miller's preaching convinced many of the nearness of the Advent, it also convicted and converted them. In spite of their emphasis on the approaching cataclysmic end to the age and their pessimism about the perfectibility of human institutions, many Millerites, like their postmillennialist counterparts, were active in the reform movements of the time.[15] They were not so obsessed with the next world that they had become oblivious to the needs of the present.[16]

It is not our purpose to tell the story of the Millerite movement,[17] but to consider how attitudes toward church organization were molded by participation in the movement which culminated in the disappointment of October 1844. The largest number of Millerite leaders came

---

[11] Hudson, 123.

[12] Ibid., 118.

[13] On the various reform movements in America, see Tyler, 267-341.

[14] Ruth Alden Doan, "Millerism and Evangelical Culture," in *The Disappointed*, ed. Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler (Bloomington, IL, and Indianapolis, 1987), 121.

[15] On the various historic interpretations of the millennium, see LeRoy E. Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* 4 (Washington, DC, 1954): 411-26.

[16] "Why was it that so many Millerite leaders came from the ranks of the abolitionists and the temperance and health reformers?" is the question posed by Numbers and Butler in *The Disappointed*, xviii.

[17] This has been done on several occasions. See, e.g., the recent spate of books on the Millerite movement, including Numbers and Butler, eds., *The Disappointed*; Ruth Alden Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism and American Culture* (Philadelphia, 1987); David L. Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets: Millerites and Dissenting Religion in Upstate New York, 1800-1850* (Chico, CA, 1985). See also Francis D. Nichols' classic defense of Millerism, *The Midnight Cry* (Washington, DC, 1944).

from three churches: the Methodists, Baptists, and the Christian Connection.[18] They brought with them the perspectives and practices of their respective groups.

Methodist polity. Several aspects of the Methodist "economy" are of interest in our present study. Methodism proved to be the most adaptable of the denominations to the needs of the gospel. It viewed matters pragmatically, suiting the polity of the church to the exigency of the moment.[19]

Methodism became the most hierarchical of the Nonconformist churches in England and America.[20] A "conference"" system—a term implying both an area of jurisdiction and a regularly called meeting—was the main instrument in coordinating the work. Certainly, Millerite (and Seventh-day Adventist) terminology drew largely upon Methodist nomenclature. The local Methodist church also carefully organized itself with class leaders, exhorters, local preachers, and circuit riders caring for the needs of the flock.

Baptist polity. In contrast, the Millerite leaders of Baptist and Christian Connection origin tended to be opposed to centralized church order. Baptist churches were, and still are, congregationally organized. Their congregational polity is derived from a strong desire to follow the perceived NT pattern, adhering to the "historic Baptist emphasis on strict biblicism."[21]

Christian Connection polity. From its earliest days, the Christian Connection took a strong antiorganizational stance. It opposed all creeds as divisive and refused to adopt a distinctive name other than Christian. As the "Christians" grew in number, they became more centrally organized, in spite of their declared intentions, in order to deploy workers and control troublesome elements more effectively within.[22] It is worth bearing in mind, in view of our discussion below on the beginnings of Seventh-day Adventist polity, that James White and Joseph Bates were both former members of the Christian Connection.

When the Millerites held their first General Conference in 1840, they had no intention of organizing a new sect or denomination. "We assemble here," they declared, "not to raise the banner of a new sect; but out of every sect to come into unity of the faith."[23] Miller himself deplored the divisions in Christendom, but throughout his career he advised Adventists to remain in their respective churches.[24] In view of the expected imminent end to all earthly institutions, any formal organizational developments would have been deemed most inappropriate.

Millerite separatist tendency. Yet, Millerism became "separatist in spite of itself."[25] As opposition from the churches grew during 1843-1844, Adventists found it increasingly difficult to retain membership in them amidst ridicule or indifference.[26] A sermon preached by Charles Fitch in July 1843 in Cleveland, Ohio, proved to be a turning point in Millerite separatism.

---

[18] Everett N. Dick estimated that 44.3 percent of Millerite preachers were Methodists, 27 percent Baptists, and 8 percent Christian Connection. The latter was a relatively small group, but contributed a larger number of preachers in proportion to its size than any other group ("The Adventist Crisis of 1843-44" [Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1980]).

[19] Cf. John Wesley's declaration, "Church or no church, we must save souls," quoted in M. L. Scudder, *American Methodism* (Hartford, CN, 1867), 101. For a more extended comparison between Methodist and Seventh-day Adventist organization see Mustard, 252-63.

[20] E. R. Taylor, *Methodism and Politics* (New York, 1975), 197.

[21] H. Shelton Smith, Robert T. Handy, and Lefferts A. Loetscher, *American Christianity* (New York, 1960), 1:269. See also Mustard, 249-52.

[22] Ibid., 30-32.

[23] *The First Report of the General Conference of Christians Expecting the Advent of the Lord Jesus Christ* (Boston, 1841), 12; cf. Froom, 4:555-57.

[24] See, e.g., "The Conference," *Advent Herald*, February 14, 1844, 9.

[25] David T. Arthur, "'Come Out of Babylon'": A Study of Millerite Separatism and Denominationalism, 1840-1865" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Rochester, 1970), 76.

[26] On the expulsion or voluntary separation of Millerites from the churches, see Rowe, 109-118.

Entitled, "Come Out of Her, My People," Fitch's sermon denounced as antichrist not only Roman Catholicism but all the sects of Protestant Christendom. Additional publicity was provided by the publication of the sermon in *The Midnight Cry*, arousing widespread antagonism to the Millerite movement.[27]

In addition to the separatism precipitated by the churches' opposition and Millerite outspokenness, several of the movement's activities led toward the formation of an independent organization. The extensive publishing work initiated by Joshua V. Himes created a "bond of union" among those expecting the Second Advent.[28] The numerous general and local conferences which elected officers and created committees provided the basis for a rudimentary organization. Camp meetings and Second Advent Associations tended to compete with the established churches for the loyalty of those who professed allegiance to both.[29]

By the summer of 1844 the move to leave the churches had become widespread; but because the Lord's return was "just around the corner," there was no perceived need for any formal organization. Most Millerites shared the views of George Storrs, a prominent Millerite preacher, who declared, "Take care that you do not seek to manufacture another church. No church can be organized by man's invention but what it becomes Babylon *the moment it is organized*" (emphasis in original).[30]

Summary. In view of Christ's expected appearance, no need was seen for a new organization as the Millerites left or were driven from the various denominations. Opposition and ridicule only confirmed in the minds of the Advent believers the conviction that the Protestant sects were apostate. Any attempt on the part of the Millerites to form a separate ecclesiastical organization would, they were convinced, only lead them down the same road of formalism and skepticism.

Development of Adventist Polity

Those who were to become founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church saw little reason for optimism in the aftermath of the Disappointment. Their only hope was that the inexplicable failure of their expectations was to be a short-lived delay. They clung to the belief that Christ would appear very soon and that their task of warning the world had been accomplished. Those who had rejected the message, they believed, were beyond reach with the gospel. Not only was there no audience that might respond, but they had no further message to give other than to comfort and urge patience upon the scattered Millerite believers.

Over a period of three or four years, Sabbatarian Adventism emerged as Joseph Bates, Ellen Harmon, Hiram Edson, Owen Crosier, and others wrestled with the fact that they were still on this earth and not with the Lord in heaven. The twin pillars of the Seventh-day Advent faith—the sanctuary and Sabbath doctrines—were both essential ingredients in explaining the reason for Christ's nonreturn on October 22, 1844.[31]

The sanctuary doctrine, as expressed by Crosier, proposed that Christ had entered upon a new work in the heavenly sanctuary, and that there was to be a corresponding work of

---

[27] Charles Fitch, "Come Out of Her, My People," *Midnight Cry*, September 21, 1843, 33-36.

[28] David T. Arthur, "Millerism," in *The Rise of Adventism*, ed. Edwin S. Gaustad (New York, 1974), 156.

[29] Cf. Mustard, 47-48.

[30] George Storrs, "Come Out of Her My People," *Midnight Cry*, February 15, 1844, 238.

[31] For more extended accounts of the early development of Seventh-day Adventist beliefs, see P. Gerard Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, 1977), 103-64; Mustard, 91-115.

preparation in the hearts of the faithful on earth.[32] The Sabbath, closely linked with the sanctuary doctrine, provided the fledgling movement with a message to proclaim before the Second Advent and a rationale for the Disappointment.

A series of Bible conferences (sometimes called "Sabbath conferences" in Adventist literature) was significant in bringing together the disparate beliefs among "the scattered flock" in New England and New York State in 1848. By the end of the year, a basic consensus had been reached on such fundamental beliefs as the Sabbath, sanctuary, state of the dead, and the Spirit of Prophecy.[33] Only with the achievement of this doctrinal unity could there be a sense of identity among the believers.

As new recruits joined the cause, Sabbatarian Adventists gradually came to realize that there was indeed a world to be evangelized. Thus, by the end of the decade of the 1840s the movement recognized that it had a message to proclaim and a mission to fulfill. Not until then could a need for organization have been considered.

Natural Reluctance to Organize

The experience Sabbatarian Adventists had endured in the Millerite movement disposed them to regard formal church organization as anathema. They still expected the return of Christ in the very near future. An established and permanent church order would have seemed a denial of that belief.

Two of their most influential leaders, James White and Bates, had been preachers for the Christian Connection, which was particularly outspoken against beliefs or structures for which there were not specific models in Scripture. Moreover, their former Millerite colleagues, who gathered at a conference in Albany in April 1845, attempted to hold the splintering movement together by formulating a statement of "Important Truths," which was regarded by some to be a return to the creedalism of the established churches from which they had been expelled.[34]

At the same time, the Millerite conference rejected the Sabbath and other beliefs and practices of Sabbatarian Adventists. Therefore, although the form of organization adopted at Albany was congregational (and considered to be true to the biblical model), church order of any kind was seen to be at the root of resistance to the Sabbatarian Adventist message. All of their recent experience, therefore, led the Sabbathkeeping Adventists to repudiate church organization.

In light of the foregoing, the establishment of a centralized church order within 20 years of the Disappointment is a remarkably rapid development. What factors brought about such a transformation?[35]

Contributions of James and Ellen White

James White stands out as the primary initiator of Seventh-day Adventist organization. Having come to prominence as the new movement formulated and consolidated its basic doctrinal beliefs by the end of the 1840s, he devoted considerable energy to producing the first Sabbatarian Adventist periodicals: *Present Truth* and *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald.*

---

[32] Owen R. L. Crosier, "he Law of Moses," *Day-Star Extra*, February 7, 1846, 37-44. See also, Richard W. Schwarz, *Light Bearers to the Remnant* (Mountain View, CA, 1979), 62-63.

[33] See Mustard, 99-103.

[34] [Joseph Marsh], "The Albany Conference," *Voice of Truth*, May 21, 1845, 61-62.

[35] I have described at considerable length the historical development of church organization from 1844-1863 (*James White and Seventh-day Adventist Organization*, 116-62) and therefore do not need to repeat that information here.

The *Present Truth* came into being as a result of divine counsel Ellen White had received in a vision at Dorchester, Massachusetts, in November 1848. She told her husband:

> I have a message for you. You must begin to print a little paper and send it out to the people. Let it be small at first; but as the people read, they will send you means with which to print, and it will be a success from the first. From this small beginning it was shown to me to be like streams of light that went clear round the world.[36]

The first issue appeared in July 1849 and continued regularly until succeeded by the *Review* in August 1851. These periodicals were the most significant unifying factor among the scattered believers during those early days. James White's involvement with this work provided him with the perspective to recognize earlier and more clearly than anyone else the need for some form of church order to foster unity.

Ellen White continued to counsel and support her husband in promoting order within the Advent movement. In 1850 she was shown in vision the "perfect order" of heaven and was told by the angel leading her, "Behold ye, and know how perfect, how beautiful the order in heaven; follow it."[37] There is no record in her writings, however, that she prescribed the form that organization should take.

The early 1850s saw a rapid increase in the number of Sabbatarian Adventists.[38] Apparently, the disfavor with which the public had regarded Adventists after the Disappointment had begun to wane. No doubt the *Present Truth* and *Review* also served as effective evangelistic tools as well as playing a role in unifying the believers. In addition, the movement now had a well-defined message to proclaim and a dawning sense of mission to restore the Sabbath and true worship in preparation for the climax of earth's history.[39]

First Steps Toward Organization

Numerical growth was not without its difficulties. Visits by the Whites to groups of believers in New England revealed a variety of problems. A few individuals at Fairhaven, Massachusetts, became involved in some form of ecstatic experience in their worship meetings; others at Waterbury, Vermont, demonstrated "a spirit of fanaticism";[40] two individuals at Medford, Vermont, insisted on setting new dates for the Second Advent and were disfellowshipped for their refusal to desist; and yet another in Washington, New Hampshire, who had "fallen victim to the bewitching power of spiritualism," was deprived of membership.[41]

There were several ways in which the Whites and Bates, the *de facto* leaders of Sabbatarian Adventism at the time, sought to deal with the above problems. Besides expelling troublesome individuals, they appointed local leaders "to see to the wants of the church" as early as November 1851. To enable believers to distinguish the genuine from the spurious, itinerant

---

[36] Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White* (Mountain View, CA, 1915), 125.

[37] Ellen G. White, "Letter 1, 1851," *Manuscript Releases* 5 (Silver Spring, MD: E. G. White Estate, 1990): 227.

[38] C. Mervyn Maxwell has estimated that the number of adherents grew from about 200 to approximately 2,000 between 1850 and 1852 (*Tell It to the World*, rev. ed. [Mountain View, CA, 1977], 129).

[39] The motif of "restoration" was a familiar theme in early Adventism, particularly in writings of Joseph Bates who referred to the need to restore the true Sabbath and perfect order of the NT church. Cf. C. Mervyn Maxwell, "Joseph Bates and the Seventh-day Adventist Sabbath Theology," in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, ed. Kenneth A. Strand (Washington, DC, 1982), 360; Mustard, 134.

[40] James White, "Our Visit to Vermont," *Review and Herald*, February 1851, 45.

[41] James White, "Our Tour East," *Review*, November 25, 1851, 52. See also Mustard, 120-24.

preachers (known as "traveling brethren") were issued ministerial credentials. The first cards of authorization were issued in 1853, if not earlier.[42]

Ordination, conducted by James White and other leaders who had been ordained to the ministry in other denominations, is recorded initially in the *Review* as early as 1851. G. Washington Morse was apparently the first to be ordained in the summer of 1851, although it is not clear whether he was ordained to the gospel ministry at that time or to a position equivalent to that of a local elder. At least seven men, including J. N. Andrews, were "set apart . . . to the work of the gospel ministry" in 1853.[43]

Summary. During the first half of the decade of the 1850s, the initial steps toward formal organization were taken in response to problems created by fanaticism and unauthorized preachers. Local and "traveling" leaders were appointed and duly authorized to thwart these threats to the fledgling movement. One should not be surprised at this development, as it is reminiscent of the situation in the early Christian church in which bishops came to be empowered with considerable authority in order to preserve the doctrinal purity of the church and guard it against the threat of heresy within and persecution from without.

Years of Discussion and Debate

Up to the mid-1850s, James White's ministerial colleagues and other readers of the *Review* readily recognized the need for system and order in the church. There is no record of controversy or dissent on the issue at this time. The story was somewhat different during the second half of the decade.

Alleged New Testament model. At the heart of the discussions over church order lay the question of the authority of the NT in prescribing the *form* organization should take. Joseph B. Frisbie and Roswell F. Cottrell were the most prominent advocates of a congregational system of organization. Both claimed that the NT church recognized and approved church government only at the local level. Only actions and policies for which there were specific precedents in Scripture could be accepted by Sabbatarian Adventists.[44] Cottrell in particular insisted that Sabbathkeeping Adventists dare not go beyond that which the NT approved. "The combination of churches into bishoprics led to the great apostasy," he said.[45]

Changing view on New Testament model. At first James White's opinions coincided with those expressed above, but as the movement grew the need for centralized coordination of the work became more apparent.[46] Gradually his views changed. By 1860 he could assert: "All means which, according to sound judgment, will advance the cause of truth, and are not forbidden by plain scripture declarations, should be employed."[47] It will be readily perceived that James White's statement is considerably broader and allows greater flexibility in matters of church order than the earlier views expressed in 1855 by Frisbie, Cottrell, and even himself.

James White's prominence in the debate over church organization is not surprising. As editor of the Review (the most important force for unity within Sabbatarian Adventism at the time), he had his finger on the pulse of the movement. In his travels with his wife he frequently

---

[42] Documentation of the events mentioned in this paragraph may be found in Mustard, 122-23.

[43] Ibid., 125.

[44] Documentation of the events mentioned in this paragraph may be found in Mustard, 122-23.

[45] R. F. Cottrell, Letter to James White, *Review and Herald*, June 19, 1860, 36.

[46] In 1855 James White wrote of the "perfect system of order in the New Testament" ("Church Order," *Review and Herald*, January 23, 1855, 164).

[47] James White, "Making Us a Name," *Review and Herald*, April 26, 1860, 180.

confronted divisive elements within the groups. He became convinced that congregational organization was insufficient to hold the movement together.

An additional problem also pressed for solution. Until 1860 James White held the unwanted position of titular owner of the press and its facilities at Battle Creek. Sabbathkeeping Adventists were still a loosely-knit group, unincorporated, with not even an identifying name. They had no legal entity by which to own church property. Consequently, individuals, such as James White, had to own the property which all had given funds to obtain.[48]

Cottrell vigorously opposed the idea of legal incorporation. It required that the church enter into dealings with the state. In his view this was unacceptable.[49] James White's arguments eventually won the day, and at the Battle Creek Conference held September 28 to October 1, 1860, legal incorporation of the publishing enterprise was agreed to be necessary.[50] At the same conference the attendees adopted the name "Seventh-day Adventist" as an essential prerequisite to legal incorporation.

The deliberations leading to the choice of the name "Seventh-day Adventist" reveal a similar shift of opinion concerning the NT model. Several, including James White, favored the name "Church of God," primarily because it was perceived to be biblical.[51] Other names were rejected because they were, by contrast, of human devising. In the end, a conference held in Battle Creek, September 28 to October 1, 1860, selected the name "Seventh-day Adventist," even though it was not found in Scripture, because it was "simple" and "expressive of our faith and position."[52]

Discussion on wider matters of organization at this conference reflect the dichotomy between the viewpoints of Cottrell and James White. Cottrell, who was not at the conference, sent a letter in which he wrote, "We should fear organization as *a church* which has no warrant in the Scriptures." James White replied, "The Scriptures do not tell us how the church, built upon the foundation of prophets and apostles, can hold power presses, offices, etc."[53]

In spite of continuing debate, events progressed rapidly after 1860. Almost everyone came around to James White's view eventually. The first state conference (Michigan) organized in October 1861, and within a year seven other state conferences followed suit. At the first annual session of the newly formed Michigan Conference (October 4, 1862), delegates sent an invitation sent to the other state conferences, inviting them to send delegates to the first General Conference to be held a year later. At James White's urging, in view of the urgency of the matter, the meeting was brought forward from the fall to May 20, 1863. Unanimously chosen as president, James White declined because of the vigor with which he had advocated centralized organization. The delegates appointed John Byington in his place.[54]

---

[48] On the debate over legal incorporation see A. G. Mustard, *James White and SDA Organization*, 135-45.

[49] R. F. Cottrell, "Making Us a Name," *Review*, March 23, 1860, 140-41.

[50] "Business Proceedings of the Battle Creek Conference," *Review*, October 9, 16, 23, 1860.

[51] James White, "Organization," *Review and Herald*, June 19, 1860, 36. For a fuller discussion on the choice of name, see Mustard, 145-47.

[52] "Business Proceedings of the Battle Creek Conference," *Review and Herald*, October 23, 1860, 179.

[53] Ibid., October 9, 1860, 163; October 16, 1860, 169.

[54] See Mustard, 153-62.

Authority of Church Leaders

Once the membership had accepted the idea of centralized church order, attention shifted to other organizational issues. As early as 1861, a committee reported to the Michigan Conference session on the role and authority of church officers.[55] Basing its proposals on the NT, it advocated a three-level hierarchical structure of ministers, elders, and deacons.

Ministers were considered to be equivalent to the NT offices of apostle and evangelist. As several not among the twelve are referred to as apostles in the NT, the apostolic office was not considered to be limited to the NT era.[56] The committee made a clear distinction between ministers and local church leaders. Ministers received their call from God, while elders and deacons were chosen by the local congregation. Since the report of the committee in 1861, Seventh-day Adventists have retained this demarcation between ministers on the one hand, whose authority and jurisdiction extends beyond the local church, and local officers on the other, who are authorized to serve only their own congregation.[57]

George I. Butler, General Conference president from 1871-1874 and 1880-1888, expressed the same viewpoint. The act of ordination to the ministry, he said, separates one from the ranks of the laity and confers authority which extends beyond the local congregation.[58] Butler held strong views on the authority of the leadership of the church. In an eight-part *Review* series, between July 28 and October 13, 1874, he likened the church to a school or army which could only succeed in its work if strict discipline were exercised by those appointed by God as its leaders.[59]

Butler also argued that James and Ellen White should be recognized as the preeminent leaders within the church because of the crucial role they had played in its formative years. His views were initially endorsed by the church at a General Conference Session in 1873, but rescinded two years later in response to James White's argument that Christ is the only leader of the church, while ministers were "shepherds of the flock and leaders of the people in a subordinate sense."[60]

Although he felt that Butler had overstated his case, James White believed strongly in the authority of the General Conference. It is "the highest earthly authority with our people," he declared in 1873.[61] His views were shared by his wife who wrote in 1880 that the leaders of the church have been given "an authority that cannot be lightly esteemed."[62]

In spite of setbacks which occurred from time to time, the mood within the church and of its leaders after the organization of the General Conference in 1863 was positive. On several occasions, James White expressed satisfaction with "the perfection and efficiency of our

---

[55] J. N. Loughborough, Moses Hull, and M. E. Cornell, "Conference Address. Organization," *Review and Herald*, October 15, 1861, 156-57. The committee also made recommendations on the election and ordination of officers, the reception of new members into fellowship, and procedures for transferring membership.

[56] Heb 3:1; Acts 14:4, 14; 2 Cor 8:22-23; Phil 2:25.

[57] Mustard, *James White and Seventh-day Adventist Organization*, 156-57, 224-25.

[58] Butler, "Ordination,"" *Review and Herald*, December 2, 1880, 360.

[59] Butler, "Thoughts on Church Government," 900.

[60] See "Business Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Meeting of the Seventh-day Adventist General Conference," *Review and Herald*, November 25, 1873, 190; "Proceedings of the Fourteenth Annual Session of the Seventh-day Adventist General Conference," *Review and Herald*, August 26, 1875, 59; James White and Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches, Early Life, Christian Experience, and Extensive Labors of Elder James White and His Wife, Ellen G. White* (Battle Creek, MI, 1888), 408.

[61] James White, "Organization," *Review and Herald*, August 5, 1873, 60.

[62] Ellen G. White, "Unity of the Church," *Review and Herald*, February 19, 1880, 220.

organization,"[63] as evidenced by an end to "secession" from the church after 1863, rapid growth in membership, and doctrinal unity. Ever pragmatic, he believed that organization was a success because it worked.[64]

What name should be applied to the model of church organization agreed upon in 1863? It is not an easy question to answer. It might simply be described as "eclectic," inasmuch as elements of several ecclesiastical systems exist within it. The term "eclectic," however, does not actually identify the form of organization, but only the process by which it came into being. Other suggested names include the following: hierarchical, Presbyterian, or representative. Elements of each may be found in the Seventh-day Adventist structure, but none is entirely accurate.

Significant similarities between the church's organization and the governmental system of the United States may be observed. But to describe the Seventh-day Adventist organization as "presidential" would also be misleading. It is probably true that had the church sprung up somewhere other than in the United States, its chief administrator might well be a "moderator," for example, rather than "president." Nevertheless, the differences between the system of the United States government and the organization of the Adventist Church are far greater than the similarities. To compare a secular organization with a religious one is like correlating apples with oranges.

As indicated above, The Seventh-day Adventist Church adopted much of the nomenclature of Methodism to describe its organization, and its organizational structure is also closer to the Methodist "economy" than any other. However, that still does not provide us with an appropriate name for the Adventist system. We can hardly call it "conference" system of organization—a term sometimes, but not exclusively, applied to Methodism.[65]

The Dawn of a New Era: The Church Becomes International

Under God's blessing and, no doubt, partially because of the greater unity and efficiency engendered by centralized government, the Adventist Church grew quickly after 1863. Membership increased, the territory covered by denominational work expanded, and the number of institutions multiplied.

Health institutions. Prior to the formation of the General Conference, the only institutional entity was the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association (later, the Review and Herald). After 1863 numerous institutions appeared, and most flourished. The pioneers founded the Western Health Reform Institute in Battle Creek in 1866; ten years later J. H. Kellogg became its medical director. Other health care and medical facilities were established in North America and overseas before the end of the century. The Seventh-day Adventist Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association came into being in 1893 to supervise the outreach of "the right arm of the message.

Educational institutions. Adventist educational facilities appeared on the scene with the birth of Battle Creek College in 1874. Several other colleges, academies, and industrial schools emerged in the next couple of decades, both at home and abroad. The Seventh-day Adventist

---

[63] See, e.g., [James White], "Conference Address," *Review and Herald*, May 20, 1873, 184. Further documentation may be found in Mustard, 171-72.

[64] See, e.g., [James White], "The Association," *Review and Herald*, June 2, 1863, 4. Further documentation may be found in Mustard, 173-74.

[65] See Mustard, *James White and SDA Organization*, 252-63, for a more extended discussion of the parallels between Seventh-day Adventist and Methodist organization.

Educational Society formed in the same year that Battle Creek College started operating, to promote the cause of Christian education. The publishing work underwent similar expansion. The Pacific Press started in 1874, and at least five overseas publishing houses were established in the 1890s.

Missions. John N. Andrews became the first missionary to be sent overseas by the General Conference in 1874. At first, foreign mission efforts were limited to Europe and later Australia (1885), but the second half of the 1880s and the 1890s saw official Adventist missions opened in Africa, Central and South America, the Pacific Islands, India, and the Far East.[66] As has been mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, by 1901 fifty-seven conferences and forty-one missions had been established worldwide.

Organizational Problems in An Expanding Church

How did the organizational structure formed in 1863 cope with the burgeoning size and number of administrative units? It soon became apparent that the burdens of leadership rested on the shoulders of too few. Until 1886 the General Conference Executive Committee consisted of only five members, all of whom traveled extensively; hence, consultation between them tended to be infrequent.[67] Hampered by slow communication with overseas workers and lack of familiarity with the situation existing in other countries, the progress of the work (especially overseas) tended to be held back, awaiting executive decisions from Battle Creek.

Furthermore, numerous societies and associations sprang up (several have been mentioned above) which had a semi-independent status in relationship to the General Conference. They not infrequently set their own policies which were not always in harmony with the decisions of the General Conference Executive Committee.[68]

From time to time attempts were made to reorganize the church and suit its structure to the requirements of a larger, international body. On one hand power was too centralized in the five-man General Conference Executive Committee; on the other hand the various auxiliary organizations tended to make decisions in accordance with their own interests, which did not always coincide with the concerns of the church at large.

In 1882 a European Missionary Council was established to provide a forum where planning and coordination of the work could take place in Europe rather than in Battle Creek. The General Conference Executive Committee was increased from five to seven members in 1886, and from seven to thirteen in 1897. The 1888 General Conference Session at Minneapolis attempted to follow the European lead by dividing North America into administrative units. The proposal created little interest, although the delegates did divide North America into four districts (increased a year later to six) with a member of the General Conference Executive Committee assigned to supervise each.[69]

The first move to bring auxiliary organizations, such as the Sabbath School Association and the International Tract and Missionary Society, under the control of the conference occurred in South Africa in 1892 under the leadership of A. T. Robinson. His experiment was opposed by General Conference president, O. A. Olsen, and the Foreign Mission Board in North America, on the grounds that it would lead to greater centralization; but by the time their reservations were

---

[66] For details of Seventh-day Adventist institutional and mission expansion, see Schwarz, chaps. 7-9, 13-14.

[67] Schwarz has pointed out that in 1885 only two of the five General Conference Committee members resided in Battle Creek. Of the other three, one lived in Europe, another in Massachusetts, and the third in Ohio (ibid., 269).

[68] Cf. Oliver, 50-55.

[69] Schwarz, 271; cf. Oliver, 69-73.

communicated to Robinson in South Africa, the plan was well under way and working smoothly.[70]

In a bid to decentralize the decision-making process in 1893, Olsen suggested establishing an administrative organization on an intermediate level between the General Conference and the local conferences.[71] His proposals were not heeded at the time, and it was not until 1901 that "union conferences" came into being in North America to occupy the role originally envisaged by Olsen. However, in 1894 the Australasian Union Conference was organized which came to serve as the pattern for union conferences introduced at the 1901 General Conference Session.[72] Apparently, the Australasian Union also initiated a departmental system in 1894 similar to the one introduced by Robinson in South Africa.[73]

The 1901 Reorganization and Its Impact[74]

On the day before the 1901 General Conference Session opened, Ellen White met informally with several leaders of the church and made a forceful appeal for reorganization. She had recently returned after nine years in Australia which had provided her with insight into the challenges and difficulties of carrying on the work of the church overseas. She recognized, along with others, the need to decentralize the administration of the church so that the key decisions would be made by those with firsthand knowledge of the local field.

Mrs. White called for broader representation on committees so that power and authority might be shared among several rather than monopolized by a few, or even by an individual. It was time, she said, to end the "kingly power" of certain leaders of the church, including the heads of the auxiliary organizations, who sought to retain for themselves the power and influence derived from the semi-independent status of their respective organizations.

On the opening day of the General Conference, Ellen White repeated her call for "renovation" and "reorganization."[75] In response to her appeal, A. G. Daniells proposed the suspension of the regular business agenda of the conference and the appointment of a representative committee (later designated the "Committee on Counsel") to study the matter of reorganization.

Important actions. The "Committee on Counsel" made several recommendations, the most significant being:

1. The organization of union conferences and union missions around the world to replace the local conferences as the constituent parts of the General Conference.

2. The enlargement of the General Conference Executive Committee to 25 members, including the presidents of the union conferences and six members chosen by the Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association. As the number of unions grew, so the size of the Executive Committee would increase.

3. The auxiliary organizations to be placed under the administrative control of the General Conference through the formation of departments. The Sabbath School Association, the

---

[70] Cf. Oliver, 73-81.

[71] See Schwarz, 272.

[72] Ibid., 272-80.

[73] According to Oliver, a departmental system which brought the auxiliary organizations under the umbrella of the respective union conference or local conferences came into being in 1894, three years before Robinson arrived in Australia to serve as president of the Victoria Conference (Oliver, 90-91).

[74] I am indebted to Oliver's in-depth study of the dynamics of the 1901-1903 period of reorganization in the writing of this section (ibid., 162-217); See also Schwarz, 267-81.

[75] *General Conference Bulletin*, 1901, 25-26; see also *Life Sketches*, 385-87.

Tract and Missionary Societies, and the Religious Liberty Association all transferred their concerns over to secretaries appointed by the General Conference Executive Committee. A similar procedure was followed on the other administrative levels. Only the Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association retained its autonomous status—for the time being.

4. The office of General Conference president to be replaced by a chairman. The 25-member executive committee would appoint a chairman from among its number who would serve as the chief administrative officer of the church.

The introduction of union conferences, the enlarging of the executive committee, and the replacement of the position of president with that of chairman were all attempts to decentralize the organizational structure of the church and to limit the power of individuals. The formation of departments tended toward greater centralization, but was seen to be necessary to accomplish more effective coordination of the mission of the church.

The immediate reactions to the reorganization of the church were mainly positive. The dynamic personalities of the new president and secretary of the General Conference, A. G. Daniells and W. A. Spicer, and the greater efficiency made possible by the restructuring of the administration of the church, brought about a "new wave of missionary commitment and fervor."[76] The mood of the church at the time was buoyant. Its leaders faced the future with a sense of urgency and expectation and, despite the immensity of the task, looked optimistically toward the completion of the mission of the church and the return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Unresolved difficulties. However, not all difficulties were resolved by the 1901 reorganization. The next year, confrontation developed between A. G. Daniells and Dr. J. H. Kellogg over organizational and theological issues.[77] They clashed over Kellogg's proposal to establish a sanitarium in England. Daniells would not allow the church to go further into debt to finance the project. Disagreement over the relationship between the church and the International Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association also threatened disruption. Daniells sought to bring the medical work under the jurisdiction of the church, while Kellogg determined to retain its independence. Further controversy arose over the pantheistic tendencies expressed in Kellogg's book, *The Living Temple*.

Perhaps even more fundamental than any of the above controverted issues were the forceful and uncompromising personalities of the two protagonists. Kellogg had for a long time poured scorn on what he perceived to be the ineptitude of the Adventist ministry. Ironically, when he met a minister who matched him in determination and assertiveness, they were (not surprisingly) at odds with each other.

The church found itself in a divided state as the 1903 General Conference Session approached, and much of the postreorganization euphoria after 1901 had evaporated. Most of the administrative staff of the church allied with Daniells over his organizational proposals. On the other side, the majority of medical personnel, as well as the influential figures of A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner, supported Kellogg. Jones, in particular, decried the return to the "one-man power" of Daniells' administration.

The 1901 session had proposed that the chief administrator of the General Conference should be chosen from among their own number by the members of the Executive Committee, and that he should be designated as the chairman of that committee rather than president of the General Conference. Daniells had seen little to commend such an arrangement in the first place,

<hr>

[76] Oliver, 177. Oliver states that there was a "dramatic leap" in the number of missionaries who went overseas in 1901 and 1902.
[77] See Richard W. Schwarz, *John Harvey Kellogg*, M.D. (Nashville, 1970), 182-87; cf. Oliver, 179-201.

as he felt that it made his management of the church's business ineffective and subject to the whim of the committee. Apparently he began using the title "president" within a few weeks of the 1901 session.

Later organizational refinements. In short, the 1903 session formally approved the reversion to the office of "president," and the medical work was integrated into the administrative structure of the church as a department of the General Conference. Given the strength of feeling of Kellogg and Jones on these matters, the subsequent separation of both men from church membership was almost inevitable.[78]

Further changes in the administrative structure of the church were relatively minor. In 1913 the divisional structure of the General Conference came into being, but present-day church organization is essentially the same as that established by the reorganization of the church in 1901 and consolidated in 1903.[79]

Ellen White's relationship to the reorganization. Ellen White did not enter the debate concerning the restructuring of the church during this period. As she had done when the church was in its infancy in the 1850s and 1860s, she pointed to the basic principles of Heaven's order as the ideal toward which those who formulated church order should aim. In her address to the leaders of the church on the day before the opening of the 1901 session, she said, "What we want now is a reorganization. We want to begin at the foundation, and to build upon a different principle." A hint was given later in the same address as to what that "different principle" might include. "Greater strength must be brought into the managing force of the Conference," she asserted; but "just how it [the reorganization] is to be accomplished I can not say."[80]

Thus, the leaders of the church grappled with its structures and administrative policies in response to immediate needs and practical concerns, as the church sought to carry out its mission. That is not to say that there were no underlying biblical, theological, and missiological principles (they will be the subject of the concluding section of this chapter). However, "the sheer necessity of the case"[81] is what invariably led to organizational development. Barry Oliver expresses a similar viewpoint: "Time and place were the conditioning factors which were to determine how the principles were to be implemented."[82]

The formation and subsequent development of Adventist organization are object lessons in God's way of dealing with His people. Structure and polity were not handed to our pioneers on a silver platter, but were hammered out on the anvil of the day-to-day experiences of the church. It should not surprise us that the impact of forceful personalities such as James White and Daniells can still be perceived in the way the church carries on its work today. Neither should we be astonished to discover that practical concerns were invariably the occasion for organizational developments.

We would suggest that God worked through the cut and thrust of contrasting ideas and personalities. He guided, but did not override, the discussions and decisions of those who sought to be true to the principles of Scripture and of the gospel in organizing the church. What were

---

[78] Kellogg was disfellowshipped from the Battle Creek Church in 1907. Jones lost his membership in 1909. See Schwarz, *John Harvey Kellogg, M.D.*, 174-92; George R. Knight, *From 1888 to Apostasy: The Case of A. T. Jones* (Washington, DC, 1987), 251.

[79] On the introduction of "Divisions" of the General Conference in 1913, see Schwarz, *Light Bearer*s, 374-75.

[80] *General Conference Bulletin*, 1901, 25.

[81] A favorite phrase of James White in discussing church organization. See, e.g., James White, *Life Incidents* (Battle Creek, MI, 1863), 299; cf. Mustard, 190-91, 267-72.

[82] Oliver, 211.

those underlying principles as perceived by Adventist leaders? That is the question we will seek to answer in the concluding section of this chapter.

Principles of Adventist Polity

Scriptural Foundation Essential

"The Bible is a perfect, and complete revelation. It is our only rule of faith and practice."[83] James White's words, written in 1847, typify Sabbatarian Adventist views on the authority of Scripture. We have observed the difficulty Seventh-day Adventists had in accepting any form of organization for which there was not a specific biblical precedent. In all their discussions concerning the name of the church, the function and authority of its leaders, and the increasing centralization of its structure, the commitment to be true to the teachings of the Bible remained constant.

While James White came to the belief that Scripture provided only the basic principles of church organization, his contemporaries continued to hold a much more literalistic view of the teaching of the Bible on the subject. The resolution of the conference held at Battle Creek in September 1860 is representative of their opinion: "[Resolved,] that we are highly favorable to such organization, and such only, as the Bible authorizes and recognizes."[84]

Apparently, most Seventh-day Adventist leaders came to believe that the Bible does indeed authorize centralized church order, but their conviction that the system of Adventist organization must be patterned exactly after the NT did not change.[85]

The Remnant and Laodicean Symbol

It is significant that the scriptural motifs and figures of speech on which Seventh-day Adventists drew for their understanding of the nature of the church came from apocalyptic literature. Seventh-day Adventists have always seen themselves as the remnant church (Rev 12:17; 14:12), called to proclaim the imminent return of Christ in the last days of earth's history.

This conviction has imbued the church with a sense of urgency and has provided justification for whatever organizational developments and policy decisions were deemed necessary. For example, in 1859, when controversy over centralized church order was at its height, James White asserted that as there was "a great work to do in a short time," the situation called for "activity, sacrifices, and persevering efforts."[86]

It was also James White, supported by his wife Ellen, who first suggested (in 1856) that Sabbatarian Adventists were represented by the lukewarm Laodicean church of Revelation 3.[87] This proved an eye-opener to the members of the movement at the time. They had felt secure in the conviction that their former Millerite colleagues, who had rejected the new light of the Sabbath and sanctuary doctrines, were the Laodiceans. Sabbathkeeping Adventists regarded themselves as the pure Philadelphian church of brotherly love. However, increasing apathy in the

---

[83] James White, Ellen G. White, and Joseph Bates, *A Word to the "Little Flock,"* (Brunswick, ME: James White, 1847), 13.

[84] "Business Proceedings of the Battle Creek Conference," *Review and Herald*, October 9, 1860, 161. For a more extended discussion on the biblical foundations of Seventh-day Adventist organization, see Mustard, 216-22.

[85] E.g., Butler believed that the Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15 carried a similar central authoritative function as the General Conference. See, "Thoughts on Church Government," *Review and Herald*, August 18, 1874, 68-69.

[86] James White, "Conference Address," *Review and Herald*, June 9, 1859, 21. It is worth noting that 1859 was the year in which the principles of "Systematic Benevolence"" were first discussed within the church in a formal way.

[87] James White, "The Seven Churches,"" *Review and Herald*, October 16, 1856, 188-89, 192.

1850s led James and Ellen White to apply the Laodicean message of reproof directly to the condition of the Sabbatarian Adventists themselves.

In view of the diminished spirituality of the believers (as depicted in Rev 3:14-22) James White suggested that organization and strict discipline were needed in the church to repress the sinful tendencies of human nature. Many years later, Ellen White reiterated the same principle. Writing in 1880, she said that strict order and discipline were needed because of "the perversity of human nature."[88] This rule, as expressed by James and Ellen White, is reminiscent of the Puritan spirit which may be perceived in much of the religious thinking of nineteenth century America. "Determined to have a church whose holiness was visible, the Puritan. . . . recognized that governments, constitutions and laws were instituted to restrain man's sin."[89]

It is clear that Seventh-day Adventists considered themselves a "holiness" church; that is, one in which only regenerate Christians might be members. The import of the purity of the church is threefold, according to John Calvin. First, so that God is not insulted by professed Christians living "shameful" lives; second, that the good may not be corrupted by the wicked; and third, "that the sinner may be ashamed, and begin to repent."[90]

It was all the more important to Adventist pioneers that the church be "without spot or blemish" in view of the need to be ready for the Second Advent. We have already referred to the motif of restoration, characteristic of Bates' thought, which expressed the urgency of preparing a holy church for the return of Christ. Full readiness for the event included proper organization and discipline.

The "holiness" of the church, therefore, is crucial to its witness. The way in which God's people relate to one another and organize is part of the gospel message. Church structure should be more than merely the facilitator of the mission of the church; it is an integral element of the message itself.

Church Organization and Adventist Theology

Since it is true that church order is part and parcel of the witness of the church, it is vital that its organization be appropriate to the rest of its theology. For example, as Christ is the head of the church (Eph 4:15; 5:23; Col 1:18), ministers should be—to use James White's words— "shepherds of the flock and leaders of the people in a subordinate sense."[91] As all members of the body of Christ are vitally important to its health and effective functioning, the main purpose of the administrative structures of the church should be to enable everyone to fulfill the Christian service for which the Holy Spirit has prepared them, through the spiritual gifts He has bestowed.

Ministers' roles primarily should be to enable all members to carry out their own ministries effectively. As Gottfried Oosterwal has pointed out, the distinction between clergy and laity is not a biblical one.[92] If you are a Christian, you are a minister. If you are a person, you are a member of the laity.[93] Some are called to the pastoral ministry, others to the ministries of teaching, healing, parenthood, or business—to name but a few.

---

[88] Ellen White, "Order in the Church," *Review and Herald*, April 15, 1880, 234.
[89] Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CN, 1972), 129. The idea that sinful human nature requires strict rules and regulations in the church (and in society) to control it reflects the Calvinistic influence in Puritan theology. Discipline, according to John Calvin, "is a kind of curb to restrain and tame those who war against the doctrine of Christ, or it is a stimulus by which the indifferent are aroused; sometimes also, it is a kind of fatherly rod" (*Institutes* 4.12.1).
[90] *Institutes* 4.12.5.
[91] See above, pp. 22-23 and n. 57.
[92] Gottfried Oosterwal, *Mission: Possible* (Nashville, 1972), 103-19.
[93] The terms "laity" or "layman" are derived from the Greek laos, meaning "people." It is misleading to think of "laymen" as

The biblical principle of the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet 2:9) lends weight to this understanding of ministry. Direct access to the throne of God through our only mediator, Jesus Christ, is just one facet of this principle. As expressed by Martin Luther, the priesthood of all believers also requires that "we stand before God, pray for others, intercede with and sacrifice ourselves to God and proclaim the word to one another."[94]

The Mission of the Church

To what extent does the Seventh-day Adventist organization today reflect these twin principles: (1) Christ is the head of the church, and (2) the priesthood of all believers? When the church first centrally organized in 1863, the main aims were to enable the church to complete its mission as efficiently as possible and to maintain unity of doctrine. The expected imminence of Christ's return lent urgency to the task.

The church still teaches that Christ will come soon. Our mission continues to be an urgent one. However, we must also recognize that until He does return, members must live and work together in peace and harmony. This was not, perhaps, such an important consideration for those who could not conceive that several generations would pass before the Second Coming. In other words, as time has elapsed and Christ's return is seemingly "delayed," pastoral concerns have become more apparent. The church has to care for the sheep in the fold as well as to seek the lost.

The increased size of the church has brought new challenges. There is always a danger that in a church of millions the individual will feel insignificant. It is possible that some may feel that their voice is not heard, that the views they hold make no difference. Such feelings can result in apathy or disillusionment.

No system of church governance can prevent the problems associated with increasing size from arising. However, the Adventist pioneers were distinguished by their pragmatic approach to matters of organization. They were able, albeit often after much controversy and debate, to adapt the structure of the church to meet the needs of the present.

Likewise the challenge of the church today is to be open to new ideas and methods, so that the organizational structure of the church might act as a facilitator, not a hindrance, to the accomplishment of the mission of the church. Some of the questions which the church may need to address in the future include:

1. Is the size and complexity of its administrative structure and institutions appropriate to the size and resources of the body of believers?

2. Has sufficient provision been made for members to be well represented on the decision-making bodies of the church, whatever the nature of their ministry?

3. To what extent is it possible for the church in a given part of the world to adopt different structures and working policies that are suited to the cultural, political, and economic situation in its area?

4. Does the present form of organization allow sufficient room for church members to exercise their spiritual gifts fully?

5. Finally, and most important, does our organizational structure preach Christ? Do our institutions proclaim that Christ is the head of the Seventh-day Adventist Church; that we believe He is coming soon; and that until then, the church exists to extend Christ's kingdom on earth?

---

amateurs, which is often the connotation attached to the word.

[94] Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia, 1966), 314.