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- EDITORIAL -

Seeds of Distress in the Church

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From time to time, since its inception, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has faced dissension. This should not surprise us. With a representative form of church government, it has many moving parts consisting of the local churches, conferences, unions, and the General Conference (GC).

In addition, it operates in many different countries, languages, and cultures around the world. With so many leaders and entities there is a lot of opportunity for discontent, for whatever reason, to develop.

Secondly, Satan hates this church. He will develop every chance to hit it from within and without. His goal is to destroy the church by either infecting it with false teaching or destroying its structure and unity. The history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, like the early church, reveals how Satan endeavors to work amongst us. Here are a couple of notable examples from the past.

In 1907 John H. Kellogg was disfellowshipped from the Battle Creek Tabernacle for his pantheistic, New Age teachings. He and his cohorts were very powerful and influential. This was no small crisis and some wondered whether the church would survive. But the church kept on growing.

Then there was Ludwig R. Conradi. He was a charismatic and talented German who oversaw and did much to build up the work in Europe. However, he was also the impetus for schism, division, and apostasy. In World War I, he became very nationalistic and encouraged

Adventists to bear arms in the conflict. Young faithful Adventists were drafted and suffered greatly because of his betrayal. Unfortunately, he was not dealt with until he had caused great damage, and arguably the impact is still felt in European Adventist churches today. He left the Adventist Church in 1932.

Now it seems we are faced with another challenge to our unity. It too is over a biblical issue as well as church governance. In 2015, for the third time, the GC session with thousands of delegates from around the world, voted not to allow women to be ordained to the office of Elder for the world church.

However, some unions have refused to bring their practice into harmony with this decision. In Europe, Australia, and North America, which make up about ten percent of the world church, there is considerable support for this insubordination. But also, in those same divisions there is a great deal of support, particularly among lay people for the GC vote and deep concern over the threat to unity.

But this *attitude* of insubordination, and not necessarily the ordination issue itself, has deeper roots. Could it be that a false presentation of the gospel has fertilized this attitude?

As Western culture has become increasingly secular and anti-Christian, our teaching on biblical lifestyle has brought attention to our peculiarity and distinctiveness. Struggling with our carnal nature in an increasingly carnal world, we have preferred a walk with Jesus that isn't so narrow and rugged. We

don't want to appear in the odd fringes of society.

In response to these longings, preachers have arisen among us who cleverly or naively pit acceptance and justification against Christian lifestyle and sanctification. In doing so they have created a tension that does not exist in the Bible. For sure, there was a debate in the early church of casting off Jewish ceremonialism, particularly for Jewish Christians. But there was never a war over God's grace against good behavior.

Nevertheless, over the years, for many Western Adventist leaders, the concept that grace produces good behavior has become blurred. The Church Manual is now viewed as dated and the section on Christian lifestyle as legalistic.

For the record, I believe Adventists maintain the correct understanding of the gospel, which incorporates both justification and sanctification. Fundamental belief number 10 states: "*Through Christ we are justified, adopted as God's sons and daughters, and delivered from the lordship of sin. Through the Spirit we are born again and sanctified; the Spirit renews our minds, writes God's law of love in our hearts, and we are given the power to live a holy life.*"

Our acceptance and justification and our Christian lifestyle and sanctification are like inhaling and exhaling. They are different, yet totally interdependent. To pit justification against sanctification is like pitting inhaling against exhaling. We must have *both* in harmony to live! Here is a sample of that harmony coming from the Apostle Paul's passionate testimony: "*God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*"¹

Mocking Christian lifestyle as though it is an enemy of the gospel is preaching a false gospel. But it gets worse. In a recent evangelism council in the West, the idea was advanced that the church should just baptize people and afterwards teach them doctrines like the "state of the dead."

I knew similar attitudes existed in places regarding smoking, Sabbath keeping, unclean foods, and jewelry, to name a few; but I was shocked when I heard that.

Let's be clear. False grace will destroy every virtue of Christianity. And legalism, which is a form of false sanctification, will destroy the joy of true grace in our hearts. Just look around at the secular churches. In the name of cheap grace one can become a member or even clergy and embrace almost any abomination forbidden in the Bible!

In Western Adventism much has been surrendered to carnal worldliness. For example, when unfaithful secular churches opened the doors to the degrading and rebellious rock music culture, many Adventist churches ignored the Church Manual and followed suit. When popular evangelicals like Rick Warren and Bill Hybels marketed their evangelistic methods, many Western Adventist leaders jumped on their bandwagon.

This attitude was on display at a recent meeting in London, sponsored by the noncompliant unions on ordination. These unions were urged to stand together against the GC like some Christians were urged to stand against Germany in WWII, or like Martin Luther against the Pope.

Do they really believe our Church is like the medieval Roman Catholic Church? Are our elected leaders—who can be removed—really like the Pope that Luther stood up to? Or is this just hyperbole? If it is, then it is an irresponsible use of hyperbole.

We could also ask if encouraging defiance and hurling unfounded accusations is the path to unity. Perhaps all of this is simply the fruit of an attitude that resents the direction and guidance of the world church over the decades and the attempt to provide justification for fissure in the name of unity.

The decisions of the body are the lifeblood of its organization! Cooperating with those decisions, even if our own opinion is different, is what brings unity

and life to the church. There will be difficult times for the Church ahead, from many directions, as we approach the end. Its organization and life will be threatened by worldly attitudes, secular culture, and false teachings.

When germs invade the body they have their own agenda contrary to the body. Sometimes they will destroy a finger or a limb, but the body does have an immune system. And there is a balm in Gilead, a master Physician that resides there. By God's grace, the church will recover. No matter how much it is mocked or crucified on the cross of human arrogance, it will fulfill the purpose of its Creator!

Despite our wounds and bruises, our Physician has promised us a new heart! The mind of Christ! It is the mind of Christ that compels us to humility and unity, that moves us to submit to Scripture instead of culture, and motivates us to patience and longsuffering with each other.

People in the church may have differences of opinion. That's fine as long as we treat each other with Christian courtesy. And respect due process! But an attitude of rebellion is like witchcraft.²

For instance, in the rebellion of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, Moses was falsely accused of all kinds of things. But in the end it wasn't Moses that responded to that attitude, it was the Lord. It was that same attitude which blinded and bewitched a third of the angels in heaven. Any attitude of rude criticism and defiance—from whatever source—against God's church can cause a lot of suffering, but in the end it will not prevail. Did Kellogg's and Conradi's rebellion succeed?

The Lord is longsuffering and patient. Remember how He dealt with Job's hard questions? The Lord delights in a submissive heart, but will never accept a rebellious attitude.³

¹ Galatians 5:16, 6:14

² 1 Samuel 15:22

³ See God's dealing toward rebellion within the context of Jeremiah 26:19.