

Seventh-day Adventists and the Ecumenical Movement

Bert B Beach

The General Conference Executive Committee has never voted an official statement regarding the Seventh-day Adventist relationship to the ecumenical movement as such. A book has been written dealing at length with the subject¹ and a number of articles have appeared over the years in Adventist publications, including the *Adventist Review*. Thus, while there is not exactly an official position, there are plenty of clear indications regarding the Seventh-day Adventist viewpoint.

Generally, it can be said that while the Seventh-day Adventist Church does not completely condemn the ecumenical movement and its main organizational manifestation, the World Council of Churches, she has been critical of various aspects and activities. Few would wish to deny that ecumenism has had laudable aims and some positive influences. Its great goal is visible Christian unity. No Adventist can be opposed to the unity Christ Himself prayed for. The ecumenical movement has promoted kinder interchurch relations with more dialogue and less diatribe and helped remove unfounded prejudices.

Through its various organizations and activities, the ecumenical movement has provided more accurate and updated information on churches, spoken for religious liberty and human rights, combated against the evils of racism, and drawn attention to socioeconomic implications of the gospel. In all this the intentions have been good and some of the fruit palatable. However, in the total picture, the banes tend to outweigh the boons. We shall examine some of these.

Adventism a Prophetic Movement

The Seventh-day Adventist Church stepped upon the stage of history—so Adventists firmly believe—in response to God’s call. Adventists believe, it is hoped without pride or arrogance, that the Advent Movement represents a divinely appointed instrument for the organized proclamation of the “eternal gospel,” God’s last message, discerned from the prophetic vantage point of Revelation 14 and 18. In the focalized light of its prophetic understanding, the Seventh-day Adventist Church sees herself as an eschatologically oriented “ecumenical” movement of the Apocalypse. She begins by “calling out” God’s children from ecclesial bodies that will increasingly form organized religious opposition to the purposes of God. Together with the “calling out” there is a positive “calling in” to a united, worldwide—that is, ecumenical— movement characterized by “faith of Jesus” and keeping “the commandments of God” (Rev 14:12).

In the World Council of Churches the emphasis appears to be first of all on “coming in” to a fellowship of churches and then hopefully and gradually “coming out” of corporate disunity. In the Advent Movement the accent is first on “coming out” of Babylonian disunity and confusion and then immediately “coming in” to a fellowship of unity, truth, and love within the globe-encircling Advent family.

In understanding the Adventist attitude toward ecumenism and other mainline churches, it is helpful to remember that the early Advent Movement (characterized by the Millerites) had ecumenical aspects: it arose in many churches. Thus, Adventists came from many denominations. However, the churches generally rejected the Advent message. Adventists were not infrequently disfellowshipped. Sometimes Adventists took with them portions of

congregations. Relations became embittered. False stories were circulated, some of which unfortunately still persist today, the pioneers had strong views, and their opponents were no less dogmatic. They tended to look more for what separates than what unites. That was an understandable development. Today, of course, the interchurch climate tends to be more irenic and benign.

What are some of the problems Adventists have with ecumenism? Before we endeavor to give a summary answer to this question, it needs to be pointed out that the ecumenical movement is not monolithic in its thinking, and one can find all kinds of views represented in its ranks (that in itself, of course, is a problem!). We will try to make reference to what can be considered mainstream thinking within the World Council of Churches (WCC), an organization now representing about three hundred thirty different churches and denominations.

Ecumenical Understanding of Unity

The New Testament presents a qualified church unity in truth, characterized by holiness, joy, faithfulness, obedience, and evangelism.² “Ecumenthusiasts” (to coin a word) seem to take for granted the eventual organic unity and communion of the great majority of the churches. They emphasize the “scandal of division,” as if this were really the unpardonable sin. Heresy and apostasy are largely ignored. However, the New Testament shows the threat of anti-Christian penetration within “the temple of God” (2 Thess 2:3, 4). The eschatological picture of God’s church prior to the Second Coming is not one of a mega church gathering all humankind together, but of a “remnant” of Christendom, those keeping the commandments of God and having the faith of Jesus (see Rev 12:17).

There is clearly a point at which unorthodoxy and un-Christian lifestyle justify separation. The WCC seems to miss this point. Separation and division in order to protect and uphold the purity and integrity of the church and her message are more desirable than unity in worldliness and error.

Furthermore, Adventists are uncomfortable with the fact that the WCC leaders seem to give little emphasis to personal sanctification and revival. There are indications that some may view such emphasis as a quaint pietistic hangover, not a vital ingredient of a dynamic Christian life. They prefer to soft-pedal personal piety in favor of social morality. However, in Adventist understanding, personal holiness of life is such stuff as the morality of society is made (with apologies to Shakespeare). Without genuinely converted Christians, any formal organizational unity is really of a plastic nature and of little relevance.

Ecumenical Understanding of Belief

In many church circles broad-mindedness is seen as an ecumenical virtue. The ideal ecumenist, it is suggested, is not dogmatic in belief and is somewhat fluid in doctrinal views. He greatly respects the beliefs of others, but is less than rigid about his own belief. He appears humble and not assertive about doctrinal beliefs—except those regarding ecumenical unity and racism. He has a sense of partial knowing. To show religious doctrinal arrogance is, ecumenically, especially sinful.

All this has a laudable side. Humility and meekness are Christian virtues. Indeed, Peter tells us to always be ready to answer and give a reason for our faith, but this must be done with humility, respect, and a good conscience (1 Peter 3:15, 16). However, there is in ecumenical

ranks an almost inbuilt danger of softness and relativization of belief. The whole concept of heresy is questioned. Lately, questions are even raised regarding the idea of “paganism.”

Typical of some ecumenical presuppositions is the idea that all denominational formulations of truth are time-conditioned and relative, and therefore partial and inadequate. Some ecumenists would even go so far as to advocate the need of doctrinal synthesis, bringing together various Christian beliefs in what has been called a kind of cocktail approach. We are told that each church is imbalanced and it is the task of ecumenism to restore balance and harmony. Within the reconciled diversity of the ecumenical movement, presumably everyone, in the words of Frederick the Great, “will be saved in his own way.”

Adventists believe that without strong convictions, a church has little spiritual power. There is the danger that the ecumenical quicksand of doctrinal softness will suck churches into denominational death. Of course, this is precisely what ecumenical enthusiasts hope for. However, Adventists feel that such doctrinal irresolutions must be vigorously resisted; otherwise spiritual self-disarmament will be the result and a truly post-Christian age would be upon us.

Ecumenical Understanding of Scripture

Adventists see the Bible as the infallible revelation of God’s will, the authoritative revealer of doctrinal truth, and the trustworthy record of the mighty acts of God in salvation history.³ Adventists see the Bible as a unity. For many WCC leaders the Bible is not normative and authoritative in itself. The emphasis is on biblical diversity, including at times demythologization of the Gospels. For a large number of ecumenists, as is the case for liberal Christianity in general, inspiration lies not in the biblical text but in the experience of the reader. Propositional revelation is out; experience is in.

Apocalyptic prophecy is given practically no time-of-the-end role. Pro forma references to the Parousia are made, but have no implications for urgency and make little measurable impact on the ecumenical concept of evangelistic mission. There is here the danger of eschatological blindness.

Seventh-day Adventists see the biblical picture of sin and redemption within the framework of the “great controversy” between good and evil, between Christ and Satan, between God’s Word and the lies of the impostor, between the faithful remnant and Babylon.

Adventists are, first and foremost, people of the Word. While believing in the unconditional authority of the Scriptures, Adventists recognize that the Bible was “written by inspired men, but it is not God’s mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. . . . The writers of the Bible were God’s penmen, not His pen.”⁴ Many ecumenists would say that the Biblical text is not the Word of God but contains this word as men respond and accept it. In contrast, Adventists would say that the utterances of the Bible writers “are the word of God.”⁵ God is not on trial; neither is His Word, from criticism notwithstanding. It is man vis-à-vis the Bible who is on trial.

Ecumenical Understanding of Mission and Evangelism

The traditional understanding of mission highlights evangelism, that is, the verbal proclamation of the Gospel. The ecumenical approach sees mission as involving the establishment of shalom, a kind of social peace and harmony. Adventists have problems with any tendency to downplay the primary importance of announcing the good news of redemption from the stranglehold of sin. In fact, the traditional, including Adventist, view of salvation has

always been the saving of individuals from sin and for eternity. Ecumenical evangelism sees salvation as primarily saving society from oppressive regimes, from the ravages of hunger, from the curse of racism, and from the exploitation of injustice.

The Adventist understanding of conversion means for a person to experience radical changes through spiritual rebirth. The majority emphasis in WCC circles appears to be on changing—converting—the unjust structures of society.

As we see it, in the area of evangelism and foreign missionary work the fruits (or maybe we should say lack of fruits) of ecumenism have often been less evangelism (as we understand it—from Paul to Billy Graham), less growth and more membership decline, fewer missionaries sent out, and proportionally less financial support coming in. In fact, the missionary outreach has shifted away from mainline “ecumenical” churches to conservative evangelicals. It is sad to see such a large evangelistic potential lost to the missionary movement, especially at a time of increasingly active and militant Islamic outreach and the awakening of Eastern and indigenous religions.

Some successful Seventh-day Adventist evangelistic outreach efforts appear to run counter to the ecumenical low-key “joint mission” approach. The latter may sound good in an ecumenical study paper, but soul-winning results are lacking. The paraphrase of an old saying has some relevance here: “The proof of the ecumenical pudding lies in the evangelistic eating.” While Adventists oppose the use of corrupt methods in evangelism (such as making false statements or using forms of bribery or cajolery), they cannot blindly condemn proselytism without a clear definition.

Ecumenical Understanding of Sociopolitical Responsibility

Admittedly, the whole question of Christian social and political responsibility is a complicated one. The WCC and other councils, of churches (such as the National Council of Churches in the United States) are heavily involved in what are usually seen largely as political questions. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is very much more circumspect in this area (in comparison to evangelism, where the tables are turned!).

Much ecumenical thinking in the area of political responsibility includes or involves: 1) a secularization of salvation; 2) a postmillennial view advocating the gradual political improvement and social betterment of humankind and the establishment through human effort, as divine agents, of God's kingdom on earth; 3) adaptation of Christianity to the modern world; 4) evolutionary Utopian faith in progress; and 5) socialistic collectivism, favoring some form of egalitarianism and the welfare state, but not Communist materialism.

Presumably, ecumenical social activists consider Adventism as a Utopian vision of pie in the apocalyptic sky by and by; this is wrong. Faced with the many problems of society, Adventists cannot be, and generally are not, apathetic or indifferent. Witness this: more than 800 hospitals, clinics, and other healthcare institutions serving more than 14 million outpatients in a recent year; a large educational system circling the globe with more than seven thousand schools; Adventist Development and Relief Agency—a rapidly expanding worldwide service of the church in areas of acute and chronic need. Several other service activities could be referred to.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church believes it is necessary to distinguish between sociopolitical activity of individual Christians as citizens and involvement on the corporate church level. It is the church's task to deal with moral principles and to point in a Biblical direction, not to advocate political directives. The WCC has at times been involved in political power plays. While Adventism will sow seeds that will inevitably influence society and politics, it does not wish to be entangled in political controversies. The church's Lord did state: "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36), and like her Lord the church wishes to go "about doing good" (Acts 10:38). She does not wish to run the government, either directly or indirectly.

Ecumenical Understanding of Religious Liberty

In the early years of the WCC, beginning with its first assembly at Amsterdam in 1948, religious liberty was placed on the ecumenical agenda. Religious liberty was seen as a vital prerequisite for ecumenical unity. In 1968 a religious liberty secretariat was set up at WCC headquarters. However, in more recent years the WCC religious liberty stance has been somewhat ambiguous. In 1978 the secretariat was closed down, mainly for what was seen as a lack of funds. This, of course, in itself speaks regarding the priority given to religious liberty in the organized ecumenical movement. Today the ecumenical tendency is to view religious liberty as simply one of the human rights instead of the fundamental right that under girds all other human rights. This is, of course, the approach used by the secular mind. Secularists or humanists refuse to recognize religious belief as something apart or above other human activities. There is here the danger that religious liberty will lose its unique character that makes it the guardian of all true freedoms.

It must not be forgotten that historically it has been the balance of power and denominationalism that have neutralized religious intolerance and worked for religious liberty. Formal religious unity has existed only with force. There is thus in society an inbuilt tension between unity and religious liberty. In fact, the eschatological picture of the final events is a dramatic tableau of religious persecution, as the massive forces of apocalyptic Babylon try to squeeze the church of the remnant into the mold of united apostasy.

Finally, the religious liberty outlook becomes increasingly clouded when it is realized that certain ecumenical activists accept fairly easily religious liberty restrictions affecting believers of a different religio-political stamp, who are exerting what is perceived to be a negative social stance. Furthermore, some ecumenical leaders are quite willing, in revolutionary situations, to see religious liberty interfered with and “temporarily shut down,” in order to promote unity, nation building, and the “good” of society as a whole.

The Influence of Prophetic Understanding

What we have written so far highlights some of the reservations Adventists have regarding involvement in the organized ecumenical movement. The general attitude of the Seventh-day Adventist Church toward other churches and the ecumenical movement is decisively influenced by the above considerations and determined by prophetic understanding. Looking back, Adventists see centuries of persecution and anti-Christian manifestations of the papal power. They see discrimination and much intolerance by state or established churches. Looking forward, they see the danger of Catholicism and Protestantism linking hands and exerting religio-political power in a domineering and potentially persecuting way. They see the faithful church of God not as a jumbo

church, but as a remnant. They see themselves as a historical part of that remnant and as not willing to be linked with the expanding Christian apostasy of the last days.

Looking at the present, Adventists see their task as preaching the everlasting gospel to all men, calling for worship of the Creator, obedient adherence to the faith of Jesus, and proclaiming that the hour of God's judgment has come. Some aspects of this message are not popular. How can Adventists best succeed in fulfilling the prophetic mandate? It is our view that the Seventh-day Adventist Church can best accomplish her divine mandate by keeping her own identity, her own motivation, her own feeling of urgency, and her own working methods.

Ecumenical Cooperation?

Should Adventists cooperate ecumenically? Adventists should cooperate insofar as the authentic Gospel is proclaimed and crying human needs are being met. The Seventh-day Adventist Church wants no entangling memberships and refuses any compromising relationships that might tend to water down her distinct witness. However, Adventists wish to be "conscientious cooperators." The ecumenical movement as an agency of cooperation has acceptable aspects; as an agency for organic unity of churches, it is much more suspect.

Relationships with Other Religious Bodies

Back in 1926, long before ecumenism was in vogue, the General Conference Executive Committee adopted an important statement that is now a part of the *General Conference Working Policy* (O 110). This declaration has significant ecumenical implications. The original concern of the statement was for the mission field and relationships with other "missionary societies." However, the statement has now been broadened to deal with other "religious organizations" in general. It

affirms that Seventh-day Adventists “recognize every agency that lifts up Christ before men as a part of the divine plan for the evangelization of the world, and . . . hold in high esteem the Christian men and women in other communions who are engaged in winning souls to Christ.” In the church’s dealings with other churches, “Christian courtesy, friendliness, and fairness” are to prevail. Some practical suggestions are made in order to avoid misunderstandings and occasion for friction. The statement makes it very clear, however, that the “Seventh-day Adventist people” have received the special “burden” to emphasize the Second Coming as an event “even at the door,” preparing “the way of the Lord as revealed in Holy Scripture.” This divine “commission” makes it, therefore, impossible for Adventists to restrict their witness “to any limited area” and impels them to call the gospel “to the attention of all peoples everywhere.”

In 1980 the General Conference set up a Council on Interchurch/Interfaith Relations in order to give overall guidance and supervision to the church’s relations with other religious bodies. This council has from time to time authorized conversations with other religious organizations where it was felt this could prove helpful.

Adventist leaders should be known as bridge builders. This is not an easy task. It is much simpler to blow up ecclesiastical bridges and serve as irresponsible “Christian commandos”. Ellen White has said: “It requires much wisdom to reach ministers and men of influence.⁶ Adventists have not been called to live in a walled-in ghetto, talking only to themselves, publishing mainly for themselves, and showing a sectarian spirit of isolationism. It is, of course, more comfortable and secure to live in a Seventh-day Adventist fortress, with the communication drawbridges all drawn up. In this setting one ventures from time to time into the neighborhood for a quick evangelistic campaign, capturing as many “prisoners” as possible, and then disappearing with them back into the

fortress. Ellen White did not believe in the isolationist mentality: “Our ministers should seek to come near to the ministers of other denominations. Pray for and with these men, for whom Christ is interceding. A solemn responsibility is theirs. As Christ’s messengers we should manifest a deep, earnest interest in these shepherds of the flock.”⁷

Usefulness of Observer Relationships

Experience has taught that the best relationship to the various councils of churches (national, regional, world) is that of observer-consultant status. This helps the church to keep informed and to understand trends and developments. It helps to know Christian thinkers and leaders. Adventists are provided the opportunity to exert a presence and make the church’s viewpoint known. Membership is not advisable. Those ecumenical organizations are usually not “neutral.” They often have quite specific goals and policies and play sociopolitical advocacy roles. There would be little point in being halfhearted members (at best) or pro forma members (as many member churches are) or often in opposition (as inevitably would be the case).

On local levels, dealing with more practical and less theological issues, one could envision some forms of Seventh-day Adventist membership, with caution, however. We are thinking of such organized relationships as ministerial associations/fraternals, local church organizations, Bible study groups, and specific groups or networks to study community needs and help solve local problems. Adventists must not be perceived as simply opting out of any Christian responsibility for the local community.

In recent years, Adventist leaders and theologians have had opportunities for dialogue with other church representatives. These experiences have been beneficial. Mutual respect has been engendered. Worn-out stereotypes and inaccurate and untrue doctrinal perceptions have been removed. Prejudices have been unceremoniously laid to rest. Theological tools and understandings have been sharpened. New dimensions have been recognized and new vistas of outreach opened up.

Heralds of the True *Oikoumene*

Adventists seek to be heralds of the only true and lasting *oikoumene*. In Hebrews reference is made to “the world [Greek: *oikoumene*] to come” (Heb 2:5, NEB), the coming universal kingdom of God. In the final analysis, it is this “ecumenism” Adventists are working for. Every other ecumenical movement is ephemeral. In the meantime, it is a Christian duty to “concentrate on being completely devoted to Christ” in one’s heart. “Be ready at any time to give a quiet and reverent answer to any man who wants a reason for the hope that you have within you. Make sure that your conscience is perfectly clear” (1 Peter 3:15, 16, Phillips).

¹ Bert B Beach, *Ecumenism—Boon or Bane?* Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1974

² See John 17:6, 13, 17, 19, 23, 26.

³ See *Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists*, chapter 1, “The Holy Scriptures.”

⁴ Ellen G White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p 21.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ellen G White, *Evangelism*, p 562.

⁷ Ellen G White, *Testimonies*, vol 6, p 78.