

Summary of *A Study of Church Governance and Unity*

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I. Introduction

This summary draws on biblical principles to inform and guide the Church in relation to policies concerning the ordination and credentialing of Seventh-day Adventist pastors. It also follows the inspired guidance of the Spirit of Prophecy and takes account of lessons from Adventist history. It also contributes to the discussion about unity in light of the vote at the 2015 General Conference (GC) Session not to allow divisions to decide on the matter of women's ordination in their territories. It is expected this ongoing discussion will help to clarify what the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy have to say about unity. As we move forward, there will continue to be dialogue at administrative levels regarding the issue of compliance.

What follows addresses, in short form, essential points from *A Study of Church Governance and Unity* prepared by the General Conference Secretariat (referred to as the *Study*). That document explores these issues at greater length and elaborates the world Church's position on some aspects of certain recent practices. This summary and the *Study* are structured similarly, making it easier to explore the evidence and analysis that support the positions summarized below. Both documents draw on the Fundamental Beliefs and *Church Manual* to inform how the Adventist Church relates to the GC Constitution and Bylaws, GC *Working Policy*, GC Session actions, and statements by the GC Executive Committee.

II. Unity and Policy

1. The Biblical Doctrine of Unity

Unity is of central importance in Scripture and is the subject of the Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Beliefs numbers 12 and 14.

As Jesus faced the ultimate trial of the cross, it was not His own imminent torment that was uppermost in His mind. Instead, it was the fate of His followers, for whom He prayed at length: "I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours" (John 17:9).¹ Concerned not only for His followers' safety but also for their unity, He prayed, "Holy Father, protect them . . . that they may be one as we are one" (17:11). Jesus also prayed for His future disciples through the ages: "I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you" (17: 20-21). Jesus wanted the same unity for these future disciples—in other words, for the Church: "that they

may be brought to complete unity,” that “the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (17:23).

Christ’s desire was that “all who believe in [Him should] be one” in the same way the members of the Godhead are one (John 17:11). That profound triune unity, from which creation sprang, is the quality Christ wants for us, His followers. It is by our “complete unity” and love for each other that the world will know the truth of our claims about Christ and Christianity.

Unity among the first believers—drawn from many nationalities and ethnicities, but baptized by the Holy Spirit—was one of the primary factors in the extraordinary missional success of the early church, as described in the book of Acts; and unity was a constant theme of the Apostle Paul (see *Study*, pp 3–4). For example, Paul prayed that God would give the Roman believers “a spirit of unity as you follow Christ Jesus” (Rom 15:5-6). He enjoined the believers in Ephesus to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Rom 5:21) and similarly charged the Colossian Christians: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity” (Col 3:13-14). Writing to the church in Corinth, Paul famously likens the church to a body made up of different organs, using that metaphor to emphasize the diversity within the body of Christ. He concludes with an affirmation: “*Now you are together the body of Christ, and each of you is a part of it*” (1 Cor 12:12, Phillips, emphasis supplied; cf. 12:13-27).

2. Unity in the Writings of Ellen G White²

Writing about unity, Ellen G White often expounds on Christ’s prayer in John 17. It is a passage she repeatedly cites for various purposes, but particularly, when addressing Adventists on the necessity of unity and united action. She ascribes exceptional importance to this passage. Many examples could be cited (see *Study*, pp 4-7), but the following are indicative of her thought.

In a testimony on “Christian unity” published in 1882, Ellen White states: “Unity is strength; division is weakness.” She counsels that “the people of God should press together,” reminding her readers “that union and love might exist among His disciples was the burden of our Saviour’s last prayer for them prior to His crucifixion. With the agony of the cross before Him, His solicitude was not for Himself, but for those whom He should leave to carry forward His work in the earth.”³ She quotes John 17:17–21 before affirming “that prayer of Christ embraces all His followers to the close of time.”⁴ Later in this testimony, she quotes Ephesians 4, applies it to Seventh-day Adventists, and declares: “Paul’s instructions were not written alone for the church in his day. God designed that they should be sent down to us. What are we doing to preserve unity in the bonds of peace?”⁵

In a general testimony in 1898 she urges church members, “Study prayerfully the seventeenth chapter of John.” The people of God should study the words of Jesus in this prayer, “to eat them, to live them. He calls upon them to seek for unity and love.”⁶ In 1902, Ellen White wrote that Adventists are not just to study John 17: “We are to do all in our power to answer the prayer in the seventeenth chapter of John—Christ’s prayer for unity.”⁷ In a powerful testimony

nearly two years later, she again appeals to church members “to learn to answer the prayer in the seventeenth chapter of John.” Adventists, she affirms, “are to make this prayer our first study.”⁸ After quoting Christ’s words at length, she affirms: “Union brings strength; disunion, weakness.”⁹

In addition to commenting on John 17, Ellen White writes frequently of unity and harmony, whether in testimonies or commentary on other biblical passages. Some of her observations are quoted later in this summary, but it is notable that she links unity to revival and reformation. “When this reformation begins,” she writes, “the spirit of discord and strife” will end. “Those who have not been living in Christian fellowship will draw close to one another [and] all will be in harmony with the mind of the Spirit.”¹⁰

3. Policy and Unity

We have seen that in Scripture and the Spirit of Prophecy unity is extraordinarily important. Conveyed by the pens of inspiration, God’s message to His people in biblical times and to His remnant church at the end of time has important implications for our governance. We are to work collaboratively and unitedly, rather than unilaterally. Only when we are united will we succeed in making disciples and building up the Church. Even more profoundly, our unity is the litmus test of our claim to follow Jesus Christ, as He Himself declared (John 17:23).

But what is the connection between unity and policy? The present *GC Working Policy* is the fruit of 150 years of collegial, prayerful, and frequently prolonged discussions among church leaders from around the world chosen by church members to represent them. Measures became policy only when a majority agreed on them, and usually only after a wider consensus was reached. Although *GC Working Policy* is formatted in numbered and lettered paragraphs, its real purpose is not to produce a perfect bureaucratic system but to promote mission and unity.

Ultimately, it is not policy but the power of the Holy Spirit that holds us together, working through human instrumentalities and avenues. A number of factors promote unity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. We are united by our:¹¹

- *Commitment to Christ*
- *Common biblical beliefs*
- *Shared passion for mission to the world*
- *Joint weekly study of the Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*
- *Interdependent worldwide organizational structure*
- *Mutually agreed-upon practices and policies*

Most important are our shared beliefs and our common mission “to call all people to become disciples of Jesus Christ, to proclaim the everlasting gospel embraced by the Three Angels’ Messages, and to prepare the world for Christ’s soon return.”¹² But Church policy strengthens all the other factors and thus helps to achieve unity in the Church.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church takes seriously the doctrine of unity and unreservedly echoes Christ's appeal to God in John 17:23, praying that the Church "may be brought to complete unity" as a witness to the world.

III. Diversity, Unity, and Authority

The question naturally arises: What about diversity? Scripture and the Spirit of Prophecy reveal that unity can flourish in diversity, but relationships among members of the body of Christ must be characterized by interdependence rather than independence.

1. Diversity in the Early Church

In the Bible, diversity is a positive quality, not a negative one. The first, fundamental thing we know about God is that He is Creator. It follows that He must value variety and multiplicity, for His self-expression in creation is extraordinarily—almost infinitely—rich and diverse.

The New Testament speaks to the virtue of diversity in God's eyes, as does the Spirit of Prophecy. Moreover, Ellen G White explicitly writes several times about the value of "unity in diversity" (*Study*, p 11). The biblical writers and Ellen White affirm, in a number of passages, that unity and diversity can coexist, but these point to the overarching importance of unity. Indeed, implicit in these statements is that diversity can cause confusion and conflict (see *Study*, pp 2-6). An appropriate decision-making process is needed—one that allows an acceptable degree of diversity while preserving unity.

Jesus invested His disciples with plenary power: "Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt 18:18, NKJV). Ellen G White repeatedly referenced this text in testimonies, over a 40-year period, underscoring the significance and plenitude of the authority awarded to the apostles.¹³ Yet the apostles may have wondered how this authority was to be implemented in practice.

The first believers in Jerusalem, though all Jews, were from many different countries (Acts 2:5; 6:1). Ellen White writes that they "all were in harmony with one another. Satan knew that so long as this union continued to exist, he would be powerless to check the progress of gospel truth; and he sought to take advantage of former habits of thought . . . to introduce into the church elements of disunion."¹⁴ Dissension between Greek- and Hebrew-speaking believers ensued (Acts 6:1), but despite their unhappiness, the Greek-speaking Jews did not take matters into their own hands. Instead, the apostles, as leaders of the whole community of believers, considered the situation and, "led by the Holy Spirit," they conceived "a plan for the better organization of all the working forces of the church." The majority made a plan to care for the needs and desires of the minority group by appointing the first deacons, an approach that had positive results.¹⁵

As the believers spread out from Judaea, there could no longer be just one local community of Christians. As they began to convert not just Jews who spoke various languages, but Gentiles too, controversy was perhaps inevitable. When crucial issues arose, however, they were not

resolved independently but collectively and only after careful study of the Scriptures. This approach ensured that unity was preserved even though the challenges arising from diversity were so serious that, in theory, they could have led to a disastrous schism.

In Antioch there was “sharp dispute and debate” between “believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees” who maintained that all Christians had to be circumcised, and Paul and Barnabas, who did not require this of their Gentile converts (Acts 15:2, 5). There was so “much discussion and contention” at Antioch, Ellen White writes, that the local believers, “fearing . . . a division among them . . . decided to send Paul and Barnabas, with some responsible men from the church, to Jerusalem to lay the matter before the apostles and elders.”¹⁶ What is often called the “Jerusalem Council” is significant almost as much for its process as for the theological decision that resulted.

It is noteworthy that “the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter” and then took a decision that was regarded as binding on churches everywhere.¹⁷ Ellen G White indicates that the members of the council were “teachers who had been prominent in raising up the Jewish and Gentile Christian churches;” they came from Jerusalem, Antioch, “and the most influential churches. . . . The entire body of Christians was not called to vote upon the question. The ‘apostles and elders,’ men of influence and judgment, framed and issued the decree, which was thereupon generally accepted by the Christian churches.”¹⁸ Their decision was to affirm diversity in key religious practices; Jewish Christians would continue to circumcise and adhere to the full panoply of the Mosaic law, whereas converted Gentiles were exempted from most of its provisions, except that they were encouraged to “remember the poor” and instructed to “abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality” (Gal 2:10; Acts 15:29, NKJV).

To many Jewish believers, the Jerusalem Council’s approach would have seemed like apostasy and some “were not . . . prepared to accept willingly the decision of the council.” This, though, was a minority reaction. “The broad and far-reaching decisions of the general council brought confidence into the ranks of the Gentile believers, and the cause of God prospered.”¹⁹

The lesson from this episode is not that “anything goes”—that local groups of believers can respond to controversies as they see fit. The Antiochene church could have claimed that circumcision was an issue only for the churches in Syria and Cilicia (*cf.* Acts 15:23). But a different model was established by the Jerusalem Council, as Ellen White observes: “When dissension arose in a local church,” it was “not permitted to create a division in the church, but [instead] referred to a general council of the entire body of believers, made up of appointed delegates from the various local churches, with the apostles and elders in positions of leading responsibility. Thus the efforts of Satan to attack the church in isolated places were met by concerted action on the part of all, and the plans of the enemy . . . were thwarted.”²⁰

In sum, the lesson of the Jerusalem Council is that, in the Church, *diversity of practice can be allowed, but only after a representative body has agreed to allow some variation.* A key New Testament principle emerges from both this episode and that of the widows and deacons: decision-

making issues with implications that may extend beyond the local or regional should be collective, rather than unilateral.

2. Diversity and Authority in the Seventh-day Adventist Church

Seventh-day Adventists believe the authority granted to the Church by Jesus enables Church leaders to make decisions that bind all members. Further, we collectively subordinate ourselves to decisions taken at GC Sessions and Annual Councils. These bodies are our highest authorities, reflecting both the model of the Jerusalem Council and Ellen G White's explicit counsel (see *Study*, pp 20-28). Adventists further follow the New Testament model in providing for as much diversity as possible without imperiling unity. Decisions are made at the local and regional levels as much as possible, but major issues or questions with wider implications are decided at the highest level by representative bodies.

The Church encourages and maintains diversity in three ways: (1) by assigning authority to different levels of structure, (2) by prescribing policy only when necessary, and (3) by allowing diversity of practice where there is consensus.

a. Delegated Authority

Adventist ecclesiastical polity, as defined and described in *GC Working Policy*, is unique because "internal governance" is not hierarchical but "representative" (B 05, paragraph 1.). The decision-making process at each level involves input from other levels. Unlike traditional hierarchical denominations, authority derives from the lowest level of structure—the local church—and flows upward through constituency-based units to the highest level—the General Conference. "The Seventh-day Adventist Church has developed on the principle of interdependence rather than independence."²¹ Inherent in our system of representative, consultative, consensus-based decision-making is that organizational units and representatives of church members have input into the decisions of organizations at higher levels of structure. However, having had input, reciprocity means that there must be acceptance of the collective decision.

The authority of an organizational unit at any level is plenary in its territory, encompassing all constituent or component organizations at lower levels. The latter are bound by the decisions of the higher-level units of which they form a part.

This applies to unions that compose the constituency of the General Conference.²² The provisions of the General Conference's Constitution and Bylaws apply to and are binding on its member unions, as well as divisions. The Bylaws provide that "all organizations and institutions within a division's territory," while "responsible to their respective executive committees/boards," must still "operate in harmony with division and General Conference Executive Committee actions and policies" (Art. I. Sec. 4.). They specify that the GC Executive Committee "speaks for the world Church" because its membership "includes representatives of all the divisions of the world field and the presidents of all unions" (Art. XIII. Sec. 1. a.). *GC Working Policy* adds that strict

adherence to policy is required of “all organizations in every part of the world field” (B 15 10, paragraph 1.). “Officers and administrators” of every conference/mission, union, and division “are expected to work in harmony with the General Conference *Working Policy*” (B 15 15).

No organizational unit has a right, unilaterally, to take decisions on important matters or depart from decisions taken by units at a higher level of structure with wider authority. Recognition as a conference, mission, or union brings with it decision-making authority in defined areas and the right of representation at higher levels of denominational structure, but both are contingent on “compliance with denominational practices and policies” and “can be reviewed, revised, amended, or withdrawn by the level of organization that granted it” (B 05, paragraph 3.). Even though unions have their own constituencies and constitutions, in the interdependent Adventist system of church governance, the responsibility to comply with world Church practices and policies supersedes all other considerations.

However, “individual units of the Church are given freedom to function in ways appropriate to their role and culture,” as long as these are “in harmony with the teachings and policies of the Church, and the actions of the world Church in the General Conference Executive Committee or in General Conference Session” (B 10 25). Unity in diversity is a vital quality of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, in line with statements by Ellen G White (see *Study*, pp 10-11); it is thus not the case that unity (in compliance with Adventist church governance) means uniformity. Examples of global diversity of practice arise from decisions both taken and not taken by the world Church.

b. Diversity in Practice

The GC Constitution, Bylaws, and *Working Policy* grant extensive power to GC Sessions and to the GC Executive Committee between Sessions. But the world Church simply has not addressed a great many topics and, in the absence of definite policy provisions, there has existed what might be termed tacit diversity—since the diverse practices arise from church leaders’ lack of action rather than their explicit approval (see *Study*, pp 15-16). Where policy is silent, a range of practices can and do flourish. However, when a GC Session or the GC Executive Committee has formally taken a stance on an issue, that decision cannot be ignored.

A number of variances from policy have been officially permitted: this could be termed active diversity—since it arises because of positive action rather than by default. Examples include specific regional variations permitted in particular fields (see *Study*, p 17). There are also, however, instances in *Working Policy* of, in effect, blanket variations from standard policy that any local union or conference/mission is permitted to adopt, in the interest of mission in its particular context (see *Study*, pp 17-18). These include some models of organization, such as the union of churches, that once were controversial because they involved adaptation of the standard structure. After years of consideration by the world Church, however, provision was made in GC *Working Policy* for four “alternatives in organizational structure” (B 10 28). A decision by the world Church permitted system-wide diversity of practice, on a case-by-case basis, while preserving standard practice.

The crucial point about all these variances is that they were authorized by the world Church. Representatives of all Seventh-day Adventists deliberated together and reached a consensus that some Adventists could organize differently. This is in keeping with the example of the Jerusalem Council.

3. Acting Collaboratively, Not Unilaterally

Longstanding Adventist practice, reflecting the model found in the book of Acts, is to let diversity flourish whenever possible, but to reserve to the world Church decisions to allow diversity in matters of significance. However, once representatives from around the world, meeting and discussing together in good faith, have jointly made a decision, that decision must be respected. Unilateral action at the union and conference levels diminishes “the worldwide identity, harmony and unity of the Church.”²³

Decisions taken at the world Church level are binding on all levels of structure. In the Adventist system of church governance, the GC Session is and always has been the supreme authority in the Church. In ascribing highest authority to the GC Session, Seventh-day Adventists are applying the biblical model found in Acts, while also following the counsel of Ellen G White, who writes about the authority of the General Conference in the strongest terms and with great consistency over nearly four decades.

4. The Authority of the General Conference in the Spirit of Prophecy

GC *Working Policy* mandates that all denominational organizations and institutions are to “recognize the authority of the General Conference Session as the highest authority of the Seventh-day Adventist Church under God” (B 10 22). The preeminent authority of the GC Session derives from statements by Ellen G White. Because what she writes on this subject has been both misunderstood and misrepresented, her statements and their historical context are explored in some depth in the *Study* (pp 12-26).

In an 1875 testimony rebuking a church member for his “individual independence,” Ellen White declares: “God has invested His church with special authority and power which no one can be justified in disregarding and despising, for in so doing he despises the voice of God.”²⁴ She affirms: “If there were no church discipline and government, the church would go to fragments; it could not hold together as a body.”²⁵ In another testimony from 1875, she declares: “I have been shown that no man’s judgment should be surrendered to the judgment of any one man. But when the *judgment of the General Conference, which is the highest authority that God has upon the earth*, is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be maintained, but be surrendered” [emphasis supplied].²⁶

Today, most Seventh-day Adventists would probably understand “General Conference” to mean the permanent overarching organization and world headquarters. However, in the first two or three decades of the denomination, when church members and leaders wrote of the “General Conference,” they typically meant the GC Session. This is important to bear in mind when

considering Ellen White's statements about the General Conference in the period 1891-1901, when she, several times, explicitly denies that the GC was the voice of God.²⁷ Yet in 1909, she made several strong statements that repeat her assertions of 1875.

There is in fact no contradiction. The key to understanding what the Spirit of Prophecy says about the authority of the General Conference and the world Church is the clear distinction Ellen White draws between the different possible meanings of "General Conference": the GC administration (the president and a small permanent staff around him); a very small and unrepresentative GC Executive Committee (in 1901 its membership was only 13 and the five members who lived in Battle Creek transacted most of its business); and the GC Session, which was representative of the whole body of Adventist believers. It was the "GC" in the first two senses that Ellen G White, during the 1890s, denied was the voice of God—not the GC Session. This is clear when one considers that her more skeptical statements about the "GC" deny that a small and unrepresentative group can exercise ecclesiastical authority; this should, she urges, be exercised by a representative body. She consistently warns against authority exercised by individuals ("kingly power") or tiny groups of leaders ("two or three men" or even "a half a dozen that [try] to be a ruling and a controlling power").²⁸ There is little or no evidence that she ever altered her 1875 view that the GC Session spoke with the authority of God.

It was a point to which she returned in an address to the 1909 GC Session. She returns to, amplifies, and nuances her 1875 testimony after 34 years, but essentially repeats its main points:

I have often been instructed by the Lord that no man's judgment should be surrendered to the judgment of any other one man. Never should the mind of one man or the minds of a few men be regarded as sufficient in wisdom and power to control the work and to say what plans shall be followed. But when in a General Conference the judgment of the brethren assembled from all parts of the field is exercised, *private independence and private judgment must not be stubbornly maintained, but surrendered. Never should a laborer regard as a virtue the persistent maintenance of his position of independence contrary to the decision of the general body* [emphasis supplied].²⁹

God has ordained that *the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority* [emphasis supplied]. The error that some are in danger of committing is in giving to the mind and judgment of one man, or of a small group of men, the full measure of authority and influence that God has vested in His church in the judgment and voice of the General Conference assembled to plan for the prosperity and advancement of His work.³⁰

Knowing that many of the 1909 delegates would be aware of what she had previously written about the "voice of God," she explains why a decade earlier she had written harsh things about the GC leadership: a "small group" of leaders had been "entrusted with the general management of the work" and had acted "in the name of the General Conference." She explicitly contrasts this with "the decisions of a General Conference composed of *an assembly of duly*

appointed, representative men from all parts of the field” [emphasis supplied].³¹ This language plainly refers to the GC Session (though as time passed, it would come to be applicable to a meeting of the enlarged GC Executive Committee as well), as do her references to “the brethren assembled from all parts of the field” and “the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth.”

Ellen White’s last word on the subject came in 1911: “God has made His church on the earth a channel of light, and through it He communicates His purposes and His will. . . . *God has invested His church with special authority and power, which no one can be justified in disregarding and despising; for he who does this despises the voice of God*” [emphasis supplied].³² Here her counsel of 1875 is repeated, word for word. Similarly, in 1909, her conclusion was the same as in 1875 about what happens “when, in a General Conference,” representatives from the whole church deliberate and make decisions: “private independence and private judgment must not be maintained, but be surrendered.”

IV. Unilateralism

Unilateral action on important matters is contrary to the biblical model and to longstanding Adventist practice. Significant decisions should be made after prior consultation with other levels of church structure and be in harmony with decisions already taken by the wider body of believers. This approach helps retain unity in church life and an emphasis on mission.

1. Biblical Principles

Christ warned His disciples of the danger of distraction (e.g. Matt. 24:24). The apostle Paul urged the early believers to emulate him in “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,” and to “press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way” (Phil 3:13-15, ESV). Our calling is clear: to witness for Jesus, making disciples by teaching and baptizing, and proclaiming the prophetic truths of Revelation 14. There is a danger that internal disputes will cause us to lose focus on the prophetic mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The divisiveness latent within unilateralism is inconsistent with the biblical model. When Paul uses the metaphor of the body for the church, he describes different organs of the body criticizing each other and imagining that they can be independent, before affirming that God intends the different parts of the body to “work together as a whole . . . in sympathetic relationship with one another.” Implicit in Paul’s call to believers to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21) is that diversity and difference of opinion or practice will exist in the body of believers, and that some believers will, at times, find themselves in the minority, having failed to persuade fellow church members of their view. Paul does not depict this as a problem per se. What matters is that believers, when in the minority, submit to the decision of the wider body of believers.

2. Ellen G White's Warnings

Unilateral decision-making was a particular concern of Ellen G White; she consistently warned against it over many years. Her repeated testimonies indicate that overly independent, unilateral action is a particular danger to the Remnant Church in its end-time mission.

The longer *Study* analyzes Ellen White's counsel at some length (pp 30-34) and is summarized here. Part of her concern was that the Adventist Church not be distracted from mission by internal disputes. However, her counsel also stresses that independent action makes outreach less effective. She also articulates her opposition to unilateralism—not merely in practical or missiological terms, but as a principled objection. She repeatedly maintains that collective and collaborative decision-making should be the norm in the Seventh-day Adventist Church because the Church is one body (*cf.* 1 Cor 12:12).

Many statements could be quoted, but her counsel to Adventist leaders in Europe is particularly relevant. In 1885, she enjoined them: “All should make it a point to counsel together . . . No one worker has all the wisdom that is needed. There should be a comparing of plans, a counseling together.”³³ Twenty years later, writing of divisions arising from ethnic differences, she encourages them to “put all this aside,” charging them to “work together in harmony . . . forgetting that they are Americans or Europeans, Germans or Frenchmen, Swedes, Danes, or Norwegians.” She then warns: “We have no right to keep our minds stayed on ourselves, our preferences, and our fancies. We are not to seek to maintain a peculiar identity of our own . . . which will separate us from our fellow laborers.”³⁴ According to the Spirit of Prophecy, neither individuals nor small groups of leaders should act without consulting widely; and they ought not act contrary to the counsel of the wider body, once it has been given.

Moreover, Ellen White makes it plain that unilateralism can arise not just from independent-mindedness but sometimes from the influence of evil forces, and that its effects will be damaging. Of many testimonies to this effect, two stand out. In 1888, she cautions that in the “last days” there would be “among the remnant . . . those who wish to move independently of the body, [and] who are not willing to be subject to the body of the church.” Yet, she warns: “It is a delusion of the enemy for anyone to feel that he can disconnect from the body . . . and think he is doing God's work. We are one body, and every member is to be united to the body.”³⁵ In 1909, she states: “I have been instructed that it is Satan's special effort to lead men to feel that God is pleased to have them choose their own course independent of the counsel of their brethren.”³⁶

Words Ellen G White wrote in the early 1880s regarding “Christian unity” are applicable to the Adventist Church today: “We cannot afford now to give place to Satan by cherishing disunion, discord, and strife.”³⁷

V. Application

Having surveyed relevant teachings of Jesus, the apostles, and Ellen G White; early church practice; and Adventist practice and policy; how, then, should we act?

1. Representation and Decision-Making

The situation that prompted the censure by Ellen White in the 1890s, in which a small group sought to control all aspects of the church's mission, is a world away from the situation today. There are, in addition to several hundred local conferences and missions, a total of 135 unions and 13 divisions—each with defined authority in its territory and its own executive committee—making collaborative decisions. The GC Executive Committee, a body representative of the world Church, makes major decisions, delivering “the judgment and voice of the General Conference,” while reserving the most important matters to the GC Session, “the highest authority that God has upon the earth,” whose judgment is definitive.³⁸

2. Invalid Ordinations

Criteria for ordination have always been set by the world Church.³⁹ The 1990 GC Session considered at length whether or not to permit female pastors to be ordained and took a definite action: “we do not approve ordination of women to the gospel ministry.”⁴⁰ Proposals came to both the 1995 and 2015 GC Sessions to allow regional variation at the division or union level of the gender-limited policy, but both were rejected.⁴¹ It is incorrect to assert that there is nothing in denominational policy to stop unions from ordaining females to gospel ministry. Such ordinations have been explicitly disallowed by a GC Session action, a decision reinforced by two other GC Session votes.

3. Credentialing Practices

GC *Working Policy* stipulates that the ministerial credential will be “Issued to ministerial employees who have demonstrated a divine call to ministry and have been ordained to the gospel ministry” (E 5 10, paragraph 1. a.). GC *Working Policy* further mandates that a commissioned minister credential be issued to certain types of church workers “unless they hold ministerial credentials” (E 5 10, paragraph 2. a.), which means that workers holding ministerial credentials are not to receive commissioned minister credentials; and it also states: “Licensed ministers are on the path toward ordination to the gospel ministry” (E 05 10, paragraph 3.), which invalidates the award of a ministerial license to one who has been ordained.

Pertinent principles in Church policy that relate to credentials and licenses, and the world Church actions associated with them, are dealt with in detail in the *Study* (pp 34-37) and are summarized below.

First, a statement approved by the GC Executive Committee in 1930, then embodied in GC *Working Policy*, sets out a foundational principle: “any shadow of uncertainty in the matter of what ministerial credentials stand for in one field reflects a shadow upon all credentials, and is a matter of general denominational concern.”⁴² If there is any question about what policies actually stipulate about credentials, it then becomes a matter for the GC Executive Committee.

A second foundational principle is that *ordination* in Adventist ecclesiology and practice is undoubtedly for life, except in wholly unusual circumstances. Ministerial *credentials* are not necessarily held for life, but where there is a change in credential, it is because a pastor has moved into a line of work that is distinctly not pastoral or spiritual and it does not affect his ordination. Ministerial credentials can be restored if the line of work alters.⁴³ Thus, the *type* of work a pastor does is temporary, but *ordination* is permanent. It can only become void as a result of disciplinary action. If a pastor's status could be changed by administrators, there would be potential for abuse of power. Instead, it can be revoked only for apostasy or moral failings. In all other circumstances, ordination is for life, and cannot be given up on individual impulse.

The only circumstances in which Adventist Church policy or practice countenances a change of *credential* for an ordained pastor is if he leaves pastoral work (temporarily or permanently), suffers a moral fall or apostatizes, or resigns. If these do not apply, then the existing provisions of *GC Working Policy* (as analyzed above) prevail: "ministerial employees who . . . have been ordained to the gospel ministry" are to be issued with ministerial credentials, but neither commissioned minister credentials nor ministerial licenses are to be issued to church workers who have been ordained. If pastors qualify for ministerial credentials, they must receive them, rather than another credential or license. *GC Working Policy* excludes any other possibility.

Some church members may perhaps feel that credentials are merely procedural matters. However, all deviations from *GC Working Policy* are of concern to the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a whole. In meetings of the GC Executive Committee, the world Church has deliberated and established common policies for all. While *GC Working Policy* allows variation from established policies, this requires "prior approval from the General Conference Executive Committee" (B 15 10, paragraph 1.). If unions wish to vary mutually-agreed rules for managing the pastorate, they should raise the matter in the appropriate forum.

4. Summing Up

Ellen G White posed a question to church members 135 years ago that bears repeating: "What are we doing to preserve unity in the bonds of peace?"⁴⁴

All the matters surveyed in this section are ones on which the world Church has pronounced a series of clear decisions by Annual Councils or GC Sessions. Action taken without counsel or contrary to counsel distracts from mission and leads to disunity.

What does this mean for us as Seventh-day Adventists? The New Testament model is one of collaborative decision-making and of diversity allowed only by joint agreement. Seventh-day Adventist Church governance has, for many years, reflected this biblical pattern. Consultation among a large leadership group that is representative of the body of believers is a key Seventh-day Adventist principle in dealing with important matters.

Another is the principle of reciprocity. Where there is input into decision-making and all parties have discussed and deliberated in good faith, the final decision must be accepted by all

those who had input into making it. This is fundamental. In a representative and consultative process we have to accept all decisions, both good and bad, remembering that, in others' eyes, our perceptions of these may be reversed. As Ellen White counseled a discontented church member, shortly after the General Conference was founded: "You should have submitted to the judgment of the church. If they decided wrong, God could take hold of this matter in His own time and vindicate the right."⁴⁵

If everyone were to defy decisions they disagreed with, there would be no point in having a decision-making process. To take part in a process, and then to disregard it if it does not go our way, is contrary to the biblical principles of unity and mutual submission. Equality and unity in Christ oblige church members and church leaders to make decisions together and then to respect fellow brothers and sisters in Jesus by following those decisions. Communities can only function if all members agree they will accept communal decisions; otherwise there is not community, but disunity.

If a GC Session—or, in certain areas of responsibility, the GC Executive Committee—permits variations from voted policies, we must accept that verdict. But where it does not, we must accept that decision also. The Theology of Ordination Study Committee's meetings in 2013-2014 were the culmination of a worldwide study process. Voices from around the world and from all sides were heard; the arguments and supporting documents of all perspectives were made freely available online to church members for their own study and prayerful consideration. The process was unmatched in both breadth and depth.⁴⁶ When a GC Session takes a decision about ordination, especially after such a process, it cannot be disregarded.

VI. Conclusion

We have seen our Savior's heartfelt desire that His disciples be united; the apostles' teachings on unity; the New Testament principle of collective decision-making by the body of believers, with diversity of practice permitted when all agree to it; and the Spirit of Prophecy's powerful endorsement of Jesus's plea for unity, consistent evocation of the authority of the General Conference, and admonitions against unilateral action. All these indicate very clearly how Seventh-day Adventists should relate to each other and how the Remnant Church should conduct itself.

We would do well to look to the wider principles of interconnectedness and interdependence which have been the basis for 150 years of powerful proclamation of the gospel and prophetic truth, of extraordinary service to humanity, and of remarkable growth.

Ellen G White appeals to church leaders: "Labor in harmony with one another, even though you are not alike . . . Do not say that because your brethren differ with you in some particular, you cannot stand by their side in service." She goes on to affirm: "We are commanded to love one another as Christ has loved us. . . . And our love for one another is to make us willing to sacrifice our feelings and ideas if by so doing we can help them."⁴⁷

Ellen White here draws attention to Jesus's prayer that His followers be characterized by their love for each other and to the need for us to make sacrifices for the unity that He desires for us. But here, too, as so often in her writings, she writes of "harmony"—a musical figure of speech. The Bible tells us that earthly history as we know it will end in music—when "those who have the victory over the beast," drawn from all nations and races, will gather "on the sea of glass" and "sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb" (Rev 15: 2-3, NKJV). The most beautiful music is polyphonic, in which a number of parts, each forming an individual melody, harmonize with each other. There is not merely a place for diversity; it is essential in creating a greater, more beautiful whole. But it is thoughtful diversity, each part composed and performed with awareness of, sensitivity to, and in harmony with every other part. If a melody is added unilaterally, it can all too easily result in dissonance. Acting unilaterally undermines the harmony that Christ desires for the Church.

Ellen White, writing on John 17, makes this promise to God's people: "When we strive for this unity as God desires us to strive for it, it will come to us."⁴⁸ If we—all of us—involve ourselves totally in the mission and ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, in ways appropriate to our different spiritual gifts; if we enthusiastically endeavor to make disciples, teaching them to obey all that Christ commanded (Matt 28:20); if we gladly bear with each other, putting aside whatever grievances we may have against others, forgiving as the Lord forgives us (Col 3:13); if we ardently strive to "be one" with our brothers and sisters as Christ is one with the Father, and to embody in our relations with fellow church members, Christ's love for His Father and His people (John 17:22-23)—then this unity that "God desires us to strive for," the unity Christ prayed for, the unity God desires for His people, "will come to us."

¹ All biblical quotations are from the NIV, unless otherwise indicated.

² Quotations from Ellen G White are cited, in the first instance, to the original letter or manuscript, including title or recipients and date, where these are known, and to any publications during her lifetime. Subsequent references are to the published text (if any), or to letter/manuscript in abbreviated form. Modern compilations are not cited, because all the writings of the Spirit of Prophecy, even previously unpublished letters and manuscripts, are now available online at <https://egwwritings.org>.

³ Ellen G White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 9 vols. (orig. eds., 1885-1909; 4th ed., Mountain View, Calif: Pacific Press, 1948), 5:236.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁶ White, "An Appeal to the Brethren in Battle Creek," 1898, in *Testimonies*, 8:80.

⁷ Ellen G White to J Edson and Emma White, January 22, 1902, Letter 8, 1902.

⁸ Ellen G White, "One with Christ in God," Dec. 31, 1903, MS 149, 1903; published in *The Southern Watchman* 13.5, "One with Christ in God" (Feb. 2, 1904): 73, and immediately republished in *Testimonies*, 8:239

⁹ White, *Testimonies*, 8:240.

¹⁰ Ellen G White, "Found Wanting," April 21, 1903, MS 32, 1903; published in *Testimonies*, 8: 251.

¹¹ Cf. “An Appeal and Appreciation to all Church Entities and Members from the General Conference and Division Officers Regarding the 2015 General Conference Session Vote on Ordination,” recorded (not voted as an action) by Annual Council, Oct. 11, 2015, in GCC Minutes, 2015:102–103.

¹² “Mission Statement of the Seventh-day Adventist Church,” WP A 05 05.

¹³ E.g., Ellen G White, “Rebellion Within the Ranks,” MS 1, 1865; “Testimony Concerning Moses Hull and Wife, Also Brother Whitney,” MS 6, 1862; “Regarding James White as a Laborer,” MS 4, 1866; “Testimony Regarding a Young Licentiate in Minnesota,” MS 8, 1883; “Treatment of the Erring,” MS 11, 1888; “Instruction Regarding Church Discipline,” MS 61, 1902; White to Brother and Sister Scott, July 6, 1863, Letter 5, 1863; White to Brethren Atwood and Pratt, May 28, 1890 Letter 1c, 1890.

¹⁴ Ellen G White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (orig. ed., 1911; Mountain View, Calif. & Oshawa, Ont.: Pacific Press, n.d.), 87.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 89; cf. Acts 6: 2–7. See Mark A. Finley, “Toward Unity in the Body of Christ,” presented to the Theology of Ordination Study Committee, Columbia, Md., Jan. 24, 2014, <https://www.adventistarchives.org/toward-unity-in-the-body-of-christ.pdf>.

¹⁶ White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 190.

¹⁷ See Acts 15:6, 22-23 and cf. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 190, 196, and 383.

¹⁸ White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 196.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 197.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

²¹ “Statement on Church Polity, Procedures, and the Resolution of Disagreements in the Light of Recent Actions on Ministerial Ordination,” Annual Council, Oct. 16, 2012, GCC Minutes 2012: 205–208, quotation at 206.

²² Constitution, art. IV.

²³ “The General Conference and Its Divisions,” GCC Minutes, 2012: 68.

²⁴ White, *Testimonies*, 3:417.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 428.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:492

²⁷ Ellen G White, “Board and Council meetings,” n.d., MS 33, 1891; “Relation of the G. C. Committee to Business Interests,” n.d., MS 33, 1895; “Concerning the Review and Herald Publishing Association,” Oct. 12, 1895, MS 57, 1895; To Brother and Sister Waggoner, Aug. 26, 1898, Letter 77, 1898; comments in the 1901 GC Session, in “General Conference Proceedings,” *General Conference Bulletin* 4, extra, no. 1 (April 3, 1901): 25; “Consumers, but not Producers,” April 25, 1901, MS 35 and “Talk by Mrs. E. G. White in College Library, April 1, 1901,” MS 43, 1901.

²⁸ White, MS 33, 1891; “General Conference Proceedings,” 26; MS 43, 1901; “Talk of Mrs. E. G. White, before representative brethren, in the College Library, April 1, 1901,” MS 43a, 1901; cf. “Regarding Work of General Conference,” Apr. 3, 1903, MS 26, 1903; *Testimonies*, 8: 232–33, 236–37. See *Study Document*, pp. 22–25.

²⁹ White, *Testimonies*, 9:260.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 260–61

³¹ *Ibid.*, 260.

³² White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 163–64; repr. in *Gospel workers: Instruction for all who are “Laborers together with God”* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1915), 443. This passage is not in the first edition of *Gospel workers* (1892).

³³ White to “Brother Laborers at Lausanne,” n.d., Letter 66, 1886.

³⁴ White, *Testimonies*, 9:187.

³⁵ White to Brother Church, March 21, 1888, Letter 33a, 1888.

³⁶ White, *Testimonies*, 9:257.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5:236.

³⁸ Unless/until it takes an action changing course. This has happened, though rarely, in our history. Perhaps the best known episode of a Session reversing itself, in the 1870s, is analyzed in depth by Kevin M. Burton, “Centralized for Protection: George I. Butler and His Philosophy of One-person Leadership,” unpublished MA thesis (Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University 2015).

³⁹ See “Unions and Ordination,” GC Secretariat Statement (Aug. 2015), available at <https://www.adventistarchives.org/unions-and-ordination-statement.pdf> ; David Trim, “The Ordination of Women in Seventh-day Adventist Policy and Practice, up to 1972,” paper presented to the Theology of Ordination Study Committee, Linthicum Heights, MD, July 22, 2013 (<https://www.adventistarchives.org/the-ordination-of-women-in-seventh-day-adventist-policy-and-practice.pdf>), 1–2, 6–7, 9–11, 24.

⁴⁰ On the proposal to the 41st (1881) Session, which has been misunderstood and misrepresented, see Trim, “Ordination of Women,” 12–17. For the 55th (1990) Session action, July 11, 1990, see GCC Minutes, 1990:1039–40, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1990-07.pdf>.

⁴¹ Fifty-sixth Session, July 5, 1995, minutes in *Adventist Review*, 172/33, (July 11, 1995): 30; 60th Session, July 8, 2015, 72–73, <https://www.adventistarchives.org/general-conference-business-session-transcript,-wednesday-pm,-july-8,-2015.pdf>.

⁴² “Statement on Ordination to the Ministry and Ministerial Credentials,” GCC, April 3, 1930, “General Conference Committee Proceedings,” vol. 13:1122–1123, quotation at 1123. This wording appears in policy currently: WP L 60 10.

⁴³ This is expressed in several Annual Council actions and embodied in GC *Working Policy*: Autumn Council, Oct. 21, 1938, “General Conference Committee Proceedings,” vol. 15:894; Autumn Council, Oct. 27, 1942, “General Conference Committee Proceedings,” vol. 16:661; Annual Council, Oct. 16, 1975, GCC Minutes, 1975: 408–9; WP E 50 (p. 248). See also *Study Document*, 34–35.

⁴⁴ White, *Testimonies*, 5:239 (quoted above, p. 2).

⁴⁵ White to Brother and Sister Scott, July 6, 1863 (the quoted statement was specifically directed to Sister Scott), Letter 5, 1863.

⁴⁶ See Trim, “Ordination of Women,” 22–23.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ White, *Testimonies*, 8:243.