

# ECCLESIOLOGY AND REORGANIZATION: THE ONENESS OF THE CHURCH

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## I. Introduction

The implications of ecclesiastical reorganization should not be underestimated. Among other things, it will require an extra investment of human and financial resources, and it will create an unusual high level of uncertainty within the world church. It could easily distract from the mission of the church, but this should not discourage us from dealing with the question. We can look at this attempt to reorganize the church from a simple administrative perspective as something required by the growth of the church, but the task carries with it significant spiritual and theological implications.

What we are attempting to reorganize is "the body of Christ" (cf. Eph 1:22-23); the only instrument on earth through which "the manifold wisdom of God" is now being made known to the cosmos (3:10); Christ's "representative on earth;"<sup>1</sup> and "the only object on earth on which He [Christ] bestows His supreme regard;"<sup>2</sup> Therefore, we should approach our task in a spirit of humility, because "the church is the property of God"<sup>3</sup> and is "dependent on Him [Christ] for her very existence."<sup>4</sup>

## II. The Oneness of the Church

Our pioneers early realized that organization and the nature of the church were inseparable and that doctrinal and theological unity and ecclesiastical organization were deeply interrelated and interdependent in the corporate life of the church.<sup>5</sup> Those

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<sup>1</sup>*Idem.*, *Acts of the Apostles*, 122.

<sup>2</sup>E. G White, *Christian Experience and Teachings of Ellen G. White*, 206.

<sup>3</sup>*Idem.*, *In Heavenly Places*, 284.

<sup>4</sup>*Idem.*, *Medical Ministry*, 318.

<sup>5</sup>See, Andrew Gordon Mustard, *James White and the Development of Seventh-day Adventist Organization, 1844-1881*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series 12 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1987), 116-122; George R. Knight, *Organizing to Beat the Devil: The Development of Adventist Church Structure* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2001), 33. Of course there were other factors apart from theological unity:

perceptions go back to Jesus Himself, who not only instituted the church but was also deeply concerned about its unity. As we seek to examine and possibly make changes to the its organizational structure we should evaluate every possible or potential change in terms of its faithfulness to the Scripture and its contribution to the global unity of the church. We will suggest that the unity of the church is revealed in the mystery of its union with Christ, in its global identity as God's end-time remnant, and in its common mission.

#### A. Common Savior and Lord

##### 1. Christ and the Origin of the Church

The mystery of the unity of the church is located in the mystery of its union with the Risen Lord (Eph 5:32). Christ placed the unity of the church at the very core of the nature and function of the church. Elements of His view of the church are particularly present in the prayer He offered to the Father before He went to the cross, as recorded in John 17. According to Jesus the origin of the church is located in the unity of essence, will, and action of the Father and the Son. The Father moved individuals to come to Jesus and He, in turn, *revealed* to them the glory of the Father (17:6). He mediated God's glory in His own person and in the process brought the church into existence. It would be correct to conclude that Christ understood the church to be the result of a theophany (*theos*, "God" and *phainein*, "to appear"), that is to say of the manifestation of the glory of God in human flesh (1:14; 11:40).<sup>6</sup> Although it is true that the term "theophany" is not used in the NT to describe the incarnation, we do find a similar one, namely "epiphany"

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"With the rapid increase in the number of adherents in the 1850s, several problems arose that brought into sharp focus the need of the church for a name and a corporate existence: the legal problems of holding church property and other assets (originally owned by individuals); the growing need for selecting, directing, and supporting a ministry; and the necessity of controlling personal ambition, fanaticism, and offshoot movements" ("Organization, Development of, in the Seventh-day Adventist Church," in *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, edited by Don F. Neufeld [Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1996], 258.

<sup>6</sup>This should not surprise us if we keep in mind that in the OT the people of Israel came into existence through a theophany (Exod 19:10-11). The twelve tribes of Israel left Egypt to become the people of Israel, a new nation upon the face of the earth. It was at Sinai that God transformed the tribes into Israel and this took place through the most majestic theophany recorded in the OT (19:16-19). God came down to the mountain and from there He revealed Himself to the Israelites and entered into a covenant relationship with them. He became their God and they became His people (19:3-6). Now, in the NT Christ creates His new people through a theophany—God in human flesh.

(Greek, *epiphaneia*, "appearing, appearance"). This term was used in secular Greek to indicate "the appearance of the saving deity and the experience of the saving act."<sup>7</sup> These same ideas are found in 2 Tim 1:10: "But it [grace] has now been revealed through the appearing [*epiphaneia*] of our Savior." Here the appearing of God in Christ is also a revelation of His saving grace for us. The verb *epiphainō* ("to appear") is used in Luke 1:79 in a quote from Isa 9:1; 42:7 that is applied to the birth of Jesus to indicate that Christ is "the light of the presence of God in the world."<sup>8</sup> Both the noun and the verb are employed in the NT to refer to Jesus' earthly ministry (2 Tim 1:9-10; Titus 2:11; 3:4) as well as to His second coming (2 Tim 4:8; Titus 2:13; 2 Thess 2:8). The church now exists within those two apparitions of God.

What did the disciples see in that divine epiphany? In the incarnated God they saw that Christ and the Father are one, and that what Jesus has and what He gave to the church, namely salvation, came from the Father (17:6-7). The church is not simply a sociological phenomenon but an entity of divine origin. It did not come into existence from below. The divine apparition of God in human flesh, out of which the church is born, is not left behind in the life of the church. The church continues to be the church in that it exists in the constant presence of the glory of Christ, in union with Him, and displaying itself that glory. This epiphany continues to manifest its power in the life of the church particularly through the conversion of sinners. It was the glorious presence of the resurrected Christ that confronted Paul during his journey to Damascus and that led to his conversion (Acts 9:3-6). The light of God's epiphany in Christ is still reaching every human being because Jesus continues to be the light that enlightens every person that comes into the world (John 1:4). One could even suggest that conversion takes place

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<sup>7</sup>P.-G. Müller, "*Epiphainō* to appear," in *Exegetical dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, edited by H. R. Balz and Gerhard Schneider. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 44. This usage of the term is similar in meaning to the significance of the apparitions of God or the theophanies recorded in the OT. In the Bible the theophanies are moments when God gloriously revealed Himself as a warrior fighting against evil powers, manifesting His control over the powers of nature, and bringing salvation, guidance, and instruction to His people (on this topic see, J. Jeremias, "Theophany in the OT," in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume*, edited by Keith Crim [Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1976], 896-898; J. E. Alsup, "Theophany in the NT," in *Ibid.*, 898-900; and particularly, Theodore Hiebert, "Theophany in the OT," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, edited by David Noel Freedman [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 505-511).

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

when the light of Christ, through the gospel and by the power of the Spirit, irrupts within the very being of a person. Peter seems to be referring to this experience when he writes: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet 2:9).

What is the nature of that divine epiphany in Christ? Its nature is soteriological. In the gospel of John it is particularly associated with the cross (12:32; 13:31; 14:14-15), where God's love is revealed bringing eternal life to those who believe (3:16). God defeated evil and brought salvation to us through a theophany, a self-disclosure of His person in Christ. The church is constituted by those who saw in Christ God in human flesh, believed, and received from the Father, through Jesus, eternal life (17:4). This is a new community, a new humanity born from above, from the Spirit (3:5-7). Believers are no longer of the world. They exist in union with Christ and with each other as co-participants of the saving revelation of God in Christ.<sup>9</sup> That understanding of the church presupposes that humans by themselves cannot experience salvation or harmony with God. They can only be restored to union and fellowship with Him through God's glorious presence in Christ.

## 2. Christ and the Importance of Church Unity

Jesus assigned a tremendous importance to ecclesiological unity. He specifically said to the Father: "I pray . . . that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (17:20-21). While on earth, Jesus was the objective evidence of the saving love of the Father by uniting in Himself God and humanity. Once He left, the saving glory of God is manifested to others in the reconciling union of humans and God in the church, made possible through Christ's sacrificial death. According to Jesus the church does not simply proclaim His message of salvation; it is an essential expression of it. In a world sundered by sin and rebellion the church stands as a visible witness to the saving work of

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<sup>9</sup>Commenting on Paul's views on ecclesiastical unity, Raoul Dederen states, "Such a unity toward which Paul strove transcends the divisive elements of race, class, and gender (Gal. 3:28). It is not the result of a voluntary act of uniting on the part of the members of Christ's body, but a unity enabled by the Spirit, for the church has found oneness in Christ (Eph. 5:2-15)" ("The Church," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, edited by Raoul Dederen [Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000], 562).

Christ who brought to an end the divisiveness of sin. Consequently, fragmentation in the church would evidence a worldly identity, a distancing from Christ, the incursion of the fragmenting nature of sin within the church itself, and a denial of the reconciling power of the cross. Without the oneness of the church the saving power of the cross would hardly be apparent in this world.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Christ and the Expression of Church Unity

In His prayer for the church Christ asks the Father to keep believers united to Him and to each other as He and the Father are united in the mystery of the trinity (John 17:21). The church participates in some way in the unity of the Godhead. Through the Spirit Christ established a union between Himself and believers that is as real as the union that exists between the different parts of our own bodies. The very existence of the church as the community of believers, its very life (John 12:23-24), its power to move and act in oneness, is determined by its union with the Lord (1 Cor 12:12-13, 27, 28).<sup>11</sup> In the Scripture this union is compared to the vital connection that exists between the branches and the vine (John 15:4-5).<sup>12</sup> This type of union is rooted in the Christian experience of the new birth. At that moment the Spirit implants in us new emotions and values, thus beginning in us a new life in union with Christ.<sup>13</sup> Then, we become part of

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<sup>10</sup>E. G. White wrote: "Unity with Christ establishes a bond of unity with one another. This unity is the most convincing proof to the world of the majesty and virtue of Christ, and of His power to take away sin" ("Comments—John," *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, 1148). In another place she wrote, "In the oneness of Christ's church it will be proved that God sent His only-begotten Son into the world" (*Selected Messages*, vol. 1, 385).

<sup>11</sup>"Once separated from God by the lying devices of Satan, they [God's children] are reunited to him by learning the lesson of redeeming love, as manifested in the great sacrifice of Christ in giving his precious life for mankind. *The human is united to the divine by a tie so strong that unfallen worlds, angels, and men are amazed*, for those who believe in the love of God to them are secure in the refuge of his love, and not all the arts of Satan can induce them to continue in transgression of the law of God." (E. G. White, "Revelation of God Through Christ," *Signs of the Times*, April 11, 1895; italics are mine).

<sup>12</sup>"We are to be attached to the parent stock, and to receive nourishment from the Vine. Christ is our glorified Head, and the divine love flowing from the heart of God, rests in Christ, and is communicated to those who have been united to Him. This divine love entering the soul inspires it with gratitude, frees it from its spiritual feebleness, from pride, vanity, and selfishness, and from all that would deform the Christian character" (E. G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, 178, 179).

the body of Christ; one with Him in heart, soul, and spirit.<sup>14</sup> The church is the mystery of the heavenly union of its members with its Savior and Lord.<sup>15</sup> The church structures are to be controlled and made subservient to this close union. Those structures will be effective to the extent that they serve to strengthen and facilitate that deep connection between Christ and His church.

The union of the church with Christ does not destroy personal identity and individuality. The church and Christ are one in mind, character, and purpose,<sup>16</sup> but this is not a mystical experience. This oneness is inseparable from truth and holiness (17:17). In the writings of John truth is located in the very person of Christ (8:40, 45-46; 16:7;

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<sup>13</sup>E. G. White connects the new birth with the privilege of partaking of the divine nature: "The new birth consists in having new motives, new tastes, new tendencies. Those who are begotten unto a new life by the Holy Spirit have become partakers of the divine nature" (E. G. White, *Lift Him Up*, 123). The life of the new birth is "a new life derived from His [Jesus] own life. . ." (*Sons and Daughters*, 299). The Pauline phrase "in Christ" expresses quite clearly the depth of our union with Christ: "At the core 'in Christ' refers to the most intimate union possible between the risen Christ and the believer. Because the believer is united with the living Lord through the indwelling of his Spirit, he/she is incorporated, on the one hand, into those events—the death and resurrection of Christ—that inaugurate the new era of salvation, and on the other hand, into the body of Christ, the Church. As a result, the believer is the recipient of all the blessings of salvation which flow from Christ and exist in the fellowship of believers" (Ivan T. Blazen, *In Christ: Union with Him as Savior and Lord in Paul*, Biblical Research Institute Releases—2 [Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2005], 15).

<sup>14</sup>E. G. White comments, "As soon as the human agent becomes united with Christ in heart, soul, and spirit, the Father loves that soul as a part of Christ, as a member of the body of Christ, He himself being the glorious head" (*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, 466). It is not that God did not love the person before, but that now love reaches new potentials of intimacy because the believer has become "part of Christ."

<sup>15</sup>After commenting about the mystery of this union, Ellen G. White is only able to use doxological language: "God in Christ, and Christ in God, and Christ abiding by faith in man, is so large a truth that the mind cannot fully comprehend it. It is so great a theme, so grand a conception, so far beyond the power of reason to explain, that, as we speak of it, we feel our insufficiency. Our comprehension is too restricted, our language too limited, to unfold this great truth. The mind fails and sinks down weary under the effort, and we can speak of this truth only in softened, subdued tones, acknowledging our helplessness, and bowing in adoration before the infinite love that has provided so great a salvation" (*Signs of the Times*, May 18, 1891).

<sup>16</sup>"The unity that exists between Christ and His disciples does not destroy the personality of either. In mind, in purpose, in character, they are one, but not in person. By partaking of the Spirit of God, conforming to the law of God, man becomes a partaker of the divine nature. Christ brings His disciples into a living union with Himself and with the Father. Through the working of the Holy Spirit upon the human mind, man is made complete in Christ Jesus" (Ellen G. White, "Comments—John," in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, 1148).

18:37), who addresses the church through the incarnated and spoken word. There is an objective content to this truth that can be expressed in propositional statements. Christ revealed the content of that truth to the church through the incarnation itself—"We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14; cf. 17:3)—and in the content of His spoken word, calling us to listen to and to obey Him (18:37; 17:6, 8). The church continues to apprehend and appropriate truth through the leading of the Spirit (16:13).<sup>17</sup> This concern for truth testifies to the *apostolicity* of the church and creates a strong bond of unity.<sup>18</sup>

According to John, truth is not only a concept, it has an ethical and practical content and orientation: "The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:4). Holiness and truth are inseparable. So, Jesus prays, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (17:17). The church is the community of believers bonded in oneness to Christ in truth and holiness. They have appropriated Christ as the truth, and they participate in His holy life through the Spirit (17:19). This is the practical and visible expression of their union with their glorified Lord.

#### 4. Christ and Universal Ecclesiastical Oneness

Jesus views the church not only as *one* and *holy* but also as *one* and *universal*: "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world" (17:18). There are two

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<sup>17</sup>Raoul Dederen perceptively comments, "This bond of unity is not found in the ecclesiastical organization of the church but in the preaching of the word of God. The word is what the apostles preached (Acts 4:31; 13:5; 15:35; 16:32; etc.), what the Gentiles gathered to hear and glorified (Acts 11:1; 13:44, 48), and what grew and multiplied (Acts 12:24; cf. 6:7; 13:49; 19:20). Divisions and factious party spirit were strongly denounced (cf. 1 Cor. 11:18, 19; Gal. 5:20), along with false brethren (Gal. 2:4), false apostles (2 Cor. 11:13) and erroneous teaching departing from the apostolic doctrine (1 Tim. 6:3; 2 Peter 2:1). As Paul saw it, God 'desires all men . . . to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim. 2:4). Thus, there is indeed such a thing as 'the truth' (2 Thess. 2:12, 13)" ("The Church," 562).

<sup>18</sup>In Christian theology it is generally recognized that the church of Christ possesses four fundamental marks or characteristics ("De notis Ecclesiae"): It is one, holy, catholic (universal), and apostolic. By apostolicity we mean identifiable with the teachings of the Apostles. This understanding of the church goes back to a creedal statement found in the Constantinopolitan Creed (381 AD), commonly known as the Nicene Creed, which reads, "We believe . . . in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church" (quoted from, John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963], 33). Adventists will accept the four marks as expressing essential aspects of the church, but will also argue that, according to the book of Revelation, the end-time remnant possesses some other specific marks (see below).

important ideas in this text. First, the horizon of the activity of the church is the world—the whole human family in a state of rebellion against God. Since the phenomenon of sin as well as its remedy are universal, the instrument of the proclamation of salvation has to be universal. The second idea is as important. It defines the church in terms of its relationship to Christ and to the world. By sending the church into the world Jesus was constituting it collectively and as individuals into *His representative*. He had been sent into the world, and now He sends the church. His mission continues to be exercised in the mission of the church. According to Jesus the unity of the church finds expression in its dynamic *universality* (catholicity), thus enabling it to fulfill its God-given mission.

The oneness of the church is grounded in and guided by God's glorious revelation in Christ, through Whom the church came into existence. This salvific encounter constituted the church into an indivisible unity in a world of rebellious fragmentation. Fragmentation is incompatible with the nature of the church, but constitutes a constant threat to the church in its present pilgrimage. The threat is so real that Jesus prayed to thwart it. This unity is vital because it discloses to the world the effectiveness of the saving power of Christ that will culminate in cosmic reconciliation, and in the final extinction of sin and evil from the universe. Any attempt to reorganize the church must enhance and strengthen that union with Christ and with each member within the community of believers.

#### B. Common Identity

History makes it clear that the visible unity of the church was compromised by the introduction of radical theological and doctrinal diversity into the church. The Adventist movement is in a sense a revolt against the fragmentation of the Christian world. Surprisingly, we do not see ourselves as one more element in that fragmentation. In fact, the lack of unity among Christians is considered by us to be a Babylonian element within the Christian world. This is obviously a strong indictment against the past and present condition of the different Christian communities, and should be addressed in an Adventist ecclesiology that emphasizes ecclesiastical unity.

The Scriptures, and particularly the apocalyptic books of the Bible, provided the Adventist movement with a clear role and identity within Christianity and the world at large. We have correctly claimed that the Adventist movement is God's end-time remnant

people. As such it addresses the fragmentation of the Christian world in preparation for Christ's return. This finds support in the fact that the messages of the three angels go to the whole world calling people to be re-united with the Creator and Redeemer through His eternal gospel (Rev 14:6-12). Any organizational changes should take into serious consideration the fact that the unity of the movement is intimately related to our common global identity as God's remnant people. We should briefly explore the ecclesiological implications of that identity from the perspective of the unity of the church.

### 1. The Remnant and the Church

Adventist ecclesiology is fundamentally a remnant ecclesiology. In the OT the concept of the remnant is employed to address the fundamental question of life and death.<sup>19</sup> When confronted with a mortal threat the family, the tribe, or the nation ask whether life will be extinguished or whether some, a remnant, will survive. A remnant was a sign of hope, because as survivors its members carried with them the potential to preserve the life of their group, tribe, or nation. In them the possibility for the restoration of the nation was real.<sup>20</sup> From that broad usage the term "remnant" developed a theological content closely related to God's activity within salvation-history. The remnant became the center or nucleus of God's true people, through whom God's redemptive work will succeed in spite of threats, obstacles, and opposition.<sup>21</sup> Situations may arise in history that will oppose God's sovereign purpose, threatening His people and the realization of His plans for the human race, but God always preserves a remnant through which His willingness to save the human race from extinction will be fulfilled. For this "believing minority"<sup>22</sup> there is a future and through it a future for the human race.

Based on this understanding of the remnant it is obvious that the remnant is intimately related to the person of Christ. In a sense one is enabled to say that Christ is

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<sup>19</sup>See Gerhard F. Hasel, "Remnant," in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, edited by G. W. Bromely (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 132; *idem.*, "Remnant," in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume*, edited by Keith Krim (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1976), 735.

<sup>20</sup>See, R. E. Clements, "Šā'ar," in *Theological Dictionary of the OT*, vol. 14 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 285.

<sup>21</sup>Hasel, "Remnant," *Dictionary*, 736.

<sup>22</sup>Clements, "Šā'ar," 274.

the true remnant.<sup>23</sup> It is on account of Him that the human race will not be totally extinguished from the universe (1 Cor 15:22-28; 1 Tim 2:5). This means that the identity of the remnant is fundamentally related to the person and work of Christ. He is God's chosen "remnant." The end-time remnant does not only owe its existence to Him; it also participates in His war against, and in His victory over end-time evil powers. It is in union with Him that we find our true identity.

## 2. The Remnant and the Universal Church

Adventist remnant ecclesiology operates on a bipolar template. On the one hand it has to justify and define its coexistence and relationship other Christian ecclesial communities, while on the other hand it must constantly examine the nature and effectiveness of its existence and its commitment to its unity with the Risen Lord. In other words, Adventist ecclesiology looks outwardly, seeking to establish a point of contact with the fragmented world of Christianity, but at the same time it looks inwardly in attempting to nurture unity within itself while fulfilling its mission. In pursuing that double task the Adventist movement reveals its distinctive identity, which directly contributes to the global unity of the movement.

### a. The Remnant and the Fullness of the Church

Possibly one of the critical questions that our ecclesiology faces is: Where does the fullness of the church of Christ reside? Christians have given various answers to this important question. Roman Catholics usually hold that the fullness of the church resides in the Roman Catholic Church alone, particularly in the mutual communion of the pope and the bishops. The Eastern Orthodox Churches claim that orthodoxy is the only true church, excluding the Roman Catholic and other ecclesiastical communities from

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<sup>23</sup>The close connection between the end-time remnant and Christ is suggested by a comparison between Rev 12:17 and 12:5 (the parallel between the two passages is pointed out by Ekkehardt Mueller, "The End Time Remnant in Revelation," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 11.1, 2 [2000]: 191, but not developed). In 12:5 Christ is the son of the woman dressed with the sun. He is her male child, the descendent promised to her in Gen 3:15. In 12:17, the remnant is specifically called "the rest of her offspring." They also are descendents of the woman, and consequently they are related to Christ. The dragon fought against Him at the beginning of and during His earthly ministry, and now at the end he is ready to make war again against Christ and the rest of the descendents of the woman. They, like Christ, are obedient to the will of God under the most difficult and trying circumstances (Matt 26:39; Rev 14:12). On the allusion to Gen 3:15 in Rev 12:17 see, David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 708.

participating in the fullness of the church of Christ. Protestants tend to believe that the fullness of the church is located in the different Christian communities in which the gospel and the sacraments are clearly understood and proclaimed. One of the goals of ecumenical dialogues is to achieve mutual recognition, inviting party in dialogue to recognize the other as an expression of the fullness of the church of Christ.

Adventists differ from those ecclesiological opinions, affirming that the fullness of the church of Christ does not reside in any particular ecclesiastical organization. This is part of the outcome of our ecclesiology. We more specifically deal with the nature of the church in two of our Statement of Fundamental Beliefs (# 12, 13), where we define the church as "the community of believers who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior." The church to be sure is not simply an institution. It is a community of believers. This notion is further elaborated by establishing a distinction between a "universal church" and "a remnant." What is this universal church? It "is composed of all who truly believe in Christ." This definition is a practical rejection of denominationalism. The "universal church" is not embodied in any particular Christian community but it is diffused throughout the Christian world. It is a church in exile, in Babylon.<sup>24</sup>

#### b. The Remnant and the Invisible Church

When we define the universal church as "composed of all who truly believe in Christ," we are basically claiming that it is invisible. At the present its members are spread throughout the different Christians communities making it practically impossible to differentiate them from others within those communities. It exists under unusual circumstances, under the direct and exclusive leadership of the Spirit. This condition is the result of the apostasy of the Christian church. The apostasy made it necessary for the Lord to work directly through the invisible church.<sup>25</sup>

#### c. The Remnant and the Visible Church

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<sup>24</sup>"Notwithstanding the spiritual darkness and alienation from God that exist in the churches which constitute Babylon, the great body of Christ's true followers are still to be found in their communion" (Ellen G. White, *Great Controversy*, 390).

<sup>25</sup>Ellen G. White supported the idea that "the visible church" during the Middle Ages was the ecclesiastical institution condemned by the Reformers. It did not constitute the true people of God (*Great Controversy*, 204; *Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 4, 162-163).

But "in the last days," we as Adventists have stated, "a remnant has been called out to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus." Theologically that means that the remnant is the visible expression of the people of God, the church. In a sense it could be said that at the preset time it is the visible church.<sup>26</sup> In a sense the existence of this remnant is a reaffirmation of Christianity—we are part of something larger than ourselves—and also a judgment against it in the sense that it charges Christianity with unfaithfulness to the Lord. In other words, with respect to the Christian world, the remnant exists in the tension between a reaffirmation of it and a call to repentance and reformation. The existence of an invisible universal church and a visible remnant introduces in Adventist ecclesiology a challenging and intriguing element related to their respective nature and spiritual relationship. If the two are part of the people of God they must have some elements in common, particularly a common future.

#### d. Common and Unique Elements

They do have a common future. One of the functions of the remnant as it relates to the invisible church in exile is to call it out of Babylon (Rev 18:4). Like the people of God in the OT, the church in exile has been scattered throughout the mystical "Babylonian empire." Soon after the end of the 1260 years (Rev 12:17) God raised a visible, historical, and faithful end-time remnant to call the rest of His people out of Babylon. Hence, the function of the visible church of Christ, the end-time remnant, is to pull the universal church of Christ out of its invisibility before the final polarization of the human race at the close of the cosmic conflict. At that point in history the invisible church will merge into the visible eschatological remnant. Meanwhile, the people of God visibly exist in the eschatological remnant of Rev 12:17 and invisibly in the universal people of God who are still in Babylon (18:4).

The invisible universal church and the visible remnant seem to have other elements in common. They both are open to new biblical truth, living up to the light they

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<sup>26</sup>The expression "visible church" is used by E. G. White to designate the Adventist Church, God's end-time remnant people. She writes, "*Every member of the church* has an individual responsibility as a *member of the visible church*, and a worker in the vineyard of the Lord, and should do his utmost to preserve harmony, union, and love in the church. Mark the prayer of Christ, "that they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us: that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me" (*Manuscript Releases*, vol. 12, 293; italics supplied).

have. One of the roles of the remnant is to restore biblical truths that had been rejected or ignored, thus strengthening the unity of the church with the Risen Lord. In that task the Scripture is the determining factor and the sole instrument of reformation. This requires from the remnant to be open to new light and unquestionably ready to embrace it. The proclamation of biblical truth to God's people in Babylon also presupposes that the universal invisible church is composed of those who are willing to listen and embrace new truth.<sup>27</sup>

Likewise, common to both the remnant and the universal church is their faithfulness to Christ. They are characterized by perseverance in the midst of a spiritual conflict that promotes a superficial religious commitment to Christ. It may even be that among the non-Christian religions those who are faithful to the light they have received from God are not aware of the fact that they are part of God's children.<sup>28</sup>

It has been suggested by some Adventists that the term remnant could be used to refer to the people of God who are still in Babylon.<sup>29</sup> If that were the case, then they

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<sup>27</sup>This is in fact a presupposition of the gospel commission recorded in Matt 28:18-20. The proclamation of the gospel is preceded by the work of the Spirit in the human heart attempting to prepare humans to give a positive response to the message of salvation. Concerning the commitment to truth of God's people in exile, E. G. White wrote, "Many in retired homes are God's hidden ones, serving Him according to the light they have received. These hidden ones greatly delight in the Word of God. His precepts are appreciated and treasured by them, and many are the works of love that they do for Christ's sake" ("They Shall be Mine, Saith the Lord of Hosts," *Signs of the Times* 30 [Nov 23, 1904]: 1).

<sup>28</sup>Perhaps a relevant biblical parallel for this condition is found in what Paul said to the Greeks in Athens during the introduction of his sermon: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you" (Acts 17:22b-23). Ellen G. White wrote, "Among earth's inhabitants, scattered in every land, there are those who have not bowed the knee to Baal. Like the stars of heaven, which appear only at night, these faithful ones will shine forth when darkness covers the earth and gross darkness the people. In heathen Africa, in the Catholic lands of Europe and of South America, in China, in India, in the islands of the sea, and in all the dark corners of the earth, God has in reserve a firmament of chosen ones that will yet shine forth amidst the darkness, revealing clearly to an apostate world the transforming power of obedience to His law. Even now they are appearing in every nation, among every tongue and people; and in the hour of deepest apostasy, when Satan's supreme effort is made to cause 'all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond,' to receive, under penalty of death, the sign of allegiance to a false rest day, these faithful ones, 'blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke,' will 'shine as lights in the world.' Revelation 13:16; Philippians 2:15. The darker the night, the more brilliantly will they shine" (*Prophets and Kings*, 188).

<sup>29</sup>We read from, *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington,

would both be in some sense "remnant" peoples. It is true that in the Bible the term remnant is applied to the remnant of the nations that will join God's remnant people at the eschatological consummation.<sup>30</sup> We also find at least a case in which Ellen G. White applies the term to true believers outside the Adventist church.<sup>31</sup> If we were to accept that suggestion it would have to be carefully nuanced. The universal church would be "a remnant" only in the sense that they are the few faithful ones living in exile, in Babylon. *They are not yet part of the end-time faithful eschatological remnant of Rev 12:17, and should not be equated with or considered to be part of it.*<sup>32</sup> In other words, in this particular context the term "remnant" does not carry the technical eschatological meaning found in Rev 12:17. The end-time remnant possesses specific marks that distinguish it

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DC: Review and Herald, 1957), 192: "Seventh-day Adventist firmly believe that God has a precious remnant, a multitude of earnest, sincere believers, in every church, not excepting the Roman Catholic communion, who are living up to all the light God has given them."

<sup>30</sup>A good example is found in Zechariah. He describes an eschatological attempt to destroy God's people that will result in failure. But there is "a remnant" of the nations that will join God's people: "Then the survivors [*yātar*] from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the Almighty, and to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles" (14:16). The verb *yātar* is used here in the nifal formation meaning "what is left over," "those who survive," and belongs to the language and ideology of the "remnant." This remnant of the nations was not confused in the OT with the remnant of the Israelites who left Babylon and returned to Jerusalem. In Isa 66:19-20 we read that it was God's intention to use the remnant of Israel to proclaim His "glory among the nations" in order to bring their brothers back from exile to Jerusalem. At the end the remnant of God's people in exile and from the nations will join God's remnant in Israel.

<sup>31</sup>She refers to those individuals as "those who hold communion with God. A vital undercurrent of influence is leading them to the light, and when the question comes to them, 'Who is on the Lord's side?' they will take their position for Him. Their characters have been moulded after the divine similitude, because they have read and practiced the teachings of His word" ("They Shall Be Mine, Saith the Lord of Hosts," *Signs of the Times* 30 [Nov 23, 1904]: 1). I would suggest that in this case she is using the term "remnant" in the way I am defining it above.

<sup>32</sup>Among some Adventists the concept of the remnant has become offensive since it sounds triumphalist and exclusive. Consequently different attempts have been made to redefine it (for a discussion of the suggestions and an evaluation, see my paper, "The Remnant and the Adventist Church," unpublished, 2002). The fact that we believe that God's people are also found outside the Adventist faith should help to put those concerns to rest. We must keep in mind that elements of triumphalism and exclusivism are found in most Christian communities (see, Donald G. Bloesch, *The Church: Sacrament, Worship, Ministry, Mission* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002], 255-256). Possessing a particular identity and claiming to have a message that has universal value and relevance almost unavoidably will be interpreted by some as an expression of exclusivism. We should do all we can to avoid such a charge, but we should not be intimidated by it. Our message and a mission do not allow us to attempt to please everybody.

from the universal church and make it a historical, visible entity with a clear identity. The end-time remnant has been entrusted with a present truth that is indispensable even for the universal church.<sup>33</sup>

### 3. The Remnant Fully Disclosed

It is God's intention to merge the universal church with the end-time eschatological faithful remnant. That remnant is already here as a historical reality, but its fullness is coming into being and will be revealed or manifested when the rest of God's people will come out of Babylon, particularly at the close of the cosmic conflict.

The existence of this remnant before Christ's return in glory is of decisive importance. At a time when the forces of evil will appear to be able to unite the human race against God's government (Rev 16:13-14), the remnant stands on God's side.<sup>34</sup> They signal the fact that evil has not totally conquered the earth, that there are some through whom God is still active, that they are reclaiming the planet and anticipating the moment when it will be fully integrated into the harmony of the cosmic kingdom of God. Through them, and in the company of those who throughout the ages were loyal to Him, the human race will be eternally preserved.

## C. Common Goal

### 1. The Mission and the Nature of the Church

The unity of the church is particularly visible in its collective journey toward a common goal, namely the fulfillment of the gospel commission in the human sphere (Matt 28:18-20; 24:14) and its impact at the cosmic level (Eph 3:10). This specific

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<sup>33</sup>I have discussed the content of that message in, "Adventist Thought: Change and Continuity," unpublished paper, 1996. On the basis of the book of Revelation Adventists traditionally have identified the following as essential characteristics of God's end-time remnant people that distinguish them from God's people those who are in Babylon: 1) They keep the commandment of God (12:17); 2) they have the testimony of Jesus (12:17); 3) they are characterized by perseverance (14:10); and, 4) they have the faith of Jesus (14:12). *These marks of the remnant relate to its corporate identity.* In other words there may be within the remnant individuals who are unfaithful to the Lord. Since they "are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—," the Lord says to them, "I am about to spit you out of my mouth" (Rev 3:16). The Protestant conviction that *ecclesia semper reformanda* ("The church [is] always in [the] process of being reformed") also applies to the end-time remnant.

<sup>34</sup>Referring to God's end-time remnant people Ellen G. White comments, "Satan numbers the world as his subjects; he has gained control of the apostate churches; but here is a little company that are resisting his supremacy. If he could blot them from the earth, his triumph would be complete" (*Testimonies to the Church*, vol. 9, 231).

mission should not only be understood as something that the church does, as if the church could still be the church without accomplishing this most important task. Mission, like its union with Christ and its organization, belongs to the essence of the church. It is not something it does; it is what the church is.<sup>35</sup> So to the question, what is the church?, one could say,

*"The church is God's appointed agency for the salvation of men. It was organized for service, and its mission is to carry the gospel to the world. From the beginning it has been God's plan that through His church shall be reflected to the world His fullness and His sufficiency. The members of the church, those whom He has called out of darkness into His marvelous light, are to show forth His glory. The church is the repository of the riches of the grace of Christ; and through the church will eventually be made manifest, even to 'the principalities and powers in heavenly places,' the final and full display of the love of God. Ephesians 3:10."*<sup>36</sup>

This is a significant theological statement that deserves careful attention. According to it, the church interacts within two spheres of existence, the earthly and the heavenly. In that interaction it manifests its very nature.

## 2. Mission to the World

The first thing we should notice is that with respect to the human sphere the church is "God's appointed agency for the salvation of men."<sup>37</sup> This brief statement suggests several important thoughts. It makes clear that, as we indicated earlier, the church is of divine origin and therefore belongs to God. It is a new creation of God in a world of sin. Besides, it has a task directly assigned to it by God, namely to be the agency for the salvation of the human race. It is not the effective cause of salvation but the agency of salvation. Its existence presupposes Christ's work of salvation. Finally, the phrase "the church is God's appointed agency for the salvation of men," raises a question that we cannot explore here, but that we should be aware of. It implies that there is no other divine agency for the salvation of humans; it points to the uniqueness of the church.

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<sup>35</sup>Obviously we may distinguish between the church and its mission and in that respect say that the church has a mission to the world. This distinction is useful for analysis and dialogue, but when we look at the nature of the church it becomes obvious that mission is part of that nature. The church is or exists in the realization of its mission. Otherwise the church would have corrupted itself, becoming a human social entity, a type of social club without a heavenly identity.

<sup>36</sup>E. G. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 9 (italics supplied).

<sup>37</sup>She also wrote, "The church of Christ is God's agency for the proclamation of truth; she is empowered by Him to do a special work" (*Sons and Daughters of God*, 218).

God's purpose for the salvation of humankind is now operative through the church of Christ.

Next, in order for the church to reach its goal, organization is of the essence. God's appointed agency "was organized for service. Its mission is to carry the gospel into the world." The church is not a mystical entity, amorphous or without borders. It has a structure that facilitates the expression of its nature in service to others through the proclamation of the gospel. Third, the church is formed by "those whom God has called out of darkness into His marvelous light." Although the church is God's agency, the effectiveness of its mission is in the hands of God. He is the One who calls men and women out of darkness into His light. The church is never left to itself in the fulfillment of its mission. The transfer from darkness to light radicalizes the distinction between the church and those outside of it.

Fourth, the church exists "to show forth God's glory." The mission of the church does not only consist in the proclamation of the gospel through the spoken word but particularly through a transformed life. This was Jesus' understanding of the church as a community of individuals who experienced a transforming revelation of His grace in the mystery of the incarnation (John 1:14). The revelation of the glory of God now takes place in the transformation of the lives of those who have been joined to the body of Jesus (2 Cor 3:18).

Fifth, what we just mentioned is possible because "the church is the repository of the riches of the grace of Christ." There is a close relationship between the church and the grace of Christ. In which sense is the church the repository of grace? Not in the Roman Catholic sense, according to which the priesthood has control over and authority to dispense or distribute the grace of Christ. It is difficult for us as Adventist to accept the idea that the church is a sacrament. Christ is the only source of grace and the exclusive means to dispense it to humans. We all have access to God through Christ, without the mediation of the clergy. The church is simply and only the repository of grace. This repository should not be conceived as a container filled with grace to be distributed to others, but rather as a living organism in which the richness of Christ's grace is exhibited in the transformed lives of its members. In its own actuality the church shows forth Christ's glory and grace to the human race.

### 3. Mission to the Cosmos

Sixth, the church also interacts with the heavenly realm: "Through the church will eventually be made manifest, even to 'the principalities and powers in heavenly places,' the final and full display of the love of God. Ephesians 3:10."<sup>38</sup> The church's witnessing to the heavenly beings is so formidable that they will eventually see in it a final and full display of God's love. Ellen G. White is referring here to the final and full display of the results of God's love in the life of church members.<sup>39</sup> We are not dealing here with an abstract understanding of the love of God, but with an evidential and concrete expression of it in the life of human beings. All heavenly intelligences will be fully enlightened with the display of the love of Christ in the mystery of the church.

The mission of the church should be clearly focused on these two targets, the earthly and the heavenly. The oneness of the church is expressed in its common witnessing to the content and transforming power of the sacrificial love of God in Christ. Any attempt to reorganize the church should be guided by the fact that ecclesiastical organization must contribute to an enrichment of that common witnessing to the cosmos.

### III. Conclusion

The ecclesiastical organizational structure is not an end in itself, but a means for the service of the church. It derives its authority from Christ through the church itself. Although the Bible does not provide for us an organizational structure, it gives some guidance concerning its role. Organizational structure has to be compatible with the nature of the church as the body of Christ, existing in intimate union with Him, and deriving its very existence from Him. God's end-time people are one in global extent (catholic), in the truth it proclaims (apostolic), in commitment to Christ (holy and faithful

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<sup>38</sup>E. G. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 9.

<sup>39</sup>She also wrote, "The Lord Jesus is making experiments on human hearts through the exhibition of His mercy and abundant grace. He is effecting transformations so amazing that Satan, with all his triumphant boasting, with all his confederacy of evil united against God and the laws of His government, stands viewing them as a fortress impregnable to his sophistries and delusions. They are to him an incomprehensible mystery. The angels of God, seraphim and cherubim, the powers commissioned to co-operate with human agencies, look on with astonishment and joy, that fallen men, once children of wrath, are through the training of Christ developing characters after the divine similitude, to be sons and daughters of God, to act an important part in the occupations and pleasures of heaven" (*Christian Experience and Teachings of Ellen G. White*, 208).

end-time remnant), and in mission. Disunity or fragmentation is absolutely incompatible with the nature of God's remnant people and should always be seen as a serious threat to the nature of the church.

We should always keep in mind that the main function of church organization is to allow the universality of the church to express itself as one, to coordinate in a global, unifying, and effective way the fulfillment of its mission, and to preserve doctrinal and theological unity within the global life of the church. It must be at the service of the union of the church with its Risen Lord, strengthening and nurturing it. The church is larger than its organizational structure, but not devoid of it; organization is part of its essence. Any changes to the system should be carefully evaluated in the light of the nature and role of the church as God's agency for the salvation of humans and as the repository of the grace of Christ.

In order for the ecclesiastical organization to accomplish its responsibilities it must retain a global center of final authority. There, plans and programs may be developed to strengthen the unity of essence, actions, and thought of the world church. Such an organization should develop ways to ensure that the global goals are implemented in the life of the church in local congregations and throughout its different institutions. If the church is significantly decentralized, the threat of fragmentation will increase. Global planning and communication, accompanied by oneness in thought and action, are indispensable for the unity of the church and the fulfillment of the mission of God's remnant people.