

Toward Unity in the Body of Christ

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Mark A. Finley

Intro: The atmosphere in the Battle Creek Tabernacle seemed tense. A significant doctrinal issue, the time for the beginning and ending of the Sabbath had not yet been fully settled. Joseph Bates, long considered the father of the Sabbath truth, was convinced that the Sabbath began and ended at 6:00 pm everywhere in the world. James and Ellen White, and many other Adventists, took this same position. Young John Andrews was not so sure.

When James White asked him to study the subject from the Bible, he wrote a convincing paper that the Sabbath began and ended, not at 6:00 pm, but at sundown. It is interesting that many Adventists who heard Andrews' paper read that Sabbath morning had begun that very Sabbath, Friday night at 6:00 pm, an hour after sundown, but now, convinced by J.N. Andrews' arguments, finished that Sabbath at sunset. The old sea captain, Joseph Bates, and Ellen White were not yet convinced. Would God lead them to make a change when Seventh-day Adventists had kept the Sabbath from 6:00 pm for nearly ten years?

As Arthur White puts it in his biography of Ellen White, *The Early Years*, "...this was a rather touchy point of division that was bound to widen as time went on." (*Ellen White Biography: The Early Years*, page 323). On November 20, 1855, light broke through the darkness. God gave Ellen White a vision of the time to begin the Sabbath and clearly revealed the "even to even," or sunset to sunset principle. Ellen White's visions confirmed the Bible study of J.N. Andrews.

Early Adventists settled doctrinal and administrative issues like these in three ways.

1. They studied the Word of God.
2. They were guided by the Gift of Prophecy to confirm the truths they studied in Scripture.

3. They also accepted that in some matters the Bible presented principles and the church had the authority to decide the best course of action to preserve unity and foster mission.

There are times when honest people may see issues differently. They may have different opinions about the same subject. At times, our vision is blurred, and we may not see things clearly. This was true both in the New Testament church and in early Adventism. When you do not have a living prophet and when there are honest differences of opinions on the biblical text how do you settle theological difficulties?

Our early Adventist pioneers found principles in the operation and administration of the New Testament church for resolving challenging situations. Today, we will study some of those principles in the book of Acts. One thing is for certain, when an issue was diligently studied, openly discussed, fairly debated, and mutually agreed upon, both the New Testament church and early Adventists accepted the authority of the church to make corporate decisions.

One significant issue we will discuss at this Annual Council is the subject of women's ordination. My topic is not women's ordination. It goes beyond whether the church decides to ordain women, or not. Let's suppose this is an issue about which you feel very passionately.... Not only do you feel passionately about it, but, for you, it is a matter of scriptural conviction.... Not only is it a matter of scriptural conviction, it is a matter of fostering mission. For some reason, however, the 2015 San Antonio General Conference in Session votes contrary to your convictions. How will you relate? What will your attitude be? How will you respond? Let's look at both sides of this question. Keep in mind that I am not suggesting in any way what the church will do. I am simply using these as examples.

1. What if you are not in favor of women's ordination, but the issue is brought to the GC Session in 2015, and the Session votes to ordain women. What will your response be?

2. On the other hand, if you are in favor of women's ordination, and the matter comes to the 2015 GC Session, and the delegates vote not to approve women's ordination. What will your response be?

I would like to survey the book of Acts and briefly review how the New Testament church dealt with issues that were somewhat difficult.... Issues that had the potential for disrupting the unity of the church.... Issues that at times were somewhat thorny. How did the New Testament believers work through these issues together, and what principles can we derive for the church today? Did the New Testament church leadership ever make a judgment error, and, if they did, what was the outcome of that mistake? We will look at three episodes in Acts and analyze how the New Testament church dealt with potential conflict, and then at an incident when church leadership did not get it right.

The book of Acts is all about God's mission to the world. It describes thirty years of vigorous evangelistic activity. The theme of Acts is summarized in Acts 1:8, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

Throughout the book of Acts, the devil introduced potential flash points or possible conflicts to distract from and deter mission. The early believers were able to face these challenges and develop strategies to meet them. The first possible point of contention arose in Acts chapter one with the necessity of replacing Judas. The choice of such an important position as another apostle could easily have brought division among believers. Let's examine the process of making the choice.

Choosing a new apostle (Acts 1:15-26)

1. **The decision was bathed in earnest prayer.** (Acts 1:14) "...these all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and with his brothers." The disciples' decisions were bathed in prayer.
2. **A meeting of the believers was called.** There was a sense of involvement, fairness, and openness. (Acts 1: 15) The one hundred and twenty believers gathered in the upper room met to discuss the issue. There was a sense of participation by all and a sense of fairness in the process. There is also the

implication of an organizational structure. The apostle Peter led out in the meeting.

3. **There was an appeal to Scripture.** All the believers sensed the decision was based on Scripture. Peter established the divine reality that the New Testament church was a prophetic movement based on Scripture as he quoted Psalm 41:9 referring to the prophecy of one of Christ's followers betraying Him.
4. **Peter made very clear to the group that the purpose of the decision was to facilitate witness.** (Acts 1:23) The focus of the New Testament church's decision-making process was: Is this faithful to Scripture, and will it facilitate mission?
5. **The believers came to consensus where they could.** They came to agreement on two names: Justus and Matthias (Acts 1:23). It is quite obvious that some preferred one name, and the others preferred another name. Any time there is a choice between two options, someone is likely to be disappointed when their preference is not chosen.
6. **Together the believers were committed to do God's will.** Do you think some of them had one position, and others held another position? Acts 1:24 reveals the earnest desire of their hearts. They prayed, as all New Testament decisions were bathed in prayer, "Show which one you have chosen." You can only know you are honest when you pray, if you are willing to give up the thing you want most if asked to do so by Christ. To ardently defend your position and pray that others will come to your point of view leaves you vulnerable to misunderstanding God's will.
7. **They chose a well-accepted process to decide.** Israel had used this process throughout their history. Casting lots was quite a common practice. The Seventh-day Adventist Bible commentary lists six different instances in the Old Testament when lots were used to make varying decisions.
 - a. Goats on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:5-10).
 - b. Allotting land to tribes (Numbers 26:55, Joshua 18:10).
 - c. Settling cases when there is uncertainty (Joshua 7:14,18).
 - d. In choosing forces for battle (Judges 20:8-10).
 - e. In appointing the high priest (1 Samuel 10:19, 21).
 - f. In allotting cities to the priests (1 Chronicles 6:54-65) (SDA Bible Commentary, Volume 6, page 131)

We could almost say that casting lots in Old Testament Israel was a well-known, accepted practice for arriving at a decision similar to the well-known, accepted practice of voting.

8. **They were linked in indissoluble union to Christ and trusted enough to accept the outcome.** Once the decision was made and the outcome determined, the text simply says, “And he (Matthias) was numbered with the eleven apostles.” (Vs. 26)

Here is a key point: once they prayed, studied the Word, sought God’s guidance, discussed the issue, and then decided, the New Testament church accepted God’s will and moved on with the mission.

They trusted the decision they collectively made and covenanted together to passionately pursue the mission. Individual believers submitted their personal views to the decision made under God’s guidance.

When there is an erosion of trust, conflict festers. When there is an unwillingness to submit personal judgment to the prayed-through, thoughtful, representative decisions of the corporate body, dissension and division flourish.

In Acts chapter one, we discover the church’s organizational structure in its infancy.

The New Testament church was designed for mission. The disciples were consumed with preaching a crucified, risen, and coming-again Savior. The story of the Book of Acts is the story of a body of believers totally committed to Christ, totally committed to the message of Christ sharing His love and truth everywhere.

Acts is the March of Mission. When the Holy Spirit was poured out in Acts chapter two in response to Peter’s sermon, three thousand were baptized. (Acts 2:41)

The march of mission continues in Acts 4:4 when the inspired account records, “However many of those who heard the word believed and the number of men was about 5000.” If one included women and children, the number of believers would likely be 15,000 to 20,000.

The priority of these first century believers is clearly described in Acts 5:42, “And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease preaching and teaching

Jesus.” The New Testament church grew rapidly. Thousands were coming to Jesus. God’s mission was priority. Winning the lost to Christ was the disciples’ passion. The devil knew this and introduced conflict.

The choosing of deacons (Acts 6:1-7)

Acts chapter six records a conflict that arose over caring for the Christian widows of Jewish-Greek descent. The perception was that they were being neglected in the distribution of food. The disciples discussed the problem with the larger body. Ellen White shares this divine insight on Satan’s intent in introducing this conflict.

“The hearts of those who had been converted under the labors of the apostles were softened and united by Christian love. Despite former prejudices, 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, in the hope that thereby he might be able to introduce into the church elements of disunion.” (AA 87)

The disciples knew that as long as this problem festered like a cancer, the mission of the church would be impeded and this would serve Satan’s purpose. The solution they proposed was to select men of good reputation, honest, deeply spiritual, wise and full of wisdom to deal with the problem so the apostles could continue focusing on prayer and the ministry of the Word. (Acts 6:4) The seven that were chosen were a representative group that were well respected, a balanced group that were perceived as being godly and fair. Notice something carefully. Each of the names in the following list is a Greek name. Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas would be well respected by a community of Jewish-Greek Christians who had felt slighted. Once the solution was proposed, the disciples prayed, laid hands on these first “deacons”, and appointed or ordained them for a specific task. When the issue had been addressed, the disciples moved on to mission.

The devil’s goal was to disrupt mission. Once again, believers accepted the decision of the body, were willing to surrender their personal desires, and focused on mission. Ellen White ties the decisions of Acts six with the decision of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 19.

“The order that was maintained in the early Christian church made it possible for them to move forward solidly as a well-disciplined army clad with the armor of God. The companies of believers, though scattered over a large territory, were all members of one body; all moved in concert and in harmony with one another. When dissension arose in a local church, as later it did arise in Antioch and elsewhere, and the believers were unable to come to an agreement among themselves, such matters were not permitted to create a division in the church, but were 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 to disrupt and destroy were thwarted.” (AA 95.3)

Conversion of the Gentiles as it relates to mission and unity (Acts 15:1-29)

A major problem surfaced at the church in Antioch. A certain group of Jewish leaders taught that circumcision was necessary for salvation. (Acts 15:1) Before we judge these leaders too harshly, let's try to understand why they thought the way they did. Circumcision was a sign of God's covenant with Israel. As seen in Genesis 17:4-13, with particular notice of verse 10, “This is my covenant which you shall keep between me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised.” In verse 13 we read this divine instruction regarding circumcision, “... My covenant shall be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.” The issue faced was an extremely serious one. For the Jewish leaders to accept the Gentiles as part of the faith community without circumcision was a violation of the everlasting Covenant that God gave to Abraham. This issue had the potential to divide the growing New Testament church.

After Paul and Barnabas had a considerable discussion with these Jewish leaders and were involved in what the Bible calls “no small dissension and dispute” at Antioch, the local church there decided to send them to Jerusalem to receive direction from the larger church body. (Acts 15:2, 3) This implies at least two things:

1. Trust that the decision made by representative leaders at Jerusalem would be best for the church.
2. A willingness to submit to that decision.

In Acts of the Apostles, page 190, Ellen White describes the situation this way:

“Finally, the members of the church, fearing that a division among them would be the outcome of continued discussion, decided to send Paul and Barnabas, with some responsible men from the church, to Jerusalem to lay the matter before the apostles and elders. There they were to meet delegates from the different churches and those who had come to Jerusalem to attend the approaching festivals. Meanwhile all controversy was to cease until a final decision should be given in general council. This decision was then to be universally accepted by the different churches throughout the country.”
(AA 190)

During the Jerusalem Council, there were three main speakers, Peter, Paul, and James. Each of these apostles reasoned from a slightly different perspective. Peter recounts his experience with Cornelius and the fact that the Holy Spirit was poured out upon Cornelius and his household as had happened at Pentecost. In essence Peter declares, “God gave me a divine revelation to witness to Cornelius, and I personally experienced what God did.” The apostle Paul builds upon Peter’s story. He relates the miracles worked among the Gentiles and their miraculous conversion. How can what God is doing among the Gentiles be denied when such an abundant manifestation of the Holy Spirit is seen? James quotes an Old Testament prophecy in Amos 9:11, 12 and reasons that the Old Testament prophecies themselves predict a moving of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles.

After a great deal of discussion, the Jerusalem Council voted a resolution. Gentile converts do not need to be circumcised, but they do need to do three things. (Acts 15:19, 20)

1. They need to abstain from things polluted by idols.
2. They need to refrain from sexual immorality.
3. They need to refrain from eating things strangled and from blood.

There are three principles to take note of here.

1. Although the Gentiles were not required to be circumcised, they were required to make some dramatic changes in their lives. Both groups, Jew and Gentile, were asked of God to do something that required a change and would have made them feel somewhat uncomfortable.
2. Both groups had to submit to the decisions of the Jerusalem Council, which were not easily acceptable for them.
3. Although Jew and Gentile would not have exactly the same practice, and there was recognition of and respect for differences, this did not disrupt the unity of the church.

They recognized that unity was not necessarily uniformity in practice. They were absolutely united on the fundamentals of faith. They were committed to the same Jesus, shared the same basic beliefs, proclaimed the same prophetic message, and were passionate about the same mission.

They were willing to accept the decision of the Jerusalem Council rather than follow their own individual opinions and fragment the New Testament church.

This decision of the Jerusalem Council was clearly communicated to all believers. It was written out in a letter and sent with Paul and Barnabas along with other representative leaders to explain the decision to the Antioch church and other churches in the region. The church did not fragment because the Holy Spirit led believers to accept the decision of the Jerusalem Council, and, guided by the Holy Spirit, the church leadership made a decision that was both faithful to Scripture and fostered mission.

There are times when the Holy Spirit beckons us to change cherished positions for the sake of the unity of the church. Ellen White's counsel is instructive.

“ ... 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.... God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the

*earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority.
Testimonies, Vol. 9, pp. 260, 261.*

The New Testament pattern for unity and resolving major differences is clear. As challenges arose, the New Testament church prayed earnestly, sought scriptural answers, discussed the issues together, considered what was best for the mission of the church, and together made a decision on the issue. They loved one another and the church enough to surrender their personal opinions for the sake of unity and mission.

This does lead us to a significant question: How does one blend individual convictions with the decisions of the larger body of Christ that may not be in harmony with those convictions?

Here are two things to keep in mind. First, there is a difference between individual convictions that relate to our personal salvation and lifestyle, and the decisions that relate to the practices of the corporate church. We should never surrender our personal convictions of salvation, morality, or lifestyle. When the Holy Spirit convicts us of something that relates to each one of us personally, our responsibility is directly to God in that matter.

When the issue is one for the corporate church to decide, however, that is a different matter. If every individual followed their own independent judgment in church matters rather than the collective decision of the church body, it would result in organizational chaos.

In the book of Acts, there were five essentials that held the church together.

1. Total commitment to Christ.
2. Dependence on the continual guidance of the Holy Spirit.
3. Faithful obedience to the Word of God.
4. Passionate proclamation of a prophetic message.
5. Recognition of the authority of church organization.

When leadership makes a misstep or has mistaken judgment. (Galatians 2:1-10, Acts 21:15-25)

There is still a pertinent question to be raised. Is it possible for an individual leader or group of leaders to make a mistake in judgment, and, if it is, how should a committed Christian relate to it?

It is fascinating to note that after the Jerusalem Council, Peter compromised his integrity by refusing to eat with the Gentiles when the Jews were present. He openly went against the spirit and sentiment of the voted action of the corporate body of believers. He followed his own inclinations rather than the mutually agreed upon actions of the church at large. Paul knew that he could not let this go unchallenged or else it would seriously impact church unity. Consequently, he challenged Peter regarding his actions. To his credit Peter sensed his mistake, repented, and changed his course of action. Leadership has the responsibility to hold one another accountable to live in harmony with the prayed-through, carefully studied, mutually agreed upon actions of the corporate church.

Here is another fascinating scenario. What if the corporate church gets it wrong? What if the committee's vote is contrary to the primary will of God? What if the counsel of the brethren is not in harmony with the mind of God?

Picture this scene. The elders at Jerusalem encourage Paul to take four Jews into the temple at Jerusalem to complete a vow and to pay for the charges of the vow. The charges would include the shaving of the head by the Levite barber and paying for a series of sacrifices including a lamb, a ewe, and a ram, and, among other things, a basket of unleavened bread. In an attempt to appease some of the more radically conservative Jews, the elders at Jerusalem urged Paul to enter the temple with these four Jewish men who were in the last week of completing a Nazarite vow. In an attempt to please the Jerusalem elders and the Jews, Paul consented. Ellen White is clear. This was a mistake.

“The Spirit of God did not prompt this instruction; it was the fruit of cowardice.” AA404

Paul's actions led him to be arrested and cast into prison. It appeared that his ministry was over. Following the counsel of the apostles, Paul was condemned by

the Jewish elders and cast into prison. After two days in prison, our Lord, Himself appeared to Paul with these reassuring words, "... Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of Me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness at Rome also. (Acts 23:11)

Christ Himself appeared to Paul with the reassuring words, "Be of good cheer". Our Lord's plan for Paul would be fulfilled. No man on earth, and all the evil forces in this world, could not stop God's plan for His disciple. Paul had this inner sense, this overwhelming conviction that God was in ultimate control and would overrule even the mistakes of the "brethren" and would accomplish His ultimate purpose.

There are times that all of us are faced with challenging situations when things do not go as we would wish. We have certain convictions, but a committee seems to vote the opposite of those convictions. At those moments, it is difficult to understand. I am sure that there were times in Ellen White's life when she felt that way, too. There is a remarkable statement that keeps us anchored in challenging times:

"Our heavenly Father has a thousand ways to provide for us of which we know nothing. Those who accept the one principle of making the service of God supreme, will find perplexities vanish and a plain path before their feet. (The Faith I Live By, pg. 64)

If God wanted Paul to share the gospel in Rome, He was fully capable of getting him there in spite of the mistakes or poor judgment of others, and, along the way, the apostle powerfully witnessed to Felix, Festus, Agrippa, and others.

In Rome, his overwhelming passion was to share the Christ who changed his life. He knew he was sent of God, and nothing, absolutely nothing, could change that divine reality. He was focused on the task, consumed with the mission, caught up with the vision of proclaiming Christ to a lost world.

Writing to the Philippians from Rome, Paul makes this amazing statement: "All the saints greet you, but especially those of Caesar's household." (Philippians 4:22)

The gospel was so powerful, Paul's witness so effective, God's plan so complete, that there were converts even in Caesar's very household. The one thing that held

the New Testament church together more than anything else were lives transformed by the Holy Spirit, a commitment to Christ and His Word, and a desire to share His prophetic, present truth message with the New Testament world. To them, good news was for sharing. Christ was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies regarding the Messiah. He was born of a virgin, lived the righteous life they should have lived, died the death they should have died, rose from the dead, and appeared in heaven's sanctuary on their behalf. Christ was alive, and He was coming again. His offer of eternal life was real, and they must share it.

This was their desire, this was their passion, and this was their overwhelming conviction. Filled with the Holy Spirit, young and old, slave and free, men and women proclaimed the message of their crucified, resurrected, interceding, and returning Lord.

Paul shared it in Rome.

Peter shared it in Jerusalem.

Mary shared it after the resurrection.

Timothy shared it in Ephesus.

Priscilla and Aquila shared it in Corinth.

Onesimus, the runaway slave, shared it in Colossae.

Lydia shared it in Thyatira.

Barnabas shared it in Cyprus.

Phoebe shared it in Cenchrea.

Thomas shared it in India.

John shared it exiled and alone on an isle called Patmos.

Whatever decision is ultimately made on the question of the ordination of women, my prayer is that nothing but God's unifying and prophetic mission will be the central focus of our lives; that the Holy Spirit will fall in latter rain power on this church, that, like the early church, we will see a mighty mission movement impact the world with the gospel; that it will be said of us like the early disciples, "Here

are they that turned the world upside down.” (Acts 17:6); that the words of Matthew 24:14 will be fulfilled in this generation, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached to all the world in this generation and then the end shall come.” Then we will see the fulfillment of Revelation 14:6, “Then I saw another angel flying in mid heaven having the everlasting gospel to preach on the earth, to every nation, tongue, and people.”

This is our calling, this is our destiny; this is the purpose of our existence, and we cannot, will not, fail Him now. By His grace, through His power, in His strength, and filled by His Spirit, the task will be accomplished; the work of God on earth will be finished, and we will go home.