6. Unity in the Writings of Ellen G. White

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The success of Adventist evangelistic outreach means that the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the twenty-first century "is marked by great diversity in culture, values, traditions, and practices." While "such diversity has the power to enrich the church" it also

> threatens to pull it apart, as its membership reads Scripture through different cultural and experiential lenses. Even within single cultural contexts diversity is growing. With increasing frequency, this diversity contributes to conflicts on theological issues and church practices in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.[1]

While the church seeks to maintain unity in the face of such apparent threats, approaches to unity often overlook the complexity of the issues involved. Too often single statements on unity are considered in isolation without regard to the complexity of the concept. Such practices leave readers to interpret statements in ways consistent with their own ideas rather than understanding what the author originally intended. Furthermore, most of the discussion fails even to define what is meant by unity and simply assumes that everyone is agreed about what it means.[2]

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1 Jackson, Wendy A., "The Unity of the Church and Church Authority: A Comparative Study of the Views and Practice of Alexander Campbell and Ellen G. White" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2015), 445. This chapter is based largely on research conducted during my doctoral studies and follows closely some sections of my final dissertation. The dissertation can be downloaded in its entirety from the Andrews University Website at the following URL: http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/dissertations/1584/.

2 Many recent decisions appear to be based on an understanding of unity as uniformity of practice although is not explicitly stated.

The Christian church has struggled from its inception with the tension between the declaration that unity is intrinsic to the nature of the church, and the reality that the church is far from united. The difficulties and challenges this tension poses have resulted in many attempts to explain the nature of unity in a way that solves the apparent gap between belief and reality. While such theological exercises may seem pointless, they are in fact fundamental to thinking through questions of praxis since any consideration of church unity presupposes an understanding of the nature of unity. We cannot consider how unity can be achieved and manifested by the church without first discussing the actual nature of the unity that we are seeking.

In this chapter the concepts of unity and disunity from the perspective of Seventh-day Adventist prophet and co-founder Ellen White will be examined. In the course of her ministry Ellen White wrote extensively on the topic of church unity. The chapter begins with a statement of several basic assumptions, followed by a note on the importance White placed on the unity of the church. The foundational question of what White understood by the term unity is explored and what she considered to be the major causes of disunity are noted. An outline of White's contribution to the topic of how unity of the church can be attained concludes the chapter.

Presuppositions

Before becoming immersed in the thinking of White, three important presuppositions on the part of the author need to be stated.

The first presupposition is that the views of Ellen White are not those of a theologian who is removed from the everyday life, but rather a hands-on leader whose views were incubated in real-world crises. Her first statements suggesting brethren press together were made in the shadow of the Great Disappointment. These were followed by statements directed to specific crises in the 1850s and 1860s, while her views came to maturity during the last decade of the 19th century as she dealt with the ongoing conflicts that emerged out of the 1888 General Conference and the drama surrounding the controversial figure of John Harvey Kellogg. Her ideas matured and developed over time as she was involved in an increasing number of crises. This means we must take care in considering the context of her statements on unity, and explore her ideas in some chronological

fashion. In this chapter an overview of the key ideas will be presented first, and then their chronological development will be considered in order to construct a model of her views.

The second presupposition is that any consideration of the theme of unity in the writings of Ellen White also needs to be cognizant of her main themes, particularly her emphasis on the love of God and the great controversy theme.[3]

The third presupposition arises from the nature of unity itself. Since unity of the church is a characteristic of the church, an exploration of unity of the church cannot be viewed in isolation from Ellen White's wider ecclesiological perspectives, including the function and role of the church's authority structure and the relationship of the organization to biblical authority.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a full ecclesiology of Ellen White. Instead, several foundational concepts that impact the discussion directly will be outlined. The most important of these ideas is that White's ecclesiology was primarily functional. Her writings defined the church in terms of its relationship to God and its divinely appointed mission. White specifically identified the church as God's appointed representatives to testify to the love of God and to "win them to Christ by the efficacy of that love."[4] White's understanding of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as the end-time remnant extended the representative role of the church. With a specific message to call people back to forgotten truths and a final message of warning to the nations, both the remnant's actions and its faithfulness to truth are to be a witness to the character of God and his law.[5] Moreover, given her understanding of the church as a voluntary society, White considered representing God as an obligation on every member who chose to join the church. In consequence she expected that all members of the church would give priority to the interests of God at all times.[6]

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3 George Knight presents an excellent summary of the main themes evident in the writings of Ellen White. See George Knight, *Meeting Ellen White* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1996), 109–127.

4 Ellen G. White, "The Church and Its Mission - No 1," *East Michigan Banner*, January 18, 1905, 1.

5 Ellen G. White, "The Remnant Church, Not Babylon," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 12, 1893, 579; Ellen G. White, "Preparation for the Testing-Time," *Signs of the Times*, April 22, 1889, 242.

6 Ellen G. White, "Scattered Churches," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 6, 1881, 161.

A second ecclesiological understanding having an impact on the topic of unity relates to order and the structure of church authority. White noted that order was essential for the church to function in the way God intended; however, she did not dictate any specific form this order should take even in the face of an urgent need for reorganization in 1901.[7] Her calls for restructuring when the existing structure was not serving the needs of the church adequately, coupled with her failure to dictate any one form of organizational structure suggest that organization was to remain flexible enough to serve the mission of the church. Nevertheless, centralization of power, no matter how convenient it seemed, was to be avoided.[8] Furthermore, even a flexible structure which met the needs of the church was dependent upon its leaders. The characters of these leaders were as important as the nature of the church structure itself, not only for the success of mission, but for the maintenance of unity. Leaders were to be humble and accountable Christians who called on God for wisdom.[9]

With these presuppositions in mind, Ellen White comments about unity can now be discussed.

The Mandate of Unity

The biblical basis of Ellen White's discussion on unity is found primarily in John 17, Ephesians 4:3–6, Philippians 2:2, and the various biblical metaphors of the church which imply its oneness.

John 17 provides the impetus and mandate for unity since it is in this passage that Jesus himself explicitly expresses that it is his desire for his followers to be one. Because it is the will of God, the call to unity

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7 Early calls for order in the church can be found in such places as, Ellen G. White, *Supplement to the Experience and Views of Ellen G. White* (Rochester, NY: James White, 1854), 18–19. White's specific call for reorganization in 1901 can be found in Ellen G. White, "A Call to Reconsecrate, Reorganize, and Advance," MS 43, April 1, 1901) in *Manuscript Releases: From the Files of the Letters and Manuscripts Written by Ellen G. White.* Edited by the Ellen G. White Estate, 21 Vols. Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald, 1981–1993, 13:192–207.

8 See for instance Ellen G. White to W. W. Prescott and Wife, Letter P-088, September 1, 1896, in *Manuscript Releases*, 13:1616–1620.

9 Ellen G. White, "Judge Not," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, November 14, 1907, 8; Ellen G. White, "Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods before Me," Manuscript 15, 1895, in *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1923), 360.

is to be taken seriously by all who take the name Christian.[10] Thus in 1894 White asked, "What can I present before my brethren and sisters in Christ, that is more important for their study and practice than the Savior's prayer for His disciples? The entire seventeenth chapter of John is full of marrow and fatness."[11] Similarly in 1904 she declared, "The instruction given me by One of authority is that we are to learn to answer the prayer recorded in the seventeenth chapter of John. We are to make this prayer our first study."[12]

Also in 1906, in relation to the prayer she wrote, "Such oneness as exists between the Father and the Son is to be manifest among all who believe the truth. Those who are thus united in implicit obedience to the word of God will be filled with power."[13]

The prayer in John 17 was also a reminder for White that unity is not an end in itself. Rather, unity is to be understood as a crucial precursor to the successful mission of the church. Writing in 1906 she stated,

> If all would completely consecrate themselves to the Lord and through the sanctification of the truth, live in perfect unity, what a convincing power would attend the proclamation of the truth! How sad that so many churches misrepresent the sanctifying influence of the truth, because they do not manifest the saving grace that would make them one with Christ, even as Christ is one with the Father! If all would reveal the unity and love that should exist among brethren, the power of the Holy Spirit would be manifest in its saving influence. In proportion to our unity with Christ will be our power to save souls.[14]

The connection between unity and mission was critical enough to suggest that there was a direct correlation between unity and the success of mission. Unity was essential for the church to fulfil its mission because it provided witness to the transforming power of

10 Ellen G. White, "One, Even as We Are One," *Bible Training School*, February 1, 1906, 129.

11 Ellen G. White, "The Living Testimony," *The Bible Echo*, April 23, 1894, 124.

12 Ellen G. White, "One with Christ in God," *The Southern Watchman*, February 2, 1904, 60. See also Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 9 vols. 1885–1909. Reprint, (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 8:239.

13 Ellen G. White, "One, Even as We Are One," *Bible Training School*, February 1, 1906, 130.

14 Ellen G. White, "One, Even as We Are One," *Bible Training School*, February 1, 1906, 130.

the gospel.[15] In addition, White also emphasized the difference unity makes to the spiritual health of both individuals and congregations.[16]

The Nature of Unity

There are hundreds of passages in the writings of Ellen White in which she wrote about unity, union, harmony, and working together in peace. The frequency with which they occur leaves no doubt that unity within the church was considered important by Ellen White. What is crucial to understand, however, is what Ellen White meant when she used the term "unity" in relation to the church.

Since Ellen White's writings emerged largely from responses to specific crises, there is no nicely formed stand-alone definition of unity in her writings. Consequently, an attempt must be made to draw out an understanding by looking at the words and phrases she employs when discussing unity, and the implications of her statements about unity.

The strong tie between mission and unity precludes White from understanding unity as something that belongs only to the invisible church as some theologians have concluded, or as something that only occurs in the eschaton. Rather, the unity for which Christ prayed was to be a present and visible reality in the historical church. Only a visible unity could testify to the reality and transforming power of the gospel and fit the purpose outlined in John 17.[17]

Unity is considered by most Christian theologians as an intrinsic or essential characteristic of the church which exists whether or not it is visible in the historic church. Ellen White clearly embraced the biblical models of the church which recognize the unity of the church, and quoted texts that imply an intrinsic unity through one baptism and one Lord. However, her discussions do not focus on a unity which already exists in the church. In keeping with her wider functional ecclesiology, Ellen White focused instead on human responsibility in the maintenance of unity. That is, unity is something that requires personal attention and active choices. This prevents excusing one's behaviour, living in complacency, or a failing to engage personally

15 Ellen G. White, "Strength and Power in Unity," *Bible Training School*, April 1, 1903, 161; Ellen G. White, "Words of Counsel," *Australasian Union Conference Record*, November 15, 1903, 1–2.

16 Ellen G. White, "Christ Is out Hope," *Bible Training School*, May 1, 1903, 177.

17 White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 3:446.

in the will of God for his church. In her eyes, all must strive actively to obtain unity.[18] Furthermore, White made it clear that unity requires ongoing daily effort. Thus she wrote to John Harvey Kellogg that unity is something that "must be cultivated day by day."[19]

An examination of the phrases White used in relation to unity reveals that she did not use only one expression to describe the nature of unity. Rather, her writings provide a variety of phrases including unity of purpose, unity of action, unity of spirit, unity of thought, unity of faith and being of one mind. At first glance this would seem to portray an array of concepts about unity. Although unity of purpose, unity of action, and unity of the Spirit would seems to be overlapping, the ideas of unity of thought, unity of faith and being of one mind seem to portray quite a different slant on unity. The great majority of phrases fall into the first of these groups, with the context of statements about unity of action being similar to that of unity of purpose. The idea of uniformity of practice is not envisaged here. Rather, what is seen is the wish that God's people should live harmoniously and work together to achieve a common purpose. For instance, she wrote in 1908:

> In the work of soul saving, the Lord calls together laborers who have different plans and ideas and various methods of labor. But with this diversity of minds, there is to be revealed a unity of purpose. Oftentimes in the past the work the Lord designed should prosper has been hindered because men have tried to place a yoke upon their fellow workers who did not follow the methods which they regarded as the best.[20]

Working in harmony not only made pragmatic sense, it harmonized with White's understanding of the church as a voluntary society. In the nineteenth-century context, a voluntary society existed for a

18 White, "Christ is Our Hope," *Bible Training School*, May 1, 1903, 177; White, "Unity of the Church," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, February 19, 1880, 113; Ellen G. White, "Notes of Travel," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, February 12, 1885, 8.

19 Ellen G. White to J. H. Kellogg, Letter K-073, April 17, 1899 in Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 8:172–176. White emphasizes the role of human choice in the attainment of unity, but that unity should not be seen as something manufactured by humans. As will become obvious as in this chapter, unity is only possible in connection with Christ and actively involves the Holy Spirit's transformation in the life.

20 Ellen G. White, "A Missionary Education," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, February 6, 1908, 24.

single purpose, and those who joined did so for the express purpose of furthering its aims. Thus, White assumed that those who choose to join the church voluntarily would be willing to work together to prioritize the mission of the church.[21]

The terms unity of thought, and being of one mind require more careful analysis. The phrase "unity of thought" arises in three contexts: a call for people of different ethnicities and nationalities to work together under a single sovereign rather than letting national pride prevent united action;[22] working together to find the best methods to mission;[23] and a call to peace and harmony instead of criticizing and tearing other leaders down.[24] In none of these contexts is unity of thought intended to convey uniformity of doctrine or understanding all scripture or all church practices in the same way.

Likewise, examination of the context of the idea of being of one mind reveals four main meanings of the term:[25] working together to do God's work; working in harmony without selfish ambition and fault-finding;[26]coming together in humility before God;[27] and teaching the

21 Ellen G. White, "Scattered Churches," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 6, 1881, 161.

22 Ellen G. White, "The Swiss Conference and the European Council," *The Bible Echo*, February 1, 1886, 27.

23 Ellen G. White, "Who are Partners with Christ," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 17, 1894, 449.

24 Ellen G. White, "Unity a Test of Discipleship," in *Manuscript Releases*, 15:165.

25 The idea is found in the phrases "unity of mind" and "being of one mind." While the term "unity of mind" only occurs in one context, the term "one mind" occurs frequently in White's writings. A significant number of these occurrences are simply quotations from Scripture including 1 Peter 3:8; Philippians 2:1–2; Romans 15:5, 6; 2 Corinthians 13:6 and 1 Corinthians 1:10. For the single reference to unity of mind, see Ellen G. White, "The Work Before Us," MS 11, 1912, in *Loma Linda Messages* (Payson, AZ: Leaves of Autumn, 1981), 601.

26 White makes this direct connection when she wrote to S. N. Haskell in 1900 noting, "We are often exhorted, 'Be ye all of one mind,' which means the same as 'Endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace.'" See Ellen G. White to S. N. Haskell, April 5, 1900, in *Manuscript Releases*, 8:68.

27 Ellen G. White, "An Important Letter from Sister E. G. White," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, December 11, 1900, 796; White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 6:469.

same doctrines. With regard to teaching the same doctrine, she wrote to Dr Kellogg in 1886,

> The soldiers of Jesus Christ must move in concert, else it were better that they do nothing. For if one speaks one thing, and another presents ideas and doctrines contrary to his fellow laborers, there is confusion, discord, and strife. Therefore the apostle charges that all who believe on Christ be of one mind, one faith, one judgment, each moving in concert, influencing one another beneficially, because they are both obedient to the precious truth of the Word of God, attached to one Savior, the great Source of light and truth.[28]

Several instances of the use of the phrase "unity of faith" also appear to call for a unity in doctrine. For instance in *Christian Experience and Teachings* she noted that

> "God is leading a people out from the world upon the exalted platform of eternal truth, the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. He will discipline and fit up His people. They will not be at variance, one believing one thing, and another having faith and views entirely opposite; each moving independently of the body. Through the diversity of the gifts and governments that He has placed in the church, they will all come to the unity of the faith. If one man takes his views of Bible truth without regard to the opinion of his brethren, and justifies his course, alleging that he has a right to his own peculiar views, and then presses them upon others, how can he be fulfilling the prayer of Christ? And if another and still another arises, each asserting his right to believe and talk what he pleases, without reference to the faith of the body, where will be that harmony which existed between Christ and His Father, and which Christ prayed might exist among His brethren?"[29]

Yet while calling for unity of faith in relation to what is believed, other passages remind us that this is not uniformity.[30] The diverse

28 Ellen G. White, "Christians, Like Soldiers, May Face Hardships, and Must Work Together in Unity," (Letter to J. H. Kellogg, July 1886) in *Manuscript Releases*, 14:29.

29 Ellen G. White, *Christian Experience and Teachings* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1940), 201.

30 See for instance Ellen G. White, "The Vine and the Branches," MS 66, 1897, published in part in *Manuscript Releases*, 6:104; Ellen G. White to P. T. Magan, Letter M-111, June 16, 1903 published in *Manuscript Releases* 6:106.

backgrounds and experiences that shape individuals may be expected to lead to different methods of working for the Lord. Furthermore, Ellen White's encouragement that everyone needs to read Scripture for themselves leads to the expectation that variation in understanding of Scripture will occur. In order to maintain harmony amongst this diversity, White advised that members dwell "upon those things in which all can agree, rather than upon those things that seem to create a difference."[31]

In summary, the nature of the unity that White envisaged was a visible, lived unity, something that requires personal involvement and choice. It is primarily expressed in harmonious working together to achieve a common purpose; however, some degree of doctrinal unity is also expected.[32]

Disunity and its Causes

While success in mission is bound up with unity, a lack of unity misrepresents the truth and brings reproach to the name of Christ.[33] The church as Christ's representatives who have an end-time mission is to demonstrate the loving character of God. This is negated by a disunited church since a divided church portrays an unloving and divided God who consequently lacks power. Thus Ellen White suggested that the church actively works against its Lord when it is disunited. At the 1900 GC Conference session she asked,

> Why do those who profess to believe in Christ, who profess to keep the commandments, make such feeble efforts to answer the Savior's prayer? Why do they seek to have their own way,

31 Ellen G. White, "Diversity and Unity in God's Work," in *Manuscript Releases*, 8: 68. Furthermore, White counselled that a failure to agree on ideas should not be seen as a reason to separate from the church. See also White, "The Importance of Unity; the Holy Spirit a Mystery," in *Manuscript Releases* 14:177. While agreement on fundamentals is highlighted, those in Christ should not waste their time disputing over "matters of little importance."

32 Late in this chapter it will be shown that unity of doctrine appears to relate to specific core beliefs related to salvation or in which the Holy Spirit has specifically led the church.

33 Ellen G. White to G. I. Butler, Letter *B-023, October 1, 1885, published in White, *Manuscript Releases*, 15:362. Ellen G. White to Missionaries in South Africa, Letter B-004, March 9, 1890, published in Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Southern Africa* (South African Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1977), 21–27.

> instead of choosing the way and will of the Spirit of God? Those who do this will one day see the harm done to the cause of God by pulling apart. Instead of co-operating with Christ, instead of laboring together with God, many who occupy positions of trust are working in opposition to Christ. The Lord has presented this to me in a most decided manner to present to his people.[34]

Her words were equally strong at the 1903 General Conference session where she equated disunity with sin: "There is a great and solemn work to be done for Seventh-day Adventists, if they will only be converted. The great trouble is the lack of unity among them. This is a sin in the sight of God, — sin which, unless God's people repent, will withhold from them his blessing ... "[35] The consequences of disunity included distraction from mission,[36] negative impact on personal spirituality,[37] and a resulting weakness of the church.[38]

What did Ellen White identify as the causes of disunity? She did not focus on doctrinal differences as a cause for disunity. Disagreements about doctrine are only surface matters that portray a much deeper issue. Disunity at its core is a sign of disconnection from Christ. Writing against the unequal treatment of some groups of believers, White declared, "The reason of all division, discord, and difference is found in separation from Christ."[39] She continued: "Christ is the center to which all should be attracted; for the nearer we approach the

34 Ellen G. White, "Unity among Believers," *General Conference Bulletin*, July 1, 1900, 156.

35 Ellen G. White, "The Work before Us," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 14, 1903, 7.

36 Ellen G. White, "The Opposer's Work," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, October 18, 1892, 642. See also White's response to the arguments over the meaning of the daily sacrifice: Ellen G. White, to My Brethren in the Ministry, August 3, 1910, in White, *Selected Messages*, 1:167–168.

37 Ellen G. White, "Make Straight Paths for your Feet." MS 157, 1897. Published in part under the title, "Christian Unity" in *Manuscript Releases*, 11:50.

38 White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 8:240.

39 Ellen G. White, "No Caste in Christ," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, December 22, 1891, 785; Ellen G. White to W. Ings, Letter I-077, January 9, 1893, in White, *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials: Letters, Manuscripts, Articles, and Sermons Relating to the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference*. Edited by the Ellen G. White Estate. (Washington, DC: Ellen G. White Estate, 1987), 1125.

center, the closer we shall come together in feeling, in sympathy, in love, growing into the character and image of Jesus. With God there is no respect of persons."[40]

The other causes of disunity that she identified also have a strong relational focus and flow directly from being disconnected from Christ. These include attitudinal problems such as stubbornness, pride, unwillingness to listen to others, and lack of love as causes for disunity.[41] She also posited as causes of disunity unbelief in the foundations of the Christian faith,[42] a failure of Christians to shoulder any responsibility for the mission of the church,[43] and an unwillingness to allow the Holy Spirit to work.[44]

How can Unity be Attained?

These causes of disunity became the basis for White's discussion about how unity can be attained. Consequently, union with Christ takes prime position among the six factors to which she points in her discussion of the attainment of unity.

Writing in 1904, she claimed

> The cause of division and discord in families and in the church is separation from Christ. To come near to Christ is to come near to one another. The secret of true unity in the church and in the family is not diplomacy, not management, not a superhuman effort to overcome difficulties—though there will be much of this to do—but union with Christ.[45]

The nature of the connection between union with Christ and unity of the church was described by White using the metaphor of a sun

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40 Ellen G. White, "No Caste in Christ," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, December 22, 1891, 785.

41 White, "To W. Ings," 1125.

42 Ellen G. White to J. H. Kellogg, December, 1904 in White, *Manuscript Releases*, 11:319. The message was written to John Harvey Kellogg when he was promoting panentheistic theories and in outright conflict with church leadership.

43 Ellen G. White, "Scattered Churches," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 6, 1881, 161–162.

44 Ellen G. White, "The Secret of Victory," *Bible Training School*, March 1, 1909, 177.

45 Ellen G. White to Sr. Harper, Letter 49, January 24, 1904 published in Ellen G. White, *Mind, Character, Personality* (Nashville, TN, Southern Publishing Association, 1977), 2:501.

and its sunbeams.[46] Beams of light are closest together at the centre of the sun, whereas they become more and more widely spaced the further they are from the sun. So, as believers remain close to Christ, they will also demonstrate a love and closeness for other believers. In fact, White stated that "they must of necessity be drawn close to each other, for the sanctifying grace of Christ will bind their hearts together."[47] However, as believers move further from Christ, so they find themselves struggling to remain close to others. Thus White could confidently claim that "True religion unites hearts, not only with Christ, but with one another, in a most tender union."[48]

Using John 15 as the backdrop of her discussion about connection with Christ, White considered individual Christians must be united with Christ just as branches are united to the vine.[49] Such a union provides both a new identity and the means by which spiritual growth can occur.[50] As union with Christ occurs, the Holy Spirit is enabled to transform the life of the individual. Consequently, the life will show evidence of the fruit of the spirit as a more Christlike character is formed.

Of particular importance in the discussion of union with Christ was the need for maintenance of the relationship. For Restorationist Alexander Campbell, union simply occurred at baptism, but for White, union with Christ was more than a profession of faith. It was something dynamic which needed to be maintained and preserved lest disconnection should occur. As in human relationships, both partners in the relationship must bear some responsibility for the maintenance of relationship. While the initiative and work that makes this bond possible comes from God, the relationship cannot work if only one

46 White to Uriah Smith, Letter S-024, September 19, 1892, published under the title "The Message of 1888; an Appeal for Unity; the Need for the Indwelling Christ," in *Manuscript Releases*, 15:88.

47 White, Letter S-024, 88.

48 Ellen Gould White, *Gospel Workers* (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1915), 484.

49 Ellen G. White, "The True Vine," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 20, 1881; Ellen G. White, "The Living Vine," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 11, 1883.

50 White, "True Vine"; White "Living Vine."

partner is interested in its maintenance.[51] The individual is therefore called to preserve the bond by continual communion[52] and "earnest prayer."[53]

The second factor in the attainment of unity that White listed is having the correct attitudes. White's written responses to individuals involved in conflict, particularly General Conference president G. I Butler and J. H. Kellogg, frequently put the emphasis on right attitudes. Even when they held beliefs which White considered were wrong, she generally devoted more space in her writing to the need for humility and the correct attitudes than she did to the condemnation of the beliefs of the individual.

The most essential attitudes for unity were those of love,[54] humility[55] and teachableness,[56] whereas attitudes of pride, self-centredness, and selfish ambition provide obstacles to unity.[57] Consequently, when looking for unity of the church one of the first steps is to examine your own heart. White wrote,

> Whether superiors, inferiors, or equals, your work is to begin with your own heart. Humble yourself before God. Come into right connection with Him by yielding to the creating power of the Holy Spirit. Then will be seen in the church the unity that is of value in God's sight. There will be sweet harmony, and all the building, fitly framed together, will grow up into an holy temple in the Lord.[58]

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51 Jackson, Wendy A., "The Unity of the Church and Church Authority: A Comparative Study of the Views and Practice of Alexander Campbell and Ellen G. White," 280.

52 White, *Desire of Ages*, 676. Elsewhere, she suggested communion must occur daily or hourly. See for instance White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 5:47.

53 *Testimonies for the Church*, 5:47, 231.

54 See, for example, White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1969), 49; White, *Acts of the Apostles* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1911), 551; Ellen G. White to Brethren Who Shall Assemble in General Conference, Letter B-20, August 5, 1888 in *1888 Materials*, 41.

55 White, "The Message of 1888; an Appeal for Unity; the Need for the Indwelling Christ," in *Manuscript Releases*, 15:81.

56 Ellen G. White, "Love among the Brethren." *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 3, 1884, 353–354.

57 See, for example, Ellen G. White to Brethren Who Assemble in Week of Prayer, Letter B-20a, December 15, 1888, in *1888 Materials*, 196–198.

58 Ellen G. White, "The Danger of Rejecting Light," MS 64, 1898, in *Manuscript Releases*, 20:321.

Indeed, she suggested that if all believers had a teachable heart, there would be no divisions between them.[59] It must be noted however, that right attitudes are only obtained by connection with Christ and by the recognition that all are sinners dependent upon the mercy of God. Humility before fellow-believers grows out of Christians' correct understanding of themselves as sinners who are often wrong. It is demonstrated by a willingness to listen to the ideas of others, and weigh their counsel in the light of scripture and experience rather than just pushing personal opinion.[60]

The third factor White identified as important to attainment of unity is to ensure that Scripture is the rule of faith and practice. The Bible itself was to be the only creed for Christians and the bond of union between members. She declared:

> When God's Word is studied, comprehended, and obeyed, a bright light will be reflected to the world; new truths, received and acted upon, will bind us in strong bonds to Jesus. The Bible, and the Bible alone, is to be our creed, the sole bond of union; all who bow down to this Holy Word will be in harmony. Our own views and ideas must not control our efforts. Man is fallible, but God's Word is infallible. Instead of wrangling with one another, let men exalt the Lord. Let us meet all opposition as did our Master, saying, "It is written." Let us lift up the banner on which is inscribed, The Bible our rule of faith and discipline.[61]

While this quote is from 1885, it is representative of her earliest thoughts about unity after the Great Disappointment. That is, the bond which tied the small discouraged remnant of believers together was their commitment to the authority of the Bible.

In choosing Scripture as the guide and authority for the Christian life, the individual is necessarily drawn towards both Jesus and fellow-believers, while at the same time being brought to a place where truth can be discovered. As the only rule of faith, White considered the Bible was both a sufficient and unerring guide for the believer, and the means to determine truth. To move away from an explicit "thus

59 White, "Love among the Brethren", 353–354.

60 Ellen G. White, "Do Not Lord It over Others," (1870) in *Manuscript Releases*, 15:126.

61 Ellen G. White, "A Missionary Appeal," *Review and Herald,* December 15, 1885, 770.

saith the Lord" was to risk not only moving away from truth, but total separation from Christ.[62]

The fourth factor in the attainment of unity was the avoidance of non-essential issues.[63] Instead of focusing on controversial and minor issues, leaders were encouraged to focus on core or vital truths which were clearly understood and with which everyone agreed. In practice the identification of which truths fell into these categories was not straightforward. Ellen White's lists of vital truths (also identified as pillars of the faith, landmarks, or waymarks) are not always consistent. However, the truths seem able to be divided into two main categories: those which are foundational for Christianity as a whole, and those which she considered the Spirit had led the Seventh-day Adventist Church to understand. These truths included but were not limited to inspiration, salvation, incarnation, atonement, the perpetuity of the law, Sabbath, creation, the Three Angel's messages, the non-immortality of the soul, the cleansing of the sanctuary, baptism and the Lord's Supper.[64]

62 Ellen G. White, "The Word of God," *Bible Training School*, May 1, 1913, 193.

63 See, for example, Ellen G. White, "Non-essential Subjects to be Avoided," MS 10, September 12, 1904 published in part in *Manuscript Releases*, 17:303–304. Non-essential things were not to occupy the mind or the preaching of the word. "We are not to allow our attention to be diverted from the proclamation of the message given us. For years I have been instructed that we are not to give our attention to non-essential questions." Similar ideas are expressed in Ellen G. White, "Ministers should Cooperate and Preach Practical Truths," September 10, 1899, Letter 233, 1899, in *Manuscript Releases*, 21:398–401.

64 White, "Standing by the Landmarks," MS 13, 1889, in *1888 Materials*, 518; White, *Great Controversy*, 582; White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 4: 211; White, *Christian Experience and Teachings*, 246; Ellen G. White, "Build on a Sure Foundation," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 24, 1908, 7; Ellen G. White, "The Relationship of Christ to the Law Is Not Understood," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, February 4, 1890, 66. Doctrines which fall into these categories have been gleaned by looking at passages where White uses the phrases or terms "vital truth," "pillars of the faith," "waymarks," and "landmarks" which are used almost interchangeably in reference to doctrines she considered indispensable. The mixture of core Christian doctrines with those more specific to Seventh-day Adventism highlights White's conviction that the Spirit continues to lead the church in truth.

The fifth key to the attainment of unity was to be found in organization, or gospel order. In 1853 she wrote:

> There is order in heaven. There was order in the church when Christ was upon earth; and after his departure, order was strictly observed among his apostles. And now in these last days, while God is bringing his children into the unity of the faith, there is more real need of order than ever before ... 'The church must flee to God's word, and become established upon gospel order which has been overlooked and neglected.' This is indispensably necessary to bring the church into the unity of the faith.[65]

Ellen White's earliest recommendations regarding order were limited to choosing suitable individuals to teach and preach, along with finding ways of appropriate recognition of these individuals by churches. While ordination of other church-officers would follow later, the fact that other officers of the early church are not discussed at this time suggests that White was not calling for an exact replication of the New Testament system of order as Alexander Campbell and the Restorationists had done, but rather an application of the principles of order demonstrated in the New Testament. Thus the principle of orderliness appears to be more important than a specific system of order.

The sixth and final key to attaining unity had to do with maintaining the right relationship with the church. In this area, White highlighted two means of right relationship. First, White emphasized the need for believers to take personal responsibility for the success of the church in accomplishing its mission.[66] Practically this meant being personally involved in the mission of the church and prioritizing the needs of the church over personal desires.[67] When members work for the prosperity of the church it focuses them on mission rather than the issues which divide them, thus promoting unity. Consequently, in 1881 White wrote, " ... churches whose members feel that they are not responsible for its prosperity will fail to show to the world the

65 Ellen G. White, *Supplement to the Experience and Views of Ellen G. White* (Rochester, NY: James White, 1854), 18–19.

66 White, "Scattered Churches," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 6, 1881, 161–162.

67 White, "Scattered Churches," 161-162.; Ellen G. White, "We Shall Reap as We Sow," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, August 21, 1894, 529–530.

unity, love, and harmony that exist with the true children of God."[68]

The second way in which church members were to maintain the right relationship with the church was by yielding their opinions to the voice of the church unless the issue was of vital importance.[69] This instruction, as difficult as it seems, reflects several of White's core beliefs: that God reveals truth to multiple individuals in his church,[70] that the church has been delegated authority by God,[71] and that the true Christian will be sensitive to the feelings and opinions of others.[72] Thus we find statements such as "God has bestowed the highest power under heaven upon His church. It is the voice of God in His united people in church capacity which is to be respected."[73]

Since White believed there was more truth to be uncovered, individuals are still called to search for truth. However, any new insights should be subject to investigation by mature Christians who are to consider the matter prayerfully in the light of the rest of Scripture.[74] Consequently, leaders and mature Christians are expected to exercise their authority responsibly and prayerfully.

Chronological Development of the White's Views on Unity

When Ellen White's ideas on unity are considered in a chronological sequence it becomes apparent that White's emphasis moved from a primary understanding of unity in terms of doctrine prior to formal church organization, to a primary understanding of unity of action and purpose in the wake of denominational organization. This did not mean that doctrine was no longer important,[75] simply that it did not

68 White, "Scattered Churches," 161.

69 White, "The Unity of the Church," *Bible Echo*, September 1, 1888, 129; White, "Unity in the Home and in the Church." *Manuscript Releases*, 19:68.

70 White, "The Unity of the Church," *Bible Echo* September 1, 1888, 129.

71 White "Unity of the Church," 129; White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 122, 164; White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 5:108.

72 White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 4:17, 19.

73 White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 3:451.

74 White, *Christian Experience and Teachings*, 203.

75 White still mentioned the need for unity of doctrine or belief at later dates. See for instance Ellen G. White, "Christians, Like Soldiers, May Face Hardships, and Must Work Together in Unity," (Letter to J. H. Kellogg, July 1886) in *Manuscript Releases*, 14:29. However, doctrine is not the focus of her unity discussions during these later time periods.

form the center of her mature definition of unity. While the church existed as loosely organized congregational bodies, doctrine was one of the few features each congregation had in common, and therefore naturally would be seen as a uniting factor. However, after the formal creation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, a degree of unity in doctrine was already implied by membership of the church. White's supposition that the church was a voluntary society led her to believe that anyone who joined the church already agreed with its core beliefs, and that this therefore no longer needed to be emphasized to members who were by choice committed to the same beliefs. Rather, focusing on a unity of action and purpose in this context allowed the church of likeminded individuals to fulfill its missional purpose.

Thus the earliest factor identified as necessary for unity is the use of the Bible as the rule of faith and practice. This was followed closely by the need for order and organization. The context helps us understand why these issues figured prominently. Between 1850 and 1860 there were no safeguards against visiting preachers presenting conflicting ideas and personal opinions. New converts were beginning to be admitted as the church moved away from its understanding of the shut door.[76] These converts had not experienced the specific leading of the Spirit in the same way as those who had been through the Great Disappointment. In addition, 1854 saw the rise of the first formal schism in the breakaway of the Messenger Party.[77] Organization and faithfulness to biblical teaching were thus crucial for the survival of the Advent groups. Thus, in this period, White called on believers to focus on maintaining unity through prayerful study of Scriptures, adherence to key doctrinal truths, obedience to the commandments of God, and the institution of gospel order.

While White also spoke of union with Christ as being essential for unity in her earlier discussion of unity, she made no direct linkage between union with Christ and these elements of visible unity.

76 *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, rev. ed., Commentary Reference Series Volume 10 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1976), s.v. Open and Shut Door.

77 *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia,* rev. ed., Commentary Reference Series Volume 10 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1976), s.v. Messenger Party; Knight, *Organizing for Mission and Growth: The Development of Adventist Church Structure* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2006), 39.

Furthermore, the earlier writings lack any consideration of the role of interpersonal and relational issues in the attainment of unity. These ideas were only developed in the context of the later conflicts of the 1888 General Conference and those associated with John Harvey Kellogg.

The issues of the 1888 General Conference—the identity of the ten horns of Daniel 7, the meaning of the word "law" in Galatians, and the implications for righteousness by faith— appeared doctrinal.[78] But White did not attribute the discord at the 1888 General Conference to doctrine. Her talks at the conference were focused on a deeper cause for the disunity, disconnection from Christ. The un-Christlike attitudes and actions which marred the conference were evidence in her eyes that many of those present were not united with Christ. Every member of the church had a responsibility for maintaining unity and this would be possible only when all remained connected to Christ who was both the source of truth and the source of unity.[79]

The 1888 General Conference also provided White with an opportunity to readdress the role of truth in maintaining unity. All delegates were called to prayerful personal study of the Word so that they would recognize the truth or error of the views presented in the meetings.[80] Nevertheless, White made it clear that knowing truth by itself was not all that was required of the Christian.[81] Truth needed to be lived.[82] This meant more than keeping the Sabbath and preparing for the second coming of Christ. Lived truth for White meant that every action exhibited the character of Christ, and every word was spoken with the best interests of the individual at their core. If truth

78 For a good overview of the 1888 General Conference see George R. Knight, *A User Friendly Guide to the 1888 Message* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1998).

79 Ellen White, "Counsel to Ministers," MS 8a, October 21, 1888, in *1888 Materials*, 132–145.

80 White's call for delegates to study Scripture for themselves begun even before the General Conference began. See Ellen White to Brethren who shall assemble in General Conference, August 5, 1888 in *1888 Materials*, 38–46. During the conference she continued to advocate the need for personal study. See for instance Ellen White, "The Need of Advancement," Morning Talk October 18, 1888 in *1888 Materials*, 117.

81 Ellen White, "The Scriptures a Sufficient Guide," Week of Prayer Reading for Sabbath, December 15, 1888, in *1888 Materials*, 201.

82 White, "Scriptures a Sufficient Guide."

was lived, even those who disagreed about the meaning of the key issues should have been able to work together without jealousy and accusation. But such was not the experience of those at the 1888 General Conference.

The growing issues with centralization and abuse of power around the same time also led White to speak again on the authority structure of the church. While White did not believe that the authority structure was the basis of unity of the church, she recognized that authority structures can either aid or hinder unity. Moreover, unity needed to occur within some form of structure. Four features of authority structure were identified as important for maximizing unity: functionality; flexibility to meet the needs of the church; avoidance of centralization of authority;[83] and avoiding giving too much power to any one individual.[84] Based on her advice to G. I. Butler, E. T. Waggoner and A. T. Jones, it can be concluded that White expected leaders to be examples of Christ-like attitudes and behavior."[85] They were to spend time prayerfully studying Scripture in order to determine for themselves what was true.[86] However, they were not to stand in the way of new expressions of truth, nor should they consider that their position meant they were infallible in their understanding or that they alone could determine truth.[87]

The Big Picture

In attempting to build a model of White's suggestions for attaining a unity of action and purpose, it is logical to begin with the group within which unity is to occur. Although Ellen White suggested that the prayer of Jesus in John 17 applies to anyone who has taken

83 See for instance Ellen G. White to W. W. Prescott and Wife, Letter P-088, September 1, 1896, in *Manuscript Releases*, 13:1616–1620; Ellen G. White to the General Conference Committee and the Publishing Boards of the Review and Herald and the Pacific Press, Letter R-071, April 8 1894, in *Manuscript Releases*, 11:272–273.

84 Ellen G. White, "A Call to Reconsecrate, Reorganize and Advance," MS43, April 1, 1901, in *Manuscript Releases*, 13:192–207. See especially, 192–193; White, "No Kingly Authority to Be Exercised," MS 26, 1903 in *Manuscript Releases*, 14: 279.

85 Ellen White to George I. Butler, October 1888, Letter 21a-1888, in *1888 Materials*, 85–106.

86 White, Letter 21a-1888.

87 White, Letter 21a-1888.

the name Christian, she only addresses the unity of those who she identifies either as the remnant or as lovers of truth. This provides a clear identity of the group within which unity is to occur. The next step is to add the Bible as the rule of faith which provides an authority for the church upon which all can agree. Necessity also suggests that unity occurs with a specific structure. Although order was important to Ellen White, it was the principle of organization which took priority over the actual details of structure. Indeed, structure rather than being fixed was to be flexible in the service of the mission of the church.

Together these ideas—the identity of the group in which unity was to occur, the authority of the group, and the structure in which unity was to occur—provided a tangible basis for beginning to write a definition of unity. It would be easy simply to put boundaries on these areas such as by specifying how the biblical authority is to be interpreted, concentrating on a core set of doctrines or emphasizing the importance of the authority structure.[88] However, these elements alone are insufficient to produce an adequate unity because they do not deal with the core and essentially intangible issues which centre on understanding the relationships of the Christian.

The keys to unity that have already been identified in the writings of Ellen White now need to be incorporated in the model. A start can be made by adding the invisible foundation of unity which Ellen White understood as union with Christ. In White's earliest writings on unity it is unclear how union with Christ related to the tangible elements of unity that we have noted. This connection became clearer as she wrestled with the crises from 1885 onward. As White focused more on Jesus connections began to become obvious. She recognized that a living connection with Christ impacts all the believer's relationships in a way that promotes unity. Union with Christ promotes the fruit of the Spirit and the development of a Christ-like character as the Holy Spirit does its work. Amongst this fruit would be a transformation of attitudes so that pride and self-centredness are replaced by love and humility. At the same time union with Christ would impact the relationship between the Christian and the church. As following

88 Restorationist Alexander Campbell did this very thing. He believed that if authentic Christians resisted organization beyond the congregational level, interpreted the Bible with a consistent hermeneutics, only used biblical terminology and concentrated on the facts of Scripture rather than opinions, unity would follow.

Christ became a priority, Christians would give precedence to the mission of the church over their own desires. This in turn would impact their relationships with other Christians, exhibiting itself in a willingness to submit to one another for the sake of harmony. Union with Christ is also expected to help the Christian to understand "truth as it is in Jesus." Being right in the interpretation of Scripture is to be accompanied by a humility and love for others where we "practice truth as it in in Jesus."[89]

The foundation that connects union with Christ with its practical results highlights three major understandings required for unity: what it means to be a Christian, what it means to be a church, and the ability to recognize truth as it is in Jesus.

These in turn affect willingness to accept the Bible as the rule of faith, willingness to work within the structure of the church, and to identity formation. The identity of those who are called to unity is thus transformed. It is still the remnant defined in Revelation, but it is the remnant that understands truth in the light of Jesus. It is a remnant whose identity is forged through understanding of one's relationship to Christ, of one's role as a member of the body of Christ, and of faithfulness to truth as it is in Jesus. Thus White's view of unity in the Adventist Church also emphasizes identity in Christ. It can be concluded that unity of purpose can only occur between authentic Christians whose relationships and identity are being transformed in connection with Christ.

Strengths of White's Views on Unity

The mature thinking of Ellen White on the topic of unity is complex, with multiple interactions, but it has a number of important strengths.

1. It demonstrates a clear connection between union with Christ and Christian unity, while at the same time, clearly delineating both divine and human roles in the process of attaining church unity.

89 Ellen White to George I. Butler and Uriah Smith, April 5, 1887, in *1888 Materials*, 32–37; Ellen White, "The Scriptures a Sufficient Guide." Week of Prayer Reading for Sabbath, December 15, 1888, in *1888 Materials*, 198, 201; Ellen White, "The Secret of Unity." Sermon at Chicago, IL on April 4, 1889, in *Review and Herald* July 2, 1889, 147–148.

2. It recognizes the biblical principle that connection with Christ does not leave individuals unchanged.

3. It focuses on authentic Christianity. While White saw unity as occurring between those who loved truth and displayed the characteristics of the remnant, the foundation of her model requires individuals to be authentic Christians first and foremost.

4. It recognizes that relationship is at the heart of unity. Unity of the church is impacted by multiple relationships including the relationship with Christ, the church, truth and other people.

5. It recognizes the impact of sin on relationships; in particular, the human tendency to pride, selfishness, and thirst for power or control. Consequently, it places emphasis on correction of attitudes and relational problems through connection with Christ.

6. By including active involvement in the mission of the church, White enables members to focus on something outside of themselves. When focus is persistently directed internally, differences of opinion become more prominent.[90] But when focus is upon a common goal outside of themselves, members are led to focus on their common identity in Christ rather than on the issues that divide them.

Weaknesses of White's Views on Unity

Three major weaknesses of White's view and their relevance to unity also need to be considered.

1. The intangible and personal nature of union with Christ makes it difficult to discuss or work as an organization. Any judgment in relation to the status of an individual's connection or disconnection from Christ is likely to be met with a defensive response from the individual concerned.

2. The understanding that Christians who come to scripture with a teachable spirit and a willingness to be led by the Holy Spirit would always come to the same conclusions does not seem to be

90 Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces that Keep Us Apart* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013). Social psychologist Christena Cleveland suggests that our human tendency to categorize is done in order to protect our identity and self-esteem. But this self-protective mechanism creates division rather than helping our pursuit of unity.

borne out in practice. White's solution was to label individuals who do not come to consensus as disconnected from Christ. But how can it be determined which group is disconnected from Christ? There is no clear answer here.

3. While organization aided unity by creating order, and streamlined communication between diverse geographic areas, it also risked creating disunity by the abuse of power and centralization of power.

Application in the Adventist Church in 2017: What are the lessons that can be learned and that are applicable to the situation today?

1. Unity is at its heart personal and therefore cannot be manufactured or constructed by leaders' wielding their authority or attempting a forced consensus.

2. Unity of purpose and action neither requires nor endorses uniformity of practice. Rather it recognizes that various practices and methodologies are needed in different places and contexts to achieve the one purpose.

3. Authentic unity of the church can only occur between authentic Christians who are united in Christ and are being transformed by his power.

4. Unity involves a variety of relationships within the church: the relationship with God, with doctrine, with individuals, and with the church as a whole. Emphasizing one type of relationship without the others is not sufficient to achieve a visible unity. Rather, all forms of relationship must be nurtured and developed.

5. Personal responsibility needs to be taken by individuals for their own attitudes and actions. The importance of personal attitudes of humility and kindness are often overlooked in discussions as each side attempts to establish that their own view is the correct one. White clearly reprimanded those who considered being right was more important than displaying the character of Christ and truth as it is in Jesus.

6. Our focus should be directed at Jesus who is both the foundation and the creator of unity. Unfortunately, the tendency is often to focus directly on the creation of unity, but the reality

is that unity is not created by Christians, or by their plans. While believers should strive to be united, unity can only occur if we are connected to Christ.