Towards an Authentic Adventist Identity

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In 1988 the South Pacific Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church sponsored a commemorative 'Righteousness by Faith'-conference, co-ordinated by the late Dr. Arthur Ferch. In the book that emerged after that 1988 event Ferch wrote of the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference and the Ministerial Institute that preceded it, 'The proceedings at Minneapolis, both during the institute and the session, highlighted that Christ and his righteousness are and must remain central to the Seventh-day Adventist message and mission.'[1] We do not know precisely what Dr. Ferch had in mind when he chose the title for that book, but perhaps we can detect in it a certain wistful longing for something not yet fully realised: *Towards Righteousness by Faith: 1888 in Retrospect.* If that is true, as well it may be, it underlines the continuing need for a thoroughly Christian Adventism or, perhaps it could be said, an Adventist identity rooted and grounded in the essentials of the basic Christian gospel, with a corresponding emphasis on the person and work of Christ.

The first paper at the 1988 Conference, and subsequently the first chapter of the book, was delivered by Dr. Arthur Patrick. In discussing the need at the time for the church to move beyond what he termed its 'seemingly immoveable posture,' represented by Uriah Smith and George Butler with regard to basic Christian doctrine and the distinctive doctrines of the nascent Advent movement, Dr. Patrick observed, 'The internationalisation of Adventism intensified its need to be seen, unmistakably, as a Christian movement.'[2] With thanks to Dr. Patrick for that important emphasis and with apologies to him for a rather liberal paraphrase, it might be said with equal aptness today, 'The secularisation of Adventism (we refer here chiefly to the church in the Western world) intensifies its need to be and to be seen fundamentally as a thoroughly Christian movement.' The continuing challenge for the church, now with even greater internationalisation and increasing secularisation, is to *be* a thoroughly Christian movement both in doctrine and lifestyle. It is even less acceptable today than it was in 1888 to preach and live merely within the prescriptive guidelines of our name. Seventh-day Sabbath keeping and insistent proclamation of the approaching Second Advent, if indeed these two features may still be claimed as definitive of our church in the Western world, are not enough.

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1 A. J. Ferch, ed., *Towards Righteousness by Faith: 1888 in Retrospect* (Wahroonga, Australia: South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists, 1989), 1.

2 A. N. Patrick, 'Smith, Butler and Minneapolis: The Problems and the Promise of Historical Enquiry,' in: Ferch, ed., *Righteousness by Faith*, 17.

Our task,[3] then, is to go beyond and behind Righteousness by Faith as a mere theological declaration to the substance of what have traditionally been known in Christian theology as christology and soteriology. They are defined in one respected source respectively as, 'The study of the Person of Christ, and in particular of the union in him of the divine and human natures, and of His significance for the Christian faith,' and 'the section of Christian theology which treats of the saving work of Christ for the world.'[4] Our task also is to take these crucial theological categories from the shelf of formal academic consideration and place them once more at the heart of contemporary Adventist Christianity or, if we prefer our own terminology, at the heart of our message and mission.

Before we attempt that, a word or two about the title of this chapter. The word 'authentic' is, I believe, important. It can and should be applied to both Adventism and to the wider Christian faith. There are, it is said, at least twenty-seven different interpretations of Jesus available today and probably as many different versions of Christianity itself. Clearly, not all can be regarded as expressions of authentic Christian faith. Somewhere, at some point, the authentic shades into the spurious and Christianity shades into pseudo-Christianity. There can only be an authentic Adventism if there is an authentic Christianity and if Adventism itself is grounded in that authentic Christianity. Authenticity may prove to be the church's greatest need in the face of the encroaching pressures of secularism, materialism and nominalism which undeniably dog our heels as we continue our journey to the kingdom in a new century few, if any, of our forefathers expected.

We may take our lead from one of evangelical Christianity's most influential and articulate twentieth-century spokesmen. In *Christian Basics* John Stott begins by defining what Christianity is *not*. It is not, he says, primarily a creed, nor a code of conduct, nor a cult, in the sense of cultus, a system of worship. If the essence of Christianity is neither creed, code of conduct, nor cult, then, he asks, What is it? Stott's answer is simple, 'It is Christ.'[5] That may, indeed, sound trite and superficial. It is, however, the truth. 'Christianity without Christ is a frame without a picture, a casket without a jewel, a body without breath,'[6] he says. Obvious as this may seem and regardless of how many times it has been said, it must be re-stated and re-affirmed in any meaningful discussion of Adventist identity. Within the constraints of space and time, we will attempt to extend this simple but essential definition in five directions, each of which we suggest will help to identify authenticity in both historic Christianity and in contemporary Adventism.

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[3] Most of the material in this essay was presented at a Bible conference in Australia in 2006.

[4] F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 3rd ed. 1997), 336, 1520.

[5] J. R. W. Stott, *Christian Basics: A Handbook of Beginnings, Beliefs and Behaviour* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 14-16.

[6] Ibid., 18.

The person of Christ

The person of Jesus, who he was and who he remains today, is the foundation of all else that can be said about him. Everything that Jesus himself said and did, including his death and resurrection, are only meaningful in the light of who he was. So who was he?

It took the Christian church four centuries or more to work out the answer to this question—not because it was doubted, or because the New Testament or the early documents were unclear, but to defend orthodoxy against unorthodoxy and heterodoxy. The formulations of Nicaea and Chalcedon concerning the person of Christ have been re-affirmed in one way or another in statements of faith produced by mainstream Christianity ever since. The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church and the Presbyterian Westminster Confession of Faith, to mention only two, assert the divine-human nature of the Son in the context of a trinitarian theology. A. H. Strong began his persuasive discussion of Christ by considering his 'deity and humanity indissolubly united,' and by arguing 'no mere human genius, much less the genius of Jewish fishermen, could have originated this conception.'[7] The incarnation, in which God became man while retaining divinity, is the irreplaceable cornerstone of all Christian doctrine and practice.

In his classic work on the incarnation, *God Was in Christ*, D. M. Baillie defends the traditional understanding of that event against twentieth-century attempts to revive various christological heresies of the early church period. He speaks of 'the coming into history of the eternally pre-existent Son of God,' and says, 'We confess that while the life lived by Jesus was wholly human, that which was incarnate in Him was of the essence of God, the very Son of the Father, very God of very God.'[8] It was not coincidental that the first section proper of *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine*, published in 1957 in response to problems perceived by leading evangelical Christians in Adventist theology, was entitled, 'Questions about Christ,' or that it dealt with the incarnation, the deity of Christ and his eternal pre-existence.[9] It is illuminating, to say the least, that after more than a century of vigorous preaching and publishing, much of it substantially theological, Adventism in the mid-twentieth century had to re-affirm its commitment to the very foundations of Christian orthodoxy. The publication of *Questions on Doctrine* was, after 1888, a defining moment in Adventist history and the pursuit of authenticity.

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7 A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (London, UK: Pickering and Inglis, 29th Printing, 1981), 186f.

8 D. M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ* (London, UK: Faber and Faber, 1949), 150f.

9 *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1957), 35-86. Section I dealt with 'Preliminary Questions,' including doctrines shared with other Christians, in which it was noted that 'practically all Seventh-day Adventist beliefs are held by one or more Christian groups,' 21.

Few have expressed the beauty and the mystery of the divine-human union better than did Ellen G. White in the aftermath of 1888. Whatever else may be said about Ellen White's writings, they articulated for the church the essential truths of the incarnation and the nature of Christ at a crucial point in our history. *Ministry* magazine did the church a great service in publishing the pamphlet *Christ's Nature During the Incarnation* in 1956, bringing together a comprehensive collection of these Ellen White statements. It is still difficult to find a clearer or more balanced expression of these most basic of Christian truths. Under the sub-headings, 'The Mystery of the Incarnation' and 'Miraculous Union of Human and Divine' we find, amongst much else in this pamphlet, the following:

> Christ was a real man; He gave proof of His humility in becoming a man. Yet He was God in the flesh.[10]
>
> Divinity and humanity were mysteriously combined, and man and God became one.[11]
>
> Was the human nature of the Son of Mary changed into the divine nature of the Son of God? No; the two natures were mysteriously blended in one person—the man Christ Jesus. In Him dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.[12]
>
> He was God while upon earth, but He divested Himself of the form of God and in its stead took the form and fashion of a man.[13]
>
> He veiled his divinity with the garb of humanity but He did not part with His divinity.[14]

In his fine book, *The Man Who is God,* Dr. Edward Heppenstall noted the importance of these truths for the church at large, for the Adventist community in particular, and for lost humanity as a whole, in saying,

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[10] E. G. White, *The Youth's Instructor,* October 13, 1898.
[11] E. G. White, *The Signs of the Times,* July 30, 1896.
[12] E. G. White, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, vol. 5, 1956), 1113.
[13] E. G. White, *The Review and Herald,* July 5, 1887.
[14] E. G. White, *The Review and Herald,* June 15, 1905. All the preceding Ellen White quotations, together with many others dealing with various aspects of the nature of Christ, were published in *Ministry* magazine in September, 1956, and were reprinted and widely circulated in pamphlet form under the title *Christ's Nature During the Incarnation.*

> That God the Creator should Himself condescend to become a creature and imprison Himself within matter He created is an event that defeats logical analysis and rational explanation. But God in Jesus did become flesh, a complete human being. This is the greatest miracle of all time and eternity. It cannot be fully comprehended. It can only be received in grateful adoration.[15]

Heppenstall concludes, 'There is no way to get rid of the incarnation without getting rid of Christianity.'[16] Authentic Adventism stands firmly with historic Christendom in this foundational truth, and is defined by the person of Jesus, God incarnate, the One in whom humanity and divinity were mysteriously and forever conjoined.

The life and death of Christ

There is no possibility of doubt about the death of Jesus as a defining characteristic of true Christianity. For centuries the cross has been the central symbol of the Christian faith. From the very beginning, Jesus' death on Calvary has been crucial to the true faith and to all genuine interpretation of the biblical revelation concerning God's redemptive activity for lost humanity. We shall return to it from an Adventist perspective shortly. But here we emphasise the life, as well as the death, of Jesus to bring a biblical balance to the Catholic and more extreme evangelical emphases on the cross and the sufferings of Christ as the sole expression of God's redeeming activity. Jesus was born, not only to die, but also to live, for lost humanity. God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, from the moment the incarnation took place. One reputable source equates atonement with reconciliation and says, 'It means the work of Christ, culminating at Calvary.'[17] The Christ-event as a whole brings reconciliation, and the Christ-event is God's intervention in human history through the Son, beginning with the incarnation and ending with Christ's return to complete what he initiated during his earthly life. John Macquarrie puts it even more clearly in his *Principles of Christian Theology:*

> Just as we cannot separate the two doctrines of the person and the work, so, when we turn to the doctrine of Christ's work, we may not separate His life and His death ... The cross does, of course, occupy the central place in the doctrine of the atonement, but the cross cannot be understood apart from

[15] E. Heppenstall, *The Man Who is God* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1977), 20. Heppenstall is still regarded by many as one of the most influential Adventist theologians of the later twentieth century.

[16] Ibid., 21.

[17] A. Richardson, ed., *A Dictionary of Christian Theology* (London, UK: SCM Press Ltd., 1969), 18.

> the life which it ended ... We must try to avoid any separation of the life and death. Our attention will indeed be focussed on the death of the cross, but only because this is the finish and culmination of Christ's work. It has its significance only in the context of Christ's life as its climax and summation.[18]

We de-emphasise the life of Christ as part of God's reconciling activity at the serious risk of misunderstanding, even minimising, his great work of expiation and reconciliation. Constrained by space, we will note just three aspects of Christ's work in human flesh that are definitive for both basic Christianity and authentic Adventism.

His sinless life. The classic definition of Chalcedon regarding the sinlessness of Christ has come ringing down through the ages: 'Like us in all things except sin.'[19] This is, of course, but a re-statement of the Pauline assertion in 2 Corinthians 5:21, 'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.'[20] There are again many statements from the pen of Ellen White which affirm the sinlessness of Jesus in words it is impossible to misunderstand. One must suffice. She wrote of Christ taking human nature:

> Christ did not in the least participate in its sin ... He was touched with the feeling of our infirmities, and was in all points tempted like as we are. And yet He 'knew no sin.' He was the Lamb 'without blemish and without spot ...' We should have no misgivings in regard to the perfect sinlessness of the human nature of Christ.[21]

This sinlessness is not something that can be discarded as peripheral. It is the crucial foundation of that righteousness which Jesus provided by living above sin in the flesh as a son of Adam, and which is, in this end-time, Adventism's special contribution to the understanding of God's plan of salvation. Again, in explaining Christ's role in reconciliation and atonement, historic Christianity declares:

> Only the Son of God made flesh could qualify in his righteousness, sinlessness and obedience. Christ is the new Adam of a renewed race which, sin-

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[18] J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (London, UK: SCM Press, Ltd., 1966), 280f.

[19] Richardson, ed., *op. cit.*, 57. See also H. Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 1963), 51. On the Council of Chalcedon, see, for example, the *Dictionary of Christian Theology*, 57f and *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 315.

[20] Biblical references cited in this chapter are taken from the New International Version, unless otherwise stated. The NIV translation of this verse, as is that of the NKJV, is obviously preferable to the AV rendering.

[21] E. G. White, *Signs of the Times*, June 9, 1898; cited in:, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, 1131.

ners though they are, have been begotten of Christ into a new people, acceptable in a righteousness which is Christ's and which he imparts.[22]

His death at Calvary. Of the many things that could be said and re-affirmed of the death of Jesus, we will mention only one. The ninth of the Adventist Fundamentals categorically states, among other things, 'The death of Christ is substitutionary and expiatory ...'[23] This accurately reflects the historic Christian interpretation and is in harmony with Paul's declaration in Romans 5:8, 'While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.' On the cross, Christ took our place. His death was substitutionary, and in being substitutionary it was redemptive. There has been little doubt about that in Adventist theology, although one recent comment is worth noting. Dr. Raoul Dederen speaks of the substitutionary act of Christ that is central to the New Testament specifically in contradistinction to the exemplarist and moral influence interpretations that have found favour with some twentieth-century theologians, including even a few within Adventist ranks. Commenting on the Greek word *antilutron* (literally translated 'ransom-in-lieu-of') he states,

> the force of this combined word ... attests that in Jesus' crucifixion the apostles saw a death endured by one both on behalf of and instead of others, so that in his death Christ took our place, and we no longer need to die eternally if we accept Him as our substitute ... It is on the ground of such biblical statements that a penal substitutionary understanding of the atonement is justified, even enjoined.[24]

When explaining the death of Jesus, John Stott similarly affirms, 'He bore in our place the penalty which our sins had deserved.'[25] Christian literature and Christian hymns repeatedly affirm the substitutionary nature of Jesus' death on the cross as, of course, does Scripture.

His resurrection. The third defining aspect of Christ's earthly life and ministry is his resurrection. It is impossible to over-estimate the significance of the resurrection of Jesus as a defining feature of true Christianity—perhaps *the* defining feature. It was the central theme of the early Christian proclamation, repeatedly emphasised

[22] Richardson, ed., *op. cit.*, 19.

[23] See, for example, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe ... A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines* (Silver Spring, MD: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1986), 106.

[24] R. Dederen, 'The Death of Jesus,' in: Bryan W. Ball and William G. Johnsson, eds., *The Essential Jesus* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2002), 160. See also R. Dederen, 'Atoning Aspects in Christ's Death' in: A. V. Wallenkampf and W. R. Lesher, eds., *The Sanctuary and the Atonement: Biblical, Historical, and Theological Studies* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1981), 292-325.

[25] Stott, *Christian Basics*, 69.

and explained in the preaching of the apostles in the book of Acts. Without it the cross would have been an empty victory. As Michael Green so aptly says, 'The cross and the resurrection of Jesus belong together ... It is not the cross which saves. It is Jesus crucified and risen.'[26] Green defends the resurrection persuasively and at length in his book *The Empty Cross of Jesus*, reminding us that its 'implications are immense.'[27]

Let us be in no doubt here. It is the resurrection which is the real sticking point between belief and unbelief. Modern man can believe easily enough in a dead Jesus, particularly if he was only a wandering Jewish rabbi or a social revolutionary bent on disturbing the present order. But contemporary man finds it difficult, impossible, to believe in a risen, living Jesus. If Adventists are to be authentically Christian, they must defend and proclaim the resurrection of Christ with as much conviction and authority as they proclaim Daniel 2, the Sabbath, the sanctuary, or any other aspect of truth which they regard as important for our age to hear. The sinless life and substitutionary death of Jesus, culminating in his bodily resurrection, are definitive of the original first-century faith and of authentic twenty-first-century Adventism.

The words of Christ

It is not what others say about Jesus, but what he himself says that is ultimately decisive in terms of Christian authenticity. We recall the unsolicited testimony of two disciples on the road to Emmaus as they shared their personal knowledge of him with an unrecognised stranger, 'He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people' (Lk 24:19). Likewise, the objective testimony of the temple guards who had heard Jesus themselves, 'No-one ever spoke the way this man does,' they said (John 8:46). We only have to look at a red-letter edition of the New Testament to know how much of the gospel records are given over to the words of Jesus. These words, even if debatable in the minds of some scholar or another, clearly set forth the beliefs and teachings of Jesus himself, and are therefore fundamental to any interpretation of Christian faith, original or for our time. Again, we attempt the impossible in trying to distill the words of Jesus into two or three paragraphs, but suggest, however, that they fall into at least two crucial categories, which we will propose as definitive—his claims and his teachings.

Firstly, the claims of Jesus. They are truly breath-taking, considered either individually or collectively. The 'I am' claims alone set Jesus apart from any other teacher or religious leader in the history of the human race: '*I am* the light of the world'; '*I am* the bread of life'; '*I am* the good shepherd'; '*I am* the vine'; '*I am* from above'; '*I am* the resurrection and the life'; and of course, '*I am* the way, the truth,

[26] M. Green, *The Empty Cross of Jesus* (London, UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 1984), 3.
[27] Ibid., 124.

and the life.' Then there are all the other claims, equally astounding: 'I and my Father are one'; 'Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father'; 'No one comes to the Father, except through Me'; 'He who comes to Me will never hunger, never thirst'; 'Come unto Me ... and I will give you rest'; 'He who hears my word and believes ... has everlasting life.' C. S. Lewis so rightly said in defending the biblical Jesus against the claim that he was no more that a great moral teacher, 'A man who was merely a man and said the things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher ... ' Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman.'[28] We may quite legitimately preach, teach, and publish about prophecy, Daniel and Revelation, archaeology, the sanctuary, conditional immortality, the spirit of prophecy, or indeed any one of the '28 fundamentals,' but we must never forget that authentic Christianity presses upon people the claims of Jesus.

Then there are his teachings. Where do we start? Again, that which distinguishes Christ and Christianity from all other teachers and world religions is the grandeur, the loftiness, the depth, the universal and eternal relevance of his moral and ethical teachings. We may take the Sermon on the Mount, once described as the 'Magna Carta of the Kingdom,' as representative. Lenski says, 'It presents the entire life in the kingdom, from the first entrance into the kingdom here on earth, to the final consummation of the kingdom in the last judgment.'[29] Consider its teachings again: 'Love your enemies'; 'Do good to those who hate you'; 'Judge not, that you be not judged'; 'Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth'; 'Whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also'; 'Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them.'

Then there are all the kingdom teachings of Jesus, the parables of the kingdom pre-eminent amongst the rest. John Bright introduced his seminal study of the kingdom in the teachings of Jesus with this observation, 'The concept of the kingdom of God involves, in a real way, the total message of the Bible.'[30] We who continually remind people that the preaching of the gospel in all the world is the final sign of the end-time, should remember that the gospel to be preached as a witness to all nations is the gospel of the kingdom, and that the kingdom involved is the kingdom which Jesus inaugurated at the beginning of his ministry and which he said was within those who were true believers. These, together with all the other words Jesus spoke, are truly definitive of authentic Christianity, as they must also be of authentic Adventism. In a sermon preached in an Oxford college

[28] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London, UK: Fontana, 1958), 52. The argument has been borrowed and repeated frequently in the last half century. It is irrefutable.

[29] R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1964), 179.

[30] J. Bright, *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and its Meaning for the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984), 7.

in 1968, shortly after his re-conversion to the Christian faith, Malcolm Muggeridge spoke specifically of the words of Jesus, 'I have conscientiously looked far and wide, inside and outside my own head and heart, and I have found nothing other than this man and his words which offers any answer to the dilemmas of this tragic, troubled time.'[31]

The compassion of Christ

Our considerations to this point have focused on theological truths and conceptual expressions of what constitutes the true Christian faith. For centuries confessions of faith, however limited, have helped both believers and those on the outside to understand just what it is that Christians believe. The written and the spoken word have been highly effective in defending and communicating that faith. Only in relatively recent times, as existentialism has gained ground, have some Christians placed more emphasis on feeling than on understanding. E. L. Mascall's ever-timely plea for the recovery of 'a clear and coherent understanding of the Christian doctrines about God, Christ, man, and redemption'[32] is perhaps even more appropriate today than it was nearly thirty years ago. He gave his book a title in the form of a question, *Whatever Happened to the Human Mind?* We lose the significance of that question in relation to authentic faith at great loss. True Christianity *does* take root in the mind, in the understanding, even though we often talk about Christian experience. 'What *think* ye of Christ?' is perhaps still the most fundamental question of all.[33] But there is another dimension, which we also neglect at great loss.

From the very beginning, Christianity has been marked by compassion and concern for others. Good works *are* the evidence of true faith and we should not allow fear of legalism or the charge of legalism to hide this truth or to prevent us from putting it into practice. Deeds of mercy and the tangible expression of compassion begin with the One of whom it is recorded, 'When he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion.' That is what true Christian compassion always does. It moves people to action. Jesus was moved by compassion throughout his ministry. The first miracle recorded as having been performed by the early disciples after Pentecost centred on a disabled cripple. Christian literature is full of stories of those who have been moved to action in disinterested service for the poor, the needy and the disinherited. The Florence Nightingales and the Mother Teresas

[31] M. Muggeridge, 'Unto Caesar,' a sermon delivered in the chapel of Hertford College, Oxford, UK, November 3, 1968, in *Jesus Rediscovered* (Collins, 1982), 110.

[32] E. L. Mascall, *Whatever Happened to the Human Mind?* (London, UK: SPCK, 1980), ix.

[33] In *The Christian Mind* (1963), Harry Blamires lamented the decline in Christian intellectuals in the latter half of the twentieth century, noting 'the loneliness of the thinking Christian,' 21. It was a valid comment on the growing tendency of the times to emphasize feeling and experience above reason. That trend has not declined.

of this world are of equal value in demonstrating what true Christianity is and explaining it to an unbelieving world as are the Billy Grahams and the George Vandemans.

Francis Schaeffer spoke of the need to practise truth as well as to proclaim it. In an age and in a culture which question the possibility of truth in any absolute sense, and which frequently equate religious truth with psychological truth, Schaeffer argued that if Christians only preach and proclaim what they believe they have thereby undermined their credibility. He points out that the watching world has a right to judge whether Christians are authentic 'on the basis of observable love.'[34] In terms of communicating truth to a sceptical culture Schaeffer states:

> If you think that those who have rejected the plastic culture and are sick of hypocrisy are going to be impressed when you talk about truth and at the same time practice untruth, you are wrong. They will never listen. You have cut the ground from under yourself. We live in a generation that does not believe that such a thing as truth is possible, and if you practice untruth while talking about truth, the real thinkers will just say, 'Garbage!'[35]

Strong words, indeed. In commenting on the Lausanne Covenant for world evangelisation, a document that still shapes the thinking of many evangelicals, and which proposed both preaching and social involvement as necessary to reach the unsaved, John Stott similarly argues that the true gospel of Christ is always defined by 'simple, uncomplicated compassion.'[36]

There is a message here of fundamental importance for people with a long heritage of words, theological arguments and a list of 'fundamentals' which continues to grow.[37] A religion which majors only in words, written or spoken, to the exclusion of actual involvement in meeting the needs of the disadvantaged is never authentic Christianity, regardless of however articulate its advocates may be. Ellen White used the phrase, 'the unwearied servant of man's necessity' in describing the incarnate Christ and stated that the work of his disciples now, as

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[34] F. A. Shaeffer, 'The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century' in *The Complete Works of Francis A. Shaeffer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), vol. 4, 'A Christian View of the Church,' 33.

[35] Ibid.

[36] John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (London, UK: Falcon Books, 1975), 29, 30.

[37] In 1956, when *Questions on Doctrine* was published, Adventists held 22 Fundamental Beliefs. This represented a considerable increase from earlier years. In 1988, when *Seventh-day Adventists Believe ...* appeared, there were 27. In 2005 a further 'fundamental' was added, bringing the total to 28. Given the length of most of these official statements of belief, one wonders just how much is actually 'fundamental,' or whether they could be expressed more succinctly.

always, is 'to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort the suffering and the afflicted.'[38] Howard Snyder even calls for a radical lifestyle that is intentionally counter-cultural and opposed to the contemporary, materialistic lifestyle which insidiously invades the lifestyle of the church. Arguing that affluent Christians are a contradiction in terms and 'out of sequence' with the times, Snyder claims, 'We have forgotten, or rejected, the values of simplicity, plainness and frugality held by our forefathers and most of the world's peoples.'[39] While speaking from within the world's most affluent society, Snyder's comments seem to have something to say to the church in the rest of the Western world, particularly to a church that is concerned with authenticity. If Christians, Adventists included, do not spread the gospel by involvement with the people they are trying to reach, how else can they be the salt of the earth? The question refuses to go away.

The presence of Christ

We have now touched on a number of issues that have traditionally been regarded as crucial to the definition of authentic Christianity.[40] There is one more that demands consideration, for without it Christianity can never be complete or authentic. From the outset it has claimed the attention of Christian writers, mystics and missionaries, saints and sinners, rich and poor, beginning with the writers of the New Testament itself. It concerns two dimensions of the Christian journey, one personal, one corporate, one at either end of the spectrum of Christian life and purpose. At one end is the inner life of the believer, the struggle with temptation and sin and the quest for personal authenticity in an alien world—in Adventist terminology the 'Great Controversy,' in all its facets and as it is played out daily on the battleground of each heart and life. And at the other end, the final accomplishment of the church's mission, a seemingly huge and increasingly impossible task

Throughout the Christian centuries untold millions of believers struggling with the world, the flesh and the devil, have found comfort and strength in the promise of Jesus, 'I am with you always.' One of the most challenging tasks for Christian leaders and those called to explain the word of God to the people has been to make this promise real and to keep it before the church. Paul speaks of 'Christ in you, the hope of glory.' But how can Jesus be with us, when the Bible says that after the resurrection he returned to heaven? And for Adventists, how can he be in us, when we know that he is seated at the right hand of God? Of course, we know the

[38] E. G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1942), 17, 106.

[39] H. Snyder, *Liberating the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 206, 194.

[40] Many of the aspects of christology and soteriology briefly examined in this chapter are dealt with more extensively in Ball and Johnsson, eds., *The Essential Jesus*, published by Pacific Press in 2002, and written by twelve highly-qualified and respected Adventist scholars.

answer, theoretically at least, to this seeming paradox, as Christians through the centuries have known it. They have defined it in terms of a trinitarian theology which recognises the Holy Spirit as the third person of the Godhead, and the One who makes the presence of Jesus a reality.

It is not necessary to recount again the biblical basis of this trinitarian theology, or even the overwhelming evidence of the New Testament for the reality of the Holy Spirit or his indispensable work in the plan of salvation. Let us merely be reminded again that he has been a vital player in the outworking of Christian history at both the personal and the corporate levels from the very earliest days. It is impossible to speak of true Christianity without giving him a prominent place. The so-called Athanasian Creed clearly spelled it out centuries ago: 'The Godhead of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, is all one ... So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. And yet they are not three Gods, but one God.'[41] Adventists believe that too, or at least, most of them do, thankfully. But here again comes the tension between belief and practice, between words and reality, between experience and nominalism, between the normal and the ideal. We cite John Stott once more. After all, we are re-affirming basic Christianity and defining Adventism in terms of that Christianity, and few have expounded basic Christianity in our time better than he has. In *Christian Basics* Stott explains the role of the Spirit in terms which Adventists, especially Adventist leaders, ought readily to understand:

> The Holy Spirit has sometimes been called the 'executive' of the Godhead, meaning that what the Father and the Son desire to do in the world and in the church today, they execute through the Holy Spirit.[42]

He then goes on to explain seven areas in which the Holy Spirit plays a crucial role in the corporate life of the church and in the life of the individual believer, qualifying each of them as specifically Christian: Christian conversion, Christian assurance, Christian holiness, Christian understanding, Christian fellowship, Christian service and Christian mission. At least four of these categories relate to the personal life of the believer, the challenge of *being* a Christian, of *being* an Adventist, in the midst of a very non-Christian culture and surrounded continually by sights and sounds that are definitely non-Christian, if not completely pagan. It is precisely the same kind of culture that surrounded the first Christians, fortified by the promise of Jesus to be with them as they set out to conquer a pagan world. The other three categories relate to the life and witness of the Christian community,

[41] Cited in Stott, *Christian Basics*, 77. On the Athanasian Creed, see for example *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (3rd ed.), 119.
[42] Stott, *Christian Basics*, 78.

all to be influenced, if not dominated, by the presence of Jesus through the activity of the Spirit. We might summarise all this in two words, substance and purpose, content and task, or perhaps, message and mission.

'Message and Mission' is a phrase that has become very familiar to Adventists in the past decade or so. Indeed, it might not be too much to say that for many it has become the catch-phrase which encapsulates our identity. It is a good phrase. It puts succinctly, and in relation to each other, the two essential aspects of our existence and our task as a people. We *do* have a message, and it *is* to be shared. We do have a mission, and it drives us, quite literally, from dawn to dusk, at least at the administrative and pastoral levels, as indeed it should. The message is the content of what we believe, and the mission is the task of sharing it with the unbelieving world—no easy task, as we are constantly reminded. But the message is to be the *whole* Christian message, not just Adventism's prophetic or distinctive features. And the mission is to share *that* message. How can it be accomplished? Only by the presence of Jesus himself, as he promised, specifically with regard to witness, through the presence of the Spirit at every level of activity in the church, not least at the individual and local church levels, where the battle is fought with increasing intensity every day and where Christianity and Adventism are first seen and encountered by the unreached and by them judged as authentic or not.

In our quest for authenticity the presence of Jesus, realised and realisable through the Spirit, is as indispensable as are all other characteristics which distinguish the genuine from the spurious. So, one final quotation:

> There is perhaps no greater need in the contemporary church than that we should be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18). We need Him not only to bring us conversion and assurance, not only to sanctify, enlighten, unite and equip us, but also to reach out through us in blessing to an alienated world like rivers of living water which irrigate the desert.[43]

That could easily be a quotation from any one of a dozen of more Adventist authors. It is, in fact, the statement of an evangelical Anglican and it reminds us in conclusion of the basic affinity, as well as the same fundamental needs, that we share with many of our brothers and sisters in the wider Christian community. Many Adventist writers and preachers have said essentially the same thing many times over. The presence of Jesus, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, is the greatest and most urgent need of the church today, as it has ever been, at every level, to make her message and her daily life before the watching world authentic and her mission a dynamic success. That divine and enabling presence, as indeed

[43] Ibid.

every other feature of the historic faith we have considered in these few pages, is still a defining characteristic of authentic Christianity and of authentic Adventism.

Concluding considerations

Our quest in the foregoing pages has been to identify authentic twenty-first century Adventist Christians. From that perspective it might be said that the substance of what has been written above is more theoretical than experiential, cerebral rather than existential. That could be equally true of those sections of this chapter that deal with the church's mission and the role of the Holy Spirit as it is of those which concern the more obviously theological concepts of christology and soteriology. Indeed, missiology and pneumatology are both recognised categories of academic enquiry and reflection, indexed in many systematic theologies together with christology, soteriology, protology, eschatology, and all other branches of theology as traditionally understood. Moreover, it must be said again that understanding is always prerequisite to action, even in the life of faith and witness. Paul's assertions that he serves God with his mind (Rom 7:25), and that believers are to be transformed by the renewal of their minds (Rom 12: 2), continually call for thoughtful consideration.

Any such criticism would, however, reflect a legitimate concern. Understanding must be translated into experience, both in the life of the individual believer and in the corporate life of the believing community. Authenticity, the central theme of these reflections, must prevail at both levels, the intellectual and the experiential, and in both the personal and corporate life of the church and its members. The stifling, stultifying, stagnating effects of nominalism, secularism and materialism, to say nothing of superficial, uninformed 'belief' which frequently passes for authentic Christianity, must be recognised, understood and rejected.

There is, then, one final consideration. It flows from one word and the concept inherent in that word. The word encapsulates all that we have attempted to articulate with reference to Christian authenticity, in whatever context it may be pursued. This word is used repeatedly throughout the four gospels and the book of Acts. It is one of the best-known words in the Christian vocabulary. It takes us back to Christian origins and to Jesus himself. It has been resurrected in recent years as a vibrant expression of Christian life and responsibility.[44] It is the word 'disciple.' The two-fold meaning of this word, as commonly understood and its actual inherent meaning, together point us clearly in the direction of true Christian

[44] E.g. in the works Donald McGavran, one of the pioneer exponents of Church Growth in the 1970s: *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), ch. 15, 'Discipling Urban Communities,' where discipling clearly means bringing people to believe in Christ and commit their lives to him. Many have since adopted McGavran's terminology.

authenticity. Jesus called men and women, young people and even children, to be disciples. That was his primary concern, the focus of much of his preaching and teaching. If there were but one defining feature of his entire ministry, it would be this. To be an authentic believer in Jesus' day was to be a disciple. It has been so throughout the Christian era.

So, in conclusion we emphasise again the two meanings of this defining and evocative word. For centuries it has been understood that a disciple is primarily a follower of Christ. True disciples are not merely believers, or sympathisers, or those who understand, but those who actually follow. Their initial interest or sympathy or comprehension results in action. 'Come, follow me,' Jesus said to Peter and Andrew, and 'at once they left their nets and followed Him' (Mk 1:17, 18). Kittel states that throughout the New Testament the word almost invariably denotes those 'who have attached themselves to Jesus as their Master,' and that it 'always implies the existence of a personal attachment which shapes the whole life' of the one so described.[45] A disciple is a person who has heard the call of Jesus and who has freely decided to follow him as Lord and Master. Kittel, again, speaks of 'the personal allegiance of the disciples to Jesus' and points out that Christ's call to discipleship results in 'acceptance into personal fellowship.'[46] A disciple is a follower in fellowship with Christ himself.

But there is another, inherent, meaning to the word 'disciple.' There is only one word in the original Greek that is translated 'disciple' in all the more than 250 times that the word appears in the New Testament. It is the Greek word *mathētēs*, and it literally means 'one who is taught,' a 'trained one.' It carries the ideas of 'learner' and 'pupil,' and explains why on occasion the apparent lack of understanding on the part of the disciples was 'a severe burden to Jesus.'[47] An authentic disciple is a follower of Jesus who has been taught. Disciples have been instructed and informed; they have heard, understood and accepted Jesus and all he stands for. And, moreover, they have willingly assented to identify with him and his mission. The call to discipleship is also 'a call to work with Jesus.'[48] It is the outcome of instruction and understanding, no matter what the pedagogical methods may have been or how long the learning process has taken. They *know* that they are disciples, and they know *why*. Authentic discipleship can never be divorced from understanding.

Authentic disciples, then, today as in the first century AD when Christian discipleship first became a reality, understand who Jesus was, and who he now is.

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[45] G. Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (transl. G. W. Bromiley, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), vol. IV, 441.
[46] Ibid., 446.
[47] Ibid., 451.
[48] Ibid., 452.

They accept the New Testament record of his life, death and resurrection as fact and the significance of those facts as reflected in the historic Christian declaration. They have heard the words of Jesus, his claims and his teachings, and have accepted them without condition or reservation. Like Jesus, they see the unheeding, shepherdless multitudes plunging inexorably to oblivion like the Gadarene swine, and they are moved to compassion. They feel drawn to Jesus as did the first disciples, comfortable yet challenged in his presence, continually called by the Spirit to higher ground and to share what they themselves have learned and experienced. Yes, discipleship accurately defines authentic Christians, as it does authentic Adventists, living as they claim to believe they do, in the last age. It always has done, and it always will.

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