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UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN THE SPACE OF GOD'S GRACE

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By John Skrzypaszek ...

INTRODUCTION

Gorden R. Doss defines the Church as a community where "God's Kingdom is revealed as a foretaste of its full revelation at the Second Coming." [1] In the space of God's Kingdom of Grace, such a community moves beyond the terms of fixed definitions, for it represents a vibrant, diversified, pulsating organism "when its members exhibit God through gifts and graces of the Spirit." [2] However, he warns that within the scope of life's journey, the Church can lose the vision of its purpose, requiring that it be converted and reconverted to regain the essence of its significance. The narrative of the Seventh-day Adventist movement reflects the meandering nature of its calling and the prophetic voice's guiding role.

CHALLENGE

In the late 1800s and early 1900s—a time of transitional adjustments to life in a changing world—interpersonal conflicts, theological quarrels, and organizational and administrative tensions clouded the movement's focus on its calling's spiritual nature. This necessitates an injection of new motivation for life mirroring the principles of God's Kingdom of Grace, nurturing creativity, broad-mindedness, tolerance, and a unified diversity of thought. In Ellen G. White's understanding, the underlying problem rested in the movement's separation from the primary source of spiritual life—Jesus: "We need to fix the eye of faith upon the cross and believe that Jesus is our strength, our salvation." [3]

Within the prevailing milieu of theological frictions and authoritarian leadership, she urged the Church to focus on God's vision: "God called for unity in diversity among his people." [4] She also argued, "In the branches of the vine, there is unity in diversity. There is a variety in a tree; scarcely two leaves are just alike. And this variety adds to the perfection of the tree as a whole." The used metaphor underscored the missing element of the movement's pursuits: "In all the representation of truth by different minds, there is to be unity in diversity." [5] One may ask: Why were Ellen G. White's appeals so relevant to the Church's progressive growth?

First, the Church had lost its original spiritual vibrancy and cohesiveness that flourished on the foundations of love and expectations of Christ's return. Recalling the intense depth of the experience, she mused, "None who experienced this hope and trust can ever forget those precious hours of waiting." [6] The genuine faith-oriented conviction of Christ's return elicited a passionate, united commitment in sharing the news. [7]

Second, in the aftermath of the failed expectations, the shattered dream forced the surviving Adventists to search for self-understanding concerning past experiences. It also challenged them to define themselves regarding the future.[8] The consequential nexus encompassing the past and future laid the foundations for a collaborative, interactive, open-minded field of creativity immersed in two essential elements: conviction and a search for meaning. More significantly, it generated an all-inclusive ambiance for diversified views, openness to a progressive understanding of God's revelation, and a relevant response to the nation's social problems.[9]

However, preoccupation with self-understanding, engrossed in the correctness of doctrinal expressions, led to what, in contemporary terms, may be referred to as cultural tribalism, which Onongha defines as "unswerving loyalty to one's group—usually to the detriment of other persons or groups." [10] He describes tribalism's essence in terms of superiority, pride, suspicion, and destructive criticism. One may add authoritarian leadership and judgmental attitudes—characteristics contrary to the principles of God's kingdom of Grace. Such prevailing attitudes enhanced cultural distancing and contributed to a deeply fractious and unsettling spiritual landscape within the community of believers.

No wonder that in 1888, Ellen G.White issued a stern warning: "The correct interpretation of the Scriptures is not all that God requires. He enjoins upon us that we should not only know the truth...We are to bring into our practice, in our association with our fellowmen, the spirit of Him who gave us the truth." [11] In response to the prevailing crisis, Ellen G. White's voice challenged the Church to recapture the spiritually multi-focal vision of God's Kingdom of Grace flowing from the hub of a creative collaboration between conviction and an unceasing search for meaning.

REORIENTATION

In the 1900s, her distinctive call for spiritual reorientation expanded in three significant areas. She advocated a change in the philosophy of mission, a visionary status of identity, and a creatively progressive application of the principles of God's Kingdom of Grace in the changing world.

In its early phase, the movement's missional consciousness rested on the proclamation of distinctive doctrines.

In the 1900s, Ellen G. White challenged the Church to engage in the mission in a fully inclusive way, "not merely by preaching, but by the deeds of loving ministry." [12] She extended the appeal to pastors, medical doctors, nurses, teachers, students, and people from every profession and walk of life. Recognizing the value of human life, gifted with a God-empowered variety of talents, she encouraged the Church to contextualize and adapt the life-inspiring distinctiveness of a Christ-centered message to people's needs—not from a distant proclamation, but the proximity of everyday life. [13] In this respect, her messages focused on the inspirational vision of service to God through every facet of life.

This all-inclusive call demanded a new reorientation and visionary acumen of identity—not in the realm of doctrinal beliefs, but one that stemmed from a spiritual relationship with Jesus. Undoubtedly, a personal, faith-oriented walk with Jesus weaves a softening influence from God's love into the fabric of one's unique individuality. She argued, "God has given each of us an identity of our own, which cannot be merged in that of another." [14] It is evident that Ellen G. White linked identity with the "religion of Christ," meaning "the reflection of the spirit of Christ's life." [15] In other words, a relational, faith-oriented commitment to Jesus restores one's uniqueness and value for a creative engagement with the world.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Conversely, a contemporary writer, Frost, suggests that preoccupation with self, whether individual or institutional, immobilizes the freedom to "step outside oneself to rethink, re-imagine, and re-describe larger reality." [16]

As shown in the diagram to the right, Ellen G. White's visionary reorientation placed the hub of the movement's identity in the life-changing fulcrum of God's Kingdom of Grace. In this space, trust and commitment to God, as revealed in the Bible, enhance openness to the process of modification and renewal expressed in faith relevant to its time and place. This process commences with an individual response to one's journey with Jesus, then spreads its wings of attraction to homes, churches, institutions — finally overflowing with the world's needs.

In her view, identity moves beyond knowledge-oriented, argumentative convictions to what she defines as a "practical religion," [17] i.e., one that enhances unity, but not conformity: "Many people may be brought together in a unity of religious faith whose opinions, habits, and tastes in temporal matters are not in harmony, but if they have a love of Christ glowing in their hearts, and are looking forward to the same heaven as their eternal home, they may have the sweetest and most intelligent communion together and a unity the most wonderful." [18] Moreover, it sanctions creative interpretation of God's revelation in an atmosphere of mutual respect and kindness.

Ellen G.White also envisioned a similar purpose for institutional identity. Institutions and organizations were to maintain individuality, while simultaneously living in harmonious relational unity with other entities: "Union with one another comes through union with Christ. In Him, each institution is united to every other while at the same time, its identity is not merged in that of another." [19] Free of self-oriented love, they were to engage in the harmonious task of expanding God's mission in the world. In Ellen G. White's mind, the harmonized unity between individual identity and the bond of togetherness embraces more than an exercise in semantics and a build-up of territorial comfort zones: "The world needs to see worked out before it the miracle that binds the hearts of God's people together in Christian love." [20]

The united effort to live out God's dream provides the freedom to search for new meanings, renewals, modifications, and creative expressions of faith without fear, for as Ellen G. White expressed, "Every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator—individuality, power to think and to do." [21] In this respect, her visionary motivation inspired the Church to re-imagine a robust future confidently as "thinkers and not mere reflectors of other men's thoughts." She spoke against the movement's progress in terms of status quo or, as suggested by Frost, a "retreat into some fundamentalist us-vs.-them model." [22]

As early as 1892, her words challenged the church leaders: "There is no excuse for anyone in taking the position that there is no more truth to be revealed and that all our expositions of the Scripture are without an error.

The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people is not proof that our ideas are infallible" [23] In her mind, unity in diversity finds its locum in the creative vibrancy of God's space, in which individual minds are united in the bond of togetherness and mutual respect "under the Great Head as branches are united to the vine." [24] Consequently, the healing power of God's grace empowers thought leaders and trendsetters to dream of God's dreams and provide an innovative leadership pathway.

It may be concluded that the nature of Ellen G. White's spiritual reorientation challenged the Church to join God's presence in human suffering to create a space of safety and attraction raised on the foundations of His incomprehensible love and grace—making room for unreserved convictions and an ongoing search for meaning.

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