

From Adventist anthropology to Adventist ecclesiology

When Seventh-day Adventists speak of the church—of the SDA church, to be specific—we typically describe it in global and historical terms. We view it as a worldwide movement with a distinctive message and a specific role to play within the course of human history. Note the titles of two recent publications from the Biblical Research Institute on the topic of Adventist ecclesiology: *Toward a Theology of the REMNANT*¹ and *MESSAGE, MISSION, and Unity of the Church*.² When it comes to the more particular aspects of Christian existence, we typically turn our attention to the experience of the individual Christian. We focus on the elements of a personal devotional life and various standards of behavior, or aspects of the Christian lifestyle. What gets lost, relatively speaking, in our preoccupation with the global and the individual is the importance of the local Christian community. In his 44-page essay on the church in the *Handbook of SDA Theology*, for example, Raoul Dederen devotes approximately one-half page to the topic of “fellowship” within a local congregation.³

This relative lack of attention to the corporate Christian life stands in striking contrast to what we find in the New Testament. Paul’s letters, in particular, devote as much attention to the church local as the church global, and arguably pay far more attention to the life of Christians in close community than the lives of Christians as private individuals. As we shall also see, another reason for us to refocus our attention on the dynamics of congregational life is the wholistic view of humanity that has always played a central role in Adventist doctrines.

Paul’s letters to first-century Christian groups in various cities around the Mediterranean Sea indicate that when it came to the church, the apostle wanted to cultivate among his fellow Christians not only a sense of solidarity with Christians everywhere but also an intimate connection with one another within the specific locale where they lived. And even though he wanted “the intimate, close-knit life of the local groups [to be] seen ... simultaneously [as] part of a much larger, indeed ultimately worldwide, movement or entity,”⁴ it was, as Wayne Meeks observes, “concern about the internal life of the Christian groups in each city that prompted most of the correspondence.”⁵ In other words, the principal object of Paul’s concern was the way Christians interacted with each other within their small local communities.

Though no model from their contemporary society perfectly fits these early Christian congregations, the closest social correlate was “the intimacy of the local household assembly.” Within

¹ *Toward a Theology of the Remnant: An Adventist Ecclesiological Perspective*. “Biblical Research Institute Studies in Adventist Ecclesiology-1. Ed. Angel Manuel Rodriguez (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2009).

² *MESSAGE, MISSION, and Unity of the Church*. “Biblical Research Institute Studies in Adventist Ecclesiology-2. Ed. Angel Manuel Rodriguez (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2013).

³ *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen et al. (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), pp. 561-62. There are, of course, other aspects of the article that apply to the local church, such as the baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

⁴ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 75. In a later work, Meeks identifies “the formation of the Christian groups as house-based communities” (*The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993], p. 45), noting that the household was one of the “constituent structures of the polis” (*ibid.*, p. 38). The urban household, Meeks observes, which was viewed as “the microcosm of the city” in Greco-Roman thought and culture, became the “basic cell” of the early Christian movement (*ibid.*, p. 49).

⁵ *The First Urban Christians*, p. 74.

these communities, as Meeks describes them, “A high level of commitment is demanded, the degree of direct interpersonal engagement is strong, the authority structure is fluid and charismatic . . . , and internal boundaries are weak. . . .”⁶ Moreover, each congregation brought into “intimate fellowship persons of a wide mix of social levels.”⁷ And each congregation “enjoyed an unusual degree of intimacy, high levels of interaction among members, and a very strong sense of internal cohesion and of distinction both from outsiders and from ‘the world.’”⁸ In his earlier letters, Robert Banks observes, the apostle only uses the word “church,” or *ekklesia*, to refer to specific groups of people, probably never more than thirty or so, who met together on a regular basis.⁹

Because the Christian life as Paul envisioned it is essentially life together, life characterized by close relations with other Christians, the apostle was distressed when he received reports that there were disharmony among them, or that some members were slighting those who had less wealth or worldly status. He was dismayed, for example, to learn that there was jealousy and quarreling among the Christians in Corinth (1Cor 3:3), along with divisions and factions (11:18-19), and that some disregarded the needs of other when they had their communal meals. Indeed, his beautiful description of love appears within an extended appeal to the Christians in that city to care for, rather than elevate themselves above, one another (1Cor 12-14).

We find even more striking evidence of the importance Paul attached to the internal life of the community in the fact that his letters say little about the relationships of Christians to those outside the community and next to nothing about sharing their faith with non-Christians. According to Robert Banks, “Nothing in Paul’s writings suggests that the gathering of believers has a *direct* function vis-à-vis the world.” The “body” metaphor “basically refers to the interaction of the members with one another, not with outsiders.”¹⁰ And a careful analysis of Paul’s letters leads Terence Donaldson to reject the popular notion that Paul saw the churches he helped to establish as centers for further proselytizing. To the contrary, there is a striking absence from Paul’s letters of any attempt to mobilize his congregations for ongoing evangelistic activity.¹¹ “Nowhere,” he exclaims, “do we find [in Paul’s letters] a single injunction to evangelize!”¹² So it was not the relation between the church and the world, not the way Christians treated people outside the

⁶ Ibid., p. 190.

⁷ Ibid., p. 191.

⁸ Ibid., p. 74.

⁹ According to Robert Banks, “In these early letters of Paul [1-2 Thess, 1 Cor, Gal, Rom], the term *ekklesia* consistently refers to actual gatherings of Christians as such, or to Christians in a local area conceived or defined as a regularly assembling community. . . . The word does not describe all the Christians who live in a particular locality if they do not gather. Nor does it refer to the sum total of Christians in a region or scattered throughout the world at any a particular time” (Banks, p. 35).

¹⁰ *Paul’s Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in their Cultural Setting* (rev. ed.; Hendrickson, 1994), p. 64.

¹¹ Terence L. Donaldson, “The Field God Has Assigned: Geography and Mission in Paul,” in Leif Vaage (ed.), *Religious Rivalries in the Early Roman Empire and the Rise of Christianity* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), p. 112. Donaldson takes exception to some of the prevalent views of Paul’s ministry and its intended results. He argues that it was not the Apostle’s conscious strategy to plant churches around the Roman Empire with the intention that they would extend a program of evangelization. Nor was the eventual success of Christianity the result of a deliberate and organized program of mission (p. 109). See also Donaldson’s paper, “The Absence from Paul’s Letters of Any Injunction to Evangelize” (Society of Biblical Literature, Annual Meeting, Nashville, TN, November 19, 2000).

¹² Donaldson, p. 118.

community, that occupied Paul, but relations within the community, the way Christians treated each other.

Indeed, in the judgment of various New Testament scholars, Paul's profound concern for harmony within these early Christian communities not only appears in the parenthetic portions of his letters; it was also the motivating factor behind his theology. For Gunther Bornkamm, for example, the gospel of justification by faith alone was a "specifically Pauline creation," and it was this doctrine that "gave the unity of the church composed of Jews and Gentiles its first real theological basis."¹³ And according to Rudolf Bultmann, Paul used the metaphor the "body of Christ" to express "the unity of the Church and the foundation of this unity in an origin transcendent to the will and deed of individuals...."^{14 15}

In Paul's writings, then, the life Christ makes available takes its primary form in the fellowship of local Christian congregations. And when he gave practical spiritual advice, he was thinking primarily of the way people interacted with the fellow believers whom they knew well and frequently associated with. The central object of concern that comes to expression in Paul's letters was the life Christians shared within small, concrete communities of faith.

Besides the apostolic emphasis on the importance of congregational life, there is another reason for Adventists to give more attention to the cultivation of close, nurturing relationships. And that is the wholistic, or non-dualistic, anthropology that has always been a central Adventist doctrine.

Though Adventists have not, to my knowledge, taken wholistic anthropology in this direction, there are scholars who have, and their conclusions have important implications for our understanding of the church. Two of them are Warren S. Brown and Brad D. Strawn, authors of *The Physical Nature of Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology, and the Church*.¹⁶

This study further develops the position presented in *Whatever Happened to the Soul?* which Brown coedited with Nancey Murphy and H. Newton Maloney. This earlier work makes a case for "non-reductive physicalism," as the contributors call it, the view that human beings are not incidentally, but essentially, physical in nature. They conclude from neurological phenomena such as localization—the intimate connection between various human experiences and specific

¹³ Gunther Bornkamm, *Paul*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1969). p. 115.

¹⁴ The *ecclesia*, says Bultmann, "is not a club in which like-minded individuals have banded together...; [nor] a conglomeration of the Spirit-endowed, each of whom has and enjoys his private relationship to Christ. ..." Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (2 vols.; New York: Scribner's, 1951, 1955), 1:310.

¹⁵ If we follow the lead of these scholars, it may be possible for us to view the elevated themes presented in Ephesians 1-3, for example, as a theological preface to what lay most heavily on the apostle's mind, namely, the concrete lives of his readers [or hearers], especially the quality of their relationships to one another. Note this pivotal text Ephesians 4:1, "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called." Read this way, the trajectory of Paul's communication reaches its apex in the second three chapters of the letter, where his thought moves not from primary to secondary concerns, but from theological premise to concrete, practical conclusion. Similarly, Paul's insistence on grace rather than works in Galatians was prompted by a breakdown in Christian fellowship, viz. Peter and Barnabas's withdrawal from table fellowship with Gentiles (Gal 2:11-12). And a clear understanding of the doctrine leads to the recognition that in Christ, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28)—a belief that has profound implications for the concrete way Christians treat one another.

¹⁶ New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

regions of the brain—that while a human being cannot be reduced to a mere sequence of neurochemical events, human existence necessarily requires a physical form of some sort, that is, a body. And since body and person are intimately connected, one’s physical state or condition exerts an important influence on all aspects of one’s experience, intellectual, emotional, social, etc.¹⁷

In this more recent work, Brown and Strawn argue that human beings are not only embodied in physical forms but embedded in a physical world surrounded by other embodied human beings, and that the formative factors in our personal development are almost exclusively interpersonal. To explain how relationships shape us, the authors appeal to the theory of complex dynamical systems, according to which complex characteristics like minds and personalities can emerge from ongoing interactions involving millions of parts. A collection forms a “system” when the individual parts function as a unity. And a system is “dynamical” in the technical sense when it has the capacity to reorganize in response to changes in the environment. Physically embodied, socially embedded in the world, and participating in various dynamical systems, the human self or person is subject to continual growth and transformation.

If we bring these insights to bear on religious experience, they lead to significant conclusions. One is the realization that wholistic anthropology and spiritual individualism are incompatible. According to Brown and Strawn, the familiar notion that authentic spirituality is intensely private is the consequence of the anthropological dualism that dominated Christian thought through much of its history. For those who conceive the soul as an immaterial reality distinct from the body, it is natural to regard one’s spiritual life as basically individual and inward and to view the relationships Christians have with one another as incidental to their spiritual identity. Connecting with other church members has no vital role to play in one’s spiritual life, and participating with others in worship and service is reduced to a matter of personal preference. Such an outlook makes genuine Christian community impossible. A mere collection of people who “swarm” at the same time and place could never become more than a loose association of the independently spiritual. It could never become a body in any significant sense, let alone “the body of Christ.”¹⁸

Viewed from the perspective of wholistic anthropology, however, personal spirituality is not only closely connected to community, personal growth is actually a by-product of congregational growth. Because the processes of human formation in general are primarily social, spiritual growth as well is social and interpersonal. So, if human beings are both physically embodied and socially embedded, spiritual growth can only occur within community, indeed, within close-knit communities comprising highly interactive constituents. An important element in personal growth, say Brown and Strawn, including spiritual growth, is the development of “secure attachments,” and this can only occur within groups of people who spend significant time together and learn to trust one another. It cannot happen when groups are too large or when members

¹⁷ *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature*, ed. Warren S. Brown, Nancy Murphy, and H. Newton Malony (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998). Nancy Murphy presents further neurological evidence for “physicalism” in *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Joel B. Green argues that a careful consideration of both biblical and scientific evidence supports a wholistic view of humanity in *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

¹⁸ Brown and Strawn, p. 120.

meet together only sporadically. Other elements include imitation, and shared attention, and empathy, as well as language and story.¹⁹

Furthermore, in a dynamical system, that is, one in which significant growth can take place, there is reciprocal interaction between the individuals and the group. In a family, for instance—a good example of such a system—influence flows from the individual to the group, and from the group back to the individual. As a result of these interactions, the roles family members play will be flexible, and the group as a whole proves to be more than the sum of its individual parts. “Families and churches develop capacities that go well beyond the singular capacities of any of the individuals in the family or church.”²⁰ Dynamical systems are formed and re-formed by “catastrophes,” that is, changes in situations in which the self or group is no longer able to deal adequately with the circumstances at hand.²¹ So, the church is not a vague collective, the sum total of the members’ individual experiences. Rather, the experience of the individual members is a reflection of, indeed a product of, the corporate experience of the community.

Brown and Strawn also consider another factor that has important implications for our views of the church. From the study of primate communities, scientists have concluded that the size of an ideal group is related to the brain size of the species. The greater a species’ brain size, they have discovered, the larger the typical group its members form. Anthropologist Robert Dunbar compared the typical size of a stable and flourishing group in 36 primate species with the average size of the cerebral cortex of the brain of each species, and found a significant linear relationship—the larger the brain, the larger the typical group. If we project the maximum size of a stable and flourishing group of humans given the size of the human brain, we reach what is known as the “Dunbar number.” According to Dunbar, “The cognitive limit to the number of individuals with whom any one person can maintain stable relationships is a direct function of relative neo-cortex size,” and that number is 150 persons.²²

Although the ideal number of persons who can form an effectively functioning community is around 150, this is too large a group for truly effective interaction. In contrast, the size of an “optimally meshed network,” one in which there are at most two relational steps between each member, is 50 persons. And the size of a “totally meshed network,” one in which members have direct connections with each other, is about twelve people.²³

Brown and Strawn’s observations are both informative and provocative. For one thing, they challenge a great deal of conventional thinking about the nature of Christian spirituality. If human beings are indeed physically embodied and socially embedded, there is something profoundly mistaken about the religious individualism that is so pervasive today.²⁴ If interpersonal relationships are not incidental to human identity, but constitutive of it, then we can be fully spiritual, as we can be fully human, only in community. And if the church is to be a body in any significant

¹⁹ Brown and Strawn, p. 101.

²⁰ Brown and Strawn, p. 129.

²¹ Brown and Strawn, p. 112.

²² Quoted in Brown and Strawn, p. 136. In a recent op-ed piece in the *Los Angeles Times*, Amy Alkon uses Dunbar’s conclusions to explain why people are rude to one another. The reason, she argues, is that we are forced to interact with far too many people. “We are rude because we are now living in societies too big for our brains.” (*Los Angeles Times*, September 25, 2014, p. A15).

²³ Brown and Strawn, p. 137. Hard not to think of the number of Jesus’ disciples in this connection!

²⁴ Cf. the popular mantra, “I’m spiritual, but I’m not religious.”

sense, if it is to function as a “dynamical system,” to use their terminology, it will take shape in relatively small communities—communities, that is, whose limited size enables their members to interact with one another in sustained and profoundly personal ways.

These observations also challenge a good deal of our conventional thinking about the Adventist church, including such things as congregational size, the measure of denominational success, and the nature of the church’s mission. If an essential purpose of the church is to cultivate significant interpersonal relationships, and this can only happen in relatively small groups, then the formation of such groups should be a high priority. In the case of large churches, those with hundreds or thousands of members, church can happen, or the body of Christ can be realized, one could argue—dynamical systems can exist—only within small groups, or “churches within the church.”

The conclusions presented in *The Physical Nature of Christian Life* also suggest an adjustment in our vision of the church’s mission. Seventh-day Adventists have a strong sense of global identity. We are eager to learn about our fellow believers in various parts of the world, especially in places where church membership is growing remarkably or where church members are facing serious challenges. We are regularly reminded of the important role that church officials play in coordinating the church’s various activities, clarifying its doctrines, and establishing uniform policies for the entire membership. The world church is waiting, with anticipation and concern, for the General Conference to make official pronouncements on a number of pressing questions. We value our denominational institutions, which only a strong, well-integrated organization could create—in particular, our extensive educational system, our well-known medical facilities. We are pleased to hear that our numbers are increasing and our various institutions are thriving.

What does not get much attention by comparison is just what Brown and Strawn maintain is vital to the church conceived as the body of Christ, namely, the deliberate cultivation of strong relationships within local congregations. If these scholars are on the right track, something more is needed than the concept that the church is primarily a worldwide movement identified by a message that is conceived as a set of doctrinal convictions. A collection of individuals does not constitute the church if it is defined only by a unified organization, commonly held beliefs, and similar religious practices. Church truly exists, their observations indicate, and the church’s mission finds fulfillment, only where there is genuine community, that is, only when relatively small groups of Christians join together to form close, caring relationships of the sort that the Apostle Paul earnestly encouraged in the letters he addressed to various groups of believers in the world of late antiquity.

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