Alliance With The Offshoots: Is This The Church Or Should We Look For Another?

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1. Introduction

As Seventh-day Adventists, we believe that the Church of Laodicea in Revelation 3:14-21 is a vivid depiction of the Remnant church in these last days. Hence, though we claim to be different from other denominations, we do not claim to be perfect. It is not a mistake to belong to this church that has no single commendation from Jesus. And yet, it is to this same Church that Christ says, "behold I stand at the door and knock..." (Rev 3:20).[1]

Nevertheless, in our circles men have arisen not so much as to remind us of our imperfections but to try and divide the Church by asserting that the church is in apostasy. Some have even gone as far as accusing the Church leaders of working in alliance with the Papacy hence concluding that the Seventh-day Adventist Church had now become Babylon.[2]

Unfortunately, whenever such men arise, they find reception especially among influential members of the Church. What makes the situation even more serious is when members of the Church are keener to listen to them than to their own leaders. Of such Ellen G. White warns:

> Rebellion and apostasy are in the very air we breathe. We shall be affected by it unless we by faith hang our helpless souls

[1]Unless otherwise stated, all Bible references are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

[2]One just needs to type "Seventh day Adventist Church and Babylon" to see how many articles are there that purport this view and surprising enough some quote Ellen White in doing so.

> upon Christ. If men are so easily misled, how will they stand when Satan shall personate Christ, and work miracles? Who will be unmoved by his misrepresentations, professing to be Christ when it is only Satan assuming the person of Christ, and apparently working the works of Christ? What will hold God's people from giving their allegiance to false christs?[1]

And then she continued to point out what seems to me to be the most foundational issue, "the doctrines must be plainly understood."[2] We have reached a time in our history, when some of our members are asking whether this is still the Church that was to come (as the Remnant), or they should look for another."[3] The purpose of this paper shall therefore is to show that in spite its perceived faults here and there, this Church, now militant, will be the one that shall stand triumphantly on Mount Zion. Rather than spending much of our time looking for faults, we should be working to make our election sure. Because of the nature of the topic in relation to the Seventh day-Adventist Church, this paper put much emphasis on the Spirit of Prophecy (SOP) books by Ellen G. White, though a few other authors on the similar topic will be cited as well.

2. Definitions

The term offshoots (OS) in this paper shall generally refer to all the different groups that are secretly or openly discrediting the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Many are still within the church while a few have openly severed their connection with the Church. They are often referred to by different terms that include, Davidians, Reformers and Home Groups etc. The main focus of this paper is to those still in the church and the influence they exert on the members of the church.

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[1]Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C: Review and Herald, 1980), 3:58..

[2]Idem, *Letter 1*, 1897.

[3]Robert H. Person, *We Still Believe* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1975), 9-18. Here elder Person, then President of the General Conference of the SDA church attempted to answer a series of questions from members who wanted to know where the church was headed for. It is clear that the people sought to understand whether the SDA church was still God's church or there was need to look for another.

The term OS is defined as, "a side shoot on a plant or a thing that develops from something else,"[1] while the term alliance mean "a union or association formed for mutual benefit, a relationship based on an affinity."[2] Basing on these definitions, alliance with OS therefore would refer to loyal members of the Church working hand in hand with those who though physically are in the Church are not moving in the same direction with the Church. Then you may ask, "How could loyal members work hand in hand with OS?" Well, it is not easy for any of us to understand. But Ellen White puts it this way,

Oh, how deceptive is the human heart! How easy it is to harmonize with that which is evil! There is nothing more detrimental to the soul's interest, its purity, its true and holy conceptions of God, and of sacred and eternal things, than constantly giving heed to and exalting that which is not from God. It poisons the heart, and degrades the understanding.[3]

3. How OS Operate

The OS' operations to different churches vary from one place to another. However, there are certain things they do that seem to be common in their approach. First they will come to a church as mere Adventist visitors. Then they will try to identify some apparent and assumed weaknesses and those members disillusioned by them.

Next, they will Secretly begin to spread their teachings through the Sabbath School units, prayer groups, bible studies, and home studies. This is where small groups become a curse instead of a blessing. Those connected with some groups abroad will then begin to send free books, magazines, cassettes and DVDs. One may ask, "Who doesn't want free things?" First they will send the obvious Adventist books like the Desire of Ages, Great Controversy etc, but later they will slowly begin to introduce the materials that propagate their agenda knowing that they have already won somebody's confidence.

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[1]"Offshoot," *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, Tenth Edition on CD-ROM 2001 Version 1.1(UK: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[2]Ibid.

[3]White, *Selected Messages*, Book 2, 78.

4. OS Main Target Groups

Having carefully studied the situation at a given local church, the OS will first target the influential members of the Church. They will go for people they know can continue with their work though they themselves are not there. They will go for the very talented members of the church. Here we see how Satan seems to have a greater appetite for the gifted.

A specific group of people that is targeted are the elders. They know the elders will give them a platform in the church. Among the elders their easiest prey seems to be those who were quickly rushed into positions of responsibility and thus not grounded in the truth. This White observed when she wrote

> In many places we meet men who have been hurried into responsible positions as elders of the church when they are not qualified for such a position. They have not proper government over themselves. Their influence is not good. The church is in trouble continually in consequence of the defective character of the leader. Hands have been laid too suddenly upon these men.[1]

Another group targeted by the OS is the young people. They will sneak into their youth camps and meetings especially those that do not have the representation of the elders. Thus, these OS will assume the role of the elders, win the confidence of the young people and soon begin to manipulate them. Thus, they take advantage of their innocence and energy.

Women groups in the church are another easy target for the OS. Again, here they will try to identify women who are either influential or those disillusioned by either things at home or at church. All in all, women are targeted because of either their innocence or seemingly assumed ignorance of the knowledge of the scriptures.

Still other groups include those already dissatisfied with the Church and the way it is run. It could be those under church discipline, those who did not get the positions they had hoped for and more often than not those cherishing secret sin. Thus, the OS will easily get to them as their sympathizers and wanting to promote their warfare. Commenting on the rebellion of Korah White adds

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[1]White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 4:406.

that "to those who are in the wrong, and deserving of reproof, there is nothing more pleasing than to receive sympathy and praise."[1] So, with people showing them to be heroes, those getting the sympathies of the OS are ready to prove their innocence usually by going to another extreme in trying to show their innocence and abilities.

5. Points of Contentions

The points of contention by the OS are many and vary not only from time to time, but also from one place to another. These among many include health reform issues; posture in prayer, leadership, finances, some procedures and policies, gender issues, church organization, and anything proving to be a bone of contention in any locality. From the above, I will make some comments on those that deserve further clarification.

The first bone of contention needing a discussion is on the issue of posture in prayer.[2] While I do not believe that there is a biblical support for kneeling as the only posture in prayer, I sometimes wonder if at all we really kneel enough in most of our congregations. On the other hand it is also important to note that it is possible to be on a kneeling position in terms of posture while one is actually standing in terms of the attitude of the heart.

The second issue is that regarding leadership. One of the major concerns is the spirituality of the leaders. For instance open sins of some leaders naturally attract the attention of the OS. Unfortunately instead of looking at those individuals concerned, all they see in them is the church. Of course there is a general understanding that the spirituality of the church is not expected to be higher than its leaders. But even then one should be able to distinguish between a leader's personal weakness and what the church stands for. On the other hand, it is true that leaders must set the pace. It is disheartening to the flock to hear of the leaders' active roles in what has come to be known as "child spacing," that is leaders having children with different women who are not their wives in different places. Thus we read,

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[1]White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Washington, D.C: Review and Herald, 1958), 397.

[2]Idem, *Counsels on Health* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1957), 362. It is interesting to note that though here many use White for their argument she here says one cannot always kneel to pray; cf; White, *Selected Messages*, Book 2, 315, 316..

> The reason why our preachers accomplish so little is that they do not walk with God. He is a day's journey from most of them.... It is the carelessness and looseness of professed ministers of Christ that gives them so little influence. There are many professors, but there are few praying men. If our preachers were men who prayed more in secret, who carried their preaching into practice in their families, who ruled their houses with dignity and gravity, their light would indeed shine to those around them.[1]

The third and fourth issues have to do with finances and certain procedures and church policies. Many OS tend to advocate for an informal ministry. Usually, this is motivated by the desire to have access to the members' finances. Hence, they teach that tithe can be given to whoever is preaching the word of God. Some OS have also tended to question anything that will promote their agendas.

In fact the OS are not even united at to exactly what they should question. What may be questioned by one group in one locality may be accepted by another or even the same group in another locality. Sometimes queries are raised on as small issues as time for eating the Lord's Supper, that is whether day time or at night, whether we need a Church manual to guide us in running the church or not and sometimes issues of Bible versions used in our study guides or sermons. Others even claim that since Christ alone is their leader, then they don't need to listen to anyone else. In doing this, they assume their getting to a higher level of holiness that only God knows too well. Nevertheless, of such White writes

> This questioning, criticizing, denouncing, passing judgment on others, is not an evidence of the grace of Christ in the heart. It does not produce unity. Such work has been carried on in the past by persons claiming to have wonderful light, when they were deep in sin. Heresy, dishonesty, and falsehood were all blended in them.[2]

The fifth and sixth bones of contention are the claims that it is now time for home churches that are independent of the mother body. This view is motivated by the presupposition that the church organization has now become Babylon, hence a call to come out of it. These claims are of course not new, for we read

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[1]White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 1:434.

[2]Idem, *Selected Messages*, Book 2, 78.

> Some have advanced the thought that as we near the close of time, every child of God will act independently of any religious organization. But I have been instructed by the Lord that in this work there is no such thing as every man's being independent.... And in order that the Lord's work may advance healthfully and solidly, His people must draw together.[1]

As regards calling the church as Babylon again White has this to say

> When men arise, claiming to have a message from God, but instead of warring against principalities and powers, and the rulers of the darkness of this world, they form a hollow square, and turn the weapons of warfare against the church militant, be afraid of them. They do not bear the divine credentials. God has not given them any such burden of labor.[2]

While White recognized that the church may not be perfect, she was convinced beyond doubt that it was still Christ's church. This conclusion did not come from without, rather it arose from a critical examination of its history and where the church was destined for. Thus she wrote

> In reviewing our past history, having traveled over every step of advance to our present standing, I can say, Praise God! As I see what God has wrought, I am filled with astonishment, and with confidence in Christ as leader. We have nothing to fear for the future except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history.[3]

Finally, the OS are ready to use as a bone of contention whatever is causing a division in a particular region. If it's the issue of women ordination or gay marriage as long as in supporting one view or another there will be divisions in the church they make it an issue. As regards theological issues, many issues they raise are simply a misinterpretation of Scripture and the SOP. Thus, one can comfortably conclude that there are really no sound theologians with real theological issues among the OS.

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[1]White, *Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 487..

[2]Idem, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1962), 23.

[3]Ibid., 31.

6. Impact of OS Presence

The presence of OS in our churches has wrought untold havoc. Men and women start battles to which they soon realize they themselves as initiators have no power to stop. Some of them, even after reuniting with the church they once fought, live to regret to see the continuation of their earlier works which end up going beyond where they had not thought of going. Nevertheless, the impact of the OS has not only brought negative effects, but also positive ones.

7. Negative Effects of OS Presence

Among the negative effects we have suspicion leading to accusations and counter-accusations. The promotion of lies and loss of confidence in the church and its leadership leading to loss of love in the church are among the sad effects. Furthermore, in their attempt to get rid of these OS other churches have ended up losing their first love for Christ. This has resulted to even physical violence in some places.

Some OS have unlawfully taken over the running of some churches at times, at other times they have locked the doors of the church as a way of showing their zeal for the Lord. The end result is that church growth has been hampered as new members begin to witness the unheard of. The whole drama is a vivid picture of the following description; "They are critical, divisive, {sic} negative. They tend to pull down rather than build up. Their stock in trade is judging, blaming, and criticizing. Their speciality is pointing out the sins of leadership."[1]

8. Positive Effects of OS Presence

Whenever God allows something to take place no matter how it may be disturbing, it is vital to understand that He also knows the positive that can come out of it. Thus, even in the midst of the above mentioned ill- effects, positive effects of the presence of the OS can be seen. The church in African as a whole has been enjoying steady

[1]Philip W. Dunham, Maylan Schurch, *Blinded by the Light: The Anatomy of Apostasy* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2001), 102.

growth in membership. The encounters with the OS have in a way come to test the quality of the growth we glory in.

Among the positives we can cite include the church's being awakened to the importance and need to study both the Bible and the SOP. In other words, the OS have revealed areas that need to be strengthened. Thus, as the offshoots misquote the Scripture and the SOP, members and pastors are compelled to study even more. Further, as they point to weakness of some leader here and there, it only becomes a call to prayer for the cleansing and taking our positions of leadership more seriously. White boldly declared

> I have been shown that deceptions like those we were called to meet in the early experiences of the message would be repeated, and that we shall have to meet them again in the closing days of the work. At this time we are required to bring all our powers under the control of God, exercising our faculties in accordance with the light He has given.[1]

9. Conclusion

The church of Christ today is the church militant though tomorrow it will be the church triumphant. Casualties may present themselves, here and there, but it is still the church of God. Rather than work to attack it, we would do well to examine ourselves and make sure whatever we are doing is helping us become more like Jesus. Both to the OS and members of the church, there is need to reflect on our actions so as to make sure we are in the faith and not a stumbling block to another. To the question as to whether this is the church, I recommend you to study the message to the church of Laodicea and realize that it is to this Church that Christ knocks at the door in spite of its not having received any commendation.

10. Recommendations

This paper has been more of a result of what I have experienced in the field than just a scholarly work. So, the following recommendations are what proved to be helpful in curbing the negative effects of the OS.

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[1]White, *Selected Messages*, Book 2, 28.

1. Employ and Train more pastors
2. Pastors to spend more time training the elders
3. Need to nurture members to be able to stand on their own
4. Turn members into soul winners
5. Teach history of the Church
6. Teach the doctrine of the sanctuary, show how man is saved
7. Teach Principles of interpreting Scripture and the SOP
8. Equip pastors with E. G. White CDs
9. As leaders we should by God's grace strive to be examples to the flock.