

## **“The dilemma we must face, and not only in Battle Creek”**

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**“Councils err and have erred.”**

Martin Luther

### **Introduction**

*The General Conference ADCOM on 07-17-18 has published a paper: „REGARD FOR AND PRACTICE OF GENERAL CONFERENCE SESSION AND GENERAL CONFERENCE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE ACTIONS“ to be presented and voted on at the Annual Council of the GC Executive Committee in Battle Creek, October 2018.*

*This paper reacts to the fact that in some areas constituencies began ordaining female pastors - in contradiction with the San Antonio decision.*

*This dilemma will not, and cannot be solved administratively. We therefore must look for a spiritual, biblical way out.*

*The Book of Acts reports about a process in the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court. This process may serve as a precedent case. There are significant similarities between the Sanhedrin in times of the apostles, and the GC Executive Committee in our church of today.*

*Sometimes it happens: at a certain point it is no longer the original problem which causes troubles, but the way the crisis is managed. Here the same.*

**I**     ***The Sanhedrin and the General Conference: both are last instance bodies.*** Decisions of both were and are binding as law, not recommendations.

**II**    ***Loyalty toward the Sanhedrin and the General Conference:*** As loyal and God fearing citizens the apostles never questioned the authority of the Sanhedrin. They never would have acted against its decisions, except in a conflict of loyalties. So even when confronted with the threat of death (Acts 4:19,20,33; 5:29) the apostles would follow their Lord - and their conscience.

After San Antonio, 2015, a number of SDA Unions in different divisions felt unable to react positively to the vote of San Antonio. They too normally never would question the authority of the General Conference. If these men refuse obedience to our worldwide church, then it is because of a serious conflict of loyalties.

### **III *Serious decisions by the Sanhedrin concerning the church, and the apostles***

1. After the death of Jesus it has been officially ruled by the Sanhedrin: „The body of the dead Jesus has not been resurrected, but been stolen by his disciples (Math 28:13); in opposition to this ruling Peter, Paul and all the apostles were preaching that Jesus had been risen from the dead (Acts 4:1,2) A serious challenge to the Sanhedrin.
2. On several occasions therefore the apostles were banned from publicly speaking of Jesus under threat of punishment (Acts 4:17, 18:5,40)
3. Because of their insubordination the apostles were sentenced to death. (Acts 5:33)

The apostles did not question the authority of the Sanhedrin, but they formulated this still valid key sentence: „*We must obey God rather than men!*“ (Acts 5:29)

### **IV *How did the apostles survive the death penalty?***

We know the story: a highly honored member of the Supreme Court, the Sanhedrin, Gamaliel, rose up with this appeal: **First:** „Men of Israel, take care what you are planning to do to these men!“ (Acts 5, 35) **Second:** „My advice is, leave these men alone. **Third:** If what they teach and do is merely on their own, it will soon be overthrown. **Forth:** But if it is of God, you will not be able to stop them, and, **fifth,** you may find yourselves fighting against God“ (Acts 5:39)

For any political or religious governing body it is unreasonable to admit: "Maybe we are wrong, maybe we have erred."

The Jewish Supreme Court did not officially withdraw its judgement. But, the council accepted Gamaliel's advice, and finally let them go (Acts 5:40) In fact the Sanhedrin officially accepted reason of conscience in a religious issue. And, at least, the Sanhedrin considered his own capacity for error possible. Gamaliel's words, caused by the Holy Spirit as we believe, opened the door to freedom for the apostles.

### **V *Parallels to the situation in our church***

This biblical case may be compared with what happened with the vote of San Antonio and thereafter. It also has to do with the next session of the GC Executive Committee.

- If Gamaliel's voice still could be heard, most likely this could be his message: „Men and women of the GC Executive Committee - take care what

you are planning to do with these unions and persons. You will not stop them in what they do.“

- Who are those who resist the vote of San Antonio? Are they rebels? For many years, most of them for their lifetime, were and still are dedicated, spiritual and loyal leaders in this church. Their service is based on their faith in God, and on the confidence of their constituency. Are they really to be punished as the ADCOM-paper is indicating? Will they be pilloried publicly, as in the Middle Ages? Will this church point on them as if they were rebels?

- Yes, human motives always can play a role in matters like these. But, at the same time, it can be as well that God unexpectedly is on their side.

Some serious questions: „It is possible that God is with those unions where female pastors are ordained?“ „Is it thinkable that the General Conference in session can err?“ The answers God only knows. The case „Sanhedrin against the apostles“ shows very clear: truth not always is on the side of a formal parliamentary majority. As it has been experienced before by Martin Luther, and the reformation.

## **VI Conclusions**

Are there valid reasons which seem justifying to claim a matter of conscience as far as the question before us is concerned? *Ellen G. White and her influence as a woman; the fact that female church elders can be ordained; ordained female pastors in China; the result of the TOSC-Committee, and its non-existence prior to the vote of San Antonio; Article 14 of Fundamental Beliefs, which stands against discrimination.*

- How liberating would it be if GC Executive Committee would follow the counsel of Gamaliel leaving this matter to God! No sanctions, no punishment. Gamaliel had recognized: these people are acting from a higher conviction, and because their conscience forced them to do what they did. May the GC Executive Committee be aware of the spiritual, and ecclesiastical dimensions.

- This church from its very beginning fought for and defended Religious Liberty, freedom of conscience. Will the GC Executive Committee punish or acknowledge reasons of conscience?

## **VII What can the GC Executive Committee do in Battle Creek?**

The paper mentioned above, from the point of view of many churches, is not suitable for resolving our dilemma, on the contrary. Our church leadership may be able to win a vote, but it may lose a much bigger one. The Sanhedrin in times of the apostles considered: what would happen in Jerusalem, if the apostles would be treated by force? (Acts 4:17, 5:26).

We too should not lightly assume that the paper in its present content would be accepted unchallenged by local congregations - with consequences which nobody can predict. What then can the GC-Executive Committee do?

***The Executive Committee cannot reverse the San Antonio decision. But the General Conference, and the Executive Committee should withdraw the above-mentioned draft resolution. Nobody's gonna lose face.***

***So doing our church would consciously give up this concern and place it into the hands of God. Led by confidence and certainty that God will bless, if we refrain from asserting ourselves by human means.***

***The General Conference should, together with the Executive Committee, observe further developments in order to report to the General Conference session in 2020.***

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