

WHAT'S IN A NAME? IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND DENOMINATIONAL DESIGNATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

STEFAN HÖSCHELE, Ph.D.
Theologische Hochschule Friedensau, Germany

The names adopted by Christian denominations customarily express elements deemed crucial for their identity. This article uses the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a case study. It traces the initial debate over the necessity of a name, discusses the conflict regarding “biblical” names, and describes the decision process that led to the denomination’s official self-designation. In most cases, it was subsequently translated into other languages in a literal manner, but there are also noteworthy modifications, especially in Europe. Several factors contribute to the stability and changeability of church names and the concomitant identity construction dynamics: theology, history, context, and language.

Key words: Seventh-day Adventist, church name, identity

1. Introduction

What name should a Christian denomination bear? In established ecclesiastical organizations this question hardly arises, but in new movements, mission contexts, and church mergers it may be, and has been, answered in divergent ways. While many Christians view denominational names as an *adiaphoron*, some traditions regard the issues involved as being of considerable importance, and there are a few movements in which naming issues are believed to carry quasi-doctrinal weight.¹ Whatever position is taken, names given to churches evidently

¹ This was the case in part of the Stone-Campbell Movement; see footnote 7 and Rice Haggard, *An Address to the Different Religious Societies on the Sacred Import of the Christian Name* (Lexington: Joseph Charles, 1804; reprint: Nashville: The Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1954). Other examples are various groups, which chose the designation “Church of God.”

often witness to sentiments which lie at the heart of religious persuasions. Like most other social groups,² Christians use names to construct specific identities.

From the time when followers of Christ were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26), such a vast number of terms have been employed to name them that an attempt at collecting these designations would entail enormous challenges. At the same time, such an endeavour would bring to light a fascinating variety of aspects. Even a cursory overview of denominational names³ reveals traces of (1) founders, (2) particular doctrines, (3) historical or geographic origin, (4) patterns of church administration, (5) typical activities, (6) sociological dimensions, (7) theological currents, and, of course, (8) various ways of expressing a relationship to God and Christ. Clearly, this diversity would justify a study of its own.⁴

When one particular tradition is being studied, the variety of designations can be particularly illuminating. Both continuities and innovations are easily discerned and reveal identity negotiation processes that religious organizations cannot avoid as they travel through time and space. By focusing on the Seventh-day Adventist Church, this article provides a case study of naming dynamics in a global Christian tradition. It discusses the origin of the denomination’s name as well as various other designations associated with this church, particularly in Europe, where a certain diversity of terms developed.

² For a discussion of the central importance of names for group identities in a systems theory perspective, see Jan A. Fuhse, *Unser “wir”: Ein Systemtheoretisches Modell von Gruppenidentitäten* (Stuttgart: Universität Stuttgart, 2001), 8–9.

³ See, for instance, the churches listed in J. Gordon Melton, *American Religious Creeds* (3 vols.; Detroit: Gale Research, 1991), or in Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (4 vols.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

⁴ Little attention has been given to denominational names so far in the theological discourse. Among the few items in the literature are Arthur R. Kelley, “The Changing Name of the Church,” *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society* 6 (1964): 69–74; J. Robert Wright, “Anglicanism, Ecclesia Anglicana, and Anglican: An Essay on Terminology,” in *The Study of Anglicanism* (rev. ed.; ed. Stephen Sykes, John Booty, and Jonathan Knight; London: SPCK, 1998), 477–483; Zandra Wagoner, “What’s in a Name: Scavenging among the ‘Brethren’ for the Sisters,” *Brethren Life and Thought* 44.3 (1999): 55–73; and Peter Vogt, “Brüdergemeine: Das theologische Programm eines Namens,” *Unitas fratrum* 48 (2001): 81–105.

2. To Name or Not to Name?

When a religious movement arises, crosses frontiers, or reorganizes itself, it is soon given some designation by its environment or chooses a name itself. Although in some cases this choice is a rather unemotional matter, such moments may also imply heated debate and at times lead to schisms. For many adherents of sabbatarian Adventism, which grew out of the North American Millerite revival of the 1830s and early 1840s, the choice of a name was a delicate matter.⁵ Several factors contributed to sentiments of opposing the choice of a particular name and, finally, to resistance against the choice of “Seventh-day Adventists.” Among them—probably the major factor—was the origin of a considerable number of sabbatarian Adventists in the Christian Connection, which was part of the broader Restoration Movement.⁶ Restorationists rejected denominationalism, and many Connectionists, like the Restorationist tradition at large, insisted on “biblical” names for congregations formed by followers of Christ such as “Christian Church” or “Church of Christ.”⁷ It is no surprise that these concepts likewise lurked among sabbatarian Adventists; various other aspects of Restorationist heritage in Seventh-day Adventism are also well documented.⁸

An important issue related to a rejection of “unscriptural” names for believers was the idea that the formal organization of a group of

⁵ A detailed account of the steps that led toward the adoption of the name “Seventh-day Adventists” is provided by Godfrey T. Anderson, “Make Us a Name,” *Adventist Heritage* 1 (1974): 28–34. Anderson does not discuss historical antecedents and theological issues connected with the initial rejection and the ultimate adoption of the denominational name.

⁶ On this movement, see Henry E. Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity: A History of the Restoration Movement* (2nd ed.; Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2003), and Douglas A. Foster et al., eds., *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

⁷ Among adherents of the “Christian Church,” which had been founded leading Restorationist James O’Kelly, one of the “Five Cardinal Principles” held from 1794 onwards was actually to use “[t]he name Christian to the exclusion of all party and sectarian names.” See Wilbur E. MacClenny, *The Life of Rev James O’Kelly and the Early History of the Christian Church in the South* (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton, 1910), 121.

⁸ Bert Haloviak, “Some Great Connexions: Our Seventh-day Adventist Heritage from the Christian Church,” available from <http://www.adventistarchives.org/docs/AST/ChrConn94.pdf>, accessed 17 December, 2012; and Bert Haloviak, “A Heritage of Freedom: The Christian Connection Roots to Seventh-day Adventism,” available from <http://www.adventistarchives.org/docs/AST/ChrConn95.pdf>, accessed 17 December 2012.

Christians into a denomination would entail a departure from God's design for the church, a concept that sabbatarian Adventists grappled with as well in the 1850s and early 1860s.⁹ Yet these two issues, a denominational name and church organization, became inescapable in the latter 1850s, when the number of sabbatarian Adventist believers had considerably increased, reaching about three thousand. While this nascent movement had given itself a distinct doctrinal identity in the late 1840s and had stabilized in terms of adherents in the early and mid-1850s, the end of the decade posed the challenge of defining what precise shape the crowd of believers was to have. In other words, a tangible ecclesiology was to be outlined, and integral parts of such an endeavour were the issues of church structure and of denominational identification.

It was not at all obvious that sabbatarian Adventists would ultimately form an organization and choose the name, which 17 million members were to carry 150 years later. After all, these Sabbath-keeping Adventists were little more than a regional movement, much less numerous than their Millerite antecedents, and continued to expect their Lord's return any time, even within months.¹⁰ Clearly, their intense apocalyptic persuasions were a motif that added to the Restorationist background of many of their leaders in creating an atmosphere in which adopting a church name was viewed with much suspicion. The sabbatarian Adventists felt they were the rightful heirs of an interdenominational revival: the Millerites had rejected the creation of new ecclesial structures during the peak of their movement in the early 1840s. To them, the denominations were "sectarian" and their multiplicity a sign of the end of time.¹¹ Thus there was a genuine Adventist reason to reject the organization of a new church, and connected with this anti-institutional mood, to choose an official name.

Yet in spite of its initial non-church self-conceptualization, the same movement also provided a motif that catalyzed the development of elements of church organization, and ultimately, a denominational name: the Sabbath doctrine. Here was a rallying point around which the

⁹ See Richard W. Schwarz, *Light Bearers to the Remnant* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1979), 86–103, especially 86.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the sabbatarian Adventists' handling of the seeming delay of the parousia in the context of their intense apocalypticism, see Rolf J. Pöhler, "Change in Seventh-day Adventist Theology: A Study of the Problem of Doctrinal Development" (Th.D. diss., Andrews University, 1995), 228–230.

¹¹ Stefan Höschele, "On the Ecumenical and Separating Potential of Revivals: A Case Study of the Millerite Movement," in *Mission und Einheit: Gemeinsames Zeugnis getrennter Kirchen?—Mission and Unity: Common Witness of Separated Churches?* (ed. Peter de Mey, Andrew Pierce, and Oliver Schuegraf; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2012), 337–355.

emerging Seventh-day Adventist movement gathered and whose existence justified, in the view of a growing number of persons, the creation of a new ecclesial identity. Had it not been for this sabbatarian emphasis, the movement would have probably disbanded or remained stagnant, as did other bodies resulting from the Millerite revival, such as the Evangelical Adventists and the Advent Christian Church.¹² Thus it was a doctrinal innovation that triggered both a new movement and its ultimate development into a Christian denomination with a distinct identity and name.

To make this move, one major intermediate step was needed: the design of an ecclesiological framework to validate the concept that sabbatarian persuasions necessitated a distinct ecclesial body. This framework was found, understandably, in the apocalyptic parts of the Bible, which had been so important for the Millerite Movement. The “remnant” motif of Rev 12:17 with its parallel in Rev 14:12, both describing believers as those who “keep the commandments of God,” was developed into a proto-ecclesiology, which stressed the importance of the Decalogue for Christian living. Soon the concept of a “remnant church” became a major ecclesiological figure of thought in the sabbatarian Adventist movement.¹³

It is not surprising, therefore, that “the remnant” appears prominently among the self-designations that were used by the Sabbath-keeping Adventists in the 1850s. Nonetheless, they also utilized a host of other terms to describe themselves in the same period: “saints,” “God’s people,” a “company,” “(advent) believers,” the “(true) Israel,” “brethren,” “(true) children of God,” a “band,” the “scattered flock” or “little flock.”¹⁴ Local sabbatarian Adventist congregations assemblies chose a similar variety of names, e.g., “the scattered flock,” “Seventh-day people,” “Advent Sabbathkeepers,” “Sabbath-keeping Remnant of Adventists,” “Church of Christ’s Second Advent,” “Church of God,” or “Church of the Living God.”¹⁵ This diversity of names and terms both

¹² On the Advent Christian Church, see Clyde E. Hewitt, *Midnight and Morning: The Millerite Movement and the Founding of the Advent Christian Church, 1831–1860* (Charlotte: Venture, 1983). It should be noted that Advent Christians, like Seventh-day Adventists, have strong roots in the Restorationist Movement, whence the word “Christian” in their denominational name.

¹³ For a discussion of the remnant concept in Adventist theology, see Carmelo L. Martines, “El Concepto de Remanente in la Iglesia Adventista del Séptimo Día: Razones Subyacentes en el Debate Contemporáneo” (Ph.D. diss., River Plate Adventist University, 2002).

¹⁴ These terms all appear in the various early Adventist publications such as the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* magazine.

¹⁵ Anderson, “Make Us a Name,” 29–30.

implied that one cannot *not* name a movement, and that agreeing on an official designation became a demand of transparency at some point.¹⁶ Added was a good deal of missionary pragmatism by James White, the movement's pre-eminent leader. During the decisive conference in 1860, he declared that opposition against choosing a denominational name was to be anticipated but such a name was "essential to the prosperity of the cause."¹⁷

3. Church of God vs. Seventh-day Adventists

Having settled the question of whether or not a church name was necessary, the issue remained which one was to be chosen.¹⁸ There is a full record of the proceedings at the 1860 conference that led to the recommendation of the name that Seventh-day Adventists officially bear until today, and the discussions have been summarized in several works.¹⁹ However, one aspect that has not received much attention is that significant division developed over the name for which the conference ultimately opted. While denominational histories explain the dynamics leading to the decision for the designation "Seventh-day Adventists," they hardly note the fact that insistence upon the name "Church of God" was considered a theological issue for some and ultimately became an organizationally divisive matter.

¹⁶ Moreover, the growing congregations often needed to hold property, which necessitated incorporation, a move which in turn inevitably led to some official name for local bodies of believers who organized themselves.

¹⁷ "Business Proceedings of B.C. Conference," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (October 23, 1860): 179. The rugged individualism typical for the era and for early Adventists is visible in the White's further statements. He expected conflicts because he had experienced similar opposition "all the way along, first against publishing a paper, then against issuing pamphlets, then against having an office, then against the sale of publications, then against church order, then against having a power press." See *ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.* The proceedings show that a first resolution, "That we take the name of Seventh-day Adventists" was withdrawn and the resolution "That we call ourselves Seventh-day Adventists" was voted for instead. The difference was probably to indicate that this is a humble, human-made designation, not even a real name, which is therefore not "taken" but a mere matter of convenience. Thus, something of the Restorationist heritage was upheld in that a name was not adopted officially—although the decision ultimately had the same effect.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Anderson, "Make Us a Name"; Schwarz, *Light Bearers*, 94–95; and C. Mervyn Maxwell, *Tell It to the World: The Story of Seventh-day Adventists* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1976), 143–146.

The proceedings do reveal that “Church of God” was “zealously advocated by some” and that one person dissented after the choice of “Seventh-day Adventists.”²⁰ They also record that the latter was “proposed as a simple name and one expressive of our faith and position.”²¹ This implies that different perspectives were represented in the two proposed names: one was an excessively biblicist outlook insisting on a particular formulation found in the scriptures, while the other arose from a missionary impulse, which aimed at transparency regarding the major tenets of the group’s faith. Ultimately a new denomination arose from disaffected individuals who defended the necessity of adopting “Church of God” as a self-designation. This small church body remained strongly opposed to Seventh-day Adventists although in fact they resembled them in many ways.²²

The architecture of the name that was chosen had a clear logic: a cross-fertilization of “Seventh Day Baptists”²³ and the term “First-day Adventists,” which sabbatarians used to refer to non-Sabbath keeping former Millerites.²⁴ On the surface, the distinct doctrinal content of “Seventh-day Adventists” seemed to imply a more antagonistic stance towards other Christian bodies than “Church of God.” Yet the opposite was intended; in fact, a major reason for the majority to reject “Church of God” was that in addition to being used by other groups it was deemed to

²⁰ “Seventh-day Adventists” had been used very rarely and not as a name, but a description; an automated search in the digitized issues of the denomination’s magazine *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* yields only three such occurrences before the 1860 conference. Even James White had advocated “Church of God” a few months before this conference but evidently changed his view later; see J[ames] W[hite], “Organization,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (June 17, 1860): 36. The importance of the term “Church of God” is also visible in the fact that the one book that had been published by sabbatarian Adventists on ecclesiological matters, Joseph B. Frisbie, *Order of the Church of God* (Battle Creek: Steam Press of the Review and Herald Office, 1859), declared on its first page: “*The Name*—THE CHURCH OF GOD This is the name that God has seen fit to give to his church, because it belongs to him.” (Emphasis in the original.)

²¹ “Business Proceedings of B.C. Conference,” 179.

²² Richard C. Nickels, *History of the Seventh Day Church of God* (Neck City: Giving & Sharing, 1999), cited from <http://www.giveshare.org/churchhistory/historysdco>, accessed 12 December 2012.

²³ The first sabbatarian Adventists had been introduced to the Sabbath by Seventh Day Baptists; thus they were well acquainted with Seventh Day Baptist doctrines and used many of their writings for their own propaganda. For the historical connection, see Russel J. Thomsen, *Seventh-Day Baptists: Their Legacy to Adventists* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1971).

²⁴ Anderson, “Make Us a Name,” 30.

have “an appearance of presumption.”²⁵ It might indicate a belief that this body was the only divinely instituted Christian organization and that believers in other denominations were not Christians at all, a concept that the nascent Adventist denomination did not advocate. Thus the name “Seventh-day Adventists” was a witness to unique doctrinal positions but entailed an attempt to eschew the ecclesiastical pride that was viewed as being connected with the most popular alternative, “Church of God.”²⁶

If such a somewhat restrained approach seems unexpected for a young and self-confident organization, one should consider the fact that another significant element of caution had already become part of sabbatarian Adventist thinking in the mid-1850s. Ellen White, the movement’s prophetess, and her husband James White, applied the “Laodicea” motif to the growing crowds of sabbatarians to express their “lukewarm” condition (cf. Rev 3:14–22).²⁷ Instead of viewing themselves as the blameless “Philadelphia,” as they had done before, Seventh-day Adventists thus built into their ecclesiology a necessary measure of self-criticism. The gospel proclamation in Rev 14, with which Adventists identified, certainly enhanced a confident view of the Adventist role in God’s mission to the world, but the eschatological corrective inherent in their own designation “Adventists” and the Laodicea self-understanding always reminded them that they, like other Christians, were *simul iusti et peccatores*.

4. Unity and Diversification

Having adopted an official name, Seventh-day Adventists had created a basic pattern that would display, together with a body of doctrines and a strong denominational structure, the bond of unity between members of

²⁵ “Business Proceedings of B.C. Conference,” 179.

²⁶ It is worthy of note that Seventh-day Adventists did not include “church” in their original self-designation. “Church” was soon used alongside “Seventh-day Adventist,” but even today some entities avoid the term, such as the denominational headquarters, which are called “General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.” Unwittingly, Adventists thus partly correspond to the call of Donald Lindskoog, who suggested that “church” be omitted in denominational names in order to demonstrate that a particular movement does not represent the full Christian Church but is only a part of it; see Lindskoog, “What is in a (Church) Name?,” *ChrCent* 110.14 (1993): 445–446.

²⁷ Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts* (vol. 2; Battle Creek: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1860), 214–215, 222–223. For a discussion of the changing understanding of the Philadelphia and Laodicea motifs by sabbatarian Adventists, see Maxwell, *Tell It to the World*, 147–151.

this growing organization in the generations to come. From a local American movement, Adventism grew into a global church as early as the first part of the 20th century. Since the denomination did not initiate independent national churches, it remained unified in a global organizational structure. Thus the relatively strong uniformity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and vestiges of its “made in America” character²⁸ have remained hallmarks of the denomination until the present. This is also reflected in the denominational name, which was not modified but simply translated in most countries where Adventists operate today—in Latin America, Africa, most of Asia, and the Pacific region.

Several exceptions to this uniformity are found in Europe. The Old World differed from other continents in that a distinct Christian heritage had existed for ages before Seventh-day Adventism arrived. Thus the emerging European Adventist movement had to present itself in ways that were understood in the respective countries where it grew, which at times also implied reformulations of the official denominational designation. Several patterns, most of which imply contextualized identity construction processes, can be observed:

1. In many cases, continuity was preserved by retaining the wording “Seventh-day Adventist” at least as part of the church name and attempting to translate “Seventh-day Adventist Church” literally.²⁹
2. In some countries, the addition of “Christian” was made to emphasize a Christian identity in a context where a minority situation easily led to the denomination’s being branded as a “cult” or an unacceptable religious option. This happened in countries with predominantly Roman Catholic or Orthodox populations, especially those with Romance and Slavic languages, such as Croatia, Italy, Romania, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, and the Ukraine, as well as Greece.
3. An opposite trend is visible in a few other cases, where a reduction took place. In countries as different as Finland, Slovenia, and Albania,³⁰

²⁸ Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 1021.

²⁹ This is the case today in, e.g., Armenia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Great Britain, Hungary, Iceland, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, and Portugal. The designations used by Seventh-day Adventists in these and other territories can be found on the official websites of the denomination in the respective countries.

³⁰ The wording here is *Kisha Adventiste Ne Shqiperi* (“The Adventist Church in Albania”), *Suomen Adventistikirkko* (“Finnish Adventist Church”), and *Kršćanska Adventistična Cerkev v Republiki Sloveniji* (“Christian Adventist Church in the Slovenian Republic”).

Adventists dropped “Seventh-day” in their common designation, evidently in a pragmatic attempt to shorten what sounds like a somewhat clumsy name in many languages. Outside Europe, a different strategy of shortening was taken in Israel, where the denomination presents itself as “Seventh-day Adventists in Israel” and has discarded the designation “Church”—for evident reasons in a society where the word “church” is burdened with a long history of conflict between Jews and Christians.

The tendency of shortening the lengthy denominational name corresponds to common usage in many countries, where few persons spell out “Seventh-day Adventist” or “Seventh-day Adventist Church” in full. Rather than insisting on the complete wording, the denomination and its members are therefore usually called “Adventist Church” and “Adventists.” This tendency shows how much the construction of identities depends on actual contexts: in the 1860s, when other sizeable Adventist groups existed, sabbatarian Adventists sought to define themselves vis-à-vis these other Adventists. In the late 20th and early 21st century, the denomination is characterized in the context of its relationship to the larger Christian world and beyond rather than to a historical North American phenomenon.

In one region outside Europe, in East Africa, the tendency of shortening the denominational name has given birth to a term which deserves a discussion of its own: *Wasabato*, which means “Sabbatarians,” “Sabbatists,” or “Sabbath people.”³¹ This Swahili word, which is used in Kenya, Tanzania, and neighbouring regions, summarizes what both outsiders and East African Adventists themselves regard as central among the church’s characteristics: a holy day which is different from that of other churches. Yet this term also reveals the awkwardness of denominational labels, which condense ecclesial identity in a way that has little discernible relationship with the christological center of the gospel. Different from “Adventists,” which clearly refers to the coming Christ, the short designation *Wasabato* remains problematic because of its disproportionate emphasis on a particular doctrine. Although Sabbath theology is certainly a biblically based Seventh-day Adventist contribution to Christianity at large and indeed may be done in a christocentric way, the unofficial but customary self-designation as “Sabbath people”

³¹ Stefan Höschele, *Christian Remnant—African Folk Church: Seventh-day Adventism in Tanzania, 1903–1980*. Leiden: Brill, 2007, 203–204. There are about 1.5 million Seventh-day Adventists who use the Swahili language.

entails the tendency to limit the denomination's character to one peculiar theme.³²

4. A last issue in the translation of the denomination's original name was that of rendering "church" in different languages. Although the term exists in most languages, its connotations were viewed as problematic in some contexts when the American-born movement reached Europe. With established churches being extant in most regions, "church" often carried the meaning of an institutional entity rather than a body of believers, at least in the popular perception.³³ Thus Adventists had to decide whether or not the term reflected their ecclesiology and construed identity, and whether alternatives were to be preferred.

In several cases, Adventists, like other religious minorities, felt that the term "church" did not appropriately express what their ecclesiology implied—a missionary movement and a community of followers of Christ emphasizing his second coming and the commandments of God. Apart from those areas where "church" was supplemented and thus indirectly modified by the addition of "Christian," this was the case in some Scandinavian countries, where a term signifying "association"³⁴ was used in order to avoid the implication of a religious body that is part of the religious establishment, a meaning inherent in the term "church" in these cultural contexts.

An interesting similar case is German-speaking Europe, where Adventists experimented with a variety of terms. Until the early 20th century, the denomination often simply called itself "Seventh-day

³² The following reasons contributed to the common acceptance of the term: (1) The official designation, *Waadventista wa Sabato* ("Sabbath Adventists"), is easily mistaken as *Waadventista Wasabato* (Adventists-Sabbatarians). Some local churches actually spell their name like this, not knowing that it is not the official version. (2) The word *Waadventista* obviously does not carry much meaning in an African context where its root meaning is not understood. Conversely, the word *msabato* has a tangible connection with a major Adventist practice, the Sabbath, and is thus easier to remember.

³³ Erich Geldbach, "Denominationen," in *Ökumenelexikon: Kirchen—Religionen—Bewegungen* (ed. Hanfried Krüger, Werner Löser, and Walter Müller-Römheld; Frankfurt: Lembeck, 1983), 235, emphasizes the usefulness of the neutral term "denomination" as compared to "church" against the background of the traditional European distinction between "churches" and "sects."

³⁴ In Sweden, the denomination calls itself *Sjundedags Adventist-Samfundet*, and in Norway *Syvendedags Adventistsamfunnet*.

Adventists" without any word for "church."³⁵ Only in 1927 was the official designation *Gemeinschaft* (fellowship, community, association) adopted for the denomination in the process of an attempt at gaining a legal status in Germany similar to other minor Christian bodies.³⁶ This term had already been used by Pietist and Methodist groups and expressed the intended organic nature of this religious group and the intimate fellowship of its members.³⁷ *Gemeinschaft* was not commonly used by church members until after World War II,³⁸ but subsequently it was employed until the early 21st century in Germany, different from Austria and Switzerland, where *Kirche* (church) and *Freikirche* (free church) were chosen in 1993, respectively.

As early as 1988, church leaders in Germany began pondering about renaming the denomination *Freikirche* as an analogy to Baptists, Methodists, and similar religious groups. The major reason for the ultimate decision to present themselves to the public as a free church as from 2006³⁹ was that *Gemeinschaft* was hardly understandable any more as a designation for a Christian denomination, in spite of its positive connotation of close fellowship.⁴⁰ The new name was well received by members and the public; apparently they felt that it corresponds as much to the denominational ecclesiology of a

³⁵ Slightly varying versions were used in German, resulting from the fact that the original wording is difficult to translate into some languages: *Adventisten vom 7. Tage*, *Siebente Tags Adventisten*, or *Sieberten-Tag(s)-Adventisten*.

³⁶ Dirk Czukta, "Die Weimarer Republik—eine Chance? Die Bemühungen der Gemeinschaft der Siebenten-Tags-Adventisten um Anerkennung als Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts in der Weimarer Republik" (Thesis, Theologisches Seminar Marienhöhe, 1985).

³⁷ Moreover, it certainly communicated more of the denomination's character than technical terms occasionally used in the public which described Adventism as a "religious society" (German: *Religionsgesellschaft* or *Religionsgemeinschaft*). These terms were used to represent the denomination to the government; see *ibid.*

³⁸ In common parlance, (*Advent-*) *Gemeinde* was commonly used even for the denomination as a whole, a term that is applied to local congregations in the established churches but which also expresses closeness.

³⁹ Karl Heinz Voigt, "Von der Gemeinschaft zur Kirche: Die Adventisten in Deutschland stehen vor einer Namensänderung," *Katholische Nachrichtenagentur—Ökumenische Information*, no. 5 (January 31, 2006): 6. German Adventists had been granted guest status in the Council of Christian Churches and the Association of Protestant Free Churches in Germany already in 1993.

⁴⁰ This development is almost opposite to English, where "community" and "fellowship" have become increasingly attractive terminological options for churches, especially on the local level.

community of believers as the former name, thus avoiding connotations of either an established church or an exclusivist sect.

5. Outside and Inside Influences

The cases in which the denomination chose to present itself to the public as a “free church” or “association,” and those in which the original name was supplemented or shortened, demonstrate that Christian churches, like other social entities, construct their identities in negotiation processes that involve both inside and outside perspectives. This is also visible in various other names applied to Christian movements and churches in earlier eras: like “Adventists,” the terms “Protestants,” “Methodists,” “Quakers,” “Baptists”—and apparently even “Christians”⁴¹—were originally coined by outsiders to express criticism, ridicule, or a rejection of core ideas in these religious groups. The fact that such etic designations subsequently changed their meaning and became customary names of well-established churches shows that discourses can change significantly once identities are connected to names.

The Seventh-day Adventist case also shows that several other factors, which relate to outside and inside perspectives play a role in the way in which identities are expressed in denominational names. One is language: the very fact that a name needs to be translated at time necessitates adaptations or modifications. Terms well understood in one linguistic setting may lack an exact translation in another, but other equivalents may be available; thus the German term for free church actually renders a “denominational” identity—the concept behind the Adventist self-identification as a “church” in mid-19th century North America—most appropriately.⁴²

Beyond language as such, various other contextual factors naturally influence the choice of church names and modes of self-portrayal. In many parts of Europe, the emphasis on a Christian identity counteracted a long history of being branded as a “cult”⁴³ or a “sect,”⁴⁴ as did the effort

⁴¹ Tim Hegedus, “Naming Christians in Antiquity,” *SR* 33.2 (2004): 173–190.

⁴² In opposition to those who rejected a definite church name, James White argued during the conference where the name issue was debated, “[I]t is objected that we shall be classed among the denominations. We are classed with them already, and I do not know that we can prevent it, unless we disband and scatter, and give up the thing altogether.” See “Business Proceedings of B.C. Conference,” 179.

⁴³ A similar attitude in some Evangelical contexts prompted characterization such as the one found in Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults: Christian Science, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormonism, Seventh-day Adventism* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1963).

to present the denomination with a “free church” image in other regions.⁴⁵ Moreover, in predominantly Protestant contexts, Adventists have persistently described themselves as Protestants,⁴⁶ at times also as Evangelicals,⁴⁷ and liked to portray themselves as “heirs of the reformation.”⁴⁸

The historical nature of ecclesial identities shines through the naming decisions as well. By keeping the term “Adventist” almost universally, the origin of the denomination and the connection of today’s inheritors to the church founders is clearly marked. Likewise, this name enshrines the relationship to the spiritual precursor of sabbatarian Adventism, the Millerite advent revival, which they came to view as having arisen through God’s direct initiative. Even after 150 years, these events and developments in North American Christianity continue to be of crucial importance for the denomination’s self-understanding.

This self-understanding evidently corresponds to a theological construction of identity. It is interesting, though, that the major Adventist theological contribution to ecclesiology, the “remnant” motif, remained

This book was printed until 1989, and both the full book and the section on Seventh-day Adventism is being marketed even today in various languages.

- ⁴⁴ For a discussion of the sect vs. free church portrayal of Adventism in the German literature on the field of symbolics, see Dirk Czukta, “Gemeinschaft—Sekte—Freikirche? Konfessionskundliche Darstellungen der Siebenten-Tags-Adventisten in Deutschland seit 1994,” in *Geschichte, Gesellschaft, Gerechtigkeit: Festschrift für Baldur Pfeiffer* (ed. Johannes Hartlapp and Stefan Höschele; Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2007), 63–82. One of the few attempts at rehabilitating the term “sect,” which seems somewhat odd today, was done by an Adventist theologian in his doctoral dissertation: Johannes Schwital, *Großkirche und Sekte: Eine Studie zum Selbstverständnis der Sekte* (Hamburg: Saatkorn, 1962).
- ⁴⁵ For a critical yet sympathetic external evaluation of Adventists as a “free church,” see Erich Geldbach, *Freikirchen: Erbe, Gestalt und Wirkung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), 239–240.
- ⁴⁶ The self-portrayal as Protestants was at times so strong that Adventists presented themselves as the “true Protestants”; both in North America and in Germany-speaking Europe, the denomination published magazines entitled *The Protestant* and *Der Protestant*, respectively, in the early 20th century.
- ⁴⁷ There is some discussion whether Adventists belong to Evangelicalism. Even though Adventists have mostly preferred not to be closely aligned with the Evangelical Movement, historically and theologically the denomination is clearly part of this tradition; cf. Russell L. Staples, “Adventism,” in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (ed. Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnston; Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 57–71.
- ⁴⁸ Cf. Hugh I. Dunton et al., eds., *Heirs of the Reformation: The Story of Seventh-day Adventists in Europe* (Grantham: Stanborough, 1997).

an “insider” concept hardly used to present the denomination in public. The fact that it was not included in the denominational name in spite of its significance for Adventists and in the Bible⁴⁹ indicates that it functions at least as much as a self-challenge as it is utilized as an ontological statement,⁵⁰ thus essentially expressing a motivation for faithfulness and referring to a mission to be accomplished.⁵¹ This missionary identity of the denomination is reflected in phraseology used even today when it is at times referred to as “Advent Movement”; historically, it is visible also in the way Ludwig Richard Conradi, the major pioneer of European Adventism, conceptualized the church he founded. He frequently called the whole denomination a “mission society,”⁵² implying that “church” and “mission” are identical.⁵³ With this way of thinking the church, Adventists anticipated an insight that has become a standard notion today: the missional nature of the church.⁵⁴ Thus even unofficial phraseology corresponds to the initial concept behind the denominational name: to express a message and a mission.

6. Conclusion

There are a variety of terms that were applied to the Seventh-day Adventism Church: official and unofficial ones, some that emphasized a Christian identity and others which stressed aspects of particular denominational teachings, unwelcome labels attached to the denomination by outsiders and terms used mainly by insiders. Most significantly, once Seventh-day Adventists adopted an official name, no major variations seemed to be possible for this self-designation.

⁴⁹ Cf. Gerhard F. Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1972).

⁵⁰ Cf. Richard Lehmann, “Die Übrigen und ihr Auftrag,” in *Die Gemeinde und ihr Auftrag* (ed. Johannes Mager; Studien zur adventistischen Ekklesiologie 2; Lüneburg: Saatkorn, 1994), 101.

⁵¹ Cf. George Knight, “Remnant Theology and World Mission,” in *Adventist Mission in the 21st Century* (ed. Jon L. Dybdahl; Hagerstown: Review & Herald, 1999), 88–95.

⁵² See, e.g., *Missionsbericht der Europäischen Divisionskonferenz der S. T. Adventisten* (Hamburg: Internationale Traktatgesellschaft, 1913), 5.

⁵³ This terminology remained part of the church’s self-description in Austria and Switzerland until the recent past; rather than presenting themselves as a church, Adventists called themselves “Advent Mission” until 1993 and at times do so informally even today.

⁵⁴ Cf. Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

The limited diversity that exists can be interpreted as arising from attempts at balancing the different factors of identity construction. Some emphases of self-portrayal necessarily changed as Adventists spread over most of the world and encountered manifold cultural contexts with their particular idiomatic options of expressing a Christian and confessional identity. Along with this missionary expansion, Adventist theology developed and made finer differentiations possible in certain instances. At the same time, the major parts of the officially chosen name continued to contain key concerns found in many denominational names: the Christian identity ("Church"), the historical origin ("Adventist"), and a denominationally distinctive emphasis ("Seventh-day"). Where other designations were used or modifications were made, these were often necessary to uphold the delicate balance between these three elements.

More generally, the Seventh-day Adventist case shows that denominational names contain three related challenges. One is the challenge of interdenominational relations, which is inherent in the fact that names are used for a Christian public. Like every movement that claims a basis in the New Testament, a specific, historically grown identity with its related theological tenets and, often, a sense of a peculiar mission, must be juxtaposed with a meaningful relationship with other churches. In the case of Seventh-day Adventism, by helping us to remember the non-adoption of "Church of God," the denomination's name enshrines a check on potential ecclesial hubris that is indispensable when interacting with Christians of other backgrounds. At the same time, the self-designation implies a challenge to non-sabbatarian and less eschatologically alert traditions. The Adventist emphasis on eschatology in the denominational name is a persistent reminder to Christendom at large that the "faith of Jesus" (Rev. 14:12) does not function without the horizon of a hope that exceeds all human efforts. The Sabbath, likewise, serves as a reminiscence—of the centrality of God as the creator as well as of the Old Testament rootage of Christianity.

Related is a theological challenge: particular church names are often best understood by members, who comprehend the tradition behind inherited terms. At the same time, denominational components invariably stand alongside references to a general Christian identity. The relationship between these two aspects may be described in many ways: whether the denominational component interprets, intensifies, narrows, develops, or illustrates the general Christian content is a question expressing the abiding tension in the names of Christian churches and, indeed, in their identities. This tension may be fruitful when it is upheld, and when the particular and general elements are juxtaposed in a reconciled duality. By way of contrast, the dissolution of this ambivalency

would be theologically problematic because one would either relinquish the gospel or characteristic doctrinal concerns.

Lastly, a naming challenge that Seventh-day Adventists as a worldwide Christian communion must ponder like every other Christian organization is the missionary issue, which implies understandability in non-Christian contexts. Other Christians may understand the peculiarities of various denominations. Yet in the world beyond Christendom, the views of 19th century Connectionists regarding the name of the church remain a challenge to all followers of Jesus in terms of the identity with which they choose to present themselves to those who do not know Christ yet.

