

## An Evaluation of Bert B. Beach's Views on Ecumenism

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### Abstract

Bert Beverly Beach (1928-2022) was the leading Adventist theologian and an authority on Christian ecumenism. His foremost contribution to Adventist theology is his magnum opus, *Ecumenism: Boon or Bane?* He presents a broad overview of both the historical backgrounds and the major current issues of concern regarding the modern ecumenical movement. Beach died in 2022 but his views are well and alive. They have been a point of controversy and debate among Adventist theologians. The main purpose of the study is to review whether Beach's views on ecumenism are consistent with the development of Adventists' attitude to ecumenism in its mission. It employs a literary research methodology based on available historical and theological data. The study reveals that Beach possesses a positive outlook on ecumenism, advocating for Adventists to engage in dialogue and collaboration with other Christian denominations. However, it fails in some major aspects, such as the potential dilution of Adventist distinctiveness. The Adventist Church continues its engagement in ecumenical activities while upholding its theological distinctiveness. Thus, Beach's views while not accepted in their entirety are acknowledged and valued for shaping the Church's approach to ecumenism.

**Keywords:** *Ecumenism, Cooperation, Theological Distinctiveness, World Council of Churches, Christian Unity.*

### Introduction

Ecumenism is the study of Christian unity and diversity.<sup>1</sup> A movement within Christianity that has its roots in the early 20th century, ecumenism seeks to promote greater unity and cooperation between Christian denominations. Theologians are divided on ecumenism, and within the Christian tradition, there are diverse views on the topic.<sup>2</sup> Some theologians are supporters of ecumenism, believing it to be essential to the health and vitality of the Christian faith, while others are reluctant or opposed to the idea.<sup>3</sup> Proponents of ecumenism argue that the fragmentation of Christianity into different denominations and traditions is an impediment to the

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<sup>1</sup>Stefan Hoschele, "Defining Ecumenics Fifty Years After Mackay," *Communio Viatorum* 55 (2013): 108.

<sup>2</sup>Reinzie Perera, "Is Ecumenism Valid for our Times?" Paper presented at the South Asian Consultation of "Churches and Seminaries: Appraising our Ecumenical Vision for Today's World," Kolkota, India, 2008, 3. Under "Birth and Growth of the Ecumenical Movement," <https://rb.gy/vth7wy> (accessed 27 February 2024).

<sup>3</sup>Nantiya Petchgate, "Promoting Ecumenism Between Catholic and Protestant Churches in Thailand." Paper presented at the South East Asian Consultation on "Churches and Seminaries: Appraising our Ecumenical Vision in Today's World," 6, Manila, Philippines, 2008. <https://rb.gy/yxrvog> (accessed 25

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mission of the church and witness in the world.<sup>4</sup> Opponents of ecumenism, on the other hand, may argue that it risks compromising essential doctrines or practices of the faith, or that it downplays the importance of theological differences between Christian traditions.<sup>5</sup>

However, it is worth noting that other theologians hold more balanced views of ecumenism, acknowledging both its potential benefits and its challenges. They are committed to ecumenism while recognizing the importance of preserving theological distinctiveness. They promote dialogue and understanding while remaining committed to specific doctrines or liturgical practices.<sup>6</sup> Bert Beverly Beach, an Adventist theologian and an authority on Christian ecumenism, is one such theologian.

According to George Knight, one is compelled to react to Beach's views in two contrasting ways.<sup>7</sup> There can be no neutrality. One either agrees or disagrees with him. The main purpose of the study is to review whether Beach's views on ecumenism are consistent with the development of Adventists' attitude to ecumenism in its mission. It focuses on Beach's critical views within Protestant Christianity, particularly the SDA denomination.

This study employs a literary research methodology. Various literature of Beach are critically analyzed to ascertain his ecumenical beliefs. The research evaluates his views systematically and objectively to find out whether they are in sync with Adventists' understanding of ecumenism and beneficial for the Adventist Church in its mission to the world; also, whether they are based on sound theology and reason. This study is carried out using hermeneutical framework in which Beach's literature on ecumenism is systematically interpreted.

### Result and Discussion

#### Beach's Views on Ecumenism

Beach had fully developed his views by the time he published the first edition of his book *Ecumenism: Boon or Bane?* in 1974. Interrelated views include the alliance model, the forum model, and the spiritual unity models of ecumenism. To have a better understanding of his views, it is necessary to briefly discuss these models.

#### The Alliance Model

Beach's alliance model recognizes and respects the diversity of theological perspectives and practices within different Christian traditions. Rather than seeking to impose a uniform approach or doctrine, the alliance model values the richness and diversity of the Christian tradition and seeks to learn from and appreciate different perspectives.<sup>8</sup> The alliance model values dialogue and communication as a means of building relationships and fostering

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<sup>4</sup>Walter R. Beach and Bert B. Beach, *Pattern for Progress: The Role and Function of Church Organization* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1985), 100.

<sup>5</sup>Jean Zurcher, "Why Adventists Don't Join the WCC," *Ministry*, March, 1979, 12.

<sup>6</sup>Bert B. Beach, *Vatican II: Bridging the Abyss* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1968), 259.

<sup>7</sup>George R. Knight, "Adventist Theology 1844 to 1944," *Ministry*, August 1994, 13.

<sup>8</sup>Minna Hietamäki, "Ecumenism and Church Relations," in *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, ed. Brendan N. Wolfe et al., published February 9, 2023, <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/EcumenismandChurchRelations> (accessed June 5, 2025).

understanding among different Christian traditions. This involves actively listening to and engaging with different perspectives, as well as seeking to learn from and appreciate diverse viewpoints.<sup>9</sup>

The alliance model is a framework for ecumenical dialogue that emphasizes the importance of collaboration and mutual understanding between different Christian denominations. The model suggests that Christians can work together to achieve common goals, while still maintaining their distinct identities and theological traditions.

## Forum Model

One of the key principles of the forum model is the notion of “unity in diversity.” It recognizes that religious pluralism is a reality in today’s world and that different traditions can coexist and contribute to the betterment of society. The model emphasizes the importance of valuing and celebrating religious differences while seeking common ground through shared values and ethical principles. The forum model of ecumenism represents a participatory and inclusive approach to fostering dialogue and collaboration among diverse religious traditions.<sup>10</sup>

Beach’s work on ecumenism is based on his belief that unity among Christians is essential for the church to fulfill its mission in the world. He argues that the church is called to be a sign of God’s love and reconciliation to the world, and that it cannot fully live out this mission if it is divided and fragmented.<sup>11</sup> To promote ecumenical unity, Beach has organized a number of forums that bring together representatives from different Christian traditions to engage in dialogue and cooperation. These forums include the World Council of Churches, the Faith and Order Commission, and the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism.

Through these forums, Beach has worked to promote a deeper understanding and appreciation of the different Christian traditions, and to identify common areas of belief and practice. He has also sought to address issues of division and conflict within the church, and to develop strategies for reconciliation and healing.<sup>12</sup>

One of the key contributions of Beach’s work on the forum model is that it has helped to create a space for dialogue and collaboration among different Christian traditions. By bringing together representatives from diverse backgrounds, Beach has helped to foster a spirit of openness and cooperation that has contributed to the pursuit of ecumenical unity.

Another important contribution of Beach’s work on the forum model is that it has helped to promote a deeper understanding of the theological and practical issues that divide different Christian traditions. Through dialogue and engagement, Beach has helped to identify areas of common ground and to develop strategies for addressing areas of difference and disagreement.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>World Council of Churches, *Ecumenical Considerations for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2003), 5. <https://rb.gy/cdfk24> (accessed June 5, 2025).

<sup>10</sup>John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 129.

<sup>11</sup>Bert B. Beach, *Ecumenism: Boon or Bane?* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1974), 68.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>13</sup>Bert B. Beach, *Ambassador for Liberty: Building Bridges of Faith, Friendship, and Freedom* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2012), 106.

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### **The Spiritual Unity Model**

The spiritual unity model in ecumenism is based on the theological belief that all Christians are united in their common faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This model recognizes that there are differences in doctrine, practice, and tradition among various Christian denominations, but it emphasizes the commonalities that unite Christians in the body of Christ.<sup>14</sup>

Spiritual unity is rooted in the common faith in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit who unites believers.<sup>15</sup> In his own work on ecumenism, Beach applies the spiritual unity model by emphasizing the importance of spiritual fellowship and dialogue among Christians of different traditions. He believes that such dialogue can lead to a deeper understanding and appreciation of each other's perspectives and can help to overcome the barriers that divide Christians.

Beach also emphasizes the need for humility and openness in the ecumenical dialogue process. He believes that Christians should be willing to learn from each other and to recognize that they do not have a monopoly on the truth. Beach sees the Spiritual Unity model as a way of promoting mutual respect and understanding among Christians, which can help to break down the walls of division and promote unity in the church.

One of the key contributions of Beach's work on the spiritual unity model is that he recognizes the importance of both the spiritual and the institutional dimensions of the church. He believes that the spiritual unity among Christians is not meant to undermine the diversity of Christian traditions and institutions but rather to enrich and strengthen them. According to Beach, the institutional structures of the church can serve as a means of expressing and embodying the spiritual unity that already exists among Christians.<sup>16</sup>

### **Evaluating Beach's Ecumenical Views**

Ecumenism is controversial in the Adventist Context. The SDA church's attitude towards ecumenism may have been influenced by Beach's views, and apparently, there is disagreement among Adventist theologians and scholars as to his views and approach. Some Adventist scholars have criticized his views and approach as compromising Adventist distinctiveness, while others have lauded his approach to building bridges with other Christian denominations. A more balanced examination of Beach's views on ecumenism will help clarify his approach and unify the church in its current position towards ecumenism.

### **Beach on Ecumenical Alliance**

When examining Beach's perspective on the ecumenical alliance, it is of paramount importance to undertake a comprehensive evaluation that takes into account both the strengths and weaknesses inherent in his views. By delving into the merits and drawbacks, a more nuanced

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<sup>14</sup>Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 12.

<sup>15</sup>Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, "Adventists and Ecumenical Conversation," *Ministry*, December 2003, 7.

<sup>16</sup>Beach, *Ambassador for Liberty*, 50.

understanding of Beach's stance can be obtained, leading to a more informed analysis of the ecumenical alliance.

**Strengths.** Beach's views on the ecumenical alliance offer a comprehensive and insightful perspective on the strengths of this approach to fostering unity among diverse religious traditions. His evaluation highlights several key strengths that make the ecumenical alliance model a compelling framework for promoting cooperation and understanding as follows:

***Finding common ground with other churches.*** One of Beach's notable strengths lies in his ability to find common ground with other churches, despite the deeply problematic nature of the Adventist Church's stance on ecumenism rooted in eschatological and apocalyptic theology. Despite the conservative Adventist position on ecumenism, Beach successfully navigates this conservativeness by advocating for areas of commonality, where alliances among Christian churches can be forged to address the common challenges facing the world. This approach is commendable, as it encourages Adventists to consider collaborating with those who possess integrity and good intentions, even if they differ in their religious practices.<sup>17</sup>

***Support from the Spirit of Prophecy.*** Another strength evident in Beach's advocacy for an ecumenical alliance is the support he finds from the Spirit of Prophecy, particularly through the writings of Ellen G. White. Initially, there may be skepticism about whether Adventists can find common ground with Sunday keepers. However, Beach's perspective aligns with White's teachings, which emphasize treating every individual as honest and cautioning against making assumptions or engaging in actions that could strengthen disbelief.<sup>18</sup>

This alignment with the Spirit of Prophecy adds credibility to Beach's stance and reinforces the importance of recognizing the sincerity and genuine love for the Lord that may exist among Sunday keepers, instead of hastily accusing them based solely on differing interpretations of prophecy. It is a testament to Beach's adherence to White's counsel and his commitment to promoting understanding and unity within the Christian community.

***The biblical foundation for ecumenical alliances.*** One of the noteworthy strengths of Beach's advocacy for ecumenical alliances is the solid biblical foundation upon which it rests. He demonstrates a deep understanding that genuine ecumenism must have a distinctly Adventist point of departure, which is the incarnation, and a point of arrival, which is the Parousia.<sup>19</sup> This alignment with Adventist teachings sets his approach apart from superficial ecumenical alliances. It is encouraging to see other respected Adventist scholars, such as Johnsson and Zucher affirm Beach's perspective by referencing biblical passages like John 17:20-23, Philippians 2:1-4, and 1

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<sup>17</sup>Keith A. Francis, "Seventh-Day Adventism's Reaction to Vatican II," In *Parochialism, Pluralism, and Contextualization: Challenges to Adventist Mission in Europe (19th-21st Centuries)*, eds. David Trim and Daniel Heinz. *Adventistica* 9 (Frankfurt, DE: Lang, 2010), 127-135.

<sup>18</sup>Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Southern Africa* (Cape Town, South Africa: South African Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1977), 19.

<sup>19</sup>Bert B. Beach, "Non-Member Churches in Critical Conversation with the World Council of Churches." *Ecumenical Review* 23 (1974): 205-213. (30)

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Corinthians 12:12-27.<sup>20</sup> These passages serve as support for Beach's argument that Christians should prioritize working together and supporting one another, as instructed by the Bible.

By establishing this biblical foundation, Beach strengthens his case for ecumenical alliances and demonstrates the theological coherence of his position. The inclusion of these passages from the Bible adds weight to his argument and underscores the importance of unity and collaboration among Christians. Beach's approach not only aligns with Adventist teachings but also resonates with the broader Christian community, as it draws from shared biblical principles. His recognition of the biblical imperative for cooperation and support among believers is commendable and contributes to fostering greater understanding and unity in the pursuit of shared goals.

**Weaknesses.** While Beach's evaluation of the ecumenical alliance model brings attention to its strengths, it is important to consider its potential weaknesses as well. These include:

*A contradictory approach.* On one hand, Beach endeavors to establish the Adventist Church as an integral part of mainstream Christianity, advocating for inclusivity and forming alliances. On the other hand, he simultaneously asserts the exclusivity of the church, positioning it as the sole conduit for God's unique message to the modern era. This contradictory approach, as astutely observed by Eva, vacillates between embracing membership in the universal Church and claiming sole ownership of truth—a stark contradiction to the principles upheld by the ecumenical movement, which emphasizes the preservation and respect of each church's identity and autonomy.<sup>21</sup>

While Adventists have shown openness to potential involvement in such a federation, as it does not undermine their core message and mission, it is essential to acknowledge Miller's proposal for addressing this contradiction.<sup>22</sup> Adventism's outward appearance of openness to alliance masks inherent boundaries and limitations. Thus, a critical evaluation of the formal and ideological ecumenism that has emerged from the Adventist perspective becomes crucial, as it raises valid concerns that necessitate attention and resolution.

*Non-receptivity among Adventists.* Beach acknowledges the existence of resistance within the Adventist community towards the idea of engaging in ecumenical alliances, recognizing that some individuals may be hesitant to participate in joint efforts with other churches. He highlights the growth of non-ecumenically minded Evangelicals within the Adventist Church as a reflection of this sentiment.<sup>23</sup>

However, Beach does not offer a clear path forward regarding how Adventists can first address their internal divisions before pursuing external alliances with other Christians. This omission is noteworthy, as it leaves an essential aspect unaddressed. It is far better to adopt an open-minded approach when it comes to collaborating with other religious groups, placing significant emphasis on the value of religious liberty, and acknowledging our shared objective of advancing God's work in the world.

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<sup>20</sup>William Johnsson, "Children of Abraham: How Should Adventists Relate to Muslims," *Adventist World*, November 2007, 10 (accessed February 27, 2024); Jean Zurcher, "Why Adventists Don't Join the WCC," *Ministry*, March 1979, 10–12.

<sup>21</sup>Willmore D. Eva, "Adventists and Ecumenism," *Ministry*, December 2003, 4.

<sup>22</sup>Nicholas Miller, *The Religious Roots of the First Amendment: Dissenting Protestants and the Separation of Church and State* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 103.

<sup>23</sup>Norman L. Meager, "Letters," *Ministry*, December 2003, 3.

Interestingly, it is worth noting that some Adventists themselves harbor reservations towards Protestants. Their particular interpretation of prophecy leads them to view Sunday-keeping Christians as adversaries, perceiving them as a threat. This deep-seated unease further exemplifies the challenges Adventists face in wholeheartedly collaborating with other Christian denominations. For these individuals, any form of cooperation, regardless of its nature or extent, is perceived as an unacceptable compromise that borders on betrayal. Such deeply entrenched attitudes contribute to the complexities surrounding Adventist engagement in ecumenical endeavors.

Based on the evaluation of Beach's views on ecumenical alliance, it is evident that his perspective carries both strengths and weaknesses. To leverage the strengths and address the weaknesses, several recommendations can be made to promote a more balanced and effective approach to ecumenical engagement within the Adventist Church.

Firstly, Beach should have strove for greater consistency in his approach. While advocating for inclusivity and forming alliances, he could reconcile the exclusivity often associated with the Adventist Church's claim of possessing a unique message. Finding a middle ground that respects the identity and autonomy of other churches while still affirming the distinctiveness of Adventist beliefs is essential. This can be achieved through open dialogue and a willingness to listen and learn from other denominations without compromising core Adventist principles.

Secondly, Beach should have addressed the internal divisions and resistance within the Adventist community regarding ecumenical engagement. Initiating a constructive conversation within the Adventist Church, emphasizing the importance of unity and collaboration, can help alleviate concerns and foster a more receptive environment. Providing guidance on how Adventists can address their internal divisions before pursuing external alliances will be instrumental in promoting a more cohesive and unified approach to ecumenism.

Moreover, Beach should have actively promoted religious liberty and the shared objective of advancing God's work in the world as a basis for collaboration. Emphasizing the value of religious freedom and acknowledging the common goals that Christians share can help overcome barriers and build bridges between different denominations. This requires fostering an open-minded approach that values diversity and seeks common ground while respecting each church's unique identity and beliefs.

Lastly, Beach should have engaged in dialogue with Adventists who harbor reservations towards ecumenical alliances, particularly those who perceive Sunday-keeping Christians as adversaries. By addressing their concerns and providing a more comprehensive understanding of the benefits and purpose of ecumenical engagement, Beach can work towards bridging the gap and fostering a more positive and receptive attitude within the Adventist community.

By implementing these recommendations, Beach could strengthen his position and contribute to a more effective and harmonious approach to ecumenical alliance within the Adventist Church. This will enable Adventists to actively participate in collaborative efforts while maintaining their distinctiveness, ultimately promoting greater understanding, unity, and the advancement of God's kingdom.

## **Beach on Forum Model of Ecumenism**

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The evaluation of Beach's views on the forum model of ecumenism presents a thought-provoking framework for understanding and fostering interdenominational unity within Christianity. By critically examining the strengths and weaknesses, one can gain insights into the potential benefits and limitations of employing forums as a means to achieve ecumenical goals.

**Strengths.** In evaluating Beach's views on the forum model of ecumenism, several strengths emerge that highlight the potential benefits of this approach to fostering dialogue and collaboration among religious traditions. These include:

***Exemplifying practical ecumenism.*** Beach effectively portrays the forum as a catalyst for fostering tangible, on-the-ground fellowship, unwavering support, and genuine care among Christians.<sup>24</sup> It may come as a pleasant surprise to many Adventists that their fundamental beliefs recognize and affirm the legitimacy of the ecumenical church. The term "ecumenical," as defined by the esteemed Oxford English Dictionary, carries a profound meaning of universality, symbolizing the concept of a "universal church."

Astonishingly, this aligns seamlessly with the Adventist statement of belief number 13, aptly named "The Remnant and Its Mission," which unequivocally asserts, "The universal church is composed of all who truly believe in Christ."<sup>25</sup> This insightful declaration demonstrates a profound acknowledgment of the presence of devout Christ followers across diverse Christian denominations, thereby encompassing the entire ecumenical spectrum as Beach Advocates.

***Alignment to the Spirit of Prophecy and the Bible.*** Highlighting the harmonious correlation between the Spirit of Prophecy and the Bible, one might anticipate Beach to incorporate the subsequent lines from the thirteenth belief, which emphasize the emergence of a remnant tasked with upholding God's commandments and the faith of Jesus during a time of extensive apostasy in the last days. Unquestionably, Beach concurs with Adventists in their belief in the distinctive role of a visible remnant endowed with a special message and mission. However, he posits a thought-provoking notion that Adventists have never propagated the notion that the existence of this remnant negates the existence of an ecumenical, universal, and intangible church.<sup>26</sup>

Quite the opposite, the pioneers of Adventism, as eloquently articulated by Ellen White, acknowledged that "true Christians can be found in every church," even within "the Roman Catholic communion."<sup>27</sup> This insightful perspective sheds light on Adventists' inclusive recognition of genuine believers spread across various Christian denominations, defying conventional expectations.

In addition, Beach adeptly highlights Ellen White's invaluable contribution to the discourse by underscoring her encouragement for Adventist pastors to actively participate in personal forums and engage in ecumenical endeavors, fostering a shared purpose and genuine fellowship with ministers from other denominations. Notably, she wrote, "Our ministers should actively seek proximity to ministers of other denominations. Let us pray for and alongside these

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<sup>24</sup>Beach, *Ecumenism: Boon or Bane?*, 31.

<sup>25</sup>General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 19th ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald, 2005), 78.

<sup>26</sup>Beach, *Ecumenism: Boon or Bane?*, 189.

<sup>27</sup>Ellen G. White, *Sermons and Talks* (Silver Springs, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1994), 2:40-41.

individuals, for whom Christ intercedes. They bear a weighty responsibility. As messengers of Christ, we should demonstrate a profound and earnest interest in these guardians of the flock.”<sup>28</sup>

This quotation encapsulates two significant aspects. Firstly, the emphasis placed on praying “for and with” these pastors signifies a genuine concern that extends beyond mere outreach, encompassing the importance of fostering meaningful connections. Secondly, by referring to these ministers as the “shepherds of the flock,” Ellen White acknowledges their pivotal role in caring for the followers of Christ. It is no surprise, then, that Beach’s staunch advocacy for ecumenical forums aligns seamlessly with the wise counsel provided by Ellen White herself, further solidifying the significance and relevance of his stance.

**Weaknesses.** While Beach’s evaluation of the forum model of ecumenism highlights its strengths, it is important to acknowledge the potential weaknesses associated with this approach. These include:

***Insufficient historical information.*** There is a notable dearth of comprehensive historical information regarding the origins of the Adventist movement. Critics of Beach’s perspective argue that Adventist pioneers are often portrayed as having convened in a room with a Bible, fashioning a unique system of beliefs and practices, effectively constructing a New Testament church from scratch.<sup>29</sup>

However, Beach’s work conspicuously falls short of presenting a clear and exhaustive account of the historical truth. As Schantz suggests, early Adventists drew upon a diverse range of beliefs and worship practices from various groups, subjecting them to rigorous biblical scrutiny. They selectively adopted and adapted those elements that aligned with the standards outlined in the Bible.<sup>30</sup> Regrettably, Beach fails to address this crucial aspect and provide a comprehensive historical record.

***Borrowed and modified practices.*** Beach neglects to shed light on the fact that numerous worship practices observed by Adventists today are not explicitly mandated or described in the Bible. Instead, they have been borrowed and modified from other Christian believers through forums and interactions. This is exemplified by the inclusion of mid-week prayer meetings, Sabbath school, camp meetings, and the order of divine service, as well as practices such as hymn singing, offering appeals, quarterly communion, and various others.<sup>31</sup> The absence of sufficient historical information further amplifies the significance of these borrowed practices, leading to the implication that the Adventist Church, through its forums, has emerged as the product of a genuinely ecumenical movement.

Based on the evaluation of Beach’s views on the forum model of ecumenism, several strengths and weaknesses have been identified. These findings provide valuable insights into the potential benefits and limitations of employing forums to achieve ecumenical goals. Considering these aspects, the following recommendations can be made:

First, in order to address the weakness of insufficient historical information, it would be crucial for Beach to have provided a more comprehensive account of the origins of the Adventist

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<sup>28</sup>Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 6:77-78.

<sup>29</sup>Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450-1950* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1994), 421.

<sup>30</sup>Borge Schantz, “The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Missionary Thought: Contemporary Appraisal” (PhD. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, 1983), 101.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*

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movement. This could be achieved by conducting further research and incorporating historical records that highlight the diverse sources of beliefs and practices adopted by early Adventists. By offering a more accurate portrayal of the movement's historical context, Beach could enhance the credibility and understanding of his perspective.

Second, to strengthen the evaluation, Beach should have acknowledged and discussed the fact that numerous worship practices observed by Adventists today have been borrowed and modified from other Christian believers through forums and interactions. By highlighting the influence of ecumenical exchanges on the development of Adventist practices, Beach could demonstrate the movement's commitment to fostering unity and drawing from a diverse Christian heritage.

### Beach on Spiritual Unity

Beach proposes that the key to spiritual unity lies in focusing on shared spiritual experiences rather than theological differences. By emphasizing the common ground of spiritual encounters, he suggests that individuals from different faiths can develop a deeper understanding and appreciation for one another. However, while this view presents a compelling perspective, it is crucial to assess its strengths and weaknesses to gain a comprehensive understanding of its effectiveness in promoting ecumenical dialogue and cooperation.

**Strengths.** Beach's evaluation of spiritual unity within the context of ecumenism brings forth several strengths that highlight the transformative power of this concept. These include:

***Coherence with the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy.*** Through his analysis, Beach highlights that the fulfillment of the second Angel's message, as described in Revelation 18:4, is yet to transpire even in the present era.<sup>32</sup> This alignment with Adventist teachings regarding the three angel's messages, which serve as a warning against spiritual Babylon in the last days, underscores the theological foundation of Beach's view.

Furthermore, Beach passionately encourages Adventist pastors to actively participate in local ministerial associations, urging even greater involvement in visits and prayers with pastors from other denominations. These relationships and associations are not only seen as vital but are also viewed as the bedrock for achieving spiritual unity on a broader scale, extending to community issues such as religious liberty, the contentious topic of creation and evolution, fostering racial harmony, and addressing matters concerning family health and morality.<sup>33</sup> This emphasis on collaborative efforts underscores the practical approach of Beach's view, which seeks to bridge gaps and establish common ground amidst diverse religious communities.

***Elimination of stereotypes and prejudices.*** The paramount objective of eradicating stereotypes and prejudices gains notable significance as Beach astutely highlights the invaluable role of spiritual unity in dispelling bias.<sup>34</sup> He compellingly asserts that such unity not only fosters a harmonious understanding of the church but also serves as a potent catalyst for dismantling deep-rooted prejudices.<sup>35</sup> Certain Christian counterparts have been obstinately resistant to

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<sup>32</sup>Beach, *Ecumenism: Boon or Bane?*, 254.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 167.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 68.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 70.

embracing the Adventist truth on specific theological matters due to the pervasive influence of their preconceived notions. Consequently, their imperviousness to alternative perspectives has impeded fruitful dialogue.

**Weaknesses.** While Beach's evaluation of spiritual unity in ecumenism highlights its strengths, it is important to consider the potential weaknesses associated with this concept. These include:

***Adventists' worship day hinders spiritual unity.*** Adventists' worship day poses a substantial hindrance to achieving spiritual unity. From a practical standpoint, their unique day of worship erects a formidable barrier that separates them from other Christian groups, as aptly highlighted by Beach. While other Christians display adaptability in their liturgy, rituals, music, and sermons to foster harmonious worship, Adventists remain steadfast in their commitment to a day of worship that deviates from the practices of the majority.<sup>36</sup>

This unwavering dedication to a distinct worship day presents genuine challenges when attempting to forge sustained fellowship and authentic spiritual unity. While sporadic attendance on both Saturday and Sunday or occasional inclusion of others on Saturdays may be feasible on special occasions, it undeniably poses significant obstacles in establishing a cohesive and enduring bond of spiritual unity.<sup>37</sup>

***Sabbath and marginalized group sensitivity.*** The observance of the Sabbath among Adventists fuels a heightened sensitivity towards marginalized groups. Their unwavering commitment to Sabbath observance has been nurtured by a deep empathy for the struggles faced by religious minorities who have been historically persecuted for holding beliefs that deviate from mainstream norms.

The pervasiveness of anti-Semitism, often targeting Sabbath-keeping practices, has long plagued Europe and America. Adventists find resonance in historical episodes such as the persecution and execution of Anabaptists by Lutherans, Calvinists, and Catholics during the Reformation.<sup>38</sup> Even in late 19th century America, Adventists endured fines and imprisonment for violating Sunday laws. Against this backdrop, when Christians convene to advocate for spiritual unity based on shared principles, Adventists approach with caution.

Adventists harbor concerns that minority groups may face undue pressure to conform to prevailing majority-held beliefs, potentially compromising the distinctive tenets they hold dear. Adventists firmly believe that prophetic revelations indicate the likelihood of future imposition of worship practices favored by the majority, further intensifying their sensitivity towards individuals like Beach, who advocate for spiritual unity by downplaying doctrinal or theological differences. Throughout history, core beliefs, such as the Sabbath, have faced vulnerability and marginalization, adding to Adventists' guarded stance.<sup>39</sup>

***The Sabbath's inherent authority for Adventists.*** The Sabbath holds an unparalleled authority within Adventist beliefs. It transcends mere rest, symbolizing a profound expression of God's benevolent dominion. It serves as a perpetual reminder that humanity was purposefully

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<sup>36</sup>Miller, *The Religious Roots of the First Amendment*, 122.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Loren Seibold, "Letting Roman Catholics off the Hook: Seven Reasons for Rethinking our Enemies List," *Adventist Today* 18, (2010): 22.

<sup>39</sup>Gehard Pfandl, "Ecumenism: At What Cost?" *Perspective Digest* 15, (2010): 107. <https://rb.gy/hkrf3o> (accessed 16 February 2024).

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created to embrace love and highlights God's singular authority as the Creator.<sup>40</sup> Diverging from most of the Ten Commandments, which can be derived from civil society without direct biblical influence (such as laws against theft, murder, and adultery), the observance of the Sabbath is a divine commandment.

Adventists view adherence to the Sabbath as an act of genuine submission to God's loving authority, thereby becoming a distinct emblem where the realms of creation, love, and authority converge in worship. Consequently, fully embracing the spiritual unity advocated by Beach necessitates compromising the sacred observance of the Sabbath, which holds immeasurable significance to Adventists and represents an integral aspect of their faith.

In light of these evaluations, it is recommended that Beach's views on spiritual unity be acknowledged for their strengths in promoting dialogue, bridging gaps, and dispelling prejudices. However, the challenges posed by Adventists' unique worship day and the significance of the Sabbath to their faith should also be considered. When striving for spiritual unity, it is important to foster an environment that respects and appreciates diverse beliefs while seeking common ground based on shared principles and experiences.

### Conclusion

The research shows that Bert B. Beach has a positive view of ecumenism and believes that Adventists should engage in dialogue and cooperation with other Christian denominations. He argues that ecumenism is essential for the growth and maturity of the Adventist Church, as it provides opportunities for learning and sharing with other Christians. Beach's views are grounded in his understanding of the gospel, which he believes transcends denominational boundaries. However, his ecumenical activities have been met with mixed reactions within the Adventist Church, with some leaders and theologians expressing concerns about the potential dilution of Adventist distinctive doctrines.

In conclusion, Bert B. Beach's views on ecumenism were shaped by his Adventist identity, but he recognized the importance of dialogue and cooperation with other Christian denominations. Beach's contributions to the World Council of Churches reflect his commitment to promoting Christian unity and addressing social and political issues. Despite criticism from some Adventists, Beach remained committed to the ecumenical movement and sought to build bridges between different Christian communities. Overall, Beach's legacy in the ecumenical movement is one of promoting dialogue, cooperation, and social justice.

Beach's ecumenical views have positive implications for Seventh-day Adventists. Adventists who have often been portrayed as being exclusive and peculiar, can emulate several of his positive contributions to ecumenism. If they want to reach out to others, they ought to build bridges with different people including those with whom they do not share a common understanding on doctrine and practices. Only when mutual friendship is built, can healthy dialogue and interaction follow. As long as Adventists do not compromise on non-negotiable beliefs and practices, it is perfectly fine and even commendable to engage in some healthy and open dialogue with people of different faiths within and without Christianity.

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<sup>40</sup>Kwabena Donkor, "Church and Society in Adventism: Some Reflections," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 6, (2010): 76-77.

### Endnote

<sup>1</sup>The Seventh-day Adventist Church's stance on ecumenism, as expressed on its website, emphasizes that while the church recognizes the importance of cooperation and respect among people of different beliefs, it also affirms the beliefs and teachings that distinguish it from other faiths. The statement highlights the church's commitment to sharing its message of hope and salvation while respecting the freedom of others to follow their own beliefs. Additionally, the statement emphasizes the importance of avoiding syncretism, or the blending of different religious beliefs, and of maintaining the church's identity and mission. Seventh-day Adventist Church, "Ecumenical Engagement," Adventist.org, accessed February 29, 2024, <https://www.adventist.org/ecumenical-relations/ecumenical-engagement/>).

<sup>2</sup>It is imperative that I acknowledge Beach's contributions to the church in a footnote. Dr. Beach has been a part of the ecumenical community for over four decades. His dedication and reputation in these circles are recognized and respected, and he has represented the church as an ambassador.

<sup>3</sup>Professor Stefan Höschele has been very resourceful in providing useful resources and critical evaluation of Bert B. Beach's ecumenical views. He has been kind to share with me his published works on the subject including "Interchurch Relations in Seventh-day Adventist History: A Study in Ecumenics" (Protestant Theological Faculty Charles University, habilitation thesis, 2004), "Bert Beverly Beach: Bridge Builder," *Communio Viatorum* 57, no. 2 (2015): and *Adventist Interchurch Relations: A Study in Ecumenics* (Göttingen, DE: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022).

<sup>4</sup>Ellen White, an influential figure in Adventism, offered this valuable piece of advice to A.T. Jones, a prominent critic of Sunday observance in *Testimonies to the Church*, vol. 6, 122. This counsel remains pertinent today, and it prompts Adventists to delve deeper into the meaning of forming alliances with honest individuals. It encourages Adventists to consider the possibility of collaborating with those who possess integrity and good intentions, even if they differ in their religious practices. Most likely, this is what Beach went out to accomplish in advocating for ecumenical alliances.

<sup>5</sup>Johnsson supports Beach's belief that Adventists should continue to explore areas of cooperation and alliance with other churches, citing the Adventist Church's participation in the Edinburgh 1910 conference as an example of a successful alliance. He also cites examples of successful cooperation between Adventists and other denominations, such as E.G. White's involvement in the temperance alliance movement. (Johnsson, "Children of Abraham," 10).

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