

## **"Doctor" or "Brother"?**

By CARSTEN JOHNSEN

Christ's words in Matthew 23:5-12 constitute a timely warning against certain forms of human self-centeredness deeply rooted in everyone: "All their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, and love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi. But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren."

I once used to think that mainly institutions of the world—and only in certain areas of the world—were infected by the peculiar habit of emphasizing one's titles. Approaching a professor in a European university, a friend of mine was careful to address him as "Herr Dr. Schmidt." But the professor corrected him most severely: "Nicht Dr. Schmidt, bitte. Ich bin Dr.-Dr. Schmidt." The student had committed the offense of failing to recognize that the scholar he was talking to had *two* doctorates.

Is the intellectualistic distinction between "Dr. So-and-so" and "Mr. So-and-so" simply a European phenomenon, or a phenomenon confined to worldly environments?

A few years ago two of our European divisions jointly arranged a convention for our university graduates. I was asked to give one of the lectures. I availed myself of the opportunity of paying due homage to our generous French hosts in connection with my subject. The manner of public address is no problem in France. Whether the man you meet may be a member of l'Academie Francaise or a garbage collector in the streets, he is always addressed simply as *Monsieur*. A country blessed with such intellectual democracy has impressed me for many years as an extremely pleasant place in which to live.

But permit me first to give you a wider background of my personal experience. I taught in our Norwegian college for about ten years. During that time I happened to be the only teacher there having completed a university education. (In fact, it seemed I was not called to teach there *because* of my education but *in spite* of it. Our brethren in those days obviously had a somewhat different way of evaluating things. And that way was not always so foolish as it may now appear to some.)

I need not tell you that so far as titles were concerned I was simply Brother So-and-so, like any other worker on the campus. Another title was never imagined or dreamed of in that particular environment.

However, after the ten-year period, it so happened that I was away from the school for some years. When I returned changes had taken place. During my ab-

sence new teachers had entered who, in their turn, had finished their university education. The first time I now heard my name called over the loudspeaker of the office, I had a surprising experience: "Would Lector Johnsen please come to the office!"

"Lector Johnsen," I mused—that certainly sounded rather strange in this environment. Well, I soon had to establish the historical fact that our office personnel had found it appropriate, presumably in accordance with the increasing status of a progressive school, to abandon the old form of address of "Brother So-and-so." In place of that outdated ecclesiastical brotherhood we now had something I was inclined to call an intellectual caste system. Our teachers had officially been divided into two groups, similar to the ones you know from our American colleges of the present day—on the one hand the "Doctors So-and-so," those who have had the good fortune of finishing their education; on the other hand, the "Misters So-and-so," the ones who must be labeled as *not* having finished their education!

### **Reason for Innovation**

I immediately went to the office superintendent inquiring why this division had been deemed necessary.

Here something interesting should be noted. I have observed the phenomenon on various occasions. It is not, generally, the teachers who take the initiative in introducing the watertight bulkheads that seem to divide a faculty into separate parts. It is rather a more neutral category of people, sometimes having no academic degrees, perhaps not even the personal ambition to acquire them, who obviously have a considerable admiration and respect for such degrees, and a definite appreciation of their value as an efficient means of boosting the prestige of their school.

Of course, I had to admit that there might be many good reasons for increasing the academic standing of our school in the public mind. Personal letters of application may need a clear enumeration of all titles and various achievements. This is not necessarily vain ostentation. This is realistic business for the teacher as well as for the firm or cause he represents. In fact, there would seem to be a lot to praise and approve in our office personnel's attitude. However, at the same time I had to point out that in my personal case the change of things meant a serious problem rather than an improvement. In fact, if I were to go on feeling at home in that school, the innovation they had devised with the best of intentions, no doubt, would have to disappear. (And I was confident that hardly a faculty member would seriously disagree with me.)

Sound pedagogical insight should also have its evident arguments. Why should we always emphasize, in front of our students—"This teacher has finished his education, but that one there, sad to say, has not. In other words, the latter's teaching is almost bound to be inferior in some way; it is far from being the ideal in this school; it is not really what you students are entitled to claim."

Should we not use any titles whatsoever then, except in our dealings with worldly authorities?

On the contrary, I admit the usefulness of certain titles on certain occasions, even on the campus. What could be more informative and practical than saying to a student, perhaps a newcomer: Go to *Dean So-and-so* or *Principal So-and-so*. Or: this is the office of *Professor So-and-so* or *Pastor So-and-so*. All these titles are meaningful in the sense that they tell something essential about the profession and practical function of that person. They tell me something of vital importance about his everyday life and the capacity in which he may enter into my life as a fellow man.

But here we are concerned about a title of a different type—that is, the title of "Dr. So-and-so," not Doctor in the sense of physician or dentist, for that also would imply a profession. But we are here speaking about Doctor in the sense of Ph.D. What meaningfulness or mission in life does that imply? What concrete information does that provide? Practically none whatsoever. Whether it was a doctorate concentrating on the guttural consonants of some dialect in the Caucasian Mountains, or on the computed prices of vacation cabin lots on the moon around the year 3,000, nothing is told you. The only thing such a title tells, in fact, the only thing it was ever *intended* to tell, is the fact that the person concerned has reached the pinnacle of erudition in some line or other, an erudition existing for its own sake.

But worse yet is the situation that arises when the phenomenon manages to enter our Sabbath school and church service bulletins—after *Mr. So-and-so* has offered prayer, *Dr. So-and-so* will preach the sermon.

#### First Impressions of a Large College Campus

Permit me to give a personal glimpse of my first impressions on arriving at the campus of one of our largest colleges in America some years ago. I had been called to the post of professor in one of its departments. Some office workers whose desks I naturally had to pass on that occasion puzzled me a little. They seemed to be actually uneasy about something. I understood afterward that almost every newcomer on the faculty caused them the same awkward predicament. How could they find out, preferably without asking directly, whether the new teacher had a doctorate? For evidently it must be considered as something close to a mortal sin to address a man as *Mr. So-and-so* if, actually, he did not at all deserve that "humiliating depreciation." Such treatment of visiting scholars would almost appear to be a valid reason for dismissal from the office.

I let them understand that in my case they could be entirely reassured. I would not take any action against them whatever they called me. In fact, as I look upon it (and I do hope I have not misunderstood my English altogether), being called "Mister" implies an infinite honor; it means that I have been pointed out as a real *gentleman*. So, from a strictly civil point of view, what more could any man expect? On the other hand, if they were Adventists, and if they thought they could accept me, too, as an Adventist (or as a passably good Christian, anyway), then I would be still happier to hear them call me *Brother Johnsen*.

What has caused the disappearance of that time-honored title of Christian fellowship, handed down to us as a precious legacy, not only from our pioneers in the Advent Movement but as a tradition older than the Church Fathers themselves? I have tried to ask some students on our campuses why *they* are so careful to avoid this form of address. Some will say openly: "It is precisely the long *tradition* that is the bad thing about it. We cannot be *that* old-fashioned today. Such obsolete phrases simply do not fit into twentieth-century language. Remember that we are here in a publicly accredited American college. We are not an isolated group any longer. You must always take into consideration that some non-Adventist may be near at any time. What would he think if we began to speak about our 'brethren'? Do we not look peculiar enough in the eyes of the world even without those out-of-date features?"

#### New Developments; New Problems

I do not doubt for a moment that new developments are creating new problems, sincere problems, for our students. And what about our administrators, the people in our offices? What problems do they have that cause them to drop the "archaic" forms of address we now find hardly surviving publicly except in letters from the General Conference? Is all this just a sign of modern adaptation or is it a symptomatic trait of a gradual process, in us as well, of a general secularization? Is there a trend that could be called the "dechristianization of Seventh-day Adventism"?

Could any other and less alarming reasons be produced for our increasing failure to proclaim, with the childlike openness of our forefathers, that joyous fellowship of belonging to a peculiar group of Christian brotherhood?

Anyway, there seems to be an invisible barrier of social pressure surrounding us on all sides, a glacial crust of modern secularism, an ice we do not dare to break.

Personally, I would like to find some mitigating circumstances to account for even the fact that we seem to be the most disturbingly "Doctor" conscious people in the world.

From my first real Adventist college experience in America I happened to come to one of the most famous university campuses in the country, a school counting a dozen Nobel prize winners among its faculty members. I asked a

woman in the reception office if I could meet a department head (a really distinguished scholar in his field). She spoke to the man, and then put down the telephone, saying smilingly, "Mr. N. N. is waiting for you in his office, Mr. Johnsen."

I was dumfounded. As for the "Mr. Johnsen," of course I could take that fairly well, but "Mr. N. N."—the famous scholar! How was it this woman had such boldness? Did she not have any reverence for the lofty peaks of expert scholarship?

I soon found that every man on that campus was addressed as *Mr. So-and-so*. And the same seems to apply to many other of our most highly selective universities. What a shock to a person such as me, accustomed to the code of manners prevailing in an SDA college.

#### Inferiority Complex?

After this, however, I seriously had to ask myself the disagreeable but pertinent question—Are we as a people internally disrupted by some kind of inferiority complex? Is that the true reason why we insist upon defining our titles?

In one way, that explanation would be nothing less than an attenuating circumstance, after all. And then there might be considerable hope that things could change for the better after a while—that is, once we have finally grown up and left behind our "childhood diseases." A time might come when we sense no more need of laboriously boosting our "lacking dignity" by maneuvers of sheer vanity! But this, too, is probably a dangerous way of looking at our problem. Should we not rather go to the Bible and ask—why are we so eager to "receive honour one of another" (John 5: 44)?

We do need honor; there is no doubt about that. No man can live without honor. Scripture testifies to that. But from where should our honor come, the only honor that avails? It must come from God. And He says, "Them that honour me I will honour" (1 Sam. 2:30). So let us have this one great concern—to honor God. Then all our personal honor problems will simply disappear. We shall have the one great thing we are all lacking—the honor of God.

But then we must become *children* again. When I taught at our Seminar Schloss Bogenhofen, in Austria, I had the thrilling experience of having those heartily childlike students address me as *Uncle Johnsen*. The title my wife received was naturally *Aunt Johnsen*. Our principal was Uncle Steiner and his wife was Aunt Steiner. Humanly speaking, I never felt more profoundly honored in any school. To me these were titles of human warmth; they could not help impressing me as truly meaningful. They were definitely distance eliminating. It takes a real child to overcome distances. It takes a child to realize the warmth and meaningfulness of brotherhood.

This, in fact, is the great objection I have to our present use of the title "Doctor" in its relentlessly intellectualistic sense—it will always tend to be humanly cold and distance creating. It is too "adult" for the child of God. ♦♦