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Models of Religious Authority

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The years immediately prior to the fateful day of October 22, 1844, were marked by much confusion and fanaticism in the ranks of Adventist believers. All who joined the movement accepted its fundamental tenet that Christ would return somewhere between 1843 and 1844; however, Millerite Adventism was not an organized movement, with clearly defined ways of understanding and interpreting Scripture. Thus, during these pre-Great Disappointment years, the leaders of the movement were caught on the horns of dilemma: on the one hand, William Miller, Joshua Himes, and others labored to project a public image of their movement as orthodox and sane; on the other hand, they and their followers believed that all people, not just certain individuals, could interpret the Scriptures for themselves in the light of the Holy Spirit. This resulted, at times, in a variety of bizarre ideas among some of those who joined the movement. Understandably, this jeopardized, to some extent, the credibility of the Millerite movement.[1] This example from early Adventist history illustrates the perennial problem of religious authority in the church.

The dilemma faced by the Millerite leaders was not new; the problem of religious authority arose soon after the ascension of Jesus. During their lifetime, the apostles functioned as a trustworthy source of authority for the primitive Christian community. With their death, however, the

[1] Ronald L. Numbers and Janet Numbers, "Millerism and Madness: A Study of 'Religious Insanity' in Nineteenth Century America," in *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987), 92-117; cf. Francis Nichol, *The Midnight Cry* (Takoma Park: Review and Herald, 1944), 329-330.

problem of authority in the church became evident. This problem has never been fully resolved.

At its best, Christian theology has sought to find a balance between two approaches to religious authority. One approach suggests that the Church has authority over the individual and that the individual should respond with complete trust toward religious authority and its pronouncements. The other approach suggests that the individual is the source of authority, having the right to scrutinize, critique, or reject the pronouncements of the Church. In this paper, these approaches to religious authority are referred to, respectively, as dependence and independence models of religious authority.[2]

At the risk of oversimplification, the history of religious authority may be explored from the perspective of these two approaches.[3] This is mainly because the problem of religious authority occurs at the point of interaction between these two mutually exclusive forces: dependence and independence. Throughout the history of Christianity, neither Roman Catholic nor Protestant ecclesiology has been able to break free from the hold of either force, at times oscillating between both or taking them to their extreme. In recent decades, and especially since the Second Vatican Council, the search for a solution to the problem of religious authority, the "holy grail" of ecclesiology, has intensified on both sides of the Christian spectrum. The issue of religious authority is, I believe, also of interest to Seventh-day Adventists. Let us now, therefore, examine the dependence model, the mode of religious authority prevalent during most of the Christian era.

Dependence. During His earthly ministry, Jesus established a community of believers, known in the New Testament as *ekkleœsia*. Following His ascension, it was the task of the apostles, as immediate witnesses to the Christ-event, to faithfully preserve the message and to function as the doctrinal authority for the primitive *ekkleœsia* (Gal 1:8-12; 2 Thess 2:15; 1 Cor 14:37; 2 Cor 10:8). Although the apostles served as itinerant evangelists who established new congregations, there is no New Testament evidence that the apostles ever presided as the heads of local churches. It is clear, however, that they were actively engaged in establishing local leadership and that this system of governance was based on

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[2] As will become evident later in this paper, I am indebted to Sharon Parks for the use of these terms.

[3] This paper is limited to the problem of religious authority within Western Christianity.

the approach used in the synagogue.[4] Within the Christian context, these leaders became known as "elders" (*presbyteroi*), or "bishops" (*episkop-oi*), which basically denoted the same office[5] (Acts 20:17, 28). It appears that the multi-elder system of church governance spread rapidly and became accepted in every Christian congregation during the life of the apostles (Acts 14:23).[6] Although the New Testament emphasizes the need for church leadership to be dependent upon apostolic testimony, it does not present its readers with an unambiguous picture of the nature of episcopal authority. The scarcity of biblical evidence regarding this matter set the stage for the ecclesiological developments of the post-Apostolic era.

With the rise of various heretical movements, the sub-apostolic Church was, to some extent, forced to address the issue of religious authority. *1 Clement* (c. 96 AD) and *Didachœ* (c. 110 AD), as well as the writings of Ignatius (c. 35–c. 107 AD), Tertullian (c. 160–c. 225 AD) and Irenaeus (c. 130–c. 200 AD) attest that the vacuum left by the death of the apostles was filled by the leaders in local churches, who all appear to have had equal authority. It is in these writings that we witness the evolution of the biblical system of ecclesial leadership into what became known as the episcopal system of church governance.[7] With time, the multi-elder system was replaced by the monepiscopate or monarchical episcopate, i.e., one bishop per church, who, it was believed, was historically linked with the apostles through the rite of ordination. The role of the bishop was to govern the church, to lead in worship, and to administer the Christian sacraments.[8] Most importantly, however, by virtue of his ordination, which allegedly endowed him with the apostolic gift of interpretation, the bishop was to serve as the protector and interpreter of the Scriptures. The bishop protected the apostolic tradition, as well as indi-

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[4] Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1969), 23-25, 76-80.

[5] Edmund Hill, *Ministry and Authority* (London: Chapman, 1988), 32.

[6] Campenhausen, 76.

[7] Maxwell Staniford, trans., *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*, ed., Robert Baldwick and Betty Radice (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 9, 234; Ignatius, *Magnesians*, 3; 6:4, in Staniford, 88; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4:26.2 (trans. Alexander Roberts, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868); Campenhausen, 91-92, 102, 171-174.

[8] Cyprian, *Epistles* 68.8 (*ANF* 5:375); Adalbert Davids, "One or None: Cyprian on the Church and Tradition," in *The Unifying Role of the Bishop*, ed. Edward Schillebeeckx (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 47; Robert Rainy, *The Ancient Catholic Church* (Edingurgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902), 512-514; Richard McBrien, *Catholicism* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 867-868.

vidual believers, against heresy, by providing correct interpretation of the Scriptures.[9] This later became known as the doctrine of Apostolic Succession, i.e., the belief that the doctrinal authority given to the apostles by Jesus was preserved in a direct and unbroken line of bishops.[10] This doctrine continues to be the linchpin of contemporary Roman Catholic ecclesiology. By the end of the third century AD, the bishops, as successors to the apostles, presided over the lives and beliefs of individuals with unique and powerful authority. The salvation of believers depended on their communion with the bishops, through whom, it was believed, God interacted with His people. The presence of a bishop in the church became indispensable to the existence of the community of faith. Where the true bishops were, there was the Church of Christ. Thus, increasingly, the church came to be defined as the bishops and those in communion with them.[11]

In later centuries, doctrinal authority was centralized in the hands of the Roman bishop, whose official doctrinal pronouncements were identified with the voice of Christ.[12] The height of papal authority occurred in the 13th and 14th centuries, beginning with the reign of Innocent III (1198-1216) and ending with that of Boniface VIII (1294-1303). The Popes of this era claimed authority over both the church and the state. This was clearly expressed in 1302, when, confronted with numerous threats to his authority, Boniface VIII issued a bull, *Unam Sanctam*, in which both the doctrinal and the temporal powers of the bishop of Rome were strongly asserted, and the unity of the Church under the rule of the Roman pontiff was emphasized.[13]

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[9] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.26.2; Cyprian, *Letter* 62; Peter Hinchliff, *Cyprian of Carthage and the Unity of the Christian Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1974), 40-41.

[10] Carlos Alfredo Steger, *Apostolic Succession: In the Writings of Yves Congar and Oscar Cullmann* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1993), 17-19; Francis A. Sullivan, "Apostolic Succession," *Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (1995), 77-79.

[11] Thus Cyprian wrote: "Whence you ought to know that the bishop is in the Church, and the Church in the bishop; and if any one be not with the bishop, that he is not in the Church" (*Letter* 68.8).

[12] At this juncture, it is important to note that within Eastern Orthodoxy, religious authority developed in a more collegial manner. A detailed discussion of religious authority within Eastern Orthodoxy, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

[13] For a succinct description of the circumstances surrounding the issuance of the bull, see J. Derek Holmes and Bernard W. Bickers, *A Short History of the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist, 1984), 100-02, and T. S. R. Boase, *Boniface VIII* (London: Constable, 1933), 316-19.

This absolute authority of the community, in the voice of the papacy and the bishops, over the individual was confirmed by the Council of Trent (1543-1563) and by the First Vatican Council (1869-1870). Both councils insisted that individual scriptural interpretation must never contradict the official doctrinal teachings of the Church. In communion with the pope, the bishops were the final arbiters of truth. If the Roman Catholic leadership defined a particular teaching or interpretation of Scripture, this was considered truth, even if a more thorough exegesis of the passage suggested an alternate interpretation.[14] This attitude was exemplified in Pius IX's (1792-1878) famous statement: *La tradizione son' io* ("I am the tradition," June 18, 1870).[15]

The Roman Catholic solution to the problem of religious authority, thus, was one of *dependence*. In this model, the leadership of the community was "the church," and they held the key to correct interpretation of Scripture. Individuals were expected to demonstrate complete submission and un-examined trust towards authority. They could contribute to theological thinking as long as they were in agreement with the leaders of the community. Thus, within this model, doctrinal assent was of primary importance.

The deficiencies of this model were not comprehensively addressed within the Roman Catholic communion until the Second Vatican Council, when it was suggested that a move away from strict authoritarianism was essential if the Church was to fulfill its missionary mandate.[16] *Gaudium et spes* ("Joy and hope"), a Vatican II document dealing with the Church's relationship with the modern world and promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1965, advocated "lawful freedom of inquiry and of thought," which, in the eyes of some interpreters, allowed a measure of

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[14] Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought*, 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 3:247; Christopher O'Donnell, *Ecclesia: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1996), 451; Michael D. Place, "From Solicitude to Magisterium," *Chicago Studies* 17 (1978): 235-36; Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 181.

[15] August Hasler, *How the Pope Became Infallible: Pius IX and the Politics of Persuasion* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1981), 91. This statement was uttered by Pius IX when challenged by Cardinal Filippo Guidi, who spoke during the First Vatican Council (1869-1870) in favor of limiting the scope of papal infallibility. Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1997), 231.

[16] Jon Nilson, "The Rights and Responsibilities of Theologians: A Theological Perspective," in *Readings in Moral Theology: Dissent in the Church*, ed. Charles Curran and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist, 1988), 13.

theological pluralism within the Church.[17] Unfortunately, the Second Vatican Council was just a brief respite in the history of Roman Catholicism. The irresistible lure of the dependence model has been evident in the pontificates of all post-Vatican II pontiffs.[18] This, however, has not had the desired effect of greater unity and conformity within the church, but has, instead, resulted in fragmentation and division.[19] It should be added that Roman Catholicism is not the only ecclesial community that, deliberately or unthinkingly, has followed the dependence model. It has proven to be irresistible even within some Orthodox and Protestant communities, with equally damaging consequences.

Independence. In contrast to the dependence model of the first fifteen hundred years of Christian history, the latter middle ages were dominated by what Jaroslav Pelikan terms, "doctrinal pluralism."[20] During the 14th century, the authoritarianism of the Roman Catholic Church was challenged in a number of ways, including growing nationalism and secularism, dissatisfaction with the moral condition of the church, and increasing prosperity.[21] Furthermore, the renaissance and humanism brought a new emphasis upon the individual, encouraging a return to original sources rather than a dependence on the official pronouncements of the church.[22] This was the milieu within which the reformation was born and which contributed, in the minds of many, to the upstaging of the mentality of dependence. While Roman Catholicism, at least until the mid-20th century, defended itself against the cultural influences referred

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[17] *Gaudium et spes* 62, in Walter Abbott, ed. *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 270; cf. Scott Appleby, "The Contested Legacy of Vatican II," *Notre Dame Magazine* 28 (Summer 1999): 25; Nilson, 29.

[18] During the writing of this article, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger entered the second year of his pontificate as Benedict XVI. Prior to his election, he was the Vatican's Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a doctrinal watchdog of the Roman Catholic Church. His prefecture was marked by little tolerance toward various post-Vatican II doctrinal aberrations. It remains to be seen if his pontificate will continue along similar lines.

[19] In 1998, a renowned Roman Catholic theologian, Cardinal Avery Dulles, wrote in a note to a friend: "I hope that between us (and with much help from others) we can help contain some of the madness than now passes for Catholic Christianity" (my personal collection).

[20] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: Reformation of Church and Dogma*, vol. 4 (Chicago: U of Chicago P), 10.

[21] Joseph Lortz, "Why Did the Reformation Happen," in *The Reformation: Basic Interpretations*, ed. Lewis W. Spitz (Lexington: D. C. Heath, 1972), 122-124.

[22] Ernst Troeltsch, "Renaissance and Reformation," in *The Reformation: Basic Interpretations*, 28-30.

to above, much of Protestantism embraced them. Individualism became the hallmark of Protestantism.

In agreement with the spirit of the age, the reformers taught the doctrines of the "priesthood of all believers" and of *Sola Scriptura*. Both of these principles emphasized the individual's immediate relationship with God and with the Scriptures, that is, without the indispensable mediation of the church. It must be noted, however, that the magisterial reformers' emphasis on these doctrines was based on an attempt to rid the church of various medieval views and practices that had crept in, rather than on a dissatisfaction with the authoritarianism of the church. Luther, for one, insisted on the need for an institutional church, albeit not in the Roman Catholic sense, which would mediate individuals' access to the Word of God and regulate the spiritual and moral lives of believers. Likewise, John Calvin insisted that one could not have God as a Father unless one considered the church as one's mother.[23] Like Cyprian, he believed that there was no salvation outside of the church. [24] The vestiges of Roman Catholic institutionalism in the reformers' teachings were perhaps the reason why they continued to maintain close ties with the state,[25] at times using its judicial structures to enforce uniformity of belief.[26]

Thus, while the magisterial reformers repudiated the dependence model bequeathed to them by Roman Catholicism and attempted to create ecclesiastical structures in harmony with the doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers,"[27] in some ways they continued to perpetuate a mentality of dependence. It was perhaps this ambiguity that prompted Ernst Troeltsch to observe that the magisterial reformation, at best, only modified the Roman Catholic ecclesiology of the middle ages. The Catholic approach, he believed, was simply fitted with a more individualistic veneer, but the medieval attempt to regulate the whole of life, including

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[23] Pelikan, 173-174; John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4. 1. 1.

[24] Pelikan, 178. Calvin devotes the entire fourth book of his *Institutes* to ecclesiology. In section 1 of book 4 he states: "there is no salvation out of the church."

[25] Roland H. Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1965), 96.

[26] The infamous case of Servetus (1511-1553) and the Reformers' attitude towards the Anabaptists may serve as examples. For a complete account of the events leading to Servetus' execution, see Roland H. Bainton, *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus* (Boston: Beacon, 1953); cf. Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250-1550* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980), 340-351.

[27] Bainton, 117-122.

the personal beliefs of the individual, was still strongly in place.[28] While Troeltsch's position may be an oversimplification of the complex historical and religious milieu of the 16th century, it nevertheless highlights the problem that plagued the magisterial reformation and was never fully resolved.[29]

In contrast, the radical reformers of the 16th century, represented by various Anabaptist groups and fiercely opposed by the magisterial reformers, recognized the radical implications of these Protestant doctrines and brought them to their ultimate conclusion. While the various groups that came under the umbrella of the radical reformation may have had different agendas, they all agreed that the success of the reformation depended on a complete return to biblical Christianity. The Anabaptists asserted that although the magisterial reformers had emphasized the role of the Scripture, they had not sufficiently freed themselves from Catholic thinking, as evidenced, for example, in their continual support of the alliance between church and state. The Anabaptists fiercely opposed such an alliance, which, they asserted, tended to curtail religious liberty by allowing the use of force to coerce doctrinal uniformity.[30] Salvation, they argued, in no way depended on church membership or assent to doctrinal formulations handed down from above. Thus, while some groups of Anabaptists produced confessions of faith, such as the *Schleitheim Confession* (1527), for the most part they were "reluctant to issue writings of dogmatic content."[31] For the Anabaptists, the true church of God was in heaven; the church on earth was just an assembly of baptized and regenerated Christians[32] in which "every individual believer had the right to interpret Scripture as he pleased." [33] This stance, which raised "the pri-

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[28] Ernst Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress: A Historical Study of the Relation of Protestantism to the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon, 1958), 48, 70. Cf. Bainton, 115.

[29] In 1570, Theodore Beza, a Calvinist theologian and Calvin's successor in Geneva, denounced any form of religious tolerance as "a most diabolical dogma because it means that every one should be left to go to hell in his own way" (Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* [New York: Atheneum, 1977], 319).

[30] Williston Walker, *A History of Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), 327; Bainton, 99-101. It is to be noted that prior to gaining the state's backing, the Reformers also argued for freedom of religion according to the individual's conscience.

[31] Pelikan, 314.

[32] F. H. Littell, *The Origin of Sectarian Protestantism: A Study of the Anabaptist View of the Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 69, 86-87, 89, 95-98.

[33] Alister McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 182.

vate judgment of the individual . . . above the corporate judgment of the church,"[34] resulted in many factions.[35] Thus, the implications of *Sola Scriptura* and the "priesthood of all believers" were fully realized in the radical reformation, ultimately resulting in the triumph of individualism and subjectivism.

This situation was exacerbated by the enlightenment, which relegated religion to the realm of private experience,[36] as well as by the rise of two prominent, primarily Protestant movements in the 19th and 20th centuries; namely, liberal theology and neo-orthodoxy. Liberal theology emphasized a personal and subjective religious experience, independent of any form of Church authority and, ultimately, even of Scripture. In an attempt to rescue Protestantism from the clutches of liberalism and its attitude toward Scripture, neo-orthodoxy suggested that although Scripture is not the Word of God in and of itself, it *becomes* the Word of God when read by the individual, guided by the Holy Spirit. Neo-orthodoxy, in true Kierkegardian fashion, affirmed that truth is personal; God speaks to the individual rather than to the community.[37] Individualism, thus, was a hallmark of each of these movements.

In summary, by shifting the locus of religious authority and combining it with a heavy-handed approach to religious dissent, the magisterial reformers inadvertently opened a Pandora's box of religious individualism which, in the long term, proved hard to control. This was exacerbated by the radicalization of the doctrines of *Sola Scriptura* and the "priesthood of all believers" by the radical reformers, as well as by the influence of the enlightenment upon Protestantism. As a result, "the monopoly of a single confession" was forever broken.[38]

A rudimentary scan of the current Protestant theological landscape leaves one with the impression that there are as many interpretations of Scripture as there are interpreters. This is often observed by Catholic apologists, who suggest that the Protestant tendency to value the individual at the expense of the community is to blame for the proliferation of various denominations and sects within Protestant Christianity. It is al-

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[34] Ibid.

[35] Pelikan, 314.

[36] Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 20-21.

[37] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1936), 127.

[38] Bainton, 211.

leged that since the reformation, over twenty five thousand new Protestant denominations have been formed. [39]

In recent years, the excesses of individualism have been recognized within Protestant circles, especially in the United States, and a steady flow of studies dealing with the church have appeared.[40] Some have concluded that the modern Protestant situation is irreparable and have turned to Catholic theology for guidance.[41] As a result, the Roman Catholic Church has experienced an unprecedented rate of evangelical conversions in recent decades. Many of these recent converts have become outspoken and influential Catholic apologists. In contrast, some Protestant writers, rather than being concerned, see increased Protestant individualism as a sign of maturity and hail it as the end of denominationalism.[42]

Faced with the continual delay of the second coming, as well as influenced by the Protestant search for greater understanding of the nature of the church and religious authority, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has initiated its own ecclesiological exploration. Until recently, ecclesiology has received scant attention within Adventist literature, pushed aside by more urgent theological issues within the church. Thus, religious authority within Adventism has tended to oscillate between the two extremes of dependence and independence. For example, when working with potential new members, we encourage them to think independently of their social and religious context. Once they are baptized, however, we expect them to relate to Adventist doctrinal and life-style issues in a more dependent style. Thus, it is plausible to assert that both theological fragmentation and undue authoritarianism within Adventism may be traced to the inability to find a balance between the forces of dependence and independence, a problem recognized within contemporary Adventist theological circles.

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[39] Scott and Kimberly Hahn, *Rome Sweet Home* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 73.

[40] See, for example, Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995); and Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier, ed. *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005).

[41] Alex Jones, *No Price too High: A Pentecostal Preacher Becomes a Catholic* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2006); Louis Bouyer, *The Spirit and Form of Protestantism* (Princeton: Scepter, 2001); David Currie, *Born Fundamentalist, Born Again Catholic* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996); Hahn, *Rome Sweet Home* (1993); Thomas Howard, *Evangelical is Not Enough* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1984). This is only a sample of many Evangelical authors who have turned their back on Protestantism and have joined the Roman Catholic Church in recent years.

[42] George Barna, *Revolution* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 2005).

As the search for answers continues, modern Adventism stands at a crossroads. We can, like some Anabaptist groups, assert that the church is nothing more than a gathering of people who come together to study Scripture, to pray, and to evangelize, bringing under our umbrella people with a variety of doctrinal convictions—thus emphasizing the independence of the individual and sliding toward fragmentation. On the other hand, we can follow the lead of Roman Catholicism, crushing any form of independence and elevating the spirit of dependence. While there are no easy solutions to the problem of religious authority facing Adventism and much of the Protestant world, I would like to propose a third approach that could perhaps make possible a balance between the mutually exclusive forces of dependence and independence.

Towards a Balanced Approach to the Problem of Religious Authority

The terminology for the model I will now explore is adapted from the work of renowned psychologist Sharon Parks,[43] who developed a stage model of young adult faith development. While Parks' model is just one among many and may be considered an overly simplistic representation of faith development, it may nevertheless offer some insight to the problem of religious authority.

Parks suggests that the faith of a young adult develops in stages. The first stage of faith development is characterized by *dependence* upon, and "un-examined trust" toward, one's social and religious systems.[44] In the second stage, the individual moves toward *independence*, beginning to question the beliefs of the formerly unquestionable authority, and to identify him or her self as the source of authority. In the third stage, which Parks labels *interdependence*, individuals recognize their need for community and are willing to surrender some of their independence.[45] For the relationship between community and individual to be successful, however, the community cannot use its norms and beliefs to intentionally limit the individual's creativity and freedom. In order to continue growing, the individual must have the freedom to question norms and boundaries and to explore new territory. This process, which can only be ac-

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[43] Sharon Parks, *The Critical Years: The Young Adult Search for a Faith to Live By* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986); cf. Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

[44] Parks, *The Critical Years*, 54.

[45] Ibid., 57.

commodated by a healthy, secure community, is crucial for the community's own search for meaning and truth.[46]

How can these insights be applied to the problem of religious authority? As outlined above, the Roman Catholic model required *dependence* of the individual on authority. In contrast, the Protestant model moved toward *independence*. As we shall see, Parks' concept of *interdependence* echoes the New Testament vision for the church, which, I believe, calls for a balance between strong doctrinal consensus and independence. Let us now take a look at both of these.

The Church and Doctrinal Consensus. In recent decades, sociologists and health practitioners have come to recognize the importance of community, over against the Western inclination toward individualism. Scott Peck, for one, views genuine community as the solution to all of the world's problems. "There is evil in the world," he states, "and community is its natural enemy."[47] Like-minded individuals are encouraged to form genuine, all-inclusive communities, to foster their personal growth, and to protect them from the world's evils.

Although the Christian community should do and be all of this, the Bible implies that the "church" is more than just a collection of like-minded individuals who come together for the betterment of self and the world. According to the New Testament, the *ekkleœsia* had its beginning in Christ, who not only established it to be His agent in the world, but also promised His continual presence within it (Matt 28:20). The church, obviously, is not an individual, but rather, a group of individuals who come together for the purpose of discerning the will of God and living it in their lives. While divine revelation does and should benefit the individual, its primary purpose is to benefit the *church,* and its goal is fulfilled when the *church* listens, receives, and responds to its message (Rev 2:7). It is the task of the whole community, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret the divine message, to contextualize it, and to formulate its doctrinal boundaries. "The Christian church," Jaroslav Pelikan notes, "would not be the church as we know it without Christian doctrine."[48] As Tony Campolo forcefully states, "the Church is a gathering of radically committed believers who realize that any subjective prompting of the Spirit must be confirmed by a group of fellow believers

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[46] Ibid., 61.

[47] M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1987), 328.

[48] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600*, vol. 1 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1971), 1.

before the individual dares follow its leading." The Scriptures invite the local community to "test the spirits to see if they be of God"(1 John 4:1-3 NIV). Thus, when an individual hears the voice of God, these insights should be shared with the community, having confidence that "if all are agreed that the leading is of God," then it is proper to obey the call.[49]

The importance of community consensus is affirmed by Paul, who states that the church, not the individual, is "the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15, NIV). Of course, to protect the integrity of the Scriptures, this statement must be balanced by Paul's other sayings, such as those found in Galatians 1:9 (NIV): "If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned" (cf. 2 Cor 11:4). These statements clearly emphasize the authority of Scripture over the community. This, according to Bernard Ramm, is the genius of Protestantism, which excludes the possibility of any scriptural interpretation from having the same authority as the Scriptures themselves.[50] While all Christian denominations lay claim to correct interpretation of Scripture, Adventists are in a unique position, as we believe that our most fundamental doctrines, such as the Sabbath, the sanctuary, and the state of the dead, are based not only on correct interpretation of Scripture, but also upheld by the prophetic ministry of Ellen White.[51]

An emphasis on doctrinal consensus need not be seen as a threat, as it provides several benefits. First, a solid doctrinal framework provides a starting point for individual Bible study. As Richard Rice correctly asserts, individuals sometimes attempt an independent study of God's word without realizing how much they depend on the church for their understanding of the Scriptures. When a believer "overlooks or deliberately ignores the influence of Christian tradition on the way he reads the Bible," Rice writes, he "actually becomes more, rather than less, suscepti-

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[49] Tony Campolo, *A Reasonable Faith: Responding to Secularism* (Waco: Word, 1983), 108

[50] Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern of Religious Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 56. Ramm adds that the authority of the church "is never final, never unquestionable, and never primary. [It] must always be under the supremacy and lordship of the revelation itself" (ibid., 60).

[51] "The Inspiration and Authority of the Ellen G. White Writings: 'Affirmations and Denials,' " *Review and Herald* (July 15, 1982): 659; George Knight, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2004), 37. Cf. R. W. Schwarz, *Light Bearers to the Remnant* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1979), 67; Nancy Vyhmeister, "Who are Seventh-day Adventists?" in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2000), 7.

ble to it."[52] In other words, a familiarity with the doctrinal teachings of the community not only enhances independent Bible study, it also make the individual less prone to repeat the errors of theological history. As the 20th century philosopher and novelist George Santayana quipped: "Those who ignore the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them."

Second, to use the Apostle Paul's terminology, a strong doctrinal framework prevents the community from being "tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching . . ." (Eph 4:14). The purpose of the gifts of the Spirit, given to individual members of the church (v. 11), is to build up "the body of Christ . . . until we all reach unity of the faith" (vs. 12-13). Thus, "unity of the faith" is a goal to which each ecclesial community should aspire (v. 3; cf. Rom 15:5; 1 Cor 1:10). While the church may welcome and encourage new insights that flow from independent Bible study, it is the entire ecclesial community, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that is called to decide on the soundness of new teaching (1 John 4:1; 1 Thess 5:21; Phil 1:10). Although "a community-wide discussion is always unwieldy and inefficient . . . it is indispensable to the theological health and spiritual vigor of the community as a whole."[53]

Finally, doctrinal consensus stands as a buffer against the excesses of independence, individualism, and unrestrained freedom. Every social network, be it secular society, the church, or the family, constrains the freedom of those who choose to join it. In the case of secular society, members have little choice but to subject themselves to the exigencies of the community. In the case of family, especially adult members, or a religious community, this submission is and should be voluntary. Whether voluntary or not, however, the success of a relationship between community and individual depends, to a degree, on how individuals relate to communal restraints and whether or not they are willing, if necessary, to give up their freedom for the benefit of the community. Ramm notes: "unguided, undisciplined, and unchallenged freedom is no great blessing. . . . The highest spiritual personality is realized by the surrender of a measure of freedom in obedience to a person, a system of moral teaching, or an institution."[54] The community may, at times, need to protect itself from particularly aggressive individuals whose aim is its destruc-

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[52] Richard Rice, *Reason and the Contours of Faith* (Riverside: La Sierra UP, 1991), 92.

[53] Fritz Guy, *Thinking Theologically* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1999), 43.

[54] Ramm, 42.

tion. Such situations, however, are rare and need to be approached with extreme caution and Christian love.

An ecclesial community that emphasizes doctrinal consensus is, however, constantly tempted by authoritarianism or dependence. The temptation is particularly strong when Christian communities elevate their own scriptural interpretation as the final bastion of all truth. A balanced approach to the problem of religious authority, however, must guard itself against the dangers of authoritarianism. This can be accomplished in several ways. First, the church must acknowledge its dependence on the authority of Scripture. It is the Bible, rather than a particular interpretation, that is the Word of God, and that should, in all circumstances, be seen as the authority for the Christian community.

Second, the church must recognize that scriptural interpretations may vary, depending upon circumstances. This is perhaps why, throughout their history, Seventh-day Adventists have tended to avoid what George Knight calls "creedal rigidity" and have allowed for the possibility of further developments in scriptural teachings.[55] In Adventist circles, this dynamic approach to church teaching is known as "present truth," a concept that allows for revision of the doctrinal statements.[56] This understanding of truth was endorsed by early Adventist pioneers[57] to guard Adventism from lapsing into its own form of scholasticism, a malady that inhibited creative Protestant theological thought during the 17th and 18th centuries. More recently, this concept of "present truth" was outlined in the preamble to the "Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists" (1980).[58] As George Knight has noted, however, it must be affirmed that the dynamic and ever unfolding understanding of truth was never to be understood as a blank check for fundamental doctrinal change, as "cer-

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[55] George Knight, *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2000), 21.

[56] For an extended discussion on the nature of "present truth," see Knight, 17-28.

[57] See, for example, Ellen White, *Testimonies to the Church* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1948), 5:706-709.

[58] The full text of the preamble is as follows: "Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed and hold certain fundamental beliefs to be the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. These beliefs, as set forth here, constitute the church's understanding and expression of the teaching of Scripture. Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God's Holy Word."

tain non-negotiables" did, and continue to, exist.[59] Finally, a balanced approach to authority can defend itself against authoritarianism by recognizing the value of the individual. It is to this that we now turn.

The Individual. Many faith development theorists believe that individuals may not reach spiritual maturity unless, at some point in their journey, they move in opposition to authority.[60] This may be a difficult and painful time for both the community (or family) and the individual, especially if the community functions in an authoritarian manner and resists the individual's move towards independence. Much pain can be avoided, however, if the community recognizes that independence is a necessary part of human development; and if, rather than defending its rights, the community provides a nurturing environment within which the individual is safe to explore.[61] It is only within such an environment that individuals can develop trust, learn to recognize the value of their own judgments, and begin to take responsibility for deciding between competing claims of truth.[62] While the move towards independence may at times result in the individual's rejection of communal beliefs, this risk must be taken, as, ultimately, it not only facilitates the growth of the individual, but also enriches the community's own understanding of truth, thus pre-

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[59] Knight, 24. Knight notes the tension between the negotiable and non-negotiable aspects of Adventist doctrines present in the writings of Ellen White. On the one hand, she concedes that all "all our expositions of Scripture" may not be "without an error" and "the fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people, is not a proof that our ideas are infallible." On the other hand, Ellen White appears to have strong convictions that the early Adventists had the truth. "It is a fact that we have the truth, and we must hold with tenacity to the positions that cannot be shaken; but we must not look with suspicion upon any new light which God may send, and say, Really, we cannot see that we need any more light than the old truth which we have hitherto received, and in which we are settled." Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Nashville: Southern Publishing, 1946), 35; Idem, *Review and Herald*, August 7, 1894, 497. See Knight, 25-27, for a discussion of this issue.

[60] J. A. Shelly, *The Spiritual Needs of Children* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1982), 70. Cf. Charles M. Shelton, *Adolescent Spirituality: Pastoral Ministry for High School and College Youth* (New York: Crossroads, 1992); Tim Kimmel, *Why Christian Kids Rebel: Trading Heartbreak for Hope* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004); Parks, 55; Roger Dudley, *Why Teenagers Reject Religion* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1978), 27-41; Rex L. Rook, "Disobedience, Rebellion, and Defiance in the Believer as Exemplified in the Adolescent Stage of Life," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 1/3 (July, 1973): 56-61.

[61] Dudley, 36-38.

[62] Martin A. Johnson, "Family Life and Religious Commitment," *Review of Religious Research* 14/3 (Spring 1973): 144-150.

venting its stagnation. Consequently, rather than being a threat to the community, the individual's move towards independence provides opportunity for the growth of the community.[63]

While recognizing the limitations of "stage of faith" theories,[64] these insights may nevertheless help us understand the limitations of an authoritarian system of church governance. Within such a system, the emphasis is on unquestioning acceptance of communal beliefs, to the neglect of individual exploration of the scriptural message. Any deviation from the doctrinal *status quo* evokes strong emotions and fierce opposition. A religious community functioning in this mode often sees itself as the medium between God and the individual, thus downplaying individuals' God-given ability to search for "truth." It must be remembered, however, that while God, through His Spirit, reveals Himself to the community, He also speaks to individuals within the community. This is perhaps what Paul had in mind when he admonished the Thessalonians: "Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast to what is good" (1 Thess 5:19, KJV). For these reasons, individual reflections on communal beliefs, although sometimes threatening to the community, must be expected.[65]

To the adolescent who rebels against the establishment, and to the theologian who explores new territory, the church must provide a safe and nurturing environment. Although independent thinking may ultimately result in the individuals' rejection of communal beliefs, a communal attitude of love and nurture may prevent negative feelings on the part of those who leave and may facilitate their return to the community. It certainly has a positive impact on those remaining within the community. In my youth, I was discouraged from asking questions about church beliefs. The thought was that questioning resulted in doubt. Such think-

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[63] The Gospel of Luke appears to provide some support for the existence of this process in the life of Jesus. While His development differed from that of other teenagers due to the circumstances of His birth, we may draw some analogies. In Luke 2:41-52 we find Jesus for the first time individuating from the faith of His parents. Ellen White writes: "in the answer to His mother, Jesus showed for the first time that He understood His relation to God" (Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages* [Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1940], 81).

[64] David R. Larson recently wrote that "stage of faith" thinking can be limiting because it can leave the mistaken impression that spiritual development is invariable, smooth and cumulative" (David R. Larson, "Is Thinking of 'Stages of Faith' Itself a 'Stage'?" http://www.spectrummagazine.org/onlinecommunity/sabbathschool/070618larson.html (Accessed, June 28, 2007).

[65] Ellen White, *Testimonies to the Church*, 5:708.

ing still prevails in some quarters. I believe that a church with a balanced approach to religious authority, a church that recognizes the value of the individual to the community, can not only withstand, but should also encourage, independent thinking. Encouraging individuals to think independently should not be seen, as a call for arbitrary and indiscriminate doctrinal revision, but rather, as an invitation for some individuals within the church to search their Bibles, meditate, and pray, and then, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, suggest ways in which the biblical message may be made more relevant to their own generation. Ellen White makes this salient observation regarding intellectual growth and development:

> Agitate, agitate, agitate. . . . The fact that there is no controversy or agitation among God's people should not be regarded as conclusive evidence that they are holding fast to sound doctrine . . . When no new questions are started by investigation of the Scriptures, when no difference of opinion arises which will set men to searching the Bible for themselves to make sure that they have the truth, there will be many now, as in ancient times, who will hold to tradition, and worship they know not what…[66]

While there is no doubt that Ellen White stood for the "pillars of our faith," she clearly upheld the value of "independent thought."[67]

Thus, a balanced approach to church authority allows individual expression of faith. Individuals within the community have diverse personalities with different sets of experiences and thus, at times, different approaches to the biblical message. An interdependent community recognizes these differences and considers them an asset, rather than a threat, as they contribute to the church's understanding of truth. Individual differences inevitably create conflict; however, conflict need not be a threat to the community. Within a community functioning in the dependence mode, which is based on doctrinal unanimity, conflict is highly destructive, as it threatens the foundations upon which the community is based; however, within an interdependent community, conflict, while undesirable and often painful, is seen as an opportunity for re-evaluation and growth. "Truth" that cannot withstand scrutiny may not be worth following.

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[66] Ellen White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1948), 5:708, 707.

[67] Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1903), 230.

I believe that for a multicultural, interdependent community of faith functioning within a post-modern context, complete doctrinal unanimity might not be possible. This was recently acknowledged by Jan Paulsen:

> There is some theological polarity in our church. Whether they be to the right or the left, reactionary or liberal, they are there. . . . An environment of polarity is sometimes the by-product of uncompromisingly held views—misguided or otherwise . . . What do we do with all that? . . . I say *we learn to live with it*, with the proviso that the church, in its teachings, programs, and activities, must at all times be visibly loyal to our heritage and our identity."[68]

This is good advice. When doctrinal consensus becomes the only uncompromising goal of an ecclesial community, relationships suffer and fragmentation increases. While wide-ranging doctrinal consensus is indeed a worthy and scripturally supported objective of an ecclesial community, it must also facilitate the growth of individuals towards spiritual maturity and allow a measure of freedom to explore. This can only be achieved if the community responds to the call of Christ: "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34).

Conclusion

In this paper, I explored, from a historico-theological perspective, two models according to which a religious body may exercise its authority. First, I examined the *dependence* model, evident primarily within the Roman Catholic communion before the Second Vatican Council. Next, I discussed the *independence* model, which became the hallmark of much of Protestantism. I then proposed that a balanced approach to the problem of religious authority should be one of *interdependence*. Without a knowledge of its developmental history, the contemporary church all too often oscillates between dependence and independence, neither of which is ideal. The ability to maintain a balance between these mutually exclusive forces is, I believe, the "holy grail" of ecclesiology. The ideal of interdependence will probably never be attained on earth, where, in Luther's words, *Ecclesia semper reformanda est* (the Church is always in the process of reforming herself). This, however, should not preclude the church's continual effort toward the ideal. While Christianity as a whole

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[68] Jan Paulsen, "The Theological Landscape" *Adventist Review* (June 13, 2002) (emphasis his), http://www.adventistreview.org/2002-1524/story3.html (accessed June 22, 2007).

is too fragmented to adopt a uniform authority model, I believe that individual faith communities, such as Seventh-day Adventists, have the potential to come close to the ideal of an interdependent model of authority.

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