

AUTHORITY OF THE CHRISTIAN LEADER

INTRODUCTION¹

In order to thrive, every human society must establish its own organizational and authoritative structures. Eventually, if someone desires to know something about a particular nation, family, or association, they are most likely to inquire about the nature and use of its authority. Human groupings may thus be described as “dictatorial,” “authoritarian,” “democratic,” “egalitarian,” “republican,” “laissez-faire,” and so on. Each of these designations reflects the way in which authority is used within a particular community.

While different from a nation, family, or association, the Church is also a human society that must have organizational/authoritative structures in order to disseminate its message and thus fulfill the Great Commission given to it by Christ.² Because of this, it is legitimate to inquire about the nature and use of authority within the community of believers.³ Such inquiry is of vital importance, as much depends on the way authority is understood and exercised within the Church. Even such foundational Christian teachings as the nature of God and salvation are influenced by the way authority is defined.

Any discussion on the nature of Christian authority, however, tends to be muddied by our cultural context, as the way we view authority is shaped by the way in which authority is exercised within the society of which we are a part. For many people, the term “authority” carries few positive connotations. A simple class exercise proves the point. When I

teach on the subject of ecclesiology, I sometimes flash the word “authority” on the screen and ask students to tell me what immediately comes to their minds. Invariably, I hear words such as “dominance,” “power,” “control,” “abuse,” “rule,” or “final decision making.” Then we check the dictionary definition of “authority” and, indeed, we find that the most prominent way in which authority is defined follows the same line of thinking, i.e., “the power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience” or “the power to determine, adjudicate, or otherwise settle issues of disputes; jurisdiction, the right to control, command, or determine.” Authority defined as such demands submission, which is defined in the dictionary as “the action or fact of accepting or yielding to a superior force or to the will or authority of another person.” In my personal experience, I have yet to meet a person who likes to submit in such a manner. On the contrary, it almost seems as though we arrive in this world with an inborn tendency to resist this type of authority—just ask parents whose children have entered the teenage years or think about our inner reaction when we are flagged by an officer for speeding.

Very rarely do my students consider “authority” a positive thing in the life of a society. And yet, authoritative structures are essential, as they provide society with continuity, stability, safety and boundaries. Without some form of authority, no human society would or could exist; this includes the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is the combination of our sinful nature and the abuse

of authority that causes us to develop negative attitudes towards authority. Unfortunately, all too often abuse, disguised by the addition of the adjective “spiritual,” happens in the church, the community Christ established to be different from any other human society on Earth.

In recent years, the issue of authority has received a fair amount of attention in Adventist circles. As we have experienced the delay of the Second Coming of Christ, we have become increasingly concerned with issues related to Gospel order, organization, ranking, and policy, all the while attempting to be faithful to Scripture. The nature of authority and its use has surfaced most prominently within the context of the discussion on women’s ordination. The most sensitive question raised in these debates is whether women can or should hold authoritative positions within the church structure. Should women be allowed to preach/teach or lead in the church? Would not ordination place them in headship positions over their male counterparts?

Responses to these questions vary. Some believe that women can never be placed in any position—be it pastor, theology professor, university or hospital president—that would situate them in authority over men. Others would allow women to fill leadership roles within the greater Adventist organization but not in the church. Accordingly, women must not be allowed to teach or preach in the church when men who are able to do so are present. Still others go so far as to allow women to preach in the church providing that they stand under the

authority of an ordained male senior pastor. All of these positions have one common denominator: *the position of “spiritual headship” in the church must be limited to men alone*. Ordination is believed to raise a particularly gifted man to a position of spiritual headship in the church, and since the Bible speaks of male headship alone, the position of pastor (or senior pastor) is closed to women; no woman, it is believed, can have authority over any man.

Observing the debate for a number of years and listening carefully to both sides, I ask myself several questions: Are we certain that we truly understand what we mean when we use the word “authority”? Am I possibly making the false assumption that when I utter the word “authority,” you know exactly what I mean and vice versa? What informs the concept of authority that resides in our minds? Is it our culture (both secular and religious) or is it careful attention to the words of Jesus?

Like many good things in life, the concept of authority has its counterfeits. The purpose of this paper is to explore two opposing views of authority. This is necessary to tease out the essential elements of the New Testament view of authority and thus help us avoid the ecclesiological pitfalls—of which many of us may not be aware—that modern Christianity inherited from post-Apostolic Christianity and which are deeply ingrained in both Catholic and Protestant traditions. For this reason I will, first, explore the characteristics of a counterfeit kind of “authority” as it evolved in Christianity from the second century onward, and which continues

to be the foundation of both modern Roman Catholicism and Protestant fundamentalism⁴; second, I will explore the concept of authority flowing from the teachings of Jesus; and finally, I will provide a response to the counterfeit view of authority.

THE POST-APOSTOLIC CHURCH AND A COUNTERFEIT VIEW OF AUTHORITY

Faced with the death of its pioneers, the delay of the Second Coming, schism, the rise of heretical teaching, as well as persecution, the early post-Apostolic Christian Church searched for ways of maintaining its unity and defending itself against various heretical teachings.⁵ Such a goal could be accomplished through providing the church with strong leadership.

Going beyond the Gospels and the writings of Paul, writers such as Ignatius (d.ca. 110–130AD), Irenaeus (d.ca. 202AD), Tertullian (c. 160–c. 225AD), Cyprian (d.ca. 258AD), and Augustine (354–430AD) gradually endowed Christian ministry with special authority, which was available only through the rite of ordination. The Christian ministry that emerged from this era was far removed from what we find in the pages of the New Testament; the authority of the ministry was (and continues to be) marked by the following characteristics:

First (A), it was hierarchical; i.e., conceived in terms of order, ranking, or chain of command. The church became divided into two classes of individuals—clergy and laity—separated from each other by the rite of ordination. At the head of the church was a monarchical (mon—one, arche—rule) bishop, surrounded and assisted by a group of elders as well as deacons, who were at the bottom of the hierarchical ladder.⁶ The bishop—or the senior pastor—was placed at the center of religious activity and was endowed with complete control over the affairs of the local church.⁷ His duties included preaching,

teaching, administration of the community, and money management. Without his presence, no Christian rite, such as baptism or the Lord's Supper, could be conducted. Believing this system to be established by God, Christians were expected to submit to the decisions of their bishop-pastor.⁸ The bishop-pastor's position and prestige in the church was significantly strengthened by the doctrine of Apostolic Succession developed by Irenaeus, who taught that the twelve apostles passed on their leadership and teaching authority to the bishops.

This system of early church governance was largely modeled on the way in which the Roman Empire was governed.⁹ While it was originally established for the sake of order and unity in the church, it eventually became an end in itself, to be protected and perpetuated at any cost. Such concentration of power in the church in the hands of the ordained elite led, of course, to the eventual establishment of the papacy. There is no need to elaborate here on the prophetic significance of this development.¹⁰

Second (B), it was sacramental; i.e., the spiritual life of the believers, and thus their salvation, in some way depended on their pastor. It was during this time that the Christian minister began to be referred to as a priest. The writers of this period came to the conclusion that the Old Testament priesthood was a type of Christian ministry.¹¹ An ordained Christian pastor, thus, became a mediator between God and other believers. This mediation was enabled through the rite of ordination when the pastor received a special seal—known as dominicus character—which enabled him to re-enact Christ's sacrifice each time he celebrated the Lord's Supper.¹² In such a system, the existence of the church itself depended upon the existence of the ordained ministry.¹³ As with the previous point, the prophetic significance of this development cannot be overestimated and will be elaborated on below.

Third (C), it was elitist; i.e., divided into two classes of individuals, those ordained and those un-ordained. As mentioned above, it was gradually accepted that, through the rite of ordination, the minister became separated from the rest of the community. The laying-on-of-hands endowed the pastor with special authority from God and enabled him to provide spiritual and mediatorial leadership to the believers.¹⁴ This teaching, first introduced by Tertullian, stated that there are two groups of people in the church: the ordained and the un-ordained, otherwise referred to as clergy and laity.¹⁵ Only those who were ordained could provide spiritual leadership in the church. In line with this thinking, the church could not be conceived as egalitarian. It was not a community of equals in terms of leadership roles. This is clearly reflected in the documents of the First Vatican Council (1869-1870). The Constitution on the Church thus states:

*The Church of Christ is not a community of equals in which all the faithful have the same rights. It is a society of un-equals, not only because among the faithful some are clerics and some are laymen, but particularly because there is in the Church the power from God whereby to some it is given to sanctify, teach, and govern, and to others not.*¹⁶

Through the act of ordination, therefore, an elite group of leaders was created in the church and only members of this elite could take the office of pastor in the church. As we shall see below, this view is contrary to the teachings of the New Testament.

Fourth (D), it was oriented towards male headship in the church; i.e., only men could fulfill headship roles in the church. Ever since its beginnings, the Christian Church has taught, and continues to teach, that Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church.

However, faced with the reality of the physical absence of Christ on earth, the post-Apostolic Church felt it needed someone who could take His place, represent Him to believers and the world, and represent believers to God. Viewing themselves as separated for special ministry via the rite of ordination, early Christian ministers assumed the position of headship in the church in place of Christ. This is the actual meaning of the widely used Latin phrase *in persona Christi Capitis* (in place of Christ the Head).¹⁷ Another phrase, *Vicarius Filii Dei* (in place of the Son of God), expresses the same belief.

The acceptance of ministerial headship through the rite of ordination was accompanied by a developing theology of male headship in the church. The reasoning was very simple: in the New Testament, the relationship between Christ and the Church is represented in nuptial terms. Christ is represented as a bridegroom, a male, who marries His bride, the Church, a female. If the pastor serves his church in *in persona Christi Capitis*, i.e., taking the role of headship in place of Christ, he also must be a man. It follows that the ordination rite is not a simple blessing but a conferral of headship powers and duties and, as such, it is a type of a marriage ceremony; the church becomes the pastor's spouse.¹⁸ In short, through the rite of ordination, the pastor assumes a headship position in the church.¹⁹ All this means that women cannot be ordained as ministers in the church because they must remain in hierarchical submission to male pastors. This ancient theology is clearly expressed in John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women) issued in 1988, in which the late pope takes the biblical teaching of male headship in the home and applies it to the church.²⁰ As we shall see below, there are significant problems with applying male headship terminology to relationships within the church.

JESUS ON THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHRISTIAN LEADER

Does the evolution of Christian ministry into papal hierarchy, as documented above, mean that the church should be deprived of leadership and organization? Or that authoritative structure should not exist within the community of faith? By no means! In order to exist and disseminate its mission the church must have organization and leadership. Rather than modeling its organization upon secular structures of authority, as early post-Apostolic Christianity did, the church should first of all look to Jesus to search for ways in which authority in the church should be exercised. It is Christ who founded the church and He knows best what Christian authority is and how it should be exercised. Thus, His followers must take His teachings on authority seriously. Other New Testament teachings related to the issue of authority, including difficult Pauline passages (eg., 1 Timothy 2:12) must thus be read through the prism of Jesus' understanding of the term rather than vice versa. So what did Jesus have to say about authority?

In preparation for this presentation, I decided to once again re-read and think through the Gospel passages where Jesus speaks about authority.²¹ His views are truly astounding. For most of us, immersed in hierarchically-oriented cultures, Jesus' message continues to be counterintuitive and difficult to comprehend, much less to accept. For this reason, we tend to gloss over the passages dealing with authority without much thought. And yet, these passages, if understood and applied, have the potential to revolutionize our personal and communal lives.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus' disciples had shown a tendency to be preoccupied with status and ranking in the kingdom of God. This is understandable, as their attitudes reflected the prevalent

cultural and religious conceptions of authority. The Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus presented such a breathtakingly different understanding of Christian authority that it took the death of Jesus for the disciples to understand His teachings. Jesus' teachings on the authority of the Christian leader are most crisply articulated in a conversation that found its way into the three synoptic Gospels.²²

The story is well known. Two of Jesus' disciples, John and James, approached Him with a request to be seated on His right and left in His Kingdom. It appears that they assumed that the Kingdom of Jesus would operate like other earthly institutions, their underlying desire was to have authority over others. Mark tells us that when the remaining ten disciples heard about it, they became very angry, not because they had a different idea of "authority," but because they themselves desired such power also. In response to this, Jesus gathered them together, and in simplest terms explained the operational rules of the Kingdom of God. His words are so striking that they must be quoted here:

"You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them (katakurieusin), and their high officials exercise authority over them (katexousiazousin). Not so with you! Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant (diakonos), and whoever wants to be first must be slave (doulos) of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45, NIV).

In this concise passage, Jesus presents two models of authority. The first is the Roman idea of authority. In this model, the elite stand hierarchically over others. They have the power to make decisions and expect submission from those below them.

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Jesus clearly rejected this model of authority when He stated, “Not so with you!” Instead, He presented the disciples with a breathtakingly new model of authority, a thorough rejection, or reversal, of the hierarchical model with which they were familiar.

The concept of authority in Jesus’ Kingdom was to be governed by two words: servant (*diakonos*) and slave (*doulos*). From our modern perspective, these two words, often translated as “minister,” have lost much of their force. For a person familiar with ancient society and its institutions, however, Jesus’ words must have been appalling. So much so that the disciples were unable to understand Jesus’ words, and to the last moments of His life, during the Last Supper, they argued about “who is the greatest” (Luke 22:24). This is because, in the first century milieu, servants (*diakonoï*) and slaves (*douloi*) represented the lowest class of human beings, beings who had few rights, and whose job was to listen and fulfill the wishes of those whom they served. Among slaves “there [was] no place for one’s own will or initiative.”²³ “Ruling and not serving is proper to a man” believed ancient Greeks.²⁴ Thus, whatever the metaphors of servant and slave were meant to convey it certainly was not exercising authority, spiritual or otherwise, over others (*katexousiazousin*) or having status in the community.

Why did Jesus use these two metaphors if he could have compared His disciples with other leadership groups in society? I believe that Jesus was keenly aware that His Kingdom would be doomed if the disciples incorporated into it the authority structures prevalent within contemporary society. For His mission to succeed, all “pecking order” in

the church had to be abolished. Murray Harris grasped this well: “Jesus was teaching that greatness in the community of his followers is marked by humble, self-effacing servanthood or slavery, modeled on his own selfless devotion to the highest good of others.”²⁵ All this shows that

Jesus certainly did not desire to abolish all authority in the church; He just radically redefined it and distanced it from the kind of “authority” that advocated submission to a higher authority. Instead, the church was to be a place where those who desired to follow His example were willing to serve in the lowest positions. In Philippians 2:5-7 Paul thus states, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God . . . made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a slave (*doulou*).” In the church of Jesus, therefore, it is not ordination to an office, a title, or a position that makes a leader, but the quality of a person’s life and his or her willingness to be the least of all. Following His lead, the despised terms *diakonos* and *doulos* later became the quasi-technical descriptions of apostolic and ministerial leadership in the church.²⁶ Taking all of this into consideration, it is not surprising that to the question, “Who is the greatest?” (Mark 9:33-35; Luke 9:46-48), Jesus answered: “For he who is the least among you all—he is the greatest” and “if anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant (*diakonos*) of all.”

Two other terms, *exousia* and *dynamis*, are commonly translated as authority. *Exousia* appears to be related to Jesus’ teaching ministry and His ability to forgive sins (e.g., Matt 7:29; 9:6; Mark 1:22; Luke 4:32). The authority (*exousia*) that Jesus exercised, thus, brought words of life and healing to those who were willing to listen. *Dynamis* is usually associated

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with Jesus' power to perform miracles and drive out demons (e.g., Luke 4:36; Luke 9:1). Nowhere in the Gospels do the terms *exousia* or *dynamis* appear to be associated with exercising any form of headship, or having authority, over others. Such thinking was simply not part of Jesus' worldview. It is *exousia* and *dynamis* that Jesus bestowed upon the entire community of believers, and it is these two terms that are often confused with a secular understanding of ministerial powers.

There is a unique usage of *exousia* in Matthew 28:18, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." He does not hand over this authority to the disciples for it cannot be done. This is the absolute authority of the Almighty, Omniscient, Creator God. And how does the Almighty Creator God exercise His authority? Does He force His human subjects to be obedient? Does He take away their free will? In Ephesians 5:1-2, Paul provides an answer to the question of how God exercises His authority: "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." The absolute authority of Christ, thus, represents a supreme example of love, servanthood, and self-sacrifice.

Thus, the concept of authority within New Testament Christianity, founded upon the words and actions of Jesus, does not represent any form of headship in terms of authority over others where submission is expected. Clearly, Jesus always allowed the exercise of free will. Instead

of exercising authority over others, His kind of authority can be expressed in terms of serving others. This he demonstrated most forcefully when He knelt to wash the disciples' feet and when He died on the cross, thus giving a supreme example of the true conception of Christian authority. Thus, the Christian rite of ordination, properly understood, is ordination to slavery; it is not going up in rank; it is not about status or having authority over others; it is about being the least in the community of believers. Only understood as such can the ministry in the church fulfill Christ's vision for leadership.

The early, post-Apostolic Christian Church soon forgot Jesus' words and introduced pagan concepts of authority into Christian practice. "Pecking order" was established where it did not belong, all in the name of protecting the church's unity and its teachings.²⁷ Modern Christianity, including Adventism, inherited these patterns of authority. It would serve us well to return to the words of Jesus and attempt to view ministry in the church through the prism of His teachings, rather than merely adding the adjective "spiritual" to foreign authoritative patterns. What, then, were the characteristics of the New Testament community of Jesus?

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH: A COMMUNITY LIKE NO OTHER

First (A1), ministry in the New Testament church was non-hierarchical; i.e., the organization of the church was not conceived in terms of a chain of command. There seems to be no doubt that,

during His earthly ministry, Jesus endowed some of His followers with the special task of sharing in His mission of proclaiming God's Kingdom. They were chosen to be His representatives and were to continue His mission and to reproduce in their own lives the central characteristics of Jesus Himself, namely total commitment and service to God and to fellow human beings. Their witness, however, was not based on their position, rank, or status but on the mission they had received from Christ. Their special authority was based on the fact that they had been eyewitnesses to the presence of Jesus on earth. Thus, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, this authority entailed preserving and passing on a reliable and trustworthy account of Jesus life and teachings in a reliable and trustworthy manner. "On this basis . . . rested the special and unique respect accorded to the apostles within the Church."²⁸ The written accounts of many of those eyewitnesses were eventually collected into the canon of the New Testament and thus their writings became normative for Christian believers and expressed in a well-accepted Protestant axiom *sola scriptura*. The New Testament, however, does not provide any evidence that the special position of expertise held by the twelve apostles within the community of faith was transferred to other leaders in the Church.

What we do see in the New Testament, however, is a community like no other. It is a community whose leaders eschewed any form of hierarchy that would place some above others. In fact, following Jesus' example, the New Testament leaders proclaimed what we can only describe as a reverse hierarchy. Following the lead of Jesus, its leaders routinely referred to themselves as *doulos* and *diakonos* of both God and the church.²⁹ Accordingly, in 1 Corinthians 3:5, Paul writes: "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants (*diakonoi*), through whom you came to believe." In 2

Corinthians 4:5, he emphatically declares: "For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves (*doulous*)."³⁰ We thus constantly find him lifting Christ and others up, while speaking of himself in unflattering terms such as "chief of sinners" (1 Tim 1:15). Elsewhere he writes: "...and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle" (1 Cor 15:7-9). In 1 Corinthians 4:1 Paul refers to himself and his co-workers as under-rowers (*hupēretas*). An image of an ancient Greek or Roman war galley with three banks of oars comes to mind. Paul places himself in the lowest place on a trireme: he is under other rowers.

While Paul was commissioned to proclaim the Gospel, to teach, exhort, and rebuke, it appears, therefore, that he purposefully desired to avoid positioning himself in a role above his fellow believers. Instead, and despite his special position as an Apostle of Christ, we see him wooing people to follow Christ, not through the authority of his "office," but through the witness of his life.³¹ "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1; 1 Cor 4:16; Phil 3:17, 4:9; 1 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess 3:7). With a clear conscience, therefore, Paul was able to write to the Corinthians that when his young disciple Timothy visits them, he would "remind [them] of his [Paul's] way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what [he taught] everywhere in every church" (1 Cor 4:17). Thus, it was the way he lived his life, rather than his position, that resulted in Paul's having genuine authority in the church.

Within the context of being slaves in the church, the New Testament writers were remarkably egalitarian. Everyone could be a slave of the Lord! In Romans 12:11, Paul encouraged all believers to "serve the Lord as His slaves" (*tō kyriō douleuontes*).

In Galatians 5:13 he urged believers “to serve one another as slaves (*doulete*) through love.” Every believer, thus, was to serve as a *doulos* of Christ and of each other.

While all believers were called to be slaves of God and one another, this especially applied to leaders in the Christian community who, according to the teaching of Christ, were to consider themselves “the least of all,” and thus examples to those under their care. Peter echoed Jesus when he wrote to the leaders in the church: “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care . . . not lording it over (*katakurieontes*)³² those entrusted to you but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2-5). This was the primary reason why Paul, James, and Peter often introduced themselves to their congregations as slaves (*douloi*) of Christ (Rom 1:1; Jam 1:1; 2 Pet 1:1). All this suggests that New Testament leadership was not about having “authority” over others, about having the “last word,” or having an “office.”³³ Instead, it was all about having the attitude of Paul, Peter, and other leaders of the New Testament church, who led by the example of their devotion to their Lord and to each other. This was the bedrock of genuine Christian authority.³⁴

Viewing church leadership from the above perspective, the overseers (*episcopēs* in 1 Timothy 3:1) or elders (*presbyterous* in Titus 1:9) were indeed to be special persons: they were to be servants (*doulos*) of the Lord and the community; they were to lead by example rather than by the authority of their position; they were to have good names in the community; they were to have stable, monogamous marriages; they were to manage their households well; they were to be protectors of the community. One thing was quite certain, however: these slaves of the Lord did not have to be males.³⁵

If ministry is to be understood as slavery to Christ and others, another passage must be highlighted.

As stated above, Paul’s favorite description of his own ministry and that of his co-workers (such as Timothy) was “slave of the Lord” (*doulos Christou*).³⁶ We find others, such as Peter and James, also referring to themselves as “slaves of the Lord.”³⁷ The same wording, this time spoken by the Lord Himself, however, appears in Acts 2:18 where Peter quotes the prophet Joel: “Even on my slaves, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.” Most frequently, this passage is used to highlight the fact that the gift of prophecy was not limited to men. However, we also find in this verse the masculine *doulos* and the feminine *doulas*. In both cases, the pronoun *mou* (my) is added. Considering that, in other places in the New Testament, *doulos* is most often translated as “minister,” this passage could legitimately be translated as speaking of both “male ministers” and “female ministers,” who are God’s own. Is Peter making the point that, in the New Testament church, both males and females could slave the Lord equally? And that both, males and females, were to receive specific gifts of the Spirit that would enable them to fulfill their ministerial calling? Whatever interpretation we place on this particular passage, one thing is clear: the Holy Spirit is not concerned with the gender of the person upon whom He bestows His gifts. Should we be?

It is indeed tragic that soon after the disciples died, post-Apostolic Christianity abandoned the charismatic understanding of Christian ministry and, instead, incorporated a pagan understanding of authority.

Second (B1), ministry in the New Testament was not sacramental; i.e., neither salvation nor the life of the community depended on the presence of ordained clergy. While the early post-Apostolic Church created a system where ordained clergy were essential to the existence of the church, we do not find such a requirement in the New Testament.

From the New Testament point of view, it was Christ alone who was the mediator between God and humanity. Leadership in the New Testament, thus, fulfilled a purely functional role, i.e., its existence contributed to church order and the laying-on-of-hands simply acknowledged the gift of leadership already present in a person.

A sacramental view of ministry, of course, was prophetically significant, as the mediatorial work of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary was replaced by the work of an earthly priest. In other words, the early post-Apostolic church sewed back together the earthly sanctuary's curtain rent by the divine hand at the time of Jesus' death. Consequently, every Catholic church on earth became a sanctuary with its own priest. This development clearly corresponded to the prophetic utterance of Daniel, "Yea, it magnified itself, even to the prince of the host; and it took away from him the continual burnt-offering, and the place of his sanctuary was cast down" (Daniel 8:11 ASV). It follows that any attempt to apply priestly language to the work of the ministry in the church takes away from the one unique priesthood of Christ and has direct, negative implications on the Adventist sanctuary message, which emphasizes that all have special access to the risen Christ without the need of spiritual mediators.

Third (C1), ministry in the New Testament was not elitist; i.e., the laying-on-of-hands did not create a spiritual elite in the church. The New Testament understanding was that functions, or roles, in the church were to be filled according to spiritual gifting. Ordination, thus, can be defined simply as "the action of the church to publicly recognize those whom the Lord has called to and equipped for local and global church ministry."³⁸ Disagreements begin to appear when we ask the question: Who can serve in the church as ordained elders or pastors?

The church of God described in the pages of the

New Testament was decidedly non-elitist. In His sayings, Jesus focused on the non-elite of the day and proclaimed them to be the children of God (Matt 5:3-8). In Matthew 23:8-13, he said to His followers: "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. . . . The greatest among you will be your servant" (Matthew 23:8-11). In modern terms we could paraphrase this saying as follows: "But you are not to be called 'pastor,' 'elder,' 'professor,' or 'doctor,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers." It is truly unfortunate that in Christian history the lowly term "pastor" has become a symbol of status.³⁹

Paul's favorite imagery for portraying the Christian community, i.e., the Body of Christ, represented a markedly non-elitist ecclesiology (1 Cor 12:12-31; Rom 12:1-8; Eph 1:22). Central to this imagery were unity of the Church and the Church's vital relationship with its Head, Jesus Christ. Paul's insistence that the church functioned like a human body served to remind believers that they were completely dependent upon Christ for their growth and life. While unity and the headship of Christ were Paul's main concern, his discussion of the church as the body of Christ was framed within the context of spiritual gifting. The recipients of spiritual gifts were all who were part of the body of Christ, and the unity of the body of Christ depended on the presence, recognition, and use of these spiritual gifts (Eph 4:1-13). Any exclusive claim to these gifts was precluded, because their distribution was dependent upon the Holy Spirit and not on the church (1 Cor 12:11). Any form of elitism was settled by Paul's masterful discussion on the mutual interdependence of believers who exhibited various spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:12-31). Furthermore, in none of the four listings of spiritual gifts (Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:8-10, 28-30; Ephesians 4:11) was Paul exclusive in any way. Notably, in Romans 12:8, the

gifts of teaching and leadership were tucked in among other, seemingly insignificant gifts. It would be ludicrous to claim, on the basis of this passage, that the gift of encouragement was lower on the scale of giftedness, while the gift of leadership was higher and thus could

only be endowed upon a certain class of believers in the church. Certainly this could not have been Paul's intention.

Paul's use of the Body of Christ imagery helps us to understand the reality of the church and the way it should function. Within such a community, all solidarities of race, class, culture, and gender are replaced by an allegiance to Christ alone. The old way of relating is replaced by a new relatedness in Christ (Gal 3:28, 29). In this community, all people are equal members of the Body of Christ, because all have experienced the risen Christ and all are gifted with a variety of spiritual gifts of equal value (1 Cor 12), which are to be utilized for the benefit of believers and the world (Rom 12:1–8). Thus, we do not find a hierarchy where some people rank above others according to status; neither do we find a division between ordained clergy and laity. What we see is a new community, the Body of Christ, a New Creation (2 Cor 5:17), where all relationships should hail back to the Garden of Eden. This is what the early post-Apostolic Church forgot soon after the death of the Apostles, introducing instead a notion of an un-equal society in which leadership in the church was restricted to ordained male clergy. The Holy Spirit was thus quenched!

The reality is that if anything apart from commitment to Christ and His church, spiritual gifting, and maturity determine fitness for various functions in the church, then, whether we intend it or not, we

Any idea of headship in the church, be it male or female, . . . usurps the headship of Christ.

create an elitist community. No pious designations attached to the "office" of pastor—such as "servant," "spiritual authority," "spiritual leadership," or "spiritual headship"—can change this reality.

Fourth (D1), the ministry in the New Testament church was

not male headship oriented; i.e., there was no room for male headship in the Body of Christ. While Scripture testifies that women were not restricted from leadership positions (Deborah, Phoebe, Junia, Lydia, Priscilla, Nympha), history witnesses to the fact that, from the second century onward, leadership and teaching positions in the church began to be restricted to men alone.⁴⁰ As outlined above, the main argument against women's ordination in the Catholic Church today is that the pastor must be a male since he represents Christ, a male, to the community of believers. Male headship in the home is, thus, extended to relationships in the church.

There are significant problems with extending the idea of male headship beyond the home circle. Most importantly, such a concept of headship clearly replaces Christ's spiritual headship of the church and endows selected individuals with Christ's own authority. The New Testament is clear, however, that the only Head of the Church is Christ (1 Cor 11:3; Eph 1:22; 4:15; Col 1:18; 2:19).⁴¹ When, in Ephesians 5:23, Paul states that "Christ is the Head of the Church" and "man is the head of the wife," he does not say that man's headship in the home in some way extends to relationships in the church. Paul's meaning is clear: as a husband is the head of his wife, his bride, so Christ is the Head of the Church, His Bride.⁴² In both cases, the nuptial language is clearly restricted to specific relationships: that between a husband and wife and that between

Christ and His church. It would be absurd to conclude that Paul meant to say that as Christ is the Bridegroom of the Church, so men in the Christian congregation are bridegrooms of women in the church. Neither is it scriptural to say that the pastor “marries” the church and becomes its head upon his ordination, just as Christ married His Bride and became its Head.

From this it follows that any idea of headship in the church, be it male or female, apart from that of Christ, usurps the headship of Christ. Thus, while we may legitimately speak of male headship in the Christian home, it is unscriptural to speak of any kind of headship in the church apart from that of Christ. While, within the greater context of mutual submission (Eph 5:21), wives are indeed asked by Paul to submit to their husbands (Eph 5:22),⁴³ nowhere in the New Testament do we find an injunction that believers are to submit to the headship of the ordained ministry; the Church submits only to Christ! It follows that when a pastor/elder and a church decide to operate according to the male headship principle, this pastor/elder and his church are committing spiritual adultery, otherwise known as sacramentalism.⁴⁴ For this reason, difficult Pauline passages, such as 1 Tim 2 and 3 and 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, can never be interpreted as teaching male headship in the church, but must be understood in light of Jesus’ statements on authority. No amount of tinkering with the text “according to the ideas they happen to entertain upon them,”⁴⁵ and adding the word ‘spiritual’ to headship, can change this reality. As noted above, sacramentalism is primarily a hallmark of Catholic Christianity, but it also exists within those Christian denominations that choose to replace the pope (also referred to as “Holy Father;” from the Latin *papa*) with a male figure of a pastor/elder. Christian communities that embrace female headship in addition to male

headship follow the same pattern.

So I have a question: Can we, as Seventh-day Adventists, really afford to flirt with applying the male headship principle to the ordained pastor/elder? I believe that this principle is a seemingly innocuous Trojan horse that has the potential to destroy the very heart of Adventism. It is telling that Ellen G. White never once used 1 Timothy 2 or 3 and 1 Corinthians 11 or 14 to support male headship in the church. The developments in early post-Apostolic Christianity, discussed in the first part of this paper, clearly show the dangers of extending the biblical notion of male headship in the home to male headship in the Church and must be avoided at all costs among true followers of Christ.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there can be no doubt that early Catholic Christianity incorporated various characteristics of the Old Testament priestly ministry into the theology and practice of Christian ministry. Christian ministry, thus, became hierarchical, sacramental, elitist, and oriented towards male headship. To a greater or lesser degree, most Christian communities, including Seventh-day Adventists, continue to perpetuate some of these characteristics in their communities.

All these characteristics, however, were fulfilled in Christ who, by virtue of being our Creator, stands over us and has no successors to His divine authority; who died sacramentally on the cross and thus became the sole provider of salvation; who, through His ministry on earth, made all humans equal in the eyes of God in terms of authority and endowed them with the gifts of the Holy Spirit to fulfill the Great Gospel Commission; and who, through His sacrificial death on the cross, became the sole Head of the Church, His Bride. He shares His headship with no one! Post-New Testament Christianity,

unfortunately, denied the sole headship of Christ in the church and contributed to the integration of a counterfeit view of authority in church organization and, thus, to the birth of an apostate religion.

I began this paper with a discussion on the nature of authority. Our God, who is a God of order, created a world in which human beings, the crown of His creation, were to live according to the authoritative patterns that governed the universe prior to the creation of the Earth. Then sin entered the world. The way God exercised His authority was challenged and a counterfeit notion of authority was introduced. This is the notion of authority that the “prince of this world” taught the first couple; this is the notion of authority that forever darkened the human vision of God and His character. The precise reason why Christ, God incarnate, came to this Earth and founded a community like no other was to counteract the counterfeit notion of God’s authority. He accomplished it by His life of divine slavery (*douleia*) that ultimately led Him to the cross. Unfortunately, human beings, weakened by millennia of sin’s existence on this Earth, returned to the old patterns of thinking soon after the death of its pioneers. Notwithstanding our devotion to Scripture, we, Seventh-day Adventists, inherited these patterns of thinking that are so tenaciously (and tragically) ingrained in the Christian faith.

It is a common human experience to be attracted to those who exhibit genuine Christian authority and to be repelled by the attitudes of those who rely solely on the authority of their office. Ideally, genuine Christian authority and the authority of a representative function should be integrated. After all, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with people holding an office, even though it is not really a biblical concept. Neither, is there anything inherently wrong with the way our church is currently organized. However, while Jesus left us with no

model of running the church, He was adamant that His church would not resemble secular structures, where authority was organized according to a “pecking order.” Is it possible that our current discussions regarding women’s ordination are complicated by our misunderstanding or misuse of true Christian authority?

I am a third generation Adventist, grandson of a head elder, son of a pastor/administrator, and an ordained pastor myself. In all my years as a Seventh-day Adventist, rarely have I encountered the integration of true genuine Christian authority with the authority of an ordained pastor. Sadly, I often struggle with such integration myself. Some of the most authoritative persons in my life were not ordained ministers. The one I place above all others was an old Christian gentleman in Tasmania (where for a time I served as a pastor after receiving my PhD) who had only four classes of formal education and had only been ordained as a deacon. I recognized, accepted, and submitted to the true Christian authority he represented and learned more from him about slaving for Christ and others than from a lifetime of being an Adventist and all my theological education combined. Unfortunately, for too many of us, being an ordained pastor tends to be about having authority over others, status, ranking, and male headship, rather than being slaves for Christ and others. This, I believe, is the real reason why we are spending our time discussing the issue of ordination and who can be ordained.

Now, I understand that “slavery” has few positive connotations, as it implies no honor, no glory, no status, and no ranking. Nobody likes that; in fact, I am repulsed by the concept. And yet, this is the word that Christ used to describe Himself and His work; this is the word that the apostles used to describe themselves and their work as well as that of their co-workers, both men and women;

this is what Christ is calling us—Adventist pastors, deacons, elders, presidents of divisions, conferences and unions—to be; not to have authority over people but rather over the task of fulfilling the Great Commission of Christ. Gospel order in the church does not require hierarchical headship, spiritual or otherwise. For true Christian ministry is not about status, rank, gender, equality, rights, or having “spiritual authority” over others; it is about being slaves of Christ and His people; not to rule over others but to be examples and, through the witness of our lives, to woo others to follow Christ. No human laying-on-of-hands can provide this kind of authority; only the work of the Holy Spirit in a person’s

heart can! While all Christians are to be ministers, those who are set apart for special ministry, both men and women, are called to be chief examples of slavery to Christ and others. I am convinced that when we embrace this understanding of authority and ministry, Christ’s vision for His community will be fulfilled, revival and reformation will follow, and the problem of women’s ordination will disappear.

So I want to leave this short investigation of the nature of Christian authority with a question: Are we going to follow culture, both secular and religious, which has taught us a hierarchical and elitist understanding of authority? Or are we going to follow Christ, who said, “Not so with you!” ■



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