The Role of Doctrine in the Life of the Church

*The truth is an advancing truth, and we must walk in the increasing light.*

The overall theme of our meeting this year—the development of Adventism into the next century—presents us with a broad range of issues to consider. They include changing approaches to biblical interpretation, transformations in our understanding of the Adventist experience and modifications in the work of the Adventist ministry. In view of the fact that Seventh-day Adventists traditionally identify themselves and account for their existence on the basis of what they believe, no aspect of the church's developing life has greater potential impact on its self-understanding than changes in the area of doctrine.

At the same time, no aspect of the church's ongoing experience displays greater complexity than doctrinal development. Besides different definitions of doctrine, we find contrasting views of the relation between the church and doctrine, along with a variety of doctrinal authorities and sources. If we turn to the topic of doctrinal development, we discover that there are diverse types of doctrinal change as well as different causes of the phenomenon. Then there are questions about the nature and function of theology.

A single discussion will not suffice even to raise all the questions our topic suggests, let alone provide answers, so we will have to be both brief and selective in our treatment of these issues here. One way to pursue our topic would be to formulate a definition of doctrine, describe its role in the church, and then deal with the questions that arise from phenomena like doctrinal change. This approach is attractive, but it runs the risk of oversimplifying the issue. Let us begin instead by diving into the turmoil of doctrinal change and then take up the nature of doctrine.

**Types of doctrinal change**

When we speak of doctrinal development, several different kinds of change come into view. The simplest sort is addition or deletion. We may acquire new beliefs or discard established ones. In either case, the content of doctrines changes. A more prevalent and more complex type kind of change involves what might be called the "configuration of belief." It is not the case here that beliefs as such are either added or deleted. The basic affirmations remain essentially the same. What changes is the relative importance church members attach to different elements of their faith. A belief that generated lively discussion at one point in the church's life may cease to attract much attention later on. Conversely, beliefs generally accepted as a matter of course can suddenly become a source of debate and controversy. This takes place on a formal as well as an informal basis. Consequently, the official status of a belief within a community can change. A belief may enjoy widespread acceptance among members for a long time before it is formally identified as an essential doctrine of the church. And there are even distinctions among formally approved doctrines between those which constitute a "test of fellowship" and those which don't.

In a related way, the rationale for religious beliefs often changes over time. Different people can hold the same beliefs for quite different reasons. Members of a given Christian community can have remarkably different attitudes toward the same doctrines at different times in history. Many of the beliefs embraced by pioneers reflect long hours of personal study, intense interaction with other searchers for truth and the courage to resist the ridicule and rejection of family members and former friends. A hundred years later church members may give their assent to the same doctrinal claims, not because they have wrestled personally with the issues involved, but because these doctrines form part of the religious heritage they grew up with and appropriated as a matter of course. They accept them because it never occurs to them to question them.

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1Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, p. 33.
Finally, the general importance members attach to the whole area of belief can rise or fall in relation to other elements in the life of a religious community. Achieving correct doctrines can be highly important to certain members of the community, or to most members at a certain time in its history, while other members place greater emphasis on such things as the quality of personal relationships within the church and the appropriateness of the church's official position on matters of social concern or public policy.

We can find instances within the history of Adventism which illustrate each type of doctrinal development just referred to. In general terms, the addition and deletion of doctrines were characteristic of the early, formative period of the church's history. The acquisition of the sabbath doctrine and the rejection of the shut door concept come to mind in this connection. Since those early years the most important doctrinal development in our history is arguably the acceptance of the evangelical doctrine of righteousness by faith, or the struggle to accept the doctrine, depending on your interpretation.

When it comes to altering the rationale for a given belief, the doctrine of the sanctuary is the best example in our history. Millerites attached great importance to October 22, 1844 because they anticipated Christ's return on that date. After the Great Disappointment, early Adventists continued to hold the date in great esteem, but they accounted for its significance by appealing not to the second coming, but to Christ's closing work as our high priest in the heavenly sanctuary. Another example is the fresh approach to the sabbath many Seventh-day Adventists have taken in recent years. In the past two decades Adventists have produced an impressive number of books and articles which approach the sabbath, not merely as an unfulfilled legal obligation, but as an important resource for modern human beings. Such developments reveal that we can affirm traditional elements in Adventism in non-traditional ways. New data sometimes require us to revise traditional beliefs, but they can also give us new reasons for embracing them.

The doctrine of the sanctuary also provides a more recent illustration of the way in which the attention devoted to various beliefs can change. For years, the concept that Jesus' mediatorial work comprises a two-stage high priestly ministry was generally affirmed as part of the doctrinal inheritance our forbears left with us. But ten years ago when questions were raised about the adequacy of its biblical basis, the doctrine suddenly attracted enormous attention. It became the subject of front page news and feature articles in numerous Adventist publications.

The beginning of this decade also saw the elevation of a long-held belief to the level of a formal doctrine of the church. In the church's various Statements of Belief which appeared prior to 1980, the prophetic status of Ellen G. White always received cautious affirmation. For example, the Church Manual of 1963 identifies belief in the gift of prophecy as a "fundamental belief," and then mentions, in a parenthetical way, that Seventh-day Adventists see a manifestation of this gift in the life and ministry of Ellen G. White.² And traditionally Seventh-day Adventists were always careful to specify that belief in Ellen G. White's prophetic status did not constitute a "test of fellowship."³ However, the 1980 the

²19. That God has placed in His church the gifts of the Holy Spirit, as enumerated in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4. That these gifts operate in harmony with the divine principles of the Bible, and are given 'for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ...'. That the gift of the Spirit of prophecy is one of the identifying marks of the remnant church... They recognize that this gift was manifested in the life and ministry of Ellen G. White" (Church Manual [General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1963], p. 34).

³James White declared that Adventists "do not... make belief in this work [of Ellen G. White] a test of Christian fellowship" (The Review and Herald, June 13, 1871). According to F. M. Wilcox, "A member of the church should not be excluded from membership because of his inability to recognize clearly the doctrine of spiritual gifts and its application to the second advent movement" "although no one should be chosen or retained as a representative of the denomination... who does not believe the principles of faith taught by the Seventh-day Adventist Church" (The Testimony of Jesus [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1944], pp. 142-43).
General Conference meeting in Dallas approved a Statement of Beliefs which contains a much stronger affirmation of Ellen White's significance and clearly establishes it as one of the church's fundamental beliefs. The 1980 Statement of Fundamental Beliefs was also the first to mention the ordinances of footwashing and the Lord's Supper, even though they played a part in Adventist worship from the beginning.

Yet another kind of doctrinal development apparent today, in certain ways more radical than change in either the content or configuration of beliefs, is a general shift in the attitude of many Adventists toward the religious value of doctrines. In years past, doctrinal purity or correctness enjoyed the highest priority among Seventh-day Adventists. Traditionally, Adventists referred to their beliefs collectively as "the truth," and the superiority of Adventist doctrines to those of other Christian groups was often cited as a major reason why people joined the church. But the relative importance Seventh-day Adventists attach to doctrine is changing, especially among younger members of the church, if my contact with college students is any indication.

Several years ago I had a conversation with a bright student on the campus where I teach after her return from a summer of study at Oxford University. While there, she rubbed shoulders with a number of people whose religious backgrounds differed markedly from her own. She was deeply impressed to find young people with no religious inclinations or commitments who were optimistic and world-affirming in their outlook. She admired their ability to see a great deal in life that is beautiful and worth celebrating in spite of the problems that face us all today.

My friend found in this attitude a striking contrast to her own, shaped as it was by a conservative Seventh-day Adventist upbringing. She felt that Adventist eschatology, with its pessimistic assessment of the human condition and its gloomy forecast of moral, social, and spiritual decline, had blinded her to the beauty in the world. And she was wondering how to relate her religious background to the attractive perspective on life displayed by her summer colleagues.

Her remarks made a profound impression on me. Here was one of our best students, without a hint of rebelliousness, who honestly wondered how she could come to terms with the view of life our church had given her. She wasn't challenging the truth of our fundamental beliefs. Nor was she seeking some excuse for ignoring one of our behavioral standards. Her question concerned something more fundamental than particular beliefs or practices. She was wondering what to do with the fundamental, comprehensive view of life and reality which Seventh-day Adventism had given her.

Another conversation raised similar suspicions about a changing perspective on doctrines in the Adventist community. During a field trip not long ago with a world religions class, I had an opportunity to talk to one of the students about her own religious situation. A lifelong Adventist, she nevertheless described herself as "searching." She said she didn't have any major problems with the doctrines of the church, but she no longer found the experience or atmosphere she felt she needed in Adventist circles. Consequently, she was looking for a religious community and a worship experience that would more adequately respond to her needs on a deeper, personal level. In her scale of religious values, evidently, other things are more important than doctrinal orthodoxy.

These observations suggest that doctrinal change not only assumes many different forms, but it is constantly taking place. Like a large body of water or a great land mass, the beliefs of the Christian community may appear to be stable, but under the surface there are always stresses and tensions at work, shifts and adjustments, often imperceptible, sometimes disturbing, occasionally cataclysmic. The complexities of doctrinal change also sug-

4"One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church and was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White. As the Lord's messenger, her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction" (Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook, 1988, p. 7).

5Ibid.
gest that the doctrinal dimension of a religious community is not one thing, but a number of things. It derives from several different sources and performs a variety of functions.

We have used "belief" and "doctrine" almost interchangeably so far. Now let us try to identify more carefully the specific features of doctrine.

The nature of doctrine

Definitions of doctrine typically make use of three or four basic terms, such as "faith," "church," "Scripture" and "tradition." We find a close relation between church and doctrine in the opening sentence of Jaroslav Pelikan's magisterial work, "The Christian Tradition." "What the church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches, and confesses on the basis of the word of God," Pelikan writes, "this is Christian doctrine."6 By this account, doctrines are not merely religious beliefs, but beliefs with special status. For one thing the church's doctrines are the beliefs held by the community as a whole, not just by certain members here and there. Second, doctrines represent the official beliefs of the community. Not everything church members happen to accept constitutes church doctrine. Church doctrines are beliefs which are basic to the identity of Christianity. They are the means by which the church defines itself. Third, as the word itself suggests, the doctrines of the church are the teachings of the church. They form an important part of the public expression of Christianity. A church's doctrines are the declaration of what it stands for.

Pelikan's definition also indicates the important relation between Christian doctrine and the Bible. Christians, like Jews and Moslems, are "people of the Book." The various Christian doctrines represent the church's understanding of what the Bible teaches. The church's creoidal formulas and confessional statements, therefore, represent official summaries of biblical truth. According to one authority, "The creed is simply the Church's understanding of the meaning of Scripture."7

Although the Bible is basic to Christian beliefs, the church does not derive its doctrines directly from a simple reading of the Bible. What Pelikan refers to as "environmental factors" always figure in the process, too.8 To some degree doctrines inevitably reflect the specific situation of the Christian community at the time of their formulation. The concrete experience of the church includes the relations of its members to each other and to the larger world around them. Over the centuries, for example, heresy has provided a powerful stimulus to doctrinal development.9 The New Testament canon arose in reaction to inadequate lists of authoritative Christian writings. And the orthodox view of the person of Christ developed in response to a variety of christological heresies. So important, in fact, is the role which heresy has played in doctrinal development that people often describe it as the "mother of orthodoxy."

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7John Leith, "Creeds and Their Role in the Church," in *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine From the Bible to the Present* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1963), p. 8. Leith also observes, "The whole history of theology is the history of the interpretation of Scripture, even though the theologians do not always cite Biblical references. In general, the victories in the great theological debates have gone to those who have been the most convincing interpreters of Scripture. The creeds are the record of the Church's interpretation of the Bible in the past and the authoritative guide to hermeneutics in the present" (Ibid., pp. 8-9).


9George A. Lindbeck observes, "For the most part, only when disputes arise about what it is permissible to teach or practice does a community make up its collective mind and formally make a doctrinal decision" (*The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984], p. 75).
A look at Adventist origins reveals the impact of controversy on doctrinal formation. The issues that attracted the attention of early Adventists were matters of dispute within the larger Christian world. When would Christ return? Which is the appropriate day for Christian rest and worship? In fact, Adventists picked a denominational name that identified their position on disputed questions and underscored their differences with other religious groups, rather than one which emphasized the views they shared with Christians generally. On a host of other matters, of course, early Adventists accepted the doctrinal scheme, social concerns and political sentiments of conservative American Protestant Christianity.

Since doctrines arise, not from the Bible alone, but from the dynamic interplay between the Bible and the living experience of the church, we can characterize the church's doctrines either as formal responses on the part of the Christian community to the ongoing challenges it meets in light of the Word of God, or as the community's understanding of the Bible within its concrete historical situation. In either case, it is clear that an important relation obtains between the experience of the church and and its understanding of Scripture.

An appreciation for the contribution of human experience to doctrine leads some theologians to define doctrine with reference to faith. Schubert M. Ogden makes some distinctions that illustrate this approach. Ogden locates faith, witness and theology on different levels of experience. Faith is basic to the other two. It represents the fundamental apprehension of God's action in Jesus Christ as decisive for human existence. Witness is one step removed from faith. It involves the believer's more or less spontaneous, pre-reflective expression of religious commitment. In bearing witness or confessing their faith, believers make use of fundamental titles, symbols and metaphors in order to confess their trust and devotion. One thinks in this connection of things like Thomas' exclamation on meeting the risen Christ, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). Doctrines enter the picture on the level of reflection. They provide a conceptual interpretation of the expressions of faith. They represent attempts to identify the intellectual content of the claims faith implicitly makes on the more spontaneous level of witness.

The relation between religious experience and doctrinal formation also figures prominently in George A. Lindbeck's careful study, The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age. Lindbeck distinguishes several views of doctrine, two of which are important to us here. For the "propositional-cognitive theory," "church doctrines function as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities." In other words, doctrines are assertions about the way things are. According to this theory, doctrines may be right or wrong; doctrinal claims may be true or false.

This view of doctrines is typical of traditional Christianity. Today as throughout history, the vast majority of Christians assume that the teachings of the church provide information about ultimate realities. At the same time, a number whose theological positions are non-traditional hold the propositional-cognitive view of doctrines, too. They may reject the literal truth of various traditional beliefs, and yet maintain that certain cognitive claims are essential to Christianity and that the truth of these claims can and often must be argued for.

In contrast, those who embrace what Lindbeck calls the "experiential-expressive" view regard doctrines as "noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations." They see doctrines as arising from an underlying religious experience which could find expression in a variety of verbal formulas. Unlike cognitivists, symbolists do not attach great importance to variations in doctrinal formulations. For them, the same doctrines can serve to express different religious meanings, and conversely, the same religious meanings can find expression in a variety of doctrinal formu-

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10 Ogden describes "faith, witness, and theology" as "points along the continuum defined by the two poles of existential self-understanding and objectifying knowledge" (The Reality of God and Other Essays [New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966], p. 81). Ogden identifies many traditional doctrines as forms of witness rather than theology in the sense of reflective understanding.

11 Lindbeck, p. 16.
Consequently, doctrinal claims are not so much right and wrong as truth claims, but more or less adequate as expressions of religious experience.

These different views of the relation between doctrine and religious experience suggest contrasting ways to conceive the relation between doctrine and the church. One sees the church as the servant of doctrine; the other sees doctrine as the servant of the church.

According to the first of these views, doctrine has priority over community. The Christian church exists to serve its message. In fact, the church is the creation of its message. It came into existence in response to the truth which early Christians accepted themselves and endeavored to communicate to the world. Consequently, doctrine exists above and apart from the church. For those who hold this view, the Bible represents a compendium of propositional claims, or a handbook of information. The work of the church is to explore the contents of Scripture, formulate these contents in an organized way and communicate them effectively to the world. Its mission is to pass along a body of teachings handed down from divine authority.

The second view gives the church priority over doctrine. Those who defend this idea maintain that truth never exists independently of its perception. And they observe that categories such as prophet, revelation and Gospel have no meaning apart from the context of a religious community. Revelation always presupposes the presence of a people to whom God communicates. The prophets were not isolated figures. They functioned within communities. They fulfilled roles which were established within their communities. And they delivered messages which were assimilated, interpreted, codified and preserved by communities. Supporters of this view also observe that the primary language of the Christian community is not ideological, but devotional, confessional language. Its natural setting is not the theological textbook, but the experience of worship.

In its stronger versions, the "church over doctrine" view construes doctrine as the creation of the church. Its supporters maintain that Christianity is basically a form of concrete social existence, not a set of beliefs, and the only reason Christians formulate doctrines is to express and rationalize their corporate experience. One advocate of this position insists that the church's doctrines should include only what is absolutely required to account for the church's existence.

In its strongest form, each position just described has significant problems. The view that the church is the servant of doctrine implies that doctrine exists on an independent level above the church and consists in the codification of divinely imparted information. But this overlooks the dynamic way in which doctrine develops historically and the intimate interaction between the concrete life of the community and the community's grasp of truth. As we have seen, the church's formulation of its doctrines never takes place in a cultural vacuum. Circumstances always contribute to it.

On the other hand, the view that doctrine is the servant of the church seems to overlook the fact that the church acknowledges a higher authority than itself. It is true that the various instances of biblical revelation always presupposed the presence of a community to which God communicated. But the biblical prophets not only spoke from within their communities, they also spoke from beyond them. They expressed the hopes and aspirations, and occasionally the prejudices of their communities. But they also criticized the beliefs and practices of their audiences.

Similarly, the collections of documents which Christians invest with decisive religious authority arose within communities of faith. But what led the church to formulate a canon to begin with was the recognition by early Christians that certain writings carried an authority that was superior to themselves. Strictly speaking, the process of canonization represents, not the creation, but the recognition of the community's authorities.

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12 Lindbeck, p. 17.
13 According to John Knox, "the existential reality of the Church [is that] by which all our beliefs as Christians are required and therefore justified" (The Limits of Unbelief [London: Collins, 1970], p. 97).
An adequate concept of the relation between church and doctrine lies somewhere between these two positions and combines their respective insights. On one hand, the church exists to serve the truth. The Christian community formulates doctrines in response to a message that comes from beyond itself. It acknowledges a higher power and defers to a higher authority. So, doctrines are more than just the expression or codification of believers' collective state of mind.

On the other hand, a grasp of truth represents achievement as well as gift. It takes effort to acquire truth. It never comes to us in wrapped and sealed packages directly from its divine source. The forms of its expression always reflect the cultural situation of its first recipients, and our perception of it always reflects to some degree the concrete circumstances that surround us. As a result, our doctrinal formulations are always provisional and open to revision.

We must therefore define doctrine as the expression of the Christian community's present understanding of the truth conveyed in Scripture. The notion of "present truth" has a venerable history in the Seventh-day Adventist church. As employed by our pioneers, it was primarily a call to move beyond the accepted positions of the day and receive new light as it became available. The expression also serves to remind us that our doctrinal achievements are subject to reconsideration and reformulation as new problems confront the church and new insights accumulate.

The functions of doctrine

Now let us turn to the central question our title suggests. What is the role of doctrine in the church? How does doctrine function in the life of the Christian community?

According to Pelikan's definition, Christian doctrines represent formal statements of the church's beliefs. They identify the fundamental claims on which the community rests. From the beginning of Christianity such statements have served two related purposes. They both safeguard and communicate the Christian experience of faith. Early Christians perceived that the experience of faith is not compatible with just any formulation of its meaning. The apprehension of God's personal presence in Jesus Christ—which is the central and originating Christian experience—excludes certain accounts of Jesus' identity. It is incompatible, for example, with the view that Christ only appeared to come in the flesh (1 John 4:1-2). It is also incompatible with the notion that Christ was less than co-eternal with God, as well as the idea that Christ's divinity replaced an essential element of his human nature.

During the first few centuries of its development, the church steered clear of docetism, Arianism and Apollinarianism because astute Christian thinkers perceived that these various concepts of Christ in their respective ways violated the apprehension of Jesus as the decisive relation of God to human beings. They saw that if the Christian community accepted them, the essential experience of faith would become distorted and eventually be lost. As Emil Brunner observes, "Had Arius conquered, it would have been all over with the Christian Church." Consequently, we can describe the christological statements that emerged from the first five centuries of the common era as conceptual vehicles which made the experience of faith available to succeeding generations.

From the earliest days, careful statements of what Christians believe also helped to communicate and inculcate the experience of faith. The early Apologists tried to describe the meaning of Christianity in an intellectually attractive way in order to dispel the suspicions of those who misunderstood it and make faith a viable option for thinking people. Their modern counterparts like C. S. Lewis pursue the same objective. Doctrinal statements also figure in the process of Christian development and nurture. As we noted above, religious experience contributes to doctrinal development, and some people describe doc-

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trines as the product of careful reflection on the more or less spontaneous expressions of faith in symbols and metaphors. But influence runs in the other direction, too. Doctrines play an important role in shaping religious experience, as well as expressing it. In fact, terms which originate in theological reflection sometimes find their way into the liturgy of the church. For example, Tertullian coined the word "trinity" in his efforts to formulate an adequate doctrine of God. Nevertheless, the word appears in a number of Christian hymns, including some in the new Adventist hymnal.15

A less attractive function that doctrines have performed historically is to determine who really belongs to the Christian community and exclude those who fail to qualify. It is customary for theologians today to praise the christological achievements of the early church's thinkers, and continuing study of their work generally increases our admiration for the astuteness of their perceptions and the ingenuity of their solutions to the problems they faced. At the same time, it makes us wince to read the closing words of those early doctrinal formulas. Those whose views diverged from the stated position were anathematized.16

Although doctrines are generally thought of as an inventory of Christian beliefs, a community's formal doctrines never perfectly reflect what its members actually believe. The two are typically "out of sync" to some extent, because, as we noticed earlier, the experience of the Christian community is constantly developing.

Occasionally the church's formal doctrines are "ahead" of the community's actual beliefs. In the fourth and fifth centuries, for example, when the christological formulas of Nicea and Chalcedon became the official position of the church, a majority of the church's members were probably Arians. It took a while for the actual beliefs of the community to "catch up" with the official statements. In other ways the church's formal doctrines are often "behind" the community's actual beliefs. To cite a controversial example, Christian worship manifests the deep conviction that God is genuinely affected by our praise and our petitions. Yet traditional doctrines of God insist on divine immutability. Here is a case where the religious intuition of Christians may be ahead of their formal doctrines, and the church's official teachings ought to be revised.17 Unfortunately, formal statements of belief sometimes stand in the way of doctrinal development because people are reluctant to progress beyond established positions in their thinking. Early Adventists may have objected to creeds because they prevented people in mainline churches from considering new biblical interpretations.

If changes in popular religious belief do not always result in changes in doctrine, it is also true that changes in doctrine do not always produce changes in belief. Sociological evidence suggests that religious beliefs are remarkably stable and durable. Profound theological developments have taken place on an academic level in the United States since the

15Hymn number 73 in the 1985 Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal contains the line "God in three persons, blessed Trinity" in two verses. Hymn number 148 contains the words "The Trinity whom we adore." In hymn number 85 the words appear, "O Trinity of love and power." Other hymns with trinitarian formulas such as "three in one" are numbers 2, 11, 27, 30, 47, 70, 71, 91, and 117.

16The Creed of Nicea (325) concludes with these words: "But, those who say, Once he was not, or he was not before his generation, or he came to be out of nothing, or who assert that he, the Son of God, is of a different hypostasis or ousia, or that he is a creature, or changeable, or mutable, the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes them" (Leith, p. 31). Similarly, the Second Council of Constantinople (553) voted a lengthy list of anathemas, the eleventh of which condemns anyone who himself fails to anathematize "Arius, Eunomius, Macedonius, Apollinaris, Nestorius, Eutyches and Origen, together with their impious, godless writings, and all the other heretics already condemned and anathematized by the holy catholic and apostolic Church... and all those who have held and hold or who in their godlessness persist in holding to the end the same opinion as those heretics just mentioned" (Ibid., p. 50).

17Charles Hartshorne sees a drastic difference between the religious and the predominant Western philosophical conceptions of God and argues that the "religious," as distinct from the "secular," attributes of God should receive more attention than they have ("The Two Strands in Historical Theology," Man's Vision of God and the Logic of Theism [Hamden CN: Archon Books, 1964], pp. 85-141).
Second World War, but according to a recent study the central doctrinal beliefs of Americans have not changed over the past forty years.\textsuperscript{18}

One of the perpetual challenges the church faces is to preserve the benefits of giving its beliefs formal, doctrinal expression without allowing its formal statements to impede intellectual and spiritual growth. The only way to achieve this is to emphasize the provisional character of all doctrinal formulation. To borrow one of Whitehead's famous statements, in formulating its doctrines, the church should seek simplicity and distrust it. Consequently, the preface to the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists voted in Dallas is immensely important. It indicates that revision of the twenty-seven items listed "may be expected" "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." These words provide a mandate for continuing reflection on the church's beliefs and a caveat against allowing the Statement to assume the status of an unquestioned authority in the minds of church members.\textsuperscript{19}

The role of theology in the life of the church

No discussion of doctrines in a meeting of the church's religion scholars would be complete without considering the role of theology in the life of the church. We have identified doctrines as the official beliefs of a religious community. In one sense, theology refers to the activity of the church as it develops and reflects on its beliefs. In another sense, it is the task of reflecting on these beliefs in a way that is methodologically self-conscious. It involves the deliberate application of reason to the contents of faith. Doctrinal formulation generally is the business of the church as a whole, but critical reflection on doctrine is the specific concern of those entrusted with the ministry of teaching.

The relation between doctrine and theology in this second sense involves several different things. On the most basic level, theology simply identifies the faith of the Christian community. It provides an inventory or catalogue of Christian doctrines. Instead of merely listing doctrines, however, theology also seeks to arrange the various doctrines of the church in a logically attractive pattern. It explores what we identified above as the "configuration of Christian belief." In this capacity theology seeks to determine the relative importance of different doctrines within the Christian community. For logical reasons, certain doctrines seem to be more central or basic to Christian faith than others. Most Christians would agree, for example, that the doctrines of God and Christ are more fundamental than, say, the doctrines of systematic benevolence and healthful living.

To a certain extent, the role of theology is not only descriptive, but prescriptive or normative as well. Theologians not only say what Christians do believe, at times they assert what they should believe.\textsuperscript{20} Theologians may, for example, propose a new configuration for Christian doctrines. They may retrieve a doctrine whose significance has been overlooked and elevate it to a position of prominence. Or they may suggest that a subject of vigorous debate within certain circles is less important than it seems. Less frequently, theologians propose more radical doctrinal innovation. They may suggest that the church abandon a time-honored belief or embrace a new one.

\textsuperscript{19}In view of the significance of this preface for the church's reflective life, it is startling to find that the Ministerial Department's widely circulated publication, \textit{Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines} (Washington, D.C.: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1988), fails to include it.
\textsuperscript{20}According to Bernard Lonergan, "The theologian . . . has a contribution of his own to make." He is not "just a parrot with nothing to do but repeat what has already been said" (\textit{Method in Theology} [New York: Herder & Herder, 1972], p. 331).
Theologians justify doctrinal rearrangement and innovation in various ways. One is to argue that Christian doctrines should be consistent with each other. Some theologians see a contradiction between the affirmation that God is supremely loving and the familiar belief that divine justice demanded the death of Jesus. In order to relieve this tension, they suggest another explanation for the cross. To cite a second example, many theologians see an inconsistency between God's love and the idea that the wicked suffer the pains of hell through all eternity. In response, some argue against the idea of an everlasting hell; others, against any idea of hell at all. The former maintain that the suffering of the wicked is temporary, rather than unending. The latter reject the whole idea of divine punishment, insisting that God's love logically requires the eventual salvation of every human being.

Another basis for doctrinal revision is the need to bring our doctrines into harmony with the concrete experience of Christians. As we mentioned above, aspects of practical religious experience sometimes conflict with the official teachings of the church. The intuitions and needs of practical religious experience provide a powerful warrant for theological innovation.

The most important basis for doctrinal change will always be the Bible. Theologians who find that the church's beliefs are out of harmony with the Bible have a responsibility to identify the discrepancy and encourage the Christian community to make appropriate changes in its formulation of truth. At the same time, a significant change in belief is never achieved by theological pronouncement or administrative fiat. Doctrinal transformation involves change on the part of the community as a whole, and this ordinarily takes considerable time.

To summarize, theological endeavor rests on the underlying convictions that Christian faith is intelligible, that its intellectual contents are important to the experience of faith, and that it is possible to express them in a logical way. The essential task of Christian theology is biblical interpretation, since the Bible is the normative source of Christian belief. It also involves paying close attention to interpretations that have developed during the course of the church's history and to the dynamic experience of the Christian community today. If theology seeks to preserve the faith of the past, it must find ways to express that faith effectively in the language of today. We do not preserve the faith of an earlier generation of believers by simply repeating the formulas they developed. To make their faith our faith, we must think it through for ourselves. This means looking carefully at the Scriptures and trying to hear the Word of God anew in our time and place.

The final, somewhat paradoxical, task of theology is to relativize its own importance. There are two reasons to qualify the significance of our attempts to understand the contents of faith. One is the fact that our concepts of ultimate reality at their very best are but dim reflections of the real thing. Because our beliefs always fall short of the truth they seek to represent, theology inevitably fails. In the words of Heinz Zahrnt, "The reason for the failure of theology is the greatness of its object." It "consists of men, sinful, finite, imperfect and mortal men, daring to speak in human words about God." Consequently, "God must . . . forgive us our theology, our theology perhaps most of all."22

Another reason for qualifying the significance we attach to theology returns us to something we touched on earlier. It is the fact that belief is only one of several elements in religion, and not necessarily the most important one. During a visit to Jerusalem two years ago, I had a memorable conversation with a Jewish rabbi from the United States who co-pastors with his wife a thousand-member Conservative congregation in Indianapolis, Indiana. One of the things we talked about was the task of communicating a religious her-

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itage to young people—a challenge to adherents of every tradition, and one which I feel keenly as a college religion teacher and the father of two teen-age children.

The rabbi told me that he identifies a triad of elements when he describes what it means to be a Jew, especially to an audience of young people. They are believing, belonging and behaving. Participating in Judaism involves all three factors, but belonging takes priority. To be a Jew is to become a part of the Jewish community, to appropriate the community’s tradition as central to one’s self-understanding. On a secondary level, it involves observing the community’s forms of ritual and worship, and then, perhaps on a tertiary level, it involves believing—giving intellectual assent to certain claims. For Judaism, deed is more important than creed, as another rabbi friend of mine recently put it.

As he talked I could not help contrasting his account of these three elements in Judaism with the configuration that I would instinctively assign them in Adventism. For Adventists, surely, believing traditionally occupies a position far ahead of any other element in our experience. Being an Adventist means first and foremost to affirm the truth of certain claims, and doctrinal orthodoxy occupies a place of paramount importance in our scheme of religious values. Behaving, in the sense of following various guidelines for diet, dress, and such things would no doubt be second. And belonging would come in a distant third, if it figured in the picture at all.

There are indications that these traditional priorities are changing among Adventists today. According to the recent special edition of Adventist Review many people are less concerned with achieving doctrinal correctness than with finding a spiritual home—a place where they can find acceptance and belonging. If this is so, then theology needs to recast its objectives and its sense of importance. Theology is not the most important thing in the world, even though it concerns what is most important. It is always subordinate to faith.

In saying this, I do not intend for a moment to undermine the importance of theology. To the contrary, insisting that theology is subordinate to faith and exists to serve the church is the only way to preserve its significance. Nothing is more cumbersome than a set of religious beliefs which no longer embody the living faith of a community, and nothing is more useless than theological proposals which reflect no interest in the lived experience of Christians.

Believing, then, is essential to religion, and careful reflection on our beliefs is important as well. But there are other, complementary, aspects of religious experience that deserve attention, too, and it is important for them to get it. Indeed, only as they do so will theology find its proper place within the life of the church.

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