Future Views of the Past: Models of the Development of the Early Church

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Abstract

Models of historiography often drive the theological understanding of persons and periods in Christian history. This article evaluates eight different models of the early church period and then suggests a model that is appropriate for use in a Seventh-day Adventist Seminary. The first three models evaluated are general views of the early church by Irenaeus of Lyon, Walter Bauer and Martin Luther. Models four through eight are views found within Seventh-day Adventism, though some of them are not unique to Adventism. The ninth model, proposed by the author, is expressed colloquially for the sake of simplicity and memorability: The good guys are the bad guys/The bad guys are the good guys. The lessons of history must be learned from actual people with their successes and failures. There was no golden age when exemplars thought and acted in perfect virtue. History was lived by very human people.

Keywords: tradition, orthodoxy, heresy, model.

Introduction

Religious training has always been a problematic area of humanities education, wishing to be, at the same time, both specific to the values and needs of a particular confession or movement as well as being objective and academic. This paper is directed toward establishing a model for understanding the development of Christianity in the early church for use within Seventh-day Adventist seminary training, but has implications for all teaching of the early church.

Ever since Martin Luther wrote his Babylonian Captivity of the Church Protestants have had a tendency to view the early church as having fallen away from the teachings of Jesus Christ in a great apostasy. The Seventh-day Adventist church is no exception. The extent of knowledge many Adventists have of the early church, including many entering seminary, is derived from three short chapters in Ellen

\[\text{Footnote:} \text{ The full title is} \text{ A Prelude on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church. It was written in 1520 and at www.lutherdansk.dk/Web-Babylonian_Captivitate/Martin_Luther.htm an English translation is available.}\]
White’s book *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* in which she both praises and condemns the leaders of the early church. On one hand, praise is offered for their devotion to Christ in the face of persecution, and on the other, they are condemned for their incorporation of pagan-style superstition and ritual in place of the simple forgiveness and worship of Christ. Many Adventists take these chapters to mean that the early church was irretrievably corrupt and is, therefore, of no value to study other than to identify what went wrong in the great apostasy.

Whereas gaining insight into the great apostasy is understandable and necessary to a church trying to dodge the mistakes of the past, it is not a current concern of the larger academy of Christian historians. Quite frankly, the question has been out of vogue for nearly a century. Yet it is indeed one of the questions that our Seventh-day Adventist movement/church most definitely needs to address, especially if we are to further define what church is in our self-understanding. Hence, I shall proceed in attempting to bring together a model, or parts of a model that can help us understand not just what has been called the great apostasy, but the whole development of the early church, both the positives and the negatives.

**Models 1 & 2: Irenaeus and Bauer**

Two major models of orthodoxy and heresy have dominated the twentieth-century scholarship on the development of the early Christian church. The first, articulated by Irenaeus of Lyon, essentially assumed and re-articulated by most of the Christian writers throughout the early centuries. Irenaeus’ model is caricatured by Walter Bauer in his classic 1934 book on *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, where he argues that there was originally a uniformity of belief among Christians that was only disrupted by heretics who arose with diverse views afterwards. Bauer in his introduction rejects what he calls the “ecclesiastical position” on the development of heresy. His four points on that view can be summarized as follows:

1. Jesus revealed pure doctrine to his apostles both before and after his death.
2. After Jesus’ final departure, the disciples apportion the world among themselves, and each takes the unadulterated gospel to his allotted portion.

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3. Even after the death of the disciples, the pure gospel branches out further. But the devil plants seeds of error in the divine wheat field; true Christians, blinded by Satan, abandon the pure doctrine. As Origen said: “All heretics are first believers; then later they swerve from the rule of faith.” (*Commentary on Song of Songs* 3, commenting on 2.2) The unspoken idea is that all heretics were first believers.

4. Right belief is invincible. In spite of all evil efforts to the contrary, orthodoxy prevails.⁵

This “uniformity to diversity and back to uniformity” model had a triumphal appeal to fourth- and fifth-century Christians who are very aware of their fights for orthodoxy and their assumptions of following a continuous tradition. In its place, Bauer suggests that the triumph of orthodoxy over heresy was the end of a struggle between various competing parties which mutually referred to themselves as the true Christians and the others as those with degenerate views. The winner, Roman Christianity, was enabled by its victory to declare itself orthodox and rewrite history in its own favor.⁶ Thus, in Bauer’s model, orthodoxy is defined late fourth-century, and did not exist earlier, leaving very little connection between the Jesus movement and what developed into Christianity.

Whereas I think Bauer makes several good points and brings together an impressive amount of historical details, I must say that his major premise is not proved. He seems to push the evidence in his favor in two different directions. For North Africa, Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, and Macedonia Bauer stresses the evidence which portrays the variety of Christianity, especially the prevalence of Marcionism, Gnosticism, Bardaisanism, and Montanism.⁷ For Rome, however, he

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⁵Ibid., xxiii, xxiv.

⁶See, for instance, ibid., 112, 120, and 131.

⁷First, Marcionism is the label used to describe the beliefs of Marcion of Sinope about God. According to this figure of the second century, the God of the Hebrews were not the same as the God of Jesus and Christians. Ireneaus condemned this teaching and claimed that the Hebrew Scriptures are Christian. See B. Aland, “Marcion – Marcionism” in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*. Ed. Angelo Di Berardino, 3 vol. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 2:676-678. Second, Gnosticism, similar to Marcionism, proposes the dualistic worldview that describes Jesus Christ as a lesser divine being sent by the Supreme God to bring humans esoteric knowledge (*gnosis*) in order to free their souls to heaven. See I. Ramelli, “Gnosis – Gnosticism” in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, 2:139-147. Third, Bardaisanism is the somewhat Christian gnostic idea, originated with Bardesanes of Edessa in the second century, with strong influence of oriental astrology, combated by Hippolytus and St. Ephrem of Syria. See A. Camplani, “Bardesanes (Bardaisan) of Edessa” in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, 1:327-330. Fourth, Montanism was a movement of the second century, also called the new prophecy, which originated with a so-called prophet, Montanus. Some of his companions, Prisca and Maximilla also claimed to have the gift of prophecy. They practice asceticism and believed in an intimate
downplays the variety and portrays a very stable, consistently orthodox, power-motivated Christianity. The early presence of diversity within Christianity seems incontrovertible, especially, unfortunately for Bauer, at Rome. This “diversity to uniformity” model has been adapted by many history of religions scholars to become, in its current form, the dominate model of the academy. As with any emergent model, the academy has collectively praised and damned him and his idea while constantly editing and adjusting it. Helmut Koester has taken the idea of early diversity to the extent of arguing that as soon as there were twelve apostles there were twelve Christianities, while the more orthodox-minded I. Howard Marshall argued for a coherent, though not uniform, set of beliefs shared by even the “earlier” Christians, the writers of the New Testament.

Model 3: Luther

A third model should arguably be added to these two, though Bauer would lump it as a derivative of the Irenaean, or ecclesiastical, model. It is a perspective presented by Martin Luther and many of the sixteenth-century Protestants. In his Babylonian Captivity of the Church Luther suggests that the Roman Catholic Church embodies the falling away and the anti-Christ predicted in the New Testament. He also wrote that her covering over the way of salvation with her mystagogical sacraments is the great apostasy. This model also represents a uniformity followed by diversity recovered into a uniformity, but the final uniformity, instead of being orthodoxy, is considered heresy which needs reformation. What remained to be demonstrated during the Reformation was how soon after the death of the apostles did the church go astray? I remember reading Luther describing the Babylonian captivity as being for a thousand years, but in another of his writings he suggested fifteen hundred years. Obviously these are round numbers, but the discrepancy shows the ambiguity of when Luther considered the church to have apostatized, closer to the first- or second-century or closer to the sixth-century. For Luther, Augustine and John Chrysostom were both to be read with great authority, but the earlier writer Origen was heretical.

These three models of Irenaeus, Walter Bauer, and Martin Luther all match some aspects of the historical data we can uncover. Irenaeus demonstrates that many subversive readings of scripture did arise in the second century and did attack an earlier orthodoxy. The two best-known examples of this being the connection with the Holy Spirit which was not accepted by what became orthodox Christianity. See B. Aland, “Montanus – Montanism” in Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity, 2:833, 834.

8Note that Koester also argues for a late date on the number twelve being associated with apostles. See Helmut Koester, History and Literature of Early Christianity, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1982), 8. See also sections 8-11.

readings of Marcion, who radically separated the God of the Israel from the God of the Christians, and Valentinus, the Gnostic, who associated the major words of the New Testament with archons guarding the levels of the *pleroma*. Bauer is correct in his assertion that diversity did exist in the earliest church. Also, agreement on terminology representing God as Trinity and Christ as having two natures did culminate late, in the fourth and fifth centuries. Furthermore, Bauer’s claim of triumphal writing of history did take place, Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* and Jerome’s *Lives of Illustrious Men* being obvious examples. Luther’s presentation of the Roman Catholic sacramental system actually getting in the way of salvation seems straight-forward enough to the Protestant mindset. Luther is correct in showing that the Roman positions are difficult to align with Scriptures. So all three models have some merit, but none are completely applicable to an Adventist understanding of the early church. Luther’s model comes the closest, using some of the church fathers positively and some negatively, but does not allow for early diversity of Christian belief, nor is it specific enough on how or when the apostasy took place. None of these are an adequate model to demonstrate the development of Christianity in the early church for use within a contemporary and future Adventist seminary training.

*Seventh-day Adventist Models*

Now we turn to models four through eight that now function within Adventism to understand church history and point toward a ninth that I suggest may be a useful addition for the twenty-first century students of the early church.

**Model 4: Truth Cannot Mix with Error**

Often in discussions with Adventists and other Protestants on a topic in the early church I encounter the attitude that if someone has any of their theology wrong they are a heretic. This would be based on the model that truth and error cannot mix. With this model the task becomes very easy for an Adventist to show when the great apostasy took place: A.D. 96 with the first extant Christian writings outside the New Testament. Clement of Rome, writing to correct a usurpation of power by the younger church members in Corinth over their elders, refers in chapter five to the martyrs Paul and Peter now being in heaven. This, of course, most Adventists would agree is wrong theology, and every single extant writer in the church after that has mistaken theology of one stripe or another as judged by the 28 Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists. But this model is untenable in the light of the representations of Ellen White in the *Great Controversy*. She presents her chapter on the “Persecution in the First Centuries” in a very positive light.\(^\text{10}\) The oft quoted “Let there be a revival of the faith and power of the early church, and the spirit of persecution will be revived, and the

\(^{10}\text{White, } The Great Controversy, 39-48.\)
fires of persecution will be rekindled,” is the final sentence in that chapter. Also, that same chapter, focusing on the first three centuries of the Christian era, quotes from Tertullian’s *Apology*, chapter 50, the familiar phrase, “the blood of Christians is seed.” But her positive use of sections of this writer does not mean that Tertullian did not teach theological errors. He wrote that the Sabbath, along with circumcision, were temporary in their literal observance. He also taught that repentance of sin after baptism must be accompanied by outward *exomologesis* which alone can prevent one from a perpetual punishment in hell-fire. These beliefs disqualify Tertullian as one of the good guys according to a simple “truth and error do not mix” model, yet Ellen White is positive toward him.

Model 5: Present Truth

This brings up another Adventist model which is usually applied to the other end of the era of spiritual darkness: the idea of “present truth.” As applied to the Reformers, this model suggests that there are certain beliefs that are of most import during a certain time. Thus, the development of Christian theology is described in a stair-step reformation of one area of belief at a time being reformed. This model, used often by Ellen White, came to the forefront of my mind as I researched a short article on John Calvin for the *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*. I found that in three different places of the *Great Controversy* Ellen White positively addresses John Calvin. She gives a summary statement of the work and influence of John Calvin and expresses her assessment of Calvin’s value to the work of God both in Geneva and across Europe. “His course as a public leader was not faultless, nor were his doctrines free from error. But he was instrumental in promulgating truths that were of special importance in his time.” These final words include both a disclaimer and an affirmation. White would no doubt have rejected Calvin’s acceptance of the religious intolerance in Geneva and might have considered Calvin’s part in the condemnation and execution of Michael Servetus as a failure. Also, Calvin’s strong views on predestination directly contrasted her own Arminian position of human free will. In spite of these and other differences between Ellen White and John Calvin, she presents him as of

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11Ibid., 48.
12Ibid., 42.
18Ibid., 236.
positive value to God in holding fast to the present truth of his time which included “the principles of Protestantism” such as justification by faith and the authority of Scriptures over tradition.\(^{19}\) These positive elements of Calvin’s theology faithfully advanced in the face of the rising counter-Reformation during the second generation of the Reformation movement, make him, in the eyes of Ellen White, a positive Christian figure or one of the good guys of salvation history.

This present truth model works great in a Reformation setting of advancing truth, but it is harder to apply in a setting of receding truth, as with Tertullian, and yet, the same kind of principle seems to apply. Maybe White sees him as holding on to a truth which others are letting go. Maybe she sees him as spokesperson for a group of serious Christians who are willing to stand up for their beliefs in a time of persecution. One can hardly help respecting those persecuted for their faith during Tertullian’s time for their determined devotion. And yet, just one generation later, these very martyrs become a major difficulty as examples for those going through the persecutions in Carthage during the time of Cyprian.

**Model 6: Remnant**

Two other models, based on Ellen White’s handling of Christian history, suggest themselves from a paragraph in the middle of the chapter on “Persecution in the First Centuries” in *The Great Controversy*. White begins the paragraph with the statement, “Most of the Christians at last consented to lower their standard, and a union was formed between Christianity and paganism.” She then outlines the infiltration of idolatry through worshiping “images of Jesus, and even Mary and the saints.” She bemoans that “unsound doctrine, superstitious rites, and idolatrous ceremonies were incorporated” into the “faith and worship” of the church. Her final sentence of the paragraph states, “There were some, however, who were not misled by these delusions. They still maintained their fidelity to the Author of truth and worshiped God alone.”\(^{20}\) This contrast between the many and the few lends itself well to the familiar Adventist model of “the Remnant.” As detailed from the prophecies of Isaiah by Gerhard Hasel, the “remnant motif is rooted in [the] dialectic of judgment and salvation.”\(^{21}\) That is, God’s people are negatively judged, but a remnant is spared, or saved, to continue on the line of God’s people. This is expressed in Isa 6:11–13 as a tenth, which would be a visible remnant, that is again consumed until all that is left is root stalk or seed, which would be more like a potentiality than a visible remnant. Hasel calls this remains

\(^{19}\)Ibid.

\(^{20}\)Ibid., 43.

of the destruction of the tenth an “irreducible remnant.” In popular Adventist thought, as expressed in Sabbath School classes and fellowship meal discussions, the remnant model is used to describe not only the Protestant Reformation and the beginning of the Advent movement. This remnant model is used in describing Noah, Lot from Sodom, the separation of Judah and Israel, the Babylonian captivity of Judah, the partial return from Babylon to Jerusalem, the Christian separation from the Jews, and is of interest to us here to describe the woman clothed with the moon in contradistinction to the woman clothed in scarlet in the book of Revelation.

The major difficulty with applying the remnant model to the early church is that it is hard to locate in history, any visible, or identifiable, group of Christians who did not participate in any “unsound doctrines, superstitious rites, [or] idolatrous ceremonies.” One could argue that Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople in the early fifth-century, was holding out for a piece of the truth when he refused to venerate Mary as theotokos, bearer of God. But his celebration of the Eucharist seems to be very little different than that of his predecessor John Chrysostom, and his Christology separated the two natures of Christ to such an extent as to have separate identifiable actions from each nature. And, of course, there is the problem of his highly combative spirit. One could suggest that the seventh-century iconoclasts could have been a remnant holding out from the idolatry of the majority of the church. But they too seemed to have little difference in attitude or practice in regards to the veneration of the elements of the Eucharist. Besides, there is the problem that they apparently assimilated readily into Islam, with which they shared their iconoclastic virtue. We have no record of much tension between them when Islam took over their area. But this just highlights how little we actually know. We certainly do not have enough records to illustrate a continuous, identifiable remnant throughout history, and if we could, it would simply be a different line of apostolic succession. The remnant model works much better as the seed or stump, latent and then growing again.

Model 7: Visible and Invisible Church

This lack of identification of any continuous remnant linking the people of God in the New Testament with the people of God in the Protestant Reformation is often addressed with the second model suggested by the same paragraph quote

\[\text{22\text{Ibid.}, 240.}\]


above by Ellen White in the *Great Controversy* chapter on the first centuries, that of the visible and invisible church.\(^{25}\) In a general sense this model is actually at least as old as Tyconius’ *Book of Rules*.\(^{26}\) Tyconius was a Donatist Scriptural exegete writing from North Africa in the latter part of the fourth century. His *Book of Rules* is a set of seven hermeneutical keys which help to unlock the text of Scripture. The first rule, “The Lord and His Body” alerts the interpreter that at times Scriptures refers to the Lord’s body meaning the actual body of Jesus Christ and sometimes to designate the church, the cosmic body of Christ.\(^{27}\) The last rule, “The Devil and his Body” alerts the interpreter that there is a literal Devil who also has a body of “believers” who are warring against the Lord’s Body.\(^{28}\) Tyconius argues that Scriptures presents the church as bipartite, being both the body of Christ and containing the body of the Devil.\(^{29}\) Throughout the *Book of Rules* Tyconius makes it clear that he perceives the church to contain the antichrist and so is looking within the church to find it.

Augustine, one of the authors that preserves this work of Tyconius, rejects this particular idea that the antichrist is within the church. In *The City of God* book 20, while exegeting the passage on the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13, Augustine rejects the notion that tares are ever really a part of the church.\(^{30}\) One could argue that Tyconius anticipated the great apostasy and identified it in his own day in his own church, for which he was excommunicated by the Donatists and rejected by the Catholics. Augustine rejects any interpretation that places the Devil or his followers within the church, which has God’s special blessing and protection, and the whole medieval church basically followed Augustine’s lead for a thousand years.\(^{31}\) During the Protestant Reformation this idea of the bipartite church is revived in terms of the church visible (antichrist) and the church invisible (the true people of God).\(^{32}\) It did not take many generations before this terminology was used less as the new Protestant groups became visible churches.\(^{33}\)

\(^{25}\)White, *The Great Controversy*, 43. “There have ever been two classes among those who profess to be followers of Christ.”


\(^{27}\)Ibid., 3-9.

\(^{28}\)Ibid., 115-117.

\(^{29}\)Ibid., 15-21.

\(^{30}\)Augustine, *Civ*. 20.9.

\(^{31}\)Ibid., 20.8.


\(^{33}\)Ibid. Note the shifts from Luther to Calvin and to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England.
Models six and seven, the remnant and the visible/invisible church, work well together, the latter stressing the individual character of each believer while the former stresses movement through time.

Model 8: Maxwell’s Toboggan and Tunnel

While in Seminary, I took a class on the history of the early church from C. Mervyn Maxwell. He had several sayings he would repeat from time to time to emphasize his points. Two of his sayings together make up a two-part model of the great apostasy. The first emphasizes the speed with which changes in Christian theology happened between the writing of the New Testament and other Christian writings which seem to have major theological differences: “The speed with which they tobogganed into apostasy takes ones breath away.” Maxwell was referring to those doctrines which seem to change nearly immediately, literally within a few years or decades. These include the Sabbath and, to use an Adventist phrase denoting theological anthropology, the state of the dead. The second phrase refers to the difficulty of seeing the changes in worship and theology of church, ministry, and Eucharist during the second through fifth centuries: “The church is like a train going through a long, dark tunnel. It goes in as one thing but comes out as another.”

These two are very helpful in conceptualizing the dynamics of the great apostasy. Some things changed so fast that the tradition of the church teaches that they never existed in Christian circles in any other way. Now, when I teach this section in my early church class I refer to three early deviations from Scripture in which the church over-accommodated to the surrounding Greco-Roman culture. In regards to the conception of the human person, the Hebrew Scriptures clearly indicate a unity. The Gospels portray Jesus as teaching a unity with “soul sleep,” though there are statements in Paul’s writings that can be twisted either direction, depending on the pre-conceptions of the reader. Howbeit the early church quickly accommodates to the super-culture and assumes soul survival after death (though at first, not innate immortality, just that God continues to sustain souls after the death of the body). Similarly with the Sabbath, the Hebrew Scriptures clearly teach a Sabbath from creation and law, and the gospels portray

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35 Matt 9:24; John 11:11.
36 For example, 1 Cor 7:34 and 1 Thess 5:23.
38 “The immortality of the soul in this context was understood as a gift of God and not as a quality of the soul (Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. 2.34.1-4).” See ibid., 621.
39 Seventh-day Adventists Believe, 281-285.
Jesus as Lord of the Sabbath, restoring it from abuses.\textsuperscript{40} Again, there are statements in Paul’s writings that can be twisted either direction, depending on the pre-conceptions of the reader.\textsuperscript{41} Nonetheless, in many places the early Christians distance themselves from Jews by denying a literal Sabbath as soon as it was no longer politic to hide under the Jewish umbrella\textsuperscript{42} (though there were places where both Sabbath and Sunday were kept, a few places clear through to modern times).\textsuperscript{43}

A similar cultural accommodation occurs with the leadership of women. The Hebrew Scriptures give more rights and value to women than do the contemporary surrounding societies,\textsuperscript{44} and the gospel portrays Jesus as giving leadership to women in His movement (John 4, 20). Once more, there are statements and mentioning of leadership in Paul’s writings that can be twisted either direction depending on the pre-conceptions of the reader.\textsuperscript{45} Even so, the early church very quickly abandons women in leadership roles of the church in favor of more culturally accepted views of women as inferior and having only domestic roles of leadership\textsuperscript{46} (though there have been a few exceptions throughout history, mostly connected with monastic leadership of women).\textsuperscript{47}

These quick deviations from Scripture were largely caused by accommodation to the super-culture, trying to fit in as an accepted religion. Obviously, many books have been and should yet be written on each of these topics,\textsuperscript{48} but these are

\textsuperscript{40}Ibid., 285, 286.
\textsuperscript{41}Gal 4:10, 11; Col 2:16, 17.
\textsuperscript{43}Charles E. Bradford, \textit{Sabbath Roots: The African Connection} (Barre, VT: Brown and Sons, 1999), 87-89.
\textsuperscript{45}1 Cor 11:7-15; 1 Tim 2:12.
\textsuperscript{47}Ibid., 58, 59.
The tunnel concept, relating primarily to matters of church practice is more difficult to illustrate. Among the most widely held hermeneutics of the early church is the concept of conserving the received beliefs and practices. So, as the inevitable changes took place, they always had to be imaged as the received tradition from Christ through his apostles and through the established church leadership. For instance, through time the church orders changed from the second-century *Didache* to the *Apostolic Traditions* and *Didascalia* of the late third- or fourth-century, to the *Apostolic Constitutions* and *Constitutions of the Twelve Apostles* of the late fourth- or fifth-centuries. Yet, they all claimed to be presenting the church order taught by Jesus to His disciples. Similarly, through time the conceptualization of the church ministry changed, both as presented in these church orders and in the treatises, letters, and homilies extant. The same is true of the conceptualization and practices surrounding the Eucharist. The historical evidence suggests that they change from place to place and over time, yet they are always presented as the tradition, not as innovation. This creates the illusion of a dark tunnel where the train always stays on the track, yet over time changes dramatically. Eventually, the distance between the snapshots of ministry and worship in Scripture and the reality of church practice became so obvious that either a change in practice or a change in authority structures was needed. The history of the Middles Ages can be seen as a series of reforms and restructuring of authority giving the church more and more authority and the Scriptures less and less. But most of the practices and conceptualizations seen in church history which showed such distance from Scriptures had their beginnings in these early centuries of the church, in Maxwell’s tunnel.

In the last few decades there has been an explosion of interest and studies in the early church. Many of the unstudied or understudied works of early church history are receiving major attention in the academy. One of the results of this vigorous attention is that the dark tunnel is getting lighter. More of the extant literature is being published in critical editions and modern translations making them more accessible and more familiar. There are still major lacunas in the trajectories of each idea and practice, but the information we do have is getting more attention and from less biased observers, and a clearer picture is coming to light. That which I struggled to picture about two decades ago in my master’s thesis in regards to the development of the priesthood is considered common knowledge now. New major studies on baptism, Eucharist, and ministry are now

showing up yearly, and the picture they are portraying emphasizes the differences and developments across geography and over time.49

Frances Young in her recent chapter “Ministerial Forms and Functions in the Church Communities of the Greek Fathers,” writes concerning the time of John Chrysostom (died A.D. 407), “Christian worship, it appears, was increasingly assimilating the religious features of a dying paganism.”50 My Lutheran friend Craig Satterlee, in his recent published dissertation on *Ambrose of Milan’s Method of Mystagogical Preaching* suggests that “the chief representatives of this genre of homily are the mystagogical catecheses of Ambrose of Milan, Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia.”51 All of these are from the same generation, a generation that felt a great need to guide the neophytes into knowledge of the Christian mysteries, the sacraments. Sacraments which, after years of slow transition, have been transformed into something quite different from what they began as nearly four-hundred years before. In my M.A. thesis, I followed the transition of Christian elder into Christian priest from the New Testament to this same generation in the person of Gregory of Nyssa.52 These three examples of studies through time which culminate in the late-fourth and early-fifth centuries illustrate a wealth of new insights and information on the early centuries which are lighting Maxwell’s dark tunnel.

*Who are the Good Guys? Who are the Bad Guys?*

So, to return to Tyconius’ body of Christ and body of the Devil, who are these people that brought about these changes that turned the church of God into antichrist? Sometimes the only way to know the story is to hear the story. History is, after all, a series of stories about people like you and me, who often times struggles to do what's right while making large blunders. Cyprian of Carthage is an example of this. As he faced massive upheaval and confusion in the North African church at the culmination of the Decian persecution, many of the confessors in prison for their faith were granting forgiveness to the lapsed (those who had denied Christianity in face of persecution), and some of the presbyters


were encouraging them in order to subvert Cyprian’s authority. To reestablish order he argued that only the bishops can forgive sins. Then, in the Valerian persecution a few years later, Cyprian gave up his life in order not to discredit his Lord, giving a martyr’s force to his words. Cyprian’s dependence on the tradition from Tertullian that an ordered penance must precede a church orchestrated bestowal of salvation through the Eucharist left him with few options other than narrowing access to this salvation by the church through the bishops only. Thus Cyprian becomes a part of the pathway toward sacramentalism, yet he stood up for Christ to his very death. Is he a good example or a bad example in church history?

How about Irenaeus, to use an example more likely to be viewed as positive to an Adventist? He sets the agenda for much of Scriptural interpretation and theology which is viewed nearly universally as positive. It was Irenaeus who was most influential in helping the early church to articulate that the four gospels we have in our Bibles today, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, are to be viewed exclusively as the best gospels from which to understand Jesus Christ. He helped to retrieve the gospel story from the Gnostic presentations that would turn the Christian message into a series of secret codes for use by the soul after death in its ascent through the heavens to the realm of light. It was Irenaeus who led the church in understanding Scriptures to reveal a Christ who, in His incarnation, was fully man and fully God at the same time, preparing the way for the fifth century understanding of the dual nature of Christ. However, it was also Irenaeus who did these things partially through his insistence on an apostolic succession of truth which became the safety net against heretical readings of Scriptures. Irenaeus set the stage for the Bible to take second place to the apostolic tradition. So, was Irenaeus a good guy or bad guy; was he a valiant speaker of Christ’s truth or a dangerous developer of a false system of truth? It is a very good thing that we are not the ultimate judges; but we must critically evaluate what we are to copy. As we stand on Irenaeus’ shoulders we must dodge his mistakes even while we respect and emulate his good qualities. The good guys are the bad guys.

All eight of these models presented have helpful aspects. The Irenaean model reminds us that there is a truth to be preserved, but that this truth must be critiqued continually by Scriptures rather than having Scriptures subservient to traditional truth. Bauer’s model reminds us of the complexity of the development of early Christianity. Luther’s model calls us to find salvation through the Christ

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53 Cyprian, Unit. eccl. 17, 18.
54 Pontius the Deacon, The Life and Passion of Cyprian.
55 Cyprian, Unit. eccl. 6-8.
56 Irenaeus, Adv. haer. 3.18, 19.
57 Ibid., 3.1, 2.
58 Ibid., 3.4.
of Scripture rather than through any church system. The principle that truth cannot mix with error reminds us to strive for purity of truth but must be balanced with the concept of present truth which recognizes that while truth does not mix with error, we humans conceive of truth progressively, as we are able. The remnant motif and the visible/invisible church models remind us that we must be in relation and submission to God, not just reliant on our church or fellow believers. Maxwell’s toboggan and tunnel remind us that Christ and Paul did warn of a falling away, and that when we see the difference and the distance between church and Scriptures in history, we must go with the Bible. All these models are helpful, but they miss two important components. For these we turn to the last model: The good guys are the bad guys.

Model 9. The Good Guys Are the Bad Guys/
The Bad Guys Are the Good Guys

This last model about the good guys and the bad guys being the same guys reminds us that we must stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, emulating what is good, appreciating their struggles, but not to follow in their missteps. It also confronts us with a reality that is not overt in any of the other models: that these good bad guys, or bad good guys, are like us. They are not “other.” The leaders in the early church were humans very similar to ourselves. When they struggled to do what is right and made mistakes, they are like us. When they let hunger for power cloud their Spirit-guided judgment, they are like us. When they withstood the temptation to give up under pressure and with deep prayer push for a solution to the seemingly insolvable, they are like us. When they assumed that their own will and the will of God are one, and ended up making major blunders because of it, they are like us. This stands as a warning that we too, who obviously view ourselves as the current good guys, must be humble as we interpret Scriptures, do theology, and practice our Christianity through living and worship, because time will tell what part we have gotten wrong, where we might also be the bad guys. But, it also means that when we look at each other and see so many faults and we feel that all those around us must be the bad guys, time will tell whether we might also be the good guys. This is what both Augustine and the Donatists rejected in the message of Tyconius: both good and evil are within us and we must discern how to go forward in spite of this. We do not have the luxury of leading God’s church without making mistakes.

The usefulness of this model in seminary instruction on the early church is the focus. Not just focusing on the theology and doctrine, as important as that is, nor only focusing on what went wrong, as important as that is, but also focusing on the stories of humans like us struggling to serve God in difficult circumstances. We must see both warnings and hope from the early church to apply to our own ministries.