DOCTRINAL DISSONANCE AND ADVENTIST LEADERSHIP: RECAPTURING SPIRITUAL WHOLENESS THROUGH CRISIS.
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"On a regular bases when I'm with pastors, I'll ask them if the message they are preaching isn't the   dominant reality of their own life. You can't believe how many will say that it isn't… "-Rob Bell[1]

The paper addresses an apparent disparity in the SDA church between corporate and personal belief systems. A survey conducted among the SDA ministers, educators, administrators, and laity indicated to a significant split between the personal beliefs and official positions of the church, creating a serious challenge.

The Survey
In 2000 a survey was conducted in Los Angeles area using a questionnaire, which was distributed among ministers, educators, church administrators, and laity. Since the variables of this research were very complex and difficult to measure, no attempt was made to produce any conclusive and quantifiable results, but instead patterns in data were looked for, and the researcher sought to offer a better understanding of the complexity. The overall pattern of this research was of qualitative nature

A questionnaire was designed for testing doctrinal consistency as well as to examine a range of organizational and leadership related issues. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The most extensive part contained the twenty-seven doctrines of the church as spelled out in the official SDA doctrinal statement "27 Fundamental Beliefs of the SDA Church." Each doctrinal belief formed a cluster of three variables, as the respondent was asked to react to three questions with regards of each of the twenty-seven doctrines. The questions dealt with the following issues:
• The perceived importance of the doctrine to the denomination;
• The perceived biblical validity of the doctrine;
• The respondent's personal belief in the doctrine.

The questionnaire was mailed to a total of 261 recipients in the greater Los Angeles area. Each respondent received exactly the same packet, which included a copy of an unmarked questionnaire, a postage paid self-addressed return envelope, and an introductory letter assuring a complete anonymity. The sample consisted of 157 pastors, thirty-five administrators, thirty-eight educators, and thirty one lay persons. Of the 261 questionnaires sent, 111 were returned, which constituted 42.5 percent of the total number.

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[1] Rob Bell "Velvet Elvis," Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan 2005 p. 119

Data Analyses

In the analysis of data from the first section of the questionnaire, all variables were computed and a summary evaluation made. Then the sets of variables with a significant percentage of non-acceptance responses were separated for further analysis. The threshold of significance was arbitrarily set at above 20 percent. In the categories of "biblical validity" and "personal belief" five doctrines reached the 20 percent threshold of non-acceptance: (1) Remnant and Its Mission; (2) The Gift of Prophecy; (3) Christian Behavior; (4) Christ's Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary; (5) The Millennium and the End of Sin.[2]

As these variables displayed significant variances, the analyses focused on these five doctrines. Out of these five, the most significant variations were observed in the remnant, the gift of prophecy, and the sanctuary doctrines, which traditionally have been at the core of Adventist doctrinal structure. Notably two other core doctrines of Sabbath and Second Advent did not show any significant variation in its acceptance.

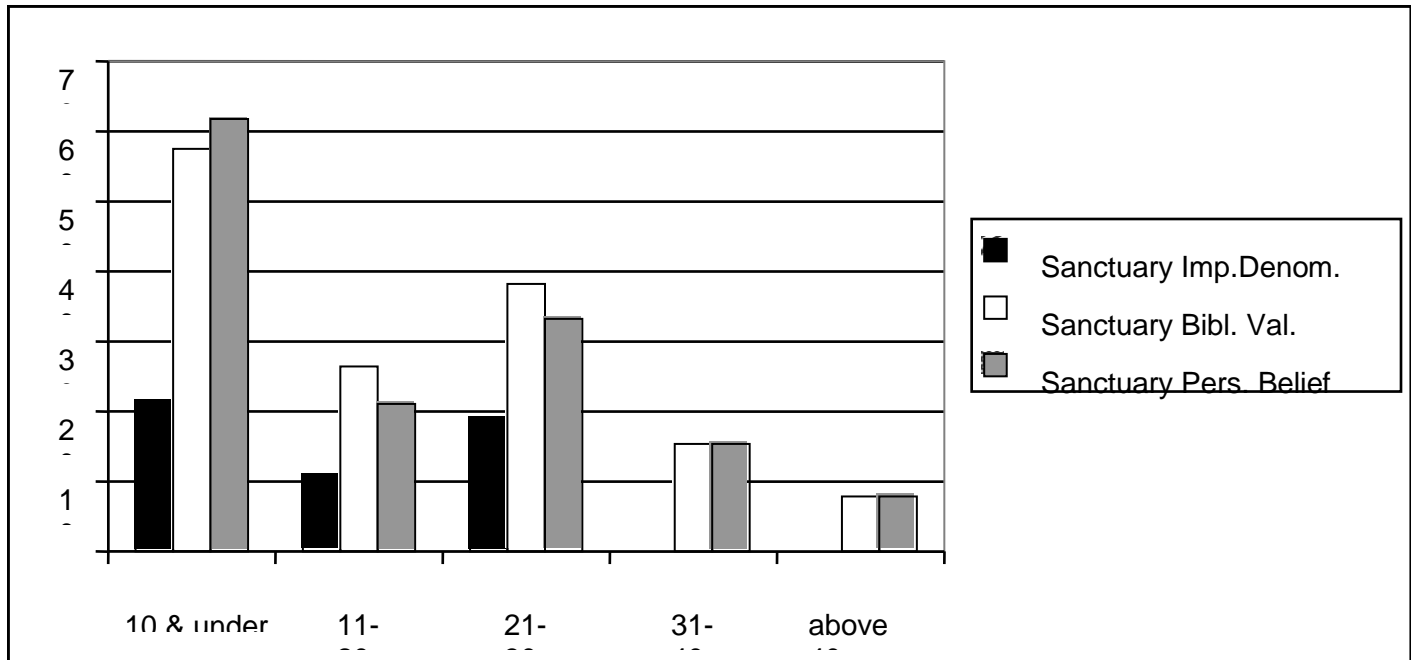The following table gives exact percentages of non-acceptance of the five major doctrines.

	Remnant	Spirit of Prophecy	Behavior	Sanctuary	Millennium
Importance for Denomination	8.9%	5.9%	14.7%	15.7%	13.7%
Biblical Validity	29.4%	31.4%	24.5%	41.2%	23.6%
Personal Belief	29.3%	36.3%	19.6%	41.1%	22.5%

Non-Acceptance Percentages

As indicated in the table the highest non-acceptance rate was observed with the Doctrine of Sanctuary which traditionally has been at the very heart of Adventism. The fact is significant indicating considerable doctrinal dissonance among Adventist pastors. It appears that Adventism is at a juncture with a significant disconnect between what the church preaches and what its members and even pastors believe. The research indicates that up to forty percent of Adventists may not believe in some of the central doctrines of the church. The implications of such a divide are huge for both, the organization and its membership. This doctrinal ambiguity at times may become unbearable, and lead the person to leave the ministry but if they chose to stay, they live under constant pressure of religious dualism. This may create a personal crisis for many of Adventist clergy.

The data was also cross-referenced with the demographical factors which indicated to certain patterns. Because of the scope of this paper, only a few of the results are presented here.

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[2] for percentages of non-acceptance of all 27 doctrines see the chart at the end of this handout.

Chart with y-axis from 1 to 7, x-axis categories: 10 & under, 11-20, 21-30, 31-40, above 40. Legend: Sanctuary Imp.Denom. (black), Sanctuary Bibl. Val. (white), Sanctuary Pers. Belief (gray).

The above chart demonstrates the various levels of non-acceptance of the Sanctuary doctrine among the clergy respondents grouped by their longevity in ministry. It is noteworthy that those with higher longevity in ministry (thirty-one years and up) did not even reach the threshold of significance set for this study (twenty percent), even though the over all non-acceptance of this doctrine was the highest. Yet the disparity between the younger pastors and those who are approaching their retirement or may in fact be retired is considerable. It is quite stunning that over 60 percent of ministers in the "under 10" years of longevity in ministry reported some degree of non-acceptance of this core doctrine of the church. Those who responded with non-acceptance were a clear majority in that group.   Similarly there is considerable variance between longevity in ministry groups with the Remnant doctrine.

The data was analyzed in a variety of ways, yielding a wealth of information and pointing to areas of possible future research. For instance, the analyses revealed an interesting phenomenon regarding the education and upbringing of the respondents. It seems that the more exposure to Adventism a person have had, the more likely he or she is to object to at least some of its doctrines. For instance, those respondents, who had had elementary education at an SDA school, were more likely to respond negatively to the five doctrines than those who had had their elementary education at a non-SDA school. Similarly and surprisingly, those respondents who had been brought up in an Adventist home were more inclined to respond negatively to doctrines than those who had joined the church later in their lives.

The samples of data presented above suffice to demonstrate the noteworthy doctrinal dissonance playing a significant role in Adventism. The toll it takes in the minds and souls of laity and especially clergy is hard to estimate, but one thing is clear – a split like that is unhealthy, both spiritually and emotionally. It also affects church mission and ministry. It creates an atmosphere of distrust, a sense of dishonesty as well as generally dark outlook of the

church. The latter is underscored by the data gleaned from the responses to another question in the survey. The participants were asked to respond to the following statement: *I see my denomination as capable of making major change.* This was obviously a very subjective question, which calls for a subjective answer. Still it is a good indicator of how the church's health is perceived by its pastors, teachers, administrators, and members. The responses to this statement were rather consistently negative with almost seventy-two percent of all respondents not believing in change being possible in the Seventh-day Adventist church. The only exception was the administrators, who expressed a much higher degree of confidence in the organization being capable to reform itself than other groups of respondents. This is a very troubling fact because the hope that the organization is able to effect positive change is the very thing that sustains its members in the midst of the challenges the church faces. If the hope goes, so does the motivation for these people to stay. Smuts van Rooyen in his Ph.D. Dissertation expresses a similar conclusion that one of the reasons for clergy discontinuance in the SDA Church is that they see the church and its leadership as "invariant, incapable of making change over time. The status quo would remain stable for years to come… This pattern… would explain their emotional distress, their demotivation to continue in Adventist ministry, and their subsequent departure from the Seventh-day Adventist church as their spiritual home."[3]

If the data from the research presented above should be indicative to a larger Adventist population not just in the Southern California, then the fact that up to forty percent of Adventists may not believe in some of the central doctrines of the church is truly troubling. The implications of such a divide are significant for both, the organization and its membership. The reality is that regardless of applicability of the research data one can find a lot of tension in the SDA membership and clergy in how they perceive the denomination's doctrines.

The tension is hardest for SDA pastors and teachers, they end up having to choose whether to stay true to their personal beliefs or to remain loyal to the denomination. This doctrinal ambiguity may become unbearable and encourage pastors to leave ministry. Even if they do not quit they live under constant pressure of religious dualism. This reality has created a personal crisis for many of Adventist clergy.   The question is, how can they cope with the crises, how can the problem be resolved, which leads us to seeking of new paradigms as we attempt to re-envision Adventism.

Stages of Spiritual Life

Jon Paulien proposes a multi-stage model which depicts the spiritual development of pastors and church leaders. According to this model there are six stages in a person's spiritual life. However, only few reach the higher stages.   I would like to borrow this model to suggest a new paradigm for Adventist ministry.[4]

The first three stages are typical to most ministers and church leaders, through which they discover God and learn discipleship and in the third reach a certain level of success in their ministry. However, the serenity of success stage in the minister's life may soon be disrupted by a personal crisis. Paulien calls it "the dark night of the soul." The dark night changes everything,

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[3] Van Rooyen, Jan Smuts "Discontinuance from the Ministry by Seventh-day Adventist Ministers: A Qualitative Study." Andrews University, a Ph.D. Dissertation, 1996, p. 180

[4] used with permission, some of the concepts used are borrowed from Janet Hagberg.

as the minister begins to doubt everything in his or her life and ministry: God's presence, faith, the call to ministry, the minister's fitness for service and perhaps even the very existence of God. A painful internal turmoil results.

At this point the minister has several choices to choose from. He can choose to blame everything on the Church and God and decide to abandon both. He can also choose to return to the success stage as if nothing had happened. However, there will be a feeling of something essential missing from his or her life and ministry. The success will not be satisfying but will feel shallow and fake. There will be a strong sense that the minister had missed God's call to something far greater, something of a much higher order. But there is yet another choice, with the help of a spiritual mentor who has been through a similar night of the soul, the minister may choose to journey through the dark night and allow God to transform his heart and lead him to a whole new level of spirituality. The experience of the dark night of the soul will lead the minister to re-discover God for real. This may mean letting go of shallow, narrow and misleading notions of God and admitting that God is infinitely great. The dark night of the soul may be the only way of discovery of being personally loved and accepted by God regardless of personal failures, which will lead the pastor to surrender specific areas of his or her life and ministry to God. In this painful process, the minister will search and discover the meaning and purpose that God has for his life and ministry. Eventually, the success will come back again, but this time it will be different. The success will not be a result of human effort or skills, or knowledge. Instead, it will be brought about by God's power and presence in ministry. The work of the minister will no longer be done for the church or for self, but for God.

Historical Considerations

There are many examples from the SDA history, that demonstrate that the "dark night of the soul" can be experienced not only individually but also corporately. The Great Disappointment experienced by the early Advent believers, for instance, meant a massive ecclesiastical crisis on an unprecedented scale. We have to remember that the majority of Millerites deserted the movement or gave up on Christianity and God altogether. Yet there were those who tried to find some sense in this extremely traumatic experience, they instinctively looked for meaning in the chaos that ensued. In the end they did allow God to guide them through this extremely painful trauma and walk them through the dark valley experience and out into the sunlight again. This group, our early pioneers, were modeling something very profound for us today as we look at the problems and crises Adventism faces today – they are telling us how to turn a great disappointment into even greater beginning and a spiritual blessing, how to allow God to use the crisis as a vehicle of transformation.

The 1888 Minneapolis Conference provides another example of how out of an incredibly messy and traumatic ecclesiastical crisis characterized by strife, internal discord and doctrinal bickering, God was able to bring transformation and move the young church towards a more mature spirituality and a more accurate view of God and his work of salvation.

Similarly, in the middle of the last century the painful reality of being rejected by the Evangelical community, prompted the Adventists to dialogue with other Christians and re-examine our beliefs and positions which in turn lead to the publication of "Questions on

Doctrine." Once again, through the crisis God was able to take the church to a higher level of maturity.

Perhaps we, the Adventists of the 21st century facing our own challenges and crises, can learn something from these painful experiences from our past. Perhaps we can learn not to focus so much on the crisis itself, but instead allow God to do the work of transformation among us. Perhaps we also can acknowledge that God's mysterious work of transformation is maybe our greatest need. It is a greater need than streamlining the organizational chart, it is greater than acquiring new and more effective leadership styles, greater than finding new methods for our work. It is a greater need even than fine-tuning of our minor doctrinal differences after which we so thirst. It is a need for seeing God for who he really is, getting our basic theology right. It is a need for genuine spirituality born out of experiencing God in the midst of the worst of our crisis.

Focus on Personal Spirituality

I am convinced that such transformation, a very personal and intimate knowledge of God, that comes from encounters with him is the only thing that can revive this, or any other church.

To illustrate how this affects our spirituality I would like to use the following graph.[5]

Spiritual health grid
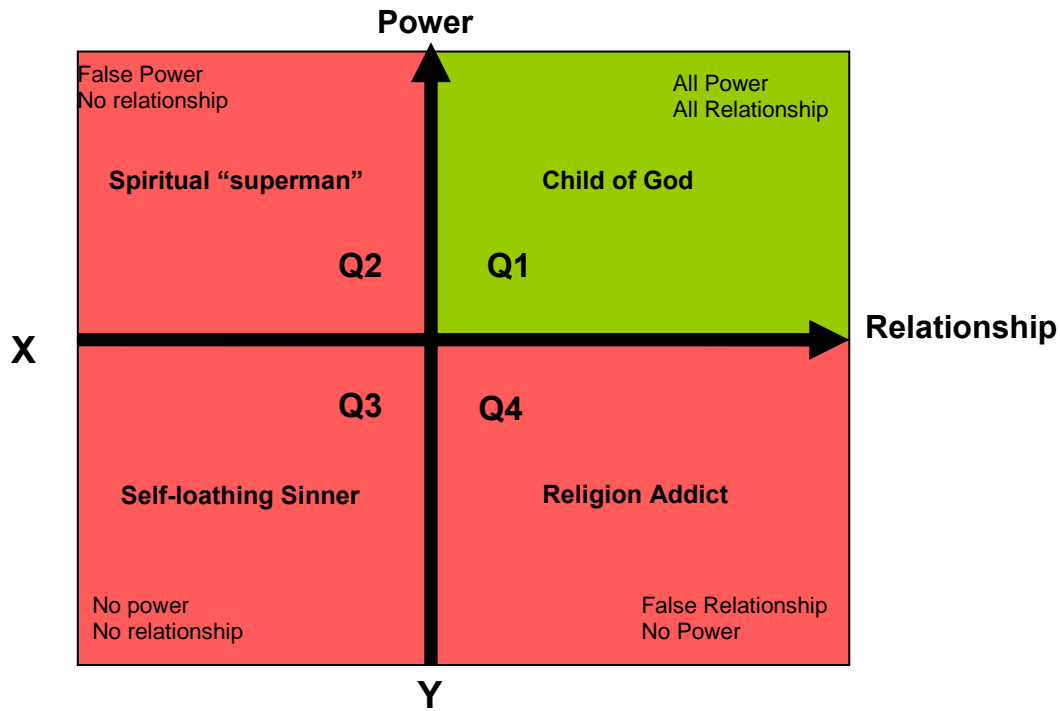
The chart is helpful to visualize how we relate to God. The two axes represent the two polarities, the capacity for relationship and the personal power. The relationship in this context, of course, is not a relationship of equals as God is indefinitely greater than humans. Yet he seeks this

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[5] Adopted from Donald R. Hands and Wayne L. Fehr "Spiritual Wholeness for Clergy" The Alban Institute, New York 1993

relationship with us, he desires us, he wants to be close to us. And the paradox of this divine human relationship is that "the more closely related the human creature is to God (always involving utter dependence and unqualified "surrender"), the more perfectly individuated and fulfilled the person is (the more personal "power" he or she experiences).[6]
Each of the four quadrants then represent a certain spiritual condition that we can position ourselves in.

I have come to believe from my own experience in ministry that the lack of spirituality, the lack of a personal intimate knowledge of God on the part of ministers is a major cause of most ecclesiastical failures to achieve its goals and fulfill its purpose. We are so focused on good programs, right methodologies, improving the doctrine at the expense of true spirituality. I believe that in order to re-envision Adventism and to make it more effective, more able to fulfill it's original vision and mission, it would take more than just fixing the system, more than just finding the right methods, it would take much more than using the right "stuff" – it would take nothing less than a total and complete spiritual transformation by the grace of God, and he can do that through the life crises that we find ourselves in.

We need to personally rediscover the Person we speak about. We need to enter into a deeply personal love relationship with our God leading to intimacy unparalleled in any other human experience. "The discovery that one is loved by God must eventually take priority over all other ways of relating to God."[7]

Recommendations

1. Radically supplement our ministerial training curriculum, including courses that intentionally encourage spiritual formation and assist students in developing genuine intimacy with God.
2. Setting up mentorship programs in ministry, where pastors would have access to a safe and qualified spiritual mentor to guide him/her through their dark nights of the soul toward spiritual transformation and renewal.
3. Develop anonymous recovery programs for ministers.
4. Provide ongoing training programs.
5. Safe forums for pastors and scholars where open discussion can take place on doctrinal and other issues.

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[6] Hands and Fehr p. 51
[7] ibid p. 55