

# THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH FATHERS' LEGACY IN EASTERN ORTHODOX AND ADVENTIST HERMENEUTICS

BOHDAN KOVAL

Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, PHILIPPINES

## Abstract

This article explores the place and role of the Church Fathers' legacy in the hermeneutical frameworks of Eastern Orthodox and Adventist theology through claims of both denominations to be the true heirs of the Early Christian faith. The Eastern Orthodox Church has always declared a deep reverence for the Church Fathers, considering their writings integral to the church tradition. According to Orthodox opinion, the Fathers are not merely historical figures but living witnesses to the apostolic doctrine, whose interpretations and teachings should be regarded as authoritative in the process of biblical exegesis and theological reflection. In contrast, the Adventist movement, with its emphasis on *Sola Scriptura* and the primacy of the Bible, has traditionally viewed the writings of the Church Fathers with a degree of skepticism, often perceiving them as potential sources of doctrinal deviation from biblical teaching. Indeed, the valuable insights and historical perspectives that the Fathers can offer should be thoroughly studied, particularly for understanding the development of Christian theology and practice in the formative centuries of the church. This presentation aims to investigate the nuanced and evolving perspectives of both Eastern Orthodox and Adventist communities towards Patristic studies, highlighting the potential for dialogue on the issue and mutual understanding between these two traditions. Such a study contributes

to the ongoing discussion on the role of tradition, authority, and interpretation in Christian theology and biblical hermeneutics.

*Keywords:* Church Fathers, Patristic studies, hermeneutical premises, authority of tradition, Adventist hermeneutics, Eastern Orthodox hermeneutics, apostolic doctrine

## 1. Introduction

Christianity encompasses a vast array of denominations worldwide, each asserting its unique claim to represent the One and True Church of Christ. Each denomination endeavors to establish its succession with the apostolic church to validate its doctrines and practices.<sup>1</sup> The Twelve were regarded as possessing the highest doctrinal authority for the correct understanding and living out of the Christian ideal as the chosen witnesses of Jesus, following Him during His ministry, absorbing His teachings, and emulating His life to spread His message in many nations (cf. 1 John 1:1–3). The belief that the True Church should trace its origin back to the apostolic church is not just a claim to historical lineage but also an assertion of authenticity and doctrinal purity.<sup>2</sup>

When it comes to the certain ways in which this succession can be defined, different denominations suggest varying approaches according to their hermeneutical frameworks. The Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglican churches support a doctrine emphasizing an unbroken line of bishop ordination from the apostles and adherence to “apostolic Tradition,”<sup>3</sup> which includes teachings and liturgical practices presumably directly passed down from early Christians.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, most Protestant churches prioritize biblical doctrine over hierarchical succession and tradition, claiming that their theology aligns with the teachings of the apostles in the NT.<sup>5</sup> Some denominations link their connection to the apostles through

<sup>1</sup> Edward McCrady, *Apostolic Succession and the Problem of Unity* (Sewanee, TN: University Press, 1905), 2–7.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Whitehead, *One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic: The Early Church Was the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 28–33.

<sup>3</sup> David W. T. Brattston, *Apostolic Succession: An Experiment that Failed* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publication, 2020), 11–13.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Wood, “Continuity and Development in Roman Catholic Ecclesiology,” *Ecclesiology* 7.2 (2011): 147–72.

<sup>5</sup> Protestants generally emphasize the importance of individual interpretation of Scripture, allowing for greater theological diversity and independent thought. Therefore,

mission work, viewing evangelism as a continuation of the Great Commission (cf. Matt 28:19–20).<sup>6</sup> The validity of these approaches remains a topic of scholarly and theological debate.

One of the key issues in claiming succession within the Christian tradition is the relation to the immediate post-biblical legacy of the Early Church, which historically links apostolic Christianity to subsequent theological developments.<sup>7</sup> The attitude of representatives of traditional denominations and Protestants toward this heritage also differs when it comes to its application in preaching, writing, and doctrinal defence. The difference is mainly caused by their respective hermeneutical approaches. Denominations ask numerous questions about whether the diverse Patristic legacy should be embraced indiscriminately as the relevant link to apostolic teaching, whether and from when “apostolic teaching” begins to diverge into “perversion of pure doctrine,” and whether the Fathers’ biblical interpretations are reliable, given the historical closeness of these ancient sources to apostolic times.

To explore this difference and its implications, this article considers Eastern Orthodox (further simply Orthodox) hermeneutics to represent the traditional approach and Seventh-Day Adventist (further Adventist) hermeneutics as an example of the Protestant restorationist approach. The article will follow the methodological outline of a comparative study, aiming to analyze the significance of apostolic lineage and the role of Church Fathers in the hermeneutics of the two denoted Christian denominations and ultimately seeking common ground for interdenominational dialogue based on shared historical roots. Such a comparison has never been previously undertaken. Understanding both perspectives may be crucial for fostering potential dialogue between these two distinct branches of Christianity, which,

what set of “core biblical doctrines” are seen as remaining unchanged from apostolic times may vary from denomination to denomination. This emphasis on individual interpretation inevitably leads to less attention to hierarchical structure and a greater focus on personal faith and experience. See William Thompson-Uberuaga, “Continuity Amidst Disruption: The Spirit and Apostolic Succession at the Reformation,” *Horizons* 29.2 (2002): 290–98.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., consider the Mennonite view; see Hans Kasdorf, “Teaching the Great Commission,” in *Called to Teach: A Symposium by the Faculty of the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary*, ed. David Ewert, Perspectives on Mennonite Life and Thought 3 (Fresno, CA: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1980), 134–37.

<sup>7</sup> John Chryssavgis, “The Significance of the Church Fathers,” *Expository Times* 99.8 (1988): 230–33.

despite their different theological frameworks, yet share a common historical heritage.

## 2. The Legacy of the Church Fathers: Approaches to Reception

Before coming to a comparison, we should first set the spectrum of opinions regarding the place of Church Fathers in denominational hermeneutics. By definition, the generic term “Church Fathers” refers to early Christian theologians whose writings and teachings significantly shaped Christian doctrine and ecclesiastical structure during the epoch, spanning from the late 1st to the mid-8th centuries CE.<sup>8</sup> This era is roughly divided by scholars into three phases: the Ante-Nicene Period (c. 100–325), Nicene Period (c. 325–451), and Post-Nicene Period (c. 451–800), each marked by key figures and theological developments.<sup>9</sup> The main criterion that helps to set the spectrum is defined by the question: what part of this legacy is a denomination ready to accept as authoritative in the matters of doctrine and biblical interpretation? Should a denomination adhere solely to the Apostolic heritage, as Restorationist Protestants do? Up to the Nicene tradition, like the Oriental Orthodox churches do? Or embrace the entire Patristic legacy along with later developments, as Catholics and Eastern Orthodox do? Here lies the critical distinction that shapes hermeneutical presuppositions.

Traditional churches, namely, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, take one extreme side of the spectrum of options, trying to embrace all the perspectives in Patristic writings and placing a strong emphasis on the concept of *Consensus Patrum*. This concept refers to the idea that the collective teachings of the Church Fathers represent a unified and authoritative interpretation of Christian doctrine.<sup>10</sup> In reality, the writings of the Fathers are vast and complex, often containing contradictory statements and varying nuances that can be mistaken as substantial disagreements.<sup>11</sup> However, traditional churches argue that any discovered disagreements among the Fathers

<sup>8</sup> Bryan M. Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers: An Evangelical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 15–16.

<sup>9</sup> See the discussion regarding the periodization of Eastern and Western Patristics in Ion M. Croitoru, “Patristic and Neo-Patristic Theology? Periods of Patrology in the Church Life,” *Icoana Credintei* 5.10 (2019): 80–89.

<sup>10</sup> Yulia Rozumna and Mina Soliman, “The *Consensus Patrum*: What Is It?,” <https://orthodoxyindialogue.com/2018/01/06/the-consensus-patrum-what-is-it-by-yulia-rozumna-and-mina-soliman/>.

<sup>11</sup> Sarkis Sanayants, “Consensus Patrum in Russian Theology. Part 1: Church Fathers,

should be regarded as negligible, as they believe the Holy Spirit guided these writers to prevent substantial errors in faith matters. The collective agreement carries weight in establishing true doctrine, and this isn't simply a majority vote but a search for a unified voice across geographical and cultural boundaries within the early Church.<sup>12</sup> Defenders of the *Consensus Patrum* approach typically avoid creating a definitive list of Fathers, instead referencing the most prominent and orthodox authors up to the East-West Schism of 1054. The selection of Fathers often varies based on the specific doctrine discussed and the denominational perspective of those invoking the consensus.

Protestant denominations, guided by the *Sola Scriptura* principle, occupy a middle ground in the spectrum. They advocate the significance of the Patristic legacy, valuing the historical context it provides for understanding Christian doctrine.<sup>13</sup> The emergence of Protestantism itself stemmed from a critical examination of tradition during the Reformation. Prominent magisterial reformers, such as Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–1564), recognized the value of the “classical” Patristic legacy of the 1st–8th centuries but often critiqued later developments that they viewed as corruptions of original Christianity. For instance, Luther advocated a selective reading of the Church Fathers, acknowledging Augustine’s decisive impact on his teaching of righteousness by faith.<sup>14</sup> Calvin incorporated Patristic thought to articulate his views on predestination and covenant theology within a Reformed framework.<sup>15</sup> Anglican theologian Richard Hooker (1554–1600) emphasized the importance of the first four ecumenical coun-

the Tradition of the Church and Consensus Patrum,” *Voprosy bogosloviya* 2.2 (2019): 28–31.

<sup>12</sup> George Maximov, “The Principle of Consensus Patrum and Modern Attacks Against It,” <https://orthochristian.com/106134.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Harding Meyer, “Apostolic Continuity, Apostolic Succession and Ministry from a Reformation Perspective,” *Louvain Studies* 21.2 (1996): 169–82.

<sup>14</sup> Manfred Schulze, “Martin Luther and the Church Fathers,” in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, ed. Irena Backus (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 613.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin’s reading of the Fathers involves two key elements: first, that the Fathers should be judged in the light of Scripture, and second, that his use of the Fathers was primarily polemical. See Jason R. Radcliff, “Thomas F. Torrance and the Church Fathers: A Reformed, Evangelical, and Ecumenical Reconstruction of the Patristic Tradition” (PhD diss., The University of Edinburgh, School of Divinity, Edinburgh, 2013), 29–32.

cils for governance and doctrine, positing that the Anglican Church represented a true return to Patristic consensus.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, John Wesley (1703–1791), the founder of Methodism, frequently referenced the Church Fathers in his sermons and writings, advocating for a type of faith that could be both experiential and simultaneously rooted in historical Christianity.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the voice of the Church Fathers anyway remained influential in shaping magisterial Protestant understandings of authority and interpretation of Scripture.

At the opposite extreme of the spectrum are various Restorationist movements within Protestantism that aim to completely reject later developments in favor of a return to 1st-century apostolic Christianity. These ideas trace back to radical Reformation theologies, such as those of the Anabaptists.<sup>18</sup> Restorationists viewed Church Fathers as contributors to doctrinal confusion rather than authoritative figures. By denying the Patristic legacy, they sought to bypass centuries of theological development and return directly to the teachings of Christ and his apostles. They believed that after the death of the last apostle, John, deviations from biblical truth began, later fueled by ideological interactions with paganism, philosophical influences, and ecclesiastical power struggles.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, Restorationists celebrated the motto “Bible, and Bible only,” highlighting the importance of direct access to the Scripture for every believer and encouraging their personal interpretation free from any historical-theological frameworks.<sup>20</sup>

To investigate the contrast in the hermeneutical reception of the Church Fathers' legacy from both extremes of the spectrum, this study compares two denominations as exemplary: Orthodoxy and Adventism. Orthodoxy emphasizes traditionalism by taking Patristic writings as essential for un-

<sup>16</sup> See John K. Luoma, “Who Owns the Fathers? Hooker and Cartwright on the Authority of the Primitive Church,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 8.3 (1977): 45–59.

<sup>17</sup> Ted A. Campbell, “Wesley’s Use of the Church Fathers,” *The Asbury Journal* 51.1 (1995): 57–70.

<sup>18</sup> Richard T. Hughes, “How Can We Rethink the Restoration Vision?,” *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 25 (2005): 18–35.

<sup>19</sup> See Franklin H. Littell, “The Power of the Restoration Vision,” in *The Primitive Church in the Modern World*, ed. Richard T. Hughes (Urbana, OH: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 49–73.

<sup>20</sup> Rick Cherok, “Lessons from Restoration Movement History,” <https://renew.org/restoration-movement-history>.

derstanding Scripture and historically relevant in shaping doctrinal formulations and conciliar resolutions.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, Adventism, embodying the Restorationist spirit, prioritizes direct biblical mandates and questions the unconditional acceptance of the early church heritage, which it is believed can lead astray toward unbiblical doctrines and practices.<sup>22</sup> The following sections examine these contrasting viewpoints individually and then explore potential commonalities for interdenominational dialogue.

### 3. Church Fathers in Orthodox Theology

Orthodox theology introduces the hermeneutical framework, where the interaction between Scripture and Tradition (understood as the authority of the Church Fathers' writings, liturgical texts, canons, and the lived experience of the faith community throughout history)<sup>23</sup> is fundamental to understanding faith, worship, and ecclesiastical authority. Within this framework, Scripture is not viewed as self-sufficient for discernment but is always interpreted within the context of Tradition.<sup>24</sup> The aspect of the historical experience of the community is crucial, since, for Orthodox believers, Tradition is a living, dynamic process guided by the Holy Spirit, not merely a collection of obsolete inspirational and canonical writings. Therefore, the Church is considered a sacramental community that provides the context for interpreting Scripture and the writings of the Church Fathers. This understanding emphasizes that interpretation must be grounded in the Church's communal life, where Scripture is read in conjunction with the ever-relevant ancient teachings of the Church Fathers and the ongoing life of the faithful.<sup>25</sup>

Orthodox hermeneutics asserts that the Holy Spirit, who once inspired the Scriptures, guides the Church in preserving and interpreting Tradition

<sup>21</sup> See Andrew Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 13–15.

<sup>22</sup> Adventist hermeneutics tend to emphasize the need to interpret the Bible independently of later theological developments; the voices stating the need for scholarly attention to the history of the reception of scriptural texts are very weak; see Biblical Research Institute, "Another Look at Adventist Hermeneutics," <https://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/another-look-at-adventist-hermeneutics/>.

<sup>23</sup> Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 195–96.

<sup>24</sup> Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, "Scripture and Tradition in the Church," in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, ed. Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 21–22.

<sup>25</sup> Vladimir Lossky, "Tradition and Traditions," in *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Daniel B. Clendenin (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 134–37.

that embraces Scripture as one of its written manifestations.<sup>26</sup> The tendency of every individual believer and the Church as the entire body toward maturity in spiritual experience is seen as a means of deepening one's understanding of the faith. This belief presents true interpretation not solely as an intellectual exercise but as a spiritual discernment that requires prayerful engagement with Scripture.<sup>27</sup> Again, Orthodox insist not on an individual but on an ecclesiastical reading of Scripture, meaning that interpretation occurs within the context of the Church's liturgical and sacramental practice. This principle highlights that the Scripture reveals its full meaning when presented in worship before the community of believers rather than in isolated scholarly study.<sup>28</sup>

These features of the hermeneutical framework collectively shared by Orthodox theologians aim to ensure that any interpretations remain faithful to the core tenets of the faith as articulated in the early centuries by the Church Fathers. In this sense, the Church Fathers hold a revered place of authoritative voices that are crucial in articulating and defending essential doctrines. Their writings, which include commentaries on Scripture, theological treatises, and homilies, are often seen as a means of accessing the "collective wisdom" of the Church, collected through centuries.<sup>29</sup> Orthodox recognize the dignity of "Fathers" in various authors across Eastern (such as Athanasius the Great and Cyril of Alexandria), Western (such as Augustine and Pope Gregory the Great), and Oriental (such as Ephraim the Syrian and Isaac the Syrian) traditions. Their writings are viewed not as contradictory but as offering diverse perspectives on the faith, and here the *Consensus*

<sup>26</sup> "The Spirit of Truth is he who opens the historical road to the permanent presence of Christ in history, by means of the church community.... The Bible is the crystallized form of his action, and Tradition is the life of those who are living in historical continuity of the charismata of the Paraclete" (Dumitru Stăniloae, *Theology and the Church*, trans. Robert Barringer [Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980], 49–50).

<sup>27</sup> On the Orthodox practice of *Lectio Divina*, see John Breck, *Scripture in Tradition: The Bible and Its Interpretation in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 67–71.

<sup>28</sup> "The Church does not give us Holy Scripture as a book to study and interpret on our own" (Mary Ford, "Reflections on Reading the Scriptures as an Orthodox Christian," *Religions* 8.7 [2017]: 122).

<sup>29</sup> Breck, *Scripture in Tradition*, 71.

*Patrum* concept plays the vital role.<sup>30</sup> The significance of the Fathers' legacy in Orthodox hermeneutics can be explained through several key aspects.

First, Church Fathers are viewed as successors to the apostles, maintaining an unbroken line of teaching that connects contemporary believers with the early Christian community. This apostolic continuity reinforces the legitimacy of their theological insights and interpretations.<sup>31</sup>

Second, Church Fathers were instrumental in defining Orthodox identity against heretical movements. For instance, Athanasius's defense of Nicene Christology against Arianism established foundational beliefs about Christ's divinity. The contributions of Gregory of Nyssa and Basil the Great in the formulation of the Trinity and emphasizing the co-equal and co-eternal relationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit further solidified the Nicene Creed's assertions, providing a robust framework that safeguarded the church against the rising tide of Arian influence. The work of these and many other Church Fathers was not just an intellectual exercise; they once addressed the existential crises of their time, but their contribution is considered definitive to manifest and defend the distinct Orthodox theological identity throughout history.<sup>32</sup>

Third, Church Fathers provided rich spiritual resources for practicing the Orthodox faith. Their works encompassed not only doctrinal teachings but also spiritual guidance on prayer, asceticism, and moral living. Figures like John Chrysostom and Basil the Great offered profound insights into Christian ethics and pastoral care. Contemporary Orthodox theologians often refer to the Church Fathers' legacy for demonstrating how biblical principles should be integrated into the life of the Church, thereby bridging the gap between knowledge of doctrine and spiritual practice.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Generally, Orthodox tradition recognizes the Church Fathers as continuing through influential writers up to the present. It holds that agreement on every detail and infallibility are not prerequisites for being considered among the Church Fathers; instead, the doctrine is shaped by the consensus of inspired writers. See Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* (Platina, CA: Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1984), 37.

<sup>31</sup> Boris Bobrinskoy, "The Continuity of the Church and Orthodoxy," *The Ecumenical Review* 16.5 (1964): 512–29. See also Tobias Nicklas, "The Church Fathers Can Guide but Not Replace One's Own Understanding: An Orthodox Perspective," in *The Promise of Ecumenical Interpretation: Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox*, eds. Tobias Nicklas, Christos Karakolis, and Stefan Alkier (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2024), 53–68.

<sup>32</sup> Breck, *Scripture in Tradition*, 161–94.

<sup>33</sup> See Augustine Casiday, "Church Fathers and the Shaping of Orthodox Theology," in Cunningham and Theokritoff, *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 167–87.

Fourth and last, the teachings of the Church Fathers are deeply integrated into Orthodox liturgy. The lectionary cycle, which organizes Scripture readings throughout the liturgical year, reflects how Orthodox Christians engage with biblical texts and their historical interpretations. Hymns, prayers, and other liturgical elements often draw upon Patristic writings, further intertwining Scripture with tradition and ensuring that the Fathers' theological insights remain central to worship. In this sense, the Church Fathers are perceived by Orthodox as witnesses to the faith speaking through generations.<sup>34</sup>

In light of all these points, contemporary Orthodox theologians often revisit texts of the Fathers, drawing parallels between the challenges faced by the early Church and those encountered today. They attempt to show that issues such as the relationship between faith and reason, the role of tradition in a rapidly changing world, and the ethical implications of modernity find their echoes in the writings of these ancient thinkers. A trend that is still popular in contemporary Orthodox theology is the Neo-Patristic movement, originated by Georges Florovsky (1893–1979) in the 1930s. He argued that modern Orthodox theology had overly emphasized scholasticism and rationalism, losing connection with the spiritual insights of early Christianity. Florovsky urged a return *ad fontes*, or, in his interpretation, to the Patristic Tradition to revitalize Orthodox theology. His followers, including Vladimir Lossky (1903–1958), John Meyendorff (1926–1992), and Dumitru Stăniloae (1903–1993), aimed to recover the Fathers' comprehensive vision, characterized by a holistic approach integrating Scripture, Tradition, and personal experience. This movement profoundly impacted contemporary Orthodox hermeneutics, reshaping how the mentioned sources of faith are interpreted and integrated into modern theological discourse.<sup>35</sup>

The Neo-Patristic movement advocates for what they understand as a "Patristic" approach to the Scripture that is designed to transcend widely accepted "modern Western" exegetical analysis with its attention to linguistic, historical, and cultural features of the text. This approach is characterized instead by a spiritual and Christocentric reading, where Christ is seen as the key to understanding the entire biblical narrative. Neo-Patristic authors argue that a multi-layered interpretation rooted in church tradition—

<sup>34</sup> Alexander Golitzin, "Liturgy and Mysticism: The Experience of God in Eastern Orthodox Christianity," *Pro Ecclesia* 8.2 (1999): 159–86.

<sup>35</sup> Ciprian I. Toroczka, "The Orthodox Neo-Patristic Movement as Renewal of Contemporary Orthodox Theology: An Overview," *Review of Ecumenical Studies Sibiu* 7.1 (2015): 94–115.

accepting both literal and allegorical meanings—facilitates deeper engagement with Scripture and inspires believers to pursue applicable spiritual truths.<sup>36</sup> This feature gives Neo-Patristic literature a unique existentialist flair. Such an approach differs not from scholarly exegesis only but also from Protestant *Theologia Crucis*, since the Scripture is still viewed through the lens of Patristic authority and legacy. Moreover, it was the Neo-Patristic movement that placed so much stress on the dynamic understanding of tradition within Orthodoxy, showing how the Fathers themselves developed the “teaching of apostles” they received. This perspective helps contemporary Orthodox theologians to view themselves as part of a continuum tasked with articulating the faith in ways that are faithful to the past yet relevant to the present. The movement has also emphasized the experiential dimension of theology, highlighting its connection to prayer, liturgy, and personal transformation. In such a way, the Neo-Patristic hermeneutic approach necessarily embraced the mystical and existential dimensions of the Christian faith, making Orthodox theology applicable to personal spiritual life. Eventually, the movement’s stress on the legacy of the Fathers as a common Christian heritage fostered a more open and engaged Orthodox approach to ecumenical dialogue. By focusing on the shared heritage of the early Church, Orthodox theologians are better equipped to articulate their faith in a way that they consider both true to Orthodoxy and respectful enough of other Christian traditions.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, it is evident that the Orthodox hermeneutical approach is characterized by a profound commitment to the legacy of the Church Fathers as vital and still relevant sources of spiritual wisdom. Orthodox theologians uphold this legacy to ensure continuity while addressing contemporary challenges with its help. Their efforts to reinterpret Patristic thought for modern contexts encourage interconfessional dialogue and simultaneously foster spiritual renewal for the clergy and laypeople in their midst.

#### 4. Church Fathers in Adventist Theology

Adventist hermeneutics emerged from the restorationist American denominational spirit of the 19th century, with its particular stress on restoring the

<sup>36</sup> See Georges Florovsky, “The Ethos of the Orthodox Church,” *The Ecumenical Review* 12.2 (1960): 183–98.

<sup>37</sup> See Viorel Coman, “Revisiting the Agenda of the Orthodox Neo-Patristic Movement,” *The Downside Review* 136.2 (2018): 99–117.

biblical teachings and practices of the NT church.<sup>38</sup> In a typical Protestant manner, Adventist hermeneutics claims *Sola Scriptura* to be its foundational principle. Ultimately, it implies that Scripture alone is the ultimate authority for faith and practice. This principle emphasizes that all teachings and doctrines must be derived from the Bible, rejecting any authority that might supersede it.<sup>39</sup>

In their interpretation of Scripture, Adventists emphasize the unity and coherence of Scripture, recognizing that the Bible is a single, cohesive narrative that reveals God's plan of salvation.<sup>40</sup> They often focus on the eschatological themes and prophecies in Scripture. To be precise, a fundamental framework of Adventist biblical interpretation is the Great Controversy theme that posits that the universe is the stage of an ongoing battle between God and Satan, starting with Lucifer's rebellion in heaven and continuing on earth after the fall of Adam and Eve. The argument over God's character and law is said to underpin the entire narrative of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation.<sup>41</sup>

Adventist hermeneutics also places significant emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in interpreting Scripture. Theologians within the denomination view the Holy Spirit not only as the inspirer of the biblical authors but also as the ongoing guide for believers in understanding and applying biblical texts today.<sup>42</sup> For Adventists, the Bible is the inspired Word of God, characterized as a self-authenticating and self-interpreting text. This pers-

<sup>38</sup> George R. Knight, *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs*. Adventist Heritage Series (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2000), 31–32.

<sup>39</sup> See Aleksandar S. Santrac, "The Sola Scriptura Principle in the Current Debate," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 24.1 (2013): 122–26. The article critiques the assumption that Protestant and Evangelical theologies align with Adventist beliefs, highlighting contributions by Fernando Canale, who argues for a distinct Adventist interpretation of Scripture centered on the Sanctuary doctrine. Canale proposes that the reinterpretation of Scripture through this lens marked a departure from traditional Protestant views.

<sup>40</sup> See the official Adventist church statement "Methods of Bible Study" in *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Adventist Approach*, ed. Frank M. Hasel, Biblical Research Institute Studies in Hermeneutics 3 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2020), 463–73.

<sup>41</sup> Kwabena Donkor, "Presuppositions in Hermeneutics," in *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Adventist Approach*, ed. Frank M. Hasel, Biblical Research Institute Studies in Hermeneutics 3 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2020), 23.

<sup>42</sup> See John T. Baldwin, "Faith, Reason, and the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics," in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. George W. Reid, Biblical Research Institute Studies in Hermeneutics 1 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2005), 15–26.

pective encourages the individual to prayerfully study the Bible, again, a practice deeply rooted in the Protestant tradition. The faithful Bereans, who “received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11), are usually set as role models for such an individual study approach. Consequently, everyone who practices such an investigation has direct access to God through the Holy Spirit, who leads them into all truth. This belief contributes to the notion that believers do not need to rely on intermediary authorities for interpretation.<sup>43</sup>

In this framework, the writings and teachings of the Church Fathers receive only a small room for acknowledgment, maybe only as a historical witness to the work of the Holy Spirit in the early Christian church. Actually, there is a significant lack of Adventist contribution to the field of Patristic studies due to an underestimation of the role of Church Fathers in Christian history. Adventists never regarded ancient Christian writings as obligatory “hermeneutical lenses” for understanding Scripture. While even recognizing that the Church Fathers contributed within specific historical contexts, Adventists often judge their insights as not aligning with the “present-time truth” per definition. Like all human authorities, the Church Fathers are considered fallible and potentially prone to erroneous interpretations. Most Adventist scholars contend that, despite their good intentions, ancient Christian theologians were generally influenced by Greek philosophy and other external factors, which compromised the purity of the Gospel message. Referring to the Fathers, Adventists always view their legacy from a specific angle: they are nothing more than valuable historical resources that shed light on the development of early Christian thought. This perspective allows Adventists to interact with Patristic writings while maintaining a critical distance from their theological conclusions.<sup>44</sup>

If Adventists reject the legacy of the Church Fathers entirely, other Christians may view this as a too radical break with the early Church history. The

<sup>43</sup> See Frank M. Hasel, “Presuppositions in the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. George W. Reid, Biblical Research Institute Studies in Hermeneutics 1 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2005), 36–37.

<sup>44</sup> On Adventist approaches to the study of the history of the Christian Church of the first centuries, see John Reeve, “Future Views of the Past: Models of the Development of the Early Church,” *Andrews University Seminary Student Journal* 1.2 (2015): 13–15. I didn’t find any Adventist sources clearly articulating an attitude toward the legacy of the Church Fathers; all these observations are inspired by Reeve’s article and need to be elaborated.

church that is unable to demonstrate its apostolic roots cannot, in their view, be truly Christian and pretend to any sort of continuity. That is why Adventists seek to avoid the stance of total rejection,<sup>45</sup> but instead embark on engaging with the Patristic heritage in a quite specific mode.<sup>46</sup> Such a mode of interaction has been set primarily through the works of Ellen G. White (1827–1915), one of the founders of Adventism and one of the key figures in shaping Adventist hermeneutics and doctrine. She never quoted or relied on the Church Fathers in her writings, but while discussing general Christian topics on doctrine, ethics, and church practices, she inevitably came to similar conclusions held already in Patristic writings. Much more often, her works contain a rigorous critique of developments within the Christian tradition that diverged from biblical teachings, such as the immortality of the soul and eternal torments of hell, as articulated by some early church leaders.<sup>47</sup> Her seminal work, *The Great Controversy*, promotes the idea of continuity and legitimacy through the concept of the faithful Remnant, which she understands as the continuous line of truth-keepers throughout history. These individuals remained loyal to God and biblical truth despite facing general apostasy and persecution.<sup>48</sup> While no notable Church Father is specifically identified by White as representative of the Remnant, her concept

<sup>45</sup> Making a “long genealogy” for the denomination, Adventist authors typically extend the roots of their faith up to the Patristic era: “Sabbath-keeping Adventists inherited this historicist approach to the apocalyptic prophecies of Daniel and Revelation—the same method followed by the Church Fathers [*sic!*] and by the Protestant Reformers and expositors since the sixteenth century” (Hans K. LaRondelle, “Prophetic Basis of Adventism,” *Adventist Review* 4 [1989]: 5, [https://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/Prophetic-Basis-Adventism\\_0.pdf](https://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/Prophetic-Basis-Adventism_0.pdf)).

<sup>46</sup> When addressing topics like the Trinity or Christ’s nature and Divinity, Adventists may reference Patristic sources to illustrate early Christian understandings of these doctrines, but such references serve primarily to support biblical interpretations rather than to assert the Fathers’ authority. E.g., discussing the issue of Trinity, Denis Fortin recognizes that “the early Church Fathers gave us the vocabulary we use and discuss today” (Denis Fortin, “God, the Trinity and Adventism,” *Perspective Digest* 15.4 [2010]: 4).

<sup>47</sup> See Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan*. Vol. 5 of *The Conflict of the Ages in the Christian Dispensation* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1950), 49–60. The entire Chapter 3, titled “An Era of Spiritual Darkness,” clearly reflects the author’s negative view of the prevailing trends of that time.

<sup>48</sup> “Those were days of peril for the church of Christ. The faithful standard-bearers were few indeed. Though the truth was not left without witnesses, yet at times it seemed that error and superstition would wholly prevail, and true religion would be banished from the earth” (White, *The Great Controversy*, 55).

suggests that such faithful people unceasingly existed during the historical period, which is nowadays referred to as the “Patristic era.”

This challenges Adventist experts in Church History to discover groups and movements that may be links in the supposed continuous line of truth-keepers. In *Great Controversy*, White outlined the scheme of history quite simply with too broad strokes, describing Valdenses, Lollards, and some other pre-Reformation movements as the “missed links” in the chain of transmission of “pure biblical teaching.”<sup>49</sup> In fact, she shrouded the Patristic period with mysterious silence. Therefore, later Adventist authors studying the historical origins of what they considered “pillar doctrines” (such as Sabbath-keeping, conditional immortality, investigative judgment on heaven, etc.) felt obliged to explore and finish what White had left unfinished.<sup>50</sup> A good example is the works of LeRoy E. Froom (1890–1974), a prominent Adventist theologian and historian. In one of his multi-volume works, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, Froom explores the historical development of the interpretation of biblical prophecies, particularly in aspects directly related to Seventh-day Adventist eschatology. He inevitably references the Church Fathers to demonstrate how early Christian interpretations of prophecy influenced later theological developments; for example, he discusses the eschatological interpretations of Fathers such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Julius Africanus, and many others and how these resonate with Adventist beliefs.<sup>51</sup> Froom notes quite skeptically:

Although it is true that, on the whole, the church following the apostolic age retained the early prophetic interpretation to a considerable degree

<sup>49</sup> See White, *The Great Controversy*, 61–96.

<sup>50</sup> In seeking “missed links” of the faithful Remnant, Adventist scholars are tempted to incorporate certain Christian movements historically labeled as heretical by traditional churches. E.g., some consider Montanists as proto-Adventists due to their belief in the imminent Second Coming of Christ; see Danijela Schubert, “Missional Movements of Montanists and Seventh-Day Adventists Compared and Contrasted” (Term Paper, Pacific Adventist University, 2009), <https://www.academia.edu/113835063>, or Florin Lăiu, “The Second Coming Files: A 2000-Year Inquiry,” <https://st.network/analysis/top/the-second-coming-files-a-2000-year-inquiry-part-i-the-fossilisation-of-the-great-christian-hope.html>. Others portray Albigenses, who held a dualist worldview, as proponents of the Great Controversy narrative; see Oleg Zhigankov, “Vo chto na samom dele verili katary, al'bigoytsy i val'densy? [What Did the Cathars, Albigenses, and Waldenses Really Believe?],” *Open Seminary Blog on Yandex.Dzen*, September 7, 2021, [https://dzen.ru/a/YTX09rjfqTfe7ID\\_](https://dzen.ru/a/YTX09rjfqTfe7ID_).

<sup>51</sup> Leroy E. Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1950), 1:241–82.

down to the end of the era of pagan persecution—and even to Jerome—there were definite divergences, and many of the fathers departed more from the apostolic viewpoint in other respects than on prophetic interpretation. The writings of the Fathers reveal the early inroads of unscriptural doctrines and practices into the church. Protestants [read: first of all, Adventists as exemplary Protestants—*the note is mine*] do not cite the Church Fathers to authenticate doctrines, prophetic or otherwise, but only to trace their development.<sup>52</sup>

In another work, *Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*, Froom, in the same manner, examines the doctrine of conditional immortality. Here, Froom turns to such early Christian writers as Tatian, Theophilus of Antioch, Melito of Sardis, and Irenaeus to illustrate how their teachings align with conditionalist perspectives. Again, his conclusion is not flattering:

[Apostolic Fathers] are therefore of definite value in our quest, for they are the most primitive writings of early Christian witness that have been preserved, and constitute all of the available writings of the earlier successors of the apostles. Their contrast with the inspired writings of Scripture is, of course, tremendous.... They constitute, as it were, the lingering echoes of apostolic teaching, but in progressively distorted form.<sup>53</sup>

This assertion once more highlights Froom's intention to reclaim Patristic thought as supportive in some aspects of contemporary Adventist theology, though even blaming ancient authors or the "distortion of apostolic teaching." It was Froom who contextualized for Adventist theology the writings of the Church Fathers against the background of the broader history of Christian thought.<sup>54</sup> By using the historical approach in such a way, he coined a typically restorationist attitude shared by Adventist scholarship after him: while the Church Fathers' contributions may be appreciated in some way, they always must be critically assessed against "pure" Scriptural teaching and the "present truth."<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Froom, *Early Church Exposition*, 1:207.

<sup>53</sup> Leroy E. Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers: The Conflict of the Ages over the Nature and Destiny of Man* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1966), 1:757, 760.

<sup>54</sup> A more successful attempt than that of Froom to establish Adventist historical lineage during the Patristic era through Celtic and Syriac Christianity was made in Benjamin G. Wilkinson, *Truth Triumphant: The Church in the Wilderness* (Rapidan, VA: Hartland Publications, 1997).

<sup>55</sup> Hans K. LaRondelle, "The Historicist Method in Adventist Interpretation," *Spes Christiana* 21 (2010): 83–84.

In recent years, contemporary Adventist theologians have increasingly argued that early Christian thought offers valuable insights into current issues facing the church. A review of recent publications by Andrews University faculty and students supports this view.<sup>56</sup> While for Adventists the legacy of the Church Fathers does not hold authoritative status like Scripture, it still can serve as a valuable resource for enriching theological discussions and providing historical context for doctrinal development. This is particularly evident in doctrinal topics when it comes to discussing the nature of God, Christology, and soteriology; for instance, every chapter of the *Handbook of the Seventh-Day Adventist Theology* contains a historical survey of the discussed doctrines where Patristic developments are briefly outlined.<sup>57</sup> By getting more acquainted with the Fathers' legacy, Adventist scholars can better articulate their beliefs in relation to historical Christian thought.<sup>58</sup>

## 5. Orthodox and Adventist Perspective on the Fathers: Any Common Points?

Significant theological differences in how Orthodox and Adventist groups regard the legacy of the Church Fathers position them at opposite ends of the spectrum. Orthodox Christians see the Patristic heritage as the authoritative hermeneutical "lens" through which the Church's teachings and practices are shaped, whereas Adventists regard it merely as fragments of historical evidence for the evolution of Christian doctrine. Despite this notable

<sup>56</sup> These contributions in the Patristic legacy studies reflect a trend within Adventism toward a more nuanced understanding of the place of Adventist distinctive doctrines within the larger Christian tradition. Some titles can be briefly mentioned: Arthur Marmorstein, "Eschatological Inconsistency in the Ante-Nicene Fathers?" *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 39.1 (2001): 125–32; Denis Kaiser, "Leo the Great on the Supremacy of the Bishop of Rome," *Andrews University Seminary Student Journal* 1.2 (2015): 73–87; Thomas W. Toews, "Biblical Sources in the Development of the Concept of the Soul in the Writings of the Fathers of the Early Christian Church, 100–325 C.E." (PhD diss., Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, 2011). Such studies are not many, but their number is growing.

<sup>57</sup> See Raoul Dederen, ed., *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology*, Seventh-Day Adventist Reference Series 12 (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2000), passim.

<sup>58</sup> Following the pattern of the *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology*, church compendiums on particular doctrines started to include a historical overview of the issue that (at least briefly) goes through the development of this teaching in the Patristic period; cf. Martin F. Hanna, Darius W. Jankiewicz, and John W. Reeve, eds., *Salvation: Contours of Adventist Soteriology* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2018), passim.

divergence, there remains potential for common ground between the two perspectives.

First, mutual understanding can start from an acknowledgment of the historical significance of the Church Fathers' legacy. Both traditions recognize the historical importance of the Church Fathers in shaping Christian doctrine and practice. Both understand that these figures played a crucial role in articulating foundational beliefs that continue to influence modern Christianity. Protestants generally recognize the main theological stances established by at least the first four Ecumenical Councils, especially affirming the doctrine of the Trinity, the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father, the divinity of the Holy Spirit, and the unity of both divine and human natures in Christ's person. These conciliar decisions are seen by the majority of Christian denominations, including Adventists, as accurately reflecting biblical teachings on the nature of God and Christ. Some Protestants (not Adventists) may give varying degrees of recognition to the later councils, even when they are not ready to accept them as having the same level of authority as the first four.<sup>59</sup>

Second, Adventists and Orthodox engage with the writings of the Church Fathers with the common purpose of gaining insights into early Christian thought. This engagement allows both traditions to contextualize their beliefs within the broader narrative of Christian history. Such study establishes both traditions' claims about apostolic legacy, albeit in different ways. The separate teachers and movements of the early Christian Church, either canonized as Fathers or remained unknown as "truth-keepers," are seen as essential links in this chain, providing continuity with the teachings of the apostles and affirming the respective claims to authenticity in faith.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Donald Fairbairn, an Evangelical, reflects on the Ecumenical Councils and their contributions, considering how their statements align with Protestant beliefs; see Donald Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy Through Western Eyes* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 38–39.

<sup>60</sup> A good example of this is nineteenth-century America, where the study of early Christian history and theology was heavily influenced by contemporary religious conflicts and cultural battles, with the Church Fathers often utilized as ideological resources in denominational disputes. Over time, this study has shed some of its sectarian biases and established a presence in Religious Studies departments at universities. A prominent factor in this transition was the influence of German education. Many American theological students studied in Germany, particularly in Protestant faculties, where they were exposed to the historical development of concepts emerging from German Romanticism and Idealism. Although some American professors resisted German radical critiques of Christianity, most engaged with these ideas to varying degrees

Third, both traditions emphasize that interpretations of Scripture should be informed by the historical context, including insights from the Church Fathers. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of biblical texts. While Orthodoxy places a strong emphasis on tradition as a guiding force for interpretation, Adventists also acknowledge the value of historical context in understanding Christian doctrine. Therefore, both groups may benefit from dialogical engagement with the writings of the Church Fathers.

Fourth and last, the Church Fathers' legacy provides resources for spirituality in both traditions. Their insights into prayer, ethics, and community life can inform contemporary practices, encouraging believers to cultivate a deeper relationship with God. Indeed, the Church Fathers articulated foundational ethical principles that drew heavily from biblical teachings (though inevitably reflecting the influence of their Greco-Roman cultural context), and their writings on topics such as virtue, sin, and repentance centuries long shaped Christian understandings of moral life. While Orthodoxy accepts fully and unconditionally the spiritual insights found in these patristic sources, Adventist scholars may encourage their study with discernment, recognizing both their historical significance and the need for careful theological evaluation. Nonetheless, both traditions can find meaningful insights in the Fathers' efforts to articulate a life oriented toward Christ. Both Orthodox and Adventist traditions emphasize the transformative nature of personal devotion, leading to union with God in an eschatological sense. Though Orthodox understanding of theosis differs significantly from Adventist teaching on glorification in their theological foundations and spiritual emphases, they each affirm the hope of ultimate restoration and communion with God. Moreover, the Fathers' legacy emphasized the importance of community life and mutual support among believers. This communal aspect is reflected in Orthodox practices that encourage collective worship and acts of charity; Adventists would agree with this kind of activity, putting more stress from their side on social justice and community service.<sup>61</sup>

Setting aside the dispute over exclusive apostolic succession, these

throughout their careers, often trying to reconcile them with traditional Protestant beliefs. See Elizabeth A. Clark, *Founding the Fathers: Early Church History and Protestant Professors in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

<sup>61</sup> Utilizing the Evangelical perspective, Jason Radcliff in the same manner suggests the development of an "evangelical Patristic theology" as the step forward in the study of common roots of Christian spirituality; see Radcliff, "Thomas F. Torrance and the Church Fathers," 272-97.

points illustrate how Adventist and Orthodox traditions can find common ground in their interpretation of the Church Fathers' legacy, promoting dialogue and mutual understanding within the wider Christian community. The aspects mentioned represent only a few elements of early Christianity that can stimulate discussions between these two groups. Engaging with early Christian thought can lead to meaningful conversations about shared beliefs while acknowledging seemingly irreconcilable theological differences.<sup>62</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

The examination of the Church Fathers' legacy in Orthodox and Adventist hermeneutics highlights significant differences between the two perspectives. Orthodoxy regards the Church Fathers as authoritative figures integral to the Tradition, viewing their writings as essential for interpreting Scripture, while Adventism adheres to the *Sola Scriptura* principle, considering the Fathers as historical figures whose insights are informative but not authoritative. Despite these seemingly irreconcilable takes, both traditions can find common ground by carefully studying Patristic contributions, particularly in the area of moral guidance and spirituality. Such a collaboration paves potential avenues for academic dialogue between Adventist and Orthodox theologians regarding the Church Fathers' legacy. Joint conferences, collaborative research initiatives, and educational projects can foster mutual understanding and respect. As both Adventists and Orthodox Christians navigate contemporary challenges, deeper engagement with their shared early Church heritage can lead to fruitful discussions that may have rich implications in biblical, systematic, applied, and historical theology, as well as ecclesiastical practice and the life of the believers.

<sup>62</sup> The Adventist church recognizes more and more the growing need for contextualized mission strategies and developing dialogue in Orthodox-majority cultures. The most significant initiative lately was the Conference for Adventist Mission in Orthodox Cultures, held November 26–28, 2024, in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, which brought together over 100 representatives from 23 countries. See David Neal, "Conference Discusses Intersection of Adventist Mission and Orthodox Culture," *Adventist Review*, December 2, 2024, <https://adventistreview.org/commentary/conference-discusses-intersection-of-adventist-mission-and-orthodox-culture>. Based on the conference materials, a resource book was published. See Tihomir Lazic and Anthony WagenerSmith, eds., *Adventism Meets Eastern Orthodoxy: Historical, Theological, and Missiological Bridges* (Bracknell, UK: Newbold Academic Press, 2025).