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—Valmy S. Karemera
Compass News Editor

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The Evolution of Adventists’ Creation Belief Statement

Sergio Silva

This article traces the history of the first Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Belief Statement on creation (FB#6). It is a revised version of a previous article,[1] which describes how external and internal attacks on a literal interpretation of biblical protology (the study of origins as described in Genesis 1-11) led SDA leaders to voice their support of (1) a literal interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis and (2) the formulation of a specific statement on creation. It also describes the process used by the General Conference (GC) to formulate the statement on creation, and how this statement was rewritten to include multiple interpretations of origins.

Creation in Early Adventist Fundamental Belief Statements

From the early days of the Second Advent Movement, Adventists were firm believers in the Creation account of Genesis 1:1-2:3. It is here that they found the theological foundation of the biblical Sabbath. To the Adventist pioneers Creation was “the reason why God blessed and sanctified the seventh day, because ‘in it he had rested from all his work which GOD had created and made.’”[2]

As the Second Advent Movement progressed, The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald became the official publication of the movement. From August 15 to December 19 of 1859, “a list of five leading doctrines was published in the masthead of the Review and Herald.”[3] Although a reference to the Law of God appeared in the list, there was no direct reference to Creation.

Adventism grew and in 1872, A Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by the Seventh-day Adventists was printed. It contained twenty-five unsigned propositions, and it was later published in the Signs of the Times on June 4, 1874, under the title Fundamental Principles.[4] It placed more emphasis on God as the Creator but had no explicit statement on Creation.[5] This particular list was never printed in the Yearbook or the Church Manual.

“In the 1889 Yearbook of the denomination, . . . these ‘Fundamental Principles’ were included in a slightly revised and expanded form in Twenty-eight sections. . . . This was not continued in subsequent issues, but it was inserted again in the Yearbook in 1905 and continued to appear through 1914.”[6] The same twenty-eight statements appeared in the Review and Herald in 1912 and remained as the official doctrinal statement of the SDA Church until 1931.[7] Again, this list contained no specific statement on Creation.

The title “Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists” (FB) appeared for the first time in the 1931 Yearbook. Then it was printed in the Church Manual in 1932.[8] This list with twenty-two articles was “prepared by a committee of four, including the GC president and the editor of the Review and Herald.”[9] Though the statement on the observance of the Sabbath included the words “memorial of Creation,” no specific statement on Creation was added until 1980.

Thus, for almost 50 years, the Seventh-day Adventist Church endorsed the 1931 articles of fundamental belief with minor revisions. Then, on April 25, 1980, the GC in session took a vote on what became known as the Twenty-Seven Fundamental Beliefs, also referred to as “a summary of the principal features of Adventist beliefs.”[11] This was the first formulated set of fundamental beliefs to include a statement on Creation (1980 FB#6)—a statement that remains unchanged 35 years later. (For the wording of this statement, see the right-hand column of Table 1.)

Adventists’ View of Origins
Despite the absence of an official statement, the SDA Church has believed in biblical protology since its establishment in 1863, treasuring both the positive outcomes of the Enlightenment and Scriptural authority.[12] This can hardly be overemphasized, since Adventism emerged during a time of great epistemological turmoil over whether Scripture or science should be considered the ultimate source of knowledge, especially as related to protology. After the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, the search for a foundation of knowledge intensified, causing many to renounce their belief that Scripture is a reliable source and a foundation of knowledge.[13] To Adventists, between 1844 and 1980 the very foundation of Christianity was under attack. Thus, some SDA leaders voiced their support for a literal interpretation of biblical protology.

One of the first to voice his support was W. H. Littlejohn. He wrote in 1884, complimenting the faculty of Battle Creek College for their transparent and solid stand on origins. He emphasized the distinction between the Adventist college and other institutions, where it became “confessedly true that the leaven of evolutionism ha[d] entered largely into the theories of many of the college professors of [that] time, and that many of them openly avow[ed] and publicly [taught] doctrines in harmony with . . . the ‘higher criticism.’”[15] “Fortunately,” Littlejohn said, the teachers at Battle Creek College “are not only professors of religion themselves, but they are also firm believers in the inspiration of the Scriptures, and interpret them in harmony with their most literal and obvious sense.”[16]

Nearly 100 years later GC President Robert Pierson also voiced support for biblical protology. He said on October 12, 1978:

> Already, brethren and sisters, there are subtle forces that are beginning to stir. Regrettably there are those in the church who belittle the inspiration of the total Bible, who scorn the first 11 chapters of Genesis, who question the Spirit of Prophecy’s short chronology of the age of the earth, and who subtly and not so subtly attack the Spirit of Prophecy. There are some who point to the reformers and contemporary theologians as a source and the norm for Seventh-day Adventist doctrine. There are those who allegedly are tired of the hackneyed phrases of Adventism. There are those who wish to forget the standards of the church we love. There are . . . those who would throw off the mantle of a peculiar people; and those who would go the way of the secular, materialistic world.

> Fellow leaders, beloved brethren and sisters—don’t let it happen! I appeal to you as earnestly as I know how this morning—don’t let it happen! I appeal to Andrews University, to the Seminary, to Loma Linda University—don’t let it happen! We are not Seventh-day Anglicans, not Seventh-day Lutherans—we are Seventh-day Adventists! This is God’s last church with God’s last message!

About the same time W. J. Hackett also spoke on the importance of formulating a statement to communicate clearly the SDA belief about creation in six literal days, a global Flood, and the age of life on the earth. Hackett said:

> Areas to be explored are those concerning the church’s positions that have been challenged. Some fall in the area of science and include topics such as a literal, seven-day Creation, a universal Flood, and the age of life on earth. A clear definition here will enable teachers of science in our schools clearly to present to inquiring young minds the church’s position.[18]

In academia, Adventists also took a stand in favor of biblical protology.[19] Instead of adopting a method of accommodating the interpretation of Scripture to the interpretation of nature, or simply dismissing mainstream science as incompatible with the biblical view of creation, as fundamentalists did,[20] mainline Adventism sought to embrace mainstream science and theology as complementary enterprises. For these scholars, it was through Scripture alone that knowledge about the relationship of the natural and the supernatural realms coalesces.
Formulating a Statement on Creation

When tracing the history of the Creation Fundamental Belief, I was surprised to find out that the current statement on Creation is the result of an extensive rewriting process that transformed the statement originally prepared by the GC between 1978 and 1979 under the leadership of B.E. Seton.[22] In fact, the 1980 FB was rewritten by a group of theologians at the SDA Theological Seminary to include multiple interpretations of origins, and then it was published in the *Adventist Review* on February 21, 1980, prior to its approval at the GC Session.

Although some discussion may have taken place earlier, the formulation of the statement on Creation started on June 8, 1978, when the GC voted to appoint an Ad Hoc Creation and Revelation Statements Editing Committee (hereafter ADHOC).[24] The work of the ADHOC was done mainly by correspondence from June 1978 until August 1979.

A tentative statement on Creation was prepared and presented to the X-1535 Church Manual Committee (hereafter X-1535) in September 1978.[25] On that occasion, “the chairman shared copies of B. E. Seton’s comments and suggestions regarding the Fundamental Beliefs section of the Church Manual. Members of the committee were urged to give careful study to the suggested revisions and to make notes.”[26] One of Seton’s comments pointed out the inadequacy of that first statement. In February 1979, “a tentative revision of the ‘Fundamental Beliefs’ as prepared by B E Seton” was brought to X-1535, where the chairman “stressed the need for a clearer statement concerning Creation.”[27]

As a result of the concerns raised by Seton, the X-1535 voted “to ask W. J. Hackett, R. Hammill and B. E. Seton to form a subcommittee” to write the statement on Creation.[28] By the end of the next day, the X-1535 had approved a tentative statement on Creation (See Document 1). It contained the key phrases “reliable chronicle of the Creation of the world,” “In six literal, consecutive days God created the world,” and “world-wide Noachian flood.” Even though this draft was edited extensively, one can sense a positive reaction to Hackett’s invitation to “preserve the landmarks” of biblical protology.[29]

**Document 1: A Tentative Statement on Creation Voted on by the X-1535 Committee**

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Creation

After lengthy consideration of the paragraph suggested by the subcommittee,
VOTED, To recommend the adoption of the following paragraph as an additional "Fundamental Belief" to express SDA convictions concerning creation:

Fundamental Belief -- Creation

That God is the Creator of all things. The book of Genesis contains the only inspired, reliable chronicle of the creation of the world. It provides the framework for our understanding of the natural world and of all creation. In six literal, consecutive days God created the world, all living things upon it, and their supporting environment. The Lord then established the seventh-day Sabbath as the perpetual memorial of His finished creative work. The Bible gives the basic account of the creation of man in the image of God, the defacement of that image by man's fall into sin, and the consequent world-wide Noachian flood. But Scripture also declares that God will restore creation's original perfection after the Second Coming of His Son and the eradication of sin from the universe.

W. Duncan Eva, chairman
B. E. Seton, secretary
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The subcommittee continued to improve the statement. On March 4, 1979, Seton provided the X-1535 some new revisions. Documents 2 and 3 show the full statement being edited. This version included an allusion to the Trinity, a specific reference to Satan as the originator of sin, and a reference to the Garden of Eden.

**Document 2: Full Suggested Statement on Creation During Formulation Process**

_Suggestion for Statement of Belief on CREATION_

That God, with Christ and by the agency of the Holy Spirit, is the Creator of all things. He spoke into existence the world, and all living creatures upon it with their supporting environment in six literal consecutive days; then instituted the seventh-day Sabbath as the perpetual memorial of His completed creative work. Man was originally made in the image of God, but his sin defaced that image and led to the world-wide Noahian flood. Through Christ, God will eradicate sin and its results from the universe and restore the pristine perfection of His creation in a new heavens and a new earth at the close of human history. Gen. 1:1-26; Ps. 33:6, 9.

D B Seton 3. 4. 79

**Document 3: Alteration Suggested to the Portion Between the Brackets**

Man was originally created in the image of God, but his fall into sin in response to Satan’s temptation in the Garden of Eden, resulted in the progressive defacement of that image. It also resulted in the marring of God’s handiwork in creation, particularly as a consequence of the world-
Satisfied with the progress, the X-1535 agreed that the chairman [W. Duncan Eva] should approach Andrews University with a view to arranging a meeting with solicited members of the Theological Faculty to obtain their input on the revised fundamental beliefs as prepared by this committee. It was therefore suggested that Elders W. D. Eva, W. J. Hackett and Dr. R. Hammill meet with theologians on a convenient date on the Andrews University campus.[32]

After all the work put into the formulation of the statement on Creation, this single move would soon undermine Hackett’s appeal to “preserve the landmarks” of biblical protology. The review group of theologians, known as the Committee of Twelve, would remove several of those landmarks.

The X–1535 prepared a three-column document showing the progress on the Fundamental Beliefs so far. The first column included the 22 articles printed in the Church Manual since 1932; the second column showed the alterations to that version and the new articles; and the third column showed the revised Fundamental Beliefs. This three-column document was mailed to Andrews University and to a group of SDA leaders on August 10, 1979.[33]

**Searching for the Three-Column Document**

For many years, researchers tried to locate this three-column document, for they believed the original statement prepared by X–1535 would reflect the SDA understanding of Creation more clearly. But the document would not be easy to locate.

On March 15-17, 2010, I was granted access to the Adventist Archives at the GC headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland. Accompanied by my two sons—Matheus and Gabriel—I arrived to find eight storage boxes filled with material on the 1980 FB#6, including the personal files of W. Duncan Eva. Peter Chiomenti, assistant director of the Archives, had separated out all the material available on the history of the Fundamental Beliefs statement of 1980.

On the second day of research I located the three-column document sent to Andrews University in 1979. As Lawrence Geraty pointed out, the document had a cover saying, “At this stage this document is confidential and intended only for those to whom it is sent. It may not be copied or duplicated in any way.” The differences between the 1980 FB#6, which was revised by the Committee of Twelve, and the statement proposed by the X-1535 are substantial (See Table 1).[35]

**Table 1: Comparison of Statements**

| X-1535 Final Proposed Statement on Creation Sent to Andrews University[36] | Statement on Creation Returned From Andrews University (ultimately voted as 1980 FB#6)[37] |
---|---|
That the book of Genesis contains the only inspired, reliable chronicle of the Creation of the world, and that God [the Father], with Christ and the Holy Spirit, is Creator of all things. In six literal days the Lord made heaven and the earth and all living things upon it with their supporting environment. The Lord then established the seventh day as the Sabbath, a perpetual memorial of His completed creative work. Man was originally created in the image of God, but his fall into sin in response to Satan’s temptation in the Garden of Eden resulted in the progressive defacement of that image. It also led to marring God’s handiwork in Creation and to the worldwide flood in the days of Noah. Through Christ, God will eradicate sin and its results from the universe and at the close of human history restore the pristine perfection of His Creation in a new heavens and a new earth (Gen 1:1-26; Ps 33:6-9; Gen 3:1-24; Exo 20:8-11; Gen 6-8; Rev 21:1-7).

God is Creator of all things, and has revealed in Scripture the authentic account of His creative activity. In six days the Lord made “the heaven and the earth” and all living things upon the earth, and rested on the seventh day of that first week. Thus He established the Sabbath as a perpetual memorial of His completed creative work. The first man and woman were made in the image of God as the crowning work of Creation, given dominion over the world, and charged with responsibility to care for it. When the world was finished it was “very good,” declaring the glory of God. (Gen. 1; 2; Ex. 20:8-11; Ps. 19:1-6; 33:6, 9; 104; Heb. 11:3.)

According to Fritz Guy—secretary for the Committee of Twelve—it was Geraty who drafted the 1980 FB#6. In the rewriting process, Geraty omitted some of the key words and phrases. For example,

- The phrase, “That the book of Genesis contains the only inspired, reliable chronicle of the Creation of the world”;
- The term “chronicle,” which suggests that SDAs accept the Bible as historically trustworthy;
- The phrase, “In six literal days the Lord made heaven and the earth and all living things,” which indicates that SDAs interpret the days of the creation week as literal days of 24 hours and therefore as historical days;
- The phrase, “It also led to marring God’s handiwork in Creation and to the worldwide flood in the days of Noah,” which implies that SDAs support a short chronology for the existence of life on earth and a global flood.

The omission occurred because the 1980 FB#6 was written—according to Guy—under the premise that SDAs have multiple views “regarding the history of life on Earth. Individual Adventists—scientists, theologians, pastors, and others—hold widely differing views regarding the age of the universe, of the planet Earth, and of life on Earth.”

The Creation Statement on the Floor of the GC Session

As the day to review and vote on the statement on creation arrived, GC President Neal C. Wilson addressed the delegates, emphasizing the importance of leaders refusing to be content with the status quo. He said: “An organization is developed to achieve an objective. [An] organization should not continue simply to maintain itself. Unless there are clear targets, organization is meaningless.”

Given this emphasis on “clear targets,” the ambiguous language used in the 1980 FB#6 did not pass unnoticed by some delegates.

For instance, Leroy Moore, supported by A. A. Roth, expressed concern about the wording of the creation belief. He suggested that some room could be made for the Spirit of Prophecy to contribute to the creation statement. E. J. Humphrey inquired about the possibility of including “six literal days” in the statement. John V. Stevens stressed that a purpose for rewriting the FB and including a statement on creation was to make the SDA beliefs “more easily understood by those not of our faith.” To Moore, Roth, Humphrey, and Stevens, a Fundamental Belief on creation should let the world know what SDAs believe.
Others like Humberto R. Treiyer pointed out the importance of including “our position about the earth’s chronology.” Neal C. Wilson responded with openness to these revisions, but none of the delegates picked up on his openness. At that point, Geraty justified the wording, saying that “creation is far more extensive than just origins.” Pressing the issue, Geraty argued, “In a paragraph on Creation, I would like to testify to the world that God does not work, as deists believe, by getting things started and then allowing them to run their course. I would like to include creative activity that includes not only origins but much more.”[44]

In spite of the observations presented and the request of some delegates to use a clearer wording for FB#6, the discussion ended shortly after Geraty’s arguments, and the Creation belief was voted into effect on the morning of April 25, 1980.

The Fruits of the 1980 Statement on Creation

Looking back into the events that led SDAs to formulate a Fundamental Belief statement on creation, it is perplexing to see how this positive action has opened the door to internal controversy about origins.

Regardless of the fact that the Committee of Twelve produced a statement of fundamental beliefs that raised many theological concerns and controversies, we must recognize their efforts and contributions to Adventism. Geraty, for example, expressed his concerns about the time assigned for this task. As a result of his observation, the committee suggested that more time be allowed for future revisions of the FB. They also suggested that all “the results of [their] effort . . . be published in the Adventist Review with the invitation for comment and reaction by any concerned.”[45]

On the other hand, though I can sympathize with the committee’s intentions, I suggest that what unfolded during this process has fallen short of fulfilling the purpose of the FB Statement—to present “the church’s understanding and expression of the teaching of Scripture.”[46] The appeal to stand against “those . . . who belittle the inspiration of the total Bible, who scorn the first 11 chapters of Genesis, . . . [a] short chronology of the age of the earth” was overlooked, and the call for “a clear definition” to “enable teachers of science in our schools clearly to present to inquiring young minds the church’s position”[48] was disregarded. (For information on how FB#6 was used to support the teaching of theistic evolution at an SDA institution of higher education, see pages 36-38 of my article “Development of the Fundamental Beliefs Statement with Particular Reference to the Fundamental Belief #6: Creation” in the Journal of the Adventist Theological Society.)

Fortunately, after more than thirty years, and with a revived commitment to a literal interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis, the 2010 GC in session took a vote to reword FB#6. The motion brought by GC President Ted Wilson included a request to approve the statement “A Reaffirmation of Creation,” which more clearly stated the belief of mainline SDAs on origins. The motion included a request to integrate FB#6 and the statement “A Reaffirmation of Creation.”[49] The motion was approved.

Where Will We Go from Here?

Much hard work was put into the formulation of a statement on creation that would testify of the Adventist Church’s high view of Scripture. The statement initially produced by the ADHOC was a true attempt to preserve the “biblical landmarks” as suggested by Hackett. It included

1. The word “literal” to describe the six days of creation;
2. The term “chronicle” to describe the Genesis account as “the only inspired, reliable chronicle of the Creation of the world”; and
3. The concept of a “world-wide flood.”

The 1980 FB#6, however, does not include these biblical landmarks. To be blunt, the 1980 FB#6 does not adequately represent the belief of mainline Seventh-day Adventists on origins.
First, it lacks the linkage of Scripture and history within itself, falling short on making clear that Adventists accept the creation account as reliable history.

Second, the 1980 FB#6 downplays the use of the Hebrew numeral after the Hebrew yom (יומ), which, based on its use in Scripture, indicates that the days in Genesis 1:1–2:4a are literal twenty-four-hour days and not long periods of time.[50]

Third, the 1980 FB#6 gives no indication of whether the Genesis Flood is regarded a historical event or an ancient myth.

In my opinion, the 1980 FB#6 is more a subjective deliberation on the age of the earth (including life on earth) than a statement of the mainline SDA understanding of origins.

Moving forward, I suggest that the SDA Church should eliminate these key areas of ambiguity from FB#6. The SDA statement on creation cannot allow for multifold interpretations when it comes to how God gave form to and created life on earth (Gen 2:1-4a, Exod 20:11; Ps 95:5-6)—He did “in six days” and “rested the seventh day.” These are essential points for SDA theology and cannot be compromised. Remember, “The greatest want of the world is the want of men—men . . . whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole, men who will stand for the right though the heavens fall.”[51]

The countdown to the 2015 GC Session in San Antonio, Texas, has already started. The Annual Council has already seen drafts of a new statement on Creation, and the task of rewording the 1980 FB#6 is nearly finished.[52] (The proposed wording to be considered at GC Session can be found on p. 54-55 of the GC Session Agenda.) What will be the outcome? We will soon see whether Adventists will choose to affirm more clearly their belief in the Bible’s historical account of origins.

Notes:


[4] Ibid.


[8] General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Church Manual (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1932), 180-186.


[10] Ibid. Additional information can be found at Guy.


Schleiermacher and Lücke, *On the Glaubenslehre: Two Letters to Dr. Lücke*.


Littlejohn, “The Battle Creek College: What it is Not, and What it is,” 51.

Ibid.


Raymond A. Eve and Francis B. Harrold, *The Creationist Movement in Modern America* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 49. In relation to biblical protology, fundamentalists actively participate in the Young Earth Creationism movement (YEC). Independently of mainstream science providing reliable evidences in favor of an old universe, fundamentalists insist that because the genealogies in Scripture seem to account for the beginning of human life on earth some six to ten thousand years ago, that the entire galactic universe was created about the same time in six literal days. A good example of this theologically fundamentalist understanding is found in the belief statement of the Institute for Creation Research (ICR), *Principles of Scientific Creationism*. It says: “The record of earth history, as preserved in the earth’s crust, especially in the rocks and fossil deposits, is primarily a record of catastrophic intensities of natural processes, operating largely within uniform natural laws, rather than one of gradualism and relatively uniform process rates. There are many scientific evidences for a relatively recent creation of the earth and the universe, in addition to strong scientific evidence that most of the earth’s fossiliferous sedimentary rocks were formed in an even more recent global hydraulic cataclysm.” Institute for Creation Research, “Principles of Scientific Creationism,” Institute for Creation Research, [http://www.icr.org/tenets/](http://www.icr.org/tenets/) (accessed April 10, 2012). Emphasis supplied. See also Institute for Creation Research, “Principles of Biblical Creationism,” Institute for Creation Research, [http://www.icr.org/tenets/](http://www.icr.org/tenets/) (accessed April 10, 2012).


General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (Washington, DC), Minutes of Meetings of the (X-1535) Church Manual Committee, meeting of 8 September 1978.

General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (Washington, DC), Minutes of Meetings of the (X-1535) Church Manual Committee, 14–15 February 1979, meeting of 14 February 1979.

General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (Washington, DC), Minutes of Meetings of the (X-1535) Church Manual Committee, 9–10 April 1979, meeting of 9 April 1979.

A brief reference to this event can be found at Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia, Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia, 2nd rev. ed., 2 vols. (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1996).

W. Duncan Eva, to X–1535 Church Manual Revision—“Fundamental Beliefs” Members of ad hoc committee, August 10, 1979. W. Duncan Eva Collection, Office of Archives & Statistics, Silver Spring, MD.


Eva, “Proposal for the 1980 Statement on Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists.” See Appendix A and B

General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Church Manual (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1981), 33.


Definition of “chronicle”: “an historical account of events arranged in order of time usually without analysis or interpretation.” 11th ed. s.v. “Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary.”


Fritz Guy, “Seven Considerations for Productive Conversation About the History of Life on Planet Earth,”
Spectrum, June 18, 2009.


[44] Ibid. Emphasis supplied.


Has the Church Misplaced Its Priorities? Why We Need to Refocus in the Wake of the Same-Sex Marriage Decision

Valmy Karemera

In a landmark decision last Friday, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 5-4 in favor of same-sex marriage. The Court has made gay marriage a fundamental constitutional right for everyone in the United States. Writing for the majority, Justice Kennedy said,

No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family. In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were. As some of the petitioners in these cases demonstrate, marriage embodies a love that may endure even past death. It would misunderstand these men and women to say they disrespect the idea of marriage. Their plea is that they do respect it, respect it so deeply that they seek to find its fulfillment for themselves. Their hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization’s oldest institutions. They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right.

The Court’s majority interpretation of the text poses a significant threat both to the historical definition of marriage and to the constitutional right of dissenters, especially those with religious convictions. Ironically, it was Justice Kennedy who during the oral arguments of Obergefell v. Hodges was “concerned about changing a conception of marriage that has persisted for thousands of years based on little more than a decade of experience with same-sex marriage in the United States.”

Justice Alito further probed the issue when he asked, “Suppose…a group consisting of two men and two women apply for a marriage license. Would there be any ground for denying them a license?” Today’s ruling not only changes marriage to allow for same-gender couples; it also opens a door for polygamy.

It is interesting to note that even as secular as Europe is considered to be, many European countries have opted to provide same-sex couples the right to form “registered partnerships” but not to participate in the marriage institution that has lasted millennia. Worldwide, there are only 21 other countries where same-sex marriage is legal nationwide. Last week the U.S. became the 22nd!

By making same-sex marriage a right in the whole country, the Court potentially threatens the religious freedom of many. During the oral arguments, the Chief Justice asked Solicitor General Verrilli: “Would a religious school that has married housing be required to afford such housing to same-sex couples?”

The equivocating answer from Mr. Verrilli was revealing about the messy situation Christians will face in the coming years. He said it “is going to depend on how the States work out the balance between their civil rights laws, whether they decide there’s going to be civil rights enforcement of discrimination based on sexual orientation or not, and how they decide what kinds of accommodations they are going to allow under State law…different states could strike different balances.”

Moreover, when Justice Alito questioned Mr. Verrilli about the right of religious institutions to maintain tax-exempt status, President Obama’s top lawyer struggled further to respond, recognizing the depth of the issue: “You know, I...
— I don’t think I can answer that question without knowing more specifics, but it’s certainly going to be an issue. I — I don’t deny that. I don’t deny that, Justice Alito. It is — it is going to be an issue.”

Make no mistake, religious liberty is going to be a problem. The legalization of same-sex marriage may mean an existential threat for the church.

A Call for the Adventist Church to Prioritize

Next week, the 60th General Conference (GC) Session kicks off in San Antonio. In certain circles of the church, this GC Session has been billed as the most defining session in recent memory.

For four decades now, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been in the trenches vigorously debating over women’s ordination. Arguably, few issues have consumed more time and resources than the ordination of women to pastoral office. By now it should be obvious to all concerned church members that there is a deep and profound hermeneutical and cultural divide within the world church. In the context of the current divisive rhetoric, it seems unlikely that a simple yes or no vote can resolve the issue.

In light of the Supreme Court’s decision, one may ask—is the church misplacing its priorities? Permit me to highlight four areas that demand that the church shift its focus from the women’s ordination debate: loss of religious freedom, resource allocation, our Fundamental Belief on creation, and stagnant church membership.

1. First, the loss of religious freedom is upon us. Preaching against homosexuality may soon be against the law, if the situation in Canada is any indication. With little, if any, legal protection, the church is likely to face many litigations over its Biblical and homiletical stance. How can the church maintain its Biblical fidelity in such a hostile environment?

Some Christian leaders have been quick to respond. Christianity Today released a statement written by 90 leaders entitled: “Here We Stand: An Evangelical Declaration on Marriage.” These leaders write:

In the coming years, evangelical institutions could be pressed to sacrifice their sacred beliefs about marriage and sexuality in order to accommodate whatever demands the culture and law require. We do not have the option to meet those demands without violating our consciences and surrendering the gospel. We will not allow the government to coerce or infringe upon the rights of institutions to live by the sacred belief that only men and women can enter into marriage.

A few days ago—June 16, 2015, to be precise—the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution on gay marriage. Here is an excerpt from that resolution:

RESOLVED, That the messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Columbus, Ohio, June 16–17, 2015, prayerfully call on the Supreme Court of the United States to uphold the right of the citizens to define marriage as exclusively the union of one man and one woman; and be it further

RESOLVED, That Southern Baptists recognize that no governing institution has the authority to negate or usurp God’s definition of marriage; and be it further

RESOLVED, No matter how the Supreme Court rules, the Southern Baptist Convention reaffirms its unwavering commitment to its doctrinal and public beliefs concerning marriage; and be it further

RESOLVED, That the religious liberty of individual citizens or institutions should not be infringed as a result of believing or living according to the biblical definition of marriage; and be it further
RESOLVED, That the Southern Baptist Convention calls on Southern Baptists and all Christians to stand firm on the Bible’s witness on the purposes of marriage, among which are to unite man and woman as one flesh and to secure the basis for the flourishing of human civilization; and be it finally

RESOLVED, That Southern Baptists love our neighbors and extend respect in Christ’s name to all people, including those who may disagree with us about the definition of marriage and the public good.

Contemporary challenges call for wisdom from on high and courageous church leadership.

2. Second, **wise allocation of church resources** needs to be a priority. With the church at risk of losing its religious liberty protection for refusing to compromise, Adventist universities and other institutions face the possibility of losing their tax-exempt status. Is the church engaged in faithful stewardship today to sustain its future operations? Jason K. Allen, president of Midwestern Seminary, provides this three-step approach:

*First, Christian institutions must be clear and consistent about their convictions. Faithfulness to one’s confessional heritage and mission demands it; a discerning constituency should expect it; and courts of law will necessitate it. Intentional ambiguity on the great theological and moral challenges of our generation never was a virtuous strategy, and it is no longer a tenable one. In the courts of law, only Christian institutions that have clearly codified and long practiced their biblical convictions will have a fighting chance.*

*Secondly, Christian institutions must quickly develop a sustainable business model. Operational sustainability necessitates that institutions prepare to free themselves from dependency on Pell Grants and Federal student loans. Furthermore, they must devise contingency plans for losing their tax-exempt status. These considerations are not prompted by paranoia; they are prompted by realism.*

*Finally, Christian institutions must engage the new—and most urgent—front in the culture war: religious liberty. Now is the time for every religious institution, Christian or otherwise, to advocate for religious liberty. The government that is powerful enough to limit your neighbor’s religious liberty may prove powerful enough to eliminate yours.*

3. Third, we must **strengthen Fundamental Belief #6**. Sadly, the urgent need to tighten the language of our belief on creation at this year’s GC Session seems to have been lost in the women’s ordination debate. Genesis 1-11 provides a foundation for the God-ordained family unit as well as for the rest of the Bible. Wavering on the historicity of the creation account greatly undermines the rest of the church’s teachings, such as salvation, Sabbath, and the Second Coming. It opens a door for theistic evolution into our church. (For a discussion on the length of days in Genesis 1, see Gerhard F. Hasel’s excellent article.)

4. Finally, stagnant church membership calls for a **renewed focus on evangelism**. With certain parts of the world church facing minimal growth and an aging population with few youth in the pews every Sabbath, the church needs to get back to the most important mission ever given to mankind—the proclamation of the first, second, and third angels’ messages (Ellen White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 19). Ordained or not ordained, one has to agree that the church has spent too much time and resources on a singular issue—whether it is an ecclesiological civil rights issue or not. It is time for the church to prioritize much weightier issues with far deeper implications.

Momentous times are upon us. The church must acknowledge that we are no longer ministering to a Christian culture in North America. In such an environment we face increasing challenges. It is time that we press together,
press upward, and press forward, vindicating the truth and honoring Christ.

The battle is not ours; it is the Lord’s (2 Chron. 2:15). His church will prevail. Maranatha!

[Photo: Crowds outside the Supreme Court last Friday when the same-sex marriage verdict was announced. Photo from Wikimedia Commons.]
Why We’re Not Ready for a Doctrinal Vote on Women’s Ordination

Michael Younker

I do not enjoy discussing or talking about the question of women’s ordination publicly, as it always seems to stir up unpleasant conversations these days, and I dislike controversies with my fellow believers and friends, with whom I so often agree. Nevertheless, the issue is upon us, and so I’ve decided to offer a few words about why, sadly, I fear we as a church will continue to disagree, even after the vote. Yet I hope we can take courage, for God is over all, and we may have peace with each other so long as we recognize this. There is hope for those who trust in God.

Whether it is from beliefs or more pragmatic concerns, the lesson immediately following the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 discussing circumcision may be apropos to our situation. It was here that Paul and Barnabas felt obliged to differ and part ways for pragmatic mission-minded reasons (Acts 15:36-39).

Think about it for a minute. Both Paul and Barnabas were genuine soul-winners, and they had just emerged from a unifying council on a controversial issue not so dissimilar from our own. Then immediately afterward, for practical considerations, these two giants of the early church separated their ministries. In the end the more prominent one, Paul, was proven the more judgmental, with his later change of heart about Barnabas’ kinsman, John Mark, who simply needed more time to mature in his faith (Col 4:11; 2 Tim 4:11; AA 170.2).

If believers can disagree after a conference that resulted in unity, how much more so when the prospects of continuing disagreements linger?

I would like to mention, as senior editor, that I’m aware of and respect the fact that The Compass Magazine has readers who lean, some more strongly than others, toward both directions on the matter of ordination. That said, we also hold firm to the notion that “those who think that they will never have to give up a cherished view, never have occasion to change an opinion, will be disappointed. As long as we hold to our own ideas and opinions with determined persistency, we cannot have the unity for which Christ prayed” (CET 203.2).

Therefore, so long as God has not led us to establish something at the level of a fundamental belief or pillar doctrine, we must remain open-minded and generous in our attitude toward those who differ from us. Whether or not our General Conference delegates vote this summer to affirm or deny divisional discretion on whether to ordain women to gospel ministry, I would encourage that we all consider the true origin of unity, God.

Whence Comes Unity?

One of the suggestions that has been floated around the Adventist world is that the upcoming GC delegates’ vote on women’s ordination should have been arranged as a doctrinal vote, one that would “settle” the issue for our church once and for all, and thus “create unity.” I believe God’s Spirit, in wisdom, has prevented us from taking such a rash vote at this time, and it has to do as much with how unity is created as well as what is the truth on the matters of gender and ordination. Let me share why I believe this is so.

If we truly seek harmony on this issue, we need to understand, first and foremost, why it may be that God is preventing us from creating a new doctrine addressing ordination and women. I share this to those holding perspectives on either side of the issue. If I may say it, now would have been the perfect time to permanently vote down women’s ordination, given that no one questions that a global majority of adult baptized believers would reject women’s ordination if we all voted democratically.
So why has God not inspired us to do so? Is it because it would create a false harmony and unity that only concealed a deeper discord? Is it because not all the issues, despite years of study, have yet been fully revealed? Does God want us to understand how real unity works first?

A few points to consider:

1. The Question of Women’s Ordination Touches on Complex, Interrelated Issues.

There is nowhere near a “super-majority” opinion on the matter amongst our leading scholars and thinkers; in fact, an opposite majority exists amongst our most credentialed scholars in support of women’s ordination. Our laity and scholars are divided deeply.

Part of this division has to do with just how many issues are interrelated with the questions of gender and ordination. Some issues take more time to bake in the ovens of our minds than others. Despite how clear either side may think their view is, we still disagree, and I suggest it’s because there are too many questions being addressed at once. These questions include

- the meaning / purpose of ordination,
- its relationship to priesthood / leadership,
- the extent of gender roles / functions beyond the physical, such as psychological aspects,
- the nature of hermeneutics,
- the presence of culture in Scripture,
- the nature of the Trinity,
- the extent and purpose of headship,
- the significance of ecclesiology / visible church, and
- corporate perfection.

Even after years of study, I frequently see online that many do not understand just how many issues are interconnected on our question of whether to ordain women. It’s not as simple as people think, and a doctrinal vote either way would imply far more than we actually believe on the other intricately connected issues.

2. Votes Do Not Produce Unity.

Unity of heart is the real objective, not simply a new resolution or even doctrine that would be so deeply misunderstood. Ellen G. White offered sound advice for our church concerning the origin and nature of true harmony amidst divisions and disagreements in a church consisting of erring mortals. Especially noteworthy is the role that resolutions (majority votes on non-fundamental beliefs) play in bringing about unity:

Christ prayed that His disciples might be one, even as He and His Father are one. In what does this unity consist? That oneness does not consist in everyone having the same disposition, the very same temperament, that makes all run in the very same channel. All do not possess the same degree of intelligence. All have not the same experience. In a church there are different gifts and varied experiences. In temporal matters there is a great variety of ways of management, and yet none of these variations in manner of labor, in exercise of gifts, need to create disension and discord and disunion. One man may be conversant with the Scriptures, and some particular portion of the Scripture is especially appreciated by him because he has seen it in a certain striking light; another sees another portion as very important; and thus one and another presents the very points to the people that appear of highest value. This is all in the order of God. One man blunders in his
interpretation of some portion of the Scripture, but shall this cause diversity and disunion? God forbid. We cannot then take a position that the unity of the church consists in viewing every text of Scripture in the very same shade of light.

The church may pass resolution upon resolution to put down all disagreement of opinions, but we cannot force the mind and will, and thus root out disagreement. These resolutions may conceal the discord but they cannot quench it and establish a perfect agreement. Nothing can perfect a perfect unity in the church but the spirit of Christlike forbearance. Satan can sow discord; Christ alone can harmonize the disagreeing elements. Then let every soul sit down in Christ's school and learn of Christ who declares Himself to be meek and lowly of heart; and Christ declares that if we learn of Him, then our worries will cease, and we shall find rest to our souls. {15MR 149-150, emphasis supplied}

Read the rest of Ellen White’s letter: “More Love Needed”


Drawing from White’s quote above, the uncomfortable fact is, sometimes people see things differently and disagree. This side of glory, we will never have perfect harmony of mind; we will never understand certain passages of Scripture in the same light. This does not mean, however, that those who disagree on some minor points don’t both maintain faithfulness to our pillar doctrines. Unity comes in recognition of this fact.

How we learn to navigate through differences says a lot about what kind of people we really are and desire to be. It may prove well to remember that “Christ did not reveal many things that were truth, because it would create a difference of opinion and get up disputations” {1888 24.3}. This is a rebuke to both sides who push their nonessential views too strongly upon those around them.

Indeed, writing in the aftermath of the infamously divisive GC session in Minneapolis in 1888, White commented, “We are in danger of falling into similar errors. Never should that which God has not given as a test be carried as was the subject of the law in Galatians. I have been instructed that the terrible experience at the Minneapolis conference is one of the saddest chapters in the history of the believers in present truth” {1MR 142.2, emphasis supplied}. Again, White shared, “The law in Galatians is not a vital question and never has been. Those who have called it one of the old landmarks simply do not know what they are talking about. It never was an old landmark, and it never will become such” {1888 841.1}.

Nonessential theology? Yes, White absolutely believed that nonessential theology existed. Are there aspects of how we understand ordination and church authority that are nonessential? I think so. I believe the precise details concerning how ordination works and how we should understand gender within our church structure are not vital test questions, and never will be.

During the time of trouble, I don’t expect communiqués from the GC or my conference president encouraging the faithful believers. Church structure has its place and functions here on earth, but it is not eternal and unchangeable, nor are its leaders infallible, nor will it endure or have meaning as it does today through the time of trouble.

Furthermore, Ellen White is far clearer about some issues, like our health message, that are also never to be a test of fellowship, than she is on the law in Galatians or on specifically excluding women from a particular church office. For example, White actually says it’s a sin to violate natural law (3T 161.2), yet she still doesn’t make abstaining from eating meat a test or a doctrine. It seems that not even some issues that are clear should become tests of our faith, even when White did express clear preferences on a given issue.

So which issues are deserving of greater importance? White would leave that answer to the complexities of biblical
hermeneutics and the leading of the Holy Spirit. If a new issue emerges which represents new light, then let it come. But the process for how we would cement such light into a fundamental belief must not change. It must still be something upon which our sincere scholars and laity agree, in their joint and mutual efforts of Bible study. If we've learned anything from our history, it is that God will not present any tests arbitrarily that confuse as much as they divide.

With these thoughts in mind, I think it would serve us well to remember that, as White put it so well following 1888, "There are mistakes being made on both sides in this controversy." Let's try to trim down some of those mistakes with that humble forbearance which is only possible through the influence that the Holy Spirit inspires. Let's not bring down the scourge upon our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ; let us leave the world and its fallen deposed ruler to do that.