
The Baptismal Vow As The Criterion of Adventist Faith

by Wayne Willey

If someone were to ask you for a definitive written statement of what Seventh-day Adventists believe, what would you give them? There are at least three different formulations that might be considered “official” statements of Seventh-day Adventist beliefs. Confused? So are many other people.

Before we can consider any doctrinal statement as representative of Seventh-day Adventists, we must demonstrate that it embodies the view of at least a majority of the total membership of the church. I think that the articulation of our faith that everyone assents to when they join the church—the baptismal vows—should be regarded as the fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

What are the “official” statements of the beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists? The *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* contains three different formulations of the beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists. First, there are “The Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists.” Second, there is a “Summary of Beliefs” which has been prepared for the

doctrinal instruction of those who wish to join the church. Third, there are the “Baptismal Vows,” and the slightly modified form of those vows used for people who join our churches by profession of faith.

In addition, there are the summaries “Seventh-day Adventists Believe,” which are printed on church bulletins, but as these statements of general belief have never been acted upon by any representative body of the church, they cannot legitimately be called an “official” statement of the “fundamental beliefs” of Seventh-day Adventists. Let us examine the statements that might be considered official to see which most accurately embodies the doctrinal views of the majority of Seventh-day Adventists.

The statement of beliefs which now appears in the church manual under the title “Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists” was adopted by the General Conference session in 1980. The 1,973 delegates representing all Seventh-day Adventists at that General Conference session were composed primarily of denominational employees and constituted approximately 1/20th of one percent of the total membership of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. It would be very difficult to present a convincing case for an assumption that any statement of beliefs adopted by less than one

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percent of Seventh-day Adventists must be considered representative of the beliefs of the remaining 99-plus percent of Seventh-day Adventists. That difficulty would be compounded by the fact that an overwhelming majority of the delegates to the General Conference session were on the denominational payroll. Less than seven percent of the delegates, including those presenting or explaining the material on behalf of the committee which formulated the document, spoke to the proposed restatement of the "Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists" document.

The second statement of beliefs in the church manual, entitled "Summary of Beliefs" or "Doctrinal Instruction for Baptismal Candidates," was also approved only at the gathering of the General Conference in session. These statements would be representative of what the majority of the delegates present at the General Conference session believe should be taught to people who wish to join the Adventist denomination. Whether these beliefs are an accurate "summary of beliefs" of Seventh-day Adventists would depend to a large extent upon the perceptiveness of those who framed the document.

We need to address some very important questions before we can accept either the "Fundamental Beliefs" or the "Summary of Beliefs" as representative of the fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a whole. On what basis would the decision of a gathering of denominational employees who comprise 1/20th of one percent of the total membership of the church have sufficient authority to bind the whole church to a particular statement of beliefs? Why is a decision by this particular group superior to the decision of any other gathering of a similar number of Adventists? What is to protect the church from a takeover by a small group of people who might attempt to impose radical doctrinal changes on the

church? How does one harmonize this ability of the few to bind the church in doctrinal matters with the biblical doctrine of the priesthood of all believers which teaches that not only do all believers have equal access to God, but God has equal access to all believers?

Our dilemma is resolved when we discover that there is a statement of beliefs which accurately reflects the doctrinal views of the majority of Seventh-day Adventists. I refer to the baptismal vows and the nearly identical vows taken by those who join the church by profession of faith. I use the term "membership vows" for both. Every person who joins the Seventh-day Adventist Church makes a public commitment. The prospective member expresses agreement with the church and acceptance of the conditions of membership. This commitment or covenant is in effect a contract based upon specific terms publicly stated and mutually agreed upon. Any change of the terms of the covenant without the agreement of all parties concerned would void the "contract." The membership vows state "the fundamental beliefs" of more than 85 percent of Seventh-day Adventists today—the 3.1+ million people who have made a commitment to these "fundamental principles" since they were formulated and adopted in 1941. As a result, we can demonstrate that the "membership vows" meet the criteria of being representative of the beliefs of the majority of Seventh-day Adventists. These are the essential teachings or fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Adopting the less detailed wording of the membership vows as the definition of Adventist belief need not lead to laxity. As a pastor I recognize that I have a responsibility to require strict adherence to the terms of the membership covenant. I believe that any member who repudiates the membership covenant, either in word or in deed, has no legitimate right to call himself or herself a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. At the same time I recognize that

no one or no group within the church may require commitment to any doctrine or practice beyond the specific terms of the covenant. The terms of the covenant are the ties that bind us together as Adventists.

During the past several years I have attempted to lead my congregation into an annual renewal of their commitment to Christ and their covenant with one another at the beginning of each year. I have found that an annual renewal of one's covenant of membership has many benefits for the unity and spiritual growth of the local congregation. I have several times sent out a copy of the membership covenant with the mid-December issue of the church newsletter and encouraged church members to sign the covenant and return it to the pastor. Recently, however, my church used this document in a "Covenant Renewal" service during the worship hour on the first Sabbath of the new year. A copy of the membership covenant was distributed with the church bulletins (Because we have several people attending services who are not members of the Adventist community, we also provided a copy of the old Roman version of "The Apostles' Creed" from Bettenson's *Documents of the Christian Church* under the title of "My Christian Covenant" which would allow non-members to participate in our covenant renewal service.) After a sermon on "The Ties that Bind us Together," I invited those who wished to renew their covenant with Christ and the church to gather around the communion table and sign the appropriate "Covenant." An unanticipated benefit which resulted from the covenant-signing services was that several of our unbaptized young people came forward and signed the Christian covenant even though there was no specific call for them to do so. They considered themselves Christians and wished to renew their covenant with Christ. I am now preparing these young people for baptism and membership in the church. Another benefit of the

covenant signing is that failure to renew the covenant may provide an indication that a church member is experiencing a spiritual identity crisis and needs pastoral counseling.

Since Seventh-day Adventists do not have a "fixed" creed, there is always the possibility of revising the statement of fundamental beliefs contained in the membership vows. I believe that a return to the practice of early Adventism regarding church membership would be the most effective way to maintain unity during the continuing process of development in our statements of fundamental beliefs. There was a time when the quarterly communion service

was opened with a reading of the membership roll by the church clerk, each member giving testimony regarding his Christian experience as his name was called. Next the church record for the previous quarter was read and corrected . . . Absence from quarterly meetings without report for nine months was grounds for dismissal from the church."

Present practices regarding church membership show little recognition of the fact that church membership does not exist unless the individual is "in Christ." Some

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church members show little or no commitment to Christ or to the activities of the church, even worship and group study. Yet unless these "backslidden" members withdraw from the church, fail to communicate with the church for several years and thus become designated as "missing," or commit a public sin that causes them to be disfellowshipped, they may retain their church membership as long as they live.

**SDA Encyclopedia* article "Lord's Supper," p. 813.

There are some very practical implications of the view that the membership vows are the only truly representative statement of the beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists. We are able to focus upon these statements as the "ties that bind" us together in the fellowship of the church. This develops a spirit of unity within the church as well as a tolerance for the viewpoints of one's brothers and sisters on those points which are not specifically stated in the membership vows. This spirit of tolerance for other views results in the granting of religious liberty within the church and maintains the unity of the church.

It is worth noting that the controversies which have resulted in division within the Adventist body throughout its history have arisen over issues which are not specifically

dealt with in the membership vows. I have asked many former Adventists if it was a repudiation of their membership covenant that resulted in their leaving Adventism. Most of these individuals have told me that they would still be in the church if some one or some group had not tried to impose additional tests of membership beyond the covenant vows they had made when they joined the Adventist Church. Practicing the principles of religious liberty within the church will also increase our credibility when we seek redress for violations of religious liberty in society.

Someone has rightly said "in essentials we must have unity, in non-essentials we must grant liberty, but in all things we must practice charity." When this motto becomes reality in Adventism, then there will be fewer alienated people leaving our churches and fewer schisms within the church.

SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST BAPTISMAL VOWS

In the presence of the church or in the presence of a properly appointed body, the following questions should be posed and answered in the affirmative by candidates for baptism, and by those being received on profession of faith.

1. Do you believe in God the Father, in His Son Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit?
2. Do you accept the death of Jesus Christ on Calvary as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of men, and believe that through faith in His shed blood men are saved from sin and its penalty?
3. Renouncing the world and its sinful ways, have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour, and do you believe that God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven your sins and given you a new heart?
4. Do you accept by faith the righteousness of Christ, recognizing Him as your Intercessor in the heavenly sanctuary, and do you claim His promise to strengthen you by His indwelling Spirit, so that you may receive power to do His will?
5. Do you believe that the Bible is God's inspired word, and that it constitutes the only rule of faith and practice for the Christian?
6. Do you accept the Ten Commandments as still binding upon Christians; and is it your purpose, by the power of the indwelling Christ, to keep this law, including the fourth commandment, which requires the observance of the seventh day of the week as the Sabbath of the Lord?
7. Is the soon coming of Jesus the blessed hope in your heart, and are you determined to be personally ready to meet the Lord, and to do all in your power to witness to His loving salvation, and by life and word to help others to be ready for His glorious appearing?

8. Do you accept the Biblical teaching of spiritual gifts, and do you believe that the gift of prophecy in the remnant church is one of the identifying marks of that church?

9. Do you believe in church organization, and is it your purpose to support the church by your tithes and offerings, your personal effort, and influence?

10. Do you believe that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and that you are to honor God by caring for your body, avoiding the use of that which is harmful, abstaining from all unclean foods, from the use, manufacture, or sale of alcoholic beverages, the use, manufacture, or sale of tobacco in any of its forms for human consumption, and from the misuse of, or trafficking in, narcotics or other drugs?

11. Knowing and understanding the fundamental Bible principles as taught by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, is it your purpose, by the grace of God, to order your life in harmony with these principles?

12. Do you accept the New Testament teaching of baptism by immersion, and do you desire to be so baptized as a public expression of your faith in Christ and in the forgiveness of your sins?

13. Do you believe that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the remnant church of Bible prophecy, and that people of every nation, race, and language are invited and accepted into its fellowship? Do you desire membership in this local congregation of the world church?

From the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, revised, 1981.