

# *Making a Stand:*

## Official Statements Bring Out the Best and the Worst of the Church

*By Aubyn Fulton*

**T**wo official statements adopted at the 1999 Annual Council of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in October capture the Church at its best and worst. It is refreshing to be reminded that the Church can be thoughtful and respect diversity while giving meaningful moral guidance and leadership. However, it is depressing to be reminded that the Church can also be simplistic and dogmatic, ignoring both biblical and human complexity to reaffirm standard moral clichés that ring hollow.

With approval of four new official statements the Church now has official positions on everything from assault weapons (against) to women (in favor—though the Church will not fully ordain them). The precise status and function of these statements is not clear; apparently, there is no official statement on official statements. Still, perhaps it is significant that the complete list and full text of all 44 official statements can be found on the Church's official website <<http://www.adventist.org>> just beneath its 27 Fundamental Beliefs in a section entitled "About Seventh-day Adventists."

The four most recent statements deal with birth control, homosexuality, religious minorities, and the religious significance of the year 2000. The first of these two involve controversial and intimate issues and raise interesting questions about both the role of these statements and the Church as a redemptive community.

An interesting ambivalence has apparently developed among Seventh-day Adventists in recent decades: Despite traditional suspicion of hierarchical creeds, a desire seems to be growing for definitive statements of orthodoxy. This ambivalence is reflected in the Church's 27 Fundamental Beliefs. Entitled on the Church's website—in creedal fashion—"What We Believe," the 27 Fundamental Beliefs begin with a brief preamble that Seventh-day Adventists "accept the Bible as their only creed." The possibility is not explicitly addressed that no such document would be needed if this preamble were actually true. One might be forgiven for assuming that the official statements passed at Annual Council or General Conference sessions are in some way part of this latent creedal tradition within the Church.

The title "Official Statement" itself seems to imply that the statements are normative, with an implicit or



explicit disciplinary or purification function. ("Here is what Adventists believe; if you are a *real* Adventist, you should believe this, too, or get out of the church.") Yet the statements lack any visible teeth—no stated consequence for deviation, no indication in any collateral document this writer has identified that continued church membership or denominational employment depends on submission to them. Instead, recent conversations with members of the General Conference Executive Committee suggest that a pair of these new official statements serve at least two other functions: descriptive (public relations) and advisory (pastoral).

General Conference Communication Director Ray Dabrowski has emphasized the public relations function. "The Church is often asked by the media what its position is on socially

prominent issues. It is important for the Church to have an answer to the question 'what is it that you believe?' on these kinds of matters." The criterion for assessing any such statement has little to do with the practical effect it might have on people struggling with the issue addressed, much less the quality of the biblical exegesis or interpretation behind it. The issue is simply this: Does the statement accurately reflect the position of either a majority of church members or their duly elected representatives meeting in official session? Because the birth control and homosexuality statements *were* adopted at Annual Council, there can be no doubt that, whatever their content, both statements accurately reflect the position of the Church's representative body.

The pastoral function of the statement on homosexuality has been emphasized by Selma Chaij, a psychologist and lay member of the 330-person Executive Committee that approved both statements. "My perception is that there are many people who just do not know what to do about homosexuality in the church. Pastors and local churches are asking for guidance in working with their homosexual members."

In the press release that accompanied the statement on birth control, General Vice President Leo Ranzolin echoed Chaij regarding function: "It is appropriate for the Church to give guidance and some orientation to Christian married couples coming from a wide variety of backgrounds and cultures as to aspects of birth control." As for success fulfilling this pastoral

function, the two statements appear to differ markedly, though this assessment is admittedly subjective and complex and will be explored at greater length below.

Formally titled "Birth Control: A Seventh-day Adventist Statement of Consensus" (see pages 73-74), the birth control statement is in many ways a refreshing model of how to offer genuine moral guidance on complex and controversial issues while still recognizing diversity and subtle complexities. In the statement's preamble, Allan Handysides, the Church's health director and chair of the committee that wrote the document,

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insists "This is not a statement of dogma. We are not assuming the authority to dictate, but to provide guidelines for those who want to know where we stand." The statement largely succeeds in creating a moral context within which couples can make responsible reproductive decisions. This context is woven from raw materials often thought to be natural to people on opposite ideological extremes. For example, the statement notes as related concerns increased temptation for sexual promiscuity due to free access to contraception, as well as the potential for patriarchal oppression of women inherent in limited access to contraception.

The statement avoids narrow, rigid proclamations about what constitutes acceptable expressions of sexuality and instead identifies useful biblical principles of stewardship and responsibility. While recognizing the importance of procreation, the statement takes the stand that marital sexuality has fundamental purposes in addition to reproduction. This is welcome clarification for those who may still struggle with nineteenth-century notions that the pursuit of consensual sexual pleasure even between married couples is something vaguely sinful, or at least unseemly.

Point number five, where the statement identifies appropriate methods of birth control, contains the meat of the statement. The statement deems as morally acceptable birth control methods that merely prevent conception because it views sexual intercourse as much for pleasure as for procreation and childbearing as a



choice, not an obligation. The statement respectfully notes the views of some that any interference with a fertilized egg is immoral, but manages to convey the message that responsible Christians can use birth control pills and IUDs morally. The paragraph concludes with an assertion that abortion "is not morally acceptable for purposes of birth control." There is less here than meets the eye, however, because every abortion results in the control or termination of a birth. This rather vague (perhaps intentionally so) construction is open to several interpretations. Perhaps it represents an attempt to condemn casual abortions and abdication of reproductive responsibility before engaging in intercourse.

The attempt to create a document that respects the full range of responsible Christian positions while still offering useful moral guidance is not entirely successful. For instance, sandwiched between two sentences that note the sinfulness of intercourse outside of marriage is another that mentions the usefulness of some birth control methods to reduce the risks of sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy in nonmarital sexual relationships. The paragraph in which this interesting

the Church with a meaningful moral context within which to hold sincere ethical conversations.

Perhaps one reason for the difference is the statement's origin. The statement on homosexuality did not originate in the Christian View of Human Life Committee, despite a sentence in the official press release that implied the contrary. Reports suggest that this particular committee, which authored the statement on birth control, is characterized by careful attention to relevant scholarship and science, pastoral concern for the Church community, and a commitment to respect the full spectrum of a diverse membership.

The statement on homosexuality actually originated in the Public and Official Statements Committee, a body whose mission is to initiate, prepare, and evaluate official public statements on behalf of the General Conference. According to two different members of the Executive Committee, the Public and Official Statements Committee is more concerned with the public relations function of official statements than with their pastoral function.

The brief statement on homosexuality concludes, "Adventists are opposed to homosexual practices and relationships." There is little to criticize if those words are taken simply as a press release that summarizes the view of the Church expressed through its representatives at Annual Council. Unfortunately, however, the statement pretends to fill another, normative function and refuses to fill a pastoral function that

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triad occurs bears the title "Misuses of Birth Control," yet the intended implication of the middle sentence is not clear. One can imagine half the committee reading the sentence with approval and the other half with disapproval. Apparently, not all differences can be split.

In many ways, the "Seventh-day Adventist Position Statement on Homosexuality" (see page 74) could not differ more from the Church's statement on birth control. Absent is any disclaimer as to the former's dogmatic nature or its attempts to dictate to others. Absent, too, is a tone of respect for a full range of Christian perspectives, or recognition of related complexities and subtleties. The document lacks evidence of underlying redemptive and pastoral concern to provide

seems to be needed desperately. In these more important senses, the statement must be viewed as a resounding failure.

Normative pretensions can be detected in repeated claims within the document itself and in an accompanying press release that the statement expresses "The Scriptural view about homosexuality" (press release). This is not simply a public relations statement that describes what the Annual Council of the Seventh-day Adventist Church voted in regard to homosexuality during the fall of 1999. Here is a claim to report in 277 words the clear biblical position on a topic as complex and difficult as homosexuality, without so much as a hint that sincere, Bible loving, God-fearing Christians can interpret matters differently.



The results are unsettling. For example, the official statement uses familiar texts like Leviticus 20:7-21, Romans 1:24-27, and 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 to condemn homosexuality, but fails to mention any of the complexities involved in their interpretation. Thus, it ignores verses from the same chapter in Leviticus that condemn to death any man who reviles his father and mother (20:9) or that require any man who has sexual intercourse with a woman during her menstrual cycle to be "cut off from the people" (20:18). All this despite any possible help these texts might give for a meaningful interpretation of Levitical purity codes. Furthermore, the statement does not even hint at the well-known difficulty finding an appropriate English equivalent for the Greek word *arsenokoitai* in 1 Corinthians 6:9, which the New International Version translates as "homosexual offenders" but the Revised Standard Version renders as "sexual perverts." Not least among the statement's shortcomings is the fact that it also ignores the troubling possibility that the New Testament world may not have even known a category that corresponds to modern understandings of homosexuality as a state of predominant sexual attraction to the same sex.<sup>1</sup>

An official statement of the Church—whatever its function—is probably not the place for extended biblical exegesis, and the items noted above do not necessarily demonstrate that the statement's conclusion is erroneous. Still, these deficiencies *are* sufficient to demonstrate the failure of any statement that pretends to report the clear, simple, biblical position on homosexuality without acknowledging some room for different interpretations. This fault is particularly troubling because it raises the possibility that the statement may unintentionally promote attacks on homosexuals as well as those who emphasize and respect the role of interpretation in matters related to the Bible.

Besides failing to articulate a defensible normative view of homosexuality, the statement does not provide genuine pastoral guidance. No matter how many times one repeats variations on the theme of "love the sinner, hate the sin," it is difficult to communicate true compassion when an integral part of a person's core identity is rejected. (Try to detect compassion in the following words: "We love Adventists, but we hate, and are disgusted by, any religious behavior, and any intent or desire to pray or worship. They can be part of our community as long as they pretend not to love or believe in God.") The official statement on homosexuality could have identified a few core biblical values and priorities to help guide sexual decision making among all Christians—gay or straight—rather than rushing to an

overly simplistic conclusion that severely limits genuine conversation about morality and homosexuality.

By all accounts, two motivators for this statement were the growing visibility of gay members in local churches and the struggle of pastors and church boards to respond in ways that are redemptive and have moral integrity. It is hard to see how a simple "we're against it" can be of much help if it ignores complex biblical evidence as well as growing scientific data regarding the biological basis for a great deal of sexual orientation and resistance to change that orientation.

The Annual Council adopted its statement on homosexuality on October 3, 1999. Almost a year to the day before—on October 7, 1998—an openly gay 21-year-old college student named Matthew Shepard was found tied to a fence, his hands bound beneath him, blood streaming from one of his ears. Shepard never regained consciousness and died five days later. Perhaps the official statement's repeated expressions of compassion for homosexuals would have rung more sincere had the document also included condemnation of antihomosexual violence in all forms as strong as its condemnation of homosexual behavior.

The Annual Council would have risked much had it approved a statement on homosexuality as thoughtful and ethically demanding as the one it passed on birth control. Approval would have required a fundamental shift in thinking, away from a focus on public relations in defense of traditional orthodoxy toward a pastoral focus on the struggle that we all share—whatever our sexual orientation—to embrace our sexuality with genuine ethical and moral integrity. Clearly many at the top levels of leadership in the Church have this pastoral concern. According to one member of the Executive Committee who spoke at the Autumn Council in favor of a more nuanced and compassionate statement, a large number of fellow council members expressed their support in private. Sadly, however, no one spoke out on the floor.

One cannot be surprised that the Church in official session chose not to issue a statement that normalized homosexual relationships. One *can* be disappointed that, at the last Annual Council in the second millennium of our Lord, the Church did not find courage to draw a circle large enough to include heterosexual and homosexual members in redemptive conversation and community.

## Notes and References

1. L. W. Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 118.



# Birth Control: A Seventh-day Adventist Statement of Consensus

<[http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/main\\_stat44.htm](http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/main_stat44.htm)>

Scientific technologies today permit greater control of human fertility and reproduction than was formerly possible. These technologies make possible sexual intercourse with the expectation of pregnancy and childbirth greatly reduced. Christian married couples have a potential for fertility control that has created many questions with wide-ranging religious, medical, social, and political implications. Opportunities and benefits exist as a result of the new capabilities, as do challenges and drawbacks. A number of moral issues must be considered. Christians who ultimately must make their own personal choices on these issues must be informed in order to make sound decisions based on biblical principles.

Among the issues to be considered is the question of the appropriateness of human intervention in the natural biological processes of human reproduction. If any intervention is appropriate, then additional questions regarding what, when, and how must be addressed. Other related concerns include:

- \* likelihood of increased sexual immorality which the availability and use of birth control methods may promote;

- \* gender dominance issues related to the sexual privileges and prerogatives of both women and men;

- \* social issues, including the right of a society to encroach upon personal freedom in the interest of the society at large and the burden of economic and educational support for the disadvantaged; and

- \* stewardship issues related to population growth and the use of natural resources.

A statement of moral considerations regarding birth control must be set in the broader context of biblical teachings about sexuality, marriage, parenthood, and the value of children—and an understanding of the interconnectedness between these issues. With an awareness of the diversity of opinion within the Church, the following biblically based principles are set forth to educate and to guide in decision making.

**1. Responsible stewardship.** God created human beings in His own image, male and female, with capacities to think and to make decisions (Isa. 1:18; Josh. 24:15; Deut. 30:15-20). God gave human beings dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:26, 28).

This dominion requires overseeing and caring for nature. Christian stewardship also requires taking responsibility for human procreation. Sexuality, as one of the aspects of human nature over which the individual has stewardship, is to be expressed in harmony with God's will (Exod. 20:14; Gen. 39:9; Lev. 20:10-21; 1 Cor. 6:12-20).

**2. Procreative purpose.** The perpetuation of the human family is one of God's purposes for human sexuality (Gen. 1:28). Though it may be inferred that marriages are generally intended to yield offspring, Scripture never presents procreation as an obligation of every couple in order to please God. However, divine revelation places a high value on children and expresses the joy to be found in parenting (Matt. 19:14; Ps. 127:3). Bearing and rearing children help parents to understand God and to develop compassion, caring, humility, and unselfishness (Ps. 103:13; Luke 11:13).

**3. Unifying purpose.** Sexuality serves a unifying purpose in marriage that is God-ordained and distinguishable from the procreative purpose (Gen. 2:24). Sexuality in marriage is intended to include joy, pleasure, and delight (Eccl. 9:9; Prov. 5:18, 19; Song of Sol. 4:16-5:1). God intends that couples may have ongoing sexual communion apart from procreation (1 Cor. 7:3-5), a communion that forges strong bonds and protects a marriage partner from an inappropriate relationship with someone other than his or her spouse (Prov. 5:15-20; Song of Sol. 8:6, 7). In God's design, sexual intimacy is not only for the purpose of conception. Scripture does not prohibit married couples from enjoying the delights of conjugal relations while taking measures to prevent pregnancy.

**4. Freedom to choose.** In creation—and again through the redemption of Christ—God has given human beings freedom of choice, and He asks them to use their freedom responsibly (Gal. 5:1, 13). In the divine plan, husband and wife constitute a distinct family unit, having both the freedom and the responsibility to share in making determinations about their family (Gen. 2:24). Married partners should be considerate of each other in making decisions about birth control, being willing to consider the needs of the other as well as one's own (Phil. 2:4). For those who choose to bear children, the procreative choice is not without limits. Several factors must inform their choice, including the ability to provide for the needs of children (1 Tim. 5:8); the physical, emotional, and spiritual health of the mother and other care givers (3 John 2; 1 Cor. 6:19; Phil. 2:4; Eph. 5:25); the social and political circumstances into which children will be born (Matt. 24:19); and the quality of life



and the global resources available. We are stewards of God's creation and therefore must look beyond our own happiness and desires to consider the needs of others (Phil. 2:4).

**5. Appropriate methods of birth control.** Moral decision making about the choice and use of the various birth control agents must stem from an understanding of their probable effects on physical and emotional health, the manner in which the various agents operate, and the financial expenditure involved. A variety of methods of birth control—including barrier methods, spermicides, and sterilization—prevent conception and are morally acceptable. Some other birth-control methods<sup>1</sup> may prevent the release of the egg (ovulation), may prevent the union of egg and sperm (fertilization), or may prevent attachment of the already fertilized egg (implantation). Because of uncertainty about how they will function in any given instance, they may be morally suspect for people who believe that protectable human life begins at fertilization. However, since the majority of fertilized ova naturally fail to implant or are lost after implantation, even when birth control methods are not being used, hormonal methods of birth control and IUDs, which represent a similar process, may be viewed as morally acceptable. Abortion, the intentional termination of an established pregnancy, is not morally acceptable for purposes of birth control.

**6. Misuse of birth control.** Though the increased ability to manage fertility and protect against sexually transmitted disease may be useful to many married couples, birth control can be misused. For example, those who would engage in premarital and extramarital sexual relations may more readily indulge in such behaviors because of the availability of birth control methods. The use of such methods to protect sex outside of marriage may reduce the risks of sexually transmitted diseases and/or pregnancy. Sex outside of marriage, however, is both harmful and immoral, whether or not these risks have been diminished.

**7. A redemptive approach.** The availability of birth-control methods makes education about sexuality and morality even more imperative. Less effort should be put forth in condemnation and more in education and redemptive approaches that seek to allow each individual to be persuaded by the deep movings of the Holy Spirit.

## Editorial Note by the Committee

1. Some current examples of these methods include intrauterine devices (IUDs), hormone pills (including the "morning-after pill"), injections, or implants. Questions about these methods should be referred to a medical professional.

## Seventh-day Adventist Position Statement on Homosexuality

[<http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/main\\_stat46.htm.>](http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/main_stat46.htm)

The Seventh-day Adventist Church recognizes that every human being is valuable in the sight of God, and we seek to minister to all men and women in the spirit of Jesus. We also believe that by God's grace and through the encouragement of the community of faith, an individual may live in harmony with the principles of God's Word.

Seventh-day Adventists believe that sexual intimacy belongs only within the marital relationship of a man and a woman. This was the design established by God at creation. The Scriptures declare: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24, NIV). Throughout Scripture this heterosexual pattern is affirmed. The Bible makes no accommodation for homosexual activity or relationships. Sexual acts outside the circle of a heterosexual marriage are forbidden (Lev. 20:7-21; Rom. 1:24-27; 1 Cor. 6:9-11). Jesus Christ reaffirmed the divine creation intent: "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?'" So they are no longer two, but one" (Matt. 19:4-6, NIV). For these reasons Adventists are opposed to homosexual practices and relationships.

Seventh-day Adventists endeavor to follow the instruction and example of Jesus. He affirmed the dignity of all human beings and reached out compassionately to persons and families suffering the consequences of sin. He offered caring ministry and words of solace to struggling people, while differentiating His love for sinners from His clear teaching about sinful practices.

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