

Uncovering the Origins of the Statement of Twenty-seven Fundamental Beliefs

By Fritz Guy

In 1861, when Seventh-day Adventist ministers in the state of Michigan gathered in Battle Creek to consider the prospect of adopting a formal organizational structure, James White introduced the idea of a “church covenant.” It would simply say, “We, the undersigned, hereby associate ourselves together, as a church, taking the name Seventh-day Adventists, covenanting to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus Christ.”¹ So the total content of this “covenant” would consist of the proposed denominational name and the words of a favorite verse of Scripture (Rev. 14:12). But to some in the group even this brief, innocuous statement sounded suspiciously like the beginning of a “creed,” and thus a step toward “becoming Babylon.”

John Loughborough was blunt: “The first step of apostasy is to get up a creed, telling us what we shall believe. The second is to make that creed a test of fellowship. The third is to try members by that creed. The fourth is to denounce as heretics those who do not believe that creed. And fifth, to commence persecution against such.”

White responded by explaining that he, too, was opposed to forming a creed,

although he gave a different reason. “Making a creed,” he said, “is setting the stakes, and barring the way to all future advancement... The Bible is our creed. We reject everything in the form of a human creed. We take the Bible and the gifts of the Spirit; embracing the faith that thus the Lord will teach us from time to time. And in this we take a position against the formation of a creed.”²

Whatever the reasoning, the common



Adventist conviction was that formulating a creed would be dangerous to the spiritual and theological health of the fledgling community of faith. But eventually the doubters were persuaded that a “covenant” would not be a “creed,” and the proposed covenant was adopted unanimously.

The reluctance to have anything like a creed has been explained by Walter Scragg:

The early [Adventist] leaders came out of bodies that they felt had calcified their beliefs in...creedal statements, and [had] fought to defend those statements rather than embark on fresh searches for biblical understanding and truth. The Reformation remained incomplete because it was held back by creeds. They also feared that such statements might become a rival to the freedom of the Spirit that they saw operating in their midst, both in the work of Ellen G. White, and in their various study conferences at which they sought to find answers to perplexing Bible questions.³

More than a century later, some of the spiritual descendants of the early Adventists had similar misgivings about the idea of revising the official statement of Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists. One of my most respected friends called from halfway across the continent to express disappointment that I was involved in such a project. He argued that the whole endeavor was a bad idea because of its huge potential for misuse. Unintentionally echoing both White and Loughborough, he insisted that it would inhibit creative thinking and be used as a disciplinary device to keep people in line. It would, in other words, be treated like a creed.

Both in 1861 and in 1980, the skeptics were right in their predictions but wrong in their reasoning. They were right in their predictions because in spite of a very strong and consistent Adventist bias against creedalism, we find ourselves today with something that functions very much like a creed. Our present statement of Fundamental Beliefs can be, and indeed has been, misused. But neither the danger nor the actuality of abuse negates the value of having such a statement and using it properly. Like the tradition of which it is the most current authoritative expression, it can function not as a stockade to imprison our thinking, but as a platform on which to build.

In this discussion I want to do three things: first describe briefly the historical predecessors of the current statement, then describe what we might call “the saga of the twenty-seven,” and finally offer some reflections on both the process of revision and the product.

The need for some kind of declaration of Adventist belief was recognized several years before the meeting that adopted the church covenant and the denominational name, and there has been a long series of them since.

The first one usually cited was an informal statement by James White in 1853, composed in reply to a query from an official of the Seventh-day Baptist Central Association, who had been directed “to correspond with the Seventh-day Advent people, and learn of their faith.” White replied with a brief review of the gradual acceptance of the Sabbath by “that portion of the Second Advent people who observe the fourth commandment,” and then explained:

As a people we are brought together from divisions of the Advent body and from various denominations, holding different views on some subjects; yet, thank Heaven, the Sabbath is a mighty platform on which we can all stand united. And while standing here, with the aid of no other creed than the Word of God, and bound together by the bonds of love—love for the truth, love for each other, and love for a perishing world—which is stronger than death, all party feelings are lost. We are united in these great subjects: Christ’s immediate, personal second Advent, and the observance of all of the commandments of God, and the faith of his Son Jesus Christ, as necessary to a readiness for his Advent.⁴

Later that year, White published in the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* a series of four editorials on “Gospel Order,” by which he meant church organization; but he insisted that this did not include formulating a creed: In the first editorial he said, “We want no human creed; the Bible is sufficient. The divine order of the New Testament is sufficient to organize the church of Christ. If more were needed, it would have been given by inspiration.”

In the second he reiterated his conviction

that the church of Christ...is provided with a creed that is sufficient. ‘All scripture is given by inspiration of God.’... Let the church of Christ take the Bible for their only creed, believe its plain teaching, obey its injunctions, and for them it will accomplish the very work for which it was designed... While we reject all human creeds, or platforms... we take the Bible, the perfect rule of faith and practice, given by inspiration of God. This shall be our platform on which to stand, our creed and discipline.⁵

Nevertheless, in August 1854 the first issue of volume six included in its masthead a list of five “Leading Doctrines Taught by the Review,” placed immediately below the identification of James White as editor, who was presumably responsible for the list:

The Bible, and the Bible alone, the rule of faith and duty.
The Law of God, as taught in the Old and New Testaments, unchangeable.
The Personal Advent of Christ and the Resurrection of the Just, before the Millennium.
The Earth restored to its Eden perfection and glory, the final Inheritance of the Saints.
Immortality alone through Christ, to be given to the Saints of the Resurrection.⁶

This brief doctrinal summary continued as part of the Review masthead for seventeen subsequent issues, and then disappeared.⁷

A more elaborate statement, evidently the work of Uriah Smith, appeared in 1872 and was entitled “A Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by the Seventh-day Adventists.” This was published unsigned as a pamphlet and contained twenty-five propositions. The introduction read in part:

In presenting to the public this synopsis of our faith, we wish to have it distinctly understood that we have no articles of faith, creed, or discipline, aside from the Bible. We do not put forth this as having any authority with our people; nor is it designed to secure uniformity among them, as a system of faith, but is a brief statement of what is, and has been, with great unanimity, held by them.⁸

This statement was reprinted several times—in *Signs of the Times* in 1874 and 1875, in *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* in 1874, and as a pamphlet in 1875, 1877–78, 1884, and 1888—always introduced by a statement that Adventists “have no creed but the Bible, but they hold to certain well-defined points of faith, for which they feel prepared to give a reason.” It was revised and expanded to twenty-eight sections in the 1889 denominational *Yearbook*, then disappeared for fifteen years, but was reprinted in the *Yearbook* annually from 1905 to 1914, and in the *Review and Herald* in 1912, where it was designated “Fundamental Principles” and described as “by the late Uriah Smith.” It was also reprinted in pamphlet form, with an additional, twenty-ninth section on religious liberty.⁹

In the meantime, in 1894 the Battle Creek Church, the most prominent Adventist congregation at the time, published a church directory that included a statement titled “Some Things Seventh-day Adventists Believe.” It contained thirty items, preceded by this explanation: “The Seventh-day Adventist people have no creed or discipline except the Bible but the following are some of the points of their faith upon which there is quite general agreement.”¹⁰

In 1931, a statement of “Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists” appeared with twenty-two sections. It had been requested by the General Conference Committee and was submitted by a four-person group including C. H. Watson, president of the General Conference, and F. M. Wilcox, editor of the *Review and Herald*.¹¹ According to one version of the story, Wilcox did the actual writing, which was then accepted by the others,¹² but according to another account the initial drafting was done by F. D. Nichol, the thirty-four-year-old associate editor of the *Review*.¹³

However it originated, “realizing that the General Conference Committee—or any other church body—would never accept the document in the form in which it was written, Elder Wilcox, with full knowledge of the group, handed the Statement directly to Edson Rogers, the General Conference statistician, who published it in the 1931 edition of the [*Seventh-day Adventist*] *Yearbook*.”¹⁴

This statement, which began, “Seventh-day Adventists hold certain fundamental beliefs, the principal features of which... may be summarized as follows,” was reprinted each year in the *Yearbook*, and, beginning in 1932, in the *Church Manual* by vote of the General Conference Executive Committee. In 1946, the General Conference session in Washington, D.C., voted that the *Church Manual* could be revised only at a General Conference session—that is, not by the Executive Committee. Although the 1931 statement had thus become “official,” it was still “not, however, considered a creed.”¹⁵

All of these earlier formulations—James White’s informal statement in 1853, the five items in the *Review* masthead in 1854, the “church covenant” of 1861, Uriah Smith’s “Declaration of Fundamental Principles” in 1872, the Battle Creek congregation’s “points of faith” in 1894, and the statement of “Fundamental Beliefs” in 1931—were intended to be descriptions of an existing Adventist consensus rather than prescriptions of a theological obligation.



In 1976, two concerns converged to provide an incentive for a revision of the 1931 statement. On the one hand, some General Conference officials expressed an interest in revising the paragraph on “the Holy Scriptures” to include an explicit assertion that “they give the authentic history of the origin of the world.” At the same time, the *Church Manual* Committee felt a need for the coordination of three different statements it contained: the Fundamental Beliefs, the Doctrinal Instruction for Baptismal Candidates, and the Baptismal Vow.

The *Church Manual* Committee recommended the appointment of an ad hoc committee to consider both—namely, the coordination of the three statements and also “the preparation of an additional ‘Fundamental Belief’ statement to deal with the Doctrine of Creation.” In response, the General Conference Administrative Committee voted that its chair, F. W. Wernick, and the president of the General Conference, appoint the committee, which he did. Its chair was W. Duncan Eva and its secretary was Bernard Seton.¹⁶

At this point the story is illuminated by Seton’s detailed personal recollections of the process. Although his account does not agree completely with the official history, it throws interesting additional light on the developments and the dynamics:

In 1965 I wrote from Berne [Switzerland] to the General Conference administration and expressed my conviction that our Statement of Fundamental Beliefs needed revision from both a theological and a literary point of view. The administration’s reply revealed that no such need was felt at the General Conference, so the matter was dropped.

In 1970 I became an associate secretary of the General Conference, and I found that one of my duties was to serve as secretary of the Church Manual Committee. It became clear that the Manual needed revision. It had grown like Topsy, with additions being made in random fashion by individuals and groups as they became aware of deficiencies in the original statement. The 1967 edition revealed the patchwork nature of the volume and cried out for editorial attention. But on page 22 it was recorded, “All changes or revisions of policy made in the Manual shall be authorized by a General Conference session” [1946]. This quotation proved to be a roadblock in every effort to revise any part of the Manual.

It took several months of interpretive endeavor to convince the committee that editorial, literary

revisions in the interest of clarity and consistency were not covered by the above declaration. Then that light dawned. Many pages of editorial emendations were accepted and eventually presented to the 1975 session of the General Conference in Vienna. Because of the official reluctance to change a jot or tittle of the Manual, I had refrained from including the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs in the initial editorial suggestions.

After the 1975 session, however, the time seemed ripe for attention to the Fundamentals. They seemed surrounded with an aura of untouchability, and the secretary of the committee [that is, Elder Seton himself] seemed to be the only one convinced of the need for revision. He, therefore, produced a complete but cautious revision for presentation to the chairman of the committee and at an early date to a subcommittee that was appointed on the chairman’s initiative. With the initial one-man revision as its base, that subcommittee spent many hours producing a revision for presentation to the full Church Manual Committee.

At every step, however, it was dogged by the tradition of untouchability concerning the Fundamentals. Indeed, there appeared to be an aura of inspiration that hamstrung most suggestions for refinement and improvement of each statement. If that aura could have been laid to rest, the way would have been open for a much more effective revision. Under that mighty handicap, the subcommittee revised the original statement presented to the full committee for its reaction.

An ad hoc committee was then appointed with the specific task of preparing a document that via the Church Manual Committee would prepare a statement for presentation to the 1980 session, and that ad hoc committee was commissioned to work within the framework of minimal revisions, in deference to the idea of the sacrosanct nature of the Manual and the sensitivities of the church membership respecting any change that might appear to touch the doctrinal beliefs of the church. Once again the brakes were on, and revision had to be carried out on a very limited basis.¹⁷

The ad hoc committee did not complete its work until August 1979, when a draft was distributed to General Conference officials. In a cover letter, Eva “noted that [both] formal and substantive changes had been

made. Formally, the sequence of topics had been altered and paragraph headings had been inserted. Substantively, the sections on the Trinity had been expanded from two paragraphs to four, and sections had been added concerning angels, creation and the fall, the church, unity in the body of Christ, the Lord's Supper, Christian marriage, and the Christian home and education."

Eva "also said that before the new statement would be submitted to the full *Church Manual* Committee, it would be presented to 'certain professors at the Seminary with whom we will meet in September.' After the *Church Manual* committee gave its approval, the statement would proceed to the [General Conference] officers, the union [conference] presidents, the Annual Council, and finally to the General Conference session in Dallas [the following April]."¹⁸

Here, again, Seton's recollections are interesting:

When that further limited revision was completed I ventured to suggest that it would be wise to submit the document to our professional theologians on the basis that it would be better to have their reactions before the document went further rather than await their strictures on the session floor. There was some hesitation, but eventually the suggestion was accepted and the document went to Andrews University with the request that it be studied, that comments and emendations be referred back to the ad hoc committee. Those terms of reference did not register, for the University prepared its own set of Fundamentals."¹⁹

Scragg, who was president of the Northern European Division, later reported, "W. Duncan Eva has described to me his surprise when he received back from [the Andrews scholars] not a reworking of the material submitted but a completely rewritten document." But in spite of this surprise, the Andrews document

became the basis of the one recommended by the 1979 Annual Council to the 1980 General Conference Session... To one used to the workings of denominational machinery it is nothing less than staggering that the church could in 1980 meet the challenge of the 1946 action which put a protective mantle over the 1931 statement, and not only reconsider the statement, but actually act as if it did not exist and create new language, new articles, new scripture references, and then have the new document voted."²⁰

Seton similarly observed,

The University's action accomplished what a timorous interpretation of *Church Manual* procedure had failed to effect. Hindsight suggests that it would have been wise if the *Church Manual* Committee had worked more closely with Andrews theologians from an early date, but the traditional reticence to touch the *Manual* would probably have made that a too revolutionary suggestion.²¹

What had gone on at Andrews, however, was as straightforward as it was unexpected. The university president appointed the vice president for academic administration, the dean of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, and eight members of the Seminary faculty to meet with Eva, with two additional faculty members added later.²² However, none recalled instructions that we were to make "only comments and emendations."

On the contrary, it seemed to many of us that although on the one hand "in general the statement prepared by the *ad hoc* committee in Washington was a genuine improvement over the 1931 statement." On the other hand, it "was uneven in its organization and style... with mixed terminology, a lack of balance with regard to length of individual sections, differences in the way documentation was handled, and a general administrative concern with events and behavior rather than meaning."²³ Perhaps Eva's communication with the Andrews group was so gentlemanly and respectful that we failed to understand its precise intent. In any case, we decided almost immediately that what was needed was not more editing but a complete rewriting.

So we went to work, deciding what should be included and assigning various sections to different members of the committee. For example, Lawrence Geraty produced the original draft of section six, "Creation"; Ivan Blazen drafted section twenty-three, "Christ's Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary"; and I drafted sections two, "The Trinity," and three, "The Father." Of course, many minor and some major changes were made not only by the faculty group but also by later committees at the General Conference headquarters and at the General Conference session, so the final content and wording cannot properly be attributed to this initial drafting. New materials beyond the 1931 state-



ment included the sections on creation and family life.

As it finally turned out, the statement had a deliberate structure; it was not just twenty-seven beads on string. Indeed, it reflected a very traditional theological pattern:²⁴

[Prolegomena]

Preamble

[Word of God]

1. The Holy Scriptures

[God]

2. The Trinity

3. The Father

4. The Son

5. The Holy Spirit

[Creation]

6. Creation

7. The Nature of Man

[Salvation]

8. The Great Controversy

9. The Life, Death, and Resurrection of Christ

10. The Experience of Salvation

[The Community of Faith]

11. The Church

12. The Remnant and Its Mission

13. Unity in the Body of Christ

14. Baptism

15. Lord's Supper

16. Spiritual Gifts and Ministries

17. The Gift of Prophecy

[Life in Christ]

18. The Law of God

19. The Sabbath

20. Stewardship

21. Christian Behavior

22. Marriage and the Family

[Consummation]

23. Christ's Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary

24. The Second Coming of Christ

25. Death and Resurrection

26. The Millennium and the End of Sin

27. The New Earth

This was merely a plausible, traditional structure, certainly not the "right," "holy," or "God-given" structure.²⁵ There are many different ways in which the theological pie can reasonably be cut.

The number twenty-seven was a fairly arbitrary initiative of mine. As secretary of the group, I was given the task of recording and organizing the results of our deliberations. Since there was no predetermined number of sections, we could have come out with twenty-six or twenty-eight; but I preferred twenty-seven. Twenty-six seemed (to me) to be a dull, uninteresting number; twenty-eight seemed better because it was four times seven, the arithmetical product of two numbers prominent in the Book of Revelation.

Twenty-seven seemed more interesting still: it was three to the third power, three times three times three. Given the importance of the Trinity (Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:13 [14]), and the threefold praise of the angels, "Holy, Holy, Holy" (Isa. 6:3), the other numbers didn't have a chance: twenty-seven it would be. During the subsequent discussion at the General Conference, the number of sections was increased to twenty-eight, but subsequently reduced again to twenty-seven.²⁶ So twenty-seven it remained, and the statement is sometimes identified informally as "the twenty-seven."

Some other details may be of interest although they are not significant enough to have been included in the historical record of the project.

The group invested the most time and effort on section twenty-three, "Christ's Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary." Because exegetical and experiential questions had been publicly raised about the traditional doctrine of the sanctuary in heaven and its "cleansing," we tried to construct a cautious statement that would fairly represent what we understood to be a broad consensus of the church membership.

The group decided not to include a section on Christian education after all, on the grounds that if we thus highlighted the work of one of the church's major organizational departments, we would in fairness have to highlight others as well (Sabbath School, health care, youth ministry, and so forth), and that would make the statement too much like an organizational chart.

Section fifteen, "The Lord's Supper," evoked considerable debate over the participation of children. In spite of the Adventist tradition of open communion, some members of the group were convinced that only children who had been baptized should be permitted to participate; others were equally convinced that a child who was old

enough to know what the symbols meant should be able to participate. We reached an impasse we could not resolve, so this issue was not (and is not) mentioned in the statement.

But most important was a sense of excitement, and an awareness of the importance of the task. We were trying to be both descriptive (expressing beliefs of our community of faith) and instructive (leading the community of faith to greater perception and clarity). Had we been writing our own personal statements of belief, each of us would have written somewhat differently, reflecting our individual backgrounds, perspectives, and understandings.

Then came the wider discussion. The proposed revision went back to the General Conference, where it was modified slightly by the *Church Manual* Committee and approved in principle at the Annual Council in October 1979. It was published in the *Review* in February 1980, with a request for comments from readers around the world.²⁷

There were many suggestions, ranging from the superficial to the extremely thoughtful; probably the most thorough examination was given by the religion faculty at Pacific Union College. Further discussions between General Conference officers and the Seminary group and subsequent major revision at the General Conference produced significant modifications.²⁸ Finally the statement was presented for consideration by the 2000 delegates to the fifty-third session of the General Conference in Dallas in April.²⁹

The discussion in Dallas began with extensive introductory comments by President Neal C. Wilson, including the following:

For some time we have been considering a refinement of our Statement on Fundamental Beliefs... No doubt you have done both some studying and some praying.

We have heard a variety of interesting rumors. Some, it is said, understand that the church leaders want to destroy completely the foundations of the church and set the church on a course that would be un-Biblical, contrary to the tradition of the past and to historical Adventism. My fellow delegates, there is nothing that is further from the truth.

We have also heard that any time we touch the Statement on Fundamental Beliefs we would be introducing the Omega, the final confusion of theological and doctrinal positions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I suggest to you

that this is also a very unfortunate statement.

I can understand how individuals far removed from where some of these things are being studied, and who may not themselves have been asked to participate in a restudy or refinement of wording, might feel that there is something very sinister, mysterious, and secret going on that will suddenly confront us, and that it may contribute to the ultimate detriment and demise of the Seventh-day Adventist Church... I assure you that no one who has been struggling with some of these matters has any such intention.

There are others who think they know why this is being done. They believe it is being prepared as a club to batter someone over the head, to try to get people into a narrow concept of theology, not leaving any opportunity for individual interpretation of prophecy, or any individual views with respect to theology or certain areas of doctrine. This also is unfortunate, because this never has been and is not the intention of any study that has been given to the Statement on Fundamental Beliefs.

Some academicians, theologians, and others have expressed the fear that this statement was being developed so that the church could confront them with a checklist to determine whether they should be disqualified from teaching in one of our institutions of higher education. It is very, very tragic when these kinds of rumors begin to develop.

I fully recognize, and am very willing to admit, that we do need to use extreme care, including a wholesome variety of minds with training and background, to provide input on this kind of statement. However, I do not think anyone should become frightened when the wording of such a document is studied. Perhaps I should go one step further and say that the Seventh-day Adventist Church does not have a creed as such. Nothing set in concrete in terms of human words. The time never comes when any human document cannot be improved upon. We feel that every 20, 30, or 50 years it is a very good thing for us to be sure we are using the right terminology and approach... Certain terms mean today what they did not mean 50 years ago... It is extremely important that we should understand what we believe and that we should express it simply, clearly, and in the most concise way possible.³⁰



Thus the process of discussion, further revision, and final approval of “the twenty-seven fundamentals” began.

As Geraty observed, “The process undertaken in Dallas was more helpful for those who participated in it than it was for the product.”³¹ Recalling the aphorism that a camel looks like a horse designed by committee, anyone can recognize that a committee of nearly two thousand members is not an ideal group to revise any document.³² But it was certainly good that a General Conference session, the most authoritative structure of the church, spent much of a week talking about the beliefs that give us our theological identity, not simply

the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. These beliefs, as set forth here, constitute the church’s understanding and expression of the teaching of Scripture. Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God’s Holy Word.³⁵

The last sentence encompasses Wilson’s introductory observation that “we should understand what we believe and...express it simply, clearly, and in the most concise

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about church structures, policies, and procedures.

An example of the adjustments that occurred in Dallas is paragraph seventeen, “Ellen G. White.” Some delegates wanted to enhance the affirmation of her authority, so where the original draft read, “Her writings provide the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction,” the revision read (with a grammatically dangling modifier), “As the Lord’s messenger, her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth which provide the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction.” Then, lest this change be misunderstood as putting the Ellen White writings on the level of Scripture, a further clarification was added: “They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested.”

Perhaps as important as the revisions that were made were the revisions that were not made. These included a number of suggestions for greater specificity regarding the days of creation week, the beginning of the Sabbath, the place(s) of Christ’s ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, ways of supporting the church financially, and proscribed behaviors such as card-playing, theatergoing, and dancing.³³

One extraordinarily good thing occurred at the Dallas session, even as the committee of two thousand was designing its theological camel: the addition of the preamble, the most important sentences in the whole document. Unofficially known as “the Graybill preamble” because it was initially drafted and proposed by Ronald Graybill, it reads:³⁴

Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed and hold certain fundamental beliefs to be

way possible,” and goes beyond it to reflect the important but too-often-overlooked emphasis of Ellen White that we have noticed previously: “Whenever the people of God are growing in grace, they will be constantly obtaining a clearer understanding of His Word. They will discern new light and beauty in its sacred truths. This has been true in the history of the church in all ages, and thus it will continue to the end.”³⁶

Unfortunately, this preamble has also been often overlooked. The book *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, published in 1988 by the General Conference Ministerial Department, ignored the preamble completely. So did a series of Sabbath School lessons devoted to the Fundamental Beliefs in the last two quarters of 1988,³⁷ as well as a similar series of articles in *Ministry* in August 1995.³⁸ Perhaps this repeated omission is understandable: the preamble is different in content and intent; it is not about the substance of the Fundamental Beliefs, but about their status. Perhaps also the authors of these various interpretations of the current statement disagreed with the preamble’s explicit relativizing of any particular formulation of belief.

Whatever the reason, however, disregarding the preamble is unfortunate, because it ignores one of the most basic elements in authentic Adventism—namely, its commitment to “present truth,” to a progressive understanding of Scripture, of God, and of ourselves in relation to God.

Fortunately, however, in his brief history of Seventh-day Adventist theology George Knight refers to the preamble as “the all-important preamble” and comments, “That remarkable statement captures the essence of what

James White and the other Adventist pioneers taught. Creedal inflexibility, as they saw it, was not only a positive evil but also denied the fact that the church had a *living* Lord who would continue to lead them into truth.... The concept of progressive change stands at the heart of Adventist theology.”³⁹

Finally we can reflect on the process and the product. The input into the process was good, but still not ideal. For the first time, a formal statement of Adventist beliefs was not the work of a single person or a small group. There was an intentional inclusion of scholars in theology and biblical studies, and an attempt to include the church membership at large. But more could have been done, and should be done the next time.

First and foremost, there should have been far more participation by women, who comprise well over half of the Adventist membership but who were not named to any of the committees involved in the process. Their official participation was therefore limited to the discussion on the floor of the General Conference session, and the result is an essentially male statement.⁴⁰

There should also have been provision for wide participation by church members who were not sufficiently fluent in English to read the draft statement published in the *Adventist Review*. This was in part the result of the draft’s relatively late publication.

The discussion at the General Conference session should have included more scholars. Blincoe was there as dean of the Seminary, and Geraty was there as the elected representative of the Seminary faculty; both were members of the editorial committee and Geraty was actively involved in the discussion. But surely Raoul Dederen, who as chair of the Seminary’s Department of Theology was arguably the Church’s most significant theologian, should have been invited, as well as Kenneth Strand, the Church’s leading church historian, and many of the Church’s other religion scholars in various parts of the world.

In spite of these and other imperfections, however, the product is a useful document and an improvement over its predecessor. Although the statement as a whole was quite well received, there were, inevitably, some negative reactions and questions.

Some, particularly in Australia, were dismayed by section twenty-three, “Christ’s Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary,” which they regarded as “watered down” and even “a sellout.”

A different sort of criticism has concerned the absence

of certain essential dimensions of spiritual life—forgiveness, for example, and prayer. The explanation, which does not satisfy everyone, is that it is intended to be a statement of Adventist *beliefs*, not a description of Adventist spirituality, any more than it is a description of the Church’s organizational structure. One can of course reply that Adventists in fact *believe* in forgiveness and prayer.

Sometimes the notion of “twenty-seven fundamental beliefs” has seemed like an oxymoron: if there are twenty-seven of them, how can they all be “fundamental”? There are two answers to this question. The first is that the word *fundamental* is relative: some things are *more* fundamental than others. Among the things Adventists believe, for example, the Sabbath is important; indeed, it is essential; but the truth that God is unconditional love, and that Jesus of Nazareth is the supreme revelation of that love, are even more important, more fundamental in Adventist theology and life.

The second answer is that, as statements of belief go, the number twenty-seven is not unusually large: in the Anglican tradition there are the famous “Thirty-nine Articles of Religion”; and in the Lutheran tradition the Augsburg Confession contains twenty-eight articles, some of which are several pages long.⁴¹

So is it a “creed” after all? In one way it certainly is: it is a formal, official, and therefore “authoritative” statement of belief. This is true in spite of the fact that the opening lines insist that “Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed,” and in spite of Wilson’s assurance to the General Conference delegates that “the Seventh-day Adventist church does not have a creed as such.” So claims that it is not a creed may seem somewhat strained.

On the other hand, however, there may be no other statement of belief in Christian history that begins with an explicit expectation that it may be changed “when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God’s Holy Word.” Anyone who thinks of the Fundamental Beliefs statement as a “creed” must recognize that it is a very unusual one that breaks the historic mold.

Of course, like all statements of belief, this one is subject to misuse and abuse. The preamble notwithstanding, it can be regarded as absolute rather than relative, and thus stifle rather than stimulate theological thinking and conversation. It can be interpreted rigidly rather than flexibly,



and used to discourage creative thought about the meaning of Adventist faith. But church people who abuse others with a creed would probably abuse them *without* a creed.

Furthermore, in spite of their potential and actual misuse and their understandably bad press, “creeds” can be useful. A creed can be appropriately “authoritative” in the sense of representing the church family as a whole and expressing its theological consensus. A church needs to define itself theologically; this is a matter not only of identity, but also of “truth in advertising.” Persons interested in becoming part of a particular community of faith deserve to know what they are getting into; and journalists who write about such a community ought to have access to a reliable description of what its people generally believe.

Yet there is an ironic moral to this story. As a community of faith grows, the need for organization becomes increasingly obvious, and so does the need for theological self-definition. The world in which we live and serve, and to which we witness, needs to know who we are and what we believe. Oncoming generations also need to know who we are and what we believe. So it is not only legitimate but valuable to have statements of belief, especially as the community becomes more diverse—ethnically, culturally, educationally, and theologically.

But—and here is the irony—with the growing and obvious need for such statements, there also comes a growing and much less obvious danger inherent in them. As soon as we produce a statement of belief, some people will stop thinking, stop asking questions, and stop growing. And some people will use the statement to judge others, and to try to exclude from the community those who don’t measure up, and to inhibit creative thinking within the community. Loughborough may have been too pessimistic in 1861, but he wasn’t entirely wrong when he warned against developing a creed that would tell us what we must believe, making it a test of fellowship, trying members by it, and denouncing as heretics and persecuting those who do not affirm it.

To be sure, this twofold danger is not an Adventist monopoly; it occurs in every community of faith. But it is especially significant for Adventists, because the spirit, the *geist*, the *ethos* of Adventist theology is an openness to and quest for “present truth”—an openness and quest that “will continue until the end.” This is why the preamble is so important. To stop thinking, to stop asking questions, to stop “seeking a fuller understanding” is to betray our Adventist heritage. It ought to be literally *unthinkable*.

To put it positively: to the extent that a congregation is a context for “obtaining a clearer understanding of

[God’s] Word” and for “discerning new light and beauty in its sacred truths,” it will be an example of what it means to be authentically Adventist in the twenty-first century.

Notes and References

1. “Doings of the Battle Creek Conference, Oct. 5 & 6, 1861,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Oct. 18, 1861, 148.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Walter R. L. Scragg, “Doctrinal Statements and the Life and Witness of the Church,” unpublished paper presented at workers’ meetings in Vasterang, Sweden, and Manchester, England, between Aug. 24 and Sept. 4, 1981.
4. James White, “Resolution of the Seventh-day Baptist Central Association,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Aug. 11, 1853, 52.
5. James White, “Gospel Order,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Dec. 20, 1853, 173, 180.
6. *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Aug. 15, 1854, 1.
7. See *ibid.*, Dec. 26, 1854, 137, 145.
8. *A Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by the Seventh-day Adventists* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1872), 3; quoted in *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2d rev. ed., 2 vols. (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1996), 1:465.
9. *SDA Encyclopedia* (1996), 1:465–66.
10. *Membership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church of Battle Creek, Michigan, As It Stood April 16, 1894*, 12, quoted by Scragg, “Doctrinal Statements,” 9.
11. According to Lawrence Geraty, “A New Statement of Fundamental Beliefs,” *Spectrum* 11.1 (July 1980): 2, the other members of the committee were M. E. Kern, associate secretary of the General Conference, and E. R. Palmer, manager of the Review and Herald Publishing Association.
12. See *ibid.* 2–3; Scragg, “Doctrinal Statements,” 15.
13. Raymond F. Cottrell, oral statement at a meeting of the San Diego Adventist Forum, Apr. 8, 2000. The two accounts are not necessarily incompatible; it is possible that Nichol prepared an initial draft that was reviewed and perhaps reworked by Wilcox, and then submitted to the other three members of the committee.
14. Gottfried Oosterwal, “The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Mission: 1919–1979,” unpublished paper cited by Geraty, “New Statement,” 3.
15. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1976), 396. In the second revised edition, (1996), 1:465, the corresponding sentence omits the explicit rejection of the notion of a creed and reads simply, “It was considered to be a summary of the principal features of Adventist beliefs.”
16. Minutes of the President’s Administrative Committee (PREXAD), Mar. 18, 1976, and the President’s Advisory Council (PRADCO), Mar. 24, 1976. According to the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), 1:465, the ad hoc committee was appointed by the chairman of the Church Manual Committee, but this is not supported by the PRADCO minutes.

Eva was a vice president and Seton an associate secretary of the General Conference. Other members of the ad hoc committee were all General Conference personnel: Willis Hackett, Richard Hammill, and Alf Lohne, vice presidents; Clyde Franz, secretary; Charles Bradford, associate secretary; Gordon Hyde, general field secretary; N. R. Dower, Ministerial Association secretary; and Arthur White, secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate.

17. Bernard Seton to Lawrence Geraty, transcribed from audio-tape recording of presentation by Geraty at meeting of San Diego Adventist Forum, Apr. 18, 2000.

18. Geraty, "New Statement," 3.

19. Seton to Geraty.

20. Scragg, "Doctrinal Statements," 21.

21. Seton to Geraty.

22. According to Geraty, "New Statement," 13, n. 5, the group named by Joseph G. Smoot included Richard Schwarz, professor of history and vice president for academic administration; Thomas Blincoe, professor of theology and dean of the Seminary; Ivan Blazen, professor of New Testament; Raoul Dederen, professor of theology; Lawrence Geraty, professor of Old Testament; Roy Graham, professor of theology and provost of the university; William Johnsson, professor of New Testament and associate dean of the seminary; Hans LaRondelle, professor of theology; Gottfried Oosterwal, professor of mission; and William Shea, professor of Old Testament. Kenneth Strand, professor of church history, and I were subsequently added, making a total of twelve. I served as secretary of the group.

23. *Ibid.*, 3-4.

24. The structure given here was essentially established by the Seminary faculty group; the terminology is that of the final version adopted by the General Conference session. See *Adventist Review*, May 1, 1980, 23-27; *SDA Encyclopedia* (1996), 1:465-70.

25. See, for example, Karl's Barth's scheme for his projected but never-finished five-part theological system, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936-58): *Word of God, God, Creation, Reconciliation, Consummation*.

26. See Geraty, "New Statement," 6, 8.

27. "Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists," *Adventist Review*, Feb. 21, 1980, 8-10.

28. For examples see Geraty, "New Statement," 8.

29. The discussion of the proposed statement of Fundamental Beliefs occurred April 21-25, 1980. For personal observations and interpretation of selected elements of the discussion, see Geraty, "New Statement," 8-13. For the complete official record of the discussion, which occurred April 21-15, see "Session Proceedings" in General Conference Bulletins 5-9, *Adventist Review*, Apr. 23, 1980, 8-11, 14; Apr. 24, 1980, 18-23, 28-29; Apr. 25, 1980, 16-20, 31; Apr. 27, 1980, 14-18; May 1, 1980, 17-18, 20-22.

30. "Seventh Business Meeting, Fifty-third General Conference session, April 21, 1980, 3:15 p.m.: Session Proceedings," *Adventist Review*, Apr. 23, 1980, 8-9.

31. Geraty, "New Statement," 13.

32. The document was not, however, amended directly from the floor. Wilson appointed a twelve-person editorial committee of administrators and scholars to provide wording for changes: Richard

Hammill, vice president of the General Conference (chair); Maurice Battle, associate secretary of the General Conference and secretary of the Church Manual Committee (secretary); Thomas Blincoe, dean of the Theological Seminary; Robert Brown, director of the Geoscience Research Institute; Duncan Eva, vice president of the General Conference; Lawrence Geraty, representative of the Seminary faculty; W. Richard Lesher, director of the Biblical Research Institute; James Londis, pastor of the Sligo Church in suburban Washington; Robert Olson, secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate; Jan Paulsen, president of Newbold College; G. Ralph Thompson, vice president of the General Conference and chair of the Church Manual Committee; and Mario Veloso, director of the temperance and youth department of the South American Division. See "Seventh Business Meeting," 14.

33. See Geraty, "New Statement," 10.

34. Graybill, an assistant secretary of the Ellen G. White estate, had written about the historic Adventist aversion to creedal statement under the pseudonym William Wright. See "Adventism's Historic Witness Against Creeds," *Spectrum* 8.4 (Aug. 1977): 48-56.

35. As reported in "Session Proceedings" for Apr. 24, 1980, 9:30 a.m., *Adventist Review*, Apr. 27, 1980, 13, Graybill's original wording was substantially the same as the final form. The principal difference is a slight softening of the language regarding revision. Whereas Graybill's proposal said, "These formulations can and should be revised," the final version said, "Revision of these statements may be expected."

36. Ellen G. White, "The Mysteries of the Bible a Proof of Its Inspiration," *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948), 5:706.

37. Erwin R. Gane, J. Robert Spangler, and Leo R. Van Dolson, *God Reveals His Love, Adult Sabbath School Lessons*, July-Sept. and Oct.-Dec. 1988.

38. The presented comments generally followed the order of the statement itself: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 19, 7, 25, 8, 23, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 24, 26, 27.

39. George R. Knight, *A Search for Identity: the Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (Hagerstown, Md.: *Review and Herald*, 2000), 2002.

40. According to the official record of the discussion (see references in n. 30 above), at least 120 men and only 6 women participated in the discussion—a ratio of 20 to 1. The gender differences in the experiencing of humanness, God, selfhood, and the community of faith are indisputable grounds for the active and validated involvement of women, not only in pastoral ministry but also in the development and articulation of the Church's theology.

41. See "Articles of Religion," in *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church* (New York: Seabury, 1979), 867-76; "The Augsburg Confession," in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 27-96.

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