

The Fundamental Beliefs and “Growing in Christ”:

From a Proposal for a Twenty-eighth Fundamental Doctrine
Presented to the General Conference, Spring Meeting, 2004

The Fundamental Beliefs play a vital role in the life and mission of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church. We are a rapidly growing movement with a presence in more than 200 countries, and the Fundamental Beliefs describe what Seventh-day Adventists believe. Thus, they establish our doctrinal identity and help to keep us united.



As currently stated, the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs dates from the 1980 General Conference Session held in Dallas, Texas. However, the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs voted on that occasion was not intended to necessarily be the last word on the matter. The Fundamental Beliefs are a *living* document, not a creed.

A. The Fundamental Beliefs: A Living Document

The preamble to the 1980 Fundamental Beliefs states:

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

This view of the *living* character of the Fundamental Beliefs really stems from the conviction of the pioneers that we are a people of “present truth” (2 Peter 1:12) who seek always to be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit into deeper understanding of truth. Ellen White encouraged us to guard against the tendency to fossilize our beliefs into a creed. Among her many counsels calling upon us to be receptive to new insights, while maintaining the foundations, we find the following:

“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. But as real spiritual life declines, it has ever been the tendency to cease to advance in the knowledge of the truth. Men rest satisfied with the light already received from God’s word, and discourage any further investigation of Scriptures. They become conservative, and seek to avoid discussion” (*Gospel Workers*, pp. 297, 298).

“New light will ever be revealed on the word of God to him who is in living connection with the Sun of Righteousness. Let no one come to the conclusion

that there is no more truth to be revealed. The diligent, prayerful seeker for truth will find precious rays of light yet to shine forth from the word of God. Many gems are yet scattered that are to be gathered together to become the property of the remnant people of God” (*Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, p. 34).

The history of development of doctrine in the Seventh-day Adventist Church shows growth in understanding and formulation.

1. The earliest list of doctrines appeared in the masthead of the *Sabbath Review and Advent Herald* in five successive issues, August 15–December 19, 1854. The “leading doctrines” were just five: The Bible alone, the law of God, the Second Coming, the new earth, and immortality alone through Christ.
2. In 1872 Uriah Smith wrote “A Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by the Seventh-day Adventists.” The list had 25 doctrines.
3. In 1889 the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for the first time published a list of “Fundamental Principles of Seventh-day Adventists.” This list, based on Uriah Smith’s list from 1872, contained 28 articles.
4. In 1894 the 1,521-member Battle Creek Church issued its own statement of faith. It had 31 elements.
5. The statement of faith that first appeared in the 1889 *Yearbook* was also included in the yearbooks for 1905, and from 1907 to 1914. According to Leroy Edwin Froom, the statement was not included in the yearbooks 1890–1904, 1906, and 1915–1930 because of conflicting views over the Trinity and the Atonement (*Movement of Destiny*, pp. 412, 413).
6. In 1931 F. M. Wilcox prepared a statement of faith on behalf of a committee of four authorized by action of the General Conference Committee. This statement, titled “Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists,” had 22 articles. Although it was never formally adopted, it appeared in the 1931 *Yearbook* and in all subsequent yearbooks. In 1932 it was printed in tract form. This was the statement that remained in place



(with slight changes) up until the new formulation in Dallas in 1980.

7. The 1941 Annual Council approved a uniform "Baptismal Vow" and "Baptismal Covenant" based on the 1931 statement.
8. The General Conference Session of 1946 voted that no revision of the Fundamental Beliefs shall be made at any time except by approval of a General Conference Session.
9. In 1980 the General Conference Session made major revisions of the Fundamental Beliefs. Completely new articles were added on: Creation; The Great Controversy; The Life, Death and Resurrection of Christ; The Church; Unity in the Body of Christ; The Lord's Supper; The Gift of Prophecy; and Marriage and the Family. Some existing articles were rephrased...

Content of the Proposed New Fundamental Belief and the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs

The proposed new fundamental belief has two main purposes. First it explicitly addresses Christian growth in order to exclude eastern transcendental meditation as a spiritual exercise that is incompatible with the gospel of salvation through Christ. Second, it proclaims freedom through Christ from demonic powers to demonstrate that seeking help and guidance from them in our spiritual growth is not only unnecessary but totally incompatible with the work of Jesus on our behalf.

The present Statement of Fundamental Beliefs does not explicitly address those doctrinal concerns. Some of the basic theological elements presupposed in the proposed new statement are briefly touched in some of the doctrinal statements, thus providing a link between this one and the rest of the body of beliefs. We will briefly look at the fundamental beliefs in which this link is found.

A. Statements Addressing Demonic Power

We read in Statement number 8, ("The Great Controversy"): "To assist His people in this controversy, Christ sends the Holy Spirit and the loyal angels to guide, protect, and sustain them in the way of salvation." The new pro-

posed statement will reaffirm the content of this sentence but will go beyond it by developing its thought in the context of a call to Christian growth in freedom from the controlling power of demons.

In Statement number 9 ("The Life, Death and Resurrection of Christ") we find a sentence that comes very close to one of the main thoughts of the proposed new statement: "The resurrection of Christ proclaims God's triumph over the forces of evil, and for those who accept the atonement assures their final victory over sin and death." However, it does not clearly state the present freedom Christians enjoy from the enslaving power of demons and neither does it set God's triumph over the forces of evil within the context of a constant Christian growth in Christ.

B. Statements Addressing Character Development

The Statement on "The Holy Spirit" establishes that, "He [the Holy Spirit] draws and convicts human beings; and those who respond He renews and transforms into the image of God." The sentence describes a fundamental biblical truth but it does not develop the thought. In any case, it is not the purpose of that specific fundamental belief to deal with the phenomenon of Christian growth but to describe in a general way the work of the Holy Spirit not only in our sanctification but also in several other areas.

Concerning the "Experience of Salvation" we read, "Through the Spirit we are born again and sanctified; the Spirit renews our minds, writes God's law of love in our hearts, and we are given the power to live a holy life. Abiding in Him we become partakers of the divine nature." The sentence deals very briefly with Christian renewal and spiritual growth but it does not address the indispensable elements in that growth. That is not the primary purpose of that fundamental belief.

We read in the Statement on "Christian Behaviour," "For the Spirit to recreate in us the character of our Lord we involve ourselves only in those things which will produce Christlike purity, health, and joy in our lives." This sentence, like the previous ones, is quite general and does not include the importance of prayer, the study of the Word, meditation, and involvement in mission as God's instruments for character development. Neither this fundamental belief nor any of the others can be edited to include the concerns of the proposed new one without distracting from their primary purpose and making them excessively large and cumbersome. Our Fundamental Beliefs are

usually short, dealing with a particular issue in a very concise form, summarizing a significant biblical teaching in a clear way. We should preserve that format.

We may need a new statement that will bring together the main ideas expressed in the statements we quoted and that at the same time will put the emphasis on a daily walk with the Lord characterized by freedom from evil powers and on a devotional life characterized by prayer, Bible study, meditation on God's Word and His providence in our lives, and participation in the gospel commission. This new statement will sharpen the Adventist understanding of the nature of a constant growth in Christ. This is indispensable at a time when some church members are more interested in theological discussion than in the spiritual impact of those doctrines in their daily lives.

Possible Content of the Proposed New Fundamental Belief

Growing in Christ

By His cross Jesus triumphed over the forces of evil. He who subjugated the demonic spirits during His earthly ministry has broken their power and made certain their ultimate doom. Jesus' victory gives us victory over the evil forces that still seek to control us, as we walk with Him in peace, joy, and assurance of His love. Instead of evil forces, the Holy Spirit now dwells within us and empowers us. Committed to Jesus as our Savior and Lord, we are set free from the burden of past deeds and our former life with its darkness, fear of evil powers, ignorance, and meaninglessness. In this new freedom in Jesus, we are called to grow into the likeness of His character, as we commune with Him daily in prayer, feeding on His Word, meditating on it and on His providence, singing His praises, gathering together for worship, and participating in the mission of the church. As we give ourselves in loving service to those around us and in witnessing to His salvation, His constant presence with us sanctifies every moment and every task. (Ps 1:1-2; 23:4; Col. 1:13-14; 2:6, 14-15; 1 Thess. 5:23; 2 Peter 2:9; 3:18, 2 Cor. 3:17, 18; Phil. 3:7-14; 1 Thess. 5:16-18; Matt. 20:25-28; John 20:21; Gal. 5:22-25; 1 John 4:4).

Proposed by Angel M. Rodriguez, William G. Johnsson, and Michael L. Ryan at Spring Meeting, 2004, Silver Spring, MD.

An unedited copy of this proposal can be viewed online at www.adventistreview.org/2004-1515/fund-beliefs.pdf

