

Discussed: new computer system, able chairpersons, the cross as a symbol of domination, sanctified moments, protocol for revising the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs, fear of creeds

# Seventh-day Adventist Church Gets New Fundamental Belief—The First in a Quarter Century

*By Lawrence T. Geraty*

**T**wenty-five years after the adoption of the Statement of (27) Fundamental Beliefs at the 1980 Dallas Session of the General Conference, a twenty-eighth belief (“Growing in Christ”) was finally voted at the 2005 session of the General Conference in Saint Louis. But it came only after a fractured discussion that lasted over parts of five days.

One of the problems was that delegates had difficulty getting recognized by the chair because of a new computer system, which, when the “bugs” are worked out, will certainly be an improvement in comparison to past procedures.

Second, not enough time was allowed in one sitting for this important discussion; chairmen kept introducing other scheduled items, often of lesser consequence (including, for instance, the singing of “Happy Birthday” to one chair’s father). Consequently, the discussion stretched over almost a week in several isolated sessions that lacked continuity, sometimes even with different delegates in attendance.

A third issue was varying levels of skill among chairmen (all general vice presidents

of the General Conference) assigned to the business sessions. Often the way they applied parliamentary procedure complicated rather than fostered progress. Some chairmen sought the assistance of others on the platform, including the parliamentarian.

At one crucial point, newly reelected General Conference president Jan Paulsen saved the day by appealing to delegates that they refer the statement back to committee for reconsideration rather than trying to wordsmith it on the floor. Kudos go to the two most able chairs, both Canadians: Elders Lowell Cooper and Gerry Karst.

The substance of the new fundamental belief emphasizing personal spirituality and

victory over demonic forces is mostly innocuous. Many delegates from developed countries wondered why it was needed and what all the fuss was about, but they were assured it was necessary for the developing countries, where many new members still struggle with evil spirits and the power of the Devil.

**I**n my view, the General Conference administration and those who were involved in presenting the new belief statement to the assembled delegates had designed a careful process leading up to Saint Louis. This was reflected in the way this item (Number 207 on the General Agenda) came to the delegates in three parts:

1. Procedure for Suggesting Additions or Revisions to the Fundamental Beliefs (actually presented as General Agenda item Number 213, "Protocol Statement on Additions or Revisions to the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs").
2. Proposal for a New Fundamental Belief.
3. Growing in Christ—New Fundamental Belief.

Part 1 suggested a seven-step process to be followed by the General Conference to involve the world church after a proposed addition or revision to the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs is received at headquarters (see sidebar, page 29, for text). The delegates were told that these were basically the steps followed after this particular belief was proposed.

Biblical Research Institute director Angel Rodriguez emphasized that "the nature of our fundamental beliefs is not a creed but is a list of beliefs that hold us together. This implies that truth is dynamic. It indicates that revisions and additions could be added in the future." The protocol was adopted by the delegates after some discussion and clarification.

Part 2 is an eight-page proposal that explains the issues surrounding this specific new belief statement. After an introduction, there follows a brief history of the development of fundamental beliefs in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, an explanation of the denomination's need for this new statement, a rationale for the content of the proposed new fundamental belief, an outline of the process itself in the case of this specific proposed statement, and a conclusion with some comments on the statement.

Finally, there is an appendix, "Chronology of the Development of the New Statement of Fundamental

Belief." This document, which was passed out on the floor, answered in advance many of the questions delegates would otherwise have had.

Part 3 contains the wording of the new statement itself. The delegates received an initial statement in their notebooks upon registration. During the floor discussions, the delegates received a slightly revised page. Then on the final day of discussion, after a behind-the-scenes committee tried to incorporate suggestions from the floor that made sense to them, they distributed a final (third) revised statement that was eventually voted, but only under the pressure of time and the encouragement of the chairman.

The new statement will take its place within the total of twenty-eight statements as number eleven, after number ten, "The Experience of Salvation," and before the old number eleven, "The Church," which is now number twelve (see page 28 for final version).

**W**hat were some of the issues raised in the fractured discussions? The main one was the way the proposed statement began: "By His cross, Jesus triumphed over the forces of evil." Because of their work with Muslims and Jews, Trans-European Division delegates in particular pointed out that for many of the people they try to reach, the cross is a symbol of domination, as seen during the Crusades, when Christians arrived in the Middle East as conquering armies.

These delegates, supported by several from other fields—notably Claude Richli from East Africa—appealed for changed wording that would say something like, "By His death on the cross, Jesus triumphed over the forces of evil."

While those on the platform (the committee assigned to work on the new statement: new General Conference vice president Mike Ryan, Biblical Research Institute director Angel Rodriguez, and Adventist Review editor Bill Johnsson) initially defended their original wording, as did delegates from the floor, the revised wording eventually won the day.

A suggestion that "by His death and resurrection Jesus triumphed over the forces of evil" was dismissed because the one who proposed it was trying to incorporate all theology into one statement; after all, a pre-



## FINAL VERSION

### Growing in Christ

By His death on the 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. Now the Holy Spirit dwells within us and empowers us. Continually committed to Jesus as our Saviour and Lord, we are set free from the burden of our past deeds. No longer do we live in the darkness, fear of evil powers, ignorance, and meaninglessness of our former way of life. In this new freedom in Jesus, we are called to grow into the likeness of His character, communing 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 through the Spirit transforms every moment and every task into a spiritual experience.

(Ps 1:1, 2; 23:4; 77:11, 12; Col 1:13, 14; 2:6, 14, 15; Luke 10:17-20; Eph 5:19, 20; 6:12-18; 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; Rom 8:38, 39; 1 John 4:4; Heb 10:25.)

vious statement already dealt with the resurrection.

With regard to the second sentence in the statement, "He who subjugated the demonic spirits during His earthly ministry has broken their power and made certain their ultimate doom," a German delegate pointed out that the statement mentions only "external threats," but not "internal threats," such as mental illness. Only the cultural situations that prevailed in the third world carried the day, though a North American delegate noted that people in the developed world have problems with evil, too!

Several Australian delegates argued that "Continually committed to Jesus as our Saviour and Lord, we are set free from the burden of our past deeds," is not really true experientially, for we continue to live

with the consequences of our past deeds. So they suggested (unsuccessfully) that we are "set free from the guilt or power of our past deeds."

In addition, the Australians said that the last sentence was problematic: "As we give ourselves in loving service to those around us and in witnessing to His salvation, His constant presence with us through the Spirit sanctifies every moment and every task." Are moments and tasks sanctified, rather than persons?

A lengthy discussion ensued, which resulted in the final wording: "His constant presence with us through the Spirit transforms every moment and every task into a spiritual experience." In the process of these particular exchanges, an argument arose between some members of the Australian Biblical Research Committee and Elders Rodriguez and Johnsson as to whether or not the statement had been approved in their division.

**A**lthough the process on the floor was tortured (delegates voted the original wording, brought it back for further discussion, referred it to the behind-the-scenes committee to modify the wording, and finally voted the statement as it came back from the committee), I was among the delegates who felt satisfied with our accomplishment.

I am satisfied first because this was the first time in twenty-five years that the Preamble to the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs had been taken seriously and was frequently referred to in a positive manner. After all, the official book explicating the Twenty-Seven Fundamental Beliefs, authored by Gerard Damsteegt and published by the General Conference Ministerial Association, not only ignored the Preamble, it didn't even acknowledge its existence! That situation has thankfully changed.

Second, delegates from a world church attempted seriously to respond with sensitivity to a felt need of members in the most rapidly growing sectors of the Church.

Third and finally, the General Conference carefully thought through a process and protocol for revising or adding to the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs, which demonstrates that it can be modified (and how), and that it is thus not set in stone.

The latter was what denominational pioneer, John Loughborough, feared most, for it was he who said, "The first step of apostasy is to get up a creed, telling us what to believe. The second is to make that creed a test of fellowship. The third is to try members by that creed.

## Protocol Statement on Additions or Revisions to the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs

**I**n adding to and/or revising the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs it is imperative to involve the world church as much as possible in the process. Any suggestion should be based on a serious concern for the well-being of the world church and its message and mission, be biblically based, and informed by the writings of Ellen G. White. Considering the importance and necessity of involving the world church in the process of additions and/or revisions to the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs, any suggestion for possible changes should reach the office of the President of the General Conference not later than two (2) years before a General Conference Session.

If the perceived need for additions and/or revisions to the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs is initiated by the world field, the matter should be carefully discussed at each administrative level. In the evaluation of the suggested change the governing body at each level shall establish an appropriate process for evaluation, seeking wide input. The process at each level shall result in the governing body either recommending the proposed change to the next level of administration, or abandoning any further consideration of it. In this way the recommendation for changes in the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs arrive at the General Conference. Once the suggestions reach the General Conference, or if the suggestions originated at the General Conference, it shall appoint an ad hoc committee to coordinate the process and facilitate the dialogue.

The following procedure shall be used by the General Conference in seeking the consensus of the world church in favor of or against the proposed change:

1. The General Conference will coordinate and facilitate the process of discussion through Presidential and the members of the ad hoc committee.
2. A preliminary draft approved by the Spring Meeting or Annual Council will be sent to the Divisions for reactions and comments. It should be discussed at the Union and Conference/Mission levels and printed in the local church papers.
3. Involve Theology/Religion Departments and Seminaries.
4. Discuss it at the Biblical Research Institute Committee and other pertinent committees.
5. Publish a draft in the *Adventist Review*, the *Ministry*, and place it on the Internet for comments and reactions from church members.
6. The GC ad hoc committee will receive all the suggestions from the world field and prepare the final draft to be submitted to the Annual Council for further discussion before it is placed on the agenda of the General Conference Session.
7. Only the General Conference in session can approve additions or revisions to the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The fourth is to denounce as heretics those who do not believe that creed. And fifth to commence persecution against such." (Of course, it remains to be seen just how our church will now use the revised statement!)

Hopefully, the Church will not need to wait another twenty-five years for the next change or addition, and, hopefully, next time around there will be adequate time allotted for discussion. Furthermore, let's hope that someone who knows how to use parliamentary procedure to move things along will chair the process. Time discussing what we believe and the implications,

if spent wisely and in the right spirit, can draw a diverse church together—a goal we need to spend more time pursuing.

I think that, despite our problems in Saint Louis, this was the positive result of our time together.

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