



## Let's Eliminate Hyperorthodoxy | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

*"When I was baptized, I had to promise I would not wear feathers."*

My friend, James Reece, told me this a few months ago during a retreat we were both attending, and my mouth dropped open. Later he sent me a copy of his baptismal certificate, and I could see—I am not making this up—that question nine began: "Are you willing to follow the Bible rule of plainness in dress, refraining from the wearing of *plumes*...?"

I put in the italics myself. Amazing.

Reece, who had perfect recall for the spirit of the question, was baptized on December 19, 1936. Back then, I gather, "plumes" made hats (and who knows what else) ostentatious. I expect someone fought for years to keep plumes on the prohibited adornment list, but they dropped off. If they returned to fashion, no one today, I expect, would object to plume-y Adventists holding membership on church boards.

It's not just church "standards" that end up different from one decade to the next. Doctrines develop, too. Most Adventists would be surprised to learn that the pioneers once thought the "door" to salvation was "shut" for anyone who had not accepted the Millerite doctrine that Jesus would return in 1844. They would be equally surprised to learn that Adventists did not even mention the Trinity in their first declaration of basic beliefs, or that for decades church leaders did not believe in sending missionaries overseas.

When Ellen White died in 1915, the church, as Bull and Lockhart say, lost its "chief means of authorizing innovation."<sup>1</sup> She had lent support to a constant struggle for deeper

understanding, and while she was alive conversation flourished. Now those left behind began to focus on preserving the vision they had instead of reaching for one that was better and more faithful. Suddenly, Adventist voices were verging toward a single party line. An ethos of *hyperorthodoxy*, coming on like a bad cold, was stifling innovation.

The same writers say the 1960s opened the door a crack—to second thoughts and new ideas. But by the 1980s, many Adventist leaders wanted to push it shut again, and this was symbolized by a new statement of "fundamental beliefs," twenty-seven in all at the time. I have always thought the preamble to that document is a healthy acknowledgment of God's interest in further conversation, and Bull and Lockhart overlook this. But I have to admit that the preamble is often ignored. (In 1988, the General Conference Ministerial Association published a book-length exposition of the Fundamental Beliefs and *left out* (!) the preamble.<sup>2</sup>)

Once, I myself felt the door creaking shut. In the early 1990s, an article I wrote on the meaning of Christ's death raised questions about a single word out of the 120 or so that make up Belief Number 9. The word I focused on does not even *appear* in Scripture, but the idea it has come to stand for was widely held. I was throwing out a fresh—and as I hoped to show, more faithful—point of view.

Robert Folkenberg, then the General Conference president, believed my effort was misguided, and he commissioned two of his colleagues, Calvin Rock and Humberto Rasi,

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to let me know. Both spoke with me at some length, and both were courteous *and* insistent. I needed, somehow, to issue a public change of mind.

Rasi transcribed the conversation we had, and the next day gave me the copy I still have. Absent the public change of mind, he was asking for, the "denominational accrediting body" would issue a "warning," and possible "probationary status," to the school that I was leading.

In the end, thanks to generous effort by Ralph Martin, who was then my boss, this threat fell stillborn, more or less, from its author's mouth. Nothing seismic happened, and whatever the smaller-scale effects, I am still employed—and still passionate about Adventism.

But why not put a moat around the edifice of doctrine? Why not disallow challenges? Why not fend off all innovation?

For one thing, doing this would mock the Holy Spirit. When Jesus promised his followers that he would continue to be with them through his Spirit, he said: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." From then forward, however, the Spirit would be there to "guide" them "into all the truth" (John 16:12, 13).

For another, disallowing challenges would contradict the first words in the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs. These words embrace the Holy Spirit, and imagine "fuller understanding" and "better language" than the document itself contains. By its own account, the statement itself is revisable.

Finally, if you put a moat around the edifice of doctrine, you'd kill Adventism.

No human institution prospers under a ban on innovation. I've just read *Better*, a book about improving performance in medicine by the physician and *New Yorker* writer Atul Gawande. He says one requirement for more effective healthcare is "ingenuity," which he defines as "thinking anew." This is never easy. Not even "superior intelligence" is enough. Success depends on "character." And with the right character, what happens? You are willing "to recognize failure." You refuse "to paper over the cracks." You are ready, even eager, "to change."<sup>3</sup>

That's important for the institution of medicine, and that's just the spirit the Bible recommends for followers

of Christ. By God's grace, you own up to your shortcomings, and then you grow. Your goal is always ahead of you. Change—within faithfulness—is how you live.

Though it's as simple as that, it's not easy. "Betterment," as Gawande says, "is perpetual labor."

In thought and practice alike, you can embrace this labor without saying that anything goes. None of us has the last word on orthodoxy, but *orthodoxy does matter*. My own idea is that, to be Adventist, you must agree, minimally, on something like the following: *In response to the grace and peace of Christ, and in the hope of his return, we promise together that we will change the world by keeping the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.*

This is just one point of view. But more conversation about a new orthodoxy—a new sense of what is most basic in Adventism—would *enliven* the church. Hyperorthodoxy—resistance to innovation, the fear of the Holy Spirit—has the capacity, in contrast, to kill. Put another way, hyperorthodoxy is the Berlin Wall standing between today and a better tomorrow for Adventism.

Unless, of course, it is torn down. ■

## Notes and References

1. Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream*, 2d ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University press, 2007), 105.
2. P. Gerard Damsteegt, principal author, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe...: A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines* (Washington, D.C.: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1988). By the third printing (if not the second), the words of preamble were restored—but to the book "front matter," or introductory remarks, and not their honored place as the beginning of the statement. On the Web, Damsteegt identifies himself as principle author; the book's front matter says that he wrote initial drafts for each chapter. I thank Alden Thompson for help with these details.
3. Atul Gawande, *Better: A Surgeon's Notes on Performance* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007), 9.



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