

How the Adventist Church Changed its Fundamental Beliefs in San Antonio

BY LARRY GERATY

The current statement of *Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists* was adopted for the first time by the 1980 General Conference Session in Dallas. Other than adding an additional statement to satisfy a “third world” need several years ago (Belief 11, “Growing in Christ”), 2015 was the first time this 35-year-old Statement had been revised (as provided for in the original Preamble). Work on this Fundamental Beliefs statement zeroed in on the nuances of specific words on Monday, July 6, 2015, at San Antonio’s Alamodome where General Conference delegates gathered for their fourth day of business sessions.

The conversation began with the matter of how many votes would be needed to pass changes in the beliefs—a “simple” majority, or two-thirds. A delegate had requested on the first day of meetings that, given the importance of the Fundamental Beliefs, any changes be treated like changes to the constitution and bylaws that require a two-thirds majority vote to alter.

President Ted Wilson told the group that the Steering Committee had considered the request, but decided not to move away from the simple majority vote. He said, “It is not our intention that the fundamental beliefs be changed with a close vote, but a consensus vote. We recommend that we do not insert into the rules order a requirement for a two-thirds vote.” He appealed to the delegates to “Calm our hearts so we do not get caught up in parliamentary process and block the progress of our work.” After some discussion, the delegates voted to accept the recommendation of the Steering Committee to

remain with a simple majority.

Drafting Committee members Artur Stele, Bill Knott, and Angel Rodriguez were introduced and on the platform ready to answer questions. Though not present, it was mentioned that Gerhard Pfandl had also been a part of the working group. (Unlike the members of the original Drafting and Review Committees in 1980 which included a number of the denomination’s top scholars and professors, the 2015 committee was made up exclusively of General Conference employees, the two primary theologians being with the GC Biblical Research Institute). Stele, capable chair of the committee and a GC vice-president, led the way through the Fundamental Beliefs documents. He said the committee had been given a specific task—first, to review all the beliefs to make sure that the language is clear and distinct, and secondly, to find a way to integrate the language of the “Affirmation of Creation” document approved by the 2005 General Conference, into Belief 6 on “Creation” and Belief 8 on “The Great Controversy” (the most suitable place for mentioning a global flood). He emphasized that there were no recommendations to change what we believe. Rather the effort was directed at making the Beliefs clear, given the changes that occur over time in the understanding of words and phrases. It soon became apparent, however, that though the preamble states Adventists “accept the Bible as their only creed,” Ellen White and “tradition” were also sources of authority in terms of the revised Fundamental Beliefs.

Slight revisions to a few Beliefs were first quickly voted because their only changes were

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putting the biblical references in canonical order: the preamble and Beliefs 13, “The Remnant and Its Mission”; 14, “Unity in the Body of Christ”; 15, “Baptism”; 16, “The Lord’s Supper”; 26, “Death and Resurrection”; 27, “The Millennium and the End of Sin”; and 28, “The New Earth”. Other simple changes to Beliefs 25, “The Second Coming of Christ”; 20, “The Sabbath”; 11, “Growing in Christ”; and 9, “The Life, Death, and Resurrection of Christ”, were voted.

Throughout the entire statement of Fundamental Beliefs a change to gender neutral language was achieved, mostly without controversy, except in a few specific beliefs.

The word “apostolic” in Belief 17, “Spiritual Gifts and Ministries”, sparked extended discussion. Since it could be misunderstood without more clear definition, the committee said in its recommendation that it be removed from the sentence: “Some members are called of God and endowed by the Spirit for functions recognized by the church in pastoral, evangelistic, apostolic, and teaching ministries particularly needed to equip the members for service, to build up the church to spiritual maturity, and to foster unity of the faith and knowledge of God.” There were suggestions for alternative words such as cross-cultural, and pleadings to leave the word in place. Eventually the vote to refer this Belief back to the Drafting Committee for reconsideration was defeated and “apostolic” removed from the Belief that was then approved.

Belief 21, “Stewardship”, was voted without extended discussion. A delegate then suggested that discussion move to Beliefs 6, “Creation”, and 8, “The Great Controversy”, which everyone was waiting for, but Artur Stele demurred, not wanting “to destroy the good movement that was occurring.”

Belief 22, “Christian Behavior”, was easily voted.

Proposed changes to Belief 23, “Marriage and the Family”, brought defenders of the gay community to the microphone, because the proposed changes included removing the word “partners”, given its current connotation with gay

marriage. In the midst of the conversation, President Ted Wilson went to the microphone and said in an authoritative tone, “We want to leave no ambiguity about marriage”. His comment received thunderous applause. All proposals to alter the proposed changes then met with defeat and the revised Belief was voted as is.

Finally, Belief 6, “Creation” was introduced. Not long into the discussion, Arthur Stele said the Committee knew that it would need to review this item, and Belief 8, “The Great Controversy”, so rather than going through vote after vote on parliamentary procedures, the comments from the delegates should simply address what the committee should review. Suggestions included (from the Seminary) whether to use the creation language of Genesis or Exodus in Belief 6, and (from Geoscience) to substitute “global” for “worldwide” in Belief 8. But most of the extended discussion centered on the fundamental words: “recent” (in terms of time), “literal” (in terms of days), and “historical” (in terms of account). Because of the Committee’s mandate, it was clear that even though these words do not appear in Scripture and are clearly debatable based on increasingly well-known evidence, because they are used by Ellen White, they had to be in the statement in order to “exclude any possibility of the concept of evolution creeping in to the church.”

Monday afternoon, the only sticking point in Belief 24, “Christ’s Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary”, was the use of the word “symbolized” in the phrase: Christ’s ministry in the heavenly sanctuary “was symbolized by the work of the high priest in the holy place.” Some preferred a word like “typified”, which was referred to the review committee. Perhaps it is worth noting that this relatively brief discussion was in contrast to the 1980 GC Session in Dallas where this particular Belief was debated at length and was the last Belief to be adopted (on the last Friday of the session).

Belief 19, “The Law of God”, was easily approved. There followed some controversy over Belief 12, “The Church”. As revised, it reads

in part, "The church derives its authority from Christ who is the incarnate Word revealed in the Scriptures." Several South American delegates, wanting to distance themselves from Catholicism, argued for a dual source of authority—Scripture and Christ—but current GC officials expressed the view that Christ is the only authority, and their view prevailed.

Belief 10, "The Experience of Salvation"; Belief 2, "The Trinity"; and Belief 3, "The Father", were easily voted. Not so Belief 4, "The Son". The issue raised by several delegates was the phrase "became also truly human, Jesus the Christ," where it had originally been "truly man." The review committee argued in response that the issue was the incarnation, not gender, so the referral lost and the proposed belief was voted.

Belief 7, "The Nature of Humanity", and Belief 5, "The Holy Spirit", were adopted as presented. Belief 18, "The Gift of Prophecy", provoked quite a debate about Ellen White's relation to the Bible. For instance, Cliff Goldstein spoke strongly in support of the wording, while Ray Roenfeldt felt Ellen White herself would be "scandalized" by the wording. Several spoke in favor of referring the statement back to the committee so it could be strengthened. Some wanted to add "truth" into the statement: "Her writings speak with prophetic authority and provide comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction to the church." A delegate questioned the "canonization" of Ellen White, but the delegates voted the Belief as presented.

With Belief 1, "The Holy Scriptures", being the last one to be considered, and yet, in some ways, the most important, Artur Stele suggested referring it back for review, presumably so as not to prolong discussion on such issues as whether to include the word "final" in the proposed addition, "The Holy Scriptures are the final, authoritative, and the infallible revelation of His will."

By the end of Monday, during sessions ably chaired by Vice Presidents Ben Schoun and Lowell Cooper, all Beliefs were voted as presented except for four: Beliefs 1, 6, 8, and 24. Comments and concerns about them were to be

reviewed by the Drafting Committee overnight and brought back to the delegates for disposition on Tuesday morning.

Tuesday's chair was Vice President Ella Simmons, who endeavored to handle business carefully and compassionately. In many ways, she had the most difficult chairing task of all, but throughout the morning several delegates complimented her on the way she conducted business; she deferred to the Spirit's guidance. "Right off the bat" Tuesday morning, various delegates had general suggestions. One was the importance of modern language for the Beliefs so they could be better understood, including by youth. Another was an appeal to leadership, that they really listen to the body of delegates, even though they seemed determined to stick to what they had already written. Artur Stele then reported on the "hard work" overnight of the Drafting Committee, indicating that they would proceed from "the easiest to the hardest".

On Belief 24, "Christ's Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary", the committee accepted the previous day's suggestion to incorporate "typified" instead of "symbolized". This provoked many objections to "typify," as old English and hard to translate, but the body voted the new word and passed the Belief as presented.

On Belief 8, "The Great Controversy", the Drafting Committee accepted Geoscience's recommendation that "global" replace "worldwide" for the extent of the flood, even though the notion of "global" is not biblical and was unknown until modern times. A young delegate asked if there had been consideration of eliminating the sentence which had been added by the committee, "as presented in the historical account of Genesis 1–11." Stele said yes, but the decision was to keep it in. The delegates duly voted the Belief as presented.

On Belief 1, "The Holy Scriptures", Artur Stele reported that they wanted to strengthen the statement, so looked for a word other than "final" that would not have chronological implications. The word "supreme" was chosen; the Belief thus reading "the Holy Scriptures are the

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supreme, authoritative, and the infallible revelation of His will." Many other words were suggested, such as "normative" and "ultimate." Roger Robertsen from the Israel Mission was the first to speak. He reminded the delegates that the preamble speaks of the Bible being our "only creed," so suggested that to strengthen the "sola scriptura" concept, the following statement should read, the Scriptures are "the sole revealer of doctrine." Artur Stele's rejoinder was, "there are many words and this is the one that came up!" Gerard Damteegt again objected to inclusive language, being sure that no females were involved in writing the Bible. There followed quite an involved discussion as to the meaning and use of the Greek word "anthropos" (man, human) and how it should be translated. It appeared at times that some delegates enjoyed showing off their knowledge of New Testament Greek. There was also a debate over the term "author" vs. "writer", which one delegate tried to settle with Ellen White's well-known statement in *1 Selected Messages* 25, that "God is author, but writers are human." He was countered by Ellen White's own statement that her writings are not to be used to settle arguments! Ultimately, Belief 1 was voted as presented.

That left to the last Belief 6, "Creation". Angel Rodriguez said the committee knew the wording for this Belief was controversial but their work proceeded on the following basis: first, they decided not to use ambiguous words that would allow evolutionary thinking. Second, the word "recent" was necessary to combat the notion of "deep time"; the biblical genealogies place creation not that long ago, even though we know they are incomplete. Third, "Seventh-day Adventists assume the history of our planet began in Genesis 1," so a literal reading of Genesis is necessary, and seven literal days has to be a part of the statement. The word "historical" was thus voted, even though the fact that God is the subject of every sentence in Genesis 1 means that "theological" would have been a more accurate and helpful word. Bill Knott, a member of the Drafting Committee, said how proud he was to be an Adventist as he watched the process, including the "year of listening" by the committee. After a review of the statement the evening before, a "clean copy" of the Belief was put up on the screen; Artur Stele then moved Belief 6 as amended.

At that point President Ted Wilson came out to speak: "Essentially this version of the Belief was brought to the floor at the 2005 GC Session. I personally endorse it. This

wording will help us in our work. You can put a spin on any word, such as 'recent,' but it means 'not old.' There is no room for theistic evolution. I will tell you I personally believe, based on the Spirit of Prophecy, that the earth is approximately 6,000 years old." From then on, all speeches were either supportive of the Belief as presented, or wanted to strengthen it further. Typical was Cliff Goldstein's comment: "This issue didn't arise in a vacuum. We are purposely doing this to exclude evolution." There followed a bit of discussion about whether the entire universe is 6,000 years old but the consensus was that the wording presented was adequate for the church. An African delegate admitted he was now relieved. "It is now time to trust the Holy Spirit and the scholars who have worked on this. My children will be safe. I call question on the motion." Belief 6 was voted as presented. Artur Stele assured the assembled delegates: "None of what we voted has changed what we have always believed."

That is what happened with the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs on Monday and Tuesday. This author tried unsuccessfully to participate in the process, but the outcome was predetermined. Good people, able people, were involved but no meaningful discussion of the issues could take place in two-minute segments. As a result, the statement of *Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists* looks increasingly like the work of a committee rather than a convincing literary masterpiece. It's hard for several hundred delegates to make a positive difference in two days. Maybe the hopes of delegates to improve the wording of their beloved beliefs was unrealistic from the start. Certainly the administration of the General Conference got what it wanted. The question now is how will they use what they have crafted? Will it be "descriptive," which would be an appropriate use, or "prescriptive," which could prove to be disastrous—both to the concept of "present truth" and to denominational employment. Will the words of our pioneer, John Loughborough, quoted on the floor, be prophetic? A guiding hand was evident throughout; let's hope it was the Holy Spirit's. ■

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