

# THE BIBLE STORY

# How to Tell the Bible and its Fundamental Beliefs as One Powerful Story | BY JAN BARNA

**The confessional statement of Adventism is organized as twenty-eight stand-alone definitions.**

I dream of a day when the Seventh-day Adventist church will have a narrative confession of faith which will be understandable to all inside and outside the church. I should hasten to add that such a narrative confession of faith will grow out of the Bible's own story and will place the church inside that story. This is, for me, the ideal that the church should be pushing for unceasingly. Here, I will try to sketch what it could look like.

How far or close the current form of our Fundamental Beliefs is away from the ideal, could be a good starting question. How well do the twenty-eight articles, which represent the current confessional stance of the church, tell the story of God (what I call the Bible story)? How close do the two narratives—the biblical and our confessional—stand to each other? We may well think that the Fundamental Beliefs are biblical—derived from the Bible and representing Bible truths. But are they also close in the overall shape, structure, and content to the Bible's meta-narrative?

To get to the bottom of some of these key questions, I obviously need to explain more about the function and nature of the Bible and, if indeed it is possible, to piece together a comprehensive overall narrative from its many and varied books and, if it is possible, to detect a narrative within our Fundamental Beliefs. So here's what I will try to accomplish in this paper:

First, I will address the nature of the Fundamental Beliefs and analyse the narrative they try to tell and whether their structure and content help or hinder an effective utili-

sation of our confession, be it by the church or the world.

Second, I will look at the nature of Scripture and will argue that the Bible at its core tells a simple yet powerful narrative. However, it has not been natural at all for us to allow the Bible to tell its own story *on its own terms* because—ironically—many classical Christian and Protestant confessions have utilized philosophical and propositional language (often apologetic in nature) which is foreign to the Bible's own conceptual world, thus leaving the impression that the Bible is a collection of propositional statements. We do not find it strange to have philosophically and carefully worded definitions of doctrines. And, consequently, we do not find it natural to look at the Bible as essentially a book telling us a story.

And so, finally, I will propose a narrative reconstruction of the Adventist confession which strives to be faithful both to the Fundamental Beliefs' outlook and to the Bible's own narrative structure and narrative content. This paper will argue that the church of God's dreams is a church that is capable of locating its own confession within the Bible's core story.

## Twenty-Eight Fundamental Beliefs and Their Narrative

What kind of message do the Church's Twenty-Eight Fundamental Beliefs tell? If we analysed the direction and the content of what they actually portray, what kind of shape and content would that narrative take?

The confessional statement of Adventism is organized as twenty-eight, stand-alone defini-

tions. That is twenty-eight articles of faith, if we wanted to use classical dogmatic terminology. Each of these statements is carefully defined and each stands alone as a statement or article. Each of the articles references Bible verses to indicate that the definition is derived from the Bible. Such is the obvious shape of the articles.

### The Structure and the Direction

What, however, is not so obvious is the direction the articles then travel. Where do they start, what is in the middle, and where do they end? What essential plot do they present?

Let’s start first with the structure and the direction of the statements. Interestingly, at the very beginning, there are two preliminary statements, even though they have different weight and form. We may call the “Preamble” and Article 1, “The Holy Scriptures,” the Church’s *methodological* confession.

They both express the church’s epistemological and methodological commitment to the primacy of Scriptures over and above confessional articles, and that trust lies in the Bible’s divine origins. Following these are the specific articles defining the *theological* confession.

For easier recognition of their structure, I have organized the articles under the following major theological themes (Table 1, *right*).

So, what is clear from this brief analysis is that the twenty-nine articles (including the preamble) can be organized under eight theological themes and one core methodological point. But, when we look closer, even among the eight theological themes there is some overlap. The motif regarding “salvation applied” appears twice. First, as statements 10 and 11, and then in a second group of articles from

19 to 23. Theologically they address the same theme, but they are separated by seven ecclesiological articles, 12–18. Thus, overall, we can really identify seven major theological emphases that the Twenty-Eight Fundamental Beliefs contain: (1) Doctrine of God, (2) Doctrine of Creation, (3) Doctrine of Sin,<sup>1</sup> (4) Doctrine of Salvation Achieved/Work of Christ,

Table 1

“Preamble”	
(1) The Holy Scriptures	The Epistemic and Methodological Confession (2)
(2) The Trinity	
(3) The Father	Doctrine of God (4)
(4) The Son	
(5) The Holy Spirit	
(6) Creation	Doctrine of Creation (1)
(7) The Nature of Humanity	
(8) The Great Controversy	Doctrine of Sin (2)
(9) The Life, Death, and Resurrection of Christ	Salvation Achieved (1)
(10) The Experience of Salvation	Salvation Applied/Sanctification (2)
(11) Growing in Christ	
(12) The Church	
(13) The Remnant and Its Mission	Ecclesiology (7)
(14) Unity in the Body of Christ	
(15) Baptism	
(16) The Lord’s Supper	
(17) Spiritual Gifts and Ministries	
(18) The Gift of Prophecy	
(19) The Law of God	
(20) The Sabbath	Salvation Applied/Sanctification (5)
(21) Stewardship	
(22) Christian Behaviour	
(23) Marriage and the Family	
(24) Christ’s Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary	
(25) The Second Coming of Christ	Eschatology (5)
(26) Death and Resurrection	
(27) The Millennium and the End of Sin	
(28) The New Earth	

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(5) Doctrine of Salvation Applied/Sanctification, (6) Doctrine of Church, and (7) Doctrine of Eschatology.

What does this tell us about the direction of the statements? The twenty-seven theological articles (if we leave out Number 1—the methodological one) can be grouped as seven major leading theological motifs. Apart from the division of the theme of salvation applied (the sanctification motif), and omitting the fact that the doctrine of sin is not stated outright, the articles move in a clear direction.

### **The Plot**

When we zoom out and focus on the level of major motifs, the confession may display a narrative. First, it is introducing the main actor God, His peculiar attributes, and His unique nature as Triune God. Importantly, He is the God of love and service (articles 2–5).

Second, the confession introduces the creation. Creation is the resulting act of God and it was very good (article 6).

Third, the confession begins to outline the problem, the predicament into which humanity fell by removing itself from the relationship of dependence on God, their Creator, resulting in the loss of God's image and the experience of death. The predicament of humanity is also linked with a larger cosmic issue which transcends this earth and relates to the character of God and the nature of His government (articles 7 and 8).

Fourth, the confessional articles then jump quickly from the predicament scene to a depiction of the solution through the mission of the Messiah. Through His life, death, and resurrection the problem has been undone, the lie about God has been broken. Salvation has been achieved for humans by Christ. They can live with assurance of eternal life already now (article 9).

Fifth, while one article of the confession depicts the victory of salvation achieved by

Christ, there are an additional seven articles (10–11 and 19–23) which paint a broad panorama of situations and responses of how salvation is applied and appropriated by us humans. While the topics range from the Law of God, Sabbath, Marriage, Stewardship, Christian Behaviour, or Victory over Evil Forces, their common theme is sanctification and practical, everyday appropriation of salvation into every aspect of our experience through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. This is the major emphasis of the confession.

Sixth, the life of a follower of Christ is also depicted through another major emphasis of the confession—the theme of Ecclesiology. A Christian is a member of God's church, which is recognized in particular by the signs of baptism and the Lord's Supper. The church is a place for service and praise. It is a unique community where all are equal in Christ. The church at some point, in the end-times with widespread apostasy, will also take on an additional form as a remnant community. This will call all to full faithfulness to God and to His commandments and will announce the arrival of the judgement and the nearness of the Second Coming of Jesus. The Remnant's specific mission is connected with the message of Revelation 14 and its particular sign is the presence of the Gift of Prophecy, which the confession links with the ministry of Ellen G. White (articles 12–18).<sup>2</sup>

Which brings us to the grand finale of the confession.

Seventh, the statements conclude by logically extending the discussion from salvation applied to salvation confirmed, which we more often call eschatology. The grand finale of the confession is indeed the grand finale of God who, through several steps, will undo all evil on all its levels and open up a new future for His people through a new creation (articles 24–28).

In terms of the plot then, the articles do present a story. However, and this also has to be emphasized, one can only begin to discern the Twenty-Eight Fundamental Beliefs' plot

and its direction, after going through the kind of theological zooming out I have done here. The general direction of the Adventist confession of faith, and the underlying narrative within which the individual statements are located, may not actually be discernible immediately, or at all, to people who read it. If readers have never formulated the Bible for themselves as narrative, or never think of the Bible as telling a story, they simply may not discern any story behind the statements. The articles would be then stand-alone definitions without a narrative glue holding them together.

### The Local Adoption

Because the Seventh-day Adventist confession contains twenty-eight articles, I have noticed that many of the local Adventist churches have a shorter version of these on their webpages. Many indeed do not choose to go with the full version. Interestingly enough, at times the statements or articles of faith on such webpages are put together in a random order, or in the order that the web editor or church board thinks is important or relevant. However, if our own churches choose to go with shorter versions and organize the articles in various orders, does it not perhaps tell us that there could be a problem with our twenty-eight articles in that their direction and the overall plot is not immediately and obviously discernible? Perhaps it raises the interesting question of whether we are not overdoing the confession by having too many articles which give the impression that they are all on the same level. Would not a similar kind of grouping of the articles under major theological motifs be helpful in bringing out their underlying unified message?

The traditional Christian confessions are very much aware of the direction and the underlying story they want to portray and hence they order their articles very carefully.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, is the Adventist confession as effective as it could be?<sup>4</sup>

Would the current form of the confession

therefore benefit from a full blown narrative story accompanying it? As I have demonstrated, the confessional articles attempt to make a coherent impression, but they do it very clumsily, and some readers without a narrative notion may not even discern the attempted message of the statements. So, would it be desirable to have a Biblical narrative upfront, sitting next to the articles? I happen to believe it is.

### The Bible and Its Story

As it has been pointed out by ancient scholars and modern philosophers alike, there is something about stories and how they are able to capture reality. Story is not a weak way of depicting what one thinks or believes about the world. It is, in fact, a very powerful means of capturing and transmitting one's own beliefs and, indeed, worldviews.

Tom Wright has pointed out that when Paul thinks Bible he thinks, in fact, story.<sup>5</sup> It was the habit of the first Christians, and in fact it was the habit of the Jews and the ancient near east generally, to utilize narrative as a major vehicle of meaning and the means of preserving confessions.<sup>6</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that Bible scholars have increasingly recognized that the Bible itself as a whole is "not only irreducibly narrative in form ... but also displays an extraordinary ... overall storyline of astonishing power and consistency... [F]rom Genesis to Revelation, [there] is a massive narrative structure."<sup>7</sup>

If that is the case, what does such Scriptural structure and narrative look like? While we cannot go into any serious detail in this paper, after teaching on this subject for the last fifteen years, this is how I would propose a simplified Scriptural narrative could look, which could be useful in our attempt to formulate an Adventist narrative confession.<sup>8</sup>

The Biblical drama could be organized into seven acts. These acts or stages themselves are discernable by major transitional events which advance the narrative plot.

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**Act One:** The story begins with a beautiful image of *creation* and *paradise* (Gen 1–2) being brought into existence by an omnipotent God. The creation is full of life, variety, and movement, and importantly harmony. There is no hint of evil or deficiency, all was “very good” (Gen 1:31). The Sabbath rest is the expression of this initial harmony.

**Act Two:** Then the narrative enters a new stage, when the serpent deceived humanity because he lied to Adam and Eve about God and their dependency upon Him (Gen 3). Something goes horribly wrong and the plot develops as the predicament unfolds. As a result of *the Fall*, humanity is exiled, excluded from the possibility of participating in the Creator’s immortality (Gen 3:22–24).

**Act Three:** But then in the middle of this tragedy, a *promise* is given to Adam and Eve (Gen 3:15) to defeat the serpent and what he brought to the human experience—his lies and death. This promise will be fulfilled through one of their seed or descendants. The first promise is in this stage being progressively developed throughout the Old Testament books with some astonishing details, from the promise to Abraham (Gen 12, 15, 17), through Israel (Ex 19), to David (2 Sam 7). The narrative becomes preloaded with expectation in the third act which, from the time of David, is narrowed down to one of his descendants.

**Act Four:** And then the expectation is fulfilled. Jesus is immediately presented as the promised descendant of Abraham and David (Matt 1:1). His life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension are all part of the “great exodus” from the continuing exile in which humanity had been ever since the Fall (Luke 9:31, John 8:33–36). In Jesus, the big *reversal* has arrived and the serpent is defeated.

**Act Five:** From now on, according to the Biblical narrative, there is time to once again gather God’s people and re-establish Israel—now with a new disposition of hearts towards God. In this scene, we see God re-launching

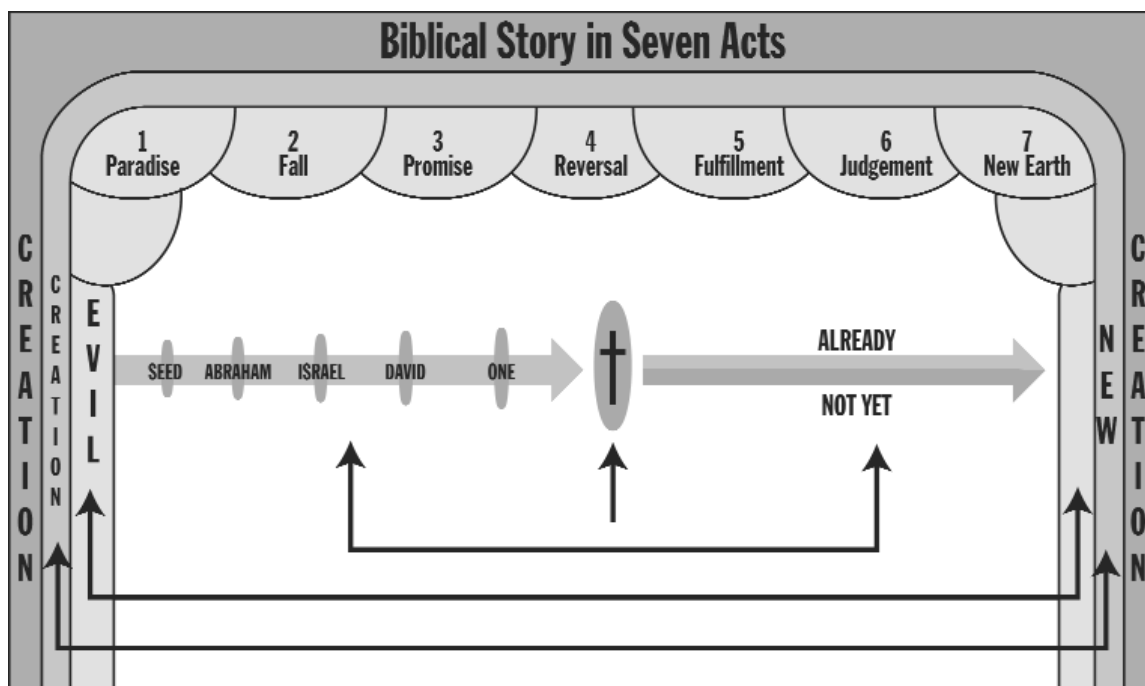
His new community (Acts 2–4, 10; Rom 3:28–29; 9–11). People become part of the new Israel, no longer through national or blood connections with the seed of Abraham, but through the faith connection with the Seed. In this stage, the newly constituted community of believers now tells the story of God-Creator, humanity, the Fall, and the U-turn in Jesus who now mediates to humanity the benefits of His past work so that as many as possible may be part of His future work.

**Act Six:** With the *reversal being applied* to the current experience of humanity, one day God will begin to bring about the final great exodus of all humanity. Through the decisive and revelatory actions of the Divine *Judgement*, evil is finally removed and God and His people are justified. This act in the Biblical story includes visions of pre-Advent, Advent, and post-Advent judicial aspects of Christ’s ministry (Dan 7–9, Rev 14–15, 20). Just as Act Two, the Fall, introduced a certain mysterious serpent who attacked the character of God and brought all the evil to the world of God’s creation, so in Act Six, the Judgement, the story directly exposes the serpent by unmasking his lies, his character, and consequently justifies God’s reign and His people (Rev 12–20).

**Act Seven:** Only after this is accomplished, the narrative finally arrives at the scene of a *New Creation* (Rev 21–22). This is where the curse is no more, where sin, death, and all evil are no more and instead everything is once again created anew. The redeemed humanity continues its eternal journey with God. But the “old” story is not forgotten. It is immortalized through the names of the twelve tribes of Israel and the names of the twelve apostles on the gates and walls of the New Jerusalem as an everlasting reminder of God’s infinite faithfulness to His creation.

With some over simplification, this is the captivating story the Bible appears to be telling. It depicts the whole of reality, its ori-





A Christian  
is a member of

God's church

which is

recognized in

particular by

the signs of

baptism and

Lord's Supper.

gins, God, the problem of our existence, its solution, the future, and where things are going. Importantly, it also places us into a particular stage of the story. Formulated in this way, the Bible gives us a unique worldview perspective. What matters in this analysis is the recognition of the Bible's own structure, plot, and direction which, I'd like to propose, should provide the organizational perspective for our Fundamental Beliefs, and for its narrative expression. So, what then would a project of turning the Fundamental Beliefs' plot into a narrative form, which would at the same time be inspired by the Scriptural drama, look like? Here's one attempt.

## The Adventist Narrative Confession

**Act One:** In the beginning, God created the world. The world was good, full of life, peace, and harmony. All living creatures draw life and breath from God who is the loving and caring sustainer of everything that exists. The first people, Adam and Eve, knew their Creator face-to-face and loved Him.

**Act Two:** The harmony between them and God was sadly spoiled by a cunning creature

who, being created before life on earth was formed by God, now brought his lies about God's character to the innocent first human couple. Propagating a lie about God, the deceiver made humans think of themselves as being independent of God, not needing the Sustainer for their life. They rebelled and became enemies to one another and to God. A new reality of evil, pain, and death entered the world. Paradise changed into an experience of exile. The human heart turned dark and rebellious, just as the deceiver's heart.

**Act Three:** But God so loved the world that He would not let the humans live forever in the exile with darkness in their hearts. Right there in front of the deceiver, He made a promise that a descendant would be born to Adam and Eve who would clear God's name from the charges and defeat the lie. The patriarchs, including Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and Israel collectively, and the line of David and his descendants particularly, became the direct descendants of the divine promise. Through them God was clarifying what, how, when, and through whom He would change the fate of humanity.

**Act Four:** Generations of descendants have come and gone in this manner until, in the

New Testament Gospels, the spotlight is directed onto an individual who claimed all the past promises. It is in the life, service, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth that we recognise the promised descendant. Because He took the sin of the world (John 1:29) upon Himself, He defeated the lies of the deceiver by showing us the true character of God. In Jesus the human story has a new beginning. He is the turning point in the drama. He is the light of the world dispelling the darkness of sin.

**Act Five:** He is also, even now, the rightful and all-powerful King over all nations, gathering His people, the church, to flood the whole world with the light of God's character. The church is God's new creation, a community built on a new set of values: service, acceptance, and forgiveness. The Holy Spirit is sent from Jesus to empower the church to constantly grow in their knowledge of God and in their unselfish service to others.

**Act Six:** Not all, however, will want to see the light and will rather choose to live in the darkness. And so,

at the time of the major opposition to God, He calls His church for a special task, equipping it with special gifts of the Spirit to announce the looming defeat of evil. Stubborn evil will not go willingly and thus God has begun the legal path to remove it and to vindicate His people. God has begun to justify His people, His government, His name, and all the truth that was so far being defiled by the lies of the deceiver. This is the good news of the Gospel for the time of the end. The undoing of the exile has begun. At this time of growing opposition to God, when the forces of darkness gather pace, the church is calling all to unwavering faithfulness to all God's commandments, including the Sabbath commandment which specifically acknowledges God as Creator and Saviour. Give your loyalty to God and do not believe the lies about Him. The day of the final consummation when Jesus as King will appear a second time is thus near. At His coming, His people will receive immortality, but those who liked darkness more than light will be judged so that no questions re-



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main unanswered about their darkness and the deceiver who has brought it upon the world.

**Act Seven:** When the righteous judgement is finished and the darkness, including those who bound their fate with it, will be dispersed and will be no more, God will start where He began initially with this world—creating again, a new creation, a good creation. Harmony will be back and all will see God face-to-face and declare that He indeed is Love. The journey of humanity will restart afresh and this time, it will never end.

This particular narrative confession is about 750 words long. It can be reduced or enlarged according to the needs of the audience. It's an example of how respecting the Bible's inherent structure, plot, and its direction could be preserved alongside the particular theological emphases of our confession.<sup>9</sup> I hope it shows the potential of such narrative confession which could be used alongside the Fundamental Beliefs or even separately for specific types of audiences. It would frame the mind of the readers of the Twenty-Eight

Fundamental Beliefs to read them within a particular story in mind. The accompanying picture, which attempts to visualize the structure of the narrative, has twenty words, but can in an imaginative way sum up what is effectively the foundation of our statements of beliefs—namely the Bible and its narrative. ■

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From now on,  
according  
to the Biblical  
narrative, there  
is time to once  
again gather  
God's people  
and re-establish  
Israel—now  
with a new  
disposition of  
hearts towards  
God.

## References

1. Doctrine of Sin, even though a major theological theme, does not appear as a separate statement, but is addressed under different headings in articles “The Nature of Humanity” (7) and “The Great Controversy” (8).

2. It is interesting to note that half of the 28 articles are focused on two theological motifs—sanctification/salvation applied, and the church. Both themes receive attention in seven articles and, consequently, they appear to stand out in the confession as carrying the key theological weight.

3. See many examples in Philip Shaff (ed.), *Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes, Volume I: The History of Creeds* (1877) and also *Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes, Volume II: The History of Creeds* (1877).

4. On the effectiveness of the Adventist confession, see Rolf J. Pöhler, “Fundamental Beliefs; Curse or Blessing? – On the Pros and Cons of Adventist Confessional Statements” in *Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda: Proceedings of the European Theology Teachers' Convention, Newbold College of Higher Education, 25–28 March, 2015*, ed. Jean-Claude Verrecchia, (Bracknell, UK: Newbold Academic Press, 2016), 123–148.

5. Wright argues that “thinking Scripture” for Paul meant “thinking narrative.” N. T. Wright, “Reading Paul, Thinking Scripture” in *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible*, eds. Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), particularly 60–61.

6. For the value of the story in ancient times see for example: Edward Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Chicago, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1990).

7. Wright, “Reading Paul, Thinking Scripture,” particularly 60–61.

8. For a more elaborate discussion on the Bible as Story see: Jan Barna, “The Grand Story,” *Ministry* (March 2012): 21–22, 24; Gunnar Pedersen and Jan Barna, “Towards a Biblical Theology Method: A 7-stage Theistic Narrative

Methodology,” Tyndale Fellowship, Cambridge, UK (Biblical Theology group annual conference paper), 1–20, (available on academia.edu); Gunnar Pedersen, “The Bible as ‘Story’: A Methodological Opportunity” in *Exploring the Frontiers of Faith: Festschrift In Honour of Dr Jan Paulsen (Congratulatory Edition)*, eds. Børge Schantz and Reinder Bruinsma (Lueneburg, Germany: Advent-Verlag, 2009), 237–245; and Gunnar Pedersen, “Towards Scripture-Based Theology” in *Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda: Proceedings of the European Theology Teachers' Convention, Newbold College of Higher Education, 25–28 March, 2015*, ed. Jean-Claude Verrecchia, (Bracknell, UK: Newbold Academic Press, 2016), 149–177.

9. Philip Shaff rightly points out that “[t]he value of creeds depends upon the measure of their agreement with the Scriptures” (Shaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. I, 7.). But just what exactly is meant by “the Scriptures” and how we “measure” is often the point of the debates. In this paper I have tried to argue that the agreement of our or any confessional statement should be measured not only on the micro-textual level, referencing specific pertinent passages, but primarily on the macro-Scriptural level. It is on this level that the measure of agreement is crucial. In other words, articles of faith only make sense if we locate them within a specific story context. Apart from that they do not have meaning. Consequently, the language we use in our confessional statement, the form of it, the structuring of it, the plot it portrays, the direction it travels, and the order in which key points are made are, or should be, key measuring points for the confession to be called biblical.