

# WHY A STATEMENT OF BELIEFS?

**A statement of beliefs offers some challenges—and some opportunities—for a church seeking to offer its membership a way to consider their place in the theological world.**

The *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* presents a summary of doctrinal beliefs “especially prepared for the instruction of candidates for baptism.”<sup>1</sup> This underscores that Seventh-day Adventists subscribe to a set of teachings that sets them apart from other Christian denominations. The use of this set of doctrines for the instruction of baptismal candidates reminds one of the classical creeds of Christendom. It appears that early Christian confessions of faith were employed in part for the instruction and baptism of new converts.

In this particular sense, the Adventist statement of doctrines appears to take on the character of a creed. Yet, throughout the develop-

ment of their statements of fundamental beliefs, Seventh-day Adventists have insisted that they have no creed but the Bible.

Their reluctance to subscribe to a creed seems to be based on the tendency of creeds to lead to authoritarianism, calcification of beliefs, and the stifling of fresh searches for biblical understanding and truth. Apparently, this is why the church prefers the use of the title “Statement of Fundamental Beliefs.”

The Enlightenment of the 17th

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century introduced its own depreciation of creeds, though based on different concerns. The aversion to authority and disaffection with Protestant scholasticism introduced a radical subjectivism that remains a defining characteristic of our times. Today there is a decided contempt for officially defined systems of doctrine. Contemporary aversion to systems of doctrine goes beyond the historic creeds of Christendom to include confessions of faith and statements of beliefs of more recent vintage.

Among the reasons for the decline in confidence in creeds, confessions, and statements of beliefs are the following: (a) belief in the subjective nature of truth in the post-Enlightenment climate, (b) the stress on orthopraxis over orthodoxy, (c) the appeal to cultural relativism, and (d) a revised concept of revelation as an ongoing reality that evolves and matures.

What may be said in favor of a statement of fundamental beliefs in the context of the contemporary penchant for subjective truth? The analysis of the nature of a statement of fundamental beliefs involves three issues: its formal essence, its material connection to the Scriptures, and its efficiency, i.e., what makes it what it is.

## The Role of the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs

In discussing the role of the state-

ment of fundamental beliefs, a couple of general distinctions must be made. First, a simple distinction could be made between those who value such a document and those who oppose it as unnecessary. The latter might argue: “If we have the Bible, why do we need a statement of fundamental beliefs?” Second, a more subtle distinction could be made between those who see the development as a necessary process and those who see it in less absolutist terms as legitimate and valuable. Those in the first category may seek to ensure the continuation of the development of such statements in every situation. The latter may question its continuing validity or seek to clarify how an earlier statement of beliefs may function in a contemporary situation.

## The Formal Essence of a Statement of Fundamental Beliefs

Technically, the issue of essence relates to the formal cause of a statement of fundamental beliefs. The reference made earlier concerning a statement of fundamental beliefs as an instrument of instruction speaks to this essential, formal nature of the document.

One of the primary things that may be said about a statement of fundamental beliefs is that it is a set of doctrines or teachings. The focus is not on teaching as an activity but on teachings as in a system of beliefs,

*didaskalia*. The Greek usage of *didaskalia* in the New Testament usage stresses content, usually of ethical instruction. “Sound doctrine” in the pastoral epistles is contrasted with immoral living (1 Tim. 1:10; Titus 2:1–5, KJV). Furthermore, the ethical dimension of biblical doctrine/teaching is connected to preaching as the means by which people are brought to faith in Jesus and instructed in the ethical principles and obligations of the Christian life.

On the other hand, since God’s will is the focus of ethical instruction in the Bible, doctrine/teaching becomes closely identified with the essential beliefs of the Christian faith. Yet, knowing doctrine in the Bible is not a mere accumulation of pieces of data; rather, knowing doctrine results in the love of God (2 John 6–10).

Biblical teaching is useful only as it leads to conversion. The goal of the Bible and its teachings is to lead people to a saving knowledge of God through Christ. Biblical teaching and truth aim at building a community into Christ. We are told that by “speaking the truth in love,” we may grow into Christ (see Ephesians 4:15, 16, KJV). It is in this sense of growing up in Christ in “all things” (vs. 15, KJV) that the statement of fundamental beliefs is so wholistic in all aspects of life. Yet a statement of beliefs remains a help along the way in pointing to Christ as the center of

belief and practice. Clearly, Christ should remain the ultimate essence of the statement of fundamental beliefs (John 14:6).

An implication of a statement of fundamental beliefs as a set of *didaskalia* is that its essence contains content, comprising data of the faith that, when embraced, eventuates in love and obedience to God through Jesus Christ.

The use of a statement of fundamental beliefs as instruction implies some measure of sameness with regard to belief within the group. In other words, a statement of fundamental beliefs reflects a group’s corporate faith-consciousness. It is a consensus document that mirrors the belief commitments the group regards as essential to its identity and mission. The historical development of the Seventh-day Adventist fundamental statements of beliefs bears out this point. As early as 1872, the press at Battle Creek issued a pamphlet embodying 25 doctrinal propositions with this introductory comment: “In presenting to the public this synopsis of our faith, we wish to have it distinctly understood that we have no articles of faith, creed, or discipline, aside from the Bible. We do not put forth this as having any authority with our people, nor is it designed to secure uniformity among them, as a system of faith, but *is a brief statement of what is, and has been with great unanimity, held by them.*”<sup>2</sup>

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This statement ought to be understood in the context of the newly developing group’s experience with “established religion” and its creeds. The reference to the propositions as not “having any authority with our people” or not being “a system of faith” may be read as reflecting the new group’s disdain for creeds and systems of belief in established churches. Thus, Ellen G. White wrote: “Though the Reformation gave the Scriptures to all, yet the selfsame principle which was maintained by Rome prevents multitudes in Protestant churches from searching the Bible for themselves. They are taught to accept its teachings *as interpreted by the church*; and there are thousands who dare receive nothing, however plainly revealed in Scripture, that is contrary to their creed, or the established teaching of their church.”<sup>3</sup>

This observation on consensus is not distinctive for Christian communities; secular communities also develop statements of commitment as a symbol of their life together. We

must qualify the consensus in a Christian statement of beliefs as a symbol of community life.

Though a statement of fundamental beliefs reveals an underlying consensus, what is portrayed is not mere “group prejudice.” The underlying consensus reflects a consensus on “truth.” This point is of pivotal importance in considering the role of the statement of fundamental beliefs in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Presently, two views are detrimental to defining and formalizing truth the way a statement of fundamental belief does. On the one hand, the view is fairly widespread in contemporary theology that its task is a second-order, reflective enterprise that focuses on the Christian faith to clarify the particular idea of God peculiar to the Christian community. The postmodern version of this idea commonly takes for granted that different Christian communities, and indeed religions, reflect particular ideas of God in those particular communities. The question

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of Truth is not directly addressed in these formulations of the theological task. Furthermore, this view presupposes an understanding of revelation not as propositional, but as an encounter between God and humanity in which no content as such is communicated.

On the other hand, it has been argued that “a ‘true’ doctrinal statement . . . can, it may be admitted, never lose its truth, but it can lose its relevance.”<sup>4</sup> The validity of this argument is based on the premise that the logic of doctrinal statements means that their meaning is connected to a total worldview of God and His relation to the world. Therefore, a change of worldview could render a doctrine no longer relevant.

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sensus on truth, or is it an in-house understanding of reality? Is there any such thing as “the truth” at all? The position taken on these questions has profound implications for valuation of the statement of fundamental beliefs.

In addressing this question, some take the critical view that diversity in doctrine inheres in the Bible itself. From this perspective, it is pointless, for example, to talk about a uniform teaching in the New Testament, let alone in a subsequent confessional document. Of course, not only does this view run contrary to Tertullian's view that there was an orthodox doctrine that Jesus taught the apostles, which they in turn passed on, and that heresy represents a departure from orthodox doctrine summarized in creedal confessions, but it also runs against Scripture's admonition to keep the faith delivered (1 John 2:23, 24; 2 Thess. 3:6).

From the Seventh-day Adventist perspective, however, from the very beginning, a definite conception of

truth underpinned the formulation of a statement of fundamental beliefs. James White's 1853 response to a query from an official of the Seventh Day Baptist Central Association is seen as a precursor to the current Seventh-day Adventist Statement of Fundamental Beliefs. In response to the query about the faith of Seventh-day Adventists, White wrote: “As a people we are brought together from divisions of the Advent body and from various denominations, holding different views on some subjects; yet, thank Heaven, the Sabbath is a mighty platform on which we can all stand united. And while standing here, with the aid of no other creed than the Word of God, and bound together by the bonds of love—love for the truth, love for each other, and love for a perishing world—‘which is stronger than death,’ all party feelings are lost. We are united in these great subjects: Christ's immediate, personal second Advent, and the observance of all of the commandments of God, and the faith of his Son Jesus Christ, as necessary to a readiness for his Advent.”<sup>5</sup>

One of the significant observations about this “proto” statement of fundamental beliefs is that although the believers held different views on some subjects, love for the truth led them to a consensus on certain fundamental topics.

In James White's comment cited above, he also spoke of a threefold

love that drove the unity of the Millerite group. The pursuit of the truth was not a mere scholastic enterprise, but one based in mission, expressed here as love for one another and love for a perishing world. This is an important aspect of the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the statement of fundamental beliefs that should distinguish it from authoritarian creedalism, which Seventh-day Adventists have traditionally rejected.

Every point made so far about the formal essence of the statement of fundamental beliefs—that it implies content, reflects a consensus on truth, and is based in a context of mission—requires a material grounding. In other words, having a consensus on truth is one thing, but to ask for the nature and source of the truth is a completely different matter. The critical point here is that the content, the truth, and the mission-context of the statement of fundamental beliefs must have a material referent.

### **Fundamental Beliefs and Scripture**

The Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the statement of fundamental beliefs presupposes an dynamic relationship with Holy Scripture. Not only does the church see its statement of fundamental beliefs as grounded in the Bible, but it explicitly and purposefully subordinates the statement of beliefs to the Bible by giving the Bible magisterial

oversight on its future expressions. The statement of fundamental beliefs in the *Church Manual* is prefaced: “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.”<sup>6</sup>

Holding certain fundamental beliefs yet affirming the Bible as a sole creed may seem contradictory, but this highlights the derivative nature of the statement of fundamental beliefs. Keeping in mind that the word *creed* comes from the Latin *credo*, which simply means “I believe,” it becomes immediately apparent that there is no contradiction. Behind the Seventh-day Adventist expression of the phrase “no creed but the Bible” is a particular understanding of the relation between the church’s expression of doctrine and beliefs and the Bible.

A classic Adventist expression on the relation between doctrine and the Bible is provided by Ellen G. White: “When God’s Word is studied, comprehended, and obeyed, a bright light will be reflected to the

world; new truths, received and acted upon, will bind us in strong bonds to Jesus. The Bible, and the Bible alone, is to be our creed, the sole bond of union; all who bow to this Holy Word will be in harmony. Our own views and ideas must not control our efforts. Man is fallible, but God’s Word is infallible.”<sup>7</sup>

Taken with other statements in her writings, this quotation begins to disclose Adventists’ evaluation of creeds and statements of fundamental beliefs as they relate to Scripture. It evidences a few concerns with regard to the Word of God in the Christian’s life: openness to reception of new truths and bonding to Jesus, implying that on both of these fronts, the Bible and not a creed should be the standard. Other statements evidence other concerns, such as the need for heart conversion over against intellectual belief in truth<sup>8</sup> as well as the maintenance of the interpretive authority of Scripture in defining truth over against human interpretive—e.g., papal—authorities.<sup>9</sup> The concern over heart conversion in this regard is insightful in view of the comment that “accepting new theories, and uniting with a church, do not bring new life to anyone, even though the church with which he unites may be established on the true foundation.”<sup>10</sup> Here again we see a concern among the early Adventists with regard to an authentic Christian life

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for which a creed may be found wanting. It seems clear from these statements that Adventists’ resistance to a creed taking the place of the Bible arises from the realization that only the Bible as God’s inspired word, and not a creed, albeit a sound one, is able to address expressed concerns.

The notion of “No creed but the Bible” is certainly not unique to Seventh-day Adventists, but their perspective on the idea is to emphasize the need to go to the Bible for new vistas on truth, as well as to help them be “individual Christians.”<sup>11</sup>

Despite the foregoing, Seventh-day Adventists have also emphasized the need for correct doctrine and truth, as expressed in their adoption of a statement of fundamental beliefs. This is not designed in any way to diminish the role of Scripture in the life of the Adventist community of faith. Indeed, the very fact of the adoption of a statement of fundamental beliefs suggests two things

pertaining to their stand on Scripture.

On one hand, contrary to the sentiment behind one use of “No creed but the Bible,” which scorns responsible reflection on Scripture, the Seventh-day Adventist Statement of Fundamental Beliefs in no way takes away from the supremacy of the Bible. Rather, the fact that the church has taken a definite stand on certain biblical fundamental beliefs reflects its responsible commitment to the *sola scriptura* principle and its continuing trust in the Bible as the inspired Word of God.

On the other hand, the church’s adoption of a statement of fundamental beliefs that derives from the Bible demonstrates a contrary approach behind an equally popular slogan, “No creed but Christ.” This tends to emphasize the subjective element of the Christian religion over its objective, cognitive, and doctrinal aspects. Whereas the slogan “No creed but the Bible” sometimes re-

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flects a fundamentalist disposition toward the Bible, the slogan “no creed but Christ” sometimes represents a liberal reductionist approach. Underlying the fundamentalist's disapprobation of creed-like documents is the fear that such documents undermine the sufficiency of Scripture. Liberal dissatisfaction with creed-like documents, however, sometimes results from a concern for non-coercion and freedom of belief, but at other times from a relativistic, existential perspective.

Subscription to a statement of fundamental beliefs, while on the one hand not inconsistent with scriptural primacy and sufficiency, on the other hand prevents a decline into relativism that may deny Scripture's legitimate authority.

#### **Efficiency of the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs**

In the word *creed* there is already a suggestion of authority shared by the statement of fundamental beliefs, as a creed-like document. The range of views on the authority of a

statement of fundamental beliefs may be broad and sometimes raise difficult questions, but its power will rarely be denied. The question is, In what does the authority and power reside? An understanding of what invests it with authority is helpful in determining its role in the church.

One of the sources of the power of a statement of fundamental beliefs is that it is partly rooted in history. The historical roots of interest here relate specifically to the faith community's perception of God's action in their midst and in their history. Such were the confessions and declaratory affirmations of Israel about God's activity in history (Deut. 6:4, 5; 26:5–9) which it is believed form the basis of Christian creeds.

The power of a statement of fundamental beliefs as a reflection of its rootedness in the history of the faith community is manifested in the fact that once they come into being, “they begin to shape history also.”<sup>12</sup> Creeds, confessions, and statements of belief shape history by providing context for future theological deci-

sions as well as defining denominational practice.

This raises the question of tradition in doctrinal definition. It is important to distinguish tradition as the teaching and practice of a church from tradition as defined, for example, by the decrees of the Council of Trent (1545–1563). No denomination can exist without tradition in the former sense. Whereas the former may be a helpful, even an unavoidable and indispensable theological resource, the latter has been rejected by Protestants as contrary to the *sola scriptura* principle. Even within an acceptable view of tradition, care ought to be taken to avoid a “rule of faith” sense of tradition in which the church's interpretation of Scripture equates with Scripture. Using the statement of fundamental beliefs as a theological resource in the sense of tradition defined above does indeed shape history, but the church should be constantly vigilant to guard against the temptation to equate tradition with Scripture.

Among Seventh-day Adventists, for example, the events prior and subsequent to 1844 were instrumental in their “creedal” development, which in turn informed and continues to inform Adventist theology, worship, and mission today. For Adventists this rootedness in history shapes their philosophy of history and their place in it along cosmic lines in what is generally known as

the Great Controversy. In that sense, the statement of fundamental beliefs is not any mere collection of biblical truths. It represents, rather, “present truth” in the context of the Seventh-day Adventist philosophy of history.

The relation between a statement of beliefs and history, however, ought to be dialectical. Though they shape history, in the sense of Adventists' understanding, they ought to be judged by history—the history of the faith community. As the expression of how the faith community understands God's Word, the statement of fundamental beliefs is examined, clarified, and confirmed in the history of the community. The community's historical reflection and clarification is an attempt to reflect more accurately God's will expressed in Scripture. Thus we are returned to the ultimate source of the authority of the statements of fundamental beliefs, namely, the Bible. The statement of fundamental beliefs is really the church's reading and reception of Scripture, and it is truly authoritative to the extent that it accurately depicts the message of Scripture.

Historical rootedness, however, is not the only source of the power of a statement of fundamental beliefs. Indeed, it is not the most significant source of its authority. The faith community ascribes authority to the statement mainly because as the community sees in it an expression of God's activity among them, they find



Christ's promise regarding the Holy Spirit fulfilled among them (John 16:13). In this sense the statement of beliefs is regarded as one of the results of the work of the Spirit. The consensus expressed in the statement is seen as Spirit-directed. To say that the statement is a Spirit-guided consensus is to acknowledge an attitude of openness to the Spirit's further leading in doctrinal expression.

### The Usefulness of a Statement of Beliefs and Creeds

Considering this discussion thus far, then, a statement of fundamental beliefs may be defined as a faith community's Spirit-directed consensus on the truth at any one time, based on its interpretation of inspired Scripture, which then defines the community's identity and mission. What possible value does such a statement have for the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

The nature of a statement of beliefs as the community's reading of Scripture points to one of its key roles: as an indicator of the community's concern for hermeneutics. By putting out a statement of beliefs, the community is declaring that "this is the way we read Scripture." Furthermore, the statement of beliefs, as a system of beliefs, becomes collectively the principle or framework of interpretation for the community in organizing the disparate data of Scripture.

Speaking about Adventists' reading of Scripture, Ellen G. White has drawn attention to the centrality of the sanctuary by observing that "It opened to view a complete system of truth."<sup>13</sup> Fernando Canale has also shown that hermeneutically (methodologically), the sanctuary provides for Adventists guidance in interpreting foundational philosophical principles regarding the nature of reality (God, humanity, and the world) and the place of historical knowledge as we go about the theological enterprise.<sup>14</sup>

In this way, the statement not only declares the interpretational stance of the community in the past, but also provides a guide for present interpretational efforts. At a time in the history of theology, and even in the Seventh-day Adventist Church itself, when things appear uncertain and changing, the methodological value of a statement of beliefs in providing theological identity cannot be underestimated.

It should be evident that in fulfilling the foregoing role, the statement begins to function as a "rule." Anti-creedalism takes some of its objections from this role of officially defined doctrinal systems. Edward Farley, for example, argues that we should refuse "to make anything human and historical a timeless absolute, dwelling above the flow of contexts and situations. . . . [Indeed] one refuses to give this status . . . to

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one's denomination, to one's confessions, to one's heritage, even to one's Scripture."<sup>15</sup> For him, this stance is a positive expression of the "conviction that God's presence and truth come through human, but historical and fallible vessels."<sup>16</sup> Farley's assessment is even more radical: "If we need certainty about salvation, modernism would direct that to God and God alone, not to the vessels that deliver it."<sup>17</sup> If our analysis of the nature of a statement of beliefs is correct, then there are two divergent, but equally inappropriate attitudes: "If we desist from divinizing the creed, neither do we depreciate its intrinsic worth and relevance."<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, the statement of beliefs should be viewed as "a rule that is ruled," but nonetheless a rule. The indispensability of biblical interpretation means that at any time the role of Scripture will be as interpreted. To the extent that a statement of beliefs represents what has been dubbed "the precipitate of the religious consciousness of mighty men and times,"<sup>19</sup> a

record of the "central convictions" of earlier generations, it deserves a wider utilization in the church. Individual explorative interpretations, as important as they are, may not, without some risk, treat officially defined doctrinal systems lightly. We should not be unaware that, as in the case of Farley, some voices of "anti-creedalism" may result from a loss of confidence in Scripture's authority or uniqueness due to its inspiration. Equally, such positions may be the result of a loss of confidence in human ability to know the truth.

On the other hand, a statement of beliefs is still a rule that is ruled. This has always been the cornerstone of the Seventh-day Adventist apprehension about creeds. However closely the statement purports to represent biblical teaching, the *sola scriptura* principle should be maintained. Scripture is the ultimate court of appeal. In the eventuality of appeal, the critical issue becomes the science of hermeneutics. This is why a broad-based community effort in establishing hermeneutical principles before-

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hand is indispensable to the community's theological health. The General Conference Committee of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's action in voting a document on "Methods of Bible Study" at the 1986 Annual Council in Rio de Janeiro should be evaluated in this context.

#### **The Statement of Beliefs and the "Critical" Task**

Closely related to the role of the statement of fundamental beliefs as an indicator of the community's hermeneutical concern is its role in the detection of doctrinal error. Traditionally, the rise of heresy was one of the reasons for creeds. The statement of beliefs provides a standard by which to judge new teachings arising in the church. Of all the roles that a statement of beliefs may play, this attracts the greatest fear and concern. The history of the Christian Church is filled with inquisitions and persecutions on the basis of creedal formulations.

Fear of the critical use of a statement of beliefs is well-founded.

Still, in assessing a statement of beliefs, the central question is this: Is the question of heresy still appropriate? If the answer is yes, then it seems that, despite potential for abuse, the critical role of officially defined systems of doctrine cannot be avoided. The biblical perspective is quite clear, for the Bible places a high priority on maintaining sound teaching and on avoiding heresy (1 Cor. 11:2; Gal. 1:8; 1 Tim. 1:3; 6:3; 2 Tim. 1:13).

Understandably, contemporary anti-creedal concerns often embody a certain degree of ambivalence. Though the value to the faith community of theological self-definition is applauded, apprehension is entertained about what may happen to those whose theological convictions may fall short of what is officially and consensually defined. Some have detected an irony in the situation: "A creed can be appropriately 'authoritative' in the sense of representing the

church family as a whole and expressing its theological consensus. A church needs to define itself theologically; this is a matter not only of identity, but also of 'truth in advertising.' . . . But—and here is the irony— . . . as soon as we produce a statement of belief . . . some people will use the statement to judge others, and to try to exclude from the community those who don't measure up."<sup>20</sup>

The real question is whether there is an irony here in that the acts of judging and excluding are unexpected results of the act of theological self-definition in formulating a statement of beliefs. In other words, does theological self-definition in formulating a statement of fundamental beliefs necessarily involve the judging and exclusion of those who do not accept the terms of self-identification? Historically, with regard to creeds, the answer appears to have been yes. "The task of the creed was to defend the Church against heresy. The creed has the negative role of shutting the heretic out and setting the boundaries within which authentic Christian theology and life can take place."<sup>21</sup> It appears that formally, judging and exclusion may belong functionally to a statement of beliefs. It is in its nature to exclude and judge, at least intellectually.

This conclusion, however, needs to be nuanced.

First, it has been shown that the Adventist use of the slogan "no creed

but the Bible" expresses a desire that even a sound statement of beliefs should *not* interfere with the believer's continuing interaction with Scripture as the source of new insights as well as the guarantor of "individual Christianity." In providing this critical role, therefore, the statement of beliefs must be seen primarily as the locus of the community's consensus without stifling the need to go back to the Bible in the "critical" process.

Second, there are a few possible conditions under which theological variance with a statement of beliefs may not necessarily lead to personal exclusion: (a) One could make a case for a distinction in a statement between common and essential features so that one could disagree on a common feature without being a heretic. This distinction has been made in other contexts. The issue in this situation revolves around the legitimacy of making such a distinction in the context of a statement of beliefs. (b) It may be possible to argue that one ought not to become the subject of exclusionary action the moment one's theological reflection yields something contrary to consensus in the statement of fundamental beliefs. In the interest of encouraging creative thinking and forestalling the danger that the pioneers perceived in creeds as "setting the stakes, and barring the way to all future development,"<sup>22</sup> theo-

logical difference from the statement of fundamental beliefs ought not to lead to exclusion unless the circumstances surrounding the variance go to the very condition of endangering the existence of the community. Such could be the case in which, for example, a “new light” is peddled in a manner that threatens the unity of the community of faith.

The point is that a statement of fundamental beliefs has a legitimate juridical role in settling doctrinal disputes as well as even possibly avoiding them. Whether this role *always* leads to exclusion raises questions beyond this basic point. But the significance of the statement of beliefs in fulfilling this juridical role needs to be underlined. The questions are: In our post-modern context, does the church subscribe to belief in the truth? Is this question still a legitimate one?

At this point, these issues have little to do with the expression of our doctrines in the 28 fundamental beliefs. It is a formal one about the other side of the question about heresy. It appears the answer is positive, for the fact that the church opens itself up for future redefinition and clarification of truth does not mean that it may not express itself definitively on questions of truth at any one time. To take such a stance would amount to a virtual “agnosticism” that would undermine the very existence of the church.

#### Statement of Beliefs: Church Unity and Mission

The negative role of a statement of beliefs in detecting heresy necessarily highlights its positive role in promoting unity. This role of officially defined doctrines is noted as its constitutional use. The relationship between heresy and unity is clear because heresy denotes schism or faction (1 Cor. 11:19; Gal. 5:20), and Paul’s use of the adjective *hairetikos* (Titus 3:10) characterizes the heretic as divisive or factious. The absence of heresy, then, is conducive to the promotion of unity. Stated positively, the statement of fundamental beliefs serves as a rallying point for those who make the same confession of the truth.

Of course, the total unity of the church goes beyond theological concerns to include matters that may be more appropriately described as ecclesiological, as well as even cultural and sociological. Nevertheless, dependence of denominational unity on doctrine cannot be denied, since theological matters usually create separate denominations in the first place. Herein lies the importance of affirming the statement of fundamental beliefs. It is one of the strong evidences of the unity of the church. Since the document is put together on the basis of definite historical, hermeneutical, and methodological presuppositions, affirming such a document signals not only a unity and

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continuity with the faith community’s historic past, but with its present theological and missiological goals.

Important as theological unity is, achieving that goal is not an end in itself. As mentioned before, there is a connection between the biblical concept of teaching and ethics. The ethical dimension of biblical doctrine/teaching is connected to preaching as the means by which people are brought to faith in Jesus and instructed in the ethical principles and obligations of the Christian life. Thus, the role of a statement of belief in preserving the church’s theological unity is significant because that unity contributes to the promotion of the mission of the church. Clearly, community effort is better performed in an atmosphere of homogenous faith. “God is leading out a people to stand in perfect unity upon the platform of eternal truth. Christ gave Himself to the world that He might ‘purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.’ This refining process is

designed to purge the church from all unrighteousness and the spirit of discord and contention, that they may build up instead of tear down, and concentrate their energies on the great work before them.”<sup>23</sup>

The statement of beliefs not only unifies the church for mission, but also is itself a witness to those outside the church. It appears that this role of the statement is what motivates some of our churches to print the statement of fundamental beliefs at the back of their regular worship programs. The statement, as a document, performs this function in a number of ways: It clearly outlines and expounds on the fundamental assertions of the faith; it witnesses to the unity and systematic nature of the faith; and it demonstrates the rational, objective biblical content of the truth as believed in the community. It does all these things in such a systematic, yet concise way that what the community believes is made readily clear to those who stand outside the community of faith. In this



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way, the statement of fundamental beliefs performs an invaluable apologetic function.

#### **Statement of Beliefs and Theological/Biblical Education**

After warning against the temptation to reduce the history of Christian doctrine to a list of formulae to be memorized for the sake of avoiding heresy, Richard Muller observes: “The issue in studying the formulae is to understand their interpretive relationship to the Christian message and the way in which they have served in particular historical contexts to convey that message and, in addition, to preserve it into the future.”<sup>24</sup> The statement of beliefs discloses intent on the part of the faith community to interpret and apply the biblical message. For contemporary theologians, understanding the interpretational dynamics of the intent of the statement of beliefs provides useful insight into how it may be preserved for both the present and future.

At a popular level within the community of faith, the statement of beliefs is an invaluable pedagogical aid. It has often been noted that the sheer volume of the Bible presents challenges of comprehension for many believers. The statement of beliefs, by compiling, systematizing, and summarizing biblical teaching on many subjects, makes it easier for the church to fulfill its instructional mandate within the faith community.

Yet it is important to observe that its pedagogical role should not eclipse the role of Scripture, in which case it would begin to smack of creedalism. In this regard it is worth drawing attention to the format of the statement of fundamental beliefs as presented, for example, in the *Church Manual*. At the end of each statement is a list of Bible texts that serves as an invitation to a personal, biblical exploration of the particular doctrine. In a unique sense, the statement of beliefs in performing its pedagogical role func-

tions as a sign pointing to the Bible.

With particular reference to the use of statements of beliefs for children and new believers, Philip Schaff comments: “In the form of Catechisms they are of especial use in the instruction of children, and facilitate a solid and substantial religious education, in distinction from spasmodic and superficial excitement.”<sup>25</sup> The value of a statement in facilitating biblical education is premised on the fact that a growing understanding of the Bible comes with reading it, systematizing it, and applying it. The statement of fundamental beliefs, as a distilled exposition of biblical themes as understood by the faith community, facilitates education in Scripture.

#### **Statement of Beliefs and Baptism**

On the basis of Romans 10:9, 10, E. Glenn Hinson connects the creed as a confessional statement with the new believer’s covenant initiation into the family of God. In Hinson’s view, it is natural that the first step toward Christianity would entail a confession of some kind, however rudimentary. His conclusion is that the confession that Jesus is Lord, and the belief that God raised Him from the dead (verse 9), “represent[s] in an external and visible way the making of an inward covenant: ‘For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved.’”<sup>26</sup> It is this connec-

tion, Hinson says, between confession and the personal covenant-making process that made creeds a *sine qua non* of initiation rites in the early church. Thus, the creed played a critical role in the convert’s total cognitive and affective commitment.

The significance of this role of a statement of beliefs goes back to the analysis of it as teaching. One implication was that content is of the essence of a statement of beliefs. The use of a statement of beliefs as a means of incorporation into the body of Christ is an indication of how the Seventh-day Adventist Church understands the nature of the Christian life and experience. The Christian life flourishes mainly through the Word and not in a sacramental manner. A proper use of the statement of fundamental beliefs offers a powerful avenue for personal incorporation into and private appropriation of the ethos of the faith community.

The role of the statement of beliefs in the baptismal rites of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is recognized by the *Church Manual*. The 16th edition requires those who are being baptized or received into fellowship by profession of faith to affirm publicly acceptance of the doctrinal beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Although the practice of incorporation into the body may vary, connection between belief and incorporation into the body of Christ is, in principle, acknowledged. In-

deed, as noted before, the manual gives the impression that the statement of beliefs was primarily prepared for baptismal instruction.

### Other Uses of a Statement of Fundamental Beliefs

A few other uses may be derived from a statement of beliefs, such as for homiletical and liturgical purposes. Thus, some Seventh-day Adventist ministers have developed preaching schedules around the fundamental beliefs of the church. The purpose has always been to set forth in the church the truths that are held together in the community, and thereby to ground the people of God in the truth. Similarly, portions of a statement may be incorporated into the worship of the church as “affirmations of faith.”

Is the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs infallible? Both the analysis and the church’s official pronouncements show that it is not infallible. But what does that mean for the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs in the life of the church?

This discussion of the usefulness of a statement of fundamental beliefs has not presupposed its infallibility, which is not a necessary requirement for the usefulness of a statement of beliefs. Consequently, the issue around the status of a statement of beliefs with respect to infallibility is perhaps not fundamentally about usefulness. It appears that the issue

concerns the possibility of error in the statement: What if the statement is wrong or inaccurate in some parts?

It should be kept in mind that, theologically, every allegation of error regarding a point in the statement of fundamental beliefs represents a difference of interpretation between the church’s consensus position in the statement and the position of those making the allegation. Whether the statement actually contains error is an evaluation that will have to be made on the principles of interpretation and theological effort. Formally, however, the consensual nature of the statement of beliefs would appear to require that amendments, clarifications, redefinitions, etc., ought to be pursued consensually. Care should be exercised so as not to give the impression that the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs as we have it now is actually erroneous since the question about “what if” really has to do with potentialities.

### In Summary

A statement of beliefs clearly serves a useful role, but it is not without shortcomings. Primarily, the resistance among Adventists to a creed replacing the Bible resides in its inability to facilitate “individual Christianity” as well as its tendency to block further biblical insights. Indeed a litany of objections about creeds may also be true of a state-

ment of beliefs.

It is objected that statements of belief obstruct the free interpretation of the Bible and the progress of theology; that they interfere with the liberty of conscience and the right of private judgment; that they engender hypocrisy, intolerance, and bigotry; that they produce division and distraction; that they perpetuate religious animosity and the curse of sectarianism; that by the law of reaction, they produce dogmatic indifference, skepticism, and infidelity.

Schaff’s observation on these objections is on target: “The creeds, as such, are no more responsible for abuses than the Scriptures themselves, of which they profess to be merely a summary or an exposition.”<sup>27</sup> History shows that both creedal and non-creedal churches are equally exposed to division and controversy. The reality seems to be that the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs, although imperfect, is an indispensable instrument of the church as it seeks to accomplish its mission in an imperfect world. □

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