

The Role of the Statement of Beliefs and Creeds

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The Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual (16th ed., rev. 2000) presents a summary of doctrinal beliefs “especially prepared for the instruction of candidates for baptism.”¹ What this set of doctrines underscores is that Seventh-day Adventists subscribe to a set of teachings which defines them and 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. There seems to be near universal agreement on the fact that early Christian confessions of faith were employed in part for the instruction and baptism of new converts.² In this particular sense, the Adventist statement of doctrines appears to take on the character of a creed. Yet, throughout the development of their Statements of Fundamental Beliefs, Seventh-day Adventists have insisted on the fact that they have no creed but the Bible.

Seventh-day Adventists’ 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.³ Apparently, this is the reason why the church prefers the use of the title “Statement of Fundamental Beliefs,” although others, such as Baptists, with similar disposition toward creeds, prefer the title “Confession of Faith.”

The Enlightenment of the 17th century, however, introduced its own depreciation of creeds, though based on different concerns. The Enlightenment, embodying a general aversion to “authority,” and capitalizing on the disaffection

¹ *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 16th Edition (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2000), 209–213.

² E. Glenn Hinson, “Confessions or Creeds in Early Christian Tradition,” *Review and Expositor* 76 (1979), 6.

³ See Fritz Guy, “Uncovering the Origins of the Statement of Twenty-seven Fundamental Beliefs,” *Spectrum* 32/3 (2004), 20.

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with Protestant scholasticism, introduced a radical subjectivism that remains a defining characteristic of our times. From Adolf von Harnack through Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, and Gordon Kaufmann to many contemporary postmodernists, there is a decided contempt for officially defined systems of doctrine. Evidently, contemporary aversion to officially defined systems of doctrine goes beyond the historic creeds of Christendom to include confessions of faith and statements of beliefs of more recent vintage.

We cannot enter into a full discussion of the reasons for the contemporary depreciation of officially defined systems of doctrine, but it may be worth noting some of them at this point. Among the reasons for the decline in confidence in creeds, confessions, and statements of beliefs are the following: belief in the subjective nature of truth in the post-enlightenment climate, the stress of orthopraxis over orthodoxy, the appeal to cultural relativism, and a revised concept of revelation (i.e., revelation as an ongoing reality) that leads to a new over-emphasis on understanding doctrine as an organism that ever evolves and matures.⁴

The question regarding the role of the statement of fundamental beliefs in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is raised in the context of the foregoing background. In other words, what may be said in favor of a statement of fundamental beliefs as an officially defined system of doctrines in the context of the contemporary penchant for subjective truth? In view of the significance of the subject, it is critically important that any meaningful comment on the role of the statement of fundamental beliefs in the church be preceded by an adequate analysis of the phenomenon. The analysis of the nature or phenomenon of a statement of fundamental beliefs in this paper will involve three issues: its *formal* essence, its *material* connection to the Scriptures, and its efficiency, i.e., what it is that makes it what it is. Each of the issues raised will be discussed in turn, then a concise definition of the statement of fundamental beliefs will be formulated, and finally some specific conclusions on the place and role of fundamental beliefs in the Seventh-day Adventist church as a community of faith will be provided.

Before examining the three issues raised above, it may be useful to define more clearly the question about the role of a statement of fundamental beliefs.

Clarifying the Role of the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs

The following discussion is guided by a certain understanding of the issue regarding the role of a statement of fundamental beliefs in the Seventh-day Adventist church. This understanding of the issue needs to be spelt out. It is of some importance that while we speak of the role of the statement of fundamental beliefs, a couple general distinctions be made. First, a simple distinction could

⁴ See Bruce A. Demarest, "Christendom's Creeds: Their Relevance in the Modern World," *JETS* 21/4 (1978), 352-56.

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be made between those who see value in the development of a statement of fundamental beliefs and those who oppose it as an altogether unnecessary development. The latter might argue along the following lines: “if we have the Bible, why do we need a statement of fundamental beliefs?” Secondly, 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*. While those in the first category may seek to ensure the continuation of the development of such statements in every situation, the latter group may question its continuing validity or seek to clarify how the Statement of Beliefs which functioned in an earlier era may function in a contemporary situation. The ensuing discussion intends to keep the two concerns outlined in view.

The Formal Essence of the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs

The first part of the analysis of the nature of a statement of fundamental beliefs will deal with its essence. By referring to the *essence* of the statement of beliefs, a very formal idea is in view. Technically, the issue relates to the *formal cause* of a statement of fundamental beliefs. Some of the points that will be raised in this section of the paper may come up subsequently for further consideration, but at this point the focus will simply be on a formal analysis of the nature of the 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.

First, one of the primary formal things that may be said about the nature of a statement of fundamental beliefs is that it is a set of doctrines or teachings; *didaskalia*. Here, the focus is *not* on teaching as an activity but on teachings as in a system of beliefs. Two important points emerge from a biblical understanding of *doctrine* or *teaching*. On the one hand, unlike the Greek usage of *didaskalia* outside of the Bible, which emphasized the communication of intellectual or technical knowledge, the New Testament usage stresses *content*, usually of ethical instruction. Thus, “sound doctrine” in the pastoral epistles is contrasted with immoral living (1 Tim. 1:10; Titus 2:1–5). 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.⁵

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 data of the faith,” taking on a meaning which includes the essential beliefs of the Christian faith.⁶ 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).

⁵ G. D. Fee, “Doctrine,” *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 2:152.

⁶ *Ibid.*

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Christ as the Ultimate Essence of the Statement. Care should be exercised to note that biblical teaching is useful only as it leads to conversion.⁷ The goal of the Bible and its teachings is to lead people to a saving knowledge of God through Christ. Biblical teaching and truth all aim at building a community into Christ. We are told that by “*speaking the truth in love*,” we may grow into Christ (Eph 4:15–16). It is in this sense of growing up in Christ in “all aspects or things” (v. 15) that the statement of fundamental beliefs is so wholistic in its reach into 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, since in reality He is *die ursprüngliche Lehre* (John 14:6).

First, then, an implication of understanding the statement of fundamental beliefs as a set of *didaskalia* is that it belongs to the very essence of such a statement to have *content*, comprising data of the faith which, when embraced, eventuates in love and obedience to God through Jesus Christ.

Second, the use of a statement of fundamental beliefs by a group as an instrument of instruction implies the anticipation of some measure of “sameness” with regards to belief within the ranks of 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 the following 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.*⁸

The foregoing 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 a critique and a reflection of the

⁷ “All, high or low, if they are unconverted, are on one common platform. Men may turn from one doctrine to another. This is being done, and will be done. Papists may change from Catholicism to Protestantism; yet they may know nothing of the meaning of the words, ‘A new heart also will I give you.’ 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. Connection with a church does not take the place of conversion. To subscribe the name to a church creed is not of the least value to anyone if the heart is not truly changed. . . .” (Ev 290).

⁸ Quoted in *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2d rev. ed., 2 vols. (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1996), 464. All emphasis throughout this paper is mine.

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new group's disdain of established churches' use of creeds and systems of belief. Thus, E. 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. (GC 596)

Be that as it may, the preceding observation on consensus or "sameness" is not particularly insightful or even distinctive for Christian communities since secular communities also develop statements of commitment as a symbol of their life together.⁹ We must, therefore, move on to make a third point by qualifying the quality of consensus in a Christian statement of beliefs as a symbol of community life.

While 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 as we seek to reflect on the role of the statement of fundamental beliefs in the Seventh-day Adventist church.

Presently, there are two views that are detrimental to attempts to define and formalize truth the way a Statement of Fundamental belief does. On the one hand, the view is fairly widespread in contemporary theology that the *task* of theology is a *second-order reflective enterprise* that focuses on the Christian faith to clarify the *particular* idea of God *peculiar* to the Christian community. In the postmodern version of this idea, it is commonly understood and taken for granted that different Christian communities, and indeed religions, reflect particular ideas of God in those particular communities. The question of truth is not directly addressed in these formulations of the theological task and consequently is left unanswered. Furthermore, this view of the theological task presupposes an understanding of revelation not as propositional, in the sense of having a cognitive content, but as an encounter between God and man 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."¹⁰ 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 world-view of God and His relation to the world. Therefore, a change of world-view could render a doctrine which used to be true no longer relevant.

⁹ Hinson, 5.

¹⁰ Maurice Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1967), 9.

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Comment on the role of the statement of fundamental beliefs in the Seventh-day Adventist church must require a prior assessment and clarification of the relationship between the statement of beliefs and the question of truth. In other words, does the statement of beliefs represent the church's consensus on "truth," or is it an "in-house" understanding of reality? Underlying this question is the issue of whether there is any such thing as "the truth" at all. The position taken on this question has profound implications on one's valuation of the statement of fundamental beliefs. In addressing this question, another issue should be pointed out. There are those who take the critical view that diversity in doctrine inheres in the Bible itself.¹¹ 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 (about A.D. 200) 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,¹² but it runs against Scripture's admonition to keep the faith delivered (1 John 2:23–24; 2 Thess 3:6).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into the continuing debate on the unity of the Bible broached above. From the Seventh-day Adventist perspective, however, it appears that from the very beginning, a definite conception of "truth" underlay the effort to formulate 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴

¹¹ On this issue, see Gerhard Hasel, *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 140ff.

¹² *Ibid.*, 13.

¹³ Guy, 20.

¹⁴ James White, "Resolution of the Seventh-day Baptist Central Association," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Aug. 11, 1853, 52.

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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.

A final point on the essence of the statement of fundamental beliefs comes out of James White’s comment cited above. White spoke of a three-fold love that drove the unity of the Millerite group. The pursuit of *the truth* was not a mere scholastic enterprise, but one that was 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 despised.

Every point that has been 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. That is the subject of the next section.

Fundamental Beliefs and Scripture

The second part of the analysis of the nature of a statement of fundamental beliefs has to do with its *relation* to Scripture. The Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the statement of fundamental beliefs presupposes an ongoing 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 16th edition of the Church Manual is prefaced as follows

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.¹⁵

The church’s holding certain fundamental beliefs and at the same time affirming the Bible as its only creed may seem contradictory. Nevertheless, this seemingly contradictory position highlights the derivative nature of the statement of fundamental beliefs. How is this possible? When it is kept in mind that the word *creed* comes from the Latin *credo*, which simply means “I believe,” it

¹⁵ *Church Manual*.

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becomes immediately apparent that, technically, there is no contradiction here. But 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. How may this relationship be expressed?

The Bible as the Creed of Seventh-day Adventists. A classic expression of Adventist psyche on the relation between doctrine and the Bible is provided by E. 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. (1 SM 416)

Together with other statements in her writings, the statement above begins to disclose Adventists’ evaluation of creeds, and for that matter a statement of fundamental beliefs, with respect to its relation to Scripture. The quotation evidences a few concerns with regards to the Word of God in the Christian’s life: openness to reception of new truths and bonding to Jesus. The implication from the statement is that on both of these fronts, the Bible and not a creed should be depended upon. Other statements evidence other concerns, such as the need for heart conversion over against intellectual belief in truth (EV 290) as well as the maintenance of the interpretive authority of Scripture in defining truth over against human interpretive authorities, such as papal authority (FW 77). The concern over heart conversion in this regard is an insightful one 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*” (EV 290). Here again we see a concern among the early Adventists with regards to an authentic Christian life 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 the concerns noted above.

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 us be “individual Christians” (FW 77).

In spite of the foregoing, Seventh-day Adventists have also emphasized the need for correct doctrine and truth, a fact which is 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 brings out two

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implications of their stand on Scripture. On the one hand, quite contrary to the sentiment behind one use of the slogan “No creed but the Bible,” which scorns responsible reflection on Scripture, the Seventh-day Adventist Statement of Fundamental Beliefs does not in any way take away from the authority or 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 is derivatively connected to the explicit teachings of the Bible demonstrates an approach which runs contrary to the sentiment behind an equally popular slogan, “No creed but Christ.” This tends to emphasize the subjective element of the Christian religion over against the objective, cognitive, and doctrinal aspects of it. Whereas the slogan “No creed but the Bible” sometimes reflects a fundamentalist disposition towards the Bible, the slogan “no creed but Christ” sometimes represents a liberal reductionist approach to the Bible. Underlying the fundamentalist’s disapprobation of creed-like documents is the fear that such documents undermine the sufficiency of Scripture.¹⁶ The liberal dissatisfaction with creed-like documents, however, sometimes results from a concern for non-coercion and freedom of belief, but other times from a relativistic, existential perspective.

Both the liberal and fundamentalist tendencies mentioned above will need to be addressed when we examine the value and role of the statement of fundamental beliefs in the life of the church. At this point, we only wish to point out that 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 its legitimate authority in

¹⁶ The point should be made that there is more to orthodoxy or correct doctrine than the slogan “No creed but the Bible.” While the slogan on its face may sound pious, it does indeed evidence different dispositions. Traditionally, Adventists have also made the claim, “No creed but the Bible”; so have Jehovah’s Witnesses, as well as some Church of Christ denominations. On the one hand, when Seventh-day Adventists make the claim, they are defending the normative status of the Bible over against any interpretations of men that are set up to interfere with the Bible from functioning as ultimate authority. As E. G. White noted clearly about Protestant churches of her time, “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” (GC 596). The following statement by E. G. White again shows that the concern was to ensure that the Bible has the final word. “But God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reforms. The opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils, as numerous and discordant as are the churches which they represent, the voice of the majority—not one nor all of these should be regarded as evidence for or against any point of religious faith. Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain ‘Thus saith the Lord’ in its support” (GC 595). On the other hand, a fundamentalist may make the claim sometimes to defend a crude literalism over against responsible interpretation.

the church. This point will be picked up when the role of the statement of fundamental beliefs is specifically discussed.

Efficiency of the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs

Before we discuss more directly the role of the statement of fundamental beliefs in the church, we need to explore one more aspect of our analysis of the nature or phenomenon of the statement of fundamental beliefs. Here we ask the question about the efficiency of a statement of fundamental beliefs, namely, the power that enables it to be what it is and to accomplish its desired goal.

In the word creed there is already a suggestion of authority¹⁷ that the statement of fundamental beliefs, as a creed-like document, shares. The range of views on the nature and scope of the authority of a statement of fundamental beliefs may be quite 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 makes it have the authority it has will be helpful in determining its role in the church.

One of the sources of the power that attends a statement of fundamental beliefs seems to be the fact that it is partly rooted in history.¹⁸ The rootedness in history that is of interest here relates 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 26:5–9; Deut 6:4–5) which it is believed form the basis of Christian creeds.¹⁹

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, as Leith observes, "they begin to shape history also."²⁰ Creeds, confessions, and statements of beliefs shape history by providing the context for future theological decisions as well as defining denominational practice.

Obviously, the comment made above raises the question of tradition in doctrinal definition. Tradition, however, must be distinguished in its various meanings. It is important to distinguish tradition as the teaching and practice of a church, as this teaching and practice has been carried on continuously from the beginning, from tradition as defined, for example, by the decrees of the Council of Trent (1545–63).²¹ 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

¹⁷ John H. Leith, *Creeds of the Churches* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁹ J. N. D. Kelly, "Creeds," in Alan Richardson and John Bowden, *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 131.

²⁰ Leith, 3.

²¹ R. P. C. Hanson, "Tradition," in Richardson and Bowden, 574.

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ought to be taken to avoid a “rule of faith” sense of tradition where tradition as the church’s interpretation of Scripture is made to necessarily equate with Scripture.²² Using the statement of fundamental beliefs as a theological resource in the sense of tradition defined above does indeed shape history, but the church ought to be constantly vigilant to guard against the temptation to necessarily equate tradition and 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 motif. 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 a dialectical relationship. While they shape history, it is also the case that a statement of fundamental beliefs in the sense of Adventists’ understanding ought to be judged by history—the history of the faith community. This is the case because 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. It is important to emphasize that the community’s historical reflection and clarification is an attempt to more accurately reflect the will of God expressed in Scripture. Thus we are pointed back 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 a Spirit-directed consensus. To say that the statement is a Spirit-guided consensus is to acknowledge in the same breath an attitude of openness to the Spirit’s further leading in doctrinal expression.

²² Such, for example, is the view taken by Thomas Oden when he argues that “It is not necessary to decide between Scripture and what the church historically teaches in order to define the rule of faith. For what the church, at its best, teaches is precisely what the Scriptures teach.” See *The Living God* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 344.

The Usefulness of a Statement of Beliefs and Creeds

From the analysis carried out so far, how may the phenomenon, whose usefulness is about to be outlined, be succinctly defined? The following outline of the role of a statement of beliefs should be read in the context of the preceding analysis. Synthesizing that analysis, we may formulate the understanding of a Statement of Beliefs that underlies this discussion as follows: *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.* The question we face now is the following: what possible value does such a statement have for the community, in this case the Seventh-day Adventist church? The value of the statement of fundamental beliefs to be discussed below flows from the analysis of its nature given above.

Statement of Beliefs and Hermeneutical Concern. The nature of a statement of beliefs as the community's reading of Scripture points to one of its key roles, namely, 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"; "we are not indifferent to any reading of 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, E. G. White has drawn attention to the centrality of the sanctuary by observing that "It opened to view a complete system of truth" (GC 423). 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, man, and the world) and the place of historical knowledge as we go about the theological enterprise.²³

In this way, the statement not only declares the interpretational stance of the community in the past, but 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 quite 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, objects to this function of a creed, arguing 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 one's denomination, to one's confessions, to one's heritage, even to one's Scripture."

²³ Fernando Canale, "Philosophical Foundations and the Biblical Sanctuary," *AUSS* 36/2 (1998): 183–206.

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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.”²⁴ 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”.²⁵ If our analysis of the nature of a statement of beliefs is correct, then two divergent, but equally inappropriate attitudes on this issue need to be pointed out. As Bruce Demarest has correctly noted with regards to creeds, “If we desist from divinizing the creed, neither do we depreciate its intrinsic worth and relevance.”²⁶

Similarly, the statement of beliefs should be viewed as *norma normata*, “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,” 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 be due to 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. The desire to maintain this principle has always been the cornerstone of the Seventh-day Adventist apprehension about creeds. Thus, however closely the statement purports to represent biblical teaching, the *sola scriptura* principle should be maintained that, in matters of doctrinal controversy, inspired Scripture is the ultimate court of appeal. Obviously, in the eventuality of any such process of appeal, the critical issue becomes the science of hermeneutics. It is for this reason that a broad-based community effort in establishing hermeneutical principles beforehand is indispensable to the community’s theological health and existence. 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.²⁷

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 why the need for creeds arose. The statement of beliefs provides a standard by which to judge

²⁴ Edward Farley, “The Modernist Element in Protestantism,” *Theology Today* 47(1990): 141.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Bruce A. Demarest, “Christendom’s Creeds: Their Relevance in the Modern World,” *JETS* 21/4 (1978): 355.

²⁷ For the full text of the document see *Adventist Review* (January 22, 1987), 18–20.

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new teachings arising in the church. Of all the roles that a statement of beliefs may play, this is the one that attracts the greatest fear and concern. The history of the Christian church is filled with inquisitions and persecutions of all sorts that were carried out on the basis of creedal formulations. Hence, a fear of the critical use of a statement of beliefs is well-founded. Still, in assessing a statement of beliefs in this regard, the question that lies close to the heart of the matter is the following: Is the question of heresy still askable?²⁸ If the answer is yes, then we seem to be faced with a situation where in spite of the 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 by guarding the pure content of the true gospel (1 Tim 1:3; 6:3; 2 Tim 1:13; 1 Cor 11:2; Gal 1:8).

Quite understandably, contemporary anti-creedal concerns expressed on this matter often embody a certain degree of ambivalence. While 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 . . .”²⁹

The real question is whether there is an irony here in the sense 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. Leith observes, “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.”³⁰ 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 noetically.

²⁸ S. W. Sykes, “Heresy,” in Richardson and Bowden, 249. Sykes observes that “The radical denial that heresy could exist, or if it existed, could be identified, seems to be based on a sociological misunderstanding. The fact that the boundaries of a religion may be difficult to determine with precision does not mean that a religion has no boundaries. Religious commitment depends upon both affirmations and denials”

²⁹ Guy, 28.

³⁰ Leith, 9.

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However, the foregoing conclusion needs to be nuanced in a couple of ways by virtue of the nature of a statement of fundamental beliefs as discussed above. 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.” Therefore, in providing this critical role, the statement of beliefs must be seen primarily as the *locus* of the community’s consensus without in any way stifling the need to go back to the Bible in the “critical” process. Second, one may conceive of a few possible material conditions under which theological variance with a statement of beliefs may not necessarily lead to “personal” exclusion. First, 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.³¹ The issue in this situation revolves around the legitimacy of making such a distinction in the context of a statement of beliefs. Second, it may be possible to argue that one ought not become the subject of exclusionary action the moment one’s theological reflection yields something contrary to what has been consensually expressed 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 . . .”³² theological 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 where, for example, a “new light” is peddled in a manner that threatens the unity of the community of faith.

The point being made here is that a statement of fundamental beliefs has what may be seen as 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 question is simply this: In our postmodern context, does the church subscribe to belief in *the truth*? Is this question still a legitimate one? At this point, the question has very little to do with the material expression of our doctrines in the twenty-eight 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

³¹ Thomas Morris has made the distinction between essential and common properties in discussing the attributes of God in connection with the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Using the human being as an example, Morris refers to having ten fingers as a common human property. Yet having ten fingers is not essential to being a human being. See Thomas V. Morris, “Understanding God Incarnate,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 43 (1988): 64–65.

³² James White, *Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald* (October 8, 1861), 148.

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may not express itself definitively on questions of truth at any one time.³³ To take such a stance would amount to a virtual “agnosticism”³⁴ which 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 *hairesis* 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 a divisive or factious person. 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 all 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 issues. Nevertheless, the fundamental dependence of denominational unity on doctrine cannot be denied, since it is usually the case that theological matters 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 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. The initial analysis of the essence of a statement of beliefs made the connection between the biblical concept of “teaching” and ethics. It was noted that 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. It is quite evident that community effort is better performed in that community that possesses

³³ The following comment by E. G. White may be worth noting: “In our churches we should not act as though we were groping our way in the dark. Clear light has been given to us. We are not left in uncertainty . . . A complete system of faith has been revealed, and correct rules of practice in our daily life have been made known” (RH, July 22, 1890). Even more challengingly she observes regarding the third angel’s message “that those who are seeking to understand this message will not be led by the Lord to make an application of the Word that will undermine the foundation and remove the pillars of the faith that has made Seventh-day Adventists what they are today” (2 SM 103).

³⁴ It has been noted that agnosticism may not only be identified with denial of belief, but could be compatible with “that strand in Christian thought recognized in an earlier age through stress on the *via negativa*, or throughout the history of theism in recognition of the transcendence and mystery of God”; see Steward Sutherland, “Agnosticism,” in Richardson and Bowden, 10.

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a homogenous faith. E. G. White certainly saw the “truth-unity-mission” connection:

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.* (4T 16)

The statement of beliefs not only unifies the church for mission, but 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 manner that what the community believes is made readily clear to those who stand outside the community of faith. In this way, the statement of fundamental beliefs performs an invaluable *apologetic* function.

Statement of Beliefs and Theological/Biblical Education. From a wider theological perspective, the role of a statement of beliefs as a theological resource has been noted. 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.”³⁵ 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.³⁶

At a popular level within the community of faith, the statement of beliefs is an invaluable pedagogical aid to believers. It has often been noted that the sheer volume of the Bible presents challenges of comprehension for many believers.

³⁵ Richard A. Muller, *The Study of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 114–115.

³⁶ The discussion over the wording of Fundamental Belief #11 at the recent General Conference Session in St. Louis, Missouri, highlights this point. Critical to the debate over the correct semantic formulation of the statement was the principle of striking a responsible balance between theology and mission. Underlying the whole discussion on phraseology was a difference of opinion in expressing the intent of the statement, a difference that indicated perceptions of how far it was thought that statement should correctly reflect biblical teaching or whether it was felt that “relevance” to mission should be the proper intent of the statement.

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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 based on our analysis of the nature of a statement of beliefs, its pedagogical role should not be understood to 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 which serves as an invitation to a personal, biblical exploration of the particular doctrine. It seems that in a unique sense, the statement of beliefs in performing its pedagogical role functions as a *sign* to the Bible.

With particular reference to children and new believers, Philip Schaff's comment on creeds in general is relevant. Referring to creeds in the form of catechisms, he writes, "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."³⁷ 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. The teaching role of the statement of beliefs in the case of new believers requires further comment. The role of the statement in baptismal rites is especially in view here. On the basis of Rom 10: 9–10, E. Glenn Hinson has made a connection between the creed as a confessional statement and the new believer's covenant initiation into the family of God. In Hinson's view, it is only natural that the first step towards Christianity would entail a confession of some kind, however rudimentary. His conclusion is that the confession with the lips that Jesus is Lord, and the belief with the heart that God raised Him from the dead (Rom 10:9), "represented 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.'"³⁸ In Hinson's view, it is this connection between confession and the personal covenant-making process that made creeds a *sine qua non* of the initiation rites in the early church.³⁹ Thus, although the creed was only one part of the initiation process, it played a critical role in the convert's total cognitive and affective commitment to be faithful in all circumstances.

The significance of this role of a statement of beliefs goes back to our analysis of it as "teaching." One of the implications of that analysis was that

³⁷ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker), 1:8.

³⁸ E. Glenn Hinson, "Confessions or Creeds in Early Christian Tradition," *Review and Expositor* 76 (1979): 6.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

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“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 is nourished and 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 an individual’s 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 Revised 2000, 16th edition of the Manual requires those who are being baptized or received into fellowship by profession of faith to publicly affirm their acceptance of the doctrinal beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Although the practice of incorporation into the body may vary, the connection between belief and incorporation into the body of Christ is, in principle, acknowledged.⁴⁰ Indeed, as noted at the beginning of the paper, the Manual gives the impression that the statement of beliefs was primarily prepared for baptismal instruction.

Other Uses of a Statement of Fundamental Beliefs. There are a few other uses that may be derived from a statement of beliefs, such as for homiletical and liturgical purposes. Thus, there are Seventh-day Adventist ministers who have developed preaching schedules around the fundamental beliefs of the church. The purpose of such preaching 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.” It is possible that a few other roles of a statement of beliefs may be found, but what have been presented above are probably its major uses.

Is the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs Infallible? The nature of the statement of fundamental beliefs and its role has been discussed. The question must now be faced whether such a document is infallible. In analyzing the nature of a statement of fundamental beliefs, we discussed its relation to Scripture. Both the analysis and the Church’s official pronouncements show that the

⁴⁰ The recently voted amendment to the Manual on “Baptismal Vows and Baptism” introduces some degree of flexibility in the administration of the vow in the baptismal service. Whether a public, detailed, verbal affirmation of *all the contents* of the statement of beliefs should be required will probably continue to attract theological discussion. On the one hand, while the recently voted alternate vow does not expressly and specifically spell out the teachings of the statement, it does require a full, formal, and public affirmation of “the teachings of the Bible as expressed in the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.” On the other hand, although the existent vow expressly spelled out specific teachings in the statement of beliefs, it fell short of outlining all the beliefs in the statement. While the existent vow appears to create a hierarchy of beliefs, the alternate vow seems to fall short of details. It may be that in all of this, the principle to preserve is a reasonable measure of both cognitive and affective elements in the initiatory service.

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statement is not infallible. But what does that mean for the statement of fundamental beliefs in the life of the church?

To begin with, the above discussion of the usefulness of a statement of fundamental beliefs was not presupposed on its infallibility. In other words, infallibility 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 an issue about usefulness. It appears that the issue concerns the possibility of error in the statement. In other words, 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 consensual position as expressed in the statement and the position of the one/s making the allegation. Whether the statement actually contains error or not is an evaluation that will have to be made on the basis of 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. At this point, 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.

Conclusion

The statement of fundamental beliefs as a "phenomenon" has been analyzed in order to discern what legitimate role it may play within the community of faith. 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 that have been raised about creeds may also be true of a statement of beliefs.

It is objected that they 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 . . .⁴¹

Schaff's observation on these objections is quite on target. "But 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."⁴² Consequently,

⁴¹ Schaff, 1:9.

⁴² *Ibid.*

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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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