

CREEDS AND STATEMENTS OF BELIEF IN EARLY ADVENTIST THOUGHT

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Introduction

The founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church exhibited a strongly hostile attitude toward creeds, affirming the Bible alone as their creed. However, an examination of their literature shows a gradual development of statements of belief. This leads to two questions: What is the difference between creeds and statements of belief? Why did the early Adventists feel comfortable with statements of belief, while vigorously denouncing creeds?

The scope of this research has been limited to the period of Seventh-day Adventist thought between the years of 1840 and 1931. During this time, two major Seventh-day Adventist statements of belief were drafted—one in 1872 and the other in 1931. My research has been largely drawn from primary sources found in church publications such as the *Review and Herald*, *Signs of the Times*, and the writings of Ellen G. White.

Roman Catholic and Protestant Creeds

Creeds, E. Glenn Hinson argues, have played important and varying roles in Christian history. They were employed in the presentation of articles of faith; in the instruction of baptismal candidates; in the hymns, prayers, and sermons of common worship; in healing and exorcism; in resistance to persecutors; and for differentiating between heresy and orthodoxy. Used in these ways, creeds may be seen as the church's attempt to articulate an intelligible expression of its understanding of the Christian faith.¹

The authority ascribed to various confessional statements has varied with time and circumstance and is largely dependent upon the theological persuasion of the Christian group that adheres to them. For example, Roman Catholicism has historically regarded creeds as oracles from God and thus authoritative for all time and under all circumstances. For Catholics, creeds are part of the received tradition that can be traced to the apostles.²

Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, accepted only the Apostles' Creed and the creeds of the first four centuries, since, as their argument goes, these were the only creeds that agreed with the Scriptures, which is the only rule of faith and practice. The Reformers were of the opinion that biblical truth had not been taught consistently by

¹E. Glenn Hinson, "Confession of Creeds in Early Christian Tradition," *Review and Expositor* 76 (Winter 1979): 5-17.

²Pierre-Thomas Camelot, "Creeds," in *Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. Karl Rahner et al. (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), 2:37-40.

the Roman Catholic Church during the medieval period.³ They also felt that the ancient confessions did not always speak directly to the prevailing needs of their time. To explain where they stood with regard to the practices of the medieval Catholic Church, several Protestant groups constructed their own confessional statements.⁴

The Christian Connexion: Church and Creeds

At the turn of the nineteenth century, three groups of churches arose in North America, each calling itself “Christian.” The first group withdrew from the Methodist Episcopal Church in North Carolina and Virginia. The second arose in Vermont from among the Baptists. The third came from a Calvinistic Presbyterian background. In time, these three groups, having arisen independently of one another, came together without negotiation or formal action. Their binding points of commonality were the acceptance of the Bible as the only creed, “Christian” as their only name, and Christian character as the sole test of fellowship.

About this time, Thomas Campbell and his son Alexander, members of the Scotch-Irish Presbyterian Church, came to America. Thomas Campbell, however, was denied licensure in the Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh on the grounds that his theological views were not in full harmony with the Presbyterian Confession of Faith. The Campbells subsequently began yet another independent church, which they called the “Christian Association.” In 1824, Alexander Campbell met Barton Stone, who was then the leader of the Christian Church. The two men immediately recognized that their teachings and sympathies had much in common. Early in the 1830s they decided to unite the two groups, which came to be known as the Christian Church of the Disciples of Christ.

However, a number of the so-called “Christian” churches in the western United States and the majority of those in the eastern part of the country refused to recognize Campbell and Stone’s union. These churches came to be known as the Christian Connexion, the church to which several leaders of the Millerite movement belonged, including Joshua V. Himes, Joseph Bates, and James White.⁵ Bates and White went on to become cofounders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The Christian Connexion stipulated that the Bible alone should be its guide and standard. Unlike most other Christian churches, the Connexionists believed that freedom of theological opinion was better than conformity to a standard and that Christian character was to be the only test of fellowship. Bates, who confessed, as did Stone before him, that he could not believe in the Trinity, was, nevertheless, taken into membership and later accepted into the ministry. This was possible, Bates indicated, because the Christian

³John Leith, *Creeds of the Churches* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 1-11, 196-228.

⁴Ibid.

⁵George R. Knight, *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 31.

Connexion Church renounced all creeds.⁶ Thus the Christian Connexion and the Disciples of Christ took a stand against ecclesiastical formalism and creeds.⁷

Millerism and Creeds

William Miller was convinced through his study of the Bible in 1818 that Christ would come by 1843. However, he waited for someone else to discover this truth and proclaim it to the world. Thus Miller's movement did not build momentum until 1839 when Himes teamed up with him as an organizer and promoter. The result of this union was that Miller's message of the Second Coming spread like wildfire. Bates, a retired sea captain, joined the ranks in 1839, and James White became a supporter in 1842. Hundreds of ordained and lay pastors joined the movement by 1843 and the word was spread not only in North America, but also in Western Europe.

The time for the great event of Christ's return was, finally, set for October 22, 1844. But this time came and went, nearly bringing the whole movement to an end. The disappointment was heightened by the fact that many had nowhere to go since they had been ostracized and excommunicated by their churches. There were others, however, who felt that the blessed hope must be kept alive and that this could not be done by returning to the established churches. The result was that several new churches emerged after the Great Disappointment of October 22, 1844. The two most significant ones that developed from the original Millerite Advent movement, however, were the Advent Christian Church and the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

As a direct result of the mistreatment they had received from the established churches, the Millerites tended to be against rigid creeds, which had been, in many cases, the grounds for disfellowshipping them. Often they had been given "no opportunity for defense, no chance to give a Bible answer for their new-found faith."⁸ LeRoy Froom notes that

This dictatorial handling created strong feelings of revulsion against church organization as such, and all organizational controls and evictions. Such arbitrary procedures all came to be looked upon as "ecclesiastical despotism." Organization was accordingly considered a part of "Babylon," from which they had been compelled to flee. They were thus instinctively set against

⁶Joseph Bates, *The Autobiography of Elder Joseph Bates* (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press, 1868), 204-205.

⁷LeRoy E. Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1950), 4:31-32. See Winfred E. Garrison, *An American Religious Movement: A Brief History of the Disciples of Christ* (St. Louis: Bethany, 1960), 41-59.

⁸LeRoy E. Froom, *Movement of Destiny* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1971), 134.

organizing another church, or formulating any restrictive creed—
or even a specified Statement of Faith.⁹

Moreover, Miller did not intend that his good news would result in another church, but that it would bring revival to all the churches through the “blessed hope” contained in the hearts of the members. Besides, there was certainly no time for forming a new church if Christ was to come soon.

Thus the idea of formulating a creed to define what they believed was not an issue for the Millerites. Rather, the intent was to withdraw from the “sectarian organizations” (i.e., the creedal churches), but this withdrawal was not to result in the formation of a new organization.¹⁰ Commenting on this, Himes stated that “We neither expect nor desire any other organization until we reach the New Jerusalem, and organize under the King of Kings.”¹¹ Again, in 1844, Himes said of the Millerites that “All peculiarities of creed or policy have been lost sight of in the absorbing inquiry concerning the coming of the heavenly Bridegroom.”¹²

Miller also spoke against denominational “peculiarities,” stating: “We must then, either let our brethren have the freedom of thought, opinion and speech or we must resort to creeds and formulas, bishops and popes. . . . I see no other alternative.”¹³ In another place, he wrote: “I have been pained to see a spirit of sectarianism and bigotry.”¹⁴ It seems that in this statement Miller points to the history of the misuse of creeds in Christianity, and applies this misuse to the Millerite experience. Miller thus came to identify creeds with oppressive church organizations that restricted the religious freedom of Christians.

In spite of this fear of creeds and ecclesial organization, less than a year after the Great Disappointment Himes, with Miller’s approval, tried to create a union among the disenchanted believers at the Albany Conference.¹⁵ Bates, however, criticized Miller and the First-day Adventists for this inconsistency. He wrote: “Look at your publications, and your Albany and subsequent conferences. . . . All such as did not subscribe to this creed and countenance this organization, and of course yield up their former views have been treated

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Joshua V. Himes, “Second Advent Conference,” *The Advent Herald* 7/3 (21 February 1844), 21.

¹¹Joshua V. Himes, “The Rise and Progress of Adventism,” *The Advent Shield and Review* 1/1 (May 1844): 91.

¹²Ibid., 90.

¹³William Miller, cited in F. D. Nichol, *The Midnight Cry* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1944), 294-295.

¹⁴William Miller, cited in Isaac C. Wellcome, *History of the Second Advent Message and Mission, Doctrines and People* (Yarmouth, ME: by the author, 1874), 411.

¹⁵William Miller, “The Albany Conference,” *The Advent Herald* 9/17 (4 June 1845), 1-3.

as disorganizers and fanatics.”¹⁶ Thus the Millerites—like their predecessors, the Disciples of Christ and the Christian Connexion— were opposed to church creeds.

The Founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and Creeds

The founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church who emerged after the Great Disappointment of October 22, 1844, shared the Christian Connexion’s and the Disciples of Christ’s belief about creeds. Creeds were the basis upon which they had been expelled from their former churches and were also the reason why Seventh-day Adventists had been rejected by other Advent groups. Their peculiar beliefs regarding the seventh-day Sabbath, the sanctuary, state of the dead, and, later, the visions of Ellen G. White set them apart from other movements and established churches.¹⁷ With the experience of rejection still fresh in their minds, they wrote forcefully against creed-making. For example, in 1847, Bates asserted that creeds hampered the progressive nature of revelation; truth is always unfolding in fresh and relevant ways to every generation. Creeds would fix the understanding of truth, making it rigid and unchanging.¹⁸ As Froom summarized, the early Adventists “clearly recognized that Bible truth must continue to unfold through continuing study and divine leading. . . . They feared any hampering, stultifying creed or rigid formulary. They determined not to drive in any creedal boundary stakes, as most others had done, saying, ‘Thus far and no farther.’ The tragedy of the creed bound churches all about them was an example of that fallacy and futility.”¹⁹

Bates was not alone in his renunciation of creeds. In May of 1847, a tract titled *A Word to the Little Flock* was published, including articles by James and Ellen G. White and Joseph Bates and firmly stating their opposition to creeds: “The Bible is a perfect, and complete revelation. It is our only rule of faith and practice.”²⁰

James White spoke against creed-making on other occasions as well, blaming the confusion and infidelity among Christian bodies on the formulation of creeds. He asked: “Why is this world filled with infidelity? . . . Human wisdom, unaided by the spirit of truth, has sought the way to heaven. It has sought out a strange confusion of creeds. Men have forsaken the fountain of living water [the Bible] and with their broken cisterns that can

¹⁶Joseph Bates, *Second Advent Way Marks and High Heaps: or A Connected View of the Fulfillment of Prophecy, by God’s Peculiar People, from the Year 1840-1847* (New Bedford, MA: Press of Benjamin Lindsey, 1847), 53-54.

¹⁷A. W. Spalding, *Captains of the Host: A History of Seventh-day Adventists* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1949), 141-143.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Froom, *Movement of Destiny*, 135.

²⁰James White, *A Word to the Little Flock* (1847), 13.

hold no water [their Babylon of creeds] they have blocked up the very gate of heaven against a world of sinners.”²¹

The same issue of the *Review and Herald* in which the above statement appeared contained another article in which James White again strongly stated his opposition to creeds: “We want no human creed: the Bible is sufficient. . . . It is the will of the Lord that his people should be called away from the confusion and the bondage of man-made creeds, to enjoy the oneness and freedom of the gospel.”²² The very next week, he wrote:

It is the opinion of the mass of professors of religion that human creeds are indispensable to the maintenance of the gospel order. . . . Creed making has produced the Babel confusion now existing among them. . . . And while we reject all human creeds, or platforms, which have failed to effect the order set forth in the gospel, we take the Bible, the perfect rule of faith and practice, given by inspiration of God. . . . “As the heavens are higher than the earth,” so is our creed, which is the word of God, higher in perfection than all human creeds.²³

James White believed passionately that the confusion that existed in the churches at that time was due to their creeds. This is easy to understand in light of the fact that these churches had rejected the early Seventh-day Adventist Church and its progressive beliefs. James White also believed that the use of creeds was an unbiblical attempt to secure doctrinal unity. He noted to this effect that

The gifts have been superseded in the popular churches by human creeds. The object of the gifts, as stated by Paul, was “for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come in the unity of the faith.” These were Heaven’s appointed means to secure the unity of the church. But the popular churches have introduced another means of preserving unity, namely, human creeds. These creeds secure a sort of unity to each denomination; but they have all proved insufficient.²⁴

It is interesting to note that for four months in 1854 (August through December), under the masthead of the *Review and Herald*, there appeared a list of five “Leading Doctrines”: “The Bible, and the Bible alone, the rule of faith and duty; The Law of God, as taught in the Old and New Testaments,

²¹James White, “Gospel Union,” *Review and Herald* 4/22 (6 December 1853), 172.

²²Ibid.

²³James White, “Gospel Order,” *Review and Herald* 4/23 (13 December 1853), 180.

²⁴James White, “Perpetuity of Spiritual Gifts,” *Review and Herald* 19/10 (4 February 1862), 77.

unchangeable; The Personal Advent of Christ and the Resurrection of the dead just before the millennium; The Earth restored to its Eden perfection and glory, the final inheritance of the Saints; Immortality alone through Christ, to be given to the Saints at the Resurrection.”²⁵ These articles, though they might be viewed as a form of fundamental beliefs or creed, had the sole purpose of pointing out that the Bible was the source of truth and understanding.

The early Seventh-day Adventist leaders rejected creeds not only because they could be misused, but also because they were fallible human documents that could lead to infidelity or apostasy. This understanding was summarized by J. N. Loughborough at the 1861 organization of the Michigan Conference. He stated: “We call the churches Babylon, not because they covenant together to obey God. . . . The first step in apostasy is to get up a creed, telling us what we shall believe. The second is to make that creed a test of fellowship. The third is to try members by that creed. The fourth to denounce as heretics those who do not believe that creed. And, fifth, to commence persecution against such.”²⁶ It seems clear that Loughborough linked creeds with church organization. In the minds of the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, creeds, church organization, and ecclesiastical hierarchy were linked with the system of Babylon and thus needed to be protested, not adopted.

The Seventh-day Adventist founders also rejected the adoption of creeds because they were of the opinion that creeds and spiritual gifts stood in opposition to each other. After referring to the gifts in Eph 4:11-13, James White stated:

I take the ground that creeds stand in direct opposition to the gifts. Let us suppose a case: We get up a creed, stating just what we shall believe on this point and the other, and just what we shall do in reference to this thing and that, and say that we will believe the gifts too. But suppose the Lord, through the gifts, should give us some new light that did not harmonize with our creed; then, if we remain true to the gifts, it knocks our creed all over at once. Making a creed is setting the stakes, and barring up the way to all future advancement.²⁷

The issue to be faced, James White contended, was how the church would respond to new light from God, granted through the gifts, if the new light was at variance with the accepted creed. He feared that new light might be rejected in favor of the creed and was of the opinion that “making a creed” would halt the acceptance of future new revelation.

In 1874, Uriah Smith wrote an article in which he listed some “Romish errors” that had been followed by Protestants. He argued that not only would

²⁵*Review and Herald*, 6 (1854): 1-19, see the following dates of publication: August 29; September 5, 12, 19, 26; October 3, 10, 17, 24, 31; November 7, 14, 21; December 5, 12, 19, 26.

²⁶James White, “Doings of the Battle Creek Conference, Acts 5:16, 1861,” *Review and Herald* 18/19 (8 October 1861), 148-149.

²⁷*Ibid.*

creeds bar all further progress into truth (as James White had previously argued), but also that the Bible itself would be used to support the wrong, predetermined system of belief.²⁸ He thus viewed the creeds as a rigid and unalterable system of doctrine.

Other reasons that Seventh-day Adventists opposed creeds can be found in the arguments used to defeat a proposal for the preparation of a church manual in 1883. It was stated that creeds would cause members to “lose their simplicity and become formal and spiritually lifeless.”²⁹ As to its impact on preachers, the preparers of the manual stated: “If we had one [a church manual], we fear many, especially those commencing to preach, would study it to obtain guidance in spiritual matters, rather than to seek it from the Bible and from the leadings of the Spirit of God.”³⁰ Thus another reason that Seventh-day Adventists rejected a formal creed was from fear that creeds would stifle the church spiritually and block the work of the Spirit through the gifts. Meanwhile, they continued to uplift the Bible as the only source of faith and practice.

Ellen G. White's Counsel

Ellen G. White, one of the principal founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the wife of James White, was, not surprisingly, also against creeds. Referring to the discovery of the “truths” by the founders, she emphatically stressed that

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. Instead of wrangling with one another, let men exalt the Lord. Let us meet all opposition as did our Master, saying, “It is written.” Let us lift up the banner on which is inscribed, The Bible our rule of faith and discipline.³¹

She also saw the danger of exalting a creed above the status of the Bible, thus making the creed the standard of authority. She advised: “Do not carry your creed to the Bible and read the Word in the light of your former opinions. Do not try to make everything agree with your creed.”³² Thus she clearly saw that there was a risk of attempting to make Scripture meet “established

²⁸Uriah Smith, “The Reformation Not Yet Complete,” *Review and Herald* 43/8 (3 February 1874), 60-61.

²⁹“General Conference Proceedings,” *Review and Herald* 60/46 (20 November 1883), 733.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1980), 1:416.

³²Ellen G. White, “MS 12, 1901,” in *Manuscript Releases*, 21 vols. (Silver Spring, MD: E. G. White Estate, 1981-1993), 3:432.

opinions,” instead of judging opinions by the Scriptures.³³ She seemed to also believe that subscription to a creed may tempt some to neglect the more vital issue of personal spirituality, noting that “To subscribe the name to a church creed is not of the least value to anyone if the heart is not truly changed.”³⁴ Nor was true unity in the church to be found in using creeds. She noted that “The prayer of Christ to His Father, contained in the seventeenth chapter of John, is to be our church creed. It shows us that our differences and disunion are dishonoring to God.”³⁵

Justification of Statements of Belief

It might seem paradoxical that the Seventh-day Adventist founders, in spite of their opposition to creeds, did indeed have a statement of beliefs. L. A. Smith, son of Uriah Smith, wrote in 1887 that “adopting a statement of faith amounts to taking a doctrinal position, and taking such a position is scriptural.” He was quick to point out, however, that only beliefs in harmony with Scripture should be confessed. Defending the necessity of the statement of beliefs, he wrote: “If there is anything which Scripture plainly teaches, it is the importance of possessing a clear and definite faith, or summary of religious beliefs; in short a ‘creed’ in harmony with the truths God’s word has revealed.”³⁶

Another justification for statements of belief was given by J. H. Waggoner in his book on church organization, written in 1886. He stated that

Repentance and faith are almost universally recognized as requisites to Christian character. But beyond this brief statement—too brief to indicate the position of the church or of the candidate—each denomination of professed Christians has some definite declaration of its faith; some peculiar expression of faith and practice, which it requires that all its members shall endorse and receive. Were not this the case they would not possibly satisfy even their own minds that there is any reason for their denominational existence. Which is to say that different denominations attach different ideas to the word repentance and faith and these definitions with their results become the peculiar basis of their organization.³⁷

³³Ellen G. White, “Search the Scriptures,” *Review and Herald* 69/30 (26 July 1892), 465.

³⁴Ellen G. White, “The Truth as It is in Jesus,” *Review and Herald* 76/7 (14 February 1899), 1.

³⁵Ellen G. White, “MS 12, 1899,” in *Manuscript Releases*, 5:49.

³⁶L. A. Smith, “The Value of a Creed,” *Review and Herald*, 64/19 (10 May 1887), 298.

³⁷Joseph H. Waggoner, *The Church: Its Organization, Ordinances, and Discipline* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1886), 105.

Waggoner seemed to emphasize that certain Christian phrases such as “repentance and faith” are ambiguous since other Christian bodies use them in differing ways. Therefore, affirming the Bible as the only creed is not enough. The Bible must be opened, and what it teaches must be confessed. L. A. Smith drove this point home when he wrote again in 1888 that “every person has his creed and might have it in spite of himself. His creed is simply his belief.” Since this was the case, he insisted that individuals must adopt creeds that have the support of the Scriptures.³⁸ For these reasons, the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church had no problem adopting some statements of belief.

Development of Statements of Belief

In the course of its development toward a full-fledged statement of belief, the church passed through a number of phases. In this section, we will briefly trace the development of these formulations from 1850 to 1931.

1. *Original Faith* (1850, James White). In an article intended to “expose the absurdities in the position of those who reject the present truth and still profess to stand on the original faith,” James White stated that the “2300 days [prophecy of the book of Daniel] has been and still is the main pillar of the Advent faith.” The reason for this brief statement of faith was to differentiate the Adventists who ascribed to the doctrines of the seventh-day Sabbath and the sanctuary from other Advent believers.³⁹

2. *Seventh Day Baptist Questions* (1853). In August of 1853, James White, in answering some questions from a Seventh Day Baptist, made what could be regarded as an early statement of faith. After commenting on the background of the body of believers that made up the “Little Flock” and pointing out that there were “different views on some subjects,” he said:

As a people we are brought together from the divisions of the Advent body, and from the 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 the Commandments of God, and the faith of his Son Jesus Christ, as necessary to a readiness for his Advent.⁴⁰

³⁸L. A. Smith, “Creeds,” *Review and Herald*, 65/44 (6 November 1888), 699.

³⁹James White, “Our Present Position,” *Review and Herald*, 1/2 (December 1850), 13-15.

⁴⁰James White, “Resolution of the Seventh-day [sic] Baptist Central Association,” *Review and Herald*, 4/7 (11 August 1853), 52, last full paragraph.

3. *Covenant Resolution* (1861). The year of 1861 was to be a landmark for the loosely organized “Sabbatarian Adventists.” Even though James White had been calling for organization (“Gospel Order”) for years, the deep prejudices of the believers against any form of organization had made themselves felt. On October 5 and 6, a meeting to organize the Michigan Conference convened. A covenant resolution presented by James White was adopted, which stated: “Resolved, that this conference recommend the following church covenant: We, the undersigned, hereby associate ourselves together as a church, taking the name Seventh-day Adventists, convenanting to keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus Christ.”⁴¹

While the resolution was adopted, the vote was not unanimous. This troubled James White and he urged another discussion of the issues. Since no one vocalized their concerns, he raised some possible objections, such as “We are patterning after the churches around us” or “We are following after Babylon.” Then various individuals present, including Loughborough, who had voted in favor of the covenant, argued for the propriety of the covenant. Finally, James White commented:

I take the ground that creeds stand in direct opposition to the gifts. . . . Making a creed is setting the stakes and barring up the way to all future advancement. God put the gifts into the church for a good and great object; but men who have got up their churches, have shut up the way or have marked out a course for the Almighty. They say virtually that the Lord must not do anything further than what has been marked out in the creed. A creed and the gifts thus stand in a direct opposition to each other. Now what is our position as a people? The Bible is our creed. We reject everything in the form of a human creed. We take the Bible and the gifts of the Spirit; embracing the faith that thus the Lord will teach us from time to time. . . . We are not taking one step, in what we are doing, toward becoming Babylon.⁴²

After the discussion, a vote was again taken and the resolution passed unanimously.

4. *Insanity at Monterey, Michigan* (1869). Another brief statement of beliefs appeared in a pamphlet dated 1869. It was written by the church board at Monterey, Michigan,⁴³ to explain that the insanity of two ladies there could not be blamed on efforts to proselytize them to the Seventh-day Adventist faith, nor on the writings of Ellen G. White. Apparently such an allegation had been published in some local papers.⁴⁴ The statement lists the Second Advent, the Sabbath, the judgment, the state of the dead, and the gifts of

⁴¹James White, “Doings of the Battle Creek Conference,” 148.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³See Document File 287-a, Center for Adventist Research, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

⁴⁴*Cases of Insanity at Monterey, Michigan* (pamphlet, April 1869).

the Spirit as essential beliefs that distinguish Seventh-day Adventists from “the Christian world at large.” Ellen G. White was specifically mentioned and described as “a worthy Christian woman of blameless life,” who was also the recipient of the gift of God.

What makes this statement somewhat important is that there is some evidence that the Monterey Church was the place where the first annual session of the Michigan Conference was held from October 4-6, 1862. Furthermore, Ellen G. and James White visited the church several times in 1868 for revival meetings.⁴⁵

5. *The 1872 Declaration.* The year of 1872 is a focal point for any discussion of the development of the statements of belief. This was the year that the Adventist publishing house published *A Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by the Seventh-day Adventists*. The (unnamed) author was Uriah Smith, editor of the *Review and Herald*. This was the most comprehensive statement of belief that Adventists would draft from 1844 to 1931. In fact, all the fundamental belief statements appearing in church publications during this period were based on this document. The introduction is of particular interest:

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 great unanimity among them, as a system of faith. But it is a brief statement of what is, and has been, with great unanimity, held by them. We often find it necessary to meet inquiries on this subject, and sometimes to correct false statements circulated against us, and to remove erroneous impressions which have obtained with those who have not had an opportunity to become acquainted with our faith and practice. Our only object is to meet this necessity. . . . As Seventh-day Adventists we desire simply that our position shall be understood; and we are the more solicitous for this because there are many who call themselves Adventist who hold views with which we can have no sympathy, some of which, we think, are subversive of the plainest and most important principles set forth in the word of God.⁴⁶

These principles were reprinted first in pamphlet form and later in the *Signs of the Times* in 1874,⁴⁷ usually prefaced with the same or a similar introduction. The statement contained twenty-five articles of belief, covering a wide array of subjects including God, Christ, the Scriptures, baptism, the

⁴⁵James White, “Report From Brother White,” *Review and Herald*, 32 (May 12, 1868), 344; Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 2:22-23.

⁴⁶[Uriah Smith], *A Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by the Seventh-day Adventists* (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press, 1872), 3.

⁴⁷“Fundamental Principles,” *Signs of the Times*, 1/1 (4 June 1874), 3.

judgment, the Sabbath, the state of the dead, the second coming, and the new earth.

The degree of unanimity may not have been as marked as the statement suggests, but whatever disagreements there were between the believers were over the content of the declaration rather than the fact that a statement of belief had been formulated and published. Ellen G. White did not protest the publication of the statement; rather she pleaded for unity. In 1875, she wrote:

God is leading a people out from the world upon the exalted platform of eternal truth, commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. He will discipline and fit up His people. They will not be at variance, one believing one thing, and moving independently of the body. Through the diversity of the gifts and governments that He has placed in the church, they will all come to unity of faith. . . . He has given His people a straight chain of Bible truth, clear and connected. This truth is of heavenly origin and has been searched for as for hidden treasure. It has been dug out through careful searching of the Scriptures and through much prayer.⁴⁸

6. *The 1889 Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*. The 1889 *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* contained a slightly revised form of the “Fundamental Principles” of 1872. This was presented in a section containing general information about the church and its activities. The statement was not published in every yearly update of the *Yearbook*, however. After 1889, the statement was not published again until 1905. It appeared again in the years from 1907 to 1914. Then it disappeared again until 1931, when the statement was rewritten. These gaps between the publication of the statements of belief are significant. They are a silent witness to the absence of the unity for which Ellen G. White continued to plead. A thorough comparison of the 1931 edition and earlier editions of statements of belief shows that there were disagreements over the divine nature of Christ, as well as over the nature of the atonement.⁴⁹ The important point for this discussion, however, is that the statements were not omitted because of opposition to statements of belief as such, but for other reasons including, most importantly, doctrinal disagreements.

7. *Creeds and Error* (1890). The 1890s saw a renewed interest in creeds, which, it has been suggested, was the result of the controversy over the revision of the Presbyterian creed. Two articles of interest were printed one week apart in the *Review and Herald*. The first article by J. M. Manning, “The Use of Creeds,” favored creeds as a safeguard against error.⁵⁰ The second article by W. A. Blakely, “Why Not Have a Creed?” attacks creeds as tending “to

⁴⁸Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to the Church*, 9 vols. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 3:446-447.

⁴⁹Merlin D. Burt, “History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on the Trinity,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 17 (2006): 135-137.

⁵⁰J. M. Manning, “The Use of Creeds,” *Review and Herald*, 67/1 (7 January 1890), 5.

embitter the controversy, to multiply sects, to suggest and foster intolerance, and to transform persons who are naturally amiable into acrimonious and ambivalent persecutors.”⁵¹

8. *Fundamental Principles* (1931). The statement of belief of 1931 is the next comprehensive statement of beliefs written after the 1872 Declaration.⁵² Three reasons can be given for the formulation of this document:⁵³ Lack of a Seventh-day Adventist statement of faith after the 1914 *Yearbook* gave an unfortunate impression to other denominations that Adventists had no defined or specified beliefs. The presence of fundamental beliefs was to reveal to the world “both what we believe and why.” Second, Adventist leadership in Africa made a formal request for a statement of beliefs that could guide “government officials and others to a better understanding of our work.”⁵⁴ Third, the document was produced to correct misrepresentations and distortions of the Adventist faith by apostates.

Most of the differences between the twenty-five fundamental beliefs of 1872 and the twenty-two principles of 1931 were minor and due to differences in the organization of the two documents. However, the 1931 statement reflected the church’s movement forward regarding its official acceptance of the doctrine of the Trinity and also a view of Jesus’ ministry that balanced his work in the heavenly sanctuary with a stronger emphasis on his birth, life, and death.⁵⁵ Just as the 1872 statement became the basis of all belief statements prior to 1931, the “Fundamental Principles” of 1931 served as the basis of all Seventh-day Adventist confessional statements until the Dallas statement of 1980.

Contradiction or Harmony

The founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, while exhibiting a hostile attitude toward creeds, eventually became comfortable with the formulation of statements of belief. How can we harmonize an opposition to creeds, on one hand, and an acceptance of statements of belief, on the other?

⁵¹W. A. Blakely, “Why Not Have a Creed?” *Review and Herald*, 67/2 (14 January 1890), 20.

⁵²The 1931 statement is found under “Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists,” *Yearbook of the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1931), 377-380. Two less important statements should be noted. The Battle Creek, Michigan, Seventh-day Adventist Church published a statement of beliefs in 1894 that represented a modification of the 1872 statement (Froom, *Movement of Destiny*, 338-342). A brief forerunner of the 1931 statement appeared in 1913; see F. M. Wilcox, ed., “The Message for Today,” *Review and Herald* (9 October 1913), 21.

⁵³See Froom, *Movement of Destiny*, 410-419.

⁵⁴Action taken on 29 December 1930. See *General Conference Committee Minutes*, Seventy-second Meeting (29 December 1930), 195.

⁵⁵See Karen K. Abrahamson, “Adventist Statements of Belief: A Comparison of Five Statements of Belief Covering the Period of 1872-1980,” Center for Adventist Research, Andrews University.

First, it is necessary to understand that what the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church understood by the word “creed” is not necessarily the way everyone would define a creed. Funk and Wagnalls defines “creed” as a “Formal summary of fundamental points of religious belief; an authoritative statement of doctrine on points held to be vital, usually representing the views of a religious body; a confession of faith.”⁵⁶

This definition makes creeds sound quite similar to statements of belief. Not so in the mind of the Seventh-day Adventist founders. To them, a church creed was more than a statement of belief; it was an elaborate, all-inclusive, binding, officially adopted summary to which all members must subscribe. By contrast, they understood statements of belief to be simply a description of who they were, what made them unique, and what Bible truth they had discovered up until their present time. Statements of belief were used to refute false teachings, to expose errors in the nominal churches, and to clear themselves of false charges.

Second, the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church viewed creeds as unchangeable, but saw fundamental beliefs as open to revision as new light was received. They wanted the freedom to revise their confessional statement so as to reflect more accurately progressive biblical revelation. When the denomination became convinced its belief was in error (such as the semi-Arian understanding of the Godhead), it thought it appropriate to amend the belief.

Third, the weightiest concern of these church founders was that the adoption of creeds would discourage people from studying the Bible, citing instead the creed as their final authority. They believed that as the believers advanced in their spiritual lives they should not cease to search diligently for the truth. Ellen G. White wrote in this regard that “However much one may advance in spiritual life, he will never come to a point where he will not need diligently to search the Scriptures. . . . All points of doctrine, even though they have been accepted as truth, should be brought to the law and to the testimony; if they cannot stand this test, ‘there is no light in them.’”⁵⁷

Fourth, the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church understood creeds to be rigid and authoritative documents that required the full assent of the believer, without recourse to further study and reflection. This caused much pain for them since they had been disfellowshipped from their previous churches on the basis of creeds. On the other hand, they emphasized that statements of belief should not be used as a binding authority on the conscience of the believer.

Did the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church believe in discipline over doctrinal disagreements? In his article, “Gospel Order,” Ellen White differentiated between “teaching” and “enforcing” the pure doctrine. While the need for discipline was seen, it was recognized that discipline could never be a matter of forcing unity. “The church may pass resolution upon resolution to put down all disagreement of opinions, but we cannot force the mind

⁵⁶*Funk and Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1966), s.v. “creeds.”

⁵⁷Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 5:595.

and will, and thus root out disagreement. These resolutions may conceal the discord; but they cannot quench it, and establish perfect agreement. Nothing can perfect unity in the church but the spirit of Christ-like forbearance.”⁵⁸

For all these reasons, the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church had no difficulty in accepting statements of belief, while strongly opposing creeds. They wanted to emphasize that statements of beliefs carry no degree of finality or infallibility and that they are subject to change as new light emerges.

⁵⁸Ellen G. White, “MS 24, 1892,” in *Manuscript Releases*, 11:266.