



Sola Scriptura or Creedal Creep?

Reclaiming the Bible's Authority at the General Conference Session

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John Witcombe

“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” (Ellen White, *Review and Herald*, Dec. 15, 1885). This foundational principle of the Seventh-day Adventist Church underscores the Bible’s supreme authority as the only standard for faith and practice.

In light of this foundational principle, we must confront a pressing question: Has the practical application of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs functionally displaced Scripture as our denomination’s authoritative creed?

While summarizing shared beliefs serves a valuable purpose—providing clarity and fostering unity—these statements must remain strictly subordinate to Scripture and never become authoritative tests of faith. A dangerous shift occurs when a human document transitions from a descriptive summary to a prescriptive standard—when precise adherence to specific wording becomes the determining factor for church membership, employment eligibility, or ministerial credentials.

Our denomination’s pioneers warned against this very danger. “The first step of 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 is to **denounce as heretics those who do not believe**

that creed. And fifth, to commence persecution against such.”

The following correspondence from the Biblical Research Institute demonstrates that this warning has gone unheeded, as the 28 Fundamental Beliefs are now being used to assess doctrinal fidelity—with severe consequences for those whose understanding aligns with Scripture but conflicts with the precise wording of our denominational statements:

Biblical Research Institute Official Response

Silver Spring, MD
September 13, 2022

Dear Elder _____

As you requested, on Wednesday, September 7, the BRI scholars met with Elder Ken LeBrun and Brother Val Ramos to discuss their views on the SDA Fundamental Belief no. 2 and other matters related to the Godhead. Though we had separate meetings with these brethren, we noted that they hold virtually the same views on the matters discussed. Therefore, one document shall suffice to report our discussion. Subsequently, a communication from Elder John Witcombe, an employee of the _____ Conference, was forwarded to us that expressed essentially the same views and suggests that all three men are working together with a common aim.

Pastor LeBrun and Brother Ramos, in separate interviews, affirmed their belief in the personality, divinity, and eternity of each of the three coeternal persons of the Godhead. But they deny the statement that the three coeternal persons

should be designated “one God” as stated in FB no. 2...

We appealed to our brothers to reexamine their views on the matter. Since FB no. 2 represents the consensus of the world church on the doctrine of God, those who disagree should not occupy leadership positions while attacking our beliefs or promoting views that undermine it. And depending on the situation, they may even forfeit their rights to membership in the church.

Elias Brasil de Souza
BRI Director

P.S.: This document was prepared in collaboration with my associate directors: Daniel Bediako, Frank Hasel, Alberto Timm, Clinton Wahlen.

In a troubling demonstration of this creedal creep, conference leadership acted swiftly on the BRI's recommendation. Within weeks of receiving the September 13, 2022 letter—whose closing warning stated that dissenters from FB #2 “may even forfeit their rights to membership”—the local administrators terminated the employment of Elders John Witcombe and Ken LeBrun—revoking their ordinations despite each having served over 30 years as pastors. This severe disciplinary action was taken even though investigations confirmed they held no heretical views and their beliefs on the doctrine of God fully aligned with Ellen White's writings.

Their dismissal resulted solely from their reluctance to affirm the precise wording of the church's second and fourth Fundamental Beliefs. Specifically, they opted to affirm the biblical phrase “Son of God” (rather than Fundamental Belief #4's “God the Son”) and the explicit scriptural definition of “one God” (instead of the definition provided in Fundamental Belief #2). By

removing these ministers on such grounds, church leadership has effectively elevated the exact phrasing of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs above Scripture itself as the ultimate standard of doctrinal truth.

While these actions by conference leadership deserve scrutiny, we must recognize they were technically operating within the parameters established by the Church Manual, which explicitly assigns creedal authority to the 28 Fundamental Beliefs:

“The reasons for which members shall be subject to discipline are: 1. Denial of faith in the fundamentals of the gospel and in the **Fundamental Beliefs** of the Church or teaching doctrines contrary to the same.” (2022 *Church Manual*, p. 67).

Some might ask: How can the church safeguard doctrinal purity from apostate influences without a formal creed? Many believe a human-crafted statement like the 28 Fundamental Beliefs is necessary to identify and correct those who deviate from biblical truth. Yet this reasoning overlooks the divine provision—God Himself has established something far superior to any human creed for this very purpose. Ellen White addresses this directly:

“I recommend to you, dear reader, the Word of God as the rule of your faith and practice. By that Word we are to be judged. **God has, in that Word, promised to give visions in the ‘last days’**; not for a new rule of faith, but for the comfort of His people, **and to correct those who err from Bible truth**” (*Early Writings*, p. 78).

The implications are profound: when a pastor’s or church member’s understanding of Scripture harmonizes completely with the divinely given “visions in the ‘last days’”—the Spirit of Prophecy—no

legitimate grounds for church discipline should exist. This prophetic gift, not the 28 Fundamental Beliefs document, confirms and clarifies the correct understanding of biblical truth.

A Call to Action at the General Conference Session

The Seventh-day Adventist Church faces a critical issue: while officially affirming the Bible as its only creed, the 28 Fundamental Beliefs have, in practice, functioned as a creed. The current preamble to these beliefs has failed to prevent this shift. Instances abound where members have been disfellowshipped and employees dismissed for not endorsing the exact wording of certain statements, despite fully embracing the underlying Scriptures and “the truths upon which the Spirit of God has placed His approval” (Ellen G. White, Manuscript 125, 1907, par. 15).

A motion will be presented at the upcoming General Conference session to address this discrepancy and uphold the Bible’s sole authority. It proposes appending a single sentence from the 1872 Fundamental Principles’ preamble to the current preamble of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs. This addition seeks to clarify that these beliefs are a descriptive summary, not a binding creed, and to prevent their misuse as an authoritative standard. The historically significant sentence is:

“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.”

If adopted, the revised preamble would read:

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. *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.*

We must prayerfully weigh the implications of adopting or rejecting this addition. Failing to include this clarifying historical sentence could imply an unspoken intent to maintain the 28 Fundamental Beliefs as a functional creed. If so, integrity requires revising the preamble's claim that "Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed," as our actions currently contradict this statement. Let us adopt this sentence to uphold the Bible's sole authority or align our preamble with our practice.

For the complete story of Brother Val Ramos, Elders Ken LeBrun, and John Witcombe, download **One God, One Church: A New Approach to Fortify Membership Against the Anti-Trinitarian Movement** (available in English and Spanish, PDF and Kindle) at ProphecyWaymarks.com



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