

A 29th Fundamental Belief

**How Many Will
Be Saved?**

**Civil Unions as a
Religious Liberty Issue**

WINTER 2021 • VOL. 29 NO. 1

Adventist *Today*

**Why I Love Atheists,
Agnostics, Backsliders,
Unbelievers, Cultural
Adventists, and
All Who Are at the
Margins of the Faith**



A 29th Fundamental Belief

By Greg Jones and Loren Seibold

THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST fundamental beliefs, organized propositionally and phrased pedantically, carry the implication that those who do not subscribe to all 28 are non-Adventists, sub-Adventists, not-quite-Adventists, possibly even wine-sipping California Adventists. At the very least, they might be assigned to the dismissive category of cultural Adventists, which is reserved for those raised in Seventh-day Adventist families who are just a bit too open-minded to escape a condescending label of their own.

Many of us have examined those 28 fundamental beliefs and asked ourselves whether or not we agree with them. The evangelical Adventists—particularly those old enough to remember Glacier View—may trip over the notorious No. 24, about Christ’s ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. The scientifically minded Adventists stumble over the inexplicably reformulated No. 6. The LGBT+ people and their supporters, not to mention people who are divorced and remarried, struggle with No. 23.

On the other side, women’s ordination opponents ask why the denomination includes a clause in No. 14 saying that “differences between high and low, rich and poor, *male and female*” ought not to affect the roles in which they are to “serve and be served.” In addition, we even have a small anti-Trinitarian crowd who, like a few of our denominational pioneers, would be happy to be free of that troublesome No. 2.

While we Adventists-on-the-outskirts accept some or even most of the 28, we may reject others for (it seems to the authors) understandable and fully justifiable reasons. God’s first rule, if we understand it correctly, is to give his creatures as much freedom as he can in spiritual matters.

Even if they disagree with certain beliefs of the mainstream church, most Adventists who’ve been hyphenated or otherwise labeled are amicable toward it. They wish the church well. After all, they may hold degrees from Adventist colleges. Their friends and family, people they care about, are still True Believers. They know the culture, know the people, and are comfortable with those who are former and current Adventists. It is understandable that many regard the Seventh-day Adventist Church as their home, even if they have moved on—just as when people still love their hometown after they move to a different city.

They may, in fact, be full participants in their congregation, recognizing the value in being part of a good church community—even if it is clearly not a perfect one. Imperfection, after all, is the nature of human organizations.

It seems unjust to dismiss questioners of some part of this faith as if they had no place among a people of whom Ellen White said: “We have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn. God and heaven alone are infallible. Those who think that they will never have to give up a cherished

view, never have occasion to change an opinion, will be disappointed. As long as we hold to our own ideas and opinions with determined persistency, we cannot have the unity for which Christ prayed.”¹

A Modest Proposal

Rather than regarding some as lesser Adventists, or dissenters, or silent hypocrites, we propose a 29th fundamental belief. This 29th statement would say that people can embrace or reject any one or more of the previous 28 and still remain loved and active members of our community, as long as they are kind, respectful of others’ feelings and opinions, and behave toward others according to Christian principles.

This may seem counterintuitive at first read. We’re used to our religion being tightly defined by doctrines; indeed, we are reminded of them at every evangelistic campaign. However, we defend this addition for the following five reasons.

First, it merely admits what is already the case. Not all Adventists wholly subscribe to every church belief. Fundamental Belief No. 29 would acknowledge the agnosticism that a great many have about some of these points. To admit that moves our questions out of the shadows, where they can’t be discussed, into the open for examination. It erases the shame of analytical thinking and allows all to feel part of the body rather than like hypocrites hidden in plain sight.

Second, it defines the church as a

community rather than a creedal body. New Testament metaphors for this simple but profound notion include a body of people, working together with Christ as the head, or a house constructed of people with Christ as the cornerstone. It is who we are together, not merely what doctrines we hold, that make us a church.

Adventists have departed from this in crafting a long, complex, and specific doctrinal statement. John Wesley, whom Adventists hold in high regard, preached in a sermon: “My belief is no rule for another. I ask not, therefore, of him with whom I would unite in love, Are you of my church, of my congregation? Do you receive the same form of church government, and allow the same church officers, with me? Do you join in the same form of prayer wherein I worship God? I inquire not, Do you receive the supper of the Lord in the same posture and manner that I do? nor whether, in the administration of baptism, you agree with me in admitting sureties for the baptized, in the manner of administering it; or the age of those to whom it should be administered. Nay, I ask not of you (as clear as I am in my own mind), whether you allow baptism and the Lord’s supper at all. Let all these things stand by: we will talk of them, if need be, at a more convenient season, my only question at present is this, ‘Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?’”²

Third, the addition of this No. 29 would make us more in line with the convictions of our pioneers about doctrinal statements. James White, J. N. Loughborough, and others all objected to crafting any kind of creed, favoring instead remaining continuously alert to God’s guidance. James White wrote: “I take the ground that creeds stand in a direct opposition to the gifts. ... Making a creed is setting the stakes, and barring up the way to all future advancement. ... 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.”³

Fourth, it opens up a new freedom for churches to do ministry in ways most comfortable to the congregation. It lets some be the broad churches that they want to be, while others can define

Not all Adventists wholly subscribe to every church belief. Fundamental Belief No. 29 would acknowledge the agnosticism that a great many have about some of these points.

themselves as narrowly as makes their members comfortable. A congregation would no longer need to apologize for taking a different stance on some issue than the General Conference does. Adding No. 29 would pitch a broad tent, covering traditional Seventh-day Adventist congregations as well as those that are progressive.

Finally, adding this 29th fundamental belief wouldn’t specifically repudiate anything Adventists have believed. It does not ignore the historical basis for—nor the subsequent hard theological work that has gone into crafting—these teachings. It discards nothing. It merely gives people permission not to pretend they believe what they don’t believe. Adventists remain, as believers in a “present truth” ought to be, open to learning more or to gently setting aside what we have ceased to find truthful.

Ought We to Be Afraid?

Can the church survive these “twenty-niners”? Any group that regards itself as special and unique is going to struggle with this fear. However, we argue that to say you can choose what to believe is not to say that there is no Seventh-day Adventism, or that the Adventist church disintegrates into something indistinguishable from all others.

Congregations, as the holders of memberships, are the fundamental building block of our denomination. They, not the denomination, hold people accountable to the community. As long as we use our denominational name and study the Bible, neither the history and ethos of the Seventh-day Adventist Church nor the basics of Christianity will go away. We will remain believers who speak of Jesus’ return and worship on the Saturday Sabbath.

Furthermore, the new fundamental belief specifies that we live by commonly accepted moral and ethical standards, such as “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23, NIV). In this respect, No. 29 is deeply conservative. It insists that the most important part of being a member of our community is that we must treat one another kindly and with consideration, respecting others’ feelings and opinions.

Those who are most rigid about the first 28 beliefs have shown a tendency to reject people who don’t believe as they do. “Twenty-niners” would find such a stance ungenerous, unmerciful, and unlike a righteous God. **AT**

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Review and Herald* (July 26, 1892).

² John Wesley, “Catholic Spirit” (1750), 1872 edition.

³ James White, *The Review and Herald* (Oct. 8, 1861).