



LIVING 28

FRESH PERSPECTIVES ON PRACTISING OUR FAITH

Edited by Jarrod Stackelroth



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Foreword

The Bible was written for practical purposes. Writing to Timothy, the apostle Paul says, “From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man [person] of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:15–17, ESV).

God’s story in history as recorded in Scripture becomes our story in life. A person who believes and follows the Bible will be different—they will want to develop themselves in every way so they can serve others.

The Seventh-day Adventist faith is based on Scripture and we have articulated what we consider the most important scriptural beliefs into 28 Fundamentals. In this volume, you will read heartfelt, contemporary, personal and researched explanations of and responses to these fundamental beliefs. You will be exposed to a part of God’s story through the story of the God-believer. While each article may not be exhaustive and you might have chosen to highlight other aspects of the particular belief, this book was compiled to remind us that our faith today is to be biblical and practically lived.

Ultimately it is the power of the inspired Word of God, in a receptive human heart, that is able to change a person (see 1 Peter 1:23). The same Holy Spirit who inspired the Bible is active in helping us as people know God and deepen our understanding and appreciation of God. It is in this process that God’s story becomes our story. Our story is lived in real life.

Much of the Bible tells stories. The Ten Commandments are the closest to a formula or a code of belief and conduct (see Exodus 20:1–21)—in some ways, similar to the fundamental beliefs. There are also sacrificial rules, genealogies, poems and songs, snippets of wisdom and prophetic utterances—but they are all a part of God’s story and have a local, historical, cultural and very human story behind them.

This book challenges us to live God’s story as disciples of Jesus. Any belief that has value must be lived out in our stories every day.

Glenn Townend

About This Project

I was travelling with my family in North America for our first “White Christmas”. I thought I knew what it meant to be cold, but I quickly found out I had no real idea. Minus 31 degrees. Are you serious? The coldest day we experienced was Christmas Day itself. Minus 31 degrees Celsius.

It was beyond freezing.

Up until then, cold to me was choosing the wrong clothes during an Australian winter or regretting wearing shorts for a few hours if the weather turned blustery. Minus 31 is different altogether.

I wore a heavy jacket, snow pants and layers. But I didn’t have a face covering or scarf and my nose went red with the cold. My beard turned prematurely white as my breath iced it up!

After a few minutes outside, the cold set in. I could feel it begin to seep into my bones. I now understand the serious risk of dying from exposure.

That experience certainly changed my perspective on feeling cold. As we headed down the coast from Canada into the United States, it slowly warmed up. The days that were minus 2 felt positively balmy!

That Sabbath, in Seattle, we walked along the beautiful shoreline and through a park, taking photos (thankfully in Seattle the mercury was in the positive). As we walked, I noticed I kept finding better places to take a photo of the same landmarks. We would get closer and, all of a sudden, the impressive view would provide a new perspective, just as beautiful, yet different somehow.

Looking back through my images, I realise I took a number of photos of the same thing but my perception had changed. And that’s what I love about our Seventh-day Adventist beliefs. We have this concept of progressive truth. It means that, as new revelation or understanding from the Holy Spirit comes to light, we can incorporate those things into our understanding of God. We are not locked into a creed or human traditions that outweigh the Bible.

As I have grown as a Christian, my understanding and perspective on God has changed, grown and developed. Has God changed? The Bible says God does not change (see Hebrews 13:9, Malachi 3:6). Like a landmark, He is unchanging; yet depending on where we stand in relation to Him, our view of Him will change. The closer we get, the clearer He becomes.

In the same way that experiencing those frigid temperatures gave me a whole new appreciation of cold, experiencing God in our lives changes us. By living in His presence and having Him use us in His work, we are changed.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has formally pulled together some of the perspectives we have on God, humanity and how we interact. They are known as the 28 Fundamental Beliefs. I see them as important perspectives on God. But until we experience them, they are only theory, merely perspectives. Just like I needed to experience the cold to really understand what it felt like, we need to make our beliefs practical and applicable to our everyday lives.

Yet many of us, particularly my generation and younger, have lost touch with what we really believe. Maybe we are vaguely aware but don't have a sense of how we, and all our—choose your favourite descriptor—unique/peculiar/special beliefs fit into the picture.

So this book will bring those beliefs together, as a refresher, before challenging you on how to implement them into your everyday discipleship.

Marcos Torres, pastor in Western Australia and a contributor to this series, has stated many times on his The Story Church Project podcast and blog, “Adventism has a beautiful story.”

He goes on to explain. “I love our theological narrative complete with our passion for Daniel and Revelation. I love the health message. I love the writings of Ellen White. I love the history of our church and its legacy. I love our sanctuary hermeneutic, our global structure and haystacks. And most of all, I love the way authentic Adventism lifts Jesus up. There's just nothing like it.”

I agree. Our 28 Fundamental Beliefs fit together to outline that beautiful story. They are not isolated islands of information. They are not a smorgasbord of options from which we only enjoy the choicest morsels.

Instead, they are a mosaic that forms a greater picture of God and our lives as we follow His plan. They form a framework for our faith community to see and understand God's character, mission and our ultimate purpose—“Our church exists to communicate the heart of God to the whole world,” Marcos continues.

And these 28 Fundamentals, these “understandings”, fit together to help explain our picture and communicate it to others.

I learned a lot while watching this project come to fruition, including that we cannot merely hold our beliefs. If we want to get the most out of them, we need to engage, understand and live them.

The challenge I set for our writers was to remind us of the practical way belief translates into the everyday. Challenge yourself, as our writers did, to take these beliefs and make them personal and practical. We need to rediscover and re-imagine our beliefs in a way that reminds us of their beauty, as well as how they impact our daily life.

I encourage you to take this journey further than the pages of this book. We've included questions that will help you to look and think deeper—and challenge you to make your beliefs practical. You can even take this journey in a group or Sabbath school class.

I pray that as you read this book, you are reminded of what you believe, why you believe and how to believe in a way that makes a difference in your life and the lives of those around you.

Jarrold Stackelroth
Editor
Adventist Record

A Readiness to Grow

Preamble

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 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 to express the teachings of God's Holy Word.

Reading Ellen White's *The Great Controversy* as a young adult blew my mind. I was expecting something old-fashioned and stuffy, and I was kind of right—I still struggle to connect with White's dated language and style. But her ideas were radical!

Again and again, as she recounted the history of God's people since the end of New Testament times, she slammed empty church traditions and upheld a fresh, vital faith, rediscovered and reinvented for each generation. And, as one of the youthful founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church herself, Ellen White didn't just promote these ideas, she lived them.

While reading *The Great Controversy*, I discovered that Adventists are restorationists. This has nothing to do with rescuing old motorcycles or furniture and everything to do with recovering and re-embracing the vitality and original truths of New Testament Christianity. "Before the final visitation of God's judgments upon the earth there will be among the people of the Lord such a revival of primitive godliness as has not been witnessed since apostolic times," predicted Ellen White in *The Great Controversy*.

Primitive godliness—that's a powerful turn of phrase that resonates very deeply for me. How do I open myself up to God so that He can restore in me the Spirit-led power of the early followers of the Way? And how does a

worldwide denomination of 20 million worshippers participate together in this work of restoration? The answer is hinted at in the preamble to the Adventist Church's official doctrinal statement, 28 Fundamental Beliefs.

Although the preamble is not one of the fundamental beliefs itself, it establishes the context for the 28 points that follow—and is overlooked too often as extraneous to the “main event”. The preamble reminds us that 28 Fundamental Beliefs is a fallible human document—a hand-drawn sketch of the multi-dimensional, living colour we see in the pages of the Bible. However, it also implies that each of the 28 points are the product of countless hours of study, prayer and deliberation—painstaking processes where those involved sensed the presence of the Holy Spirit among them.

To understand the preamble is to understand the origins of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Many early Adventists saw themselves as the inheritors of a Reformation tradition that emphasised the rediscovery of forgotten Bible truths and the rejection of human religious traditions. Hence, Adventist believers differed from other Christians in promoting the sanctuary doctrine, the seventh-day Sabbath, soul sleep, healthy living and more. These were not new teachings but neglected and misunderstood Bible truths that were being re-established.

The Adventist pioneers detected a worrying pattern in Christian movements of the past: While many of them were genuinely called by God and began doing the valuable work of reformation and restoration, their vital energy and commitment dissipated as they became established.

A number of early Adventist leaders were determined to avoid repeating these mistakes and resisted calls for more organisational structure, including a definitive statement of doctrine. “[T]he first step of apostasy is to get up a creed, telling us what we shall believe,” warned J N Loughborough. “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.” Ouch! Strong words that were controversial even then.

Nevertheless, from the earliest days, Adventist leaders found it necessary to have an answer for those who asked, “What do you people believe?” The earliest official summary of doctrine—just five points—appeared on the masthead of *Review and Herald* in 1854. Various other “fundamental principles” appeared over the decades containing 25, 28 or 22 statements and were increasingly the product of committees of Adventist

leaders/scholars and subject to formal votes by the General Conference (GC) in session.

At the 1980 GC Session, Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists was approved. It contained 27 points and, for the first time, the current text of the preamble, which states the document is not the denomination's creed and notes that it is subject to variation.

So what exactly is a creed? And how is it different from the Fundamental Beliefs? This has worried me for a while, because a bald assertion that the Bible is Adventism's only creed is worse than useless if the evidence points the other way.

The word "creed" comes from the Latin *credo*, meaning, "I believe"; creeds too are statements of belief. *Credo* is the first word of both the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed, two of the most well-known expressions of fundamental doctrine in Christianity and both clear, biblical statements with which Adventists would struggle to disagree.

Creeds were used historically to examine incoming Christian converts. Much like a wedding celebrant will ask, "Do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?" new Christians were asked, "Do you believe . . . ?" followed by the words of the creed. A shortened version of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs is put to similar use in Adventist baptismal services. It has become, in Loughborough's words, "a test of fellowship". I have to admit, this discomfits me, although I struggle to imagine how a purely "primitive", "apostolic" statement of faith at a baptism might look.

But Loughborough's concern was how creeds were ultimately used to "try members . . . denounce as heretics those who do not believe that creed. And . . . to commence persecution."

Here we begin to see differences between how creeds and the 28 Fundamental Beliefs are used. Yes, there have been times when the fundamentals were used as a test of orthodoxy. But, generally, Adventist leaders have shied away from this kind of "blunt instrument" approach. Why? Because of the preamble, which explains that, unlike a fixed creed, the 28 Fundamental Beliefs is subject to change.

There's a hierarchy of authority: the General Conference Session outranks the fundamentals, and clearly the Bible outranks them both. Thus it's neither reasonable nor practical to root out heretics using the finer points of the fundamentals.

Yes, the 28 Fundamental Beliefs are supposed to be taken seriously but it's also subject to investigation and review. As inheritors of the Reformation, we Adventists need to maintain our commitment to progressive revelation, which is neatly summarised in the preamble: "when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth". History demonstrates the reality of this perspective; over the centuries, new light has repeatedly flared from the pages of Scripture. "[T]he word of God is alive and active," says the writer of Hebrews (4:12).

The alternative is an all-too-human attitude of self-sufficiency. The mountain of truth has been climbed, the summit has been attained; all that remains is to shout instructions to the stragglers below. This kind of mindset is a very real risk for our denomination as we mark our 157th anniversary this year. Adventism provides a wholistic and rational paradigm of God, life and truth and its legacy is a comfortable resting place.

It's also a legacy worth defending. In the face of threats from secularism and liberalism, the temptation is to reinforce the bulwarks of doctrine and empower authoritarian efforts to silence dissent. But in doing so, we are in danger of betraying the very principles on which our legacy is established.

ADVENTISTS NEED TO MAINTAIN BOTH AN OPEN BIBLE AND AN OPEN MIND—CHANNELS THROUGH WHICH THE HOLY SPIRIT CAN PURSUE HIS AGENDA OF RESTORATION AND RENEWAL.

This is true in both a corporate theological sense and a personal devotional sense. The Holy Spirit also influences what the Adventist pioneers called "present truth"; that is, the aspects of Bible teaching that are particularly relevant in the contemporary context. What is God's message to today's world as it struggles with millions of refugees, the commodification of sexuality, an overburdened environment, the information technology revolution and the renewed threat of nuclear annihilation? The 28 Fundamental Beliefs do not pretend to address these immediate issues; only a careful, prayerful investigation of God's Word can do that.

The preamble to Adventism's fundamental beliefs urges us toward humility, a closer connection with the Author of the Bible and a readiness to grow in our understanding of truth. It provides the essential balancing context for the 28 points that follow. And I, for one, am glad it's there.

Kent Kingston is editor of Signs of the Times magazine, based in Wahroonga, New South Wales.

Discussion Questions:

What idea stands out to you after reading about the preamble to the 28 Fundamental Beliefs?

Why do you think the concept of progressive truth is so important?

The author asks, “How do I open myself up to God so that He can restore in me the Spirit-led power of the early followers of the Way?” How can you become more receptive to God’s leading and what are some things that might need to change in your life to become more like those early followers?

What have you learned from reading this that you could share with others this week?



The Right Place to Start

1. The Holy Scriptures

The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God, given by divine inspiration. The inspired authors spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In this Word, God has committed to humanity the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are the supreme, authoritative and the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the definitive revealer of doctrines and the trustworthy record of God's acts in history. (Psalms 119:105; Proverbs 30:5,6; Isaiah 8:20; John 17:17; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 3:16, 17; Hebrews 4:12; 2 Peter 1:20, 21.)

In a recent online post I read, the author noted that many doctrinal belief statements begin with a treatment of the Bible or Scriptures. He went on to suggest the doctrine of God should really come first. After all, everything is about God. All our beliefs find their reason and source in Him. In contrast, the Bible is a human book and only a secondary revelation of God Himself. Have we Adventists got the order of our doctrines wrong?

From known to unknown

There are a number of suppositions implicit in the order of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs—first, that before we can say anything concrete about God, it needs to be revealed to us. So to entertain the idea of God—to understand His character or discover truth about Him—there must first be some kind of revelation or encounter.

While we could start by postulating about the doctrine of God, it would be equally legitimate to deal with the doctrine of man. We could note what we know to be true from our experience about human nature, sinfulness, love, relationships, how we die, suffer, search for meaning and so on.

Instead, we start at a place where the human and divine intersect. The Bible is not the first, not the only, not the best revelation of God (see Hebrews 1:1-3). But it is common to us all. It is a shared reference point.¹

We move from what is known, in this case our reading of Scripture, to what is unknown—the Person of God.

Human limits of knowing God

Therefore, systematising our beliefs begins by recognising that theology is both enhanced and limited by our human condition and experience. To pray, write or speak of God requires language (itself an arbitrary human construct). To think of God or commune with Him requires human consciousness, created in a matrix of organic chemical and electric impulses that we do not fully understand but that is very much human.

Through such impulses, visionary states, vivid dreams and impressions, men and women feel compelled or driven to give voice and word to their thoughts.² These, of course, are steeped in cultural nuances, historical references, local idiom and exotic worldviews that might be foreign to us.

To experience the acts or presence of God engages human senses of sight, sound, touch, etc, which are profoundly personal and also subjective. Scripture, therefore, is an artefact of this encounter between the human and the divine. We cannot isolate it from the human experience of ancient people—or ourselves, for that matter.

The fact God reveals Himself to us at all should cause us to engage in theological dialogue with a great deal of humility and some holy hesitation. Having read the first doctrinal statement, we should proceed to the other 27 with caution—for to be certain about God implies a certain misguided overconfidence in ourselves.

Despite being an infallible and authoritative revelation of His will, the Bible leaves plenty of room for uncertainty. Yes, there are profound statements of truth, confidence and faith. There are voices from heaven and glory on mountains. But there are also doubts, struggles, contradictions and unanswered questions that Scripture leaves us with. The Bible's revelation, while necessary for a knowledge of God and salvation, is partial and incomplete.

Even the Gospels—the story of God's ultimate self-revelation in the Personhood of Jesus—are limited. What we know about God, as revealed in Creation, personal experience and the collective experience recounted in the historical record of Scripture, is only made possible by an act of divine grace. It is at God's initiative.

Divine revelation then is a fusion of divine and human elements, the distinctions of which are mostly indistinguishable. The Scriptures are the fruit conceived by the intimate union of the human and divine.

As the Spirit hovers over the waters in Genesis 1, the Logos (Word) of God speaks life into existence. In the same way, the Holy Spirit hovers over Mary (see Luke 1:35) and the Word of God is fulfilled with the incarnation of Jesus as the Logos³ becomes flesh and makes His home with us (see John 1).

So, too, the Spirit hovers over the words of human vessels. The Spirit animates ideas, gives life to words and hovers over the writer, and the reader, so that God is conceived and takes form in human language and imagery.

The agency of the Holy Spirit means Scripture is more than inspirational, it is inspired. It is more than historical, it is historic. It is more than myths and legends and tales of heroes and villains. It is the human story. It is God's story. It is our story.⁴

Reading Scripture today

There is always the danger we may overemphasise either the human or divine elements of Scripture to the detriment of the other.

Adventism emerged in the fallout of the enlightenment, humanistic rationalism and democratisation. Our pioneers approached Scripture much as people would a textbook, formula or thesis. They mined the Bible for truth to be proven, argued and defended. It was an exercise in reason and it has become our legacy. Yet that encounter with Scripture was not devoid of human emotion, charismatic experiences or deep encounters with a personal God. The beauty of literature gave way to the beauty of Jesus. Not an idea, but a person.

The theological exercise of thinking and talking about God should not take place in a vacuum, devoid of a personal relationship with God or without reference to humanity. Scripture causes the reader to know more about God while leading to a deeper subjective connection. It should also lead us to a deeper knowledge of ourselves, enabling us to be more fully human, while also deepening our connectedness with others.

As I read Scripture, I remember I am doing it through the eyes and experience of another person just like myself. By putting myself in their shoes and understanding their story, I can gain a better sense of what God revealed to or through them.

Then I can reflect on how it applies to my own life narrative. I remember our stories aren't the same. I may draw insight from the interpretation or application made by others who have read the same passage. But I am also mindful the same Spirit hovers over me, the reader. With a whisper the inception of an idea transforms me through the renewing of my mind. At many times and in various ways I am moved, compelled, carried forward to action with divinely inspired words, thoughts and actions. God has made Himself known to me. Another cycle of His revelation is complete.

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While recognising that God and the Spirit inspired the ministry of prophets outside the canon of Scripture, Christians have accepted the authoritative nature of this collection of writings called the Bible. Many consider the transmission of Scripture through time and the formation of the canon to have been guided by the Spirit also.

Se 2 Peter 1:21. In Greek, to be moved is also used to describe a boat carried along, driven or compelled before the wind. 2 Peter 1:18 and 1 John 1:1–3 emphasise the sensory nature of the divine revelation, particularly of Jesus.

Logos literally means “word” in New Testament Greek. Figuratively, it referred to the essence of matter of something and was used outside the New Testament to talk about the source and substance of creation: “The Word was with God and the Word was God.”

Adventists affirm that Scripture is a trustworthy record of God’s acts in history.

Discussion Questions:

What do you think is the most exciting or interesting thing about how God reveals Himself to us through Scripture?

How can Scripture be an “infallible and authoritative revelation” but still leave room for uncertainty? How do you deal with uncertainty in your faith and how can the Bible help with that?

What are the dangers of overemphasising the human element of Scripture? Of overemphasising the Divine?

How do you engage with Scripture in your own experience? What do you think God is telling you in this moment?