

# Baptismal Vows

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This article examines the history of the development of baptismal vows in concept, word, and usage throughout the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church—from early references in Adventist publications and letters to current, official baptismal vows found in church manuals.

## Introduction

Today when a person seeks to join a faith, it is not uncommon to give a confession of faith or declare one's conviction as a sign of commitment. In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, prior to being baptized, a baptismal candidate will declare an affirmation to a set of vows—a series of statements summarizing and declaring agreement with the Fundamental Beliefs and giving commitment to faith in action.<sup>1</sup>

While baptismal vows have been used since the inception of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the first reference to any systematic set of baptismal vows was not published until 1920. Prior to this there were numerous references to the practice of utilizing a vow upon baptism, however no specific set or sets of vows have been found from this time period in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. From 1920 and onward, numerous iterations of vows have been utilized. This, of course, is connected to the revision of the church's Fundamental Beliefs throughout the years, keeping vows harmonious with the core beliefs of the church while at the same time avoiding turning either the Fundamental Beliefs or a set of baptismal vows into any form of creed.

This article will examine the development of baptismal vows within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, beginning with a look at the New Testament and early Christianity to lay a foundation for the church's engagement with vows. We will then discuss what the use of baptismal vows looked like to the pioneers of Seventh-day Adventism all the way to the church's engagement with baptismal vows today. Through this process, we will also discover gradual changes seen in the church as a whole.

## Baptismal Vows and the Bible

An examination of Scripture demonstrates a number of commitment statements given in connection to confessing faith in Christ. "Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved," (Romans 10:9)<sup>2</sup> Here confession is seen as key to salvation. "Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses" (1 Timothy 6:12). Paul's message to Timothy highlights the significance of intentional action in correlation with confession.

Scripture shows baptism as an action used to physically demonstrate commitment to Christ and the decision to live a holy life. "And Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 2:38). Peter points out that repentance must come with baptism, and with both comes a commitment to a sanctified life. "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16). Here the confession of Christ is partnered in tandem with baptism.

It should be noted that nowhere in Scripture is it stated that a vow was taken upon an individual's baptism<sup>3</sup> However, while there was no established recitation to give, baptism in the New Testament was still accompanied by a confession of Christ and a commitment to Him. It is out of this model that baptismal vows began to take form. Thus, when we read of individuals taking baptismal vows through the centuries since the New Testament, we can conclude that these are indeed separate from the act of baptism itself, even though they are done in tandem.

In the centuries since He walked the earth, many confessions of Christ have been made, some even being formally crafted, such as the Nicæan Creed, Apostles' Creed. Early church father Tertullian is noted as describing the practice of such confession upon baptism in his day: "When we are going to enter the water, but a little before, in the presence of the congregation and under the hand of the president, we solemnly profess that we disown the devil, and his pomp, and his angels."<sup>4</sup> From early church history until today, there has often been a felt need for such a confession when deciding to be baptized.

Most denominations have recognized the need for some form of doctrinal and commitment preparation of a candidate who wishes to join the church. The Catholic Catechism is used by the Catholic Church, the Westminster Confession is used by the Presbyterian Church, baptismal covenants are used by the Methodist Church and some Lutheran churches. Membership in each church is based upon some sort of commitment to belief. When joining the Seventh-day Adventist Church, people affirm their agreement with basic biblical beliefs that are held by the church.

As part of the final public examination of the candidate who wishes to join the Seventh-day Adventist Church, there is usually a brief commitment stated in front of the congregation. This public confession is often called a baptismal vow or covenant. Baptismal vows are summary statements of a church's beliefs which the candidate for membership must agree to prior to baptism or profession of faith to officially join the church. Because

baptism marks an individual's entrance into the church, it certainly seems appropriate that the beliefs of the church are stated and affirmed at this ceremony.

As early as 1920, the Seventh-day Adventist Church began to recognize the importance of a specifically Adventist baptismal vow, and by 1932 the church recognized the need for *uniform* vows, publishing them in the church manual. Through the years, the 11 questions that comprised the first unofficial baptismal vows went through many additions, subtractions, and changes to form the 13 official articles that the church has as of 2021. There were several key milestones of development for these baptismal vows which will be discussed below.

## The Development of Baptismal Vows in the Seventh-day Adventist Church

### Early Seventh-day Adventists

The early pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church came from a number of different church backgrounds, including Methodist, Baptist, and Christian Connexion. While there was no formalized set of baptismal vows within the Adventist Church for a number of years, the practice of using such vows would have been common for these early church leaders as they came from their different religious backgrounds.

References to baptismal vows appear as early as 1844. In the Millerite periodical *The Advent Herald, and Signs of the Times Reporter* on August 28, 1844, an article entitled "Prophetic Symbols" mentions vows as an assumed part of the Christian life: "And in this sense, not to defile one's garments, is, not to act contrary to our baptismal vow, and engagements."<sup>5</sup> This offhand mention of the baptismal vow seems to indicate a natural assumption that such vows were already taking place.

Similarly, two decades later the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* ran a brief article discussing the importance of remaining faithful to sworn vows.<sup>6</sup> The article encourages readers to take spiritual vows, including a baptismal vow, and after having done so maintain them solemnly.

Ellen G. White and others' early mentions of baptismal vows likely did not refer to a specifically worded vow. Most likely, such a "vow" was simply a general commitment that a person gave to follow Christ faithfully, possibly including a reference to Revelation 14:12 wherein the believer agrees to keep "the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus." However, if there was a formal or informal set of vows that was used during this time, it did not appear in any major publication. This has been affirmed by David Trim, director of Archives, Statistics, and Research for the General Conference:

I can find not even a hint of any formally voted vows, or a widely agreed set text, before Underwood's article in *The Church Officer's Gazette* in March 1920. . . . I would suggest, therefore, that these earlier references to baptismal vows either are referring, in the general sense to each believer's 'vow' of faith in Christ and

commitment to follow Him faithfully; or describe some kind of formula that varied from church to church, perhaps conference to conference, and probably were borrowed from Baptists, Methodists, etc.<sup>7</sup>

Ellen G. White

As an instrumental leader in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Ellen G. White's concept of baptism and baptismal vows are significant. Although no specific, singular baptismal vow of the Adventist Church is known to have existed during the time of Ellen G. White, many of her writings do mention baptismal vows. A careful reading of her writings concerning baptismal vows seems to stress that the idea of making a covenant at the baptismal ceremony was quite common. The context in which she uses the term seems to indicate a more general approach to this idea. Her perception of baptismal vows appears simply to be a commitment made to follow Christ: to honor him, to seek after his heart, and place him first in the believer's life.

Judging from a remark in May 1904, she seemed to take the vows quite seriously, recommending to readers, "Let us not forget our baptismal vow. In the presence of the three highest powers of heaven,— the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,— we have pledged ourselves to do the will of him who, over the rent sepulcher of Joseph, declared, 'I am the resurrection and the life.'<sup>8</sup> Ellen G. White clearly saw that God promised to help and sustain the person who took the baptismal vow.

Three months earlier she noted, "When the Christian takes his baptismal vow, divine help is pledged to him. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit stand ready to work in his behalf. God places at his command the resources of heaven, that he may be an overcomer."<sup>9</sup> Though the precise words of a baptismal vow were never noted by Ellen G. White, the sentiment of the vow was significant.<sup>10</sup>

James White

In 1870, James White wrote in the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* about the Iowa camp meeting, saying that those he baptized there took baptismal vows. "Here was the aged man of white hairs, the youth, and little children, all under the influence of the word and Spirit of God, taking the solemn baptismal vows."<sup>11</sup> The way it is written seems to indicate the normalcy with which these vows accompanied baptism.

In 1876, James White wrote about the experience of parents taking their children to camp meeting with similar results: "Those parents who brought their children to the (camp) meeting and saw them converted, and take the baptismal vow, are now glad that they brought them."<sup>12</sup> Ellen G. White also noted this occurrence, writing, "several young men came to this meeting unconverted and careless, sought the Lord earnestly and take the baptismal vows."<sup>13</sup>

This last reference to baptismal vows occurs after the first publication of any sort of Fundamental Beliefs. In 1872, an unnamed author (who was most likely Uriah Smith) wrote "A Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by the Seventh-day Adventists."<sup>14</sup> Having been published and circulated several years prior, it is possible the vows James White refers to in 1876 are influenced by or based upon the stated beliefs

put forth by Smith. Any vows prior to 1872 may likely have been generically Christian and unspecific to the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

After James and Ellen G. White's mentions in 1876, there were several other references made to baptismal vows before any official vow was written. Most references were done in passing<sup>5</sup>, but two are of particular note. First, in 1907, while reminiscing on a previous Sabbath's meeting, S. E. Jackson stated, "the good Father permitted a few drops of the latter rain to fall upon us; hearts were touched and a number came forward for baptism and to renew their baptismal vow."<sup>6</sup> This statement gives evidence that, if so moved, someone who had previously taken the baptismal vows could renew them, presumably in a similar fashion. This reference also draws the distinction between baptism and the baptismal vow—that the vow itself does not simply refer to the sacred act of baptism.

Second, in 1912, B. E. Connerly wrote in the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* about the experience of taking the Lord's Supper, saying that it was an opportunity to "reverently renew our baptismal vow."<sup>7</sup> Unlike Jackson's comment, Connerly seemed to indicate a private renewal of vows that all baptized members ought to experience when participating in the Lord's Supper. This seems to indicate a common and widespread practice of taking vows upon baptism.

R. A. Underwood, 1920

The Seventh-day Adventist Church existed for nearly sixty years without any official baptismal vows.<sup>18</sup> The first known, semi-official set of vows within the Seventh-day Adventist Church were published in 1920 by R. A. Underwood<sup>19</sup> and set the stage for all upcoming baptismal vows in the church.

In 1920 R. A. Underwood<sup>20</sup> wrote an article in the *Church Officers Gazette* entitled "Examination of Candidates for Baptism and Church Membership."<sup>21</sup> In this article, Underwood directed readers to the commission given by Christ in Matthew 18:19, 20, pointing out that as followers of Christ we are to baptize men and women into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and teach them to follow Christ. Taken together, Underwood emphasized that this means that any test to determine a person's candidacy for baptism must come strictly from the Bible alone. He noted that he "sometimes heard questions asked candidates that he considers out of place,"<sup>22</sup> because they were not grounded in a command from God himself. This indicates that there were several baptismal vows in circulation at that time. Underwood desired to see a vow based out of Scripture and not personal preference. After setting such a stage, Underwood then proposed a list of 11 questions to ask those wishing to be baptized.<sup>23</sup>

In his suggested list, there is a focus upon commitment to prayer and using Scripture as a standard for living.<sup>24</sup> For example, question 5 asks, "Do you take the Bible, above all other books and above all other teaching and counsel of men, to be the standard of your daily living in the development of a perfect Christian life, and do you hereby promise to make the Bible your daily study and companion?" Question 10 emphasizes personal worship as it asks, "do you understand that in prayer we are invited to come into the presence of our Creator, the great 'I

AM,' and there 'shut the door,' and hold sweet communion with God?" Other topics Underwood brings up in these vows include taking and honoring the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; preserving the health of one's body; tithing; and agreeing with the teachings of the Adventist church.

There is one topic addressed in this version of baptismal vows that does not show up elsewhere. The second question Underwood proposes asks, "have you the evidence that Christ has accepted you and forgiven your sins?" This question is omitted from all other baptismal vows that came later. No discussion is noted for why this is the case, but it may be due to how vaguely the question is stated and how difficult it would be to ascertain an accurate answer.

The primary summary of Underwood's baptismal vows was simply to accept Christ as your Savior and live an exemplary life in communion with Him.

#### *Home and School, 1926*

A few years after Underwood's publication of vows, in the August 1926 edition of *Home and School: A Journal of Christian Education*, G. A. Roberts recommended that all children attend Bible study, or baptismal, classes. Then "at the conclusion of the series of baptismal class lessons, the regular baptismal class work is discontinued and a special baptismal class is organized for those who in their daily lives show that they are ready to take the solemn, baptismal vow." It was noted that "the local pastor has charge of the special baptismal class,<sup>25</sup> wherein children would prepare to take their baptismal vows.<sup>26</sup> Within this publication, there was no mention of specific vows, however lesson plans were outlined. This instruction for local pastoral leadership demonstrated the importance that baptismal teachings and vows were given, even the vows confessed by children. Both the early assumption and the later development of baptismal vows within the Seventh-day Adventist Church provide witness to how significant these vows truly are.

#### Church Manual, 1932<sup>27</sup>

The first official set of baptismal vows for the Seventh-day Adventist Church was published in 1932. A lengthy section (17 pages) of the 1932 church manual was devoted to church membership, and much of what was discussed in this section was devoted to baptism.<sup>28</sup> Scripture was cited throughout as the author pointed out that baptism is required in the Gospel and that it is a prerequisite for church membership. Then the author walked the reader through a multi-step process of baptism, including, but not limited to, preparatory instruction, a public open questioning of the candidate, the mode and ceremony of the baptism, and the welcoming of new members.

A "suggestive outline for examination"<sup>29</sup> was given, which included 21 questions that could be asked candidates during the public examination before baptism. These questions covered a broad range of beliefs and commitments, some of which could easily be expected, such as: (#1) "Do you believe in the existence of God as a personal being, who is our heavenly Father?" and (#7) "Do you claim by faith in Christ that God for Christ's sake

has forgiven your past sins, and that He is yours and you are His?"

As compared to other lists of baptismal vows, this list is more specific regarding appropriate behavior for baptized Christians: (#20) "Do you, by going forward in baptism, thus declare that from henceforth you will have no part in such soul-destroying amusements as card playing, theater going, dancing, and all other entertainments and amusements which tend to deaden and destroy the spiritual life and perceptions?"

There is a question in this list which is more specific in discussing the gift of prophecy as it cites Ellen G. White by name: (#18) "Do you believe the Bible doctrine of 'spiritual gifts' in the church, and do you believe in the gift of the Spirit of prophecy which has been manifested in the remnant church through the ministry and writings of Mrs. E. G. White?" Future lists drop the explicit mention of Ellen G. White in discussion on the Spirit of Prophecy. Perhaps this is because baptismal vows are connected to tests of fellowship and through the years the church, including Ellen G. White herself, never intended for belief in her writings to be any sort of fellowship test.<sup>30</sup> Previously, Adventists expected baptismal candidates to affirm belief in the biblical doctrine of spiritual gifts, the biblical prediction of an end-time manifestation of the gift of prophecy, and their openness to examine the writings of Ellen G. White for themselves, believing that everybody who were to study them with an open and prayerful attitude would arrive at the conclusion that Ellen White must have been divinely inspired.<sup>31</sup> The decision to drop the explicit mention of her name may indicate a return to that earlier commitment to the Bible as test of fellowship and a trust in the compelling nature of Ellen White's writings.

There is one question in particular that is quite unique and does not show up in other baptismal vow lists: (#21) "Will you submit to the decisions of the body of the church in matters of church discipline?"

Another noteworthy point made in the 1932 church manual was a statement of church authority in the matter of fellowship. "A minister, an individual church, or a conference does not have the authority to set up or establish tests of fellowship for the denomination. This authority rests with the entire church body, and is exercised through the regularly constituted organization of the church in the General Conference."<sup>32</sup> Thus, a unified body of believers was encouraged.

The manual also made it clear that a public examination of the candidate should take place "in the presence of the church or before the church board, before they are baptized."<sup>33</sup> Also, while the questions presented in this list are published officially in the church manual, it should be noted that the vows are described in a similar way to Underwood's list of vows—that is, a suggestion rather than a prescription. Preceding the vow, the manual gave a statement on why it was only a suggestion, namely to avoid setting a creed: "The following statement forms a suggestive outline of the principles to be understood and accepted by candidates for baptism. This is not in any sense intended to be a formation of a creed."<sup>34</sup>

Despite the fact that these vows were voted on by the General Conference to include in the church manual, not all pastors and evangelists chose to utilize them. In 1939, John Lewis Shuler published a book about evangelism where he included his own set of baptismal vows.<sup>35</sup> In the same year, Florida Conference evangelist L. C. Evans

published an article in *The Ministry* where he described the set of 22 questions he always asked baptismal candidates at his meetings.<sup>36</sup> While each variant had similar themes, neither matched the vows from the church manual exactly.

Autumn Council, 1941

During the June General Conference meeting in 1941, it was voted to create a committee for the purpose of developing a new set of standardized baptismal vows for the church's use.<sup>37</sup> By this time, the church had spread all over the world, and there was a clear need for a uniform vow for new members. W. H. Branson, vice president of the General Conference at the time, proposed that a uniform vow was necessary for several reasons.

In some eight hundred languages and dialects, people are coming into the church. And workers recruited from these languages are endeavoring, often without sufficient guidance, to apply our church standards to those who request membership in our churches. With a work thus spread throughout the earth, it is obviously impossible to maintain uniformity in applying our church standards when receiving new members, without some definite guide for our church leaders... A minister or a local elder may feel that he should require candidates to promise adherence to this or that tenet, or practice, or objective, whereas others do not consider those special points as tests of fellowship, and they omit them from their examination of candidates. This lack of uniformity, and the absence of any authoritative guide, have resulted in each church elder and minister setting up his own tests of fellowship.<sup>38</sup>

At the Autumn Council, the committee which had been created a few months prior gave their report. In it, they recommended the adoption of a new list of baptismal vows, a certificate of baptism, and a summary of the church's Fundamental Beliefs. All of these were accepted by vote at the Autumn Council on October 27, 1941.<sup>39</sup>

This was the first time that baptismal vows were voted on in session to make them the official standard for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Prior to this, there had been no formalized process for the development and acceptance of baptismal vows as official statements from the church. Even though a set of vows had been appearing in the church manual since 1932, a number of prominent ministers were crafting and distributing their own sets of vows which they used when baptizing.<sup>40</sup> Oliver Montgomery, the chairman of the committee to develop this set of vows, noted that the decision to admit a candidate for fellowship or to disfellowship a member should not be done by any individual pastor, elder, or local church. Rather, the standard was created by this committee formed by the General Conference, and this standard should be followed throughout the church.<sup>41</sup> Montgomery also noted that in the creation of the baptismal vows, the committee did not use the Spirit of Prophecy as a foundation.

[The committee] made no reference to the instruction given this people through the Spirit of prophecy in regard to many evils to be avoided and the right principles to be followed. On this point may I state that as a

denomination, we hold to the fundamental Protestant principle of 'the Bible, and the Bible only' as our rule of faith and conduct. Every doctrine, every principle of faith, every truth of the gospel, every standard of righteousness, is found in the word of God.<sup>42</sup>

Here Montgomery made it clear the committee's intention to keep Scripture as the guiding standard in matters of all things, particularly membership. He noted that while the Spirit of Prophecy was important and instructive, shedding wonderful light for believers, Scripture still held the supreme position within the church.

The approved baptismal vows of 1941 were comprised of 11 questions, the same number as the suggested list from 1920. However, the questions themselves were quite different from Underwood's, including additional reference to the Ten Commandments, preparation for Jesus' Second Coming, and the work of Christ as Intercessor, while passing over any mention of evidence of forgiveness.

Many of the points from the vows of 1932 were combined in fewer articles in the list from 1941. For example, the first article of the 1941 vow combines the first three articles from 1932 as it discusses the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Article 9 from the 1941 vow combines a couple of 1932's articles about church organization and how the new believer can support it by attendance, tithe, and offering.

A number of articles from 1932 were dropped in this iteration of baptismal vows. There is no mention of confession (#6), the nature of man (#12), investigative judgement (#13), spreading the gospel (#14), temperance (#16), plain and simple dress (#17), spiritual gifts (#18), refraining from soul-destroying amusements (#20), and submission to church authority (#21).

One brand new article was added in the 1941 baptismal vows: article 4, which concerns Jesus' intercessory work. This idea of Jesus' intercession was continued in all the iterations of the baptismal vows which followed.

Church Manual, 1951

The next edition of the Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual since 1942 did not come out until 1951. Much of the 13 articles of the 1951 list match previous articles, but a few changes can be seen. In our research we found no evidence that a vote was taken to change the vows at the 1950 General Conference Session or any Spring or Autumn Meeting from 1948 through 1950. We also saw no mention in the Review and Herald in 1950 or 1951 concerning any change to the church's baptismal vows. Nonetheless, without any known record of how it got there, a new list of baptismal vows did appear in the 1951 church manual.

The first 6 articles of the 1951 church manual baptismal vows are identical to the voted vows of 1941. However, article 7, which describes the candidate's body as a temple, is added into the set. The sentiment of this article, which discusses abstinence from substances such as alcohol and unclean foods, can be seen in article 16 of the 1932 iteration of vows, but was dropped in 1941. Another article that was dropped in 1941 and added back in in 1951 was article 8, which discusses spiritual gifts, including the Spirit of Prophecy specifically. In 1932, the prophetic gift of Ellen G. White is mentioned, however her name does not appear in the 1951 list.

Besides these changes, the remaining articles are all worded almost exactly same, though appearing in a different order. This change was likely due to create a more systematic flow within the vows. For example, the article referring to the Fundamental Beliefs, which was previously number 7, was moved to be number 12, the second to last article. This seems to create a logical link to the final article, which expresses the Seventh-day Adventist Church as the remnant church. This list of 13 remained the baptismal vows in print for 30 years until 1981.<sup>43</sup>

General Conference, 1980

At the Autumn Council held in 1979, much time was spent examining the newly proposed Statement of Fundamental Beliefs, however at that same council, an amendment to the baptismal vows in the church manual was also proposed.<sup>44</sup> A committee had been selected to draft this amendment, which was passed at Autumn Council.<sup>45</sup> In April of 1980, the amendment was brought before the General Conference in Session. After a fair amount of discussion and minor revision, it was ultimately passed. This newest full-length rendition of the Seventh-day Adventist baptismal vows is comprised of 13 questions to be asked of the candidate publicly prior to their baptism.

While the 1981 church manual was updated with the new vows, much of the rest of the discussion on baptism remained the same. From 1932 until 1980, each edition of the church manual designates baptism as a prerequisite for church membership, denotes the importance of instruction prior to the candidate's baptism, and describes the process of baptism by immersion.<sup>46</sup> The primary change in each publication is simply the updated baptismal vows and a few minor alterations in wording.

The 13 articles of the most recent rendition are methodically organized. Articles 1 through 8 are centered upon doctrine and theology. Articles 9 and 10 are more practically oriented. Articles 11 through 13 are focused upon commitment—to beliefs, baptism, and the local church. These groupings build upon each other, belief leading to practical action which in turn leads to determined commitment, finally finishing with the question “do you desire membership?” This systematized progression demonstrates a smooth flow not seen in the earlier renditions of baptismal vows.

While most of the ideas remained the same, and the wording often is identical, this amendment to the 1951 baptismal vows did expand and adjust some concepts previously stated. For example, article 2 points to Christ as *the* atoning sacrifice, a small but notable difference from 1951's article 2 which referred to Christ's death as *an* atoning sacrifice. Article 7 of 1951, which discusses living healthfully and avoiding tobacco and alcohol, was expanded in article 10 of 1980 to include the use, manufacture, sale, and trafficking of these substances plus narcotics and other drugs. This change demonstrates making adjustments to fit the needs and issues of the current culture. Several adjustments were also made to the final article. Rather than stating that “the Seventh-day Adventist Church constitutes the remnant church,” article 13 in the 1980 list of vows simply states that “the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the remnant church,” noting specifically that it is “the remnant church of Bible

prophecy."<sup>47</sup> The 1980 amendment also includes the idea that "people of every nation, race, and language are invited and accepted into its fellowship." This addition creates a greater feel of inclusion surrounding church membership.

While many of the statements within these baptismal vows could be applied to any protestant Christian denomination (i.e. the Bible as the inspired Word of God; Jesus' death, resurrection, and soon coming; and God's law), there are four distinctive Seventh-day Adventist teachings mentioned: Jesus as Intercessor in the heavenly sanctuary (#4), the Sabbath (#6), the remnant church (#13), and the gift of prophecy (#8).

#### Baptismal Commitment, 2000

In the 2000 edition of the church manual, a new component was added to the section on baptism.<sup>48</sup> Following the baptismal vows, which are worded so as to ask the candidate a question, there is a baptismal commitment, which is worded in the affirmative. The baptismal commitment states each of the articles as the candidate would say them. For example, the first article of the vow asks, "Do you believe there is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three coeternal Persons?" Whereas the first article of the commitment states, "I believe there is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three coeternal Persons."

Perhaps this addition was inserted due to a felt need to move the new believer from a mere intellectual ascent to a heartfelt commitment. Offering a commitment for believers to claim may help them own personal beliefs and even move them into action.<sup>49</sup>

#### Alternative Vows, 2005

On July 7, 2005 at the fifty-eighth General Conference Session, baptismal vows were once again brought to a vote.<sup>50</sup> This time, there were no additions or subtractions—instead an alternate vow was suggested. While the 13 articles of the previous baptismal vow remained untouched, three articles were proposed for the new alternate vow:

1. Do you accept Jesus Christ as your personal Savior and Lord, and do you desire to live your life in a saving relationship with Him?
2. Do you accept the teachings of the Bible as expressed in the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and do you pledge by God's grace to live your life in harmony with these teachings?
3. Do you desire to be baptized as a public expression of your belief in Jesus Christ, to be accepted into the fellowship of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and to support the Church and its mission as a faithful steward by your personal influence, tithes and offering, and a life of service?

The alternate vow was originally proposed by the South Pacific Division. These pastors were desiring the opportunity to use a less specific vow on occasions when non-Seventh-day Adventists would be present at a baptism.<sup>51</sup> In such instances, a more concise commitment could be more understandable to non-member observers. Delegates also thought this vow would be useful when baptizing youth for a similar reason of understandability.<sup>52</sup>

However, there were some who were concerned that the new vow did not give full representation of the church's beliefs and that all aspects of the Adventist Church should be evident in any commitment statement from a new believer. Others, such as Dr. Brian Bull, feared that using the phrase "as expressed in the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs" might be encroaching on turning the Fundamental Beliefs into a creed. Similarly, the alternative baptismal vow is not clear on whether the phrase "these teachings" by which believers are expected to live refers to the teachings of the Bible or to the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This is an unfortunate blur that opens the alternative vow to the charge of "creedalism."

Understandably, there was much debate among the delegates whether such an alternate vow should be made available. But many echoed the sentiment of North American Division's Roscoe Howard when he stated that, "those who don't like it don't have to use it."<sup>53</sup> Delegates expressed their appreciation for a new option to be used at their discretion when a shorter vow would be more appropriate. Ultimately, the alternate vow was passed, giving pastors greater autonomy by allowing them to use personal judgment when selecting which vow to use.<sup>54</sup>

## Observations

Upon the examination of the development of baptismal vows, several observations rise to the surface.

First, the changes made to vows throughout the years help to demonstrate the church's anti-creedal stance. Since its inception, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has espoused a belief in present truth and steered away from anything that seemed creed-like out of a desire to make sure the Bible was given supremacy in all instruction. The fact that there have been many iterations of baptismal vows shows this commitment to following Scripture more and more closely as more revelation is given.

Second, the fact that these vows have been a dynamic, often-changing list of statements of commitment shows the efforts of church leaders to create a vow that best expresses the faith in the time and culture of the day. Language and emphasis are changed, even if slightly, in each edition to best fill the felt needs of the day.

Third, from the beginning, the church has struggled to determine just how to word baptismal vows in addition to determining what ideas should be included in the vows. Small changes in wording can be seen: for example, changing the final article to say that the "Seventh-day Adventist church *is* the remnant church," rather than the "Seventh-day Adventist church *constitutes* the remnant church."<sup>55</sup> In terms of content, earlier editions included

the investigative judgment, however later editions did not. Meanwhile the Spirit of Prophecy came and went and returned, sometimes with Ellen G. White being mentioned and sometimes not. These content changes seem to indicate an ongoing discussion of what truly should be a test of fellowship for members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as well as the best way to articulate these necessary concepts.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

Although the Seventh-day Adventist Church went for nearly 70 years without any official vows until 1932, possibly due to a fear of creeds, there still was a need for believers to express their love for Jesus and to affirm that they believed in the doctrines of the church. Ellen G. White and the other church pioneers often referenced vows and their importance, focusing on the covenantal commitment to the Lord and the new birth He provides.

Through the years baptismal vows have gone through many corrections and changes relating to wording, doctrine, and emphasis. This is significant because it demonstrates the growth of the church. As the Seventh-day Adventist Church has developed and dealt with different questions, oppositions, and needs around the world, it has adjusted, ever trying to be the church called by Christ. The changes we can see that have been made to baptismal vows reflect this development of the Adventist Church as a whole, all the while demonstrating the principles that have been most important to the church through time.

However, the purpose of any such vow has always been to answer the stirred heart of the new believer when he or she asks, "what shall I do?" Ultimately, baptismal vows will lead to action. After delivering his sermon on the day of Pentecost, Peter concluded by appealing to his hearers to accept Christ as Lord. "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?' Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 2:37-38). Our confession of faith naturally leads to action, and that is what baptismal vows are all about: creating a living covenant with God.

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## NOTES

1. *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2016), 45. Retrieved from [https://www.adventist.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/seventh-day-adventist-church-manual\\_2015\\_updated.pdf](https://www.adventist.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/seventh-day-adventist-church-manual_2015_updated.pdf).
2. All Scripture can be found in the NKJV.
3. See Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16; John 3:3-7; Acts 2:38-39; Acts 8:35-38; Acts 22:12-16; Romans 6:1-4; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Galatians 3:24-27; Ephesians 5:25-27; Colossians 2:11-15; Titus 3:4-7; and 1 Peter 3:18-22.
4. Tertullian, *De Corona*, chapter 3. Retrieved from [http://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf03/anf03-10.htm#P1035\\_422175](http://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf03/anf03-10.htm#P1035_422175).
5. "Prophetic Symbols," *Advent Herald, and Signs of the Times Reporter*, August 28, 1844, 30.
6. "Violation of Vows," *ARH*, January 10, 1856, 50.
7. David Trim, email to Joseph Kidder, December 20, 2020.
8. Ellen G. White, "Words of Encouragement," *ARH*, May 26, 1904, 9.
9. Ellen G. White, "Lights in the World," *ARH*, February 18, 1904, 8.
10. See Appendix H in the Related Content section on the ESDA website for a greater sampling of Ellen G. White's references to baptismal vows.
11. James White, "Western Tour," *ARH*, June 28, 1870, 13.
12. Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White, Vol. 3: The Lonely Years, 1876-1891* (Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald, 1984), 38.
13. Ellen G. White, Letter to W. C. White and Mary K. White, May 28, 1876, Letter 30, 1876. Retrieved from <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/14053.3789001#3789001>.
14. [Uriah Smith], *A Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by the Seventh-day Adventists* (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Pub. Assn., 1872), 3.
15. See James White, "Kansas Camp-Meeting," *ARH*, June 8, 1876, 180; James White, "Baptism," *Signs of the Times*, January 17, 1878, 20; James White, "God is Good," *Signs of the Times*, July 25, 1878, 220; Ellen G. White, "Home Discipline," *ARH*, June 13, 1882, 369.

16. S. E. Jackson, "An Old Time Meeting," *Northern Union Reaper*, October 8, 1907, 4.
17. B. E. Connerly, "The Administration of the Ordinances," *ARH*, March 7, 1912, 4.
18. The Seventh-day Adventist Church was organized on May 21, 1863, 57 years prior to R.A. Underwood's vows. See LeRoy E. Froom, *Movement of Destiny* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1971), 169.
19. Some websites and books give reference to a list of vows from 1874 (see Russell R. Standish and Colin D. Standish, *The 28 Fundamentals: Apostasy Proclaimed in Silence* [Victoria, Australia: Highwood Books, 2005], 100; Colin D. Standish and Russell R. Standish, *Organizational Structure & Apostasy* [Rapidan, VA: Hartland Publications, 2000], 164-167 (note that this same list is dated for 1946 in this book, however the list does not match the church manual list of 1942 either); Tyrone Keels, "7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventist Baptismal Vows Compared for the Years -1874-1932-2000." Retrieved from <http://www.issues-of-life.com/Baptismal%20Vows.pdf>). In our research using the Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research database ([www.adventistarchives.org](http://www.adventistarchives.org)), we were unable to find any mention of baptismal vows produced in 1874. Baptismal vows within the Adventist Church have typically occurred after a development in fundamental beliefs. Because the vows listed make references that do not match the Fundamental Principles declared in 1872 (for example, mentioning drugs and narcotics, the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, and tithing, none of which are mentioned in 1872), it seems unlikely that this list of vows from 1874 is original. In addition, the language used appears incongruent with the language of the 1870's. Furthermore, Dr. Jerry Moon, a Seventh-day Adventist historian and professor of Seventh-day Adventist history, and Dr. David Trim, the director of Archives, Statistics, and Research at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, two well-respected researchers, were both consulted in this project. Neither were able to find any reference to an original source for an 1874 rendition of baptismal vows (Dr. Jerry Moon, September 4-5, 2019; Dr. David Trim, September 7, 2019). However, through their assistance, one word for word source of this list was found, but it was published in 1939 by evangelist John Lewis Shuler. In his book, there is no reference made connecting what he calls "Guiding Principles for Adherence to God's Last-Day Message" to any mention of a list of vows created in 1874. Rather, his list seems to simply be a list of vows that he personally used in his evangelistic meetings. (see John Lewis Shuler, *Public Evangelism: Its Approach and Problems* [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1939], 246-247). This list does not match any officially voted upon list published by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.
20. R. A. Underwood was a prominent leader of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, serving as a conference president and district superintendent in many different locations across North America during the course of his ministry. At the time he wrote the discussed article, he was finishing 35 years as a member of the General Conference Committee. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (1976), s.v. "Millerite Movement."
21. R. A. Underwood, "Examination of Candidates for Baptism and Church Membership," *Church Officers' Gazette*, March 1, 1920, 1-2.
22. *Ibid.*, 1.
23. Some form of commitment statement prior to joining church membership was common at that time among many churches. The Methodist Church has a specific process of preparation, ceremony, covenant, and reception for the candidate's baptism. (See *The Book of Discipline and Book of Resolutions*, digital [The United Methodist Publishing House, 2009]) Since many early Adventists had Methodist backgrounds, it is

possible that this influenced the development of the initial baptismal vows within the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

24. This emphasis upon prayer and spiritual growth was not so clearly expressed again until the addition of the most recent belief, "Growing in Christ," to the Fundamental Beliefs in 2005.
25. G. A. Roberts, "The Baptismal Class Work a Spiritual Agency in Our Educational Work," *Home and School: A Journal of Christian Education*, August 1926, 23
26. Years later, it was determined that such instruction could also be given by an ordained elder. *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2005), 32. Retrieved from: <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Resources/ChurchManuals/CM2005.pdf>
27. Reprinted in the church manuals of 1934, 1938, and 1940. See *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* ([Washington, D.C.]: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1934), 75-76. Retrieved from: <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Resources/ChurchManuals/CM1934.pdf>; *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* ([Washington, D.C.]: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1938), 75-76. Retrieved from: <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Resources/ChurchManuals/CM1938.pdf>; *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* ([Washington, D.C.]: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1940), 75-76. Retrieved from: <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Resources/ChurchManuals/CM1940.pdf>.
28. *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* ([Washington, DC]: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1932), 71-87. Retrieved from: <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Resources/ChurchManuals/CM1932.pdf>.
29. *Ibid.*, 75.
30. For further reference on Ellen White's mention in baptismal vows as well as arguments for and against her inclusion, see Roger W. Coon, "Belief in Ellen G. White as a Prophet: Should It Be Made a Test of SDA 'Fellowship?'" (rev. lecture outline, May 29, 1996). Retrieved from [https://www.andrews.edu/~jmoon/Documents/GSEM\\_534/Class\\_outline/13.pdf](https://www.andrews.edu/~jmoon/Documents/GSEM_534/Class_outline/13.pdf).
31. J. N. Andrews, "Our Use of the Visions of Sr. White," *ARH*, February 15, 1870, 65; George I. Butler, "Visions and Prophecy: Have They Been Manifested Among Seventh-day Adventists? [No. 5]," *ARH*, June 9, 1874, 202; Uriah Smith, "An Explanation," *ARH*, Supplement, August 14, 1883, 10; Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 9 vols. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 5:668, 669; A. G. Daniells to F. E. Dufty, [c. 1920], W. C. White Correspondence File, Ellen G. White Estate, Silver Spring, MD.
32. *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (1932), 86.
33. *Ibid.*, 74.
34. *Ibid.*, 75.
35. Shuler, *Public Evangelism*, 246-247.

36. L. C. Evans, "Questions for Baptismal Candidates," *Ministry*, May 1939), 7-8.
37. Minutes of the Meetings of the General Conference Committee (June 8-30, 1941), 15.
38. W. H. Branson, "Uniform Baptismal Standards Adopted," *Ministry*, February 1942, 5-7.
39. Autumn Council of the General Conference Committee (October 21-29, 1941), 152-158.
40. See Shuler, *Public Evangelism*; Evans, "Questions for Baptismal Candidates," 7.
41. Oliver Montgomery, "Adherence to Church Standards," *Ministry*, March 1942, 5, 6.
42. *Ibid.*, 6.
43. In our research, we spot-checked several of the baptismal vows from church manuals between 1951 and 1981, and we did not find any changes.
44. G. R. Thompson, D. A. Roth, and J. W. Bothe, "Fifth Business Meeting: Fifty-third General Conference Session, April 20, 1980, 3:15 PM," *ARH*, April 22, 1980, 22-24.
45. Minutes of the Meeting: General Conference Committee (October 5, 1979), 343-347.
46. *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (1932), 71-87; *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, rev. ed. ([Washington, D.C.]: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1981), 56-63. Retrieved from: <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Resources/ChurchManuals/CM1981.pdf>.
47. The word "constitutes" created some confusion, as can be seen in this article by A. S. Jorgensen in 1978: A. S. Jorgensen, "Is the Baptism Vow in Need of Revision? One of the...Questions People Ask Me," *Australasian Record*, January 30, 1978, 11. The change of wording in this article helped clarify the idea conveyed.
48. *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2000), 33-34. Retrieved from: <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Resources/ChurchManuals/CM2000.pdf>.
49. For more details on making baptismal vows more heartfelt and action-oriented, see Chris Blake, "Adding to the Baptismal Vows," *Record*, July 22, 2000, 12.
50. "Thirteenth Business Meeting: 58th General Conference Session, July 7, 2005, 2:00 PM," *ARH*, July 7, 2005. Retrieved from <https://www.adventistreview.org/archives/2005bulletin/bulletin8-actions2.html>.
51. *Ibid.*

52. Victor Hulbert, "Delegates Debate Baptismal Vows," *Adventist News Network*, July 7, 2005. Retrieved from <https://news.adventist.org/en/all-news/news/go/2005-07-07/delegates-debate-baptismal-vows/>.
53. "Thirteenth Business Meeting: 58th General Conference Session."
54. We have discovered in talking with many pastors within and outside of the United States, I have noticed that there is a wide variety of the practice of baptismal vows—from reading the entire list in the baptism ceremony, to not reading the list at all, to a modification of the list, to simply reading it in the home.
55. Jorgensen, "Is the Baptism Vow in Need of Revision?," 11.
56. See Coon.

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