

# An Emerging Genre: Adventist Denominational Statements and Their Theological Implications

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## Zusammenfassung

Eine neue Gattung theologischer Texte wird gewöhnlich verwendet, wenn die Notwendigkeit für sie gegeben ist. Dieser Artikel beleuchtet solch eine Gattung: offizielle Erklärungen der Siebenten-Tags-Adventisten. Beschrieben und diskutiert werden ihr Hintergrund, ihre Funktion und Rezeption sowie unterschiedliche Verständnisse der Bedeutung dieser Texte. Zuletzt werden Schlussfolgerungen für die Hermeneutik dieser Erklärungen und ihre Bedeutung für die adventistische Theologie gezogen: Sie sind ein Baustein der sich entwickelnden adventistischen Ethik, sie zeigen die Notwendigkeit einer Adiaphoralehre auf und sie können als Ausdruck einer Theologie der Kultur angesehen werden.

The production of faith-related texts is a process that can lead to surprising outcomes. Of course, it mostly entails the use of well-known products such as exegetical treatises, dogmatic expositions, homilies, prayers, devotional pieces, or tracts. Sometimes, however, a new type of text is invented – the ancient Christian creeds are an important case in point. When this happens, there is usually a reason that prompts this development; at the same time, the new texts may develop dynamics of their own, which are not fully predictable. The emergence of such a new genre is therefore worth discussing at some length.

This article deals with official statements released by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, a type of text which is new in the context of this denomination. Starting in the late 1970s, the leadership of this church has been increasingly concerned with various ethical and theological issues on which it formulated declarations.<sup>1</sup> A detailed analysis of many of the statements could be written; however, this article deals with the body of documents as a whole and discusses what the emergence of the statements as a genre implies. This will be done in three steps: (1) making observations regarding background and character of these statements, (2) reflecting on their function and reception, and (3) discussing their theological implications.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Already in 1977-1979, two documents – one on creation and the other one on inspiration and revelation – were drafted and circulated. This led to a substantial debate on the necessity and possible problematic uses of such texts (Wright 1977). Finally the documents were published as “study documents” (“Study Documents” 1980).

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Kai Mester and Rolf Pöhler for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

## 1. Nature and Background

The observations in this first section are made to help the reader understand the nature of these statements, their content, history and pre-history, and the way they are being produced. Fortunately, the statements are easily available; the communication department of the denomination’s General Conference has collected them on its website.<sup>3</sup> New items are added as soon as they are voted, and the print edition *Statements, Guidelines and Other Documents* is updated every few years and is now in its fourth printing.

As the title of the book says, both the printed collection and the website make a distinction between three types of documents. This distinction is not entirely clear in some cases, for some of the statements and “other documents” contain explicit or at times implicit guidelines – e. g., the statement “Theological and Academic Freedom and Accountability” or the document “Declaration of the Seventh-day Adventist Church on Church-State Relations.” Most of the “guidelines,” in turn, reveal authentic theological deliberation and therefore constitute much more than a collection of rules and should be viewed as public declarations as much as the “statements.” Thus, these three categories may be considered as one body of texts, and in the following discussion “statements” refers to all of them.

The *content* varies, but the 83 items counted on the website in mid-2006 may be divided into three groups – some dealing with theology, others concerned with the concrete shape and values of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as an organization, and the bulk of the statements on ethical matters. Furthermore, thirteen distinct themes may be identified:

### A. Theology

- (1) *General Theological Matters*: Creation (two documents), Engaging in Global Mission, Holy Bible, Methods of Bible Study, Proselytism, Scriptures, Spiritual Renewal, Theological and Academic Freedom and Accountability
- (2) *Adventist Theological Matters*: Ecumenical Movement, How Seventh-day Adventists View Roman Catholicism, Relationships with Other Christian Churches, Sabbath Observance, Spirit of Prophecy (two documents), Year 2000

### B. The Seventh-day Adventist Church Organization

- (3) *General Statements*: Mission Statement, Values Statement, Quality of Life: On Being Transformed in Christ, Total Commitment to God
- (4) *Church Operations*: Guidelines for Employer and Employee Relationships, Trademark Guidelines, Use of Tithe, Ethical Foundations for the General

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<sup>3</sup> See “Official Statements” 2006 ([www.adventist.org/beliefs/statements](http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/statements)) and the “Guidelines” and “Other Documents” links on the same site.

### C. Ethics

(5) *Bioethics/Life Ethics*: Abortion, Birth Control, Care for the Dying, Christian Principles for Genetic Interventions, Considerations on Assisted Human Reproduction, Gene Therapy, Human Cloning

(6) *Ecology*: Caring for Creation, Climate Change, Environment, Stewardship of the Environment

(7) *Family Ethics*: Abuse and Family Violence, Children – Well-being and Value, Family, Family Violence, Home and Family, Marriage

(8) *Health*: AIDS (three documents), Chemical Use, Abuse, and Dependency, Sexually Transmitted Diseases, Drugs, Health-Care Institutions, Smoking and Ethics, Smoking and Tobacco

(9) *Human Rights*: Female Genital Mutilation, Human Relations, Human Rights, Homelessness and Poverty, Literacy, Racism, Respect for All People, Tolerance, Women's Issues

(10) *Peace and Politics*: Assault Weapons, Church-State Relations, Crisis in Kosovo, London Bombing, Peace (two documents), Peace Message to All People of Good Will, The Role of the Ten Commandments in Public Life

(11) *Religious Liberty*: Religious Extremism – A Danger to Religious Liberty, Religious Freedom, Religious Minorities and Religious Freedom

(12) *Sexual Ethics*: Homosexuality, Pornography, Same Sex Unions, Sexual Abuse, Sexual Behavior, Sexual Harassment

(13) *Miscellaneous*: Competition, Gambling, Music, Temperance Principles and Acceptance of Donations

Apart from indicating the particular topics addressed in the statements, this overview makes visible the *overall balance of themes*. Some theological issues and some documents dealing with the identity and function of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as an organization stand alongside affirmations in the field of individual ethics and a large number of statements from the realm of social ethics and public concern. Thus, issues from the whole range of problems arising from human living are being addressed.

*How are the statements produced?* Almost all of them are accompanied by a note regarding their immediate origin, date, and the responsible committee. In several cases a General Conference president published a statement after consulting with regional (world division) church presidents, but most of the documents were voted by the denominational General Conference Executive Committee or its reduced version, the Administrative Committee. Only a few stem directly from a

particular commission or department. In any case, the statements can be counted as fairly representative of the church's thought leaders worldwide.

The most important occasion for the voting and release of statements were the quinquennial General Conference sessions; almost half of the present documents come from these meetings. Only a single statement in the collection dates back to 1980, and there is one much older text on "Relationships with Other Christian Churches," which originated in the 1920s. Therefore, when five such documents were issued in 1985, this was the real beginning of what is now a genre of its own.

It should be noted, however, that there was a tradition of voting statements on different topics even before 1980, only that generally they were not published in easily accessible places and passed into oblivion as years went by. The one exception is the declaration on "Relationships with Other Christian Churches," presumably because of its inclusion in the *General Conference Working Policy*. Yet the overwhelming majority of the earlier statements voted by Adventist committees did not survive their generation, in spite of their interesting content.

Of course, not all such earlier statements can be listed here; only a few will be mentioned to show the themes that were addressed. They are all found in the minutes of the General Conference.<sup>4</sup> Among the most famous examples are resolutions made between 1865 and 1868 on "Voting," "Our Views of War," "Our Duty to the Government," "War," and military service (they are all reproduced in Morgan 2005, 95–96). In the American Civil War and immediately after the establishment of the denomination in 1863, this was a burning issue that obviously had to be dealt with in some way.

Other statements include periodic texts on Sabbath observance (see, e.g., the 1935, 1940, and 1960 GC Minutes) and statements on polygamous marriages (1930 and 1941; for an excellent discussion, see Maberly 1975). The 1960s and 1970s brought forth a "Statement of Ethics and Operating Principles for Seventh-day Adventist Hospitals" (1960), a statement addressing race issues entitled "Human Relations in the Seventh-day Adventist Church" (1961), a declaration on "Church-State Relationships in the United States" (1965), "Guidelines toward an S. D. A. Philosophy of Music" (1972),<sup>5</sup> and the statement "Seventh-day Adventist Concepts of Psychology" (1975).

What is clear is that some of the earlier statements found in the denomination's history directly arose from specific problems in missionary operations and in the relation with the society. Others aimed at clarifying issues of everyday life, and some were needed for church operations in a given context. Different from the

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<sup>4</sup> The minutes of the General Conference (GC) of Seventh-day Adventists are stored in the GC Archives, Silver Spring, USA. All minutes until 2000 are also available online at <http://www.adventistarchives.org/DocArchives.asp>.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the 2004 statement "A Seventh-day Adventist Philosophy of Music – Guidelines"; see *Statements 2005*, 147–150.

recent collection of statements, issues of public concern were almost absent.<sup>6</sup> Of course, in some areas such as bioethics or ecology, there was no public discussion until about one generation ago. However, the diversification found in the post-1980 statements is evidently a new development.

Moreover, the earlier statements had two characteristics that distinguish them from later ones: (1) They were mainly designed for internal use and did not primarily serve to present views to a public. (2) Accordingly, they mostly belonged to the category of “guidelines” for a particular group of church employees, for members or in church issues. In these two respects, the present collection constitutes a new genre: Many of the post-1980 statements declare positions but also discuss views; they often provide principles derived from biblical texts, but do not always present the clear-cut rules found in earlier statements. In other words, the post-1980 statements mostly speak about attitudes and general principle, portray a range of options for Seventh-day Adventist Christians, but often leave final decisions regarding debated matters to the individual.

## 2. Function and Reception

With this last observation, the question arises which function the statements have – i. e., which audience they address, what role they play in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and what their existence implies for this denomination. Do they merely reveal a status quo, do they possibly cement it, or will they pass into oblivion as many of the pre-1980 documents did? Are they taken note of, and do they possibly develop dynamics of their own?

Due to the large variety of topics, it is obvious that the intended audiences are also quite diverse. The introduction to the book edition says, “enquiries come from Seventh-day Adventist believers themselves, church pastors and from the general public or media” regarding what the denomination says about a particular topic (*Statements* 2005, iii). Thus, the statements are supposed to be heard by all those who are interested in the issues addressed, i. e. “varied publics” (*Statements* 2000, iv).

It is a bit surprising that the 2005 edition of the *Statements* book changes this declaration of intent to another wording: “In all, the documents were written with a particular church public in mind” (*Statements* 2005, iii). There is no explanation whether they are therefore primarily intended for Adventists themselves or other Christians but not the non-Christian public. Presumably, the Adventist Church is meant here, which would mean that the editors perceive their use to be primarily inside the denomination, like in the period before 1980. This, however, is somewhat at odds both with the “varied publics” mentioned in the earlier edition and

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<sup>6</sup> A similar observation is made by Plantak 1998 regarding the general relationship of Adventism with the public and the denomination’s dealing with matters of social ethics.

with the initial idea behind the publication – that it would serve as a tool for Adventist communication professionals in their media contacts (ibid.). At any rate, the statements are published and, therefore, are available to everyone; after all, “As the church continues to grow and make an influence, its role in society will require that its views and what it holds to be true becomes known” (ibid., iv). This line of thought clearly mirrors the reality of a 15-million-member denomination. At the same time, it intimates that it is mandatory to reflect on the actual role the statements have in expressing Adventist thinking both in the context of the societies where the denomination operates and inside the denomination.

When considering the function of the statements in the church which produced them, the time in which they originated is revealing. Probably it is more than a coincidence that the General Conference session after 1980 brought the beginning of the first wave of statements. In 1980, the Twenty-Seven Fundamental Beliefs had been voted, the first elaborate statement of faith that a Seventh-day Adventist General Conference session ever discussed. The Fundamental Beliefs were not meant as a creedal statement but emphasized that “Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed.” Still, they implied that the denomination had come to a stage where it was felt that a written consensus on doctrinal matters was needed.<sup>7</sup>

This consensus on the one hand and the abundance of denominational literature on the other left a gap which the statements aim at filling to some extent. The few other official texts that this church has on a global level – the *General Conference Working Policy* and the *Church Manual* – were not the right forum for discussions of complicated ethical matters or declarations of positions on diverse public concerns. Likewise, leaving such matters entirely in the hands of individual authors seemed inappropriate in an organization with five million members in the mid-1980s. Perhaps somewhat unintentionally a second type of theological texts was thus created, a level of pronouncements which do not have the binding force of working policies or the *Church Manual* but which are still official in the sense that leading committees of the denomination voted or endorsed them.

Thus, several explanatory lines for this emergence of a genre should be considered.

(1) A growing organization evidently needs growing means and channels to express itself; therefore, the production of denominational statements may simply

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<sup>7</sup> The introduction to the *Statements* book refers to the Adventist heritage of a “non-creedal approach” and mentions that a set of “fundamental beliefs” were formulated in the 1930s. This statement, however, did not have the weight of the 1980 Fundamental Beliefs because it had been drafted by a three-member commission, had never been discussed in detail by the General Conference, and was initially mainly meant for a self-portrayal to governments in missionary contexts. Thus, the beliefs formulated by a large group of theologians and modified by representatives from all over the world in a General Conference session in 1980 may well be counted as the first truly representative statement of Adventist beliefs.

be assessed as a *by-product* in the expansion of a successful institutional machinery. However, other metaphors probably describe the process better.

(2) The statements may also be viewed as a *sign of maturation*. Seventh-day Adventists have become a community that cannot keep silent in view of public and theological issues which it encounters, and responding verbally is the very least that a denomination is able to do. Other Christian churches do the same,<sup>8</sup> and it would be surprising if Seventh-day Adventists with their global outlook and presence did not address matters which are of interest to all humans.

(3) Especially in the context of a diversifying global church, one function of the statements is to *create some degree of unity* in the midst of an ever increasing variety of Adventisms (cf. Johnsson 1995). While it is evident that a worldwide denomination cannot be uniform, guidelines and documents on some matters at the very least point towards common goals and ideals.

(4) Some statements imply that Adventists agree to disagree on some points, leaving specific options to the individual and outlining only theological principles and possible applications. This indicates that the documents must also be taken as a *sign of differentiation* in the denomination. Not only do the themes range from theology to church operations and from individual to social and political ethics. The new genre also allows for this large variety of issues to be addressed in different ways: from tentative or reflective documents on the one side to outright operational guidelines on the other.

Another development also points into this direction of statements as a sign of differentiation. On the one hand, the General Conference statements were translated into several languages, which indicates that the need to have such texts is felt in many places.<sup>9</sup> However, statements produced by committees of the worldwide denomination were also paralleled by similar texts originating from several regional or national church bodies, especially during the last decade.<sup>10</sup> With the

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<sup>8</sup> Representative collections of several worldwide denominational bodies may be easily found in the internet. For Anglicans, a complete set of the resolutions at the Lambeth Conferences may be found at [www.lambethconference.org/resolutions](http://www.lambethconference.org/resolutions); the Church of the Brethren has a listing of declarations made from 1946 onwards at [www.brethren.org/ac/ac\\_statements](http://www.brethren.org/ac/ac_statements); a large number of Roman Catholic documents may be found through the Vatican's website [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va) or, in a German version, at [www.dbk.de/schriften/verlautbarungen](http://www.dbk.de/schriften/verlautbarungen). Two very interesting collections have also been produced by the Evangelical Church in Germany (see "Denkschriften" 2006 and "EKD-Texte" 2006). It should be noted that these texts vary in length and that most of the Adventist statements are rather short in comparison with, for instance, many of the Catholic and German Evangelical ones.

<sup>9</sup> Some examples: French: "Position de l'Eglise adventiste" 2006; German: *Erklärungen* 1998 and 2002; Italian: "Documenti Ufficiali" 2006; Spanish: "Comunicados Oficiales" 2006.

<sup>10</sup> To cite a few examples, Australian Adventists voted a declaration on Labor Unions in 2004 ("Seventh-day Adventists and Trade Unions" 2003), a text that shed new light on an old denominational and public issue. In the Euro-Africa Division, a document on "Seventh-day Adventists and

world church engaging in debates on public issues and making statements on them, it is not surprising that church leaders in some areas of the world started doing the same, at times in a more unequivocal manner or on issues where a global consensus is hard to reach.<sup>11</sup>

Additional light is shed on the function of the statements by the way in which they have been received by various audiences. As with the pre-1980 statements, no complete account can be given here, and a reasonable treatment of their *Wirkungsgeschichte* may only be attempted after several decades. Therefore, the following observations should be understood as preliminary reflections which seek to raise the right questions rather than give definite answers. However, these questions do elucidate the possible functions of the statements genre, and the following four categories are derived from some exemplary cases.<sup>12</sup>

#### *(1) Supplement to Doctrinal Statements*

One way in which the corpus of statements may be understood is a subsidiary to those texts which form the doctrinal consensus of the denomination. Being official documents next in “rank,” they may consequently be viewed as semi-doctrinal. An example for this perspective is the manner in which the constitution of the Adventist Theological Society uses the 1986 document “Methods of Bible Study” (*Statements* 2005, 209–218). There it is stated that this society “accepts the Bible as the foundational authority in matters of faith and life and upholds Christ as the only Savior of the world” and “affirms the ‘Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’ as its theological position.” At the same time, this constitution states that the society “adheres to the ‘Methods of Bible Study’ document as voted by the General Conference Executive Committee … in 1986 … as its hermeneutical position” (Adventist Theological Society 2006). This document, which rejects any use of historical-critical methodology, is therefore given an important status in the self-definition of this scholarly association, a status which is only second to the denominational statement of beliefs.

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the Efforts Regarding the Unity of Christians” was published in 1991 (*Erklärungen* 1998, 61–63). Three most interesting texts from the recent past are the German-Austrian confession of guilt (“Declaration of the SDA Church in Germany and Austria” 2005), the “Nairobi Declaration” on HIV/AIDS by church representatives in Eastern Africa (East-Central Africa Division 2003) and the statement “Violence and Non-Violence” by the Franco-Belgian Union in 2006.

<sup>11</sup> The Australian statement on Labor Unions, for instance, departs from the historic Adventist stand of rejecting Union membership in view of societal changes that have taken place in the past generations. The Franco-Belgian statement on violence and non-violence, in contrast, calls Adventists back to the historic stand of abstaining from all military service. The non-combatant stand was the most prominent Adventist concept until the early 1960s, but in 1972, the Annual Council voted to leave decisions regarding military service to the individual. On the whole issue, see Lawson 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Apparently the statements have mainly been read by academics and media professionals so far. The actual reception of the statements among the different intended audiences would justify an empirical study of its own. This is beyond the scope of this article but would certainly yield important insights.

This indicates a “high view” of the statement concerned with the implication that at least some statements form a supplement to the “Fundamental Beliefs.” Such an approach to the statements raises the question how much debate is possible and necessary once a statement has been voted and published.

(2) *Opportunity for Discussion*

It is therefore not surprising that a rather critical approach to the statements is found on the opposite side of the denominational spectrum. It occurs especially in publications of other Adventist academics, notably in the journals *Spectrum* and *Adventist Today*. Some texts such as those on “Birth Control” and “Christian Principles of Genetic Intervention” (*Statements* 2005, 6–9; 170–177) were received positively because of their differentiated character; others, e. g. those on abortion, homosexuality, music, and war were viewed more critically (see, e. g., Fulton 2000; *Adventist Today* 1993).

What is clear in these journals is that such official documents are viewed as essentially being a discussion base. Thus, they are not assigned a special status that would lift them above the general denominational literature. This critical view raises the question whether there is any authority in such texts and if so, in which sense. At the same time, it points to the necessity of reflection on the basis and beyond the statements.

(3) *Consensus of a Spiritual Community*

A third perspective, which probably corresponds to that held by many of those who voted the statements, is that most of these documents demonstrate the consensus of Adventist thought regarding a particular aspect of life or faith. In this perspective, the degree of authority inherent in such texts is not the main issue; rather, the statements are considered as present expressions of a faith community. For instance, in Reinder Bruinsma’s monograph *Matters of Life and Death*, which deals with matters of life ethics, “Church Statements” correspond to one of the sources of ethics which he calls “the spiritual community of which we are a part” (2000, 21, 25–26).

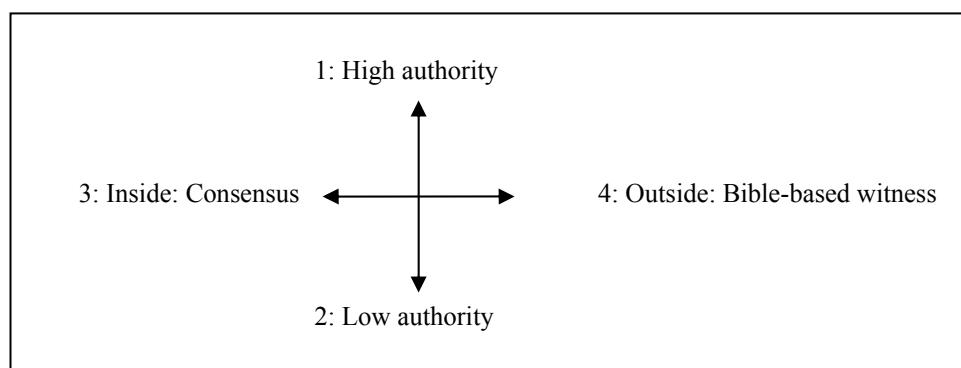
This implies that the statements indicate a present understanding on particular issues. While they do not constitute once-and-for-all pronouncements, they do have an important guiding function for the community whose leaders designed them. At the same time, one must ask whether this perspective does justice to the fact that many of the statements were written by experts and published for the context of Euro-American societies. Moreover, it is questionable whether they should really be viewed as a broad consensus in every case. In many parts of Africa, for instance, the very balanced statement on family planning (“Birth Control”) does not reflect the majority view in the church. At the very least, however, the statements do reflect what Adventist church leaders commonly hold.

#### (4) *Bible-Based Witness*

A fourth type of reception is the way in which non-Adventists deal with the statements. Evidently non-Adventists opinions regarding these texts depend on the actual statement and differ widely. Moreover, apparently few non-Adventists have engaged in an in-depth discussion of Adventist documents of this kind. Therefore, the only extensive treatment of an Adventist statement that has been found will be discussed here as an example.

A recent dissertation on euthanasia and ecumenical ethics (Schardien 2005) probably illustrates well the general impression that Adventist denominational statements evoke among other Christians. This study devotes an entire chapter to free church statements on this theme (139–170). Among them, the perceptive discussion of the Adventist document “Statement on Consensus on Care for the Dying” (*Statements* 2005, 23–26) is given a prominent place (142–157). Schardien’s findings are instructive. She affirms that the statement is rather unique with regard to its strong biblical profile (155); “44 Bible references on three pages” (148) are indeed impressive. On a more critical note, Schardien asks whether the choice of references and the way they are made to fit ready-made solutions are always valid; at the same time, “crypto-normative claims” are relativized through the fact that the statement contains no explicit condemnations of those whose views or practices differ. Altogether the document with its strong biblical focus may be “read as ... an admonition not to hide ... the Christian identity in the dialogue of society on ethics” (157).

In other words, Adventist statements, like similar documents from other denominations, do constitute part of this church’s witness to society, and the way in which they are designed generally reveals the theological basis on which they grew: a strongly Bible-oriented faith.



The four types of reception demonstrate the issues that have to be considered when interpreting the statements. The *first* and *second* types of reception raise the question of authority from opposite ends. A comparison of the two would suggest that assigning some authority to the statements – authority of a hortatory, parental kind – is appropriate. The *third* and *fourth* type of perspectives on the statements – viewing them as some kind of a present consensus of a faith community and as a biblical witness – are complementary, for they represent insider and outsider perspectives. Since they are functional perspectives, they can serve well as a basis for the interpretation of the statements. It is therefore on the foundation of these two perspectives that following section is developed.

### 3. Theological Implications

#### (1) *The Importance of Denominational Statements for Theology*

Are denominational statements a dispensable component of doing theology in the contemporary world? In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, this question has not been answered in a theoretical debate but through the actions of voting and publishing such texts. Evidently, the Christian concern for the public realm was strong enough to set the machinery of document production in motion. After all, the Adventist concern for society is a tradition which the denomination inherited from its founders in the 19th century, even if peculiar themes dominated the denominational discourse for a long time (Plantak 1998). Still, the statements should be viewed as part of a tradition of social ethics rooted in 19th century Adventism, a tradition broadening in the context of a steadily expanding view of Adventist mission (Höschele 2004).

Although the place of the statements in Adventist theological literature is yet to be seen, one can clearly affirm their importance. Without them, the theological literature of the denomination would lack a crucial element. Both constituting a witness to society and a voice of clarification in the spiritual community to which they belong are genuine contributions to an ever-growing theological discourse.

#### (2) *Hermeneutics of the Statements*

Since the statements are now a part of Adventist theological reasoning, how should they be interpreted? What significance do they have if they constitute a contemporary consensus, but no dogma? And, if they lack a creedal character, what does their “confessional” nature imply? Evidently, the statements cannot be considered “binding” like the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour; they are essentially demonstrations of Adventist mainstream thinking and therefore constitute part of written “Adventist tradition.” However; tradition is dyn-

amic; this is why a thorough reflection on these statements must emphasize that such documents can never replace personal conscience.<sup>13</sup>

The emergence of an Adventist tradition is certainly inevitable; yet it must be stressed that this Christian body does not have encyclicals and dogmas. Even the “Fundamental Beliefs” and the denominational *Church Manual* do not constitute a formal creed and church law, respectively. Thus, the statements always have to be read as attempts to apply the ethos of biblical authors in the world of today. As mentioned before, some statements contain many biblical references. Others, however, do not refer to a single biblical text. This does not automatically mean that they are not based on the Bible, but the fact that both types of statements are at the very best a *norma normata* should never be forgotten.<sup>14</sup>

The following major points may therefore help in the interpretation of such texts:

(a) *One should recognize the descriptive nature* of the statements. First of all, they are explanations of what Adventists commonly hold. This means that they present such views as a witness but do not primarily aim at serving as a final normative declaration. After all, the documents do not present any exegetical details but demonstrate results of biblical interpretation. The process of interpretation, however, is an important exercise, which cannot always be reflected in the statements.

(b) *In several cases, the statements reaffirm* what has been an Adventist position for a long time – e. g., regarding religious liberty, family ethics, sexual ethics, and health matters. Care must be used in differentiating between such texts and others which speak about issues that are less established.

(c) *Statements are best regarded as “guarding rails”* rather than “turnpikes,” i. e., impenetrable barriers (Pöhler 1997). In an increasingly complex world, they constitute helpful tools for non-specialists in particular areas of life. Thus, the statements have a warning and guiding function, which also implies that they have a contextual character. Therefore, their relation to particular cultures and periods of writing must be recognized.<sup>15</sup>

(d) *Statements should lead to, rather than hinder, reflection.* On the basis of biblical insights, the statements should help form a believer’s conscience and enhance dynamic interaction with reality.

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<sup>13</sup> A helpful discussion about the relationship between institutional authority and a Christian’s personal ethical judgement is Laubach 2000.

<sup>14</sup> In this light, a possible discussion whether the “Fundamental Beliefs” represent a “higher level” of authority is misguided. Functionally, they may be different (for some of the statements deal with very specific issues or respond to events in the contemporary world), but theologically, they all belong to the body of denominational tradition. The very insistence of the preamble of the Adventist “Fundamental Beliefs” that “Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed” implies that in the Adventist thinking the decisive distinction is biblical/extrabiblical, not Fundamental Beliefs/other materials.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Weber 1969, 30: “Christian teaching, ... church teaching, is an activity of the church or something happening inside the church. For it is right here that the personal, historical, temporal, and concrete character is disclosed which belongs to the Christian faith.”

(e) *Prayer, biblical study, experience, and discussion may lead to the need to reformulate.* The statements are a flexible body of texts produced by a thriving faith community, and the fact that several documents have already been created for the same theme in some instances illustrates that texts are not intended to be definitive.<sup>16</sup>

(3) *The Significance of the Statements for Adventist Theology*

As is visible in the overview of statement topics in the first part of the article, the thematic concentration is on ethics. Nine of the thirteen major categories and roughly two thirds of the documents deal with ethical matters. This may seem to be surprising, for traditionally, Adventist theology has a strong leaning towards doctrine. However, the very importance of doctrinal discussions may have also contributed to creating a vacuum which the statements try to fill.

The significance of the texts for the *developing discipline of Adventist ethics* should be recognized. When Michael Pearson published his pioneering study *Millennial Dreams and Moral Dilemmas: Seventh-Day Adventism and Contemporary Ethics* in 1990, he could use hardly any of the documents under discussion. Today, the situation has changed. No Adventist discussion of ethics can bypass the statements, and the denomination is beginning to develop a substantial discourse on social ethics and other realms of ethics which were formerly not in its focus.<sup>17</sup>

In this context, one should also mention that such ethical discussions raise issues which do not fare prominently in the context of dogmatics. Some statements clearly suggest that there are *adiaphora*, matters of limited ethical and doctrinal import such as family planning (see the “Birth Control” statement). Raising the question at least implicitly helps to underline the possibility and necessity of a non-doctrinal approach to some matters. Thus, the statements indirectly form a supplement to an overly doctrinal self-understanding of Adventist Christianity and, at the same time, indicate that such non-doctrinal issues do matter in their own ways. By doing so, they carry on the Adventist tradition of a holistic view of life.

Beyond the realm of ethics, what is similarly significant is what could be called the *development of an Adventist theology of culture*. Although mostly this theology is not explicit, the noticeable concern for the public expressed in many of the

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<sup>16</sup> Two documents each exist for each of the following the topics: creation, Spirit of Prophecy, and peace; several statements were published in the fields of ecology, family, AIDS, and religious freedom.

<sup>17</sup> A fact that it is not well known but interesting is that statements on bioethics were produced by the General Conference Christian View of Human Life committee, which included representatives from the Center for Christian Bioethics at Loma Linda University. An important question, which would necessitate much additional research, is how statements were worded and who contributed to the decision that they were ultimately published. Since several statements were released by General Conference presidents, it would also be very interesting to examine their role in building the body of statements.

statements clearly contains elements of a theological notion of the world. In an age when Christians of this denomination engage in major development projects, constitute majorities in some regions of the world, own large assets, and have politicians among their members in many countries, such a theology of the world and of culture is undoubtedly a necessity and constitutes an intrinsic part of the foundation for the Christian mission to this world.

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