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# Adventist *Today*

THE 2015 GC SESSION AND THE  
**FUTURE DIRECTION**  
OF THE ADVENTIST FAITH



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**WHAT THE 2015 GC  
SESSION MEANS FOR  
THE FUTURE OF THE  
ADVENTIST FAITH**

# HOW FORBIDDING INCEST RUINED THE CHURCH MANUAL

By Tom de Bruin

FOR MANY THE HIGHLIGHT—OR lowlight—of the General Conference Session in San Antonio was one of the two busiest days: Sunday and Wednesday. The hall was packed, seating was at a premium, and special guests were asked to sit elsewhere. I was one of the exceptions. In all honesty, I was bored on the days focused upon women's ordination and the changes to the fundamental beliefs; both the discussion and the votes were predictable.

For me, the last Friday was the most exciting and ultimately the most disappointing. On this day, only a couple hundred delegates were present on the floor to discuss changes to the Church Manual. Many find Church Manual discussions boring and uninteresting, but these amendments to the Manual are very important, as they govern every local church worldwide. The Manual is written to support the local church in its mission, but sadly, one amendment made things much worse for mission rather than better.

I am talking about point 405: *Reasons for Discipline*. Over the course of two days, discussions and debate reduced what, in my view, was a good suggested change to the Church Manual to a mockery. The changes ultimately voted pertain to sex and how we should be having it. Sadly,

very few delegates were present at the vote, and almost none seemed to understand the horrible implications of the changes that had been made in the last couple of days. When, out of frustration, Dutch delegate Megen Molé (who also happens to be my wife) suggested that we appoint a Sexual Perversions Study Committee, I think I was the only one who agreed.

But let's back up a little.

## Leading Up to the General Conference

The amendment to *Reasons for Discipline* was on the GC agenda at the suggestion of the Dutch and Norwegian Unions, acting independently. We felt that the old wording, where clearly criminal and hurtful sexual acts (such as child abuse) were put in the same line as ones that we felt were “merely” fornication (such as homosexual practice or the use of pornography), was inaccurate and problematic. Grouped together, these acts were termed “sexual perversions.” Working from this perspective, both unions suggested the same change: remove this seemingly random listing of sexual perversions and make it very clear that engaging in any sex outside of marriage, or committing non-consensual sexual acts, is a reason for discipline.

I personally felt that this was an elegant solution. The quite arbitrary list of sexual

perversions would be gone, and it no longer implied that, for example, watching pornography was equatable with child abuse. The Church Manual committee agreed, much to my surprise, and referred these suggestions to the GC Session. I had good hopes that through these changes, the Church Manual would become a better tool for the local church.

## At the Session

On the third day of business at the session, July 5, this point was discussed and two delegates felt that the old list should remain. This was never specifically voted or discussed, however. Later, the motion was referred back to the Church Manual committee at the suggestion of North American Division President Dan Jackson, for different reasons. On that final Friday, with very few delegates present, the Church Manual committee at last returned with their amended suggestions. The problem for which it was originally sent back was not changed, but to some delegates' great surprise, a list of “fornication issues” had been added: “promiscuity, homosexual activity, incest, sodomy, and bestiality.”<sup>1</sup> Despite protests from both Dutch and Norwegian delegates, this proposal was voted through.

The Church Manual committee gave no indication of how they reached this list of

“fornication issues.” I would imagine that this is what the committee thought of as the most basic list that all Adventists agree goes against the commandments.<sup>2</sup> Maybe I am in the minority, but I have issues with this list in general and with some items specifically. Because “homosexual activity” has been discussed far and wide lately, I’d like to stay away from that topic here. Instead I’d like to look at—hold your breath—incest. Let it be a case study on why this list makes the Church Manual less useful for the local church.

### Incest

Looking at Europe, incest is an illegal sex act in some countries, such as Germany. In others, like the Netherlands, incest is not illegal, but it is also not legally possible for family members who are directly biologically related to marry. For the Church Manual, these two variations make no difference; any incestuous sex would be considered extra-marital and therefore be classed as fornication. How would a local church deal with a case where close relatives are legally married? This situation is not entirely hypothetical; in the Netherlands cousins and adopted siblings can legally marry, a situation many might consider incestuous.

There could well be more incestuous marriages on the horizon. Last year, the German government ethics committee advised that the laws against incest go against the fundamental human right of sexual self-determination. This ruling followed the somewhat notorious case of Patrick S and Susan K, siblings, who had four children together. Patrick S and Susan K had never known each other as children; they met when Patrick was 23 and were not aware when they started their relationship that they were siblings. The case can be made that while the two are biological siblings, they are

not relational ones. This is inverse to the situation in the Netherlands, where adoptive siblings can marry, as they are not biologically related. It does not seem unlikely that local churches will someday need to deal with a legal marriage that the local church feels is incestuous.

### Local Difficulties

Incest is clearly a social taboo, and many people have a physical reaction to the thought of it. But, as the German ethics committee pointed out, “criminal law is not the appropriate means to preserve a social taboo.”<sup>3</sup> I would like to continue that thought and claim that church law should also not be used to preserve taboos. As strong believers in the Bible, Adventists should base our rejection of sexual acts and types of marriage on sound biblical exegesis, not cultural stigma, when considering disciplinary measures. Unfortunately, I am quite sure that in this case that has not been done.

How should a local church deal with an “incestuous” married couple? Surely the couple will appeal to the Church Manual’s various definitions of marriage as heterosexual, monogamous, lawful, and between one man and one woman. The couple would point out that they follow this definition to the letter, and that there is no instance of abuse or of non-consensuality in their relationship. They might point out that this is the only place incest is mentioned in the Manual and that it does not define the term in any way.

In fact, the only time the church has in any way defined incest is in a statement on child abuse, voted in 1997. It reads: “Incest, a specific form of child sexual abuse, is defined as any sexual activity between a child and a parent, a sibling, an extended family member, or a step/surrogate parent.”<sup>4</sup> This definition, treating the abuse of minors, does not

apply to the situation we are discussing here.

In this situation, the local church would need to look at what the Bible says, and the Bible doesn’t seem to be terribly interested in speaking against sibling marriages. Two passages discourage

**MANY FIND CHURCH MANUAL DISCUSSIONS BORING AND UNINTERESTING, BUT THESE AMENDMENTS TO THE MANUAL ARE VERY IMPORTANT, AS THEY GOVERN EVERY LOCAL CHURCH WORLDWIDE.**

sexual relations between a man and his sister: Leviticus 18:9 and Deuteronomy 27:22. Both of these passages are part of the Israelite cultic laws, which Adventists generally do not keep unless they are repeated in the New Testament or are part of fundamental Adventist values (e.g., the clean/unclean food laws). I will not discuss these passages in detail, but I am sure a strong case can be made that these cultic practices are no longer binding. Thus, the local church is put into a difficult position. Individuals on both sides of the issue can argue their case from the Church Manual, and the church board would be required to rule on a very complicated situation.

A second problem with the list of

*Continued on page 46*

**Leeper** continued from page 9

frustration.

“Our God we worship and love can’t possibly hate us because of the person we fall in love with, or because we get lost along the way,” she added. “Isn’t the main thing loving and worshiping him? I believe God is way better than people make him seem [when they say] ‘God hates \_\_\_ [insert derogatory term].’ No, he doesn’t. People hate.”

These types of sentiments are exactly what the leaders of our denomination need to hear: real testimonies from real believers who are struggling with the inconsistencies of our faith.

Personally, I am ashamed to be a piece of the so-called body that claims to reflect the character of Christ and yet will openly jeer against those of a different mindset, thus dividing the body. I am ashamed to belong to a group of people who will compare women’s ordination to homosexuality and transgender bathrooms, as if any of these are categorically evil. But what I find most repulsive is how I have at times picked up this sense of Adventist superiority from “more conservative” Adventists.

Please don’t mistake my meaning. I’m not liberal, and I’m not conservative. I’m just seeking the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

## Conclusion

If we, as a denomination, are truly concerned about spreading the gospel, we need to also learn how to be truly biblical. Members of the Seventh-day Adventist faith who claim to preach the truth must not cling to such inconsistencies.

Being a true Seventh-day Adventist—being a true Christian—is simple: Do as Jesus would do; don’t get caught up in the legalistic works that snagged the Pharisees. Study the Scriptures. Profess. Believe. Surrender to the Holy Spirit. And do all things in love.

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“fornication issues” is that it now raises questions about practices that are not listed. This list is not exhaustive. Should the local church investigate everything that goes on behind the doors of marriage?

And so the Church Manual, which is meant to be a boon for the local church, has instead made itself ineffectual. I can imagine that if I were a local church pastor, I would now be forced to put the Church Manual aside and deal with matters as the church saw fit. As a result of an attempt to cover all details and do away with all ambiguity, the local church may be forced to no longer abide by the guidelines set out by the General Conference Session. More useful would be a focus on basic principles, as the Dutch and Norwegians argued, that could be applied to the various local situations worldwide.

Ultimately, the amendment voted at the General Conference Session demonstrates the shortsightedness of attempts at legalism. The implicit wish to be completely clear about our stance on specific issues actually created unnecessary problems. The strong fear many delegates had about slipping sexual mores and about the acceptance of homosexual relationships has made the Church Manual less useful and less meaningful. In the rush of many delegates to fight specific agendas, it seems as if we are throwing the baby out with the bath water. In this climate, maybe the Sexual Perversions Study Committee wasn’t such a bad idea after all. 

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*Conference. He has served the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a senior pastor, church planter, and union executive secretary. De Bruin is active academically as a contract lecturer for Newbold College in the United Kingdom and as a visiting scholar at Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society in the Netherlands. He maintains an English and Dutch website and blog: tomdebruin.com.*

<sup>1</sup> (See <http://www.adventistreview.org/%E2%80%8Bfifteenth-business-meeting>)

<sup>2</sup> The 1987 statement on Sexual Behavior reads, “Sexual abuse of spouses, sexual abuse of children, incest, homosexual practices (gay and lesbian), and bestiality are among the obvious perversions of God’s original plan.”

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by the British newspaper *The Telegraph* (see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/11119062/Incest-a-fundamental-right-German-committee-says.html>)

<sup>4</sup> (See <http://www.adventist.org/information/official-statements/statements/article/go/0/child-sexual-abuse/>)

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