

MYSTIFYING MYTHS
Facts and Fiction about the General Conference’s Compliance Document
 by Pastor Mark Finley

If a myth is repeated often enough and loud enough a lot of people will accept it as reality. For centuries people believed the earth was flat, and the sun revolved around the earth. Even reputed scientists and scholars of the day taught and repeated the myth. A myth is a myth no matter how loud it is trumpeted and no matter who shouts it.

Myths are running rampant on social media about the document, [“Regard for and Practice of General Conference Session and General Conference Executive Committee Actions.”](#) recently voted at the 2018 Annual Council.

Some claim the General Conference desires to control what happens even on the local church level and no one is safe from its tentacles of control. The document has been called “papal,” “anti-protestant,” and “unbiblical.”

Let’s consider seven common myths and the facts of the document.

Myth #1: The document is an overreach by the General Conference to centralize power.

Fact #1: The document actually states, “Planning for and ensuring compliance shall initially be entrusted to the entity closest to the matter” (p. 1, line 25).

The intent of the document is to allow *the entity closest to the issue of non-compliance* to handle the matter. Rather than a centralization of power, it encourages the opposite. It urges all issues of policy non-compliance to be solved *at the local level*. If that is not possible the next highest level of church organization may become involved. For example, if a local conference has a challenge with non-compliance that it cannot or will not solve, the Union Conference/Mission can become involved in working out a solution. This is true for each level of church organization.

If there is non-compliance of a General Conference Session or Executive Committee voted action, the GC Executive Committee may become involved.

Myth # 2: The document uses a non-biblical method of coercion.

Fact #2: The document does just the opposite. Here is what the document states, “Administrators dealing with any matter of non-compliance shall exercise Christian due process which will include much prayer and dialogue” (p. 2, line 35).

The document is designed to be redemptive, not punitive. It provides for a process of dialogue, prayer, and counsel to determine how best to solve the matter of non-compliance. It follows the Scriptural pattern of reconciliation and resolution as outlined in Matthew 18.

Myth #3: The document is a heavy-handed authoritarian approach to problem solving.

Fact #3: The document provides for tolerance. It allows the administrators of the entity that is perceived to be out of compliance a 60-day period to further dialogue and offer solutions to the challenging situation (p. 2, line 14).

The due process provisions in the document encourage discussion and prayerful consideration on how to solve non-compliance issues. Rather than a heavy-handed dictatorial mandate, the document assures a process of collaboration and seeks to find solutions to problems of non-compliance.

The proposed “warning” and “reprimand” are designed to enable entities to think of the seriousness of non-compliance to voted actions of the world church, and to encourage them to come back into harmony with the world church. Any warning, reprimand, or other consequences must be voted by the General Conference Executive Committee with worldwide representation.

Myth #4: The final vote of authority regarding consequences rests in Silver Spring, Maryland, with the GC Administrative Committee

Fact #4: The document clearly states, “If, after the organization closest to the matter has been unable to resolve a compliance issue and the General Conference Compliance Review Committee has recommended consequences, *only the General Conference Executive Committee and/or the General Conference in session has authority to implement the recommendation* (p. 3, lines 27-30).

Myth #5: This document changes the culture of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and inhibits freedom of conscience.

Fact #5: What will change the culture of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is if the votes of the General Conference in Session and its Executive Committee are not respected. If each entity from the local church to local conferences, Unions and Divisions do not respect the decisions of the corporate church, the church will be led into organizational chaos, fragmentation, disunity and congregationalism.

The issue before the church is whether it desires to remain as a united worldwide body, valuing the collective decisions of the General Conference in Session and its Executive Committee or whether it will become a loosely connected body of organizational entities.

Myth #6: The General Conference does not have any entity to oversee its activities and actions.

Fact #6: The General Conference is answerable to the GC Executive Committee. This is why regular reports are given during the Spring Meeting and Annual Council. In addition, the General Conference is regularly audited for financial compliance by the independent and well-respected auditing firm, Maner & Costerisan.

During the 2018 Spring Meeting, representatives from Maner & Costerisan, reported that the General Conference was in compliance with GC Working Policy regarding financial matters.

Also during the 2018 Spring Meeting, as part of the financial reports, GC Finance presented the “Accountability for Use of Tithes” report.

This, along with the report from Maner & Costerisan, can be read in the May 2018 GC [*Executive Committee Newsletter*](#).

Myth #7: The document is not biblical. It places policy above Scripture and therefore is contrary to the Protestant Reformation in that it violates freedom of conscience.

Fact #7: Church organization is a fundamental principle of New Testament teaching. The church is held together by the Holy Spirit through a common commitment to Christ, a shared belief in Biblical teachings, a passion for mission, and a worldwide church organization. If any one of these is subtly undermined, the entire church is in danger.

The policies of the church never dictate or supersede the individual’s conscience. Every believer is free to follow the dictates of their conscience. There will be times when honest people see things differently. Policies are agreements about the way the church will operate. They determine how an international, global family will function.

Here is the point. Policies do not dictate what we believe but they should govern the actions of church leaders. Church leaders have an ethical responsibility to abide by the decisions made jointly by the representatives of the world church at a General Conference Session.

Policies are not unchangeable biblical teachings, and should never be elevated above biblical truth. They are operating principles that delegates to a General Conference Session or Executive Committee can change and at times have changed. If change to any policy passed by the General Conference in Session or to Executive Committee actions is made, it should be made by the same body where it was voted.

Where the Battle Isn't

Myths never serve us well. They lead us to operate from fear in a world of illusion. Worst of all, they deter us from the mission of the church to live and preach the gospel to fulfill the mission of Christ.

Believing myths causes us to fight where the battle isn't rather than focusing our spiritual energies and attention on reaching lost people to prepare men and women for the coming of our Lord.

May the living Christ so fill our hearts and guide our thinking that we focus on the thing that really matters: souls saved eternally for His kingdom.

Pastor Mark Finley is a well-known evangelist, author, and retired General Conference vice-president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

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