

Protestant University

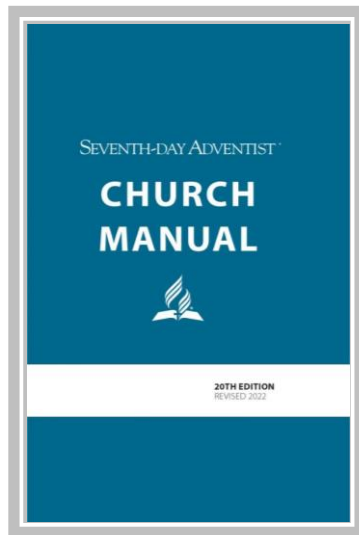
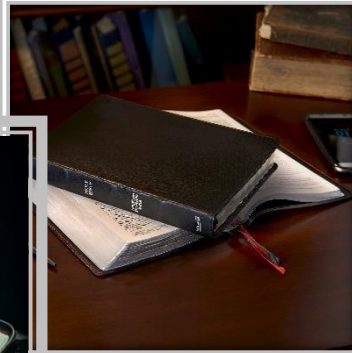


TABLE TALK STUDY GUIDE:

THE CHURCH MANUAL & SOLA SCRIPTURA



One of the five pillars of the Protestant Reformation is *Sola Scriptura*, a Latin phrase meaning “Scripture Alone.” This phrase describes the Protestant principle that the Bible and the Bible alone is to be the Christian’s rule of faith and practice.

If we firmly believe this, what role do other documents play in the church? Most denominations have some sort of manual—a collection of rules, guidelines, or policies that help the local church to deal with governance and other issues. As Seventh-day Adventists, we call ours *The Church Manual*. Since we believe the Bible alone is our rule of faith and practice, why do we need a church manual? What is the role of *The Church Manual* in the context of *Sola Scriptura*?

This study guide explores these issues. It corresponds to the two-part *Table Talk* video discussion produced by the Iowa-Missouri Conference's Protestant University.

Question 1: What is your experience, if any, with *The Church Manual*? Do you know of a time when your church used the manual to make a decision? Do you know of a time when your church deviated from the advice in the manual?

In the video, the terms *prescriptive* and *descriptive* were used. If something is *prescriptive*, then it prescribes, mandates, or requires that a certain procedure be followed in each situation. Whereas something *descriptive* merely describes recommendations for the situation. In other words, something descriptive should be seen as a guideline, whereas something prescriptive should be considered a definitive rule.

Question 2: In the video, Gary described *The Church Manual* as “a collection of best practices.” Gina concluded that there are times when the manual should be seen as descriptive and times when it must be seen as prescriptive. Do you agree with these statements? Why or why not?

Question 3: Do you find, given your personality, that you typically accept rules, guidelines, and policies easily? Or are you more prone to question or chafe against them? How does that influence the way you relate to *The Church Manual*? Given that churches are full of all different personalities, how does this influence church decisions?

In the introduction to *The Church Manual*, it describes its historical development. At first, the idea of creating a church manual was opposed by many church leaders. This was because church leaders “feared a manual might formalize the Church and take from its pastors their individual freedom to deal with matters of order as they desired.”¹ They wanted churches to make Spirit-led decisions, rather than to be governed by a rigid set of rules.

Question 4: In your experience, do you think churches have used the manual in a manner that early Seventh-day Adventist leaders feared it would be used? How can churches be free to make Spirit-led decisions and at the same time use the manual to help guide those decisions?

¹ Secretariat, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 20th Edition (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference Corporation of Seventh-day Adventists, Revised 2022), 16.

The Church Manual is often consulted in difficult situations when dealing with people, such as when the church is exploring the need to discipline someone. In the video, Dean gave the advice to “never reach for the manual first” in these types of challenging circumstances. Obviously, the manual has its place, but sometimes churches have made the mistake of caring more about the rules in the manual than they did about the person who was struggling—a soul for whom Christ died. Rather, churches should turn to prayer first and follow the way of Christ, who spent time learning people’s stories and focused on the relationship when dealing with people.

Question 5: In the video, Emily brought out 3 key ingredients for making a wise decision in tough situations: 1) Time, 2) Biblical knowledge, and 3) the Holy Spirit. How can these three elements impact challenging circumstances? What is role of *The Church Manual* in difficult situations?

There are those who tend to treat *The Church Manual* as if it were equal to the Bible, which of course violates the principle of *Sola Scriptura*. On the other hand, there are people who would like to totally disregard the manual. In the video, Gary told a story about this, sharing that many of the guidelines in the church manual protect the church.

All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

—2 Timothy 3:16, 17 (HCSB)

The Seventh-day Adventist Church does not operate as a hierarchy (a top-down model where one or a few people dictate what must occur in each church). Nor do we operate as a congregational church (where each church in the denomination operates, finances, and governs itself independent of all the other churches).

Rather, we are a sisterhood of churches with a representative form of governance. *The Church Manual* can help to safeguard this system. The procedures in the manual can help with accountability both within the church and among the sisterhood churches. As Gary said, “Whenever you get away from accountability to the body, then you’re moving away from Protestantism.”

Question 6: How do you think *The Church Manual* can help to safeguard important church practices? What are the dangers we encounter if we totally disregard the manual?

Question 7: Near the end of part 2, Desiree asked a question: “With the examples of using the manual inappropriately: either being rigidly adhered to or not being used at all, how do we find the balance in how we use *The Church Manual*?” What are your thoughts about this question?
