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### The Trinity Is a Paradox

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March 19, 2010

## The Trinity Is A Paradox



The conception of God as Trinity has always been both *central* and *problematic* to Christianity, yet "Three persons in one God" summarizes biblical revelation about the nature of the Godhead. Externally, this conceptualization of God has caused the other two monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam, to accuse Christianity of being polytheistic. Internally, ever since the early Christian Church chose this Trinitarian formula to best express what the Bible revealed about God, no doctrine has seemed more essential to the Christian conceptualization of God. At the same time, the doctrine of the Trinity has been repeatedly attacked as an illogical misrepresentation of God by various determined minorities.

### The Adventist Shift To Trinitarianism

In early nineteenth century America, the Christian Connection, a small denomination which for a time counted Joseph Bates and James White among its ministers, was one such anti-Trinitarian minority. As leaders in the little flock that grew and eventually organized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Bates and White contributed to an anti-Trinitarian overtone in the formative years of the movement. Over time, however, this early aversion to Trinitarian theology was replaced with the recognition that though the scriptures do not use the term *Trinity*, the descriptions of God given in Scripture call for just such a conception. So during the 1890s, when the Adventist understanding of Jesus Christ was heightened and The Desire of Ages was written, most Seventh-day Adventists came to a Trinitarian understanding of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I believe it was a healthy process which caused many of the early Adventist leaders to initially reject the traditional doctrine of the Trinity. They viewed this doctrine as coming from tradition rather than from the Bible. Furthermore, some of them confused the Trinitarian formula of three persons in one God with the modalistic conceptualization of God as one person in three modes. Joseph Bates wrote that he could never accept that Jesus Christ and the Father were one and the same person. This initial rejection set a healthy hermeneutic of not accepting Christian tradition as authoritative, but instead, only accepting doctrine as they understood it from the Bible. Thus, when the Adventist Church turned to a Trinitarian understanding of God, it was because they believed it to be the best representation of all that the scriptures revealed about God.

Such a shift in the conception of God has implications for how one relates to God, and also to how one perceives salvation. Viewing God as a Heavenly Trio of three equal persons making up a single Godhead has far-reaching ramifications for the doctrines of Christ, the Holy Spirit, and salvation and these will be discussions for future blog postings. I would like to focus here on the paradoxical Trinitarian formula of three in one and the ramifications this has regarding the place of human logic in the interpretation and systematization of revealed truths found in the Bible.

### Revelation And Logic

That three are one is a logical impossibility. It defies mathematical logic conceived as far back as Pythagorus. It also defies Aristotelian logic. Arius was right in asserting that you cannot logically conceive of the transcendent One as three. Plato

conceived of the creative demiurge who expressed divine immanence not as the indivisible One, but as the divisible, and decidedly subordinate and unequal, Two. So why did the early church conceptualize God as three in one?

First, and most simply, because the writers of the New Testament so clearly portrayed Jesus Christ as God along with the Father. Further and deeper exploration of the biblical teaching finds both the oneness and the threeness of God in Scripture. The oneness is clear in passages like Deut 6:4, which the Jews use as their *shema*, or daily prayer, "Hear oh Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." The threeness can be seen in passages like the baptism of Christ in Matt 3:16, 17, where the Father, the Son and the Spirit are individually described as simultaneously active. It is also evident in the great commission in Matt 28:19, where Jesus commands his disciples to make disciples and baptize them "in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." This became the standard benediction in the Christian Church. Thus two great prayers from the Bible, the *shema* and the benediction, describe God as one and as three

In spite of human logic, the Bible insists that God is one and that God is three. Do we give priority to logic or revelation?

### **Trinity: Solution Or Paradox?**

Expressed this starkly, I must conclude that I will follow revelation before logic. Any other answer creates a theology built from the bottom up, a human understanding based on perception and analogy. On the other hand, placing divine revelation before logic allows for a theology revealed from above, from God's self-revelation. Granted, this revelation comes through human agents and human language so that we are but "seeing through a glass darkly," and "knowing partially" (1 Cor 13:12); yet I would rather see partially the true God who is far above human conception than to claim a full view of a humanly constructed divinity. I'll take God's self-revelation through human agents rather than my own faulty and incomplete logic any day.


Thus, the early church faced the revealed paradox that God is one, and yet God is three. They did not resolve the paradox. They simply *named* it.

*Trinity* is not a solution. It is simply a one-word designation that holds the paradox intact: Three in one, our Triune God.

Posted by John W. Reeve on March 19, 2010 in Church History, Historical Theology | Permalink

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I have a hypothesis that without an initial rejection of the Trinity, Adventism would have had more difficulty developing a Sanctuary doctrine that conceived on God in one part of heaven and Jesus in another. I would support this by pointing to early Christianity where the doctrine of the Trinity developed after Jesus went back to be with his Father, not while Jesus was on earth and the Father in heaven. It seems that to conceive of three in one we need God to be together, and any separation/distinction between the three makes the oneness difficult to conceive.

So regarding paradox and the sanctuary doctrine, in the NT Jesus is at the right hand of the Father since his ascension but according to sanctuary typology and prophecy he did not enter the Father's presence until 1844. Is this a scriptural paradox, like the trinity? What criteria should we use to determine which proposed paradoxes are correct?

Posted by: David Hamstra | March 19, 2010 at 06:05 PM

Adventists today have a tendency to emphasize the threeness over the oneness of God. I can't decide whether that is a holdover from the literally physical conceptualization of the Father and Jesus by James White and Joseph Bates or whether it is more connected to the "heavenly Trio" of Ellen White. Either way, a literally physical conception of God would also be involved in what you describe, David. I don't know how one would substantiate such a connection without a careful linear study of the shifts in the conceptualization of God through the Church papers over decades.

Posted by: John W. Reeve | March 20, 2010 at 06:54 PM

We easily recognize that the High Priest in the Earthly Sanctuary was an object lesson about Christ as HIGH PRIEST of the HEAVENLY SANCTUARY. Therefore, we have come to understand that there is no perfect match between the drama of the earthly holy places and

the drama of the heavenly holy places. For example, the earthly priests offered many sacrifices. Christ offers only one.

What has not been so easy for us is to recognize that the ministry of Christ as High Priest in the Heavenly Sanctuary is also a dramatic object lesson for us and for un-fallen angels. Therefore, we tend to overlook the fact that there is no perfect match between the drama of the heavenly places and the internal dynamics of the relations of the heavenly trio.

If I might stretch my sanctified imagination a bit. The Father, Son, and Spirit dwell in ultimate communion which is invisible to even un-fallen angels. At the same time, that communion is revealed in ways we can understand through the sanctuary services in heaven and on earth.

Furthermore, surely the Spirit was already on earth before Christ was dramatically installed as Priest in heaven and sent the Spirit forth on the day of Pentecost. And surely, as David Hamstra wrote, Christ was "at the right hand" of the Father before His transition in the Heavenly Sanctuary drama from the Holy Place to the Most Holy Place.

Posted by: [Martin Hanna](#) | [March 20, 2010 at 07:59 PM](#)

"Either way, a literally physical conception of God would also be involved in what you describe, David."

I think that's what the incarnation introduced to Christianity. The incarnation basically forced the development on the doctrine of the trinity. Would you agree?

"I don't know how one would substantiate such a connection without a careful linear study of the shifts in the conceptualization of God through the Church papers over decades."

That's correct. I suppose all I'll ever have is a hypothesis, unless I'm able to interest someone else in taking such a project on.

Posted by: [David Hamstra](#) | [March 21, 2010 at 10:56 AM](#)

"What has not been so easy for us is to recognize that the ministry of Christ as High Priest in the Heavenly Sanctuary is also a dramatic object lesson for us and for un-fallen angels."

This is a very interesting claim that resonates with me, but how would one substantiate it from scripture?

Posted by: [David Hamstra](#) | [March 21, 2010 at 11:00 AM](#)

David said: I think that's what the incarnation introduced to Christianity. The incarnation basically forced the development on the doctrine of the trinity. Would you agree?

Yes, I would agree. In the early editions of The Spirit of Prophecy clear through to The Great Controversy White gives substantial credence to the idea that even the angels did not completely understand the role of the Son until the incarnation, especially after the cross. This sits well with the presentation of God's revelation through Christ in the early chapters of Hebrews.

Posted by: [John W. Reeve](#) | [March 21, 2010 at 08:12 PM](#)

David asked "...but how would one substantiate it from scripture?"

Is it too much of a leap to think that angels might learn something of the substance of faith by watching Jesus intercede on our behalf far beyond the realm of our limited human vision? Since their creation, they have always beheld the things of Heaven. How incredible must it seem to them, and difficult to fully grasp, that we, for all our inability to see either them or the realities of Heaven, yet believe.

Jesus told a rather doubtful Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed...blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." John 20:29

Unfallen angels have never, and will never have to walk this journey that we do...a journey to a home we've never seen, our feet lit by the holy scriptures and the illumination of the Holy Spirit. But what a magnificent journey indeed...

Posted by: [Joseph Nesbit](#) | [March 23, 2010 at 10:44 PM](#)

There are "trinities," of sorts, in various religions. This summarizes five:

Mahayana and Vajrayana vehicles of Buddhism speak of Trikaya, or three bodies: Nirmanakaya is the Buddha in human form, Sambhogakaya is celestial Buddha and Dharmakaya is the formless essence, or Buddha-nature. The Theravada primarily addresses the historic Buddha. The "Three Jewels" are the Buddha, the dharma (his teachings) and the sangha (the community of monks and nuns).

Christianity has its Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit referring to God, Jesus Christ and their spiritual bond of unity (some say the Godhead). Interpretation of the essential nature of each, and their relationship, differed among the churches. In Christian mysticism, the three ways of the spiritual life are the purgative in being purified from sin, the illuminative in true understanding of created things,

and the unitive in which the soul unites with God by love.

Hinduism's trimurti are the threefold activities of Brahman: in Brahma as creator, in Vishnu as sustainer and in Shiva as destroyer. Saccidananda are the triune attributes or essence of Brahman: sat, being, cit, consciousness and ananda, bliss. The three major schools of yoga are bhakti, devotion, and jnana, knowledge and karma, the way of selfless action. Raja yoga can apply to, and integrate, all three in mental and spiritual concentration.

In Islam, nafs is the ego-soul, qalb is heart and ruh is spirit. Heart is the inner self [soul], hardened when it is turned toward ego and softened when it is polished by dhikr, remembrance of the spirit of Allah. This is a three-part foundation for Sufi psychology. Initiation guides them from shari`a, religious law, along tariqa, the spiritual path, to haqiqa, interior reality. It is a gradual unveiling of the Real.

In the Kabbalah of Judaism, sefirot – sparks from the divine – have three fulcrums to balance the horizontal levels of the Tree of Life: Da`at (a pseudo-sefirot) is knowledge combining understanding and wisdom; Tiferet is beauty, the midpoint of judgment and loving kindness; Yesod is the foundation for empathy and endurance. They also vertically connect, through the supreme crown, the infinite and transcendent Ein Sof with its kingdom in the immanent Shekhinah.

(quoted from "the greatest achievement in life," my e-book at <http://www.suprarational.org> )

Posted by: [Ron Krumpos](#) | [March 26, 2010 at 02:42 PM](#)

A short review of THE TRINITY, Whidden, Moon, & Reeve

"In the spirit of the pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist church, the authors of this book firmly hold the following conviction: if we cannot support any teaching biblically, we do not want it" (The Trinity pg. 10) "We will be very candid with our readers--if it is not biblical we do not want it, even if the vast majority of authorities in the religious world endorse it (including Adventist pioneers and the theologians of 'Babylon')." (The Trinity pg.11) "The only way for the pioneers in their context to effectively separate Scripture from tradition was to abandon every doctrine not clearly supported from the Bible alone. Thus they initially rejected the traditional doctrine of the Trinity, which clearly contained elements not evident in Scripture." (The Trinity pg. 202)

"To whom should we direct our petitions and adoration in personal devotions and corporate worship?...But what about direct prayer to the Holy Spirit? While we have no clear example of or direct command to pray to the Spirit in Scripture, doing so does have, in principle, some implicit biblical support. If the Spirit is indeed divine and personal and He interacts in all sorts of direct personal ways (bringing conviction, healing, transforming grace, granting gifts, etc.), it only seems logical that God's people can pray directly to and worship the Holy Spirit..." "In sum--if the persons of the Godhead are truly one in nature, character, and purpose, then it seems only logical and practical to address appropriate petitions and praises to any one of the heavenly Trio at any given time and situation." (The Trinity pg. 272, 273 emphasis supplied).

I read this book with eager excitement, yet was sadly disappointed. The writers of this book seem disingenuous at least, or outright dishonest at worst. Is it really possible to claim strict Biblical "proof" of the modern Adventist version of the Trinity doctrine, while at the same time candidly admitting there is "no example of" anyone in the bible ever praying to or worshipping the Holy Spirit? Nor, is there any "direct command" anywhere in Scripture that we should worship or pray to the Holy Spirit! In other words no one in the entire Bible ever worshiped or prayed to the Holy Spirit, but we are all told to do it anyway! For many people, praying to and worshipping the Holy Spirit "seems logical and practical." Yet, praying to Mary and worshipping dead saints seems very logical and practical for over a billion people. Now, everyone is entitled to their own belief or opinion, but why try to cram this new speculative opinion about the Trinity down our throats? Some may say, "the writers of this book are not being dogmatic about their opinions and speculations, they are just trying to make sense of all the Trinity confusion." Yet, the practical definition of dogmatic dogmatism is when Pastors are fired, and laypersons disfellowshipped from Adventist churches because of variant interpretations of the "Trinity" as defined by the 28 Fundamental beliefs. If Adventist's are not required to strictly adhere to only one interpretation of the Trinity doctrine, then why make it a test of fellowship in the first place? In fact, the greatest irony of all is that "The Trinity" book belittles the early Adventist pioneer's non-trinitarian views while praising the development of modern Adventist trinitarianism as the only Biblical and legitimate form of the doctrine. Did you catch that? Modern Adventism claims that all Christian trinitarian creeds contain elements of "Greek philosophy," unbiblical speculation and human tradition. Therefore, modern Adventism cannot subscribe or endorse ANY Christian Trinity creed, and by definition, would be classified as non-Trinitarian by them all. Now that's irony. Even though modern Adventism has repudiated the non-trinitarian teachings of her founding fathers and evolved its own unique "Trinitarian" perspective, the Adventist church has always been non-Trinitarian.

COMMENT BY MODERATOR: While the substance of the questions raised in this post are generally fair, and will be responded to very shortly, we encourage those leaving comments not to gratuitously call into question the integrity and honesty of those with whom they

disagree. Charges of being "dishonest," "disingenuous" or cramming opinions "down throats" are intemperate and not welcome on this site. This is a warning that any such future language will be edited, or the post taken down altogether.

Posted by: [bobbyb](#) | [May 04, 2010 at 09:19 AM](#)

No, we can't deal here with our church possibly mistreating its members, but we can deal with our church's doctrines themselves. Now six months hence, let's look at this again....

We're not of the Nicene creed trinitarianism, since we reject "eternal generation" in any of its possible definitions - primarily neither erroneous, ongoing generation within the Nicene, formless substance of oneness (as it is defined), nor the one-off, point in eternity, begotten Sonship before creation as our pioneers published and taught, as a church.

The angels are sons of God, as was Adam (Job 38:7; Luke 3:38), by creation; Christians are the sons of God by adoption (Rom. 8:14, 15), but Christ is the Son of God by birth. The writer to the Hebrews further shows that the position of the Son of God is not one to which Christ has been elevated but that it is one which He has by right." (E. J. Waggoner, 'Christ and His Righteousness', page 12, 1890)

"A complete offering has been made; for "God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son,"-- not a son by creation, as were the angels, nor a son by adoption, as is the forgiven sinner, but a Son begotten in the express image of the Father's person, and in all the brightness of his majesty and glory, one equal with God in authority, dignity, and divine perfection. In him dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." (Ellen G. White, Signs of the Times, 30th May 1895, 'Christ our complete salvation')

Does current teaching make as much sense?

The Handbook of SDA Theology affirms the Son is not begotten of the Father and this book "The Trinity" confirms that, as have other, recent publications: When our church history is checked, Jesus' Sonship is of course taught as begotten of the Father, the pre-incarnate Son of God having been the Word from the beginning. This is perhaps obvious to note, but leaves the question, especially after reading "The Trinity", of what sort of trinitarians we confess to be as a church, and why.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit have always been believed on in our church, so challenging "the trinity doctrine" among us isn't about reducing numbers but looking at the very doctrinal definitions of a "triune God", where one Being of God threatens both losing the personal distinctiveness of Father and Son and to impose tritheism on SDA trinitarianism. That God has one and only one begotten Son is in dispute. Jn 3:16 NKJV is somehow not adequate to teach this belief, yet Strong's hasn't changed its explanation, and SOP is strong & consistent in teaching this point. The personality of the Spirit is clarified beautifully by Ellen White, too, with that statement that he is a person as much as Father & Son but not a person exactly like them. No body, but their omnipresence - indeed.

What has happened to this simple confession?

Posted by: [ColinH](#) | [November 19, 2010 at 07:35 PM](#)

"We're not of the Nicene creed trinitarianism, since we reject 'eternal generation' in any of its possible definitions"

Oh, really? Where is that in the Fundamental Beliefs?

Posted by: [BC](#) | [November 25, 2010 at 09:05 PM](#)

What if the revelation of God in three ways (The Creator, The Corporeal Revelation, and the Mind of Christ in us) is for our benefit of understanding and not definitive of God's existence?

Posted by: [David de la Vega](#) | [November 27, 2010 at 03:09 AM](#)

"The Creator, The Corporeal Revelation, and the Mind of Christ"? That's not Christian teaching. That's modalism, an ancient heresy. Christian teaching 1) baptizes "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," 2) assumes a real conversation between Son and Father, in which the Son prays to the Father as to another and the Father speaks to and of the Son, 3) a real (and eternal) relationship of Fatherhood/Sonhood between them, and 4) a real sending by them of the Spirit, who 5) testifies of Christ, inspires our witness to the world, and causes us to cry out in prayer to the Father.

Posted by: [BC](#) | [November 28, 2010 at 07:27 PM](#)

BC, you illustrate the point of my question. Do we focus on the definition of the trinity to create doctrine in order to measure one another rather than living the revelation, "inspiring the witness to our world"?

Posted by: [David de la Vega](#) | [November 30, 2010 at 08:52 AM](#)

I don't know what it could mean to "live the revelation"--Jesus is the Word, and words are intelligible. He preached a message, and told us to preach it. We have to know what we're talking about to do that. And we have to make sure what we are saying is in accord with what he said.

Posted by: BC | [November 30, 2010 at 02:52 PM](#)

I desire that you would know what it means to live the revelation. I desire that we all may live the Word as He is the Word. Then we would be assured that He is in us and we in Him. When we live the revelation then there will no longer be a need to preach nor teach, nor manage what we teach and preach. The sheep do not manage the flock, He coordinates the church.

Posted by: David de la Vega | [December 01, 2010 at 02:41 PM](#)

"When we live the revelation then there will no longer be a need to preach nor teach."

Well, Jesus said we are to preach and teach. I'll follow his instructions.

Posted by: BC | [December 01, 2010 at 09:46 PM](#)

Will it be you teaching or the Mind of Christ in you teaching? Will the nations be disciplined by you or the Spirit of the Lord through you? Do we baptize into a doctrine or into a relationship? Which goes back to my question, is the trinity a definition of God or a description of how He reveals Himself to us?

Posted by: David de la Vega | [December 02, 2010 at 09:31 AM](#)

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