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ELLEN G. WHITE AND SUBORDINATION WITHIN THE TRINITY

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Abstract

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has been engaged in a debate about the role of women in ministry, especially as it pertains to ordination. Some involved in this debate have used the doctrine of the Trinity to support their understanding of the different gender roles. In particular, opponents of women's ordination frequently argue that Jesus was subordinate to the Father, and that the relationship between Jesus and the Father serves as a model of the subordination of women to men. Many who make this argument have turned to the writings of Ellen White and have attempted to support their view of subordination within the Trinity from her writings. This paper argues, however, that Ellen White understood her role as being to confirm doctrines that have been established through study of the Bible—meaning that subordination within the Trinity, if it exists, should be established from the Bible, not White's writings. Secondly, this paper argues that White herself did not actually hold a subordinationist view. Her earlier statements on the relation of Christ to the Father are ambiguous. But after Adventist believers came to embrace the doctrine of the Trinity in the 1890s, Ellen White became more explicit on the topic, and she began to stress the equality of the divine persons rather than hierarchy within the Trinity. In sum, a one-way subordination cannot be proven in the writings of Ellen White and therefore such statements should not be used as confirmatory evidence of that position.

Keywords: Trinity, subordinationism, equalitarianism, Ellen White, ordination, Christology.

Introduction

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is currently engaged in a debate about the role of women in ministry, especially as it pertains to ordination. While engaging in discussion about this debate, I have encountered some who have used the doctrine of the Trinity to support their understanding of the different roles in gender. Specifically, the eternal subordination of Jesus to the Father is put forward as a model of the subordination of women to men. Many of those who hold to the eternal subordination of Jesus, and who use this subordination to substantiate their view on how ministry should be practiced, have turned to the writings of

Ellen White and have attempted to prove a subordination within the Trinity with her writings. But did Ellen White actually believe in subordination within the Trinity?

Before getting into Ellen White and whether she supports subordinationism, some background: There are two views among scholars regarding the nature of the relationships between members of the Trinity. While there is general agreement that Jesus existed in a position of subordination to the Father at least for some period of time, the disagreement centers on whether this submission has existed from eternity or was merely temporary. Wayne Grudem, a proponent of the former view notes that the terminology that he uses to state his position on subordinationism of the Trinity is “eternal submission of the Son,” “eternal authority of the Father,” or “eternal subordination of the Son to the Father.”¹ Those who hold this position claim that they do not believe in an ontological subordinationism, but rather a functional one; not by nature but by role. Consequently, this allows them to not view themselves as embracing the ancient heresies of Arianism.²

The other position, which is called equalitarianism, holds the view that the submission of the Son was only temporary. The submission of the Son occurred only because He was on a special mission to save humanity by becoming incarnate.³ Those who take this position sometimes suggest that the subordinationist position represents a version of the ancient heresy of Arianism.⁴ Others such as D. Glenn Butner Jr. claim that subordinationism is more a problem of Tritheism rather than Arianism because it means that Jesus and the Father have two different wills.⁵ Both Arianism and Tritheism have serious problems when taking everything into consideration that Scripture explains on the subject of the relationship between the Father and the Son.

Due to the limited scope of this paper, the arguments for or the accusations against subordinationism will not be addressed biblically, theologically, or logically.

¹Wayne Grudem, “Biblical Evidence for the Eternal Submission of the Son to the Father,” in *The New Evangelical Subordinationism? Perspectives on the Equality of God the Father and God the Son*, eds. Dennis W. Jowers and H. Wayne House (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 224.

²Arianism suggests that Jesus was created by God, has no divine nature, and has an origin in time. “Son of God” is merely a special title that was awarded to him as the highest of all creatures.

³Millard J. Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2009), 55, 80–81.

⁴Kevin Giles, “Defining the Error Called Subordinationism,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (2015): 208, 220–4.

⁵D. Glenn Butner Jr., “Eternal Functional Subordination and the Problem of the Divine Will,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 58, no. 1 (2015): 132–8, 149.

There have already been other analyses addressing this issue.⁶ The purpose of this paper is to examine whether or not Ellen White supported subordinationism within the Trinity in her writings, particularly in her book *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 1. To that end, this analysis will first explain two methodological principles for reading Ellen White. The first methodological principle is that Ellen White's role was primarily to confirm doctrine (not establish it), and the second principle is that she developed her thought over time by continued Bible study and revelation. After discussing these methodological principles, we will then move to examining two specific sections of *Spiritual Gifts* that are particularly insightful for understanding Ellen White's views of subordination—namely, her discussion of the fall of Satan, and her discussion of the planning of salvation.

Confirmation of Doctrine

The first methodological principle to be explained is that White's role, historically, was to confirm doctrines already established from the Bible. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has always taken the stand that the Bible is to be its only creed. Therefore, any doctrinal statements of the church need to come from the Bible alone.⁷ All of the key doctrines of the Seventh-day Adventist church were accepted by Bible study first, and Ellen White's visions were used only to confirm and clarify the doctrines.⁸ In fact, when describing how early Adventist believers established the denomination's doctrines in the mid and late 1840s, Ellen White minimized her own role, testifying that “during this whole time I could not understand the reasoning of the brethren. My mind was locked, as it were, and I could not comprehend the meaning of the scriptures we were studying. This was one of the greatest sorrows of my life.”⁹ According to this testimony, she was not able to contribute to the Bible studies that were formational for early Seventh-day Adventist theology.¹⁰

⁶Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity?*; Matthew L. Tinkham Jr., “Neo-Subordinationism: The Alien Argumentation in the Gender Debate,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 55, no. 2 (2017): 237–90.

⁷General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2010), 156.

⁸Denis Fortin, “Ellen White and the Development of Seventh-day Adventist Doctrines,” in *Understanding Ellen White: The Life and Work of the Most Influential Voice in Adventist History*, ed. Merlin D. Burt (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2015), 109–13.

⁹Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), 207.

¹⁰It appears God providentially guided the church this way in order to provide the foundation of the doctrines of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to be based on the Bible and not on the writings of Ellen G. White.

During these Bible studies, sometimes the early Adventist believers would be stymied in their ability to progress forward. It was then that White says the following: “I would be taken off in vision, and a clear explanation of the passage we had been studying would be given me, with instruction as to how we were to labor and teach effectively. Thus, light was given that helped us understand the scriptures.”¹¹ Therefore, it was only after thoroughly examining the Scriptures that the gift of prophecy would be given to help the early Adventist believers progress in their Bible study. White was very clear about the purpose of her writings. She said,

The written testimonies are not to give new light, but to impress vividly upon the heart the truths of inspiration already revealed. Man’s duty to God and to his fellow man has been distinctly specified in God’s word; yet but few of you are obedient to the light given. Additional truth is not brought out; but God has through the *Testimonies* simplified the great truths already given and in His own chosen way brought them before the people to awaken and impress the mind with them, that all may be left without excuse.¹²

Ellen White clearly thought that her writings were not to be giving new light. They were only clarifying principles already contained in the Bible. That is why God only gave her visions after the Bible was thoroughly examined. He wanted the Seventh-day Adventist church to have its doctrines based solely on the Bible.

The development of Adventist doctrine on the Trinity followed the same pattern established with respect to previous doctrine: Adventist believers first came to belief in the Trinity following extensive Bible study, and then Ellen White confirmed the doctrine. Many of the early pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist church were Arian or semi-Arian. Joseph Bates and James White brought semi-Arianism with them from their Christian Connexion past.¹³ This belief continued to be the dominant one until the General Conference of 1888.¹⁴ After the 1888 conference, which had taken a clear stand in favor of righteousness by faith, the

¹¹Ibid., 206–207.

¹²Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 605.

¹³Unlike Arianism, Semi-Arianism suggests that Jesus is a divine rather than a created being. He emanated or came forth from God at some point in the eternal past. Special emphasis is laid on his begottenness so that he has all the divine attributes of the Father. The title “Son of God” is not understood as a mere title or linked to the incarnation but it is seen as a reference to the Son’s origin in his preexistence. Unlike the eternal generation of the Son in the classical doctrine of the Trinity, Semi-Arians believe that origin to have occurred in time, not in timelessness / the eternal present. Besides the denial of a coeternity between the Father and the Son, Semi-Arians generally affirm a one-sided hierarchical relationship between the Father and the Son.

¹⁴Jerry Moon, “The Adventist Trinity Debate, Part 1: Historical Overview,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 41, no. 1 (2003): 114.

denomination began to place a new emphasis on the centrality of Christ. W. W. Prescott led the way in this change. While in Australia, he started to study more fully about who Jesus Christ is. Gilbert M. Valentine suggests that it was after Prescott shared his new insights with ministers that the doctrine of the Trinity came to be taught more openly in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.¹⁵

Ellen White's confirmation of the doctrine of the Trinity came in the form of her 1898 book, *Desire of Ages*. This book, written after the studies of W. W. Prescott, is the key place where Ellen White makes explicit statements about the Trinity. There are no previous places in her writings where the Trinity, as the Seventh-day Adventist church understands it today, is denounced as being wrong. However, it was only after serious Bible study from other church leaders that God used Ellen White to confirm that in Jesus is "life, original, unborrowed, underived," and that He is equal to the "I Am."¹⁶ Not only did she speak of Jesus as equal in being to Father, but in the same pages of *The Desire of Ages*, she also stated that the Holy Spirit is the "third person of the Godhead."¹⁷ Here, Ellen White began to teach the concept of the Trinity explicitly. Once again, she confirmed that theological concept after it had been thoroughly studied in the Bible by others.

This is important because, in the same way White had been used in the past to confirm doctrine, she was also used in this way with regard to the Trinity. This means that her statements about the Trinity were unclear before the 1890s. Not that there were no statements about the Trinity, but they were not explicitly definitive. However, it should be clearly noted that her statements about the Trinity did not teach an openly Arian position (even though that was the dominant teaching of the Seventh-day Adventist church at that time).¹⁸ This is significant because some try to use these more ambiguous statements to push their theological position on the Trinity. As it will be demonstrated, these earlier statements are ambiguous because the church had not thoroughly studied the meaning of the Trinity as a doctrine from the Bible.

After White confirmed the Trinity doctrine, it still took several decades for that doctrine to receive official acceptance. The earliest inclusion of the trinity as a Seventh-day Adventist fundamental belief came in 1913, though it was not formally accepted at that time by the General Conference.¹⁹ It was again listed as a

¹⁵Gilbert M. Valentine, "Learning and Unlearning: A Context for Important Developments in the Seventh-day Adventist Understanding of the Trinity, 1888-1898," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 55, no. 2 (2017): 213-36.

¹⁶Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1940), 24, 530.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 671.

¹⁸Moon, "The Adventist Trinity Debate, Part 1," 114.

¹⁹[F. M. Wilcox], "The Message for Today," *Review and Herald*, October 9, 1913, 21.

belief in 1931 in the *SDA Year Book*.²⁰ But a statement of Trinitarian belief was not officially voted by the denomination until the General Conference session of 1946.²¹ Jerry Moon states that this is “the first official endorsement of a trinitarian view by the church.”²² On that account, Ellen White’s writings confirmed the doctrine in the 1890s. However, not until 1946 was there an official acceptance of the Trinitarian view as voted by a General Conference session. The statement that was made in the 1980 General Conference session was just a revision of the 1946 statement.²³

Growth in Understanding

The first methodological principle—that Ellen White was a confirmer rather than an originator of doctrine—has been discussed; now we will examine the other principle, which is that Ellen White’s thought developed over time and that she grew in her own understanding of Scripture.²⁴

The idea of prophets growing in their understanding of divine revelation is not a new one. Moses grew in his understanding of administration as he faced challenges in leading Israel after leaving Egypt. Daniel himself did not understand one of his own visions. Jonah was rebellious against a vision. Nathan needed to be corrected. Peter was rebuked by Paul, even after receiving the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Therefore, it should not be a big surprise that Ellen White also grew in her understanding of Scripture, theology, and mission even while receiving visions.

It is a popular opinion to believe that the older the vision, the more accurate it has to be.²⁵ First, if that were true, why would Ellen White continue to receive visions and dreams all of her life?²⁶ If the early visions were the only ones that were needed, then why did God give her new visions? Also, there were occasions

²⁰H. E. Rogers, comp., *1931 Year Book of Seventh-day Adventist Denomination* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1931), 377.

²¹L. K. Dickson, J. I. Robison, and T. J. Michael, “Proceedings of the General Conference: Fifteenth Meeting,” *Review and Herald*, June 14, 1946, 197.

²²Moon, “The Adventist Trinity Debate, Part 1,” 122.

²³*Ibid.*, 122–5.

²⁴Alberto R. Timm, “Humanity of the Prophets,” in Burt, *Understanding Ellen White*, 98–100.

²⁵This does not mean that the older visions were not correct but that newer revelation is more extensive, provides more insight, and gives a fuller picture. It also should be stated that the newer the vision, the more accurate it is.

²⁶Timm, “Humanity of the Prophets,” 101–3.

when a first vision on a given topic was misinterpreted or misunderstood.²⁷ This was what happened with a vision about the Sabbath in 1847.²⁸ Ellen White and Joseph Bates wrongly understood that the vision was teaching that the Sabbath should be kept from 6 p.m. on Friday to 6 p.m. on Saturday. After J. N. Andrews studied the matter in the Bible in 1855, he was able to show clearly that the Sabbath should be kept from sundown to sundown. Everyone accepted the new position, except for two people—Joseph Bates and Ellen White. It was not until three days after Andrews' presentation of his findings that Ellen White received a vision confirming that the study of Andrews was correct. She and Joseph Bates were wrong in their understanding of the first vision. This wrong teaching of the time of the Sabbath had by this point influenced Adventist practice for about nine years.²⁹

This clearly shows that it is an inadequate position to teach that the early writings of Ellen White are purer or that the early understanding of the Seventh-day Church is more correct. The church would need to return to keeping the Sabbath from 6 p.m. to 6 p.m. if that were so. Therefore, we must compare all that Ellen White has to say on a subject and not just take her earliest statements as if they eclipse the later ones.³⁰ In view of this, it is actually better to read how a position developed in her writings in chronological order to see if or how she corrected or clarified a doctrine.

Now when it comes to the doctrine of the Trinity, the same can be said. It is not her earliest statements that are the clearest. It is actually the later ones. This is because it was not until the 1890s where some of the scholars of the church were led to study out the Trinity.³¹ Therefore, it was not until the 1890s and later that Ellen White had her clearest insights about the Trinity to confirm what had been clarified from study of the Bible. One must also be careful with the earlier statements, not because they are wrong, but because they are obscure and thus can easily be misinterpreted with one's own theological position. One needs to look at the development of her statements on the Trinity to see her trajectory as she grew in understanding, as truth was revealed to her, to see if she indeed held to a subordinationist view of the Trinity.

²⁷Herbert Douglass, "Ellen White as God's Spokesperson," in Burt, *Understanding Ellen White*, 88–90.

²⁸This does not mean that she was wrong with her Trinitarian statements nor that she had an incorrect view of the Trinity. However, it needs to be noted in a few cases that she has been corrected, in a subsequent vision, about misunderstanding a vision. This piece of evidence is being used to debunk the idea that older equates with a higher quality of revelation and inspiration.

²⁹Douglass, "Ellen White as God's Spokesperson," 88–90.

³⁰George R. Knight, "How to Read Ellen White's Writings," in Burt, *Understanding Ellen White*, 72–73.

³¹Valentine, "Learning and Unlearning," 213–36.

The Fall of Satan and Subordination

Proponents of subordination within the Trinity frequently appeal to Ellen White's description of the fall of Satan in *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 1, published in 1858. There White says the following:

The Lord has shown me that Satan was once an honored angel in heaven, next to Jesus Christ. His countenance was mild, expressive of happiness like the other angels. His forehead was high and broad, and showed great intelligence. His form was perfect. He had a noble, majestic bearing. And I saw that when God said to his Son, Let us make man in our image, Satan was jealous of Jesus. He wished to be consulted concerning the formation of man. He was filled with envy, jealousy and hatred. He wished to be the highest in heaven, next to God, and receive the highest honors. Until this time all heaven was in order, harmony and perfect subjection to the government of God.³²

White says Satan was an angel next in position to Jesus. But Satan was jealous, and he desired to be the highest in all of heaven, next to God Himself. What is assumed in this quote is a chain of positions that proceeds as follows: The Father, then Jesus, then Lucifer. However, Satan's perspective is that being next to Jesus in position was not satisfactory enough. He desired to vault over Jesus to be next to God. Satan's jealous perspective does not necessarily warrant Jesus being next in position to the Father, although from the isolated statement above such a reading is possible. In the next paragraph, White continues explaining what happened during the fall of Satan by stating:

It was the highest sin to rebel against the order and will of God. All heaven seemed in commotion. The angels were marshaled in companies with a commanding angel at their head. All the angels were astir. Satan was insinuating against the government of God, ambitious to exalt himself, and unwilling to submit to the authority of Jesus. Some of the angels sympathized with Satan in his rebellion, and others strongly contended for the honor and wisdom of God in giving authority to his Son. And there was contention with the angels. Satan and his affected ones, who were striving to reform the government of God, wished to look into his unsearchable wisdom to ascertain his purpose in exalting Jesus, and endowing him with such unlimited power and command. They rebelled against the authority of the Son of God, and all the angels were summoned to appear before the Father, to have their cases decided. And it was decided that Satan should be expelled from heaven, and that the angels, all who joined with Satan in the rebellion, should be turned out with him. Then there was war in heaven. Angels were engaged in the battle; Satan wished to conquer the Son of God, and those who were submissive to his will. But the good and true angels prevailed, and Satan, with his followers, was driven from heaven.³³

³²Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 1 (Battle Creek, MI: James White, 1858), 17–18.

³³Ibid.

White makes two imprecise statements in this quote: that God gave authority to Jesus, and God exalted Jesus by endowing Him with unlimited power and command. What makes the previous statements indefinite are their lack of mentioning why and when this bestowal of authority, power, and command took place. Basically, there is insufficient context to determine exactly what Ellen White meant by these statements. More information is needed in order to decipher the relationship between the Father and the Son from the passage about the fall of Satan as found in *Spiritual Gifts*.

Therefore, the problem with this account in *Spiritual Gifts*, is that it is brief and ambiguous. Because of its brevity and obscure nature, one can read into it the theology one already possesses. Thus, this passage can be contorted as “proof” for subordinationism, anti-Trinitarianism, or equalitarianism. Instead of twisting the passage in order to correspond with one’s viewpoint, examining White’s parallel statements is the appropriate next task.

A more expanded version of the account was produced by White in the *Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 1, which was published in 1870. Ellen White presents some added detail in the account of the fall by saying that

Satan in Heaven, before his rebellion, was a high and exalted angel, next in honor to God’s dear Son. His countenance, like those of the other angels, was mild and expressive of happiness. His forehead was high and broad, showing a powerful intellect. His form was perfect; his bearing noble and majestic. A special light beamed in his countenance, and shone around him brighter and more beautiful than around the other angels; yet Jesus, God’s dear Son, had the pre-eminence over all the angelic host. He was one with the Father before the angels were created. Satan was envious of Christ, and gradually assumed command which devolved on Christ alone.³⁴

Notice White increases important details in the account, thus making it more coherent. She states that “Jesus ... had pre-eminence over all the angelic host,” and “He was one with the Father before the angels were created.”³⁵ So even though White says Satan was next in position to Jesus in Heaven, these new additional details construct a picture of the Father and Son being one, with Satan next in position to them and then all the other angels following. She continues with the following:

The great Creator assembled the heavenly host, that he might in the presence of all the angels confer special honor upon his Son. The Son was seated on the throne with the Father, and the heavenly throng of holy angels was gathered around them. The Father then made known that it was ordained by himself that Christ, his Son, should be equal with himself; so that wherever was the presence of his Son, it was

³⁴Ellen G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 1 (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Pub. Assn., 1870), 17.

³⁵*Ibid.*

as his own presence. The word of the Son was to be obeyed as readily as the word of the Father. His Son he had invested with authority to command the heavenly host. Especially was his Son to work in union with himself in the anticipated creation of the earth and every living thing that should exist upon the earth. His Son would carry out his will and his purposes, but would do nothing of himself alone. The Father's will would be fulfilled in him.³⁶

White again, like in *Spiritual Gifts*, mentions that the angels were to appear before the Father, but this time she further explains that the Son is on the throne with the Father. She indicates that the Father made it clear that the Son was equal with Himself, and that wherever the Son's presence was, the Father's presence was there also. The Son was to be in charge of the angels and the Father's will was to be carried out by the Son. Thus, White is teaching here the equality of the Son with the Father. Again, what was imprecise in *Spiritual Gifts* was given more precision in *Spirit of Prophecy*.

Another additional piece is mentioned in the account in *Spirit of Prophecy* that was not brought up in *Spiritual Gifts*. It is what the loyal angels said when they tried to reason with Satan:

They clearly set forth that Jesus was the Son of God, existing with him before the angels were created; and that he had ever stood at the right hand of God, and his mild, loving authority had not heretofore been questioned; and that he had given no commands but what it was joy for the heavenly host to execute. They urged that Christ's receiving special honor from the Father, in the presence of the angels, did not detract from the honor that he had heretofore received.³⁷

The loyal angels, by saying this, made it clear that the Father was only stating what was always true. What could have been suggested from the *Spiritual Gifts* account of the fall of Satan was that the Son was given honor for the first time in the Father's decree, but the words from the angels in the *Spirit of Prophecy* account make it clear that it was Satan who claimed that the Son had only been recently exalted, instead of always being in that position.

Yet another parallel account of the fall of Satan can be found in White's *Patriarchs and Prophets*, first published in 1890. This account is actually the most expanded and clear statement on Satan's fall. Here White goes into detail (unmentioned in the other accounts) about what led to the fall of Satan:

Little by little Lucifer came to indulge the desire for self-exaltation. The Scripture says, "Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness." Ezekiel 28:17. "Thou hast said in thine heart, ...I will exalt my throne above the stars of God.... I will be like the Most High." Isaiah 14:13, 14. Though all his glory was from God, this mighty angel came to regard it as pertaining to himself. Not content with his position, though honored

³⁶Ibid., 17–18.

³⁷Ibid., 19–20.

above the heavenly host, he ventured to covet homage due alone to the Creator. Instead of seeking to make God supreme in the affections and allegiance of all created beings, it was his endeavor to secure their service and loyalty to himself. And coveting the glory with which the infinite Father had invested His Son, this prince of angels aspired to power that was the prerogative of Christ alone.³⁸

White suggests that it was a slow process that led to Lucifer's self-exaltation. She then proceeds to suggest that Lucifer's desire for the glory and position of the Christ was actually an attack on the glory and power of God Himself: "To dispute the supremacy of the Son of God, thus impeaching the wisdom and love of the Creator, had become the purpose of this prince of angels. To this object he was about to bend the energies of that master mind, which, next to Christ's, was first among the hosts of God."³⁹ Here Lucifer's mind is said to be next to Christ's in the context of being among the hosts of God. This might refer to the role that Christ assumed as being the archangel. It appears that Christ always assumes the mediator role, for the Trinity, by assuming a form of the group with whom He is mediating. First, it was with the angels and then it was with humanity.⁴⁰ This embodiment of angelic nature in order to fulfill the mediator role in the plan of salvation could explain why Lucifer was surprised that Jesus, who in his view was supposedly just one of the angels, received equal status with the Father. This is the confusion that God was trying to address when Satan fell. God therefore called a gathering of the angels to sort this out. This will be shown further below.

In all three of the accounts we have been discussing, White mentions this gathering of the angels, which occurred in order to decree the position of the Son in the universe. The *Patriarchs and Prophets* account gives more detail than the other two versions mentioned previously. This is what White says:

The King of the universe summoned the heavenly hosts before Him, that in their presence He might set forth the true position of His Son and show the relation He sustained to all created beings. The Son of God shared the Father's throne, and the glory of the eternal, self-existent One encircled both. About the throne gathered the holy angels, a vast, unnumbered throng—"ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands" (Revelation 5:11.), the most exalted angels, as ministers and subjects, rejoicing in the light that fell upon them from the presence of the Deity. Before the assembled inhabitants of heaven the King declared that none but Christ, the Only Begotten of God, could fully enter into His purposes, and to Him it was committed to execute the mighty counsels of His will. The Son of God had wrought the Father's will in the creation of all the hosts of heaven; and to Him, as well as to God, their homage and allegiance were due. Christ was still to

³⁸Ellen G. White, *Patriarch and Prophets* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1890), 35.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁰In the Bible this angelic form is called the Angel of YHWH. In some of the accounts the Angel of YHWH is worshipped. Worshipping an angel is something that Revelation 22:8 declares is forbidden by God. Biblically, only God can be worshipped.

exercise divine power, in the creation of the earth and its inhabitants. But in all this He would not seek power or exaltation for Himself contrary to God's plan, but would exalt the Father's glory and execute His purposes of beneficence and love.⁴¹

White points out that the purpose of the summons is to set out the true position of the Son. She says that Christ shared the throne, and she adds that the glory of God encircled them both. This statement is ambiguous and can be read in different ways. Several details seem to imply that Christ and the Father are both eternal and self-existent. The account goes so far as to say that homage was to be given not just to the Father but to the Son also—which means that the Son was not just to be obeyed, but also worshipped. This is something only allowed to happen to the divine. Granted, the account makes clear that the Son would not seek His own glory, but would exalt His Father's glory. This would be expected because it is the nature of the selfless character of God to always be seeking the other's glory.

The description in *Patriarchs and Prophets* continues by describing Satan's anger that Christ was exalted as the "Son of God as equal with the Father."⁴² This means that Father presented Jesus not as lower, but as equal with the Father. In fact, White says that "there had been no change in the position or authority of Christ. Lucifer's envy and misrepresentation and his claims to equality with Christ had made necessary a statement of the true position of the Son of God; but this had been the same from the beginning."⁴³ The only reason the Father said what He said was because of Satan's accusations, not because there was any change in the order of heaven. Therefore, Jesus was not suddenly given a change of status; He was always equal in authority and power with the Father.

The first account of the fall of Satan (in *Spiritual Gifts*) did not have the same amount of detail as what is found in *Spirit of Prophecy* and *Patriarchs and Prophets*. If one just reads *Spiritual Gifts* alone, one could be led to think that Jesus was given His exalted position just before Satan's disgruntled complaints. However, each time White published an account of the fall, she gave added detail. Based on her later accounts, it is impossible to conclude that the exaltation of Christ was something that occurred during Lucifer's lifetime; according to these later accounts, Jesus had always held that exalted status. Thus, the added details in White's later accounts help readers understand the earlier accounts. All of what she writes on a topic should be taken into account when trying to understand what she intended to communicate.

⁴¹White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 36.

⁴²Ibid., 37.

⁴³Ibid., 38.

Subordination in the Planning of Salvation

A second account from *Spiritual Gifts* that sometimes arises in discussions concerning subordination in the Trinity is the account of the planning of salvation. The principle of examining all that Ellen White wrote regarding a particular subject can aid readers in understanding this account as well. Although White writes about this event in multiple places, the account in *Spiritual Gifts* is the first account she wrote on the subject. She states that Jesus was filled with sorrow and sympathy for fallen humans and that He took the initiative to approach the Father and converse about the plan of salvation. But the Father was resistant, and the Son had to approach three times to plead for his proposal, each time being “shut in by the glorious light”, before the Father agreed to the Son’s plan.⁴⁴ This account can be interpreted in two ways. First, one can see it as Jesus needing the Father’s permission to perform His role in the plan of salvation. Second, one can see Jesus as being the initiator of the plan of salvation and the Father struggling to go along with the plan.

The second time White mentions that same scene, it is a word for word copy of the original statement with changes only in the punctuation.⁴⁵ Commenting on this section of *Spirit of Prophecy*, Woodrow Whidden says, “In these pages Ellen G. White makes it very clear that it was the Son who initiated the key move by the Godhead in spontaneously offering Himself up to the Father to come to this sin-cursed world to endure terrible temptations and to die an atoning, sacrificial death for the sinful human race.”⁴⁶ Whidden may be correct in his assessment of White’s early statement about Jesus being the initiator. One could argue that, yes, He initiated it, but He was still seeking permission from the Father. From the two statements alone, it cannot be determined if Jesus is seeking permission from a superior or encouraging an equal. Whidden goes on to state that “the Son offered Himself up to the Father, not because the Father demanded that He do it (as His ‘subordinate’) but that The Son made the offer to do so according to His own divine initiative.”⁴⁷ One can also see that the Father was not commanding the Son in White’s account, but, again, it does not necessarily show if Jesus is asking for permission or encouraging an equal. However, Whidden’s idea of initiation of the Son is important because it helps us see that Jesus was not being commanded to do something and thus submitting to the Father’s plan. Of course this was not a surprise to the Father or the Son since they designed the plan from eternity.

⁴⁴White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 1:22.

⁴⁵White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 1:45.

⁴⁶Woodrow W. Whidden, “Core Theological Convictions that Vindicate the Ministry of Women,” *Adventist Today*, <https://atoday.org/core-theological-convictions-that-vindicate-the-ministry-of-women-in-our-church/> (accessed February 27, 2019).

⁴⁷Ibid.

However, when it was necessary to be implemented it was still a real emotional struggle to give over His only begotten Son.

Later, both *Spiritual Gifts* and *Spirit of Prophecy* mention that in order to accept the plan of salvation, it was “a struggle with the God of Heaven, whether to let guilty man perish, or to give his beloved Son to die for them.”⁴⁸ This is an important piece of information because it makes it evident that the plan of salvation was not something that the Father was ready to accept emotionally immediately after it was presented by His Son. It is also clear that it was not a command initiated by the Father for the Son to accept as a subordinate. The language here makes it more difficult for one to say that the Son was seeking permission, even if it does not completely rule out that possibility. The statement seems more consistent with the Son encouraging an equal, especially given that the plan was laid before the foundation of the Earth. However, these passages taken alone can be read both ways if one only reads it in isolation of what the rest of scripture and Ellen White says on the subject.

What does it mean that the passage can be read both ways? Let us start by saying that asking someone to do something or be a part of something in no way implies submission. A lieutenant may ask a subordinate to do something; a lieutenant may ask another lieutenant to do something; or a subordinate may ask a lieutenant to do something. Therefore, asking does not necessarily imply that the inquiring person is a subordinate. An individual can just as easily ask something of a subordinate or an equal as he can of a superior. In order to see if White’s account is implying subordination or equality, one would have to look for something more than a simple statement that Jesus asked the Father for counsel about the plan of salvation.

There appears to be a connection of these accounts with the Gospel accounts of the garden of Gethsemane. In both accounts of the meeting about the plan of salvation, it took the Son three attempts in order for the Father to proceed with the plan. Correspondingly, in the garden of Gethsemane, Christ pleaded three times for the Father to let the cup pass from Him. In a reversal of roles of what took place in heaven, it is now the Son struggling with the Father. This struggle was over following through with the plan that Jesus Himself initiated after sin and both planned before the foundation of the world. Therefore, in reality, because of these statements, it is actually the Son being subordinate to His own initiative, planned by both from eternity, via the Father rather than Jesus being subordinate to the Father alone. Later, White gave these words when referring to the planning of salvation in *The Desire of Ages*:

This was a voluntary sacrifice. Jesus might have remained at the Father’s side. He might have retained the glory of heaven, and the homage of the angels. But He chose to give back the scepter into the Father’s hands, and to step down from the

⁴⁸White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 1:26; White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 1:48.

throne of the universe, that He might bring light to the benighted, and life to the perishing.⁴⁹

It is clear that Jesus was the one to volunteer His sacrifice in the plan of salvation. It ended up being accepted because of the love of the Father. However, clearly it should not be assumed that Jesus submitted to a command by His Father. It might not be clear whether Jesus was getting permission or persuading an equal, but clearly the Son was the one to initiate the sacrifice of His own life, and the Father capitulated after an emotional struggle because He loved the world so much. God's foreknowledge of events does not lessen the emotional force He experiences while He undergoes such events.⁵⁰

Jesus Shows the Father

As mentioned before, it was after further Bible study in the 1890s that White penned her clearest statements about the Trinity. One of the books that lays out her Trinitarian views most clearly is *The Desire of Ages*. The book is a theological commentary on the life of Christ and the Gospels. If White embraced the subordination of the Son to the Father, then that belief should be clearly evident in the *Desire of Ages*.

However, right from the beginning of the book, White stated that “‘The light of the knowledge of the glory of God’ is seen ‘in the face of Jesus Christ.’ From the days of eternity the Lord Jesus Christ was one with the Father.”⁵¹ She makes clear from the start that the Father is one with Jesus. She continues to say that He came for the purpose of showing forth the glory of the Father, that he was to reveal what God was like, that the law of the universe is selflessness and its source is the heart of God.⁵² It is this law of selflessness or love that Christ elucidates. Ellen White further states in *The Desire of Ages*:

All things Christ received from God, but He took to give. So in the heavenly courts, in His ministry for all created beings: through the beloved Son, the Father's life flows out to all; through the Son it returns, in praise and joyous service, a tide of love, to the great Source of all. And thus through Christ the circuit of

⁴⁹White, *The Desire of Ages*, 22.

⁵⁰People still experience emotions when listening or reading a story, or watching a television show or movie the second or more times, even though they know what is going to happen. The movies *Titanic* and *Avatar* are examples that people can watch a movie over and over again a still feel it every time. Reading the Bible can happen repeatedly and still bring about emotional responses. Foreknowledge does not negate emotional responses.

⁵¹White, *The Desire of Ages*, 19.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 19.

beneficence is complete, representing the character of the great Giver, the law of life.⁵³

This shows that the Son, in subjecting Himself to the Father, is but showing the character of the great Giver. The character of God, both Father and Son, is love. Thus, self-seeking and self-glorifying are not in harmony with the character of either. Jesus does not seek His own glory, but neither does the Father. They are always glorifying the other; they are completely other-centered; they are the quintessential givers of the universe (alongside the Spirit, who self-sacrifices to the extent of almost completely losing His own identity in exalting the Father and the Son).⁵⁴ Misunderstandings of the Trinity can occur if Their other-centered, self-sacrificing character is not considered.

As was stated earlier, it was the purpose of the Father to have His Son demonstrate to humanity what He is like—completely selfless. In commenting on the Apostle Philip’s misunderstanding about seeing the Father, White says, “Christ had not ceased to be God when He became man. Though He had humbled Himself to humanity, the Godhead was still His own. Christ alone could represent the Father to humanity, and this representation the disciples had been privileged to behold for over three years.”⁵⁵ It was humbling to take on the nature of man, but this did not make Jesus any less divine. In fact, by emptying, subjecting, and submitting Himself, Jesus was manifesting the nature of love, which is selflessness.

In fact, what Jesus did by lowering Himself was declare that it was what the Father would do if their positions were switched. Notice what White says in reference to the status and work of Jesus, in comparison to the Father: “Jesus claimed equal rights with God in doing a work equally sacred, and of the same character with that which engaged the Father in heaven.”⁵⁶ The work that He did was equal to and of the same character of what the Father did. They were both doing a work that embodied the character of love. They were both giving everything they had to save humanity.

⁵³Ibid., 21.

⁵⁴White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 1:17–23, 45–53. An example of this is in White’s account of the fall of Lucifer and the meeting about the plan of Salvation. The Holy Spirit is absent in these accounts. The Holy Spirit is so focused on exalting the other two that Lucifer is not jealous of Him and He is not even mentioned by White as being in the meeting about salvation. Just because He is missing in the accounts does not mean He does not exist. White, *The Desire of Ages*, 671. White shows He does exist by stating He is “the Third Person of the Godhead.”

⁵⁵White, *The Desire of Ages*, 635.

⁵⁶Ibid., 207.

Conclusion

First, we sought to lay out the issue of subordinationism, especially as it stands in comparison to equalitarianism in the very heart of the Trinity. Next, we explored Ellen White's role in the matter of formulating doctrine or giving new light. It was demonstrated that she had a confirmatory role when the doctrines of the church were formed. She continued in this role even when the doctrine of the Trinity was starting to be explicitly adopted by Adventists in the 1890s. Ellen White did not see herself as giving "new light", and her writings should not be used to establish new light today. Therefore, subordinationism in the Trinity should be proven first by the Bible, and the writings of Ellen White should only be used as were always intended, in a confirmatory function. This paper then demonstrated that Ellen White's early statements on the role of Christ are ambiguous and can be read as supporting either a subordinationist perspective or an equalitarian perspective. However, Adventist believers came to accept the doctrine of the Trinity in the 1890s, and White's writings after this period stress the equality of the members of the Trinity, rather than a hierarchical order among them. Therefore, Ellen White should not be used as an ultimate authority in formulating a doctrine of subordinationism within the Trinity, because that is not the function of her writings, nor is there solid evidence that she herself held such a position.

