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4-22-1999

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Recommended Citation

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Heresy or Hopeful Sign?

Early Adventists' struggle with the truth about the Trinity

doctrinal agreement on the Trinity affords insights into several aspects of how Adventists discovered truth and preserved church unity amid a diversity of viewpoints.

Part of the legacy of the Great Disappointment of October 22, 1844, was that it taught its survivors a profound distrust of human opinion and tradition concerning the Bible. It instilled in them a fierce determination to test every belief by Scripture and to reject every doctrine not firmly grounded on a “Thus saith the Lord.” This meant that virtually *everything* had to be investigated. The pioneers weren’t endowed scholars with unlimited time for study, but people with families to raise and bills to pay. Consequently, the process of reaching doctrinal consensus was a slow and lengthy one.

The first priority was to solve the problem of why Jesus had not come on October 22, 1844, the end point of the prophecy of Daniel 8:14. Study on this issue led Hiram Edson and Owen Crosier by February 1846 to a fairly comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the Old Testament earthly sanctuary and the New Testament heavenly one where Jesus had been ministering since His ascension.²

Meanwhile others had been studying the seventh-day Sabbath. The biblical basis for the Sabbath was one issue on which there already existed extensive writings because Seventh Day Baptists had already been observing it for two centuries. But the interconnectedness of Sabbath and sanctuary with the three angels’ messages and other end-time prophecies still had to be worked out.

Another example of what seems today as a surprisingly slow discovery of a biblical lifestyle is that more than 14 years after the Disappointment, James and Ellen White were still apparently using pork.³ It was not until issues of church organization had been settled in May 1863 that Ellen White received the first comprehensive vision on health reform, which called Adventists to complete abstinence

from pork⁴ and pointed out the advantages of moving toward a vegetarian way of eating.⁵ But what about the other animals listed in Leviticus 11 as inappropriate for dietary use? Another 40 years would pass before Adventists would reach agreement that oysters, for instance, were also to be omitted from the diet of Bible-believing Christians.⁶

In view of this lengthy process of doctrinal development in which laypeople as well as ministers took an active part, it is not so surprising that some teachings assumed by most Christians were rather late in receiving attention from this small but rapidly growing Christian denomination.⁷

The Adventist understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity came about through a long process of scrutiny, initial rejection, and eventual acceptance. The early Adventists had no question about the biblical testimony regarding the eternity of God the Father, the deity of Jesus Christ “as Creator, Redeemer, and Mediator,” and the “importance of the Holy Spirit.”⁸ However, they weren’t initially convinced that Christ had existed from eternity or that the Holy Spirit was a personal being, so they rejected the concept of “trinity.”

Anyone who has done any reading in theological writings about the Trinity knows that there can be a vast difference between the bare biblical statements about the Trinity and philosophical speculations about it. Some who have encountered the philosophical speculations may be pardoned for questioning whether they really have any biblical basis. The use, however, of extrabiblical words to describe biblical concepts is not inherently wrong. The word “millennium,” for example, is an extrabiblical Latin term for a thoroughly biblical concept—the 1,000 years of Revelation 20. So “trinity” is a Latin word meaning “triad” or “trio”—three components that make up one whole.

The biblical doctrine of the Trinity refers to the concept that God is one (Deut. 6:4), but that the Godhead or Deity (Col. 2:9) is composed of three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

ALTHOUGH we claim to be believers in, and worshippers of, only one God, I have thought that there are as many gods among us as there are conceptions of the Deity,” wrote D. T. Bourdeau in the *Review* in 1890.¹ What could have led Bourdeau, a highly respected evangelist and missionary in Canada, Europe, and the U.S.A., to make such a pessimistic statement about Seventh-day Adventist beliefs regarding God?

It may come as a surprise to some that the consensus reflected in the 1980 Statement of Fundamental Beliefs didn’t always exist among Adventists. The story of how the church came to

(Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14, etc.).⁹ The word “person” indicates a being with personality, intellect, and will. Unlike the multiple gods of polytheism, the three persons of the biblical Godhead are perfectly united in nature, character, and purpose so that despite Their individuality, They are never divided, never in conflict, and thus constitute not three gods, but one God.¹⁰

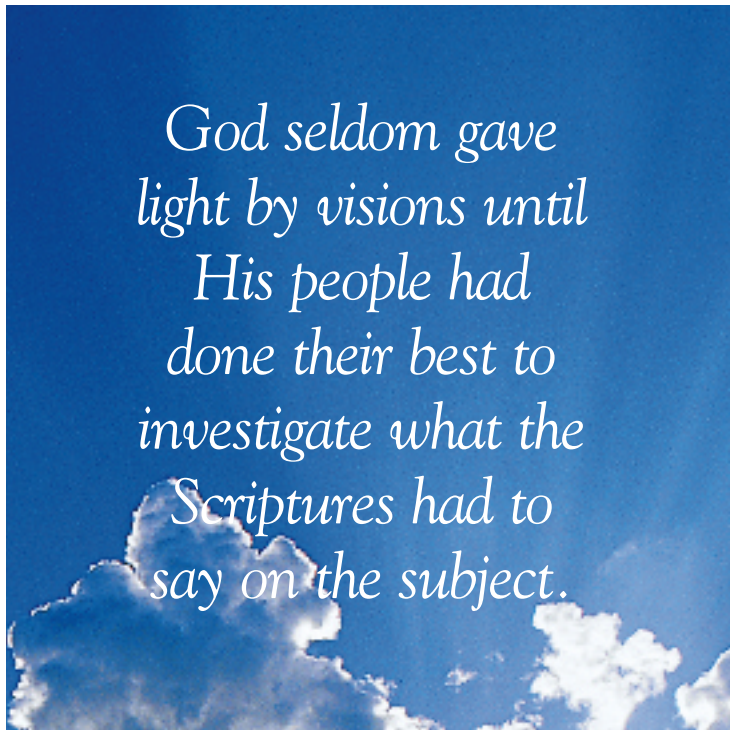
How this can be explained has been the subject of much thought and speculation over the centuries. But just as the concept of Incarnation—Deity becoming flesh (John 1:14)—defies human ability to fully explain, yet is nonetheless a truth the Bible teaches and Christians accept, so also with the Trinity.

Here’s where part of the problem occurs. The theological explanation of the Trinity doctrine over the centuries imported analogies and illustrations that made sense to the people of a given time and place and helped make the concept understandable to them. These additions to the scriptural data, however, sometimes went far beyond the actual statements of Scripture. While they made a certain sense at the time they were written, they sometimes seemed unbiblical or even nonsensical to people of other times and places. Some writing about the Trinity is a curious mixture of Bible, medieval philosophy, and the personal opinions of the writer.

This wasn’t lost on some Christians of the early 1800s, who associated the doctrine of the Trinity with other traditional beliefs they personally rejected. So it was that an American denomination called the Christian Connection concluded that the doctrine of the Trinity, at least the form of it that they had encountered, was of nonbiblical origin. Some prominent Millerites, such as J. V. Himes, and early Sabbathkeeping Adventists,

including Joseph Bates and James White, had been members of the Christian Connection.

Either because of the influence of these leaders, or because others had independently come to similar conclusions, the Adventist pioneers who questioned the doctrine of the Trinity included the most influential writers among them, with one major exception—Ellen White.¹¹ Whatever may have been Ellen White’s original



beliefs, she never expressed anti-Trinitarian views in her writings, and she eventually led Adventists to reconsider and accept a biblical concept of the Trinity, as we shall see later.

Before 1890: Anti-Trinitarian Arguments

Among the reasons given by the early Adventists for rejecting the Trinity was the misconception that the Trinity made the Father and the Son identical. Joseph Bates wrote regarding his conversion in 1827, “Respecting the trinity, I concluded that it was impossible for me to believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, was also the Almighty God, the Father, one and the same being.” D. W. Hull, J. N. Loughborough, S. B. Whitney, and D. M. Canright

shared this view.¹² And they were right in rejecting the concept that the Father and Son are the same person. This is an ancient heresy that denies the threeness of God and asserts that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are indistinguishable as separate personalities.¹³

Another objection to the Trinity was the misconception that it teaches the existence of three Gods. “If Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are each God, it would be three Gods,” wrote

Loughborough in 1861.¹⁴

A third view was that belief in the Trinity would diminish the value of the atonement.¹⁵ Since the “everliving, self-existent God” cannot die, then if Christ had self-existence as God, He couldn’t have died on Calvary, they reasoned. If only His humanity died, then His sacrifice was only a human one, inadequate for redemption.¹⁶ (See sidebar “What Happened to Christ’s Deity When He Died?”)

The fact that Christ is called Son of God and “the beginning of the creation of God” (Rev. 3:14) was thought to prove that He must be of more recent origin than

God the Father.¹⁷ It was also argued that “there are various expressions concerning the Holy Spirit which would indicate that it [*sic*] could not be properly considered as a person, such as its being ‘shed abroad’ in the heart [Rom. 5:5], and ‘poured out upon all flesh’ [Joel 2:28].”¹⁸

Most of these objections to the Trinity are based on either misunderstandings of the Trinity doctrine, extreme distortions of it, or speculative extrabiblical additions to it. None of them is a valid objection to the true biblical view of one God in three persons. Yet all of the objections were based on biblical texts. This shows that while misunderstanding or prejudice may have played a part, the pioneers were united in basing their

arguments on Scripture. As long as they appealed to Scripture itself rather than to a creed as their rule of doctrine, they were bound to discover the truth sooner or later.

1898: Turning Point

The watershed for the Adventist understanding of the Trinity came in 1898. In that year Ellen White published her monumental *Desire of Ages*, in which she differed sharply with most of the pioneers regarding the preexistence of Christ. She lost no time in bringing up the main point. Her third sentence in chapter 1 declared, “*From the days of eternity the Lord Jesus Christ was one with the Father*” (p. 19; italics supplied).

Yet even this sentence was not sufficiently unequivocal to clarify her position regarding the deity of Jesus. Later in the book, writing on the resurrection of Lazarus, she quoted the words of Christ: “I am the resurrection, and the life,” and followed them with a seven-word comment that would turn the tide of anti-Trinitarian theology among Adventists: “*In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived*” (p. 530, italics supplied). Christ didn’t ultimately derive His divine life from the Father. As a man on earth, He subordinated His will to the will of the Father (John 5:19, 30), but as self-existent God, He had power to lay down His life and take it up again. Thus in commenting on Christ’s resurrection, Ellen White again asserted His full deity and equality with the Father, declaring, “The Saviour came forth from the grave by the life that was in Himself” (p. 785; see also the next two paragraphs).

These statements came as a shock to the theological leadership of the church. M. L. Andreasen, who had become an Adventist just four years earlier at the age of 18, and who would eventually teach at the church’s main North American seminary, said the new concept was so different from the previous understanding that some prominent leaders doubted whether Ellen White had really written it.

After Andreasen entered the ministry in 1902, he made a special trip to Ellen White’s California home to investigate the issue for himself. Ellen White welcomed him and “gave him access to her manuscripts.” He had brought with him “a number of quotations” concerning which he “wanted to see if they were in the original in her own handwriting.” He later recalled, “I was sure Sister White had

If Ellen White had corrected every incomplete understanding of truth, some Adventists would have done nothing except sit and wait for her to write.

never written, ‘In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived.’ But now I found it in her own handwriting just as it had been published. It was so with other statements. As I checked up, I found that they were Sister White’s own expressions.”¹⁹

The Desire of Ages contained equally uncompromising statements regarding the deity of the Holy Spirit. On pages 669-671, Ellen White repeatedly uses the first-person pronoun “He” in referring to the Holy Spirit, climaxing with the impressive statement, “The Spirit was to be given as a regenerating agent, and without this the sacrifice of Christ would have been of no avail. . . . Sin could be resisted and overcome only through the mighty agency of the *Third Person of the Godhead*, who would come

with no modified energy, but in the fullness of divine power” (p. 671; italics supplied).

The result of these and similar statements was a division of opinion among the ministers and leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Some, such as General Conference president A. G. Daniells, *Review and Herald* editor William Prescott, and Andreasen, accepted these statements as inspired doctrinal correction for the church. Others, disbelieving that they could have been wrong for so many years, continued to repeat the old arguments.

Ellen White’s testimony, by calling attention to scriptures whose significance had been overlooked, created a paradigm shift that couldn’t be reversed. As Adventists, like the Bereans of Acts 17:11, returned to the Scriptures to see “whether those things were so,” they came to a growing consensus that the basic concept of the Trinity was a biblical truth to be accepted and embraced. The change didn’t occur overnight, but no new anti-Trinitarian publications came from denominational presses after 1898.²⁰ Some reprints of older books and articles still contained such views, but these were eventually discontinued or edited to reflect the new understanding.

Why No Correction Till 1898?

Some may wonder, “If the pioneers were wrong about such a basic matter, why didn’t God lead Ellen White to correct them right at the beginning?” That question involves three issues: the *timing* of God’s purposes, the *method* of His working through Ellen White, and the relation of both timing and method to the *unity* of the church.

Regarding timing, it’s generally recognized²¹ that God had a definite *order of priority* for introducing new truth to the church. Instruction to publish came in the 1840s; the call for “church organization” came in the 1850s; and just two weeks after the conclusion of a long contentious struggle that resulted in the legal organization of the church (May 1863), God sent the

comprehensive vision on health reform.²² Perhaps God saw that the young church could sustain only a certain level of uncertainty and debate without breaking up its unity, so He paced the introduction of new light so as not to overwhelm the believers.

Timing was important, not only in institutional developments, but in doctrinal development and correction as well. In correcting doctrinal errors, Ellen White was very careful not to unnecessarily disrupt church unity over issues that might need correction but that weren't as essential to practical godliness as some people thought. Even concerning the great issue of righteousness by faith that tore the church apart in the 1880s and early 1890s, Ellen White tried initially to keep that from being brought before the church in a contentious, disunifying way. Only after both G. I. Butler and E. J. Waggoner had gone into public print with their disagreements did Ellen White concede that since the *damage of disunity* had already been done, the only way out was by a full discussion in order to discover the *truth* about the issues under debate.

She never wrote an article directly confronting wrong views about the Godhead. But she published in *The Desire of Ages* and elsewhere state-

ments that couldn't be explained away and that were destined eventually to change the view of the church.

Thus the timing and method of God's leading through Ellen White reflected concerns not only for church unity, but for safeguarding the spiritual life of the church and its foundation in personal Bible study. If every time someone studied the Bible and came to an incomplete understanding of truth Ellen White had corrected it, soon Adventists would have done nothing except sit and wait for her to write. Historically, the progressive understanding of truth has always involved groping after it, writing partial understandings, to be corrected and advanced by others afterward.

It appears to be a pattern in Seventh-day Adventist history that God seldom gave light by visions until His people had done their best to investigate what the Scriptures had to say on the subject. The few exceptions were cases in which perhaps God saw there was too much at stake to wait for the normal process to work itself out. Much more often, He allowed partial truth or outright error to stand for years or even decades while people studied it and evaluated it from Scripture. If the error would be refuted by personal Bible study, God didn't

need to send a vision to deal with it.

While the early Adventists eschewed the word "trinity," much of what they did believe was compatible with Trinitarianism, as they occasionally acknowledged²³ (see also sidebar "Were the Early Adventists Arians?"). The pioneers in the 1840s and 1850s were approaching the Bible from the standpoint of other extremely important doctrines, such as the earthly and heavenly sanctuaries, which have everything to do with the *character* of God. In the divine purpose for this movement, the understanding of the *character* of God was a higher priority than the understanding of His nature.

After extensive Bible study, confirmed by revelation, laid the foundations of the sanctuary and related doctrines, God led Ellen White to invest more and more of her time in studying and writing about the life and character of Christ. In connection with this rediscovery/revelation of the character of Christ, both in His full humanity and His full deity, she was led to correct two errors that had prevailed regarding Christ and the Holy Spirit. Christ had been regarded as less eternal than the Father, and the Holy Spirit had been regarded as merely a power or influence coming from Christ and the Father, rather than as a divine person, coequal with Christ and the Father.

The acceptance of Christ's full eternity and the Holy Spirit as the third person of the Godhead removed the two greatest reasons for opposition to the doctrine of the Trinity. With the new perspective provided by *The Desire of Ages*, Adventists went back to their Bibles and discovered a whole range of information about the Godhead that they had not noticed before. They became convinced that indeed, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were *three* divine persons. Yet they found clear scriptural teaching as well that these three were *one* in nature, character, and purpose. Thus they constitute one God, not three Gods. The belief in three divine Persons who constitute one God is precisely the concept for which the word "Trinity" stands.

For these reasons leaders from the

Were the Early Adventists Arians?

Arianism was a teaching about Jesus that arose in the fourth century. Though rejected at the Council of Nicaea in 325, it was fought over for another half century after that as succeeding emperors enforced Arianism or Trinitarianism as the official view of the church.

The basic teaching of Arius was "that the Son of God was not eternal but created by the Father from nothing as an instrument for the creation of the world; and that therefore He was not God by nature, but a changeable [mortal] creature, His dignity as Son of God having been bestowed on Him by the Father on account of His foreseen abiding righteousness" ("Arianism," *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*). The Adventist pioneers have sometimes been called "semi-Arian" rather than Arian, because while they believed that Jesus had a beginning, they differed somewhat from the second part of the Arian definition. The Adventists believed that Christ did indeed partake of God's own nature and thus was not "merely" a creature, even though they held that at some time in distant eternity past God the Father had brought Him into existence.

Both the Arian and semi-Arian positions, however, were decisively refuted by Ellen White in *The Desire of Ages*. (Compare pp. 530, 785; see also *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Ellen G. White Comments, vol. 5, p. 1113.)

What Happened to Christ's Deity When He Died?

One of the early Adventist arguments against the Trinity doctrine was that if Christ had been eternally preexistent with the Father, He would have been immortal and thus could not have died on Calvary's cross.

In order to protect the reality of His death on the cross, the pioneers felt they had to deny that Christ had preexistent divine immortality. Ellen White plainly rejected this reasoning, explaining that when Jesus died on the cross, "Deity did not die. Humanity died" (manuscript 131, 1897). Again she wrote, "Humanity died: divinity did not die" (*Youth's Instructor*, Aug. 4, 1898; both quotations are in *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 1113).

In explaining that only Christ's humanity died, she in no way minimized the divine component of Christ's sacrifice on Calvary. Christ's deity did not die, but suffered something far worse—the rending of the Trinity. "Christ felt His unity with the Father broken up" (*The Desire of*



Ages, p. 686) and suffered "unutterable anguish . . . at the hiding of His Father's face" (*ibid.*, p. 755). "The withdrawal of the divine countenance from the Saviour in this hour of supreme anguish pierced His heart with a sorrow that can never be fully understood by man." Christ "feared that sin was so offensive to God that Their separation was to be eternal." She explains that "it was the sense of sin, bringing the Father's wrath upon [Christ] as man's substitute, that . . . broke the heart of the Son of God" and wrung from His lips the agonizing cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (*ibid.*, pp. 753, 754).

Thus she elevated the sacrifice of Christ far above mere human dying because it involved the rending apart, "the temporary severing of the mysterious unity" of the Trinity (Erwin R. Gane, "The Arian or Anti-Trinitarian Views Presented in Seventh-day Adventist Literature and the Ellen G. White Answer" [M.A. thesis, Andrews University, 1963], pp. 92, 95).

While Christ's deity could not perish, it suffered the infinite ordeal of being separated from the Father, with whom He had been, until this, eternally one.

ILLUSTRATION BY HOWARD SANDEN

second generation of the pioneers and many others after 1898 accepted the doctrine of the Trinity as a further unfolding of the biblical truths that the first pioneers had accepted. This unfolding illustrates the divinely ordained reason the pioneers were reluctant to make official statements of doctrine and absolutely refused to vote a creed—because they recognized there was more truth coming, and they didn't want to hinder it by defining their beliefs too rigidly.

Seventh-day Adventists still hold to that principle. Even though they voted in 1980 a Statement of Fundamental Beliefs, they still maintain that the Bible is their only creed. The Fundamental Beliefs can and will be refined as further insights clarify old truths or as new situations necessitate new explanations to the world of what the Bible teaches and what Seventh-day Adventists believe. ■

¹ D. T. Bourdeau, "We May Partake of the Fullness of the Father and the Son," *Review and Herald*, Nov. 18, 1890.

² O.R.L. Crosier, "The Law of Moses," *Day-Star Extra*, Feb. 7, 1846.

³ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, pp. 206, 207.

⁴ While she strongly maintained the health advantages of abstinence from pork, she consistently insisted that it was not a test of fellowship. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 206; manuscript 15, 1889 (in *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 16, p. 173).

⁵ Vegetarianism for Ellen G. White meant not habitually using meat, not necessarily total abstinence. Herbert Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1998), p. 316; A. L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Australian Years* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1983), vol. 4, p. 119.

⁶ See, e.g., S. N. Haskell, *The Bible Training School* (May 1903), vol. 1, p. 186; Ron Graybill, "The Development of Adventist Thinking on Clean and Unclean Meats" (Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1981).

⁷ Seventh-day Adventists numbered about 3,500 in 1863, 75,000 in 1898, and 10.3 million in 1999.

⁸ Gane, p. 109.

⁹ See also *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* (Washington, D.C.: Ministerial Association, General Conference of SDA, 1988), pp. 22-25.

¹⁰ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, p. 23.

¹¹ Gane, p. 67.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 104.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁴ J. N. Loughborough, "Questions for Brother Loughborough," *Review and Herald*, Nov. 5, 1861.

¹⁵ Gane, p. 105.

¹⁶ J. H. Waggoner, *The Atonement* (Oakland, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1884), pp. 173-175. Uriah Smith made a similar argument in *Looking Unto Jesus* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Review and Herald, 1898), pp. 23, 24; in Gane, p. 29.

¹⁷ Uriah Smith, *Looking Unto Jesus* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Review and Herald, 1898), p. 10; Uriah Smith, *Thoughts on the Book of Daniel and the Revelation* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Review and Herald, 1882), p. 487.

¹⁸ Uriah Smith, "In the Question Chair," *Review and Herald*, Mar. 23, 1897.

¹⁹ M. L. Andreasen, "The Spirit of Prophecy," chapel address at Loma Linda, California, Nov. 30, 1948, quoted in Russell Holt, "The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination: Its Rejection and Acceptance" (term paper, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 1969), p. 20.

²⁰ Gane, p. 55.

²¹ Roger W. Coon, "The 'Organization' Message, Final 20 Years" (lecture outline, Writings of E. G. White, Andrews University, Mar. 5, 1996).

²² Some older sources give June 6, because the vision was given on a Friday night (June 5) after sundown, hence by sundown reckoning was part of Sabbath, June 6, 1863.

²³ R. F. Cottrell, "The Doctrine of the Trinity," *Review and Herald*, June 1, 1869.

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