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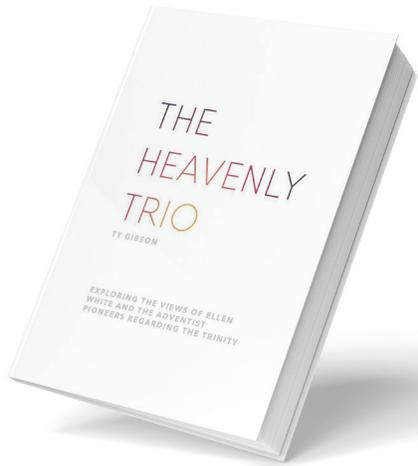
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THE HEAVENLY TRIO: EXPLORING THE VIEWS OF ELLEN WHITE AND THE ADVENTIST PIONEERS REGARDING THE TRINITY

Ty Gibson (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2020), hardback, 285 pages.

Reviewed by Denis Kaiser

Since the mid-2010s the Seventh-day Adventist Church has experienced a dramatic increase in antitrinitarian sentiments. The partial or complete rejection of the church’s Fundamental Beliefs numbers 2–5 (Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is making inroads into many local congregations. Regardless of the insights on the doctrine of God that the church has gained in the past 130 years through its study of the Bible, modern-day antitrinitarian Adventists would want to see the church return to its antitrinitarian beginnings. This situation has illustrated the need to better understand doctrinal development throughout the history of the church. In an attempt to meet this urgent need, Ty Gibson’s book *The Heavenly Trio* offers a well-articulated response that has long been overdue. The book is a follow-up to his *The Sonship of Christ*, although the new work addresses primarily a Seventh-day Adventist readership.

The book consists of 10 chapters. Chapter 1 directs the book’s preview with the “one question to rule them all”—whether “love” or “power” defines the character of God. Chapter 2 does not simply outline the early Adventist pioneers’ opposition to the Trinity but also identifies their core concern for the relationship between distinct divine personalities and their opposition to the extreme of modalistic Trinitarianism (one being manifested through various persons). Chapter 3 traces Ellen White’s personal journey, from her early silence on the antitrinitarian sentiments of her fellow Adventist pioneers to her later articulation of a rich trinitarian perspective of God, which was based on the covenantal relationship between three distinct divine personalities. Chapter 4 describes how most belief systems may be classes as either Hebrew (relational, free, open, dynamic, empathic) or Greek (solitary, fixed, closed, absolute) thinking, and how antitrinitarian perceptions may serve as a gate to pantheism. Chapter 5 traces the picture that the Old Testament paints of God, which Gibson describes as covenantal Trinitarianism. Chapter 6 focuses on two Old Testament passages (Deuteronomy 30 and Proverbs 8) and how they describe God’s activity prior to Jesus’ incarnation in communicating in love to all human beings. Chapter 7 explores a number of Old Testament passages that present two Yahwehs, one invisible to human sight and in heaven; the other one visibly and actively engaged on earth. Chapter 8 explains that whether one believes God to be “an indivisible social unit” or “a solitary self” has tremendous implications for the nature of Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross: Either it was the ultimate manifestation of God’s self-sacrificing, other-centered love, or it is evidence for His inability or unwillingness to sacrifice Himself for His creatures. Chapter 9 shows how antitrinitarianism presupposes a hierarchical perception of relationships, often resulting in hierarchical human relationships modelled on a belief that a hierarchy exists among the divine persons. Chapter 10 is a concluding reflection on the church as “the covenantal community” whose view of God inevitably influences its view of the church’s nature, identity, and mission.

The Heavenly Trio is a superb study of the doctrine of God as it was perceived by Ellen White and early Adventists, sensitive to their real concern for God as a distinct relational being, in contrast to theological views that either negated such a relationship (modalism) or dissolved the unity and harmony between them (tritheism). Gibson appropriately portrays how diligent

Bible study moved Adventists past various philosophical pitfalls and took them to a truly biblical perspective regarding the heavenly trio. This sequel to *The Sonship of Christ* is a call for Adventists to comprehend and experience divine relational, covenantal dynamics.

A few points of critique may be mentioned here:

Although it is true that Adventists have traditionally defined Kellogg's spiritualistic teachings about God as *pantheism*, it was actually a form of *panentheism*. While *pantheism* suggests that God is the universe, implying that one may worship nature/God, *panentheism* suggests instead that God is everywhere present in the universe, denying that God is synonymous with the universe, and objecting to the worship of creation. Gibson fails to distinguish between the two, and as a result simplifies the issues at stake. Modern readers may be surprised why any serious Adventist would fall prey to pantheism, yet Kellogg's views were actually an exaggeration of the immanence of God, implying that God (or the Holy Spirit) is present in every person, including wicked people, and all creatures, such as spiders, ants, snakes, etc. This view is very different from Ellen White's perspective of God's creative power in the universe, which to the careless observer may look similar to Kellogg's *panentheism*. Ellen White did not say that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, individually or collectively, were present in every animate being. By blurring the distinction between *pantheism* and *panentheism*, one may not realize the real danger of Kellogg's spiritualistic views, even for modern Adventists.

Besides his failure to distinguish between those philosophical perspectives, Gibson also fails to distinguish properly between Arianism and semi-Arianism. In describing the teachings of Arius (A.D. 256-336), he states that Arius believed in the begottenness of the Son from the Father, implying that the Son held an inferior divine status. However, this is neither an accurate description of Arius's view nor of Arianism. Arius likely taught that Christ was a created being who was granted by God an exalted position ("Son" is a title) but that He was not a divine being, to which Athanasius and the Nicene Creed (A.D. 325) replied that He was "begotten, not made"

and, as a result, He was "God from God" (modern translation). The early Adventist pioneers generally objected to the first view and would have endorsed the second view, except for its philosophical assumptions—since God is timeless and immaterial, the Son is (continually/eternally) begotten in the eternal present—that were not expressly stated in the Nicene Creed but implied by those drafting it. Since the Adventist pioneers generally agreed with the idea of the Son's divine begottenness but reasoned that this referred to a one-time event in the past rather than a continually occurring event (implying that He had a beginning/origin in time); they were technically semi-Arians, not Arians. Regardless, Gibson is correct in his observation that the Adventist pioneers inadvertently maintained some aspects of the Greek philosophical assumptions.

While not every reader may be convinced by the links that Gibson attempts to outline between antitrinitarianism and pantheism, most readers will leave the reading of the book with a deeper understanding of the developments in early Adventist history on the subject, a better perception of the real issues at stake in the antitrinitarian conflicts that are currently ravaging congregations, and a greater appreciation for the self-sacrificing, other-centered love of God. The book may be commended to readers as one of the most relatable and beautiful treatments of the Adventist doctrine of the Trinity. ☪

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