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# **The Development of the Church of God (Seventh Day)'s Christology**

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Few doctrinal discussions have evoked more controversy within the ranks of the Church of God (Seventh Day) than the subject of the pre-existence of Jesus Christ. In the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the church was divided between two positions regarding Jesus' pre-existence. Jacob Brinkerhoff, editor of the *Advocate*, observed in the June 28, 1888, issue: "On the subject of the pre-existence of Christ before being born into the world, the readers of the *Advocate* are divided on both sides of it." Sometimes the debate became so heated that Brinkerhoff would suspend publication of articles on the subject for a period of time.

The two positions being argued in the pages of the *Advocate* on the pre-existence of Christ were Ebionism, also known as Adoptionism, and Arianism.

Ebionism makes Jesus exclusively human. Although it regards Him as Messiah, it advocates that Jesus was the natural son of Joseph and Mary, and became the Son of God by adoption.

Arianism teaches that Jesus came into being sometime in eternity past. There was a time when He did not exist. He is not fully God, although he is God-like. He is not a man although he is a creature. Arianism, while intending to maintain the unity of the godhead actually results in polytheism. If Jesus is not of the same substance as the Father and does not share His eternality, then there are two gods—a lesser and a greater one.

Where did these theories come from? Who fostered these thoughts that became a part of the theological heritage of the Church of God (Seventh Day)?

The Christian Connexion (Church) is largely responsible for both schools of thought in the Church of God. The Connexion came into being in the early 1800's. It was characterized by four things: its leadership, while uneducated but sincere, rejected all sectarian names and theological labels; it considered Christian character and conduct to be of greater value than doctrine; it rejected organizational structure above local congregations except for its annual, inspirational and fellowship connexions (conferences), from which it derived its name, and it was anti-Trinitarian. The Connexion comprised about ten percent of the adherents of William Miller's, Advent Movement. However, while the Connexion was not Sabbath keeping, men who ultimately became Sabbath keepers and were major participants in the organization of Sabbath keeping churches were greatly influenced by the Connexion's anti-Trinitarian teaching. James White and Joseph Bates, major participants in establishing the Seventh Day Adventist Church, were members of the Connexion and contra-Trinitarians. Our earliest founder, Gilbert Cranmer, left the Methodist Church to affiliate with the Connexion over the doctrine of the Trinity long before he became an Adventist and a Sabbath keeper. It was Cranmer's influence and that of others who sympathized with the Connexion's anti-Trinitarian position that helped to establish the earliest Christology of the Church of God (Seventh Day).

E G Branch, Hartford, Michigan, confidant and co-worker with Cranmer asked a series of questions in the October 10, 1871, issue of the *Hope of Israel*, predecessor to the *Advocate*, which revealed the church's earliest thoughts about the pre-existence of Jesus.

"Will those who believe in the pre-existence of Christ please answer the following questions:

1. How could Christ pre-exist and be the fruit of David's loins according to the flesh (Acts 2:30)?
2. Was Christ the seed of the woman that should bruise thy head [sic], spoken of in Genesis 3:15?
3. If he was, how could he pre-exist and be the seed of the woman or Abraham's seed (Galatians 3:16)?

4. Did Christ exist before he was begotten by the Virgin Mary, as a literal or conscious being (John 1:14)?”

Branch is arguing for Ebionism! His questions are a carbon copy of the questions asked by other members of the Connexion. “Is Christ older than his mother, Mary?” “Can a son be his own father?” “How can a son be as old as his father?” These questions were common to at least a branch of the Connexion that subscribed to a “materialistic philosophy,” which understood deity in materialistic terms. Miles Grant, of the then contra-Trinitarian Advent Christian Church, the successor of the Connexion, and an ardent supporter of this theory insisted that only material things really exist. He considered “immaterial substance” a contradiction of terms. According to Grant, God exists therefore He must be a material being. The Holy Spirit is an immaterial influence that comes from a material God. The Son of God is also a material person who came into existence in the womb of the Virgin Mary (*Alpha and Omega*, Henceforth Publications, Lenox, Massachusetts).

The earliest doctrinal statement adopted by the Church of God in 1888, just four years after the General Conference was organized, subscribed to the same “materialistic philosophy.” *Articles of Faith*, Number 1, read: “We believe that God, the Creator, and Jesus Christ His Son, the Redeemer, are personal beings.” It is evident from the pages of the *Advocate* that the church advanced the idea that deity was “materialistic” and “experiential.” The observations of W C Long, editor of the *Advocate*, published in the April 4, 1893 issue, supported both concepts:

“We do not believe that God is without body parts or passion.

We do not believe that God, Christ and the Holy Spirit constitute one person.

Having stated what we not believe, we are now ready to say something about what we do believe.

We believe in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and that they are one in the plan of salvation and redemption of man. That the Father is a real personality the scriptures clearly declare [sic] and contradicts the creeds which say that God is without body parts or passion . . . He is a real personality as Christ who was here on earth, who walked up and down the hilly country of Judea and who prayed to the Father that the disciples

might be one as they were one. If it is true that God, Christ and the Holy Spirit are one person, then Christ prayed that the disciples might all merge into one big disciple, for he desired that the same oneness should exist among the disciples that existed between him and the Father. The oneness desired was not that of a personality but oneness of action and purpose.”

It must be observed from the 1888, *Articles of Faith* and Long’s commentary that the Church of God did not believe that God is Spirit. It taught that God was physical. This position changed the theological debate from the Trinity to the nature of deity. Of course, if God is not Spirit, then everything ascribed to deity may be understood in human terms. That is exactly what our early pioneers were doing. That is the reason that their question “How can Christ be older than his mother?” made sense to them. That is the reason that some ministers expressed doubt in the existence of the Holy Spirit.

Henry E Carver, a pioneer layman from Iowa, defended the Arian view of the pre-existence of Christ in the *Advocate* of June 28, 1881. He was answering an article by Brinkerhoff, which denied Christ’s pre-existence. Carver denied the “materialistic philosophy” and advanced Arianism:

“Viewing the subject from a merely human standpoint, your conclusion would seem to be incontestable . . . I suppose that no one will claim that Jesus ‘as the seed of the woman’ did exist before his mother; but that if he did have a personal existence it was in some other form, or with some other nature.

‘Surely, Surely, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am’ (John 8:58)

‘I came forth from the Father and came into the world. Again, I leave the world and go to the Father’ (John 16:28).

‘I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do. And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was’ (John 17:4,5).”

Carver was not alone in defending the pre-existence of Christ. A C Long, Missouri, first president of the General Conference, wrote for the August 17, 1886, issue of the *Advocate*, defending Christ’s pre-existence.

“‘I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright and morning Star,’ Revelation 22:16. It is

very clearly revealed in Scripture that Christ is a descendant of David through Mary his Mother; and also that he is the Son of God, and as such had a personal existence with his Father before the world was created."

A F Dugger, an Ebionist, and former minister for the Advent Christian Church, affiliated with the Church of God in 1874. He became the first vice-president of the General Conference in 1884. Dugger answered Long's comments in the October 12, 1886, *Advocate*:

"The texts referred to by Brother Long are only inferential; this is the most that can be claimed for them. Our rule is and always has been that inferences cannot set aside positive testimony . . . The clear testimony on this point . . . the very foundation of the Sonship is . . . Christ is 'the seed of woman' (Genesis 3:15) . . . Now if Christ existed as a personal, conscious being prior to the creation of man, then he existed separate and apart from the human race. This being true, we ask, How can he be in any sense the

'Seed of the woman?' It must be evident to all that in no sense could he be her seed, since he existed ages before she did, and even created her; so the promise that he should be the 'seed of the woman' is unworthy of credence."

This debate wound down with the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. As pioneer ministers grew older and began to pass away, the intense debate over the pre-existence of Christ faded into other interests.

In 1914, Andrew N Dugger, son of A F Dugger, became president of the General Conference and editor of the *Bible Advocate*. He published a series of forty doctrinal statements in 1917. Subsequently, they replaced those adopted in 1888, and became the belief statements of the General Conference, Stanberry, Missouri, and were unchanged until 1949. Dugger made several observations about God and Christ but only offered two statements on the Godhead:

"3. We believe in God the Father, the Creator of heaven and earth.

REASON: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth'—Genesis 1:1."

"4. We believe that Christ is the Son of God. That after his death, burial and resurrection he ascended to heaven and is now at the right hand of the throne of God.

REASON: . . . This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased'—Matthew 3:17.

'He was received up into heaven and sat on the right hand of God'—Mark 16:19."

There was no mention of the Holy Spirit, nor did Dugger's statements deal with the pre-existence of Christ. However, the "materialistic philosophy" of the 1888 statements was absent.

If we look at the doctrinal statements provided by Dugger to the Conference organized on November 4, 1933, in Salem, West Virginia, we notice a slight change of thought. The three statements are quoted here from the *Doctrinal Points of Faith of the Church of God*, which stated: ". . . the following points are essential to our faith:

(2) THAT Jehovah alone is God, the Creator of heaven, the earth, the sea and all therein. Gen. 1:1; Jer. 10:10,12; Eph. 3:9; Heb. 1:10; Rev. 10:6.

(3) THAT Jesus of Nazareth is the only begotten Son of God, conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, and is our Lord and Savior and Redeemer. Matt. 1:18-21; 3:17; Luke 1:28-35; John 3:16.

(5) THAT the Holy Spirit is the Comforter, which abides in the believer and is manifest by power, the fruit of the Spirit, as in Acts 2<sup>nd</sup> Chapter [sic], and Galatians 5:22-26. Manifestations regulated according to 1 Cor. 14<sup>th</sup> Chapter."

These statements served the Salem Conference until the Stanberry—Salem merger in August 1949.

In anticipation of the merger of the churches in 1949, the ministerial bodies of Stanberry and Salem met in Fairview, Oklahoma, in February 1948, to work out the details for a united church. While in this meeting, they developed a new statement of belief which was ultimately adopted by the united church. The pre-existence of Christ was included in this statement as a doctrine of the Church of God (Seventh Day) for the first time in its history.

"3. Jesus, the Son of God: Jesus of Nazareth is the only begotten Son of God, conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He is the Christ, or Messiah, sent from God to be our Savior and Redeemer. John 3:16; 1 John 4:9; John 1:18; 6:65; 4:25, 26; Matt.1:18-25; 14:33; 16:16; Isa. 7:14; Luke 1:26-36; 2:6-32; 4:14-21; Acts 4:12; Titus 2:14."

"23. Pre-existence of Christ: We believe that

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Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was in the plan of salvation before the foundation of the world. He was the Word spoken of in

John 1:1-2, and His birth of the virgin [sic] Mary was in fulfillment of, 'And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.' John 1:1, 2 and 14; 8:57, 58; Gen. 11:7; John 17:5; Col. 1:16-18."

The Church of God (Seventh Day) has arrived at its present juncture as a result of an ongoing discussion of its Christology. Our current debate began with an informal discussion on Jesus and His role in the Godhead in the Ministerial Council held in Boise, Idaho, in 1982. Elder Calvin Burrell made a presentation in which he coined the term "binatarian" as a description of what he conceived the position of the Church of God was on the subject of the Godhead at that time. He expressed that God is binary (two equals) rather than triune.

Subsequently, there were informational discussions on the nature of the Godhead in at least two sessions of the International Ministerial Congress held in Mexico.

A most significant development occurred in the meeting of the International Ministerial Congress in 1994. The brethren from Mexico presented a resolution intended to interpret the phrase "only begotten Son" in Section 3, of the Congress' *Statement of Faith*, to mean: "Jesus Christ was created by God in eternity." They argued the Arian position that Christ pre-existed, but not eternally.

A substitute motion was offered with the intent of interpreting the phrase, "only begotten" more comprehensively in two parts:

"In regard to nature, the phrase indicates the full deity of Christ. Through the begetting, the Son consists of the same nature, substance, or stuff as the Father. The term "begotten" by definition, makes the Son divine because the One from whom He was begotten is divine. Since the Son is of the same substance as the Father, He is an equal member of the Godhead and shares with the Father the nature, attributes, and title of God."

"In regard to position, the phrase, "only begotten," by definition indicates the relationship of the Son to the Father. The term "begotten" by definition, places the Son under the Father's authority . . . However, the subordination of the Son does not make Him a second or separate "god." By nature the Son remains equal to the Father, sharing with Him the divine substance of

the Godhead. Although the Father and Son differ in role and position, the equality in nature of Father and Son preserves the oneness of the Godhead."

The adoption of this interpretation by the Congress was historic. It was the first time in the Church of God's, then 136 year, (1858-1994) history that the Church of God officially validated Jesus' equality with the Father in its Christology.

In its meeting of 1996, the North American Ministerial Council, Beaver Creek, Colorado, amended its *Doctrinal Beliefs* statement Number 3, entitled "Jesus Christ, the Son," to reflect the action of the Congress. It added the sentence, "He is of the same substance as the Father," to make the statement read, "Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God. He is of the same substance as the Father. Before time began, He existed with the Father, shared the Father's glory, and participated in creation . . ." The intent of the amended statement was to reflect the interpretation adopted by the Congress two years previously. By the adoption of this amendment the Council agreed with the Congress that Jesus is an equal member of the Godhead and shares the nature, attributes and title of God with the Father.

The Church of God (Seventh Day) has come a long ways in its ongoing search for the truth about Jesus. It has gone from Ebionism through Arianism to the full recognition that Jesus is God, the Son, and reigns with His Father as one God.

The Church of God's open creed made this marvelous journey in its search for the truth about Jesus possible. It encourages and permits the Church's ministry to reinterpret its doctrinal position as it develops a greater understanding of God's Word, led by the Holy Spirit.