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Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

**DEMISE OF SEMI-ARIANISM AND ANTI-TRINITARIANISM
IN ADVENTIST THEOLOGY, 1888-1957**

A Research Paper

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by

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PREFACE

One of the remarkable aspects of the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the development of its position of the trinity and the deity of Christ. These doctrines did not become normative in the church until the middle of the twentieth century. The period of development spanned from about 1888 to about 1957. While several research papers have studied the pre-1900 Adventist view on the deity of Christ and the trinity,¹ little has been done on the crucial period from 1900 to about 1950.

The purpose of this paper is to chronologically study the progressive change in Seventh-day Adventist beliefs from a semi-arian and anti-trinitarian perspective, to the "Orthodox" Christian position. The period studied will run from 1888 to the publication of the book *Questions on Doctrine* in 1957. For the purpose of completeness, a brief sketch will be provided on the period before 1888. The nature of the Holy Spirit will be considered only briefly for the purpose of demonstrating changes that occurred. No systematic study will be given to Ellen White's theology since this has been done by others. Due to the nature of the quarter system, research was limited to a representative survey of materials on the topic from the James White Library. If time had allowed,

¹Erwin Roy 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); Russell Holt, "The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination: Its Rejection and Acceptance," term paper, Andrews University, June 2, 1969; Christy Mathewson Taylor, "The Doctrine of the Personality of the Holy Spirit as Taught by the Seventh-day Adventist Church up to 1900" (B.D. thesis, Andrews University, 1953).

research at the General Conference Archives would have undoubtedly provided helpful additional insights.

For the purpose of this paper, the following working definitions will apply. These working definitions are not intended to be a complete statement or even precisely accurate.

- Trinitarianism:** The belief that the Godhead consists of three self-existent persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who are united as one God.
- Arianism:** The belief that Christ is a created being.
- Semi-arianism:** The belief that Christ, the Son of God is “born” or “begotten” of the Father in the sense that He derived His existence from Him. The relationship of the Father to the Son is different than any other in that both share the same essence.
- “Old view”:** The essentially semi-arian view that Christ is not self-existent like the Father but rather has a derived existence. Therefore Christ had a beginning when He came forth from the Father, much as a child is born to a parent. The Holy Spirit is generally viewed as an influence or presence from the Father.
- “New view”:** The belief in the trinitarian perspective that all three persons of the Godhead are equal and “very God.” This means that they are equally self-existent and eternal, sharing the same essence.
- “Spirit of Prophecy”:** The belief that God spoke to prophets and used them as his messengers to guide and correct the church. Adventists believe that Ellen G. White received this gift, therefore her messages are sometimes referred to as the “Spirit of Prophecy.”

CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND: ADVENTIST VIEWS ON THE DEITY OF CHRIST AND THE TRINITY UNTIL ABOUT 1888

Up until the turn of the twentieth century Seventh-day Adventist literature was almost without exception opposed to the eternal deity of Jesus and anti-trinitarian. During the earlier years some even held to an Arian view that Christ was a created being. This chapter will briefly look at the views of some notable early Adventists.

William Miller, being a Baptist, was a trinitarian. He wrote, "I believe in one living and true God, and that there are three persons in the Godhead. . . . The three persons of the Triune God are connected."² Joshua V. Himes, a close associate of William Miller, was of the Christian Connection persuasion. The Christian church almost unanimously rejected the trinitarian doctrine as unscriptural. Himes wrote, "There is one living and true God, the Father almighty, who is unoriginated, independent and eternal . . . and that this God is one spiritual intelligence, one infinite mind, ever the same, never varying."³ Millerite Adventists were focused on the soon coming of Jesus and did not consider it important to argue on subjects such as the trinity.

²Sylvester Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller, Generally Known as a Lecturer on the Prophecies, and the Second Coming of Christ* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1853), 77-78.

³Joshua V. Himes, "Christian Connection," in *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. J. Newton Brown (Brattleboro, Vermont: Brattleboro Typographic Company, 1838), 363.

Two of the principal founders of the Seventh-day Adventist church, Joseph Bates and James White, like Himes, had been members of the Christian Connection and rejected the doctrine of the trinity. Joseph Bates wrote of his views, "Respecting the trinity, I concluded that it was an impossibility for me to believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, was also the Almighty God."⁴

James White wrote: "Here we might mention the Trinity, which does away the personality of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ."⁵ Arthur White, grandson of James White, correctly argued that while James White rejected the doctrine of the trinity he did believe in the three great powers in heaven.⁶ The first Hymn book compiled by James White in 1849 contains the Doxology, "Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."⁷ While James White was opposed to the trinity he did not believe that Christ was inferior to the Father. In 1877 he wrote, "The inexplicable trinity that makes the godhead three in one and one in three, is bad enough; but the ultra Unitarianism that makes Christ inferior to the Father is worse."⁸

Uriah Smith, long time editor of the *Review and Herald*, believed that Jesus was a created being. He was "the first created being, dating his existence far back before any

⁴Joseph Bates, *The Autobiography of Elder Joseph Bates* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1868), 205.

⁵James White, "Preach the Word," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, December 11, 1855, 85.

⁶Arthur L. White to Hedy Jemison, July 2, 1969.

⁷James White, comp., *Hymns for God's Peculiar People, That Keep the Commandments of God, and the Faith of Jesus* (Oswego, N.Y.: Richard Oliphant, 1849), 47.

⁸James White, "Christ Equal with God," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, November 29, 1877, 72.

other created being or thing, next to the self-existent and eternal God.”⁹ By 1881 Smith had changed his view and concluded that Jesus was “begotten” and not created.¹⁰

A selective list of Adventist who either spoke against the trinity and/or rejected the eternal deity of Christ include J. B. Frisbie,¹¹ J. N. Loughborough,¹² R. F. Cottrell,¹³ J. N. Andrews,¹⁴ D. M. Canright,¹⁵ and J. H. Waggoner.¹⁶ W. A. Spicer told A. W. Spalding that his father, after becoming a Seventh-day Adventist (he was formerly a Seventh Day Baptist minister), “grew so offended at the anti-trinitarian atmosphere in Battle Creek that he ceased preaching.”¹⁷

In surveying the writings of the various pioneers, certain concerns appear frequently. In rejecting the trinity, some saw the “orthodox” Christian view as pagan tritheism. Others argued that the trinity degraded the person-hood of Christ and the Father by blurring the distinction between them. It should be noted that while the early positions

⁹Uriah Smith, *Thoughts, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Revelation* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1865), 59.

¹⁰Uriah Smith, *Thoughts, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Revelation* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1881), 74.

¹¹J. B. Frisbie, “The Seventh Day Sabbath Not Abolished,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 7, 1854, 50.

¹²J. N. Loughborough, “Questions for Brother Loughborough,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, November 5, 1861, 184.

¹³R. F. Cottrell, “The Trinity,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 6, 1869, 10-11.

¹⁴[J. N. Andrews], “Melchisedec,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 7, 1869, 84. This is an unsigned article, J. N. Andrews is the editor of the paper.

¹⁵D. M. Canright, “The Personality of God,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, August 29, 1878, 73-74; September 5, 1878, 81-82; September 12, 1878, 89-90; September 19, 1878, 97.

¹⁶J. H. Waggoner, *The Atonement: An Examination of the Remedial System in the Light of Nature and Revelation* (Oakland, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1884), 164-179.

¹⁷A. W. Spalding to H. C. Lacey, June 2, 1947.

on the trinity and deity of Christ were flawed, there was a sincere attempt to oppose certain legitimate errors. Unfortunately the positions they were opposing were not generally held by American trinitarians. Early Adventists strove to be true to Scripture. When they read “first-born of every creature” they took it at face value. Other Bible phrases like “only begotten Son of God” also were understood on a literal English level.

During the nineteenth century there was a progression of understanding on the deity of Christ. By about 1880 the idea of Christ as a created being faded away and the concept of a “begotten” divine Son of God became the standard position. Christ was described as the Creator with the Father.

The purpose of this brief background has been to show that during the first decades of the Seventh-day Adventist Church the doctrine of the trinity and the eternal deity of Christ were almost unanimously dismissed as inconsistent with Scripture and reason.

CHAPTER II

A TIME OF TRANSITION: 1888 TO 1900

This chapter will explore the twelve-year period from 1888 to 1900. We will first consider the usage of the term “trinity” and a few examples of comments on Christ’s divine nature. The period after the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference saw a new emphasis on Jesus and the plan of salvation. This emphasis naturally led to consideration of his deity and what it meant to the redemption of humanity. A. T. Jones is among the first to use vocabulary which suggested that Christ was eternally pre-existent. A survey of his comments and a few others will demonstrate the new perspective. Finally we will consider the important year of 1898 with the publication of two contrasting books, *Looking Unto Jesus* and *Desire of Ages*.

Samuel Spear on the Trinity

The first positive reference to the term “trinity” in Adventist literature was by Samuel Spear, a non-Adventist, in a reprint from the New York *Independent* of November 14, 1889. It was published as number 90 in the Bible Students Library series in 1892. The title, *Bible Doctrine of the Trinity*, implied that the work would be sympathetic to the doctrine of the trinity. Upon reading the tract one finds almost nothing which nineteenth-century Adventists would have found objectionable. Spear argues strongly that Christ was

“subordinate to God the Father”¹⁸ and that the Father was “superior” to Christ.¹⁹ Spear even refuses to require the eternal pre-existence of Christ. “The theory of the eternal generation of the Son by the Father,” he wrote, “is an effort to be wise, not only above what is written, but also beyond the possibilities of human knowledge.”²⁰ Spear further argued against the idea of tri-theism, and for the separate personalities of the Father and Son, both important concepts in Adventist literature up to 1892. With the exception of the Spear tract, the word “trinity” was carefully avoided in Adventist literature up to that point in time.

Two Examples of Writers on Christ as the Creator

Much of the Seventh-day Adventist literature for the 1890s is vague and non-specific regarding Christ’s eternity, although with increasing regularity Christ is magnified as a creator who existed before all other created beings. The 1896 *Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly* and an article by G. I. Butler are here given as examples.

1896 Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly

The 1896 Sabbath School lessons on the Gospel of John provided a wonderful opportunity to comment on Christ’s pre-existence. But like so many other Adventist statements, the matter is left vague and unanswered. The lesson for April 4 had the following note, “In John 1:1-3 Christ is called God, and the One by whom all things were created. All creative power was manifested through Christ, therefore, all the power to

¹⁸Samuel Spear, *The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity*, in *The Bible Students Library*, no. 90 (Oakland Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Company, 1892), 3.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 4.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 11-12.

create all things was vested in Him.”²¹ The little phrase, “vested in Him,” suggests that Christ received the power to create from the Father. In the July 4 lesson on the first chapter of the gospel of John, the meaning of “in the beginning was the Word” is not discussed.²²

G. I. Butler

In 1893, G. I. Butler, past president of the General Conference, stopped just short of declaring Jesus eternal with the Father. After showing that the God of Israel declared himself as the “I Am” in the wilderness to Moses, he wrote, “They [the words ‘I Am’] seem intended to point out the eternity and self-existence of God.”²³ Butler then goes on to ask, “Does not the name of the Father belong also to the only begotten Son of the Father, in whom all the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily?”²⁴

A. T. Jones Affirms Christ’s Eternal Pre-Existence

In the aftermath of 1888 there was a new interest in Jesus and righteousness by faith. E. J. Waggoner (although semi-arian) and A. T. Jones in their publications and sermons repeatedly emphasized the idea that in Christ was the “fullness of the Godhead bodily.” A. T. Jones gave emphasis in the 1895 General Conference Bulletin to this phrase from Colossians 2:9.

²¹“Life in Christ and the Saint’s Inheritance,” *International Sabbath School Quarterly*, second quarter, 1896, 4.

²²“Gospel by John: Chapters 1 to 6:14,” *International Sabbath School Quarterly*, third quarter, 1896, 6-8.

²³G. I. Butler, “Christ the God of Israel,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 12, 1893, 585.

²⁴*Ibid.*

Possibly for the first time in Adventist literature (with the exception of Ellen White) Jones described Christ as “eternal.” “The eternal Word consented to be made flesh. God became man.”²⁵ Two days later, speaking of Christ, Jones said: “In view of eternity before and eternity after, thirty-three years is not such an infinite sacrifice after all. But when we consider that he sank his nature in our human nature to all eternity,—that is a sacrifice.”²⁶ These statements are among the earliest seeming to affirm the eternal pre-existence of Christ.

W. W. Prescott joined Waggoner and Jones in preaching on Christ and righteousness by faith. Yet he did not initially accept the eternity of Christ. Prescott held to the traditional Adventist view, stating: “As Christ was twice born,—once in eternity, the only begotten of the Father, and again here in the flesh, thus uniting the divine with the human in that second birth.”²⁷ As we shall see in later chapters, Prescott became one of the principal exponents of the eternal pre-existence of the Son of God.

A. T. Jones avoided referring to the Godhead as the “trinity.” Yet in 1899 he wrote a very nearly trinitarian statement, “God is one. Jesus Christ is one. The Holy Spirit is one. And these three are one: there is no dissent nor division among them.”²⁸

²⁵ A. T. Jones, “The Third Angel’s Message Number 17,” *General Conference Bulletin*, February 25, 1895, 332.

²⁶ A. T. Jones, “The Third Angel’s Message Number 20,” *General Conference Bulletin*, February 27, 1895, 382.

²⁷ W. W. Prescott, “The Christ for Today,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 4, 1896, 232.

²⁸ A. T. Jones, editorial, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 10, 1899, 24.

1898: Two Significant Books

The year 1898 was pivotal in the developing understanding of Christ's eternal divine nature. Two major publications appeared on Christ. Uriah Smith brought out *Looking Unto Jesus* and Ellen G. White published *Desire of Ages*. These two books both uplifted Christ but were diametrically opposed on the subject of the eternal deity of God the Son.

Looking Unto Jesus

Over the years Uriah Smith's view on Christ's divine nature progressed from making Christ a created being to almost ascribing to Christ complete equality of existence with the Father. In contrast with the ambiguity of many other Adventist authors, Smith was willing to clearly express his views. In *Looking Unto Jesus* he wrote, "God alone is without beginning. At the earliest epoch when a beginning could be,--a period so remote that to finite minds it is essentially eternity,--appeared the Word."²⁹

Smith's statement is very similar to E. J. Waggoner's in his 1890 book *Christ and His Righteousness*, "There was a time when Christ proceeded forth and came from God, from the bosom of the Father (John 8:42, 1:18), but that time was so far back in the days of eternity that to finite comprehension it was practically without beginning."³⁰ As one reads Smith's book, it focuses on Jesus as the center of the sanctuary and the only hope of salvation.

²⁹Uriah Smith, *Looking Unto Jesus or Christ in Type and Antitype* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Review and Herald Publishing Company, 1898), 10.

³⁰E. J. Waggoner, *Christ and His Righteousness* (Oakland, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Company, 1890), 21-22.

Desire of Ages

Sometimes Ellen White's writings can be interpreted in conflicting ways and misconstrued. But in *Desire of Ages* Ellen White wrote with such clarity on the eternal deity of Christ that it was bound to impact Adventist theology. The following are probably the two clearest statements on the topic, "[Christ] announced Himself to be the self-existent One, He who had been promised to Israel, 'whose goings forth have been from of old, from the days of eternity,'" "In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived."³¹ Curiously, for years after the publication of *Desire of Ages*, the church generally ignored these statements. There continued to be plenty of oblique statements which stopped short of taking a clear position. Also there are inferential comments which suggest the traditional view.

M. L. Andreasen and *Desire of Ages*

M. L. Andreasen questioned whether Ellen White had actually written some of the statements in *Desire of Ages* and other of her books. During 1909, Andreasen spent some three months at Elmshaven, California. While at Elmshaven he spoke with Ellen White and evaluated her writings in their original handwritten form. This had a lifelong positive effect on his attitude towards Ellen White and her writings. One book he especially examined was *Desire of Ages*. He wrote,

In her own handwriting I saw the statements which I was sure she had not written—could not have written. Especially was I struck with the now familiar quotation in *Desire of Ages*, page 530: "In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived." This statement at that time was revolutionary

³¹Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1898), 530.

and compelled a complete revision of my former view—and that of the denomination—on the deity of Christ.³²

Andreasen validated that his view on the eternal deity of Christ changed as a result of Ellen White's *Desire of Ages* statement. As the rest of this paper will show, it took quite a number of years for a change to actually be accepted by the denomination at large. Ellen White wrote with great clarity on the divine nature of Christ and the personality of the Holy Spirit, more than any other Adventist writer of her time.

Help Ellen White Received in Writing *Desire of Ages*

In writing *Desire of Ages* Ellen White had help from many sources. Most significant was her able assistant, Marian Davis. Davis compiled material from Ellen White's previous writings. She also gathered material for reference from various sources. Bible teacher and minister H. C. Lacey recollected that Marian Davis gathered from W. W. Prescott and Lacey himself, material on Christ as the "I Am."³³ Ellen White wrote on this subject in the first chapter of *Desire of Ages*.³⁴

While traveling to Australia in September 1895, Lacey gave study to the subject of the personality and work of the Holy Spirit. He presented the results at a convention in Cooranbong in 1896. Marian Davis and A. G. Daniells were present. Lacey remembered Davis taking copious notes. Daniells, while uncertain whether he agreed, expressed "conservative appreciation." When *Desire of Ages* was published, Daniells called Lacey's attention to page 671 where the Holy Spirit is called "the third person of the Godhead."

³²M. L. Andreasen, "Testimony of M. L. Andreasen," October 15, 1953, 3, Ellen G. White Estate Branch Office, Berrien Springs, Michigan. From Vesta Andreasen, daughter of M. L. Andreasen.

³³H. C. Lacey to L. E. Froom, August 30, 1945.

³⁴White, *Desire of Ages*, 24, 25.

Daniells then reminded Lacey of his talk in Australia and indicated that Lacey had been correct.³⁵ Lacey's letters to various ones on the background of the writing of *Desire of Ages* got him into some trouble with those who did not understand how inspiration operated in Ellen White's experience. Lacey never suggested that Ellen White was dependent upon him or Prescott for her concepts.³⁶

Frequently the struggle Ellen White faced was how to express the rich and profound themes of salvation as revealed in the life of Christ. Without a doubt she was at times helped in her expressions and vocabulary by others. The statement in *Desire of Ages*, page 530, is a loose quote from a book in her library written by John Cumming: "He [John the apostle] at once begins by asserting the Deity of Christ as God and Lord of all; and he states, 'In him was life,'—that is, original, unborrowed, underived."³⁷

Other Ellen G. White Statements on Christ and the Godhead

Ellen White made many statements before and after 1898 regarding the divine nature and pre-existence of Christ and the Godhead. While she never used the term "trinity" in her published writings, she repeatedly conveyed the concept. A selected chronological collection of her earlier statements is provided.

³⁵H. C. Lacey to L. E. Froom, August 30, 1945.

³⁶H. C. Lacey to Samuel Kaplan, July 24, 1936.

³⁷John Cumming, *Sabbath Evening Readings on the New Testament: St. John* (London: Arthur Hall, Virtue & Company, 1857), 6.

This injunction is from the eternal Son of God.³⁸

... Jesus said, "I and my Father are one." The words of Christ were full of deep meaning as he put forth the claim that he and the Father were of one substance, possessing the same attributes.³⁹

He was equal with God, infinite and omnipotent. . . . He is the eternal, self-existent Son.⁴⁰

That the transgressor might have another trial, that men might be brought into favor with God the Father, the eternal Son of God interposed Himself to bear the punishment of transgression.⁴¹

Christ is the pre-existent self-existent son of God. . . . In speaking of his pre-existence, Christ carries the mind back through dateless ages. He assures us that there never was a time when He was not in close fellowship with the eternal God.⁴²

Christ was God essentially, and in the highest sense. He was with God from all eternity, God over all, blessed forevermore.⁴³

The Father is all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and is invisible to mortal sight. The Son is all the fullness of the Godhead manifested. The Word of God declares Him to be "the express image of His person. . . ." There are three living persons of the heavenly trio; in the name of these three great powers -- the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit--those who receive Christ by living faith are baptized.⁴⁴

³⁸Ellen G. White, "Search the Scriptures, John 5:39," *Youth's Instructor*, August 31, 1887, 165.

³⁹Ellen G. White, "The True Sheep Respond to the Voice of the Shepherd," *Signs of the Times*, November 27, 1893, 54.

⁴⁰Ellen G. White, "The True High Priest," manuscript 101, 1897, 9.

⁴¹Ellen G. White, "The Truth Revealed in Jesus," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Feb. 8, 1898, 85.

⁴²Ellen G. White, "Resistance to Light, No. 3," *Signs of the Times*, Aug. 29, 1900, 2-3.

⁴³Ellen G. White, "The Word Made Flesh," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 5, 1906, 8.

⁴⁴Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church Containing Messages of Warning and Instruction to Seventh-day Adventists Regarding the Dangers Connected with the Medical Work*, Series B. No. 7 (Published for the Author, n.p., n.d.), 62-63.

Conclusion

The period following 1888 saw a new focus on Jesus as the “fullness of the Godhead bodily.” A. T. Jones, for example, began in his preaching during the 1890s to occasionally refer to Christ as the “eternal” Son of God.

The year 1898 was central to the development of Adventist understanding on Christ’s eternal pre-existence. In that year Uriah Smith’s *Looking Unto Jesus* and Ellen White’s *Desire of Ages* took opposite positions on Christ’s eternity. *Looking Unto Jesus* presented the traditional “old view” that Christ was “begotten” of the Father in the ages of eternity. *Desire of Ages* gave a “new view” that Jesus was the eternal self-existent second person of the Godhead. Ellen White’s position would be the one generally accepted by Seventh-day Adventists by the 1950s as will be seen in the following chapters.

CHAPTER III

FROM 1900 TO THE 1919 BIBLE CONFERENCE

During the first two decades of the twentieth century the church was divided in its position on the deity of Christ. The idea of Christ as the “eternal” Son appeared in print occasionally. The most prominent person to present the eternal pre-existence of Christ was W. W. Prescott. While some wrote in favor of the “new view,” others supported the “old view.”

W. W. Prescott’s 1902 Editorials in the *Review and Herald*

During the first decade of the twentieth century, W. W. Prescott played an important role in promoting Christ’s eternal deity. He was made editor of the *Review and Herald* in February 1902.⁴⁵ Almost immediately he began an editorial series entitled, “Studies in the Gospel Message.” Throughout this series, and in other articles, Prescott sought to lift up Jesus. In three articles toward the end of 1902 he emphasized the relationship of God the Father to God the Son.

September 2, 1902, Article

⁴⁵General Conference Committee Minutes for February 15, 1902. Cited in Gilbert Murrey Valentine, *William Warren Prescott: Seventh-day Adventist Educator* (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 1982), 351.

On September 2, 1902, Prescott began his article by describing what was meant by the term "I Am." Quoting William Smith's *Dictionary of the Bible* followed by his own comments, he wrote,

"He that is, 'the Being,' whose chief attribute is eternal existence." Thus when the Lord revealed himself as the Redeemer of his people from Egyptian bondage, he announced the name which emphasized his everlasting continuance.⁴⁶

He then proceeds to speak of Christ in the following terms, "eternal Word," "eternal being," and "eternal Son." The last couplet "eternal Son" he uses four times. There was little question left in the mind of the reader that Prescott believed Christ to be eternally pre-existent with the Father.

September 23, 1902, Article

On September 23, Prescott made a passing reference to Christ's divine nature. His explanation showed uncertainty, "Yet Adam, the created son, had not the same relationship to the Father as Christ the only begotten Son, who was born, or who simply *was* [italics original], the Son of God in eternal times that no human mind can fix or comprehend."⁴⁷ Continuing a little later in the article he wrote, "God the Father was in the eternal ages, and the Son also was, through whom came the creation." In this article, Prescott appears to be vacillating between Christ as self-existent and Christ as an eternal "begotten Son."

⁴⁶W. W. Prescott, "Studies in the Gospel Message," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 2, 1902, 4.

⁴⁷W. W. Prescott, "Our Place as Sons," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 23, 1902, 6.

December 3, 1902, Article

On December 3, Prescott spoke in a non-committal way of the view which attributed the origin of the name "Son of God" to a decree or determination rather than a derivation from the Father's essence. In his article Prescott called Christ the "eternal personal Wisdom of God."⁴⁸ Then throughout the rest of the article Prescott repeatedly refers to Christ as the "eternal Son."

W. W. Prescott continued as editor of the *Review and Herald* until 1909. During this period he repeatedly emphasized Christ and the gospel in his writing and made reference to the eternal deity of Christ.⁴⁹ Unfortunately Prescott became involved in the controversy over the meaning of the "daily" in Daniel 8. On this subject he and S. N. Haskell came head to head. Prescott advocated the new view and Haskell the traditional view. While it is unclear from the resources available for this paper, one wonders if the controversy also included Prescott's views on the eternal deity of Christ. As we shall see later, Haskell held to the "old view" on the deity of Christ. As a result of the "daily" conflict, Prescott was asked to step down as editor of the *Review and Herald*.⁵⁰

Prescott's conflicts while associated with the *Review and Herald* would plague him for the rest of his life. Many of the "old view" ministers ever after held him in suspicion. It is worth noting that both Prescott's views on the "daily" and the deity of Christ eventually became the accepted views of the church.

⁴⁸W. W. Prescott, "The Eternal Purpose," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, December 23, 1902, 4.

⁴⁹e. g ., W. W. Prescott, "Like unto His Brethren," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 21, 1904, 4.

⁵⁰Valentine, 389, 418.

Others on the Deity of Christ

Others besides W. W. Prescott affirmed the eternal pre-existence of the Son of God. There were also some who rejected the “new view.” First we will look at some clearer statements in favor of the eternal deity of Christ, then some vague uncertain statements, and finally the clearly “old view” positions of O. A. Johnson, and S. N. Haskell.

Clearer Statements Affirming the Eternal Deity of Christ

The following four examples of clearer statements have been chosen which seem to affirm the eternal deity of Christ. They include a statement by M. C. Wilcox, a week of prayer reading comment, and two Sabbath School lesson quarterly comments.

In a 1901 sermon M. C. Wilcox spoke of Christ as, “the eternal Son with the Father.”⁵¹ A beautiful, if not perfectly clear, statement regarding Christ appeared in the Week of Prayer Readings for December 1901,

As we gaze into the vaulted skies on a clear dark night, and behold the myriads of worlds above, and know that they are God’s, we can but fancy that in the eternity of the past, Jesus’ feet have trod their shores. We look into the eternity of the future, and there we behold the saints of God winging their flights from sphere to sphere.⁵²

The senior Sabbath School lesson for February 3, 1906, asked the following, “In what prophetic announcement is the eternal existence of Christ affirmed?”⁵³ The question

⁵¹M. C. Wilcox, “Sermon,” *General Conference Bulletin*, April 22, 1901, 400.

⁵²“Our Privilege in Giving,” *General Conference Bulletin*, December 26, 1901, 578.

⁵³“The Divinity of Christ,” *Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly Topical Studies*, January 1906, 12.

presupposes the reader's acceptance of the "new view." Unfortunately there are no records of who wrote this *Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly*.

The first quarter 1918 *Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly* written by F. D. Starr describes Christ as "the eternal Son, one with the Father."⁵⁴ Starr repeats this idea in one form or another several times.

Uncertain Statements Regarding the Eternal Deity of Christ

Three examples are given below of the type of statements which do not define either way whether Christ was eternally self-existent. In each of these, and most other quotes, one is left with the suspicion that the author believed the "old view."

About 1901 G. B. Starr published a series of illustrated Bible studies in Australia. His first chapter was entitled, "God with Us: The Pre-existence of Christ." He clearly argues that Jesus existed before all that was created. Yet he stopped short of declaring Christ eternal. Starr quotes Hebrews 13:8: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today and forever." Then Starr declared, "'Yesterday' means from eternity."⁵⁵ "From eternity" can mean either beginning at some point in eternity or it might mean without beginning. The meaning is left obscure.

H. Shultz in 1912 argued for the pre-existence of Christ, his place in the Godhead, and his creation of the world. He wrote, "Christ, the only begotten of the Father, the second person of the Godhead, who made all things. . . ." He refrained from clarifying whether Christ existed from all eternity. Quoting Colossians 1:14-16, which included "the

⁵⁴"Topical Bible Studies," *Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly*, first quarter, 1918, 3.

⁵⁵G. B. Starr, *Bible Studies: A Series of Illustrated Readings* (Melbourne: Signs Publishing Company, n.d), 7.

first-born of every creature,” he wrote, “Jesus existed before the world was, even before the angels.”⁵⁶ Shultz thus stopped short of declaring Christ eternal in his explanation.

A. T. Robinson wrote the following statement in the 1917 quarterly: “We may allow our thoughts to go back to that revealed ‘beginning,’ when only the self-existent Father and His only-begotten Son were in existence. God here inhabited eternity. . . . But in this eternity of the past, God was, and with Him was His Son—the Word.”⁵⁷

One is inclined to consider these two statements by G. B. Starr and A. T. Robinson and others like them to be expressions of the “old view.”

Clearer Statements Denying the Eternal Deity of Christ

Most of the “old view” statements denying the eternal pre-existence of Christ use certain scriptural phrases which suggest that Jesus was subject to his Father as a “begotten Son.” A representative selection of comments in this category are presented by O. A. Johnson and S. N. Haskell.

O. A. Johnson on the Relationship of the Father and Son

O. A. Johnson, published his popular *Bible Text-Book* in 1900. Ten years later he developed a *Bible Doctrines* lesson book which was revised in 1917 and 1921.

In his *Bible Text-Book*, Johnson does not give special treatment to the subject of the Godhead. He does offer a few observations on Christ’s divinity. He wrote the

⁵⁶H. Shultz, “The Preexistence of Christ,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, November 21, 1919, 7.

⁵⁷“Topical Bible Studies,” *Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly*, third quarter, 1917, 4. Confirmation of *Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly* authorship throughout this paper was given by Bert Haloviak of the General Conference, Archives and Statistics, Silver Spring, Maryland.

following, “Christ who was equal with the Father in creation,” “The Creator, Christ, put himself in man’s stead,” and “That which proves Christ to be God is the fact that he is the Son of God.”⁵⁸ In 1910, Johnson clarified his position further:

God the Father stands at the head of creation.⁵⁹

Christ is the only begotten son of the Father. Since Christ is the son of God, he must therefore be God like his Father, just the same as a human being must be a man like his own father.⁶⁰

He [Christ] existed with the Father before he was born of the virgin Mary, and even before all creation.⁶¹

In describing Christ, words like “eternal” and “self-existent” are absent. By comparing the Father and Christ to a human parent and child, Johnson makes almost explicit the idea that Christ was derived from God the Father at some point in eternity. In later editions of *Bible Doctrines*, Johnson makes God the Father above Christ. In 1917 he wrote: “God the Father is the first person of the Godhead, and, as such, he is the greatest.”⁶²

⁵⁸O. A. Johnson, *Bible Text-Book* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Review and Herald Publishing Company, 1900), 23, 41.

⁵⁹O. A. Johnson, *Bible Doctrines: Containing 150 Lessons on Creation, Government of God, Rebellion in Heaven, Fall of Man, Redemption, Prophecies, Millennium, End of Sinners and Satan, Paradise Restored, etc., etc.* (College Place Wash.: N.p., 1910), 13.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶²O. A. Johnson, *Bible Doctrines: Containing 150 Lessons on Creation, Government of God, Rebellion in Heaven, Fall of Man, Redemption, Prophecies, Millennium, End of Sinners and Satan, Paradise Restored, etc., etc.*, 4th rev. ed., (College Place, Wash.: N.p., 1917), 34. The 1921, 5th rev. ed. has the same statement.

O. A. Johnson on the Holy Spirit and Trinity

While the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is not the subject of this study, its relation to the doctrine of the trinity gives Johnson's view importance. Between 1900 and 1917, Johnson made a dramatic shift in his view on the personhood of the Holy Spirit. In the 1900 *Bible Text-Book* Johnson refers to the Holy Spirit as a "power" but not a person or individual. "What is the Holy Spirit?" he queried, "Ans.—The Bible says nothing definite about what the Holy Spirit is. . . . It seems to be a power proceeding from God the Father, coming to his children in the name of Christ."⁶³ Through the rest of the book, Johnson does not use a personal pronoun for the Holy Spirit but rather describes "it" as an "agency."

By 1910 Johnson had made some changes in his thinking as it pertains to the Holy Spirit. In *Bible Doctrines* he wrote, "The Holy Spirit is the third name in the trinity." Then he quotes *Desire of Ages*, 669, 671: "The Holy Spirit" is "the third person of the Godhead."⁶⁴ In the question section he asked: "What is the name of the three persons of the Godhead?" and "Is the Holy Spirit a Person?"⁶⁵ Even with the Ellen White quote and the questions, Johnson cannot bring himself to refer to the Spirit as "he." Throughout the section the Spirit is always "it." It is worth noting that in both the 1910 and in later editions Johnson used an unusual phrase, "The Holy Spirit is the third name in the trinity."

⁶⁶ This phrase seems to make the Holy Spirit devoid of personality. In the 1917 and

⁶³O. A. Johnson, *Bible Text-Book*, 71.

⁶⁴Johnson, *Bible Doctrines*, 1910, 15

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 16.

⁶⁶Johnson, *Bible Doctrines*, 1917; 37 and 1921; 37.

1921 editions of *Bible Doctrines* he changed the pronoun “it” to “he” in describing the Holy Spirit.

Johnson was not alone in being uncertain regarding the personhood of the Holy Spirit. As late as 1935, even W. C. White, Ellen White’s son and custodian of her writings, expressed his uncertainty regarding the personality of the Holy Spirit. He wrote of his practice, “I have thought best to refrain from discussion and have endeavored to direct my mind to matters easy to be understood.”⁶⁷

S. N. Haskell and the “First-born” Son of God

S. N. Haskell was an influential minister in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In 1919 he published his *Bible Handbook* which continued in print for many decades. In describing his book he wrote: “The ‘cream’ of the Bible studies printed in the Bible Training School [sic] during the last seventeen years is presented in this book, with other Bible studies not previously printed.”⁶⁸ In the handbook he gave scant, if any, reference to Christ’s deity, which is typical of authors which did not accept the “new” view. Haskell had clarified his position in 1914 when he published *Cross and Its Shadow*. He wrote the following of Christ: “God gave His First-born for the redemption of the world; and for that reason in God’s plan the first-born always inherited special privileges.”⁶⁹ Like Johnson, Haskell presented the idea of a “born” or “begotten” Son of God.

Conclusion

⁶⁷W. C. White to H. W. Carr, April 30, 1935.

⁶⁸S. N. Haskell, *Bible Handbook* (South Lancaster, Mass.: Bible Training School, 1919), 3.

⁶⁹S. N. Haskell, *The Cross and Its Shadow* (South Lancaster, Mass.: Bible Training School, 1914), 75.

From 1900 to 1919 opinion on the eternal self-existent deity of Christ remained split in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The use of the word “trinity” in describing God continued to be avoided in print except for rare exceptions. As editor of the *Review and Herald*, Prescott promoted the “new view” idea of Christ as eternal. Others also published similar sentiments. Various ministers either passively or actively opposed the “new view.” This division of opinion led to several important discussions at the 1919 Bible Conference which will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV

THE 1919 BIBLE CONFERENCE TO 1931

During the period from 1919 to 1931, the Church continued to be divided on the eternal deity of Christ and the trinity. In this chapter we will consider the discussions at the 1919 Bible Conference; W. W. Prescott's 1921 *Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly* and book, *The Doctrine of Christ*; the impact modern liberalism played on published statements regarding the deity of Christ; and F. M. Wilcox's 1931 statement of "Fundamental Beliefs."

1919 Bible Conference

The July 1-19, 1919 Bible Conference was an open exchange of ideas between a selected group of church leaders, editors, bible teachers, and history teachers. The purpose of the conference was to discuss questions and points of difference, particularly on the "eastern question." The frank discussions and controversial nature of some of the papers led A. G. Daniells, then president of the General Conference, to seal the transcripts. It was not until 1974 that they were found in the General Conference Archives.⁷⁰

⁷⁰Donald E. Mansell, "How the 1919 Bible Conference Transcript Was Found," July 6, 1975.

W. W. Prescott's Studies on "The Person of Christ"

The most prominent speaker throughout the conference was W. W. Prescott. His most lengthy presentations were a series of eight studies entitled "The Person of Christ."

In these largely devotional talks he touched on the subject of Christ's eternal deity:

We read in the first chapter of John's gospel, "In the beginning that Word was." There is a great difference in the way you read that. We have to have the beginning of things. To us, there is a beginning; but when you strike that which to us was the beginning, you can look back and say the word *was* [emphasis original], with no time limit at all.⁷¹

This statement and others like it led to at least two lengthy discussions on July 2 and July 6, 1919, and other briefer comments on Christ's eternal deity and the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. There were two major questions discussed:

1. Was Christ co-eternal with the Father or not? Prescott and some others agreed that he was.
2. Was Christ self-existent or did he have a derived existence from the Father?

Prescott and many of those present seemed to agree that Christ's existence was derived or in some way dependent on the Father.

Christ Was Eternal, But Derived Existence From the Father

Prescott awkwardly combined a belief in the eternity of Christ and a belief that Christ somehow came forth from the Father. In describing the relation of the Father and Son in eternity, Prescott said:

There is a proper sense, as I view it, according to which the Son is subordinate to the Father, but that subordination is not in the question of attributes or of His existence. It is simply in the fact of the derived existence, as we read in John 5:26: "For as the Father hath life in himself, even so gave he to the Son also to have life in himself." Using terms as we

⁷¹W. W. Prescott, "The Person of Christ," July 2, 1919 presentation, 1919 Bible Conference transcript, 9-10.

use them, the Son is co-eternal with the father. That does not prevent His being the only-begotten Son of God.⁷²

Prescott's Inconsistent Position Produced Awkwardness

During the discussions Prescott found himself in an awkward position. Those arguing against the eternity of Christ wondered how Christ could be “begotten,” and also “co-eternal” with the Father.⁷³ Others who agreed with Prescott on Christ’s eternity wondered about his use of the word “derived.”⁷⁴ Prescott thus found himself placed in a seemingly inconsistent position.

H. C. Lacey during the first discussion suggested a different way of expressing Prescott’s thought. Lacey argued that Christ was only inferior in “rank” to the Father as the second person of the Godhead.⁷⁵ J. N. Anderson thought Prescott’s view made Christ inferior to God but refrained from making any suggestions. His probing questions appeared to make Prescott uncomfortable. At one point Prescott even denied that he had used the word “derived.”⁷⁶ Finally, at the end of the discussion, Prescott borrowed Lacey’s idea and settled on the following summary statement regarding Christ: “One with the Father, one in authority, in power, in love, in mercy, and all the attributes—equal with

⁷²Ibid., afternoon discussions, July 2, 1919, 20.

⁷³Ibid., 19.

⁷⁴Ibid., 27.

⁷⁵Ibid., 24.

⁷⁶Ibid., 27, 28.

him and yet second in nature. I like the word 'second' better than 'inferior,'—second in rank.”⁷⁷

W. T. Knox, at the July 6 discussion suggested that Christ was the eternal Son in the same sense that Levi was in the loins of Abraham. He said,

There came a time—in a way we cannot comprehend nor the time that we cannot comprehend, when by God's mysterious operation the Son sprung from the bosom of his Father and had a separate existence. . . . I believe in the eternity of Jesus Christ. I cannot grasp the eternity of his separate and distinct existence.⁷⁸

The meeting ended without resolution and discussion on the topic was postponed to a later time.

Discussion Regarding the Trinity

At the July 6 discussion, L. L. Caviness who had come in late and missed much of the discussion expressed a fear that the church might be heading towards the trinitarian doctrine. He said plainly,

I cannot believe that the two persons of the Godhead are equal, the Father and the Son,—that one is the Father and the other the Son, and that they might be just as well the other way around. . . . In praying he [Christ] said it was his wish that the disciples might see the glory which he had with the Father, and which the Father had given him. It was not something he had all through eternity, but the Father had some time given to him the glory of God. He is divine, but he is the divine Son. I cannot explain further than that, but I cannot believe the so called Trinitarian doctrine of the three persons always existing.⁷⁹

After a little, while the meeting became so tense that A. G. Daniells suggested the “delegates not become uneasy” and requested that some of the comments not be

⁷⁷Ibid., 30.

⁷⁸Ibid., July 6, 1919, 64.

transcribed.⁸⁰ A little later Daniells reminded everyone that they were not voting a position on “trinitarianism” or “arianism” at the meeting.⁸¹ As the meeting came to a close John Isaac blurted out in frustration,

What are we Bible teachers going to do? We have heard ministers talk one way. Our students have had Bible teachers in one school spend days and days upon this question, then they come to another school, and the other teacher does not agree with that. We ought to have something definite so that we might give the answer. I think it can be done. We ought to have it clearly stated. Was Christ ever begotten, or not.⁸²

Daniells concluded by saying: “Don’t let the conservatives think that something is going to happen, and the progressives get alarmed for fear it won’t happen. Let’s keep up this good spirit. Bring out what you have.”⁸³

Summary of Views at the 1919 Bible Conference

It is useful to diagram how the commenting delegates stood on the issue of Christ’s eternal pre-existence. There were a total of 36 delegates initially seated. Others came in and some left as the meetings progressed. A roll call was not recorded except at the beginning of the Conference. Thus the it is not clear as to who all was present at the discussions on the deity of Christ. Listed below are the delegates who commented during the discussions and their positions.

⁷⁹Ibid., 57.

⁸⁰Ibid., 58.

⁸¹Ibids., 67.

⁸²Ibid., 68.

⁸³Ibid., 69.

1919 Bible Conference on Deity of Christ

Support Eternal Deity	Resisted Eternal Deity	Uncertain
W. W. Prescott J. N. Anderson H. C. Lacey G. B. Thompson	C. P. Bollman T. E. Bowen L. L. Caviness W. T. Knox C. M. Sorenson	A. G. Daniells W. E. Howell John Isaac E. R. Palmer A. O. Tait Charles Thompson W. H. Wakeham M. C. Wilcox

1921 Sabbath School Lesson by W. W. Prescott

At the 1919 Bible Conference the suggestion had been made for Prescott to put into print parts of his presentations on the person of Christ. The opportunity came when he was asked to write the first quarter 1921 Sabbath School lessons. The stated purpose of the lesson was to “present the person of Jesus Christ as the object of faith.”⁸⁴ While the lesson did focus on the person of Christ, Prescott’s strong statements on Christ’s eternal existence are absent, but the lesson makes a clear point of Christ’s divinity and his status as the “I Am” of the Old Testament. One short phrase mentions Christ as “one who had existed from eternity.”⁸⁵ All of the statements in this lesson could be heartily embraced by all Seventh-day Adventists. Either Prescott was being sensitive to the concern of a significant segment of the church or the editorial committee expunged anything that would be controversial.

Prescott’s Book *The Doctrine of Christ*

By far Prescott’s clearest published expressions, during this period, harmonizing his belief that Christ was derived but also eternal, appeared in his book *The Doctrine of*

⁸⁴“Our Personal Saviour Jesus Christ,” *Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly*, first quarter, 1921, 2.

Christ. The title page of the book indicated it was intended to be a Bible textbook for “colleges and seminaries.” The format was much like other Adventist doctrinal study books of the time. Prescott provided either a question or comment followed by a Bible text. Each chapter also had notes taken from various sources. Most are not credited because they were “not cited as authority.”⁸⁶ Only Ellen White’s statements are referenced. In explaining the eternal existence of Christ and his relationship with the God the Father, Prescott quoted the following from unknown sources:

We may conceive the Father existing from eternity and possessing infinite powers, simply because he wills so to exist, without any cause external to himself, eternal and infinite and underived; and of the Son existing with the Father from eternity, and possessing to the full the Father’s infinite powers, but these received from the Father, existing because the Father wills him so to exist, eternal and infinite and derived.⁸⁷

The Son is equal to the Father in everything except that which is conveyed by the terms Father and Son. He is equal to the Father in that he shares to the full the Father’s existence from eternity and his infinite power and wisdom and love. But inasmuch as the Father possesses these divine attributes from himself alone, whereas the Son possesses them as derived from the Father, in this real sense and in this sense only, the Father is greater than the Son.⁸⁸

Evidently in an eternal Father and an eternal Son the ideas of older and younger can have no place. As we lift up the conception of sonship out of time into eternity, these elements of it, ever present in human fathers and sons disappear. When they fall away, does any conception essential to our idea of sonship remain? Yes; there still remains the chief idea, viz., personal existence and powers derived from another person. And this idea

⁸⁵Ibid., 9, 20.

⁸⁶W. W. Prescott, *The Doctrine of Christ: A Series of Bible Studies for Use in Colleges and Seminaries* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1920), 3.

⁸⁷Ibid., 20.

⁸⁸Ibid.

is plainly embodied in John 5:26, and in other express assertions from the lips of Christ describing his own relation to God.⁸⁹

These statements, while supporting the idea of Christ's eternal pre-existence, clearly portray Christ's life and power as derived from the Father. While in harmony with Prescott's comments at the 1919 Bible Conference, this idea is very different from Ellen White's statements which were quoted in a previous chapter. Nowhere in his book does Prescott refer to the word trinity or describe "self-existent" Persons in a united Godhead. For Prescott and the church this understanding would develop during the next ten to twenty years.

Prescott's book *Doctrine of Christ* is typical of a genre of Bible class lesson books. Many Bible teachers in the early twentieth century developed outlines. These were sometimes published for broader distribution. The questions and quotations in the various lesson books do not usually clarify the issue of Christ's eternity or his underived divine nature. Occasionally there were clearer remarks. A few of these from various authors are quoted below:

The universe is ruled by the Trinity consisting of the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost.⁹⁰

Christ shares such a oneness of character with His Father, two homogeneous natures,--entirely one, such infinite harmony, that He is said to be equal with the Father, filled with all the fullness of the Godhead, and is truly God.⁹¹

⁸⁹Ibid, 20, 21.

⁹⁰Charles A. Burman, *Bible Doctrines: Lessons for Class in Academic Bible*, (Berrien Springs, Mich.: College Press, 1926), 9.

⁹¹Benjamin L. House, *Analytical Studies in Bible Doctrines for Seventh-day Adventist Colleges: A Course in Biblical Theology* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: College Press, 1926), 87.

[Quoting Ellen G. White] “From the days of eternity the Lord Jesus Christ was one with the Father, He was the ‘image of God.’”⁹²

Modern Liberalism and the Deity of Christ

During the first decades of the twentieth century, Adventists found themselves battling higher criticism and the “new modernism” growing in Christianity. Protestant Fundamentalists were resisting this trend and Adventists often found themselves battling side by side with them against teaching evolution in public schools and against liberal efforts to undermine the authority of the Bible. Modern liberalism rejected the deity of Jesus and his virgin birth. As a result, Adventist articles defending the deity of Christ began to appear in church papers on a more frequent basis. Irrespective of individual differences on details, Adventist ministers pulled into line against dangerous liberal views.

The natural result was an increased appreciation of the full deity of the Son of God as the teaching came under attack. Quite understandably even those who rejected the eternal pre-existence of Christ would not want to speak of his beginning and thus weaken their argument against higher criticism. Even articles speaking on the trinity appear to be tolerated. The resistance against the use of the term seemed to weaken as the battle against liberalism continued. One of the clearest examples in favor of the trinity during the 1920s was written by Stemple White: “The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, though agreeing in one, are . . . distinctly separate.”⁹³ While he also argued that the trinity

⁹²Alonzo J. Wearer, *Fundamentals of Bible Doctrine: Sixty Studies in the Basic Facts of the Everlasting Gospel Arranged for Seventh-day Adventist Schools of Nursing* (Angwin, Calif.: Pacific Union College Press, 1931), 28. Wearer takes this quotation from *Desire of Ages*, 19.

⁹³Stemple White, “What is Meant by the Trinity,” *Canadian Watchman*, September 1923, 18.

consisted of three personal beings, he refrained from referring to Christ as eternal or “self-existent.”

Two example articles illustrate how Christ’s deity was defended against modern liberalism. In both examples the author refrains from mentioning or discussing the subject of Christ’s eternal pre-existence. Avoided in these and other like articles are any reference to Christ’s beginning or his existence from all eternity.

C. P. Bollman wrote in 1923: “By the deity of Christ is meant that He equally with the Father is God. And this, notwithstanding denials by ‘higher critics,’ the Scriptures of both Testaments clearly teach.”⁹⁴

Similarly, Lyle C. Shepard wrote in 1927, “Not long ago some of the teachings of rationalism came to my attention and it led me to examine anew the claims, character, and nature of the founder of the Christian religion, namely Jesus Christ.”⁹⁵ He then proceeded to argue for the full deity of Christ.

1931 “Statement of Fundamental Beliefs” for Seventh-day Adventists

Throughout their history Adventists have refused to adopt a creed, realizing that truth is progressive. At various times in the history of the church, however, summary statements of faith have been published. Yet before the 1946 General Conference session, these were never intended to be the official position of the church.⁹⁶

⁹⁴C. P. Bollman, “The Deity of Christ,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 15, 1923, 4.

⁹⁵Lyle C. Shepard, “Christ: A Divine or a Human Saviour?” *Canadian Watchman*, September 1927, 12.

⁹⁶Robert Olson and Bert Haloviak, “Who Decides What Adventists Believe: A Chronological Survey of Sources, 1844-1977,” Ellen G. White Estate Shelf Document, February 24, 1977. The 1946 General Conference session required any changes in the “Fundamental Beliefs” statement to be approved by a General Conference session.

If L. E. Froom can be believed, doctrinal summaries were consistently avoided during the first decades of the twentieth century because of the division in the church on the trinity and eternal deity of Christ. Froom wrote, “Certain of these historic variances of view [on Christ’s eternal pre-existence] still persisted. And chiefly because of these differences, no Statement of Faith or Fundamental Belief had appeared in the annual *Yearbook*.”⁹⁷ As we shall see this changed in 1931.

The first decades of the new century were a time of dramatic expansion, especially in foreign fields. Frequently there was need for some statement of faith that would inform the public of what Adventists actually believed. Finally on December 29, 1930, the General Conference Committee responded to a request made by the African Division “that a statement of what Seventh-day Adventists believe should be printed in the Year Book.” The motion stated that the African Division felt “that such a statement would help government officials and others to a better understanding of our work.” A committee of four men, M. E. Kern, F. M. Wilcox, E. R. Palmer, and C. H. Watson, was appointed.⁹⁸ Froom was told by one of the four what happened on the committee:

As no one else [on the four person committee] seemed willing to take the lead in formulating a statement, Wilcox—as a writer and editor [of the *Review and Herald*]—wrote up for consideration of the committee a suggested summary of “Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists.” It was in the form of a 22-point statement.⁹⁹

⁹⁷L. E. Froom, *Movement of Destiny* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1971), 413.

⁹⁸“Statement of Our Faith for the Year Book,” General Conference Committee Minutes, December 29, 1930, 195.

⁹⁹Froom, *Movement of Destiny*, 413.

Thus it was that the *1931 Year Book* and succeeding yearbooks contained an unofficial statement of “Fundamental Beliefs.” According to Froom, F. M. Wilcox was “respected by all parties for his soundness, integrity, and loyalty to the Advent Faith—and to the Spirit of Prophecy—he, as editor of the *Review*, did what probably no other man could have done to achieve unity in acceptance.”¹⁰⁰

The second and third statements of Fundamental Beliefs read thus:

That the Godhead, or Trinity, consists of the Eternal Father, a personal, spiritual Being, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, infinite in wisdom and love; the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Eternal Father, through whom all things were created and through whom the salvation of the redeemed hosts will be accomplished; the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead, the great regenerating power in the work of redemption. Matt. 28:19.

That Jesus Christ is very God, being of the same nature and essence as the Eternal Father. While retaining His divine nature He took upon Himself the nature of the human family, lived on the earth as a man, exemplified in His life as our Example the principles of righteousness, attested His relationship to God by many mighty miracles, died for our sins on the cross, was raised from the dead, and ascended to the Father where He ever lives to make intercession for us. John 1:1, 14; Heb. 2:9-18; 8:1, 2; 4:14-16; 7:25.¹⁰¹

These statements, when read carefully in the context of the spectrum of Adventist thought on the subject, left certain details undefined. While the Father was “eternal,” Jesus was the “Son of the Eternal Father.” The one part of the statement which did not allow any uncertainty was the declaration that Christ was “very God.” The little theologically loaded couplet “very God” made Christ and the Father equally self-existent and eternal. As we shall see in the next section, many were uncomfortable with

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 415.

¹⁰¹*1931 Year Book of the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination*, Prepared by H. E. Rogers (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1931), 377.

Wilcox's use of the couplet "very God." Yet even in using the phrase "very God" Wilcox did not explain what this meant and left room for interpretation.¹⁰² The portion of the 1931 statement of "Fundamental Beliefs" referring the Godhead and person of Christ was reprinted unchanged in each new *Year Book* during the period of this study. for many years.

The 1941 Baptismal Certificate and Study Guide

While outside the time period of this chapter, the 1941 Baptismal Certificate and the Baptismal study guide were closely connected to Wilcox's statement of Fundamental Beliefs and thus fits conveniently at this point in the paper.

On October 27, 1941, the General Conference Autumn Council voted a uniform Baptismal Certificate which included a summary of Adventist beliefs and a 12-point "covenant" or "vow."¹⁰³ The condensed summary of the 27 "Fundamental Beliefs" was included on the Baptismal Certificate. The summary included a specific emphasis on the three Persons of the Godhead. The second statement described Christ as "the eternal Son of God."¹⁰⁴ Thus everyone being baptized into the church affirmed their faith in this doctrine. Unfortunately an actual copy of the first certificate was not available for this study.

A baptismal study guide was also prepared entitled *The Everlasting Gospel*. Unfortunately this document is undated. It copied, almost verbatim, much of Wilcox's

¹⁰²See on page 40, T. M. French's use of the term "very God" in the 1936 Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly.

¹⁰³Froom, *Movement of Destiny*, 421.

¹⁰⁴Olson, "Who decides What Adventists Believe," 18, 19.

statement of “Fundamental Beliefs” and therefore must have been published after the *1931 Year Book*. *The Everlasting Gospel* copied Wilcox’s first three statements of faith verbatim with one vital exception. The phrase “very God” in the third statement of “Fundamental Beliefs” was omitted. The differences between the *1931 Year Book* and *The Everlasting Gospel* are paralleled below.

1931 Year Book: That Jesus Christ is very God, being of the same nature and essence as the Eternal Father.¹⁰⁵

The Everlasting Gospel: That Jesus Christ, the Divine Son of God, is God, of the same nature and essence as the Father.¹⁰⁶

Besides omitting the phrase “very God,” a new statement of belief was added which read,

That Christ pre-existed with God before He was born in Bethlehem and was the creator of the world and all that it contains. “He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not.” John 1:10; Heb. 1:1, 2 10; Col. 1:16-19; John 1:1-3, 14.¹⁰⁷

This statement clearly refrains from articulating Christ’s eternal pre-existence. It seems clear that the intention of the change in the baptismal study guide was for the purpose of removing an affirmation of Christ’s eternal self-existence. The *1931 Year Book* and *The Everlasting Gospel* statements clearly show that the church was far from settled on the issue of Christ’s inherent deity.

¹⁰⁵ *1931 Year Book*, 377.

¹⁰⁶ *The Everlasting Gospel: Prepared for Use in Instructing Those Desiring Baptism and Admission into the Fellowship of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Takoma Park, D.C.: Washington College Press, n.d.), 1.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

During the period from 1919 to 1931 the church remained split on the trinity and whether the Son of God had a self-existent divine nature like the Father. While the matter was discussed at the 1919 Bible Conference, the only result was to confirm that church leaders were deeply divided on the subject. During the first two decades of the century, a mixture of statements appears in print. The rise of liberalism in America led to more articles on the deity of Christ and even the trinity. These articles affirmed that Christ was of the same divine essence as the Father but refrained from declaring him eternally self-existent. F. M. Wilcox's 1931 statement of "Fundamental Beliefs" is probably the most important development during this period. His use of the term "very God" in describing Christ created enough discomfort that in the published and widely used baptismal study guide it was removed. Still, Wilcox set the tone and prepared the way for future clearer positions during the 1940s and 1950s.

CHAPTER V

FROM 1931 TO THE BOOK *QUESTIONS ON DOCTRINE*

During the period from 1931 to the publication of *Questions on Doctrine*, the Seventh-day Adventist Church finally came into unity on the “new view” of the eternal deity of Christ and the trinity. This chapter will evaluate the following steps in the process: (1) “old view” statements continue during the 1930s, (2) the continuing impact of modern liberalism, (3) the role of F. M. Wilcox, and (4) the publication of *Questions on Doctrine*. In addition, the corrections made in *Daniel and the Revelation* and L. E. Froom’s view on the trinity in Seventh-day Adventist history will be examined.

An Example Statement on the Deity of Christ

During the 1930’s there continued to be statements teaching the “old view.” As we shall see later in the chapter, this largely changed during the 1940s. The fourth quarter 1936 *Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly* was prepared by T. M. French. French concluded regarding Christ’s pre-existence with these words: “He was therefore no part of creation, but was ‘begotten of the Father’ in the days of eternity, and was very God Himself.”¹⁰⁸ It seems that French was mixing Wilcox’s fundamental beliefs reference to Christ as “very God” with the “old view” of a “begotten” Christ.

¹⁰⁸“Bible Doctrines: Number One,” *Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly*, October 24, 1936, 13.

Continuing Reaction to Modern Liberalism

Articles against the liberal trend to deny the deity and virgin birth of Jesus greatly increased during the 1930s and 1940s. Every church paper, especially the more evangelistic *Signs of the Times* and *Present Truth*, frequently decried the loss of faith in America and affirmed the full deity of Christ.

A selection of statements on the deity of Christ written to identify and respond to modern liberalism are listed below:

Was Jesus of Nazareth inherently divine, and therefore the only begotten Son of God? . . . liberals (modernists) of today have answered it in an unqualified negative.¹⁰⁹

Unitarianism, once in such bad favor among the creeds of Christendom, today laughs last, for the whole liberal movement known as Modernism no longer believes in the Trinity. I believe in the Trinity because I believe in the Bible.¹¹⁰

The doctrine of the deity of Christ is the very cornerstone upon which the Christian religion is built. Destroy this foundation, and the whole superstructure must crumble and fall. . . . Already a large section of the Christian world has abandoned faith in Jesus as the divine Son of God. . . . In His providence, God has given to His remnant church a specific message to meet the tragic unbelief which is growing both within and without the Christian church. The very center of the third angel's message is the everlasting gospel, and the heart of the gospel is the divine Son of God.¹¹¹

It must now be pointed out that this proposed "ecumenical" ecclesiastical combination of power does not propose to be Christian. . . . "Jesus is not God" one of its chief spokesmen openly declares. . . . All Sunday school material is to be safeguarded against the teaching of Christ's deity and the Bible's inerrancy.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹George W. Rine, "Was Jesus God?" *Signs of the Times*, October 10, 1933, 7.

¹¹⁰L. A. Wilcox, "Three and Yet One," *Signs of the Times*, March 6, 1934, 13.

¹¹¹A. V. Olson, "Cornerstone of Christian Faith," *Ministry*, September 1942, 6.

¹¹²Carlyle B. Haynes, "Christian Leaders Reject Christ: Worship of Jesus to be Banned in Sunday Schools," *Signs of the Times*, July 4, 1944, 6.

Modernistic theology gives to us only a human savior. It teaches that Christ was divine but not Deity, that He was a good man, a super good man, but divine in the same sense in which all good men are divine. This makes our blessed Lord merely an example to be followed the same as any other good man.¹¹³

These are only a few of the many articles against modern liberalism. As Adventists saw the loss of faith in the Christian church, they naturally found themselves cherishing the doctrine of Christ's deity. For many, the trinity and the essential and underived deity of Christ were perceived as an essential part of the plan of salvation. F. M. Wilcox's "Fundamental Belief" statement of Christ as "very God" was working its way into Adventist subconsciousness. As we shall see next, Wilcox continued to share with the church a Bible and "Spirit of Prophecy" supported, trinitarian view of Christ.

F. M. Wilcox and Others Affirmed the Full Equality of the Godhead

F. D. Nichol, editor of the *Review and Herald*, gave tribute to his predecessor F. M. Wilcox at the latter's funeral by saying, "It is hard to compress in a sentence his distinctive contribution to the Advent movement. . . . His unique contribution was his presentation of the beliefs, the standards, and the objectives of the church with that peculiar persuasiveness that flows from deep conviction."¹¹⁴ In accomplishing this "contribution" to the church, F. M. Wilcox's "Heart to Heart Talks by the Editor" played an important role. Adventists looked forward to these clearly worded and helpful editorials.

¹¹³F. M. Wilcox, "The Eternity of Christ," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 3, 1945, 5.

¹¹⁴Miriam Wood and Kenneth Wood, *His Initials Were F. D. N.* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1967), 232.

In 1944 Wilcox wrote in one of his columns, "When we come to the study of the Scriptures we find that Christ is the great dominating figure. The infinite Son of the infinite Father is very God in His own right. He is the great 'I Am' existing from everlasting to everlasting."¹¹⁵ In this simple but clear statement, Wilcox settles for his readers that Christ was both eternal and intrinsically divine like the Father. Wilcox did not depend upon his own opinions in promoting his view. He made it a point to use statements from Ellen White and the Bible as authority for his position. His January 3, 1945 editorial entitled "The Eternity of Christ" is largely a collection of Bible and Ellen White quotes.¹¹⁶ Wilcox's articles and use of Ellen White quotes encouraged Adventists to embrace the "orthodox" Christian view of the Trinity and Christ's deity.

Wilcox was not alone in declaring the full deity of Christ. M. L. Andreasen, considered at the time to be one of the church's best scholars, wrote,

Christ is spoken of as "being the brightness of His [Father's] glory." The [Greek] participle "being" is an expression of eternal, timeless existence. . . . He did not come into existence in the beginning. In the beginning he "was." He did not become the brightness of the Father's glory. He always was. This constitutes the essential and eternal ground of His personality.¹¹⁷

F. D. Nichol became editor of the *Review and Herald* when Wilcox retired in 1944. In his first months as editor he published his agreement with his former mentor in

¹¹⁵F. M. Wilcox, "Christ as Creator and Redeemer," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 23, 1944, 2.

¹¹⁶F. M. Wilcox, "The Eternity of Christ," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 3, 1945, 5-6.

¹¹⁷M. L. Andreasen, "Christ the Express Image of God," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, October 17, 1946, 8.

the following words: “To believe in Christ as the eternal Son of God is to give majesty and the divine perspective of eternity to the plan of salvation on which our hopes rest.”¹¹⁸

These are only a few of the clear statements from this period. By the 1940s, many Adventists had become comfortable with and even expected the Church to defend the essential deity of Christ.

Correcting Daniel and the Revelation

For many, Uriah Smith’s *Daniel and the Revelation* held, a nearly inspired status. His book had been read and studied by nearly every Adventist for over sixty years. In Smith’s discussion of the seventh church in Revelation 3, he made the following comment: “The Son came into existence in a different manner, as he is called ‘the only begotten’ of the Father. It would seem utterly inappropriate to apply this expression to any being created in the ordinary sense of that term.”¹¹⁹ This statement was removed in the 1944 edition.¹²⁰ Naturally some were unhappy that *Daniel and the Revelation* had been tampered with. Those with the now less popular “old view” on the deity of Christ found this change particularly objectionable.

Questions on Doctrine

The book, *Questions on Doctrine*, changed the course of Adventist theology in many ways. It revised certain Adventist concepts on the atonement, the human nature of

¹¹⁸F. D. Nichol, “Christ, the Eternal Son of God,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 12, 1945, 5.

¹¹⁹Uriah Smith, *Daniel and the Revelation: The Response of History to the Voice of Prophecy* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1941), 400.

¹²⁰Uriah Smith, *The Prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1944), 391.

Christ, and “mark of the beast” which allowed an approachment to other Protestant denominations. These revisions were extremely controversial and came under attack from M. L. Andreasen and others. The debate has continued down to the present day.

Questions on Doctrine also addressed the subject of the trinity and deity of Christ.

The book gave a comprehensive and clear statement regarding the Church’s position on the divine nature of Christ and the trinity. The book affirmed:

As to Christ’s place in the Godhead, we believe Him to be the second person of the heavenly Trinity—comprised of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who are united not only in the Godhead but in the provisions of redemption. . . . Christ is one with the Eternal Father—one in nature, equal in power and authority, God in the highest sense, eternal and self-existent, with life original, unborrowed, underived; and that Christ existed from all eternity, distinct from, but united with, the Father, possessing the same glory, and all the divine attributes.¹²¹

In contrast with the conflict in other areas, there was virtually no dissent on the book’s clear teaching of the “new view” of the trinity and deity of Christ. As we have seen previously, even Andreasen published statements affirming a similar belief on the subject. *Questions on Doctrine* acknowledged that “some” had held to a different view during the early years of the movement. Question number three in the book asked,

Have Seventh-day Adventists changed from some of the positions advocated by certain adherents of earlier years, from whom citations are still currently circulated? Do such citations misrepresent the present teachings of Adventist leadership?¹²²

The answer specifically repudiated the position of the pioneers regarding the deity and eternal pre-existence of Christ thus we read that,

¹²¹*Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1957), 36.

¹²²*Questions on Doctrine*, 29.

with the passage of years the earlier diversity of view on certain doctrines gradually gave way to unity of view. Clear and sound positions were then taken by the great majority on such doctrines as the Godhead, the deity and eternal pre-existence of Christ, and the personality of the Holy Spirit. Clear-cut views were established on righteousness by faith, the true relationship of law and grace, and on the death of Christ as the complete sacrificial atonement for sin. A few, however, held to some of their former views and at times these ideas got into print. However, for decades now the church has been practically at one on the basic truths of the Christian faith.¹²³

L. E. Froom's View

L. E. Froom was one of the principal writers of *Questions on Doctrine*. This book minimized the breadth of opposition to the trinity and eternal deity of Christ in early Adventist history. When Froom published *Movement of Destiny* in 1971 he perpetuated the idea that most believed the "orthodox" position on the trinity. Understandably in *Questions on Doctrine*, Froom and others were trying to put Adventists in the best light before the world. Yet even in *Movement of Destiny*, Froom incorrectly described the early Adventist understanding as "personal, individual, minority positions."¹²⁴

Records show that for many years Froom was active in seeking an understanding of the early period. He wrote letters during the 1930s and 1940s to various ones asking for their recollections. Arthur White, secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate, even tried in 1955 to correct Froom's position, writing: "I think we will have to concede that our early workers were not Trinitarians."¹²⁵ Then he recommended Froom read Christy Taylor's thesis, "Doctrine of the Personality of the Holy Spirit up to 1900." Arthur White wrote

¹²³Ibid., 30-31.

¹²⁴Froom, *Movement of Destiny*, 484.

¹²⁵Arthur L. White to L. E. Froom, December 7, 1955.

nearly fourteen years later that “the interesting fact is that none of our early workers nor Seventh-day Adventists generally, prior to about the middle 1890s were willing to accept the doctrine of the trinity.”¹²⁶ One is left with the impression that Froom chose not to present the facts, possibly either out of fear that it might undermine someone’s faith or of jeopardizing the Church’s evangelical standing.

Conclusion

The church gradually shifted during from the 1930s to 1950s to the “orthodox” Christian view on the trinity and deity of Christ. This change seems to be due to a collection of influences: (1) Adventist response to the attacks of “modern liberalism” on the deity of Christ and his virgin birth, (2) F. M. Wilcox’s statement of “Fundamental Beliefs” and his *Review and Herald* editorials, (3) A greater awareness and appreciation of Ellen White’s statements.

The publication of *Questions on Doctrine* in 1957 and the lack of negative response to the book’s clear defense of the trinity and complete deity of Christ demonstrated that the church at large had accepted the “new view.” Although probably by the 1950s most would not think of it in terms of a “new view” but rather as the correct biblical and “Spirit of Prophecy” view. There were, however, a few who held out for the previous idea. The next chapter will discuss the last principal defenders of the “old view.”

¹²⁶ Arthur L. White to Hedy Jemison, July 2, 1969.

CHAPTER VI

FINAL OPPONENTS TO THE TRINITY AND ETERNAL DEITY OF CHRIST

During the 1940s an ever increasing majority of the church was believing in the eternal underived deity of Christ and the trinity, yet there were some who held back and even actively resisted the change. This group was mainly comprised of some older ministers and Bible teachers.

The remaining tension regarding the trinity and eternal deity of Christ is revealed by an omission in the 1941 *Church Hymnal*. The compilers had no desire to stir up controversy with any hymn. The obvious objective was for the hymnal to be a blessing to all Adventists. Therefore the familiar hymn, “Holy, Holy, Holy” (number 73) only had three verses. The fourth and last verse which ends with, “God in three persons, blessed trinity” was omitted.¹²⁷

In this chapter we will consider three individuals who were the last principal exponents of the “old view”: J. S. Washburn, C. S. Longacre, and W. R. French.

J. S. Washburn

J. S. Washburn (1863-1955) entered the ministry in 1884 and served in various church capacities, most notably as an evangelist. In retirement he felt compelled to deal

¹²⁷*The Church Hymnal* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1941), 59.

with various perceived errors in the church. He harbored a long-standing suspicion of W. W. Prescott's orthodoxy. Washburn, among other things, had disagreed with Prescott in his use of the Revised Version of the Bible and Prescott's questioning of the accuracy of some historical portions of the 1888 edition of the *Great Controversy*.¹²⁸

On October 14, 1939, Prescott preached a sermon in the Takoma Park Church entitled, "The Coming One." He urged his long standing opinion that Jesus, the Christ of the New Testament, was also the Jehovah or "I Am" of the Old Testament. Washburn distributed a strongly worded response to Prescott's sermon.¹²⁹ He considered the sermon to contain "astounding perversions." Giving his view of what Prescott had said, Washburn wrote: "The sermon is a tremendous misrepresentation of the truth of the Divine separate personality of the Father and the Son. The Father and the Son are not 'One Person' but two persons as distinct as the two persons of my Father and myself."¹³⁰ He mis-interpreted Prescott to teach the Sabellian view that Jesus Christ and God the Father were the same person. Washburn further argued for the semi-arian view that "the Son . . . was brought forth, begotten, born, of His Father (Jehovah)."¹³¹

Washburn's attacks on Prescott were circulated widely and produced quite a stir in the church. Many were upset with his diatribe. D. E. Robinson from the White Estate wrote a lengthy letter to Washburn warning him of the danger of undermining the influence of a fellow minister of the gospel. He then showed how Washburn had accused

¹²⁸J. S. Washburn to J. L. McElhany, June 2, 1940.

¹²⁹J. S. Washburn, "The Trinity," n.d. [circa 1940].

¹³⁰*Ibid.*, 3.

¹³¹*Ibid.*, 1.

Prescott falsely. Robinson then suggested that Washburn's views were the "variant views."¹³²

C. S. Longacre

Charles S. Longacre (1871-1958), a long time minister and church leader, was present at the 1919 Bible Conferences. He never accepted the "new view" on the eternal deity of Christ.

Raymond F. Cottrell had some interesting recollections of C. S. Longacre. His uncle, Roy Cottrell, was a good friend of C. S. Longacre. The elder Cottrell naturally urged his nephew to visit Longacre when he moved to Tacoma Park. Ray Cottrell followed through on the suggestion and after frequent visits the two became good friends. One Sabbath Longacre was called away and asked him to teach his Sabbath School class at the Takoma Park Seventh-day Adventist Church. It so happened that that week the lesson was on the subject of the deity of Christ. Cottrell attempted to teach the class with great delicacy. During discussion one of the class members spoke up and said, "Elder Cottrell, we want you to know that we are all Arians."¹³³ Besides this story, there are at least two incidents relating to Longacre that produced significant debate in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Bible Research Fellowship Paper on the Deity of Christ

The Bible Research Fellowship was organized by the college Bible teachers of North America in council during the summer of 1940. In 1944, L. L. Caviness, a Bible

¹³²D. E. Robinson to J. S. Washburn, April 25, 1940.

¹³³Raymond F. Cottrell interview with Merlin D. Burt, September 5, 1996.

teacher at Pacific Union College, was asked to serve as chairman. R. F. Cottrell, also of Pacific Union College, was made secretary. The Bible Research Fellowship was established for the purpose of study and dialogue among college Bible teachers and church workers. By 1952 the organization had a worldwide membership of more than 250 persons. The Fellowship was divided into local chapters which usually met on a monthly basis to read and discuss papers.¹³⁴ Often the papers were of a controversial nature. Naturally the subject of Armageddon and the King of the North was on the minds of many during and after World War II, and many papers were forthcoming.

In January 1947, C. S. Longacre presented a paper to the Bible Research Fellowship entitled "The Deity of Christ." With careful precision he articulated the earlier Adventist view that Christ had come forth from the Father in the days of eternity. He wrote: "He [God the Father] was capable of reproducing Himself and bringing forth another self-existent God possessing His own life and power and attributes."¹³⁵ Longacre met serious opposition from Fellowship members when he tried to prove his view from the Bible and the writings of Ellen White. His presentation elicited several response papers,¹³⁶ a summary, and two sets of "suggestions." The minutes of the meeting reveal that thirteen were present for the reading and discussion of the paper. Among them was M. L. Andreasen.¹³⁷

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¹³⁴Raymond F. Cottrell, "Facts about the Bible Research Fellowship," December 1951, 5-6.

¹³⁵C. S. Longacre, "The Deity of Christ," January 1947, 3.

¹³⁶Paul Omar Campbell, "Christ's Relationships," August 1947. L. L. Caviness, "The Eternal Priesthood of Christ," n.d.; Stewart Kime, "Did Jesus have a Beginning?" n.d.; R. S. Leasby, "Jesus, the Son of God," n.d.

¹³⁷"Minutes of the Bible Research Fellowship," Angwin, Calif., January 18, 1947.

Sermon at Takoma Park, Maryland

Soon after the reading of his paper at Pacific Union College, Longacre preached a sermon on the same subject at the Takoma Park Seventh-day Adventist Church. About this time, Robert W. Olson who had been a student at Pacific Union College moved to Takoma Park, Maryland to attend the Adventist seminary. He continued in school until May 1947. He had a clear recollection of events at the Takoma Park Church which illustrated the tension generated by Longacre's paper, "The Deity of Christ." Olson said in an oral interview,

I discovered that this matter of Christ's deity was a *hot* issue. Elder C. S. Longacre had preached a sermon in the old Takoma Park Church—I didn't hear it, but I was told about it—in which he gave all the Biblical reasons and whatever else he might have been able to give as to why Christ was not eternal. . . . Well, the students in the seminary were all talking about it, and of course, this came to the ears of M. L. Andreasen, who was our professor of theology there, a man who was steeped in the writings of Ellen White and who was very conscious of the fact that he had the answers. You didn't argue with him either. And so Elder Andreasen went to Elder Rapp, pastor of the Takoma Park Church at the time, and he told Elder Rapp that he wanted the pulpit on the next Sabbath so he could straighten out the congregation and correct all those wrong ideas that Elder Longacre had given them. Well, Elder Rapp, of course was quite willing. When a man of Elder Andreasen's stature asks for the pulpit, why you have to have a pretty good reason for not giving it to him. So, we were ready to hear Elder Andreasen the next Sabbath when we learned that Elder McElhany, President of the General Conference, had heard about what was going on, and Elder McElhany informed Elder Rapp, "We're not going to have a great big controversy right here. You must not allow Elder Andreasen to have your pulpit. You must deny him that privilege." So, Andreasen was not the preacher the next Sabbath. So, we had to get things straightened out in our class.¹³⁸

Ray Cottrell observed that "there were a number of survivors of Arianism back there in the 1950s, but to my knowledge it has quietly died out since then as the people

¹³⁸Robert W. Olson interview with Merlin D. Burt, October 4, 1996.

who held Arian views died. And when C. S. Longacre died, its primary exponent died also.”¹³⁹

W. R. French

W. R. French (1881-1968) was a well-known and much respected minister and college Bible teacher. Over the years he served in several North American colleges. French was a man of great intellect, who is said to have memorized the entire New Testament. Thus he could look at his students when quoting the Bible during his class lectures. One student remembered how students, for the fun of it, would give him a text in the New Testament. He would then quote the text before and after. To his students, French was an oracle—the very voice of truth. “When Elder French said something, brother, that was it! Nobody argued with him.”¹⁴⁰

Like Washburn and Longacre, French was of the old school who believed that Christ had a beginning. His students remember him teaching this through the years. To the day he died, French never changed. Robert Olson remembered 1968 and the twenty-fifth anniversary of his graduating class at Pacific Union College:

Elder French was getting to be pretty old now--he was 87--and the folks wanted to please him; they were glad that he was planning to come to that reunion. So they invited him in advance to give the ten-minute message for the Sabbath evening Vespers. And Elder French accepted. So, I went as others did, this was April 1968, to hear our dear old department chairman give us a ten-minute talk. Well, after forty minutes in which he was repeating all of his reasons for believing that Christ was not eternal, that He was the Son of God who had been produced from the Father's bosom, after forty minutes of that with all of his strong positions and vehemence

¹³⁹Cottrell interview.

¹⁴⁰Olson interview.

that he could muster, the chairman on the platform got the message to him somehow it was time to stop.¹⁴¹

W. R. French died on December 6, 1968, only eight months after what was probably his final public presentation. With the death of French an era ended for the church. He was probably the last of the well known expositors to uphold the “old” view.

Conclusion

By the 1950s and 1960s, men like Washburn, Longacre, and finally French had become an anomaly in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. History teaches that sometimes opinions die hard and that some opinions only pass into memory when those who hold them finally go to their rest.

¹⁴¹Olson interview.

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Summary

The Seventh-day Adventist view on the doctrines of the eternal self-existent deity of Christ and the trinity went through progressive changes. Initially, Adventist theology was Arian or semi-arian and anti-trinitarian. Adventists believed that Christ was either created or “begotten” by God the Father. The Holy Spirit was not generally viewed as a person but rather as an influence which came from the Father. One finds almost no exceptions to these views prior to 1888.

After the 1888 General Conference session, the church placed a new emphasis on Christ and his righteousness. Adventist understanding on the deity of Christ and the trinity took its first steps toward change. A. T. Jones made a few references to Christ as the “eternal” Son. Most important was the publication of Ellen White’s *Desire of Ages* in 1898. In her book, Ellen White clearly articulated the idea that Christ was the eternal self-existent second person of the Godhead. This was a “new view” and opposed the traditional position of most nineteenth-century Adventists.

In spite of the influence of *Desire of Ages* and other comments by Ellen White, the church remained split on the divine nature of the Son of God for the first three or four decades of the twentieth century. The 1919 Bible Conference revealed this division quite

clearly. While some church leaders, like W. W. Prescott, supported the eternal pre-existence of Christ; others, like S. N. Haskell, denied it.

Confusion and conflict also reigned regarding whether Christ was self-existent or derived from God the Father. This conflict played a part in the church avoiding any statements of faith. It was not until 1931 that F. M. Wilcox, longtime editor of the *Review and Herald*, carefully constructed an un-official “Statement of Fundamental Beliefs” which was published in the Seventh-day Adventist *Year Book*. This statement affirmed that Christ was “very God.” In contrast, the baptismal study guide removed the statement “very God” and left the issue of Christ’s self-existence out of consideration.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s the church battled the influence of “modern liberalism” which denied the deity of Christ and his virgin birth. This battle tended to confirm Adventists in the “orthodox” Christian view of the trinity and Christ’s self-existent deity. F. M. Wilcox encouraged the church through his editorials to cherish Christ as the eternal self-existent second person of the Godhead. His long tenure as respected editor of the *Review and Herald* and his liberal use of the Bible and “Spirit of Prophecy” gave authority to his position.

The publication of *Questions on Doctrine* revealed that the Seventh-day Adventist Church had truly changed its position on the trinity and Christ’s eternal self-existence. The absence of opposition to the clearly trinitarian statements in the book demonstrate the fact that Adventists generally believed in the trinity.

By the time of the publication of *Questions on Doctrine*, nearly all of those who had over the years held to the “old view” were passing off the scene. First, J. S. Washburn passed away in 1955, then C. S. Longacre in 1958, and finally W. R. French in

1968. With their deaths a doctrinal era finally ended for the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

While there was abundant material on this subject, as demonstrated in the bibliography, there still needs to be further study of the correspondence files of church leaders, particularly after the turn of the century. It would be particularly helpful to study the correspondence of A. G. Daniells, W. W. Prescott, F. M. Wilcox, C. S. Longacre, and L. E. Froom. Other names could be mentioned but, in most cases, correspondence is not readily available. It would also be useful to give more comprehensive treatment to the development of belief in the personhood of the Holy Spirit during the twentieth century.

Some Final Concluding Remarks

Over the years since the publication of *Questions on Doctrine* there have been some who have urged that the Seventh-day Adventist Church has abandoned the “historic” (pre-1888) position it held against the trinity. Those who hold this view believe that early Adventist positions were always more correct. The aspects of the trinity specially singled out for criticism have been the eternal self-existence of Christ and the personhood of the Holy Spirit. Documentary evidence does reveal that up until about 1900 Adventists were practically unanimous on two points; (1) They believed that Christ was “born” or came forth from the Father and thus had a derived existence, (2) They believed that the Holy Spirit was not a person but rather an influence or the spirit of the Father. By defining and establishing as “orthodox” the “historic” position of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, critics of the doctrine of the trinity overlook two very important points. Firstly: history shows that the church has never been static in its beliefs.

Therefore some doctrines like the trinity and eternal deity of Christ developed over a period of time. Secondly: Ellen White directly confirmed the new views in her writings especially in *Desire of Ages*.

Changes in Seventh-day Adventist beliefs have usually been based on Bible study and the confirming guidance of the "Spirit of Prophecy." Adventists have always asserted that the Bible is their creed. Naturally debate went back and forth on some subjects. In the process of Bible study certain doctrines were established earlier and some later.

History suggests that some Seventh-day Adventist doctrines may not have been settled were it not for the influential role of Ellen G. White. Throughout her life-long ministry, she played an important role in Adventist doctrinal development. Over the years the church has been confronted with occasional doctrinal deadlock. Sometimes Ellen White's writings served as a catalyst which helped break the impasse. At other times the church was gripped with conflict (such as the "king of the north" and "Eastern Question") and no prophetic guidance was forthcoming. But where the belief was fundamental and essential, prophetic guidance or confirmation was usually sooner or later forthcoming. Guidance or confirmation on a subject was sometimes long delayed in order for the church to adequately study the Bible. Occasionally when Ellen White did write definitively on a subject, such as on Christ's self-existent deity, the Church was not ready to accept the light. Then time was needed to correct the corporate consciousness of the church

Besides Ellen White's role, the Church's doctrinal development on the trinity and deity of Christ was affected by at least three other important factors: First, events in the Christian world. The growth of liberalism and rationalism in Protestantism brought Advents to a stronger realization of the importance of Christ's full deity and the

incarnation: Second, key church individuals such as F. M. Wilcox and F. D. Nichol steadily inculcated in Church papers the importance of the doctrines of the trinity and deity of Christ using the Bible and the "Spirit of Prophecy." Finally, the passage of time helped settle the issue as various individuals died. Some errors can be corrected only after those who cling to them pass off the scene. For the doctrines of the trinity and eternal deity of Christ, the change took over fifty years to become normative.

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