

# The Trinity in Seventh-day Adventist History

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The last decade has seen increased antitrinitarian activity within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Four reasons for this activity should be mentioned. (1) The availability of information through the Internet. (2) Several other Adventist groups that emerged from the Millerite movement continue to hold to an antitrinitarian perspective. Examples would be the Church of God (Seventh Day), also known as the Marion Party; the previous view of the Worldwide Church of God; the Atlanta Church of God in Georgia (formerly of Oregon, Illinois, or the Age to Come Adventists), and Jehovah's Witnesses (that branched from the Advent Christian Church). It should be noted that the Advent Christians, like Seventh-day Adventists, have embraced the trinitarian view. (3) Some think that the Trinity doctrine comes from Catholic theology and therefore must be false. Many have not realized that the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity has differences from the Seventh-day Adventist biblical doctrine of the Trinity. These include eternal generation of the Son and Divine impassibility, which are influenced by Greek philosophy. (4) Perhaps most significant, over the last few decades, some Seventh-day Adventists have thought to return to early historical Adventist faith, or what might be called neo-restorationism.

Some have failed to recognize the dynamic nature of Seventh-day Adventist theology. Historically, our doctrines have developed in the context of the original distinctive core of the three angels' messages and kindred concepts. **A small, though significant and growing segment of "historic" Adventists, are advocating a return to an antitrinitarian stance.** Sabbatarian Adventism and Seventh-day Adventists have always been Bible-centered in their theology and doctrine. They have rejected a static creed and have ever sought to study, understand, and follow the Bible as the source of doctrine and the guide for experience. Consequently, it should not be surprising that Adventist doctrine has developed over time building upon previous and new Bible study.

As Sabbatarian Adventism emerged during the late 1840s, it brought various Christian truths and placed them in the framework of fulfilled prophecy and ongoing discovery of biblical teachings. A cluster of biblical teachings explained what had happened in 1844 and why Jesus had not come. The heavenly sanctuary, the end-time ministry of Jesus in the Most Holy Place, and the Sabbath as the seal of God were a particular focus. Adventist understanding of various theological perspectives continued to develop and

improve over time. Two examples are the Sabbath and tithing. Early Adventists initially concluded, through Joseph Bates's influence, that the Sabbath should begin and end at 6:00 p.m. It was in 1855, nearly a decade after the initial Sabbath emphasis, that J. N. Andrews's biblical and historical presentation influenced believers to adopt sundown as the correct time to begin and end the Sabbath. Tithing first began in 1859 as systematic benevolence and had little or no link to the biblical teaching of 10 percent. It was not until the 1870s that a careful restudy of the topic led Seventh-day Adventists to adopt the tithing framework we practice today. A similar process is evident in Adventist understanding on the nature of God and the Trinity.

The purpose of this article is to outline the historical development of the Trinity view of Seventh-day Adventists from its beginning to the present day.

## Up to 1890: Antitrinitarian period

Until near the turn of the twentieth century, Seventh-day Adventist literature was almost unanimous in opposing the eternal deity of Jesus and the personhood of the Holy Spirit. During the earlier years, some even held the view that Christ was created. It is very important to understand that Adventist views were not homogeneous. Theological tension within Adventism began during the Millerite movement and is illustrated by the two principal leaders, William Miller and Joshua V. Himes.

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."<sup>1</sup> Himes, a close associate of William Miller, was of the Christian Connexion persuasion. The northeastern branch of the Christian church "rejected the Trinitarian doctrine as unscriptural."<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that Millerite Adventists were focused on the soon coming of Jesus and did not consider it necessary to argue about the Trinity.

Two of the principal founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Joseph Bates and James White, like Himes, had been members of the Christian Connexion 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."<sup>3</sup> James White wrote, "Here we might mention the Trinity, which does away [with] the personality of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ."<sup>4</sup> Both Bates and White were anxious to maintain the separate personalities of the Father and the Son. This concern was caused, in part, by the strong spiritualizing influence among Bridegroom Adventists during 1845 and 1846. A similar problem would resurface around the turn of the twentieth century with the de-personalizing of God and J. H. Kellogg's pantheistic views.<sup>5</sup>

Though James White rejected the doctrine of the Trinity, he did believe in the three great Powers in heaven reflected in his first hymnbook.<sup>6</sup> Though 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 that ultra Unitarianism that makes Christ inferior to the Father is worse."<sup>7</sup>

Not all agreed with James White on the equality of Father and Son. During the 1860s, Uriah Smith, long-time editor of the *Review and Herald*, believed that Jesus was "the first created being."<sup>8</sup> By 1881, he had changed to the belief that Jesus was "begotten" and not created.<sup>9</sup>

A selective list of Adventists who either spoke against the Trinity and/ or rejected the eternal deity of Christ include J. B. Frisbie, J. N. Loughborough, R. F. Cottrell, J. N. Andrews, D. M. Canright, J. H. Waggoner, and C. W. Stone.<sup>10</sup> W. A. Spicer at one point 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 antitrinitarian atmosphere in Battle Creek that he ceased preaching.”<sup>11</sup>

In surveying the writings of various pioneers, certain concerns frequently appear. In rejecting the Trinity, some saw the orthodox Christian view as pagan tritheism. Others argued that the Trinity degraded the personhood of Christ and the Father by blurring the distinction between Them. While the early positions on the Trinity and deity of Christ were flawed, there was a sincere attempt to oppose certain legitimate errors.

By about 1890, Adventists had come to a more-or-less harmonious position that viewed Jesus as the begotten or originated Divine Son of God. He was seen as the Divine Creator with the Father. The nature of the Holy Spirit was lightly discussed, though the Holy Spirit was generally considered to be the omnipresent influence from the Father or the Son rather than a person.

## From 1890 to 1900: Emergence of trinitarian sentiment

As the 1890s began, two of the key thinkers on each side of the righteousness by faith/law in Galatians issue agreed on the derived divinity of Jesus. E. J. Waggoner wrote in his 1890 *Christ and His Righteousness*, “There was a time when Christ proceeded forth and came from God . . . but that time was so far back in the days of eternity that to finite comprehension it is practically without beginning.”<sup>12</sup> In 1898, Uriah Smith wrote in *Looking Unto Jesus*, “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.”<sup>13</sup>

The period after the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference saw a new emphasis on Jesus and the plan of salvation. This led to a consideration of His deity and what it meant for the redemption of humanity. **A. T. Jones was among the first (with the exception of Ellen White) to suggest that Christ was eternally preexistent.** Jones emphasized Colossians 2:9 and the idea that in Christ was the “fullness of the Godhead bodily.” He also described Christ as “‘the eternal Word.’”<sup>14</sup> Though he avoided the word Trinity, in 1899 he wrote, “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.”<sup>15</sup>

Ellen White played a prophetic role in confirming the eternal deity of Jesus and the Three-Person Godhead. As early as 1878, she referred to Jesus as the “eternal Son of God.”<sup>16</sup> In *The Desire of Ages*, she wrote, “[Christ] announced Himself to be the self-existent One” and “In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived.”<sup>17</sup> She wrote of the Holy Spirit as the “Third Person of the Godhead.”<sup>18</sup> Ellen White played an important role in urging the church toward a biblical trinitarian position. However, for years after the publication of *The Desire of Ages*, the church generally avoided these and other statements. While she never used the term Trinity in her published writings, she repeatedly conveyed the concept.

M. L. Andreasen questioned whether Ellen White had actually written some of her statements in *The Desire of Ages* and other books. During 1909, Andreasen spent three months at Elmshaven, California, and was convinced of the accuracy of her published position.<sup>19</sup>

## From 1900 to 1931: Transition and conflict

During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the church remained divided in its position on the deity of Christ. The use of the word Trinity in print continued to be avoided. W. W. Prescott and A.T. Jones, both editors of the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, were key supporters of the full and eternal deity of Jesus. During the 1890s, Prescott was slower than Jones to accept the new view. But after 1900, as editor of the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, he published articles on the personhood and eternal nature of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.<sup>20</sup> Still Prescott believed that Jesus had a derived existence from God the Father. At the 1919 Bible Conference, he presented a series of eight devotionals for the conference titled “The Person of Christ” that expressed this view. Careful discussion at this conference showed that there were varying opinions.<sup>21</sup>

The early twentieth century saw Adventists and Protestant Fundamentalists battling higher criticism and the “new modernism” growing in Christianity. Liberalism rejected the deity of Jesus and His virgin birth. Adventist articles defending the Bible view began to appear more frequently in church papers. Irrespective of individual differences on details, Adventist ministers pulled into line against liberal views. Naturally, those who rejected the eternal preexistence of Christ did not want to speak of His beginning and weaken the argument against higher criticism. Even articles on the Trinity were tolerated.<sup>22</sup> The result was an increased appreciation of the full deity of the Son of God.

## From 1931 to 1957: Acceptance of the trinitarian view

F. M. Wilcox was crucial in facilitating the final transition to an accepted Seventh-day Adventist view on the Trinity through his guidance in the 1931 Statement of Fundamental Beliefs and his articles in the *Review and Herald*.<sup>23</sup> Doctrinal summaries were carefully avoided during the first decades of the twentieth century, due in part to conflict on the Trinity. According to L. E. Froom, 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.”<sup>24</sup> It was not until 1946 that the General Conference session officially voted a Statement of Fundamental Beliefs.<sup>25</sup>

During the 1940s, an ever-increasing majority of the church believed in the eternal, underived deity of Christ and the personhood of the Holy Spirit, yet there were some who held back and even actively resisted the change. **These were mainly comprised of a few older ministers and Bible teachers** such as J. S. Washburn, C. S. Longacre, and W. R. French. In 1944, Uriah Smith’s *Daniel and the Revelation* was revised and his comments on the derived nature of Christ’s divinity were removed.<sup>26</sup>

In 1957, the book *Questions on Doctrine* anchored the doctrine of the Trinity or Godhead for Adventists. While the book produced theological conflict in other areas, there was virtually no dissent on the book’s clear teaching of the Trinity.<sup>27</sup> The current unambiguous statement on the Trinity in the Seventhday Adventist Fundamental Beliefs was revised and voted at the 1980 General Conference Session.

The process of adopting the Trinity continued from 1900 to 1950. Key influences in the change were (1) repeated published biblical studies on the topic, (2) Ellen White’s clear statements, (3) Adventist response to the attacks of modern liberalism on the deity of

Christ and His virgin birth, and (4) F. M. Wilcox's statement of Fundamental Beliefs and his *Review and Herald* editorials.

We may learn several lessons from the history of the development of doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. First, we must acknowledge that the development of Adventist theology has usually been progressive and corrective. This is clearly illustrated in the doctrine of the Trinity. The leading of the Holy Spirit is dynamic. Other doctrinal concepts developed in a similar manner. This development never supposed a paradigm shift that contradicted the clear biblical teaching of the heavenly sanctuary ministry of Jesus and the prophetic foundation of the church. Second, the development of the Trinity doctrine demonstrates that doctrinal change sometimes requires the passing of a previous generation. For Seventh-day Adventists, it took more than 50 years for the doctrine of the Trinity to become normative. Third, Ellen White's unambiguous statements subdued controversy and provided confidence to transition to our current view. Finally, Adventist theology is always supremely dependent upon Scripture. The Bible tells us that the "path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day."<sup>28</sup> Hebrews 2:1 reads, "Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard." It was ultimately the Bible that led Seventh-day Adventists to adopt their present position on the Godhead or Trinity.

Tell us what you think about this article.

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2 Joshua V. Himes, "Christian Connexion," in *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. J. Newton Brown (Brattleboro, VT: Brattleboro Typographic, 1838), 363.

3 Joseph Bates, *Autobiography of Elder Joseph Bates* (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press, 1868), 205.

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

5 See J. H. Kellogg, *The Living Temple* (Battle Creek, MI: Good Health, 1903), 26–36, 396–398, 450–460, 484–486.

6 Arthur L. White to Hedy Jemison, July 2, 1969; James White, comp., *Hymns for God's Peculiar People* (Oswego, NY: Richard Oliphant, 1849), 47.

7 James White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, November 29, 1877, 72.

8 Uriah Smith, *Thoughts, Critical and Practical on the Book of Revelation* (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press, 1865), 59.

9 Smith, *Thoughts*, 1881, 74.

10 J. B. Frisbie, "The Seventh Day Sabbath Not Abolished," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 7, 1854, 50; J. N. Loughborough, "Questions for Brother Loughborough," *Advent*

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

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13 Uriah Smith, Looking Unto Jesus (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1898), 10.

14 A. T. Jones, "The Third Angel's Message Number 20," General Conference Bulletin, February 27, 1895, 378; *ibid.*, "The Third Angel's Message Number 17," General Conference Bulletin, February 25, 1895, 332.

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

16 Ellen G. White, Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, August 8, 1878, 49.

17 Ellen G. White, The Desire of Ages (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1898), 470, 530.

18 *Ibid.*, 671.

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27 *Questions on Doctrine* (Washington, DC: *Review and Herald*, 1957), 30, 31, 36.

28 Proverbs 4:18, KJV.