



Ellen White and God: one, two or three?

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Compilation by Pierluigi Luisetti



THE CONTENT OF THIS READING IS BASED ON:

← **Jerry Moon**. *"The Adventist Trinity Debate, Part 1: Historical Overview"* (AUSS [41:1] Spring 2003, 113-129); and *"The Adventist Trinity Debate, Part 2: The Role of Ellen G. White"* (AUSS [41:2] Autumn 2003, 275-292). (1)

W. Whidden, **J. Moon**, J.W. Reeve. *The Trinity: Understanding God's love, His plan of salvation, and Christian relationships* (RHPA 2002), 190-231.

FOREWORD by P. Luisetti (compiler)

This reading (non-academic) is a summary of the two above reading materials that Dr. **Denis Fortin** (photo above right) had embedded in his slideshow. The PowerPoint presentation, consisting of 58 slides, was presented in 2007 over the weekend from 13-15 July in Stuttgart (Germany) as part of the Adventist Theology Symposium (ATS). The speaker took this material



from his colleague Dr. **Jerry Moon** and added other interesting notes of his own. The skilful live translation, taken over by Frank Hasel (with a blue shirt), helped to understand this exciting topic.

Combining the slides from the previous mentioned presentation into one text was a pleasure for me. At the same time, I have created a small guide that will help us understand how things went in the early days of Adventism in relation to what the Adventist pioneers, and others after them,

thought about the Trinity.

All readers should be reminded that the word Trinity does not even appear in the Bible. It is one of the expressions that it was commonly accepted and is part of our language when we speak among ourselves as Adventists or with other Christians to bring its biblical fact closer. The Trinity is the second doctrinal point (it is not a creed) of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

(1) AUSS: Andrews University Seminary Studies. Both readings are recommended. Download [HERE](#)

DEBATE OVER THE TRINITY

Some Evangelical Christians are questioning traditional Trinitarianism. Some Adventists believe church leaders and theologians sold out the “original” Adventist belief on the doctrine of God for the sake of public relations and ecumenical goodwill.

A brief look at the development of our historical views on the Trinity will show that Ellen White played an influential role in helping us accept a biblical view of God, without the constraints of some unbiblical philosophical presuppositions.

**There are three development periods in the Advent story,
which are to be evaluated in relation to the Trinity**

1. Anti-Trinitarianism: 1846-1888;
2. Dissatisfaction with Anti-Trinitarianism: 1888-1898;
3. Paradigm shift: 1898-1915.

Reasons for rejecting Trinitarianism

- Early Adventists did not see biblical evidence for three persons in one Godhead.
- They thought the Trinity made the Father and the Son identical.
- They believed the misconception that the doctrine of the Trinity teaches the existence of three Gods.

J.N. Loughborough: “If Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are each God, it would be three Gods” (1861).

- They believed the doctrine of the Trinity would diminish the value of the atonement. Joseph H. Waggoner (1884): “Since the everliving, self-existent God cannot die, then if Christ had self-existence as God, he couldn’t have died on the cross”.

Ellen White, however, in 1897, flatly rejected this view. She said that when Jesus died on the cross, “Deity did not die. Humanity died”. (Manuscript 131, 1897)

- The fact that Christ is called “Son of God” and “the beginning of the creation of God” (Rev 3:14) was thought to prove that he must be of more recent origin than God the Father.
- The variety of expressions used to refer to the Holy Spirit indicate that **it** could not properly be considered a person.

1. Anti-trinitarianism: 1846-1888

During this early period, the majority of Adventists rejected the concept of the Trinity – at least as they understood it. Here are a few names of those, who stand in denial position: James White, J.N. Andrews, A.C. Bourdeau, D.T. Bourdeau, R.F. Cottrell, A.T. Jones, W.W. Prescott, Joseph Harvey Waggoner.

Joseph Bates

“Respecting the trinity, I concluded that it was impossible for me to believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, was also the Almighty God, the Father, one and the same being”.

Jerry Moon: ““These arguments made sense within an overall antitrinitarian paradigm, but when that paradigm was called into question, these points were recognized as being capable of fitting either interpretation. None of these is a valid objection to the basic trinitarian concept of one God in three Persons”. (AUSS 41:118)

2. Dissatisfaction with Anti-Trinitarianism: 1888-1898

The 1888 emphasis on righteousness by faith and the consequent exaltation of the cross of Christ called into question whether a subordinate, derived divinity of Christ could adequately account for the saving power of Christ.

Although still semi-Arian in his perspective, in 1890 E. J. Waggoner urged the necessity to “set forth Christ’s rightful position of equality with the Father, in order that His power to redeem may be better appreciated.” ... **Christ has life in Himself**; He possesses immortality in His own right”. (Christ and His Righteousness, pp. 19–22)

By 1890 Ellet J. Waggoner wrote his book *Christ and His Righteousness*.

Jerry Moon: “Waggoner was not yet fully trinitarian, but he saw clearly that a more exalted conception of Christ’s work of redemption demanded a higher conception of his being as Deity”.

3. Paradigm shift: 1898-1915

The publication of Ellen White’s *Desire of Ages* in 1898 set the stage for a paradigm shift in the Adventist conception of the Godhead and the doctrine of the Trinity. However, the shift from anti-Trinitarianism to a biblical Trinitarianism did not happen overnight. On the first page of the book, Ellen White affirmed: “From the days of eternity the Lord Jesus Christ was **one with the Father**». ⁽¹⁹⁾

In the chapter on the resurrection of Lazarus, in which Jesus affirms to Martha that he is the resurrection and the life, Ellen White states that «**In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived. ... The divinity of Christ is the believer’s assurance of eternal life**». ⁽⁵³⁰⁾

In commenting on Christ’s resurrection, Ellen White declared, «**The Saviour came forth from the grave by the life that was in Himself**». ⁽⁷⁸⁵⁾

The book included also clear statements about the personhood of the Holy Spirit. “Sin could be resisted and overcome only through the mighty agency of the **Third Person of the Godhead**». ⁽⁶⁷¹⁾

Ellen White's role

Jerry Moon: “Her writings about the Godhead show a clear progression, not primarily from anti-to protrinitarianism, but from relative ambiguity to greater specificity. Some of her early statements are capable of various interpretations, but her later statements, 1898-1906, are explicit to the point of being dogmatic.

Her change of view appears clearly to have been a matter of growth and progression, rather than reversal, because unlike her husband and others of her associates, she never directly attacked the view of the Trinity that she would later explicitly support”. (AUSS 41:278)

Ellen White did not at first recognize God's Trinitarian nature, but when she did in the 1890s and 1900s, she described God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and as real individuals. She emphasized their **threeness** as willing, thinking, social, and relational persons, and explained their **oneness** in terms of nature, character, purpose, and love, but not in terms of being one person.

Ellen White's early visions

«I saw a throne, and on it sat the Father and the Son. I gazed on Jesus' countenance and admired His lovely person. The Father's person I could not behold, for a cloud of glorious light covered Him. I asked Jesus if His Father had a form like Himself. He said He had, but I could not behold it, for said He, 'If you should once behold the glory of His person, you would cease to exist'». (Early Writings, 54)

«I have often seen the lovely Jesus, that He is a **person**. I asked Him if His Father was a person and had a form like Himself. Said Jesus, 'I am in the express image of My Father's **person**'. (Early Writings, 77. Emphasis hers)

Jerry Moon: "In terms of the trinitarian question, these two statements are ambiguous. By itself it contains nothing contradictory to early Adventist antitrinitarianism, though it also offers no contradiction to her explicitly trinitarian declarations of the early 1900s". (AUSS 41:281)

Spiritual Gifts, vol. 1 (1858)

In her first three chapters, "The Fall of Satan," "The Fall of Man," and "The Plan of Salvation," she mentions the Father and the Son discussing together how to deal with Lucifer and the fall of Adam and Eve. There is no mention of the Holy Spirit. But in the following chapter, "The First Advent of Christ," she refers to all three persons of the Godhead in the narration of Jesus' baptism.

"The Sufferings of Christ" (1869)

«This Saviour was the brightness of His Father's glory and the express image of His person. He possessed divine majesty, perfection, and excellence. **He was equal with God**». Perhaps Ellen White's first dissonant statement with the dominant antitrinitarianism in early Adventism. In the opening paragraphs of this pamphlet she asserted on the basis of Heb 1:13, Col 1:19, and Phil 2:6 that Christ in his preexistence was "equal with God". (Vol. 2 Testimonies for the Church, 200)

The Spirit of Prophecy, vol. 2 (1877)

«The Son of God was in the form of God, and he thought it not robbery to be equal with God». (The Spirit of Prophecy 2:10) The Spirit of Prophecy, vol. 2, is her early version of *Desire of Ages*. This statement is on the second page of the book.

Letter to Ellet J. Waggoner and Alonzo T. Jones (1887 from Basel)

«It was poverty that as He passed to and fro among the subjects He came to save, scarcely a solitary voice called Him blessed, scarcely a solitary hand was stretched out in friendship, and scarcely a solitary roof proffered Him shelter. Then look beneath the disguise, and whom do we

see? — **Divinity, the Eternal Son of God**, just as mighty, just as infinitely gifted with all the resources of power, and He was found in fashion as a man». (1888 Materials, 28)

Ellen White's statements of Christ's eternal Sonship is not to be understood as implying derivation from the Father. Sonship in his preexistence denoted that he was of the same nature as the Father, in unity and in close relationship with the Father. Sonship did not imply that Christ had a beginning in eternity past. The only beginning Christ knew was the beginning of his humanity at incarnation. In this sense, Sonship is historical (in reference to his incarnation) not ontological (derivation).

The Great Controversy (1888)

«Another dangerous error, **is the doctrine that denies the divinity of Christ**, claiming that he had no existence before his advent to this world. This theory is received with favor by a large class who profess to believe the Bible; yet it directly contradicts the plainest statements of our Saviour concerning his relationship with the Father, his divine character, and his pre-existence. It cannot be entertained without the most unwarranted wresting of the Scriptures». (The Great Controversy, 524)

«If men reject the testimony of the inspired Scriptures concerning the divinity of Christ, it is in vain to argue the point with them; for no argument, however conclusive, could convince them. ... **None who hold this error can have a true conception of the character or the mission of Christ, or of the great plan of God for man's redemption**». (The Great Controversy, 524)

In connection with the struggle over the law in Galatians and a clearer view of justification through the substitutionary atonement of Christ, Ellen White came to the realization that a broader concept of the atonement and of righteousness by faith required the full Deity of Christ.

«Before the entrance of evil, there was peace and joy throughout the universe. ... **Christ the Word, the only begotten of God, was one with the eternal Father**, — one in nature, in character, and in purpose, — the only being in all the universe that could enter into all the counsels and purposes of God. By Christ, the Father wrought in the creation of all heavenly beings. ... and to Christ, equally with the Father, all Heaven gave allegiance». (The Great Controversy, 493)

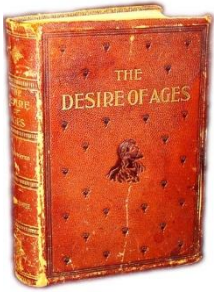
Patriarches and Prophetes (1890)

«The Son of God shared the Father's throne, and the glory of the eternal, self-existent One encircled both». (Patriarches and Prophets, 36)

Later in the book, Ellen White identifies Christ as the great I AM who spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai, the Jehovah of the Old Testament. (Cfr. Patriarches and Prophets, 366)

Special Testimonies for Ministers and Workers (1897)

«Evil had been accumulating for centuries, and could only be restrained and resisted by the mighty power of **the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead**, who would come with no modified energy, but in the fulness of divine power». (SpTA10 25)



The Desire of Ages (1898)

«In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived. ... The divinity of Christ is the believer's assurance of eternal life ⁽⁵³⁰⁾ ... and the Holy Spirit is the "Third Person of the Godhead»'. (The Desire of Ages, 671)

The first of these statements of Ellen White more — than any other — turn the tide from antitrinitarianism to a biblical trinitarianism.

Ellen White's role

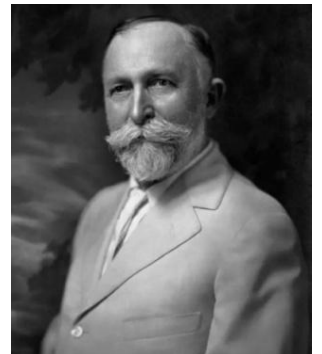
Jerry Moon: "There is a clear progression from the simple to the complex, suggesting that Ellen White's understanding did grow and change as she received additional light". (AUSS 41:284)

Kellogg Crisis (1902-1907)

Dr. J.H. Kellogg theorized that the life of every living thing — whether tree, flower, animal, or human — had the very essence of God within it. His view was published in *The Living Temple* (1903).

Kellogg: "God is the explanation of nature — not a God outside of nature, but in nature, manifesting himself through and in all the objects, movements, and varied phenomena of the universe". (The Living Temple, 28)

Photo of J.H. Kellogg (1852-1943), around 1899.



The problems with Kellogg's views:

1. God dwells intrinsically in all animated beings.
2. God's power equals his presence. (2)
3. He claimed Ellen White agreed with his view.

Ellen White's capstone statements on her view of the Godhead came in reaction to Kellogg's pantheistic teachings.

Letter to Teachers at Emmanuel Missionary College (1903)

«I have some things to say to our teachers in reference to the new book, "The Living Temple". Be careful how you sustain the sentiments of this book regarding the personality of God. As the Lord represents matters to me, **these sentiments do not bear the endorsement of God**. They are a snare that the enemy has prepared for these last days. I thought that this would surely be discerned, and that it would not be necessary for me to say anything about it. **But since the claim has been made that the teachings of this book can be sustained by statements from my writings, I am compelled to speak in denial of this claim**. There may be in this book expressions and sentiments that are in harmony with my writings. And there may be in my writings many statements which when taken from their connection, and interpreted according to the mind of the writer of "Living Temple" would seem to be in harmony with the teachings of this book. This

(2) Compiler's note: These teachings (Pantheism) regard the totality of things as divinely animated or see the world as identical with the godhead = Immanence. It would be the opposite of transcendence.

may give apparent support to the assertion that the sentiments in "Living Temple" are in harmony with my writings. **But God forbid that this opinion should prevail».** (Letter 211, 1903 in SpM 320)

«**The new theories in regard to God and Christ, as brought out in "The Living Temple", are not in harmony with the teaching of Christ.** The Lord Jesus came to this world to represent the Father. He did not represent God as an essence pervading nature, but as a personal being. Christians should bear in mind that God has a personality as verily as has Christ».^(Letter 212, 1903 in SpM 324)

Special Testimonies, B (1905)

«I am instructed to say, The sentiments of those who are searching for advanced scientific ideas are not to be trusted. Such representations as the following are made: "The Father is as the light invisible; the Son is as the light embodied; the Spirit is the light shed abroad." "The Father is like the dew, invisible vapor; the Son is like the dew gathered in beauteous form; the Spirit is like the dew fallen to the seat of life." Another representation: "The Father is like the invisible vapor; the Son is like the leaden cloud; the Spirit is rain fallen and working in refreshing power».

«All these spiritualistic representations are simply nothingness. They are imperfect, untrue. They weaken and diminish the Majesty which no earthly likeness can be compared to. God can not be compared with the things His hands have made. These are mere earthly things, suffering under the curse of God because of the sins of man. The Father can not be described by the things of earth».^(SpTB07 62)

Jerry Moon: "This manuscript offers perhaps the most radical, foundational indictment she ever wrote against a false view of the Trinity, followed by one of her most explicit descriptions of what she considered to be the true understanding of the Godhead".^(AUSS 41: 288)

«The Father is all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, and is invisible to mortal sight. The Son is all the fulness of the Godhead manifested. The Word of God declares Him to be "the express image of His person." "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Here is shown the personality of the Father».^(SpTB07 63)

«The Comforter that Christ promised to send after He ascended to heaven, is the Spirit in all the fulness of the Godhead, making manifest the power of divine grace to all who receive and believe in Christ as a personal Saviour. **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, and these powers will co-operate with the obedient subjects of heaven in their efforts to live the new life in Christ».^(SpTB07 63)

"The Word Was Made Flesh" (1906)

«Before men or angels were created, the Word was with God, and was God. The world was made by Him, "and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:3). If Christ made all things, He existed before all things. The words spoken in regard to this are so decisive that no one need be left in doubt. Christ was God essentially, and in the highest sense. He was with God from all eternity, God over all, blessed forevermore. The Lord Jesus Christ, the divine

Son of God, existed from eternity, a distinct person, yet one with the Father. He was the surpassing glory of heaven. He was the commander of the heavenly intelligences, and the adoring homage of the angels was received by Him as His right». (The Review and Herald, 5 aprile 1906, also in Selected Messages 1:247-248)

Ellen White's doctrine of the Godhead

- She refutes the assumption that all doctrines of the Trinity are the same and that objections to one demands the rejection of all.
- She rejects views that teach God is a formless, intangible, impersonal being, or simply a force in nature.
- She calls these views "spiritualistic theories".
- She embraces a literal, biblical view of the Godhead — she never uses the word Trinity.
- God includes three individual divine personalities, who in nature, character, purpose, and love are one.
- She rejects the traditional philosophical presuppositions of timelessness and impassibility of God.
- Her biblical view of God sees God as active within our time and space limitations; he is genuinely involved in our lives.

Acts of Apostels (1911)

«It is not essential for us to be able to define just what the Holy Spirit is. Christ tells us that the Spirit is the Comforter, "the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father". It is plainly declared regarding the Holy Spirit that, in His work of guiding men into all truth, "He shall not speak of Himself» (John 15:26; 16:13).

«The nature of the Holy Spirit is a mystery. Men cannot explain it, because the Lord has not revealed it to them. Men having fanciful views may bring together passages of Scripture and put a human construction on them, but the acceptance of these views will not strengthen the church. Regarding such mysteries, which are too deep for human understanding, silence is golden».

«The office of the Holy Spirit is distinctly specified in the words of Christ: "When He is come, He will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (John 16:8). It is the Holy Spirit that convicts of sin. If the sinner responds to the quickening influence of the Spirit, he will be brought to repentance and aroused to the importance of obeying the divine requirements».

(Acts of the Apostels, 51-52)

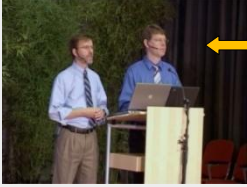
THE END

11th, January, 2022 Compiler: luisetti46@gmail.com

INFORMATION FROM THE COMPILER

Please visit my website in Italian. There are a lot of thorough biblically oriented topics, which are available for download. Some few of them are translated into German, English, French, Spanish:

www.letteraperta.it



The video recording of the present reading (**No. 6**; 512 MB-MP4) can be downloaded free on Vimeo [HERE](#). English-German spoken. It takes a little more than an hour.

Denis Fortin's web side is [HERE](#). There you can download the original version in English of the PowerPoint presentation. (Updated 15 July 2007)

Note: The German PPT version offered there is unfortunately quite flawed.



P. Luisetti



The identical PDF document of this conference can be downloaded. [HERE](#) in Italian. Title: La Trinità nel pensiero di Ellen White.



[HERE](#) in German. Title: Ellen White und die Dreieinigkeit Gottes.

The 28 Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Edition 2020. Download [HERE](#).

