

THE ADVENTIST TRINITY DEBATE PART 1: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

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Forty years have passed since Erwin R. Gane established that most of the leaders among the earliest Seventh-day Adventists held to an antitrinitarian theology. He also adduced strong evidence for a second hypothesis: that cofounder Ellen G. White was an exception to the majority view. She was, he averred, “a trinitarian monotheist.”¹ Gane did not attempt to reconstruct the history of the change from rejection to acceptance of trinitarianism, nor did he address extensively the question of Ellen White’s role in that theological shift. But by documenting two major starting points, he set the stage for other investigators to further his work.

Several authors have since taken up aspects of those two major issues. Russell Holt in 1969 built on Gane’s thesis, adding further significant evidence regarding James White, J. N. Andrews, A. C. Bourdeau, D. T. Bourdeau, R. F. Cottrell, A. T. Jones, W. W. Prescott, J. Edson White, and M. L. Andreasen. In conclusion, Holt argued that until 1890, the “field was dominated by” antitrinitarians; from 1890 to 1900, “the course of the denomination was decided by statements from Ellen G. White,” and during the period from 1900 to 1930, most of the leading antitrinitarians died, so that by 1931 trinitarianism “had triumphed and become the standard denominational position.” Thus Holt approximated the historical trajectory of the present research, though the size of his paper did not permit in-depth treatment.²

Two years later, L. E. Froom in *Movement of Destiny* argued for an earlier inception of trinitarianism, maintaining that E. J. Waggoner had become essentially trinitarian, or at least “anti-Arian,” as early as 1888, but only by “special pleading” could he sustain that aspect of his hypothesis.³ Nevertheless, *Movement of Destiny* offers a more detailed examination of the

¹Erwin R. 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).

²Russell Holt, “The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination: Its Rejection and Acceptance” (Term paper, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 1969), 25.

³Le Roy Edwin Froom, *Movement of Destiny* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1971), 279. A contemporary review calls Froom’s argument at this point an instance of “special pleading” (C. Mervyn Maxwell, review of *Movement of Destiny* by Le Roy Edwin Froom, in *AUSS* 10 [January 1972]: 121).

primary sources on trinitarianism and antitrinitarianism in Adventism than can be found in any other place. For sheer bulk, his work makes a major contribution to the history of the Adventist theology of the Godhead.

Merlin Burt, in 1996, contributed much-needed depth and detail to the understanding of the doctrine in the first half of the twentieth century.⁴ Woodrow Whidden broadened the systematic theological discussion by linking the advances in soteriology and the new openness to trinitarianism during the decade of 1888-1898.⁵

All these contributions are basically supportive of Gane's original thesis. As a result, his contention that most of the leading SDA pioneers were antitrinitarian in their theology has become accepted Adventist history. In 2003, however, the meaning of that history for belief and practice is more hotly debated than ever. On one hand, some Adventists have wrapped the pioneers' antitrinitarianism in an ecumenical conspiracy theory, claiming that Adventist leaders sold out the original "truth" for the sake of public relations, as a means of shedding the denomination's sectarian image.⁶ On the other hand, the question of whether belief in God as a Trinity is really biblical receives additional force from the fact that some contemporary theologians in the wider Protestant community are taking up anew the historic questioning of traditional trinitarianism.⁷

The purpose of this article is to examine the process of change in the Adventist view of the Trinity in order to discover what motivated the changes, and also whether they resulted from a growing biblical understanding or were driven by a desire to be seen as orthodox by the wider Christian community.

The development of the doctrine of the Godhead in Seventh-day Adventism may be divided into six periods: (1) Antitrinitarian Dominance, 1846-1888; (2) Dissatisfaction with Antitrinitarianism, 1888-1898; (3) Paradigm Shift, 1898-1913; (4) Decline of Antitrinitarianism, 1913-1946; (5) Trinitarian Dominance, 1946-1980; and (6) Renewed Tensions, 1980 to the Present. The first three periods have been treated by Gane, Holt, and Froom, and the 1888-

⁴Merlin Burt, "Demise of Semi-Arianism and Anti-Trinitarianism in Adventist Theology, 1888-1957" (term paper, Andrews University, 1996). Ellen G. White Research Center, Andrews University. Burt's paper extends some elements of the history through 1968.

⁵Woodrow W. Whidden, "Salvation Pilgrimage: The Adventist Journey into Justification by Faith and Trinitarianism," *Ministry*, April 1998, 5-7.

⁶David Clayton, "The Omega of Deadly Heresies," n.p., n.d. [ca. 2000], in the files of the author. Cf. idem, "Some Facts Concerning the Omega Heresy," www.restorationministry.com/Open_Face/html/2000/open_face_oct_2000.htm; accessed Mar. 10, 2003. See also Bob Deiner and others in nn. 75-77 below.

⁷See, e.g., Anthony F. Buzzard and Charles F. Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity, Christianity's Self-Inflicted Wound* (Bethesda, MD: Christian Universities Press, 1998).

1957 era by Merlin Burt, but none of these deal extensively with trinitarian issues during the Kellogg crisis⁸ or the period since 1980.⁹

Antitrinitarian Dominance, 1846-1888

From about 1846 to 1888, the majority of Adventists rejected the concept of the Trinity—at least as they understood it. All the leading writers were antitrinitarian, although the literature contains occasional references to members who held trinitarian views. Ambrose C. Spicer, the father of General Conference President William Ambrose Spicer, had been a Seventh Day Baptist minister before his conversion to Adventism in 1874. He evidently remained trinitarian, because W. A. Spicer recounted to A. W. Spalding that his father “grew so offended at the anti-trinitarian atmosphere in Battle Creek that he ceased preaching.”¹⁰ S. B. Whitney had been trinitarian, but in the course of his indoctrination as an Adventist in 1861, became a convinced antitrinitarian. His experience gives evidence that at least some ministers taught antitrinitarianism as an essential element of the instruction of new converts.¹¹ R. F. Cottrell, on the other hand, wrote in the *Review* that while he disbelieved in the Trinity, he had never “preached against it” or previously written about it.¹² A third bit of evidence that not all were agreed on antitrinitarianism was the remark of D. T. Bourdeau in 1890: “Although we claim to be believers in, and worshipers of, only one God, I have thought that there are as many gods among us as there are conceptions of the Deity.”¹³

Those who rejected the traditional Trinity doctrine of the Christian creeds were devout believers in the biblical testimony regarding the eternity of God the Father, the deity of Jesus Christ “as Creator, Redeemer and Mediator,” and the “importance of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴

⁸See Froom, 349-356. J. H. Kellogg’s espousal of trinitarianism will be explored in Part 2 of this series.

⁹See Fernando L. Canale, “Doctrine of God,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen, Commentary Reference Series, vol. 12 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 117-118, 126, 128-129, 132, 138-140, 145, 148-150.

¹⁰A. W. Spalding to H. C. Lacey, June 2, 1947, Adventist Heritage Center, Andrews University.

¹¹Seymour B. Whitney, “Both Sides,” *Review and Herald*, Feb. 25 and Mar. 4, 1862, 101-103, 109-111.

¹²R. F. Cottrell, “The Doctrine of the Trinity,” *Review and Herald*, June 1, 1869.

¹³D. T. Bourdeau, “We May Partake of the Fullness of the Father and the Son,” *Review and Herald*, Nov 18, 1890, 707.

¹⁴Gane, 109.

While some, very early in Adventist history, held that Christ had been created,¹⁵ by 1888 it was widely accepted that he had preexisted from “so far back in the days of eternity that to finite comprehension” he was “practically without beginning.” Whatever that beginning may have involved, it was not by “creation.”¹⁶ Moreover, they weren’t initially convinced that the Holy Spirit was an individual divine Person and not merely an expression for the divine presence, power, or influence.

“Respecting the trinity, I concluded that it was an 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,” wrote Joseph Bates regarding his conversion in 1827. He told his father, “If you can convince me that we are one in this sense, that you are my father, and I your son; and also that I am your father, and you my son, then I can believe in the trinity.” Because of this difference, he chose to join the Christian Connection rather than the Congregational church of his parents.¹⁷ One might be tempted to dismiss Bates’s assessment as simple ignorance of the meaning of Trinity, but there were then and remain today a variety of views claiming the term “Trinity.” Cottrell observed in 1869 that there were “a multitude of views” on the Trinity, “all of them orthodox, I suppose, as long as they nominally assent to the doctrine.”¹⁸

The early Adventists set forth at least six reasons for their rejection of the term “Trinity.” The first was that they did not see biblical evidence for three persons in one Godhead. This was not a new objection.¹⁹ In its

¹⁵E.g., Uriah Smith, *Thoughts, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Revelation* (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1865), 59. He later repudiated this view (idem, *Looking Unto Jesus* [Battle Creek: Review and Herald, 1898], 12, 17).

¹⁶E. J. Waggoner, *Christ and His Righteousness* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1890), 21-22; cf. Uriah Smith, *Looking Unto Jesus*, 12, 17.

¹⁷Joseph Bates, *The Autobiography of Elder Joseph Bates* (Battle Creek, MI: SDA Publishing, 1868), 205.

¹⁸Cottrell, “The Doctrine of the Trinity.”

¹⁹The names of Arius, Servetus, and Socinus come to mind. Deut 6:4 clearly teaches that God is one, but while the writer could have used the term *yahid* to denote a solitary “one,” the term chosen was the Hebrew *ʿehad*, which denotes a composite “one” or one of a group, in contrast to a solitary or emphatic “one.” The same word, *ʿehad*, is used in Gen 2:24 for the unity of husband and wife, who become “one,” but within that oneness, still retain their individuality (Woodrow Whidden, “The Strongest Bible Evidence for the Trinity,” in *The Trinity: Understanding God’s Love, His Plan of Salvation, and Christian Relationships*, Woodrow Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John Reeve [Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002], 33-34). An extended discussion of the biblical evidence is beyond the scope of this article, but suffice it to say that both the OT and NT contain indications that the One God is not merely solitary, and the NT explicitly refers to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (see, e.g., Matt 28:19; 2 Cor 13:14) (ibid., 21-117).

simplest form, the concept of Trinity is the result of affirming, on the authority of Scripture, both the “oneness” and the “threeness” of God, despite human inability to fully understand the personal, divine Reality those terms point to. How this can be explained has been the subject of much thought and speculation over the centuries. The influence of Greek philosophy on the doctrinal developments of early and medieval Christian history is well known.²⁰

A second reason the early Adventists gave for rejecting the Trinity was the misconception that it made the Father and the Son identical. We have already noted Bates’s testimony, “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.”²¹ D. W. Hull, J. N. Loughborough, S. B. Whitney, and D. M. Canright shared this view.²² The concept that the Father and Son are identical approximates an ancient heresy called Modalist Monarchianism, or Sabellianism (after Sabellius, one of its third-century proponents). Modalists “held that in the Godhead the only differentiation was a mere succession of modes or operations.” Modalists denied the *threeness* of God and asserted that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not separate personalities.²³

A third and opposite objection to the Trinity doctrine was based on the misconception that it teaches the existence of three Gods. “If Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are each God, it would be three Gods,” wrote Loughborough in 1861.²⁴

A fourth view was that belief in the Trinity would diminish the value of the atonement.²⁵ Since the “everliving, self-existent God” cannot die, then if Christ had self-existence as God, he couldn’t have died on Calvary, they reasoned. If only his humanity died, then his sacrifice was only a human one, inadequate for redemption.²⁶ Thus, in order to protect the

²⁰See Jerry Moon, “The Trinity in the Reformation Era: Four Viewpoints,” in *The Trinity: Understanding God’s Love, His Plan of Salvation, and Christian Relationships*, Woodrow Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John Reeve (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002), 166-181.

²¹Bates, 205.

²²Gane, 104.

²³F. L. Cross, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), s.v. “Monarchianism” (see also s.v. “Modalism” and “Sabellianism”).

²⁴J. N. Loughborough, “Questions for Bro. Loughborough,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 18 (Nov. 5, 1861), 184.

²⁵Gane, 105.

²⁶J. H. Waggoner, *The Atonement* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1884), 173. Smith makes a similar argument in *Looking Unto Jesus*, 23.

reality of his death on the cross, the early Adventists felt they had to deny that Christ in his preexistence possessed divine immortality. However logical that reasoning may have seemed to some, its basic premises were flatly rejected by Ellen White in 1897. She averred that when Jesus died on the cross, "Deity did not die. Humanity died."²⁷ Her influence on Adventist readers, and their confidence in the source of her information was such that the implications of such a pronouncement could not be ignored, giving Adventist scholars one more reason to reassess their basic paradigm regarding the Godhead.

Fifth, 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.²⁸ Sixth, it was argued that "there are various expressions concerning the Holy Spirit which would indicate that it [*sic*] couldn't properly be considered as a person, such as its being 'shed abroad' in the heart [Rom. 5:5], and 'poured out upon all flesh' [Joel 2:28]."²⁹ These arguments, however, depended on giving a very literal interpretation to expressions that could also be seen as figures of speech. 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.³⁰ Yet all of them were based on biblical texts. Adventists eventually changed their view of the Godhead because they came to a different understanding of the biblical texts.

Dissatisfaction with Antitrinitarianism, 1888-1898

The focus of the 1888 General Conference session on "Christ our righteousness" and the consequent exaltation of the cross of Christ called into serious question whether a subordinate, derived divinity could adequately account for the saving power of Christ. E. J. Waggoner urged

²⁷E. G. White, Manuscript 131, 1897, quoted in *SDA Bible Commentary*, ed. Francis D. Nichol (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1954), 5:1113. Later she wrote again, "Humanity died: divinity did not die" (idem., "The Risen Savior," *Youth's Instructor*, August 4, 1898, paragraph 1).

²⁸Uriah Smith, *Thoughts on the Book of Daniel and the Revelation* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1882), 487; idem., *Looking Unto Jesus*, 10.

²⁹Uriah Smith, "In the Question Chair," *Review and Herald*, March 23, 1897, 188.

³⁰The term "person" as applied to God indicates a being with personality, intellect, and will. Unlike the multiple gods of polytheism, the three persons of the biblical Godhead are profoundly "one in purpose, in mind, in character, but not in person." Thus, despite their individuality, they are never divided, never in conflict, and thus constitute not three gods, but one God.

the necessity of "set[ting] forth Christ's rightful position of equality with the Father, in order that His power to redeem may be the better appreciated."³¹ While by 1890 Waggoner had not yet fully grasped Christ's infinitely eternal preexistence,³² he argued convincingly that Christ was not created, that "He has 'life in Himself' [John 10:17]; He possesses immortality in His own right." Waggoner insisted on "the Divine unity of the Father and the Son" and averred that Christ is "by nature of the very substance of God, and having life in Himself, He is properly called Jehovah, the self-existent One" (Jer 23:56), "who is on an equality with God" (Phil 2:6, ARV), "having all the attributes of God."³³ 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. "The fact that Christ is a part of the Godhead, possessing all the attributes of Divinity, being the equal of the Father in all respects, as Creator and Lawgiver, is the only force there is in the atonement. . . . Christ died 'that He might bring us to God' (1 Peter 3:18); but if He lacked one iota of being equal to God, He could not bring us to Him."³⁴ The force of this logic leads inevitably to the recognition of Christ's full equality in preexistence as well.

Thus, the dynamic of righteousness by faith and its consequences for the doctrine of God provides the historical context for the provocative comment of D. T. Bourdeau that "although we claim to be believers in, and worshipers of, only one God, I have thought that there are as many gods among us as there are conceptions of the Deity."³⁵ Such a comment from a highly respected evangelist and missionary seems to indicate that the collective confidence in the antitrinitarian paradigm was showing some cracks. Further evidence that this was so appeared two years later in 1892, when Pacific Press published a pamphlet titled "The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity," by Samuel T. Spear. The pamphlet corrected two prevailing misconceptions of the Trinity doctrine, showing that it "is not a system of tri-theism, or the doctrine of three Gods, but it is the doctrine of one God subsisting and acting in three persons, with the qualification that the term 'person' . . . is not, when used in this relation, to be understood in any sense that

³¹Waggoner, 19.

³²Ibid., 21-22.

³³Ibid., 22-23, 25.

³⁴Ibid., 44.

³⁵Bourdeau, 707.

would make it inconsistent with the unity of the Godhead.”³⁶

In 1898, Uriah Smith prepared *Looking Unto Jesus*, the most comprehensive and carefully nuanced exposition of the nontrinitarian view among Adventists. Smith emphatically repudiated his earlier view that Christ had been created, but still held that “God [the Father] 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.” Through some means not clearly revealed in Scripture, Christ had been “brought forth,” “begotten,” or “by some divine impulse or process, not creation,” Christ had been given existence by the Father. In one paragraph Smith comes surprisingly close to a trinitarian statement: “This union between the Father and the Son does not detract from either, but strengthens both. Through it, in connection with the Holy Spirit, we have all of Deity.”³⁷ But this slow struggle toward a fuller understanding was eclipsed by the bold declarations of *The Desire of Ages*, published in the same year. *Desire of Ages* produced a paradigm shift in Adventists’ perceptions of the Godhead.

Paradigm Shift, 1898-1913

The period from 1898 to 1913 saw an almost complete reversal of Adventist thinking about the Trinity. I say “almost” because this paradigm shift did not lead to unanimity on the topic. As Merlin Burt has documented, a few thought leaders who tended toward the “old view” remained vocal, but with declining influence, for many years.³⁸

Nevertheless, the publication of Ellen White’s *Desire of Ages* in 1898 became the continental divide for the Adventist understanding of the Trinity. Beginning with the first paragraph of the book, she called into question the dominant view of early Adventists regarding the relationship of Christ to the Father. Her third sentence in chapter 1 declared, “*From the days of eternity the Lord Jesus Christ was one with the Father*” (emphasis supplied). Yet even this was not sufficiently unequivocal to clarify her position regarding the deity of Jesus, for as we have seen, others had used similar language without believing in Christ’s infinitely eternal preexistence. Later in the book, writing on the resurrection of Lazarus, she quoted the words of Christ, “I am the resurrection and the life,” and followed them with a seven-word comment that would begin to turn the

³⁶Samuel T. Spear, *The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity*, Bible Students’ Library, no. 90 (March 1892), 3-14, reprinted from *New York Independent*, November 14, 1889.

³⁷Smith, *Looking Unto Jesus*, 3, 10, 17, esp. 13.

³⁸According to Burt, 54, the last of the “old-time” Adventist antitrinitarians died in 1968. A new generation of neo-antitrinitarians would emerge in the 1980s (see below).

tide of antitrinitarian theology among Adventists: "*In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived*" (emphasis supplied).³⁹ Christ didn't ultimately derive his divine life from the Father. As a man on earth, he subordinated his will to the will of the Father (John 5:19, 30), but as self-existent God, he had power to lay down his life and take it up again. Thus in commenting on Christ's resurrection, Ellen White again asserted his full deity and equality with the Father, declaring "The Saviour came forth from the grave by the life that was in Himself."⁴⁰

These statements came as a shock to the theological leadership of the church. M. L. Andreasen, who had become an Adventist just four years earlier at the age of eighteen, and who would eventually teach at the church's North American seminary, claimed that the new concept was so different from the previous understanding that some prominent leaders doubted whether Ellen White had really written it. After Andreasen entered the ministry in 1902, he made a special trip to Ellen White's California home to investigate the issue for himself. Ellen White welcomed him and gave him "access to the manuscripts." He had brought with him "a number of quotations," to "see if they were in the original in her own handwriting." He recalled: "I was sure Sister White had never written, 'In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived.' But now I found it in her own handwriting just as it had been published. It was so with other statements. As I checked up, I found that they were Sister White's own expressions."⁴¹

Desire of Ages contained equally uncompromising statements regarding the deity of the Holy Spirit. Repeatedly it employed the personal pronoun "he" in referring to the Holy Spirit, climaxing with the impressive statement, "The Spirit was to be given as a regenerating agent, and without this, the sacrifice of Christ would have been of no avail. . . . Sin could be resisted and overcome only through the mighty agency of the *Third Person of the Godhead*, who would come with no modified energy, but in the fullness of divine power" (emphasis supplied).⁴²

These and similar statements drove some to a fresh examination of the biblical evidence about the Godhead. Others, disbelieving that they could have been wrong for so many years, studied to bolster the old arguments. Ellen White's testimony, however, by calling attention to Scriptures whose

³⁹E. G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1964), 530.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 785; see also the next two paragraphs.

⁴¹M. L. Andreasen, "The Spirit of Prophecy," chapel address at Loma Linda, California, November 30, 1948, Adventist Heritage Center, Andrews University, 3-4.

⁴²White, *Desire of Ages*, 669-671.

significance had been overlooked,⁴³ created a paradigm shift that could not be reversed. As Adventists returned to the Scriptures to see “whether those things were so” (Acts 17:11), they eventually came to a growing consensus that the basic concept of the Trinity was a biblical truth to be accepted and embraced.

While *Desire of Ages* set in motion a paradigm shift regarding the Adventist understanding of the Godhead, it was not Ellen White’s last word on the subject. Later, during the Kellogg crisis of 1902-1907, she repeatedly used expressions such as “three living persons of the heavenly trio,” while continuing to maintain the essential unity of the Godhead. Thus she affirmed the plurality and the unity, the *threeness* and the oneness, the foundational elements of a simple, biblical understanding of the Trinity.⁴⁴

Evidence that at least a portion of church leadership recognized the *Desire of Ages* statements as removing the objections to a biblical doctrine of the Trinity is a summary of Adventist beliefs published by F. M. Wilcox in the *Review and Herald* in 1913. Wilcox, editor of the denomination’s most influential periodical, wrote that “Seventh-day Adventists believe,— 1. In the divine Trinity. This Trinity consists of the eternal Father, . . . the Lord Jesus Christ, . . . [and] the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead.”⁴⁵

Decline of Antitrinitarianism, 1913-1946

Despite Wilcox’s declaration in the *Review*, (or perhaps because of it), the debate over the Trinity intensified in the early decades of the twentieth century. At the 1919 Bible Conference, Christ’s eternity and his relation to the Father were major and unresolved subjects of debate. Curiously, in view of Ellen White’s *Desire of Ages* statement that Christ’s life was “underived,” even W. W. Prescott, the foremost proponent of a trinitarian view at the conference, held that Christ’s existence was in some way “derived” from the Father.⁴⁶ This may constitute evidence that the leadership were not content to simply accept White’s pronouncement

⁴³Bible texts that Ellen White cited as supporting various aspects of a trinitarian view included Rom 8:16 (*Evangelism* [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946], 617); 1 Cor 2:10-14 (*ibid.*); John 16:7-14 (*ibid.*, 616); John 14:16-18, 26; 16:8, 12-14 (*Desire of Ages*, 669-671); and Col. 2:9 (*Evangelism*, 614).

⁴⁴These statements and their context in the Kellogg crisis will be treated in more detail in Part 2 of this study.

⁴⁵[F. M. Wilcox], “The Message for Today,” *Review and Herald*, October 9, 1913, 21. I am indebted to Bill Fagal of the White Estate Research Center at Andrews University for calling my attention to this source.

⁴⁶W. W. Prescott, “The Person of Christ,” July 2, 1919 presentation in “Bible Conference Papers 1-8, July 1-19, 1919” [continuous pagination, p. 69; July 2, afternoon session, p. 20], Adventist Heritage Center, Andrews University; see also Burt, 25-27.

without seeing it for themselves in Scripture. Or perhaps, it shows Prescott's conscious or unconscious reflection of classical trinitarian sources.⁴⁷

The polarization of American Christianity between modernism and fundamentalism in the first two decades of the twentieth century tended to push Adventists closer to a trinitarian position, since in so many other areas—such as evolution, belief in the supernatural, Christ's virgin birth, miracles, literal resurrection—Adventists were in opposition to modernists and in sympathy with fundamentalists.⁴⁸

In 1930, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists received a request from its African Division that "a statement of what Adventists believe be printed in the *Year Book*" to "help government officials and others to a better understanding of our work." In response, the General Conference Committee appointed a subcommittee (comprised of M. E. Kern, associate secretary of the General Conference; F. M. Wilcox, editor of the *Review and Herald*; E. R. Palmer, manager of the *Review and Herald*; and C. H. Watson, General Conference president) to prepare a statement of Adventist beliefs.⁴⁹ Wilcox, as the leading writer among them, drafted a 22-point statement that was subsequently published in the SDA *Year Book* of 1931.⁵⁰ The second point spoke of the "Godhead, or Trinity," and the third affirmed "that Jesus Christ is very God," an echo of the Nicene creed. Lest anyone think that Adventists intended to make a creed, "no formal or official approval" was sought for the statement. Fifteen years later, when the statement had gained general acceptance, the General Conference session of 1946 made it official, voting that "no revision of this Statement of Fundamental Beliefs, as it now appears in the [*Church*] *Manual*, shall be made at any time except at a General Conference session."⁵¹ This marked the first official endorsement of a trinitarian view by the church, although "the last of the well known

⁴⁷The generation of the Son by the Father is an Augustinian formulation (*Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, s.v. "Trinity, Doctrine of the." Cf. W. W. Prescott, *The Doctrine of Christ: A Series of Bible Studies for Use in Colleges and Seminaries* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1920), 3, 20-21; see also Burt, 30-33.

⁴⁸Prescott, 33.

⁴⁹General Conference Committee Minutes, Dec. 29, 1930, 195, Adventist Heritage Center, Andrews University.

⁵⁰Froom, 413-414.

⁵¹"Fifteenth Meeting," General Conference Report No. 8, *Review and Herald*, June 14, 1946, 197. Froom, 419, attributes this action to the 1950 session. He evidently read his source too hastily; the 1950 session only reiterated the action of the 1946 session ("Fifteenth Meeting," General Conference Report No. 10, *Review and Herald*, July 23, 1950, 230).

expositors" continued to "uphold the 'old' view" until his death in 1968.⁵²

Trinitarian Dominance, 1946 to 1980

From the retirement of F. M. Wilcox in 1944⁵³ to the publication of *Movement of Destiny* in 1971,⁵⁴ L. E. Froom was the most visible champion of trinitarianism among Seventh-day Adventists. His book, *The Coming of the Comforter* was unprecedented among Adventists (except for a few passages in Ellen White) in its systematic exposition of the personhood of the Holy Spirit and the trinitarian nature of the Godhead.⁵⁵ Froom's leading role in the preparation of the 1957 work, *Questions on Doctrine*, has been amply documented elsewhere.⁵⁶ *Questions on Doctrine* evoked a storm of controversy for certain statements on christology and the atonement, but its clear affirmation of "the heavenly Trinity"⁵⁷ went virtually unchallenged—perhaps because M. L. Andreasen, the book's chief critic in other areas, was a convinced trinitarian.⁵⁸ Froom's final word was his 700-page *Movement of Destiny*, published in 1971. Despite "instances of special pleading" and problems of bias that "somewhat diminish the work as dependable history,"⁵⁹ it nevertheless thoroughly documents the movement of Adventist theology toward a biblical trinitarian consensus.

The climax of this phase of doctrinal development was a new statement of fundamental beliefs, voted by the 1980 General Conference session in Dallas. The new statement of twenty-seven "Fundamental Beliefs," like the 1931 statement, explicitly affirmed belief in the Trinity. The affirmation came in the second article of the statement (following a preamble and a first article

⁵²Burt, 54.

⁵³Wilcox was editor of the *Review and Herald* (now *Adventist Review*), the general church paper of Seventh-day Adventists, from 1911 to 1944 (*SDA Encyclopedia* [Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1996], s.v. "Wilcox, Francis McClellan").

⁵⁴See note 3, above.

⁵⁵Le Roy Edwin Froom, *The Coming of the Comforter*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1949), 37-57. Cf. E. G. White, *Special Testimonies*, Series B, no. 7 (1905), 62-63.

⁵⁶[L. E. Froom, W. E. Read, and R. A. Anderson,] *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1957); cf. T. E. Unruh, "The Seventh-day Adventist Evangelical Conferences of 1955-1956," *Adventist Heritage* 4 (Fourth Quarter 1977), 35-46; and Jerry Moon, "M. L. Andreasen, L. E. Froom, and the Controversy over *Questions on Doctrine* (research paper, Andrews University, 1988).

⁵⁷Froom, Read, and Anderson, 36-37, 645-646.

⁵⁸M. L. Andreasen, "Christ the Express Image of God," *Review and Herald*, Oct. 17, 1946, 8; see also Burt, 43.

⁵⁹Maxwell, 119-122.

on the inspiration and authority of Scripture). “2. *The Trinity*[.] There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal Persons.”⁶⁰ Article 4 affirms that “God the eternal Son became incarnate in Christ Jesus. . . . Forever truly God, He became also truly man.”⁶¹ Article 5 declares that “God the eternal Spirit was active with the Father and the Son in Creation, incarnation, and redemption,” and was “sent by the Father and the Son to be always with His children.”⁶² At several points, the statement echoes the terminology of the classical trinitarian creeds, even including the Filioque clause with reference to the Holy Spirit.⁶³

A brief recapitulation of Adventist belief statements may clarify the significance of the 1980 action. The first *Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by Seventh-day Adventists* (1872) was the work of Uriah Smith.⁶⁴ Its first two articles deal with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

— I —

That there is one God, a personal, spiritual being, the creator of all things, omnipotent, omniscient, and eternal, infinite in wisdom, holiness, justice, goodness, truth, and mercy; unchangeable, and everywhere present by his representative, the Holy Spirit. Ps. 139.7.

— II —

That there is one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Eternal Father, the one by whom God created all things, and by whom they do consist; that he took on him the nature of the seed of Abraham for the redemption of our fallen race; that he dwelt among men full of grace and truth, lived our example, died our sacrifice, was raised for our justification, ascended on high to be our only mediator in the sanctuary in heaven, where, with his own blood he makes atonement for our sins.⁶⁵

It is notable that while there is no reference to the term Trinity, neither is there any overt polemic against a trinitarian position. Smith was clearly striving to adhere as closely as possible to biblical language. The statement represented a consensus at the time, but in harmony with its

⁶⁰*Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Washington, DC: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1981), 32.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 33.

⁶²*Ibid.*

⁶³See *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, s.v. “Filioque.”

⁶⁴Uriah Smith, *A Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by the Seventh-day Adventists* (Battle Creek, MI: SDA Publishing Association, 1872), 1.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 2-3.

preamble's explicit disclaimer of any creedal statement⁶⁶ it was never given the status of official approval.

The second statement of "Fundamental Principles" (1889), also by Uriah Smith,⁶⁷ is likewise a consensus statement that avoids pressing any points of disagreement. As with the 1872 statement, the preamble maintains "no creed but the Bible," and further claims that "the following propositions may be taken as a summary of the principal features of their [Seventh-day Adventists'] religious faith, upon which there is, so far as we know, *entire unanimity* throughout the body" (emphasis supplied).⁶⁸ Apparently, Smith did not consider the fine points of the doctrine of the Godhead as ranking among the "principal features" of the SDA faith at that time, because he could hardly have been unaware that there were certain minor disagreements related to the Trinity.⁶⁹ Article I from 1872 (quoted above), was reproduced without change in the 1889 statement. Article II in the 1889 statement has some modifications in the language about the work of Christ, but no material change in its reference to the person of Christ.⁷⁰ Because these articles adhere closely to biblical terminology, they were capable of being interpreted favorably by either nontrinitarians or trinitarians.

The third statement of "Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists"⁷¹ was prepared under the direction of a committee, but it was actually written by F. M. Wilcox, editor of the *Review and Herald*.⁷² Fifteen years later, in 1946, it became the first such statement to be

⁶⁶Smith's initial paragraph declares: "In presenting to the public this synopsis of our faith, we wish to have it distinctly understood that we have no articles of faith, creed, or discipline, aside from the Bible. We do not put forth this as having any authority with our people, nor is it designed to secure uniformity among them, as a system of faith, but is a brief statement of what is and has been, with great unanimity, held by them. We often find it necessary to meet inquiries on this subject. . . . Our only object is to meet this necessity" (ibid., 1).

⁶⁷"Fundamental Principles," *SDA Year Book*, (Battle Creek, MI: SDA Publishing Association, 1889), 147-151.

⁶⁸Ibid., 147.

⁶⁹The statement of D. T. Bourdeau, attesting that there were among SDAs "many . . . conceptions of the Deity," appeared in the *Review and Herald*, of which Smith was the editor, only one year later.

⁷⁰The only change in the portion referring to the person of Christ was the substitution of the pronoun "he" [*sic*] for the personal name "God" in the first sentence. The 1889 statement reads: "There is one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Eternal Father, the one by whom *he* created all things" ("Fundamental Principles," *Seventh-day Adventist Year Book*, [1889], 147).

⁷¹"Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists," *Seventh-day Adventist Year Book*, (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1931), 377-380.

⁷²For details of the process, see Froom, 413-415.

officially endorsed by a General Conference session.⁷³ Article 2 declares,

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. 28:19.⁷⁴

Thus, the statement voted at Dallas in 1980 was the fourth fundamental beliefs statement of Seventh-day Adventists, but only the second to be officially voted by a General Conference session. The official adoption of the explicitly trinitarian Dallas statement might have been expected to bring closure to the century-old debate, but it proved to be a precursor of renewed tensions.

Renewed Tensions and Continuing Debate, 1980 to the Present

The period from 1980 to the present has been characterized by renewed debate along a spectrum of ideas from the reactionary to the contemporary. Soon after the Dallas statement—and perhaps in reaction to it—voices from the “edges” of the church began to advocate that the pioneers’ earliest views were correct, that Ellen White’s apparently trinitarian statements had been misinterpreted, and that the Dallas statement represented apostasy from the biblical beliefs of the pioneers.⁷⁵ Some, in apparent ignorance of the 1946 action, believed that the Dallas statement was the first ever officially voted statement of Adventist belief, and hence, that its very existence was an aberration from the historical pattern.⁷⁶ Citations from the primary sources, extracted from their historical context and repackaged in plausible conspiracy theories, proved quite convincing to many.⁷⁷

A more substantial development was the continued quest to articulate a biblical doctrine of the Trinity, clearly differentiated from the Greek

⁷³“Fifteenth Meeting,” General Conference Report No. 8, *Review and Herald*, June 14, 1946, 197.

⁷⁴“Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists,” *Seventh-day Adventist Year Book*, (1931), 377.

⁷⁵“The Doctrine of the Trinity in Adventist History,” *Liberty Review* [5250 Johnstown Road, Mt. Vernon, Ohio], October 1989, 4-5, 7-8. Cf. Lynnford Beachy, “Adventist Review Perpetuates the Omega,” *Old Paths* [Smyrna Gospel Ministries, HC64, Box 128-B, Welch, WV; website www.smyrna.org], vol. 8, no. 7, July 1999, 1-14.

⁷⁶“The Doctrine of the Trinity in Adventist History,” *Liberty Review*, October 1989, 7.

⁷⁷See esp. Clayton, n. 6 above; and Bob Diener, *The Alpha and the Omega* (Creal Springs, IL: Bible Truth Productions, n.d. [ca. 1998]), videocassette.

philosophical presuppositions that undergirded the traditional creedal statements. Raoul Dederen had set forth in 1972 a brief exposition of the Godhead from the OT and NT.⁷⁸ He rejected the "Trinity of speculative thought" that created philosophical "distinctions within the Deity for which there is no definable basis within the revealed knowledge of God." Instead, he advocated the example of the apostles: "Rejecting the terms of Greek mythology or metaphysics, they expressed their convictions in an unpretending trinitarian confession of faith, the doctrine of one God subsisting and acting in three persons."⁷⁹

Building on this line of thought, Fernando Canale, Dederen's student, set forth in 1983 a radical critique of the Greek philosophical presuppositions underlying what Dederen had referred to as "speculative thought." Canale's dissertation, *A Criticism of Theological Reason*, argued that Roman Catholic and classical Protestant theology took its most basic presuppositions about the nature of God, time, and existence, from a "framework" provided by Aristotelian philosophy. Canale maintained that for Christian theology to become truly biblical, it must derive its "primordial presupposition" from Scripture, not from Greek philosophy.⁸⁰

In the more recent *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (2000), edited by Dederen, Canale authored a magisterial article on the findings from his continuing work on the doctrine of God. Again, Canale explicitly differentiates between a doctrine of God based on Greek philosophical presuppositions and one based on biblical presuppositions,⁸¹ making a strong case for his view that only through a willingness to "depart from the philosophical conception of God as timeless" and to "embrace the historical conception of God as presented in the Bible," can one discover a truly biblical view of the Trinity.⁸²

A third line of thought seeks to locate Adventist trinitarianism in the context of contemporary systematic theology. Seconding Canale's discontent with classical theology, but taking the critique in a different direction, was Richard Rice's *Reign of God* (1985). Rice argued that the

⁷⁸Raoul Dederen, "Reflections on the Doctrine of the Trinity," *AUSS* 8 (1970): 1-22.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 13, 21.

⁸⁰Fernando Luis Canale, *A Criticism of Theological Reason: Time and Timelessness as Primordial Presuppositions*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series, vol. 10 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1983), 359; 402, n. 1.

⁸¹Canale, "Doctrine of God," 105-159; see esp. 117-118, 126, 128-129, 132, 138-140, 145, 148-150.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 150.

Trinity was implied, though not explicit, in Scripture.⁸³ Fritz Guy, in *Thinking Theologically* (1999), agrees that “the traditional formulations” of the Trinity doctrine “are not entirely satisfactory.”⁸⁴ He decries a perceived tendency toward tritheism⁸⁵ and favors updating the language to make it more “functional and gender-neutral.”⁸⁶ Guy’s book, however, is not a systematic exposition of the doctrine of God or of the Trinity, and readers should beware of reading too much into brief illustrative references. How his suggestions will ultimately affect the discussion remains to be seen.

Conclusion

The long process of change from early Adventists’ initial rejection of creedal trinitarianism to their eventual acceptance of a doctrine of the Trinity could rightly be called a search for a biblical Trinity. They were not so much prejudiced against traditional formulas as they were determined to hew their doctrine as closely as possible to the line of Scripture. In order to base their beliefs on Scripture alone, and to disenfranchise tradition from exercising any theological authority, they found it methodologically essential to reject every doctrine not clearly grounded in Scripture alone. Since the traditional doctrine of the Trinity clearly contained unscriptural elements, they rejected it. Eventually, however, they became convinced that the basic concept of *one God in three persons* was indeed found in Scripture. Part 2 of this study will consider in more detail the role of Ellen White in that process.

⁸³Richard Rice, *The Reign of God*, 2d ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1985), 60-61.

⁸⁴Fritz Guy, *Thinking Theologically: Adventist Christianity and the Interpretation of Faith* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1999), 130; see also 70, 88, 151, and their notes.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 70.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 151.

THE ADVENTIST TRINITY DEBATE, PART 2: THE ROLE OF ELLEN G. WHITE

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In 1846, James White dismissed the doctrine of the Trinity as “the old unscriptural trinitarian creed.”¹ A century later, the denomination he cofounded voted an official statement of “Fundamental Beliefs” that included belief in a Trinity.² That a major theological shift occurred is no longer subject to debate. That most of the early leaders among Seventh-day Adventists held an antitrinitarian theology has become standard Adventist history³ in the forty years since E. R. Gane wrote an M.A. thesis on the topic.⁴ What is now disputed in some quarters is Gane’s second hypothesis, that Adventist cofounder Ellen G. White (1827-1915) was “a trinitarian monotheist.”⁵ Since the 1980s that view has come under intense attack from some writers, mostly from outside the academic community.⁶ Nevertheless, the renewed scrutiny of the role of Ellen White in the development of the Adventist Trinity doctrine has raised enough questions to warrant a fresh examination of the issue.

¹James White, *Day-Star*, January 24, 1846, 25.

²“Fifteenth Meeting,” General Conference Report No. 8, *Review and Herald*, June 14, 1946, 197. For a discussion of the historical context, see Jerry Moon, “The Adventist Trinity Debate, Part 1: Historical Overview,” *AUSS* 41 (2003): 122-123.

³See Russell Holt, “The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination: Its Rejection and Acceptance” (term paper, Andrews University, 1969); Le Roy Edwin Froom, *Movement of Destiny* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1971), 148-180—although Froom’s pleading on the basis of Millerite statistics that a “majority” of the Adventist founders were trinitarian (*ibid.*, 147) has not been supported by the evidence; Merlin Burt, “Demise of Semi-Arianism and Anti-Trinitarianism in Adventist Theology, 1888-1957” (term paper, Andrews University, 1996); Woodrow W. Whidden, “Salvation Pilgrimage: The Adventist Journey into Justification by Faith and Trinitarianism,” *Ministry*, April 1998, 5-7; Fernando L. Canale, “Doctrine of God,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen, Commentary Reference Series, vol. 12 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000): 117-150; and Woodrow Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John W. Reeve, *The Trinity: Understanding God’s Love, His Plan of Salvation, and Christian Relationships* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002), 190-220.

⁴Erwin R. 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).

⁵Gane, 67-79.

⁶See, e.g., [Fred Allaback], “The Doctrine of the Trinity in Adventist History,” *Liberty Review* (5250 Johnstown Road, Mt. Vernon, Ohio), October 1989, 4-5, 7-8; Lynnford Beachy, “Adventist Review Perpetuates the Omega,” *Old Paths* (Smyrna Gospel Ministries, HC64, Box 128-B, Welch, WV; website www.smyrna.org) 8/7, July 1999, 1-14; David Clayton, “The Omega of Deadly Heresies,” n.p., n.d. (ca. 2000), in my files; *idem*, “Some Facts Concerning the Omega Heresy,” www.restorationministry.com/Open_Face/html/2000/open_face_oct_2000.htm; accessed March 10, 2003; and Bob Diener, *The Alpha and the Omega* (Creal Springs, IL: Bible Truth Productions, [ca. 1998]), videocassette.

Part 1 of this research identified six stages in the development of the Adventist doctrine of God, from opposition to the Trinity doctrine to acceptance of the basic concept of one God in three divine persons.⁷ Part 2 will present evidence in support of a fourfold hypothesis: first, that Gane's characterization of Ellen White as a "trinitarian monotheist" is accurate regarding her mature concept of God, from 1898 onward. In the 1840s, however, she did not yet have all the components of that view in place. Her mature view developed through a forty-year process that can be extensively documented. Second, that her writings describe two contrasting forms of trinitarian belief, one of which she consistently opposed and one that she eventually endorsed. Third, that Ellen White's developing understanding exerted a strong influence on other Adventist writers, leading eventually to a substantial degree of consensus in the denomination. Finally, that the method by which early Adventists came to this position was by disallowing ecclesiastical tradition from having any normative authority and insisting on Scripture alone as the basis for doctrine and tests of membership. This rejection of tradition led them initially to some heterodox views that received severe criticism from the broader Christian community. Their dependence on Scripture, however, brought them eventually to what they believe is a more biblical view of the Trinity.⁸ This material will be presented under five subheadings: Evidences for Change, Varieties of Trinitarianism, The Development of Ellen White's Understanding of the Godhead, The Kellogg Crisis and the Capstone Statements, and Conclusion.

Evidences for Change

At the core of the debate is the question regarding Ellen White's position and her role in the process of change. Some assume that Ellen White did not change her position regarding the Trinity, that she was either always trinitarian or never trinitarian.⁹ There is ample evidence, however, that her beliefs did change on a number of other issues, so it is entirely plausible that she grew in her understanding of the Godhead as well. When she declared in 1849, "We know we have the truth,"¹⁰ she was referring to the beliefs that Sabbatarian Adventists held in distinction from other Christian groups. She did not mean that there was no more truth to be discovered or that

⁷Moon, 113-129.

⁸Canale, 150.

⁹For example, John Kiesz, an antitrinitarian of the Church of God (Seventh Day), speculates that White was a "closet trinitarian" who kept that view to herself for half a century until in the 1890s she suddenly broke her silence to challenge the then majority view of Seventh-day Adventists ("History of the Trinity Doctrine," Study No. 132, <<http://www.giveshare.org/BibleStudy/132.trinityhistory.html>>, accessed January 2001).

¹⁰Ellen G. White to Brother and Sister Hastings, March 24-30, 1849 (Letter 5, 1849), 5-6; reprinted in *Manuscript Releases*, 21 vols. (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1981, 1987, 1990, 1993), 5:200.

Adventists would never need to change any of their views.¹¹

The argument that her views did change is based on the recognition that at every stage of life her knowledge of God and his will was a combination of what she had learned through ordinary means such as parental training, church attendance, Bible study, and personal experience, and—after December 1844—what she received through visions. Furthermore, she herself considered her visions as an educational process that continued in cumulative fashion for many years.¹² Consequently, her personal understanding, especially in the earlier years, contained many elements not fully consistent with her later beliefs, because neither her personal Bible study nor her visions had yet called her attention to those inconsistent elements.

For instance, after her first vision in December 1844, she continued to observe Sunday as the Sabbath for almost three more years. She had not yet learned about the seventh-day Sabbath.¹³ A second example of a changed view was the discovery of the “time to commence the Sabbath” in 1855. For nine years after they accepted the seventh-day Sabbath, the Whites and most of the Sabbatarian Adventists observed the Sabbath from 6:00 P.M. Friday to 6:00 P.M. Saturday. Not until J. N. Andrews in 1855 demonstrated from Scripture¹⁴ that the biblical Sabbath begins at sunset did Ellen White reluctantly acknowledge that for nine years Adventists had been ignorant of the biblical time to begin the Sabbath.¹⁵

A third example is what Adventists have historically called health reform. Until 1863, most of them, including James and Ellen White, were heavy meat eaters, even slaughtering their own hogs. Not until after basic denominational organization had been achieved was the attention of the movement called to

¹¹“We have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn,” she wrote in 1892. “God and heaven alone are infallible. Those who think that they will never have to give up a cherished view, never have occasion to change an opinion, will be disappointed. As long as we hold to our own ideas and opinions with determined persistency, we cannot have the unity for which Christ prayed” (E. G. White, “Search the Scriptures,” *Review and Herald*, July 26, 1892, par. 7).

¹²“With the light communicated through the study of His word, with the special knowledge given of individual cases among His people under all circumstances and in every phase of experience, can I now be in the same ignorance, the same mental uncertainty and spiritual blindness, as at the beginning of this experience? Will my brethren say that Sister White has been so dull a scholar that her judgment in this direction is no better than before she entered Christ’s school, to be trained and disciplined for a special work? . . . I would not dishonor my Maker by admitting that all this light, all the display of His mighty power in my work and experience, has been valueless, that it has not educated my judgment or better fitted me for His work” (E. G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948], 5:686).

¹³It should be noted that when she and James White did accept the Sabbath, their acceptance was based initially on Bible study prompted by reading a tract by Joseph Bates. Later the correctness of this view was confirmed by vision (Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Years, 1827-1862* [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1985], 1:116, 120-121).

¹⁴See, e.g., Lev 23:32 and Mark 1:32; J. N. Andrews, “Time for Commencing the Sabbath,” *Review and Herald*, December 4, 1855, 76-78.

¹⁵A. L. White, 1:322-324.

a broader platform of health principles, including complete proscription of pork products and the strong recommendation of vegetarianism.¹⁶

In view of these and other areas of conceptual development, it is not particularly surprising that Ellen White should show both development and change in her view of the Godhead. 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.

Varieties of Trinitarianism

The conceptual key that unlocks the enigma of Ellen White's developmental process regarding the Trinity is the discovery that her writings describe at least two distinct varieties of trinitarian belief. One of these views she consistently opposed throughout her adult ministry, and the other she eventually endorsed. The trinitarian concept that she opposed was one that "spiritualized" the members of the Godhead as distant, impersonal, mystical, and ultimately unreal beings. The concept that she favored portrayed God as personal, literal, and tangible. She did not initially recognize God's trinitarian nature, but when she did, she would describe the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as real individuals, emphasizing their "threeness" as willing, thinking, feeling, social, and relational persons, and explaining their oneness in terms of nature, character, purpose, and love, but not of person. The basis of these differentiations will become clearer as we examine the historical context and process of her developing thought.

The Development of Ellen White's Understanding of the Godhead

Three pieces of evidence are particularly significant for reconstructing the historical context of Ellen White's earliest references to the Godhead: the role of "spiritualizers" in postdisappointment Millerism, the polemics of James and Ellen White against those spiritualizers, and a contemporary Methodist creed that the Whites (and other early Adventists) repeatedly cited in support of their rejection of traditional trinitarianism.

In the postdisappointment period of 1845, many former Millerites "spiritualized" the Second Coming, by interpreting the biblical prophecies of Christ's return as having a spiritual, not literal, meaning.¹⁷ Hence the

¹⁶Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, rev. ed. (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000); D. E. Robinson, *The Story of Our Health Message: The Origin, Character, and Development of Health Education in the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, 3d ed. (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1965), 75, 81. Most Adventists were already opposed to the use of alcoholic beverages.

¹⁷Schwarz and Greenleaf, 53-54. For the most extensive investigation to date of

spiritualizers could believe that Jesus did come on October 22, 1844, not literally, but “spiritually.” This view led to a wide range of aberrant behavior. Among the most extreme were the “no-work” fanatics, who believed that the seventh millennium had already been inaugurated as a Sabbath of perpetual rest, and that the way to demonstrate saving faith was to refrain from all work. Others of the “spiritualizers” dabbled in “mesmerism,”¹⁸ joined the Shakers,¹⁹ or even became followers of occult spiritualism.²⁰

James and Ellen White believed this teaching was false, because it took a Bible doctrine that they believed was clearly intended to be “literal” and made it nonliteral or “spiritual.” The core belief of Millerite Adventism was the literal, bodily, premillennial Second Advent. From this perspective, if the Second Advent is not a literal, bodily return of the same divine-human Jesus who ascended, but is rather some subjective spiritual “revelation” to the individual heart or mind, then the teaching of his literal return has been not just modified, but destroyed—hence the phrase “spiritualize away.” To “spiritualize away” means to take something intended as literal, and by calling it “spiritual” to so radically change the concept that it no longer has any real meaning.

For this reason both James and Ellen White came early to the conviction that they must oppose this spiritualizing as heresy. Ellen’s polemics against this doctrine and its resulting behaviors are well known.²¹ James also wrote repeatedly in the post-Millerite *Day-Star* against these spiritualizing tendencies.²²

One of James’s polemics against the spiritualizers included an antitrinitarian remark that implied a commonality of belief between the spiritualizers and the trinitarians.²³ Apparently some of the “spiritualizers” were supporting their error by reference to what James called “the old *unscriptural trinitarian creed*.” James charged that both the “spiritualizers” and the traditional trinitarians “spiritualize[d] away the existence of the Father and the Son, as two distinct, literal [*sic*], tangible persons.”²⁴

In maintaining that the Father and the Son are real, literal persons, the

postdisappointment Millerism, its division and disintegration, see Merlin D. Burt, “The Historical Background, Interconnected Development, and Integration of the Doctrines of the Sanctuary, the Sabbath, and Ellen G. White’s Role in Sabbatarian Adventism from 1844 to 1849” (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 2002), 60-272.

¹⁸Burt, “The Historical Background,” 145.

¹⁹Enoch Jacobs, editor of the *Day-Star*, led in this move (*ibid.*, 231-242).

²⁰*Ibid.*, 242; George R. Knight, *Millennial Fever and the End of the World* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993), 260.

²¹See, e.g., E. G. White, *Life Sketches* (Mt. View, CA: Pacific Press, 1943), 85-94.

²²Burt, 146-147, lists four such items, each titled “Letter from Bro. White,” *Day-Star*, September 6, 1845, 17-18; October 11, 1845, 47; November 29, 1845, 35; and January 24, 1846, 25.

²³James White, *Day-Star*, January 24, 1846, 25; Ellen Harmon’s first published writing was “A Letter from Sister Harmon” in the same issue, 31-32.

²⁴James White, *Day-Star*, January 24, 1846, 25.

Whites did not doubt that "God is spirit" (John 4:24),²⁵ but they insisted that as Spirit, God is still someone real, tangible, and literal; not unreal, ephemeral, or imaginary. They felt that the terms used for Trinity in the creeds and definitions they knew of made God seem so abstract, theoretical, and impersonal that he was no longer perceived as a real, caring, loving being. Thus, the attempt to make him "spiritual" rather than literal actually "spiritualized him away," that is, destroyed the true concept of who he is and what he is like.

A third piece of evidence confirms that James was indeed linking the spiritualizers with traditional trinitarians—a group that were in almost every other way the theological opposites of the spiritualizers. A Methodist creed of the same period—and the way this creed was quoted and rebutted by other early Adventist writers²⁶—supports the suggestion of common ground between Ellen White's earliest statements about the person(s) of God, and the antitrinitarianism of her husband (although she never in print denounced trinitarianism as he did). The suggestion that there is a dual linkage here—spiritualizers with philosophical trinitarians, and Ellen's concept of a personal God with James's antitrinitarianism—may sound far-fetched to many readers. But against the background of post-Millerite spiritualizers, consider the wording of a typical trinitarian creed of the time. One aspect of traditional trinitarianism espoused by some Protestant groups, but rejected by early Adventists, was the somewhat curious statement that "There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts."²⁷ The early Adventists vigorously refuted this, citing several biblical passages that portrayed God as having both "body" and "parts."²⁸

This question was evidently on the mind of Ellen White as well.²⁹ Twice in early visions of Jesus, she asked him questions related to the "form" and

²⁵In 1877, Ellen White quoted John 4:24 KJV: "God is a Spirit; and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (*Spirit of Prophecy* [Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1877], 2:143). In 1904, she wrote: "God is a spirit; yet He is a personal being, for man was made in His image" (*Testimonies for the Church* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948], 8:263). James White held that God is "a Spirit being" (idem, *Personality of God* [Battle Creek: SDA Publishing Assn., ca. 1868], 3).

²⁶Several Adventist writers cited almost the same creedal phrases. D. M. Canright quotes two creeds: Methodist and Episcopal. The Methodist creed included the phrase "without body or parts," whereas the Episcopal creed specified that God is "without body, parts, or passions." Canright claimed knowledge of "other creeds" that went "still further" and said that God is "without center or circumference" ("The Personality of God," *Review and Herald*, September 5, 1878, 81; cf. idem, September 19, 1878, 97; J. B. Frisbie, "The Seventh Day-Sabbath [*sic*] Not Abolished," *Review and Herald*, March 7, 1854, 50. Cf. James White, *Personality of God*.

²⁷*Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1856), 15.

²⁸For instance, Exod 24:9-11; 33:20-23; John 1:18; Heb 1:1-3; Uriah Smith, *The State of the Dead and the Destiny of the Wicked* (Battle Creek, MI: SDA Publishing Association, 1873), 27-30. Note Smith's polemic against any "mystical interpretation of our current theology" (ibid., 27).

²⁹The creed in question was a Methodist creed. White, though raised Methodist, was later closely associated with Adventists who cited this creedal detail as one of the unbiblical aspects of trinitarianism.

“person” of God. In one early vision, she “saw a throne, and on it sat the Father and the Son. I gazed on Jesus’ countenance,” she said, “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.’”³⁰

Also about 1850, she reported, “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*.’”³¹ Thus she gained visionary confirmation of what her husband had written in the *Day-Star* in 1846, that the Father and the Son are “two distinct, literal, tangible persons.”³² In terms of the trinitarian question, this is 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.

Other hints of her early views came in 1858 with the publication of the first volume of *Spiritual Gifts*.³³ Her belief in the Holy Spirit is not in question, for she links the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in Christ’s baptismal narrative. But she does not mention the Holy Spirit in connection with the divine councils about Creation and the plan of salvation.³⁴ These statements, like the 1850 statements, are also ambiguous. They could be read without conflict by all early Adventists, regardless of their trinitarian or antitrinitarian leanings.

Perhaps her first statement that is clearly dissonant with her antitrinitarian colleagues comes in 1869 in a landmark chapter, “The Sufferings of Christ,” where in the opening paragraph she asserts on the basis of Heb 1:3; Col 1:19; and Phil 2:6 that Christ in his preexistence was “equal with God.”³⁵ At this point it becomes evident that if no one else was listening, her husband was. James White’s

³⁰Ellen G. White, *A Sketch of the Christian Experience and Views* [Visions] of Ellen G. White (Saratoga Springs, NY: James White, 1851).

³¹E. G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1945), 77, emphasis original.

³²Note the similarity of expression between her view ca. 1850 and what he wrote in 1868: “The Father and the Son were one in man’s creation, and in his redemption. Said the Father to the Son, ‘Let us make man in our image.’ And the triumphant song of jubilee in which the redeemed take part, is unto ‘Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb, forever and ever.’”

“Jesus prayed that his *disciples might be one as he was one* with his Father. This prayer did *not* contemplate *one disciple with twelve heads, but twelve disciples, made one in object and effort* in the cause of their master. Neither are the Father and the Son *parts of the ‘three-one God.’ They are two distinct beings, yet one in the design and accomplishment of redemption.* The redeemed . . . ascribe the honor, and glory, and praise, of their salvation, to both God and the Lamb” (James White, *Life Incidents* [1868], 343, all emphasis added).

³³The title was an explicit assertion of her claim to have received the gift of prophecy.

³⁴E. G. White, *Spiritual Gifts* (SDA Publishing Association, 1864), 1:17-18, 22-28; 3:33-34.

³⁵E. G. White, “Testimony 17 (1869),” in *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 2:200; cf. “The Son of God was in the form of God, and he thought it not robbery to be equal with God” (E. G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy* [1877], 2:10).

early statements on the Trinity are uniformly negative,³⁶ but in 1876 and 1877 he followed her lead. In an editorial comparison of the beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists with Seventh Day Baptists, he included the Trinity among the doctrines which "neither [SDAs nor SDBs] regard as tests of Christian character." "Adventists hold the divinity of Christ so nearly with the trinitarian," James White observed, "that we apprehend no trial [controversy] here."³⁷ Clearly James was moving away from his early polemics against trinitarianism. A year later he proclaimed in the *Review* that "Christ is equal with God." He was not yet a trinitarian, but another remark in the same article shows that he was in sympathy with certain aspects of trinitarianism. "The inexplicable trinity that makes the godhead three in one and one in three is bad enough," he wrote, "but ultra Unitarianism that makes Christ inferior to the Father is worse."³⁸ In asserting Christ's equality with the Father, James was echoing what his wife had written eight years earlier. For another evidence of her leading her colleagues, note that her assertions that Christ was uncreated³⁹ preceded by more than two decades Uriah Smith's published acceptance of that concept.⁴⁰

Brick by conceptual brick (perhaps without even being aware of it herself), she was slowly but surely dismantling the substructure of the antitrinitarian view and building a trinitarian view. In another clear break with the prevailing semi-Arian consensus, she declared in 1878 that Christ was the "eternal Son."⁴¹ Ellen White did not understand his *eternal* Sonship to imply *derivation* from the Father. Sonship in his preexistence denoted that he was of the same nature as the Father, in unity and close relationship with the Father; but it did not imply that Christ had a beginning, for in taking human flesh Christ became the Son of God "in a new sense." From the perspective of his humanity, he for the first time had a "beginning," and also, as a human, he began a new relationship of dependence on the Father.

In His incarnation He gained *in a new sense* the title of the Son of God. Said the angel to Mary, "The power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God." While the Son of a human being, He became the Son of God

³⁶"To assert that the sayings of the Son and his apostles are the commandments of the Father, is as wide from the truth as the old Trinitarian absurdity that Jesus Christ is the very and eternal God" (James White, "The Faith of Jesus," *Review and Herald*, Aug 5, 1852, 52).

³⁷James White, "The Two Bodies," *Review and Herald*, October 12, 1876, 116; cf. Froom, 178.

³⁸James White, "Christ Equal with God," *Review and Herald*, November 29, 1877, p. 72.

³⁹E. G. White, "The First Advent of Christ," *Review and Herald*, December 17, 1872, par. 4; cf. E. G. White, "Bible Study," *Review and Herald*, January 11, 1881, par. 3.

⁴⁰Uriah Smith called Christ the first created being (*Thoughts on the Revelation* [Battle Creek, MI: SDA Publishing Association, 1865], 59), a view he repudiated in *Looking Unto Jesus* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1898), 17, 12.

⁴¹E. G. White, "An Appeal to the Ministers," *Review and Herald*, August 8, 1878, par. 4; Ellen G. White to E. J. Waggoner and A. T. Jones, February 18, 1887 (Letter 37, 1887), facsimile in idem, *1888 Materials*, 28.3; idem, "Search the Scriptures." John 5:39," *Youth's Instructor*, August 31, 1887, par. 1; idem, "The Truth Revealed in Jesus," *Review and Herald*, February 8, 1898, par. 2.

in a new sense. Thus He stood in our world—the Son of God, yet allied by birth to the human race. . . .

*From all eternity Christ was united with the Father, and when He took upon Himself human nature, He was still one with God [emphasis supplied].*⁴²

An even more fundamental departure from the “old view” emerged in 1888, in the context of the struggle over the law in Galatians (3:19-3:25) and a clearer view of justification through substitutionary atonement. Ellen White and others came to the realization that a broader concept of the atonement and of righteousness by faith demands the full Deity of Christ. “If men reject the testimony of the inspired Scriptures concerning the divinity of Christ,” she wrote, “it is in vain to argue the point with them; for no argument, however conclusive, could convince them. [1 Cor 2:14 quoted.] 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” (emphasis supplied).⁴³ Christ is “one with the eternal Father,—one in nature, in character, and in purpose,” “one in power and authority,”⁴⁴ she proclaimed, “the only being that could enter into all the counsels and purposes of God.”⁴⁵ The context shows that her phrase “the only being” contrasts Christ with the angels. Nevertheless, this statement precedes the fuller exposition of the role of the Holy Spirit.

In 1890, she followed up her 1888 affirmation of Christ’s unity with the Father (in nature, character, and purpose) with perhaps her last major statement that can still be read ambiguously. “The Son of God shared the Father’s throne, and the glory of the eternal, self-existent One encircled both.”⁴⁶ Retrospectively, this phrase harmonizes perfectly with her later statements (especially *The Desire of Ages*, 530) that Christ is “self-existent” and that his Deity is not “derived” from the Father. It is also possible, however, to read the sentence from a binitarian or even semi-Arian perspective—that Jesus, exalted to the Father’s throne in the presence of the angels, was “encircled” by “the glory of the eternal, self-existent One,” i.e., the Father. *Patriarchs and Prophets*, where the phrase appears, was an amplification of an earlier work, *Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 1 (1870), where the corresponding phrase says simply, “The Son was seated on the throne with the Father.”⁴⁷ The surrounding context in both works is similar, reflecting her earlier

⁴²E. G. White, “Christ Our Only Hope,” *Signs of the Times*, August 2, 1905.

⁴³E. G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1888), 524. Cf. E. J. Waggoner’s assertion that “Our object in this investigation is to set forth Christ’s rightful position of equality with the Father, in order that His power to redeem may be the better appreciated” (*Christ and His Righteousness* [Riverside, CA: The Upward Way, 1988]; 19).

⁴⁴E. G. White, *Great Controversy* (1888), 493, 495.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 493; *idem*, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1890), 34.1; cf. *idem*, “That We Might Be Partakers of the Divine Nature,” *Signs of the Times*, October 14, 1897, par. 3.

⁴⁶E. G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (1890), 36.

⁴⁷*Patriarchs and Prophets* (1890) was an amplification of an earlier work, *Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 1 (1870), where the corresponding sentence says simply, “The Son was seated on the throne with the Father, and the heavenly throng of holy angels was gathered around them” (E. G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 1 [1870], 17).

perspective, while the new phrase, "the glory of the eternal, self-existent One encircled both," reflects her growing understanding in 1890.

A pamphlet published in 1897 carried the next major component in her developing doctrine of God, that the Holy Spirit is "the third person of the Godhead."⁴⁸ This concept would receive wider attention and more permanent form in *The Desire of Ages* (1898), where she repeated and made emphatic the previous two points: "In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived," and the Holy Spirit is the "Third Person of the Godhead."⁴⁹ In 1899, she confirmed the other side of the paradox, that in "person," Christ was "distinct" from the Father.⁵⁰ Here the essential trinitarian paradox of the unity of God in a plurality of persons is clearly articulated, and her trinitarianism is essentially complete. All that remains for her capstone statements of 1901 and 1905 is to affirm most explicitly that the three "eternal heavenly dignitaries," the "three highest powers in heaven," the "three living persons of the heavenly trio," are one in nature, character, and purpose, but not in person.⁵¹

Thus, 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. Fernando Canale has pointed out that this progression is similar to the one presented in the NT. In the Gospels, the first challenge was to convince the disciples that Christ was one with the Father. Once their concept of monotheism had been expanded to accept "one God" in two divine persons, it was comparatively easy to lead them to recognize the Holy Spirit as a third divine person.⁵²

The Kellogg Crisis and the Capstone Statements

As noted above, Ellen White's writings on the Godhead address at least two distinct varieties of trinitarian belief—one she consistently opposed and another she eventually came to agree with. Her differentiation between these two views of the Trinity became most explicit during the Kellogg crisis of 1902-1907.⁵³ Because certain of the writings of both J. H. Kellogg and Ellen White

⁴⁸E. G. White, *Special Testimonies for Ministers and Workers*, [series 1] no. 10 (Battle Creek, MI: General Conference of SDAs, 1897). 25, 37.

⁴⁹E. G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1940). 530, 671.

⁵⁰"The world was made by him, 'and without him was not anything made that was made.' 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*" (Ellen G. White, "The Word Made Flesh," *Review and Herald*, April 5, 1906, par. 6-7, emphasis supplied).

⁵¹E. G. White, Ms. 130, 1901, in *Manuscript Releases*, 16:205; idem, *Special Testimonies*, Series B, no. 7 (St. Helena, CA: by the author, 1905), 51, 62-63.

⁵²Canale, 128-130.

⁵³On the Kellogg crisis, see R. W. Schwarz, *John Harvey Kellogg, M.D.* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1981), 174-192; idem, *Light Bearers to the Remnant* (Mountain View, CA:

during this period have been seriously misunderstood in recent years, it is necessary to consider this controversy in some detail.

Dr. J. H. Kellogg, medical superintendent of the Battle Creek Sanitarium, was the leading person of scientific credentials among SDAs at the turn of the twentieth century. Possibly influenced by intellectual companions from outside Adventism,⁵⁴ he theorized that the life of every living thing—whether tree, flower, animal, or human—was the very presence of God within it. His view was a form of pantheism.⁵⁵ Traces of this view can be found in his public presentations in the 1890s,⁵⁶ but the “crisis” did not break until 1902.

Following the Battle Creek Sanitarium fire of February 18, 1902, Kellogg proposed a fund-raising plan to finance the rebuilding. He would donate to the Review and Herald Publishing Association the manuscript for a new book on health.⁵⁷ If the Review and Herald would donate the costs of publishing, and if the 73,000 members that composed the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1902 would undertake to sell 500,000 copies at one dollar each, the proceeds would both pay off long-standing debts and rebuild the sanitarium. This plan was accepted. *The Living Temple* was primarily a handbook on basic physiology, nutrition, preventive medicine, and home treatments for common ailments. But the title page quoted 1 Cor 6:19 about the body being the “temple of the Holy Ghost,” and here and there Kellogg incorporated his theological views.

While preliminary readers of the manuscript were pleased with what it said about physiology, they sharply criticized some of its speculations about the doctrine of God. Despite this criticism, Kellogg pressed ahead with publication. On December 30, 1902, however, while the Review and Herald Publishing Association was in the midst of printing the first edition, the publishing house burned to the ground. Among other losses were the printing plates and unfinished copies of *The Living Temple*. Kellogg promptly took the manuscript to another printer and contracted for 3,000 copies at his own expense.

When the book was finally distributed, the most flagrant departures from established Adventist theology appeared in the opening chapter, “The Mystery of Life.”⁵⁸ “God is the explanation of nature,” Kellogg declared, “—not a God outside of nature, but *in* nature, manifesting himself through and in all the

Pacific Press, 1979), 282-298; Jerry Moon, *W. C. White and Ellen G. White: The Relationship between the Prophet and Her Son* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1993), 274-320.

⁵⁴Froom, 351.

⁵⁵W. A. Spicer, “Pantheism Here and in Its Ancient Setting,” in *How the Spirit of Prophecy Met a Crisis: Memories and Notes of the “Living Temple” Controversy*, [1938], chapter 13. <http://www.sdanet.org/atissue/white/spicer/index.htm>, accessed September 18, 2003.

⁵⁶See J. H. Kellogg, “God in Man, No. 1,” “God in Nature, No. 2,” and “God in Man, No. 3,” in *General Conference Daily Bulletin*, 1897, 72-84.

⁵⁷J. H. Kellogg, *The Living Temple* (Battle Creek, MI: Good Health, 1903).

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 28-30.

objects, movements, and varied phenomena of the universe.”⁵⁹ Evidently reacting to some of his prepublication critics, Kellogg sought to blunt or circumvent their objections by specific reference to the Holy Spirit. He reasoned that if the Holy Spirit could be everywhere at once, and if the Holy Spirit were also a Person, then no one could say that the God Kellogg set forth as dwelling in all things was an impersonal God. “How can power be separated from the source of power?” Kellogg asked? “Where God’s Spirit is at work, where God’s power is manifested, God himself is actually and truly present.”⁶⁰ In claiming that God’s power equals his presence, Kellogg blurs his logic, as a brief example will show. A military commander can issue orders to mobilize the armed forces, and through those orders the leader’s power reaches right down to the home of an individual soldier, but that’s clearly different from the commander visiting that home in person.

Then Kellogg spins his defining metaphor—the most quoted paragraph from *The Living Temple*.

Suppose now we have a boot before us,—not an ordinary boot, but a living boot, and as we look at it, we see little boots crowding out at the seams, pushing out at the toes, dropping off at the heels, and leaping out at the top,—scores, hundreds, thousands of boots, a swarm of boots continually issuing from our living boot,—would we not be compelled to say, “There is a shoemaker in the boot”? So there is present in the tree a power which creates and maintains it, a tree-maker in the tree, a flower-maker in the flower, . . . an infinite, divine, though invisible Presence . . . which is ever declaring itself by its ceaseless, beneficent activity.⁶¹

Kellogg’s theory was vigorously debated in the church for several years. Since leading Adventists had pointed out its errors,⁶² Ellen White hoped at first that it would not be necessary for her to get involved. But by September 1903, Kellogg’s views were gaining adherents. When he claimed publicly that the teachings of *The Living Temple* “regarding the personality of God” were in accord with the writings of Ellen White, she could remain silent no longer. “God forbid that this opinion should prevail,” she declared.⁶³ “We need not the mysticism that is in this book,” she continued. “[T]he writer of this book is on a false track. He has lost sight of the distinguishing truths for this time. He knows not whither his steps are tending. The track of truth lies close beside the

⁵⁹Ibid., 28.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid., 29.

⁶²See, e.g., W. W. Prescott, “Suggestions on Matter Found on Galleys 1-129, Inclusive, of Matter for Dr. Kellogg’s New Book, *The Living Temple*,” Record Group 11, A. G. Daniells, 1901-1950, J. H. Kellogg Case File, General Conference Archives, Silver Spring, MD.

⁶³“E. G. White to the Teachers in Emmanuel Missionary College, September 22, 1903 (‘Teach the Word’),” in *Spalding and Magan’s Unpublished Manuscript Testimonies of Ellen G. White, 1915-1916* (hereinafter referred to as *Spalding-Magan Collection* (Payson, AZ: Leaves-Of-Autumn Books, 1985), 320.

track of error, and both may seem to be one to minds which are not worked by the Holy Spirit, and which, therefore, are not quick to discern the difference between truth and error.”⁶⁴

In a follow-up letter, she zeroed in on the core issue: “The Lord Jesus . . . 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.”⁶⁵

A few weeks later, in a letter to former General Conference president G. I. Butler,⁶⁶ Kellogg defended his view: “As far as I can fathom the difficulty which is found in the Living Temple [*sic*], the whole thing may be simmered down to this question: Is the Holy Ghost a person? You say No.” (Butler was of the older antitrinitarian school which held that the Holy Spirit was an aspect or power of God, but not a person.) Kellogg continued: “I had supposed the Bible said this for the reason that the personal pronoun ‘he’ is used in speaking of the Holy Ghost. Sister White uses the pronoun ‘he’ and has said in so many words that the Holy Ghost is the third person of the God-head [*sic*]. How the Holy Ghost can be the third person and not be a person at all is difficult for me to see.”⁶⁷

Here is a fascinating example of Kellogg as a debater. Essentially he is saying, “I have been misunderstood. I didn’t claim that the Father is in everything; it is the Holy Spirit who is in everything. And if the Holy Spirit is a person, then Ellen White is wrong in saying my view undermines the personality of God.” Thus he sought to outmaneuver Ellen White’s reproof and maintain the legitimacy of his own opinion.

Butler, however, was not fooled. “So far as Sister White and you being in perfect agreement is concerned, I shall have to leave that entirely between you and Sister White. Sister White says there is *not* perfect agreement. You claim there *is*. . . I must give her the credit . . . of saying there is a difference” (emphasis supplied).⁶⁸

Kellogg is here telling casuistic half-truths to Butler, attempting to portray the “pantheism” of *Living Temple* as simply a scientific perspective of the same doctrine of God that Ellen White had expressed in *The Desire of Ages*. That is what Kellogg wanted his readers to believe, but that does not make it true, although Ellen White herself acknowledged that “to minds which are not worked by the Holy Spirit” it might seem so.⁶⁹

As the conflict dragged on into 1905, Ellen White wrote another document

⁶⁴Ibid., 320-321.

⁶⁵Ibid., 324. Kellogg hinted in *Living Temple*, 29-32, that the concept of a personal God was an (ultimately unfactual) construct for the benefit of immature minds, implying that intellectuals like himself could perceive the reality beyond the anthropomorphic accommodation.

⁶⁶George I. Butler had been president of the General Conference (1871-1874, 1880-1888), and in 1903 he was president of the Southern Union Conference.

⁶⁷J. H. Kellogg to G. I. Butler, October 28, 1903a [one of two letters from Kellogg to Butler on the same date], Center for Adventist Research, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

⁶⁸G. I. Butler to J. H. Kellogg, April 5, 1904.

⁶⁹E. G. White, “Teach the Word,” September 22, 1903, in *Spalding-Magan Collection*, 321.

that exposed the matter to the church in such stark lines that it could not be misunderstood. The 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. In this document, published in 1905, she labels the first view "spiritualistic," "nothingness," "imperfect, untrue,"⁷⁰ "the trail of the serpent," and "the depths of Satan."⁷¹ She said those who received it were "giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils, departing from the faith which they have held sacred for the past fifty years."⁷²

In contrast to this view which she unsparingly denounces, she sets forth another view which she regarded as "the right platform," in harmony with "the simplicity of true godliness," and "the old, old times . . . when, under the Holy Spirit's guidance, thousands were converted in a day."⁷³ The antagonism between two opposing views could scarcely be drawn in more stringent terms in a theological context, than a disagreement between doctrines of "seducing spirits" and the doctrine of "the old, old times" of the original Pentecost. She is talking about two contrasting doctrines of the Trinity. Here is the first, attributed explicitly to "Dr. Kellogg" and his associates in "our leading medical fraternity."

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 [emphasis supplied].⁷⁴

Then, in the very next sentence, she defines what she understands to be the truth about the Godhead.

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

⁷⁰E. G. White, *Special Testimonies*, Series B, no. 7, 63.

⁷¹Ibid., 62, alluding to Rev 2:24.

⁷²Ibid., 61.

⁷³Ibid., 63-64.

⁷⁴Ibid., 62.

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.

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 [emphasis supplied].⁷⁵

In charging that Kellogg, with his “spiritualistic” Trinity doctrine was “departing from the faith” Adventists had “held sacred for the past fifty years,” Ellen White clearly refutes the assumption that all doctrines of the Trinity are the same and that objection to one demands the rejection of all. She is clearly distinguishing between two varieties of trinitarianism.

Significantly, Ellen White condemns Kellogg’s view of the Trinity in almost identical terms to those used by her husband James in 1846 when he condemned the “old *unscriptural trinitarian creed*” for “spiritualiz[ing] away the existence of the Father and the Son, as two distinct, literal, tangible persons.” This supports the interpretation that she was at least in partial agreement with him in 1846, and that she later saw similarities between the creeds that claimed God was “invisible, without body or parts” and Kellogg’s “spiritualistic representations” of God under metaphors of light and water.

Further, Ellen White claims that in Kellogg’s heresy she “recognized the very sentiments” she had opposed among spiritualizing ex-Millerites in 1845 and 1846.⁷⁶ The implication is that the spiritualizing of the postdisappointment fanatics, the creedal teaching that God is formless and intangible, and Kellogg’s impersonal concepts of God were all associated by James and Ellen White under the general heading of “spiritualistic theories.”⁷⁷

This is directly germane to the current debate, because some have claimed that Kellogg’s view which Ellen White condemned is the same view of the Trinity later accepted by the church⁷⁸—a claim that is not supported by the evidence. White clearly rejects the view of the Trinity that makes God seem distant, untouchable, impersonal; and embraces a literal, biblical⁷⁹ view of the Trinity, a view that shows God as including three individual divine

⁷⁵Ibid., 62-63.

⁷⁶E. G. White, *Selected Messages*, (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), 1:203.

⁷⁷Ibid., 204.

⁷⁸Diener.

⁷⁹Bible texts that Ellen White cited as supporting various aspects of a trinitarian view include Rom 8:16 (*Evangelism* [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946], 617); 1 Cor 2:10-14 (ibid.); John 16:7-14 (ibid., 616); John 14:16-18, 26; 16:8, 12-14 (*Desire of Ages*, 669-671); and Col 2:9 (*Evangelism* [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946], 614).

personalities, who in nature, character, purpose, and love are one.

Her latest affirmations of one God in three persons are fully in harmony with the first explicitly trinitarian belief statement among Seventh-day Adventists, written by F. M. Wilcox in the *Review and Herald* in 1913.⁸⁰ "Seventh-day Adventists believe,—” Wilcox explained, "1. In the divine Trinity. This Trinity consists of the eternal Father, . . . the Lord Jesus Christ, . . . [and] the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead"⁸¹

Conclusion

Part 1 of this study noted that the 1946 General Conference Session was the first to officially endorse belief in the Trinity,⁸² just 100 years after James White's strong rejection of that idea in the 1846 *Day-Star*. This change was not a simple reversal. The evidence is that Ellen White agreed with the essential positive point of James's belief, namely, that "the Father and the Son" are "two distinct, literal [*sic*], tangible persons." Subsequent evidence shows that she also agreed with James's negative point: that the traditional, philosophical concepts held by many trinitarians did "spiritualize away" the personal reality of the Father and the Son.⁸³

Soon after this she added the conviction, based on visions, that both Christ and the Father have tangible forms. She progressively affirmed the eternal equality of Christ and the Father, that Christ was not created, and by 1888, that an adequate concept of the atonement demands the full and eternal Deity of Christ. Only in the 1890s did she become aware of the full individuality and personhood of the Holy Spirit, but when she did, she referred to the Holy Spirit in literal and tangible terms much like those she had used in 1850 to describe the Father and the Son.⁸⁴ By 1905, she explicitly declared her belief in three divine persons united in one God.

This confirms the fourfold hypothesis with which this article opened. First, E. R. Gane's characterization of Ellen White as a "trinitarian monotheist" is accurate regarding her mature concept of God, from 1898 onward. She never, however, used the term "Trinity" to describe her belief about God. Perhaps the closest she came was her use of the phrase "heavenly trio."⁸⁵ A likely reason why

⁸⁰F. M. Wilcox was editor of the *Review and Herald* from 1911-1944 and one of the original five trustees appointed by Ellen White to superintend her estate.

⁸¹[F. M. Wilcox], "The Message for Today," *Review and Herald*, October 9, 1913, 21.

⁸²Moon, "The Adventist Trinity Debate, Part 1," 122.

⁸³James White, *Day-Star*, January 24, 1846, 26.

⁸⁴"We need to realize that the Holy Spirit, who is as much a person as God is a person, is walking through these grounds, unseen by human eyes; that the Lord God is our Keeper and Helper. He hears every word we utter and knows every thought of the mind" (E. G. White, "Talk at Avondale School," March 25, 1899, in *Sermons and Talks* [Silver Spring, MD: E. G. White Estate, 1994], 2:136-137.

⁸⁵E. G. White, *Special Testimonies*, Series B, no. 7 (1905), 62-63.

she consistently shunned the term "Trinity," even after she had embraced certain aspects of trinitarian teaching, is the second hypothesis: that she had become aware of two varieties of trinitarian belief, one that she embraced and one that she vehemently rejected. An uncritical use of the term "Trinity" might appear to endorse philosophical concepts to which she was diametrically opposed.

This seems especially plausible in light of the third hypothesis, that as she endorsed conceptual steps toward a biblical trinitarianism, her developing understanding exerted a strong influence on other Adventist writers, leading eventually to a substantial degree of consensus in the denomination.

Fourth, the method by which the early Adventists sought to separate the biblical elements of trinitarianism from those derived only from tradition, was to completely disallow tradition as a basis for doctrine, and struggle through the long process of constructing their beliefs on the basis of Scripture alone. In doing so, they virtually retraced the steps of the NT church in first accepting the equality of Christ with the Father, and second, discovering their equality and unity with the Holy Spirit as well. In the process, Adventist theology showed temporary similarities to some of the historical heresies, particularly Arianism. The repudiation of tradition as doctrinal authority was costly in terms of the ostracism they endured as perceived "heretics," but their dependence on Scripture brought them eventually to what they believed was a more biblical view of the Trinity.⁸⁶ A controversial corollary is the conviction that the classical formulation of the Trinity doctrine, resting as it does on Greek philosophical presuppositions of timelessness and impassibility, is simply incompatible with a thoroughly biblical theological system.⁸⁷

Not an objective observer, but a systematic theologian deeply involved in the development of the Adventist doctrine of God, Fernando Canale has written extensively on the distinction between a theology based on Greek philosophical presuppositions and one based on biblical presuppositions.⁸⁸ He argues that

in a very real sense, Adventist emphasis on Scriptures as the sole source of data for executing theology has given theological reflection on God a new and revolutionary start. Systematically distrustful and critical of traditional theological positions, Adventists were determined to build doctrines on the basis of Scripture alone. The difficulties implicit in this fresh approach may account for the scant number of Adventist statements on the doctrine of God.⁸⁹

Canale makes a strong case for his contention that because Adventists

⁸⁶Canale, 150.

⁸⁷Ibid, 148-150. On a more popular level, see Moon, "The Trinity in the Reformation Era: Four Viewpoints," in *The Trinity: Understanding God's Love, His Plan of Salvation, and Christian Relationships*, Woodrow Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John W. Reeve (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald), 166-181.

⁸⁸Fernando Luis Canale, *A Criticism of Theological Reason: Time and Timelessness as Primordial Presuppositions*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series, vol. 10 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1983), 359; 402, n. 1; idem, "Doctrine of God," 117-118, 126, 128-129, 132, 138-140, 145, 148-150.

⁸⁹Canale, "Doctrine of God," 148.

“departed from the philosophical conception of God as timeless” and “embraced the historical conception of God as presented in the Bible,” they were enabled to develop a genuinely biblical view of the Trinity.⁹⁰

⁹⁰Canale, 150, elaborates: “Finally, having departed from the philosophical conception of God as timeless and having embraced the historical conception of God as presented in the Bible, Adventists envisage the relation between the immanent and economic Trinity as one of identity rather than correspondence. The works of salvation are produced in time and history by the immanent Trinity [Fritz Guy, “What the Trinity Means to Me,” *Adventist Review*, September 11, 1986, 13] by way of its different Persons, conceived as centers of consciousness and action. Consequently, the indivisibility of God’s works in history is not conceived by Adventists as being determined by the oneness of essence—as taught in the Augustinian classical tradition—but rather by the oneness of the historical task of redemption [Raoul Dederen, “Reflections on the Doctrine of the Trinity,” *AUSS* 8 (Spring 1970): 20]. The danger of Tritheism involved in this position becomes real when the oneness of God is reduced to a mere unity conceived in analogy to a human society or a fellowship of action. Beyond such a unity of action, however, it is necessary to envision God as the one single reality which, in the very acts by which He reveals Himself directly in history, transcends the limits of our human reason [W. W. Prescott, *The Saviour of the World* (Takoma Park, MD: Review and Herald, 1929), 17]. In no way could human minds achieve what the classic doctrine about the Trinity claims to perceive, namely, the description of the inner structure of God’s being. Together with the entire creation, we must accept God’s oneness by faith (James 2:19).”