

The Doctrine of the Trinity Among Seventh-day Adventists

Gerhard Pfandl
Biblical Research Institute

While the Seventh-day Adventist Church today espouses the doctrine of the Trinity, this has not always been so. The evidence from a study of Adventist history indicates that from the earliest years of our church to the 1890s a whole stream of writers took an Arian or semi-Arian position.¹ The view of Christ presented in those years by Adventist authors was that there was a time when Christ did not exist, that His divinity is an inherited divinity, and that therefore He is inferior to the Father. In regard to the Holy Spirit, their position was that He was not the third member of the Godhead, but the power of God.

¹ The first comprehensive study of Arianism in the Seventh-day Adventist Church was Erwin R. Gane's unpublished M.A. thesis, "The Arian or Anti-Trinitarian Views Presented in Seventh-day Adventist Literature and the Ellen G. White Answer," which was completed in 1963 at Andrews University. Others who have written on the topic since then include Russell Holt, "The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination: Its Rejection and Acceptance," term paper, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 1969; Merlin Burt, "Demise of Semi-Arianism and Anti-Trinitarianism in Adventist Theology, 1888–1957," research paper, Andrews University, 1996; John M. Fowler, "In the Presence of Mystery," *Adventist Review*, April 13, 1997, 16–19; Woodrow W. Whidden, "Salvation Pilgrimage," *Ministry* (April 1998): 5–7; Jerry Moon, "Heresy or Hopeful Sign," *Adventist Review*, April 22, 1999, 8–13. George R. Knight, *A Search for Identity* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2000), 110–117. Because of a resurgence of anti-Trinitarian views within the church, two books on the Trinity have been published in recent years: Max Hatton's book *Understanding the Trinity* (Grantham: Autumn House, 2001) does not address the Adventist situation, but focuses on the biblical material and responds to attacks on the doctrine of the Trinity. W. W. Whidden, J. Moon, and J. W. Reeve's book *The Trinity* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2002) has two chapters by Jerry Moon dealing with anti-Trinitarianism in Adventism.

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A number of Adventist authors today who are opposed to the doctrine of the Trinity are trying to resurrect the views of our early pioneers on these issues.² They are urging the church to forsake the “Roman doctrine” of the Trinity and to accept again the semi-Arian position of our pioneers.

The Early Pioneers

Two of the principal founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Joseph Bates and James White, were originally members of the Christian Connection Church, which rejected the doctrine of the Trinity. James White was an ordained minister of that church. When he and Bates joined the Advent Movement, they continued to hold the anti-Trinitarian view that they had held in the Christian Connection Church.

In 1855 James White published an article in the *Review and Herald* entitled “Preach the Word.” In dealing with Paul’s statement in 2 Timothy 4:4, “they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables,” he wrote, “Here we might mention the Trinity, which does away the personality of God and His Son Jesus Christ,”³

Joseph Bates wrote in 1868, “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.”⁴

Other prominent Adventists who spoke out against the Trinity were J. N. Loughborough, R. F. Cottrell, J. N. Andrews, and Uriah Smith. For example, J. N. Loughborough, in response to the question “What serious objection is there to the doctrine of the Trinity?” wrote, “There are many objections which we might urge, but on account of our limited space we shall reduce them to the three following: 1. It is contrary to common sense. 2. It is contrary to scripture. 3. Its origin is Pagan and fabulous.”⁵ And R. F. Cottrell, in an article on the Trinity, stated:

² For example, Fred Allaback, *No New Leaders . . . No New Gods!* (Creal Springs: Fred Allaback, 1995); Lynnford Beachy, *Did They Believe in the Trinity* (1996); Rachel Cory-Kuehl, *The Persons of God* (Albuquerque: Aggelia, 1996); Allen Stump, *The Foundation of Our Faith* (Welch: Smyrna Gospel Ministries, 2000).

³ *Review and Herald*, December 11, 1855, 85.

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

⁵ *Review and Herald*, November 5, 1861, 184.

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To hold the doctrine of the trinity is not so much an evidence of evil intention as of intoxication from that wine of which all the nations have drunk. The fact that this was one of the leading doctrines, if not the very chief, upon which the bishop of Rome was exalted to the popedom, does not say much in its favor.⁶

In an article concerning the identity of Melchizedek in Hebrews 7:3, J. N. Andrews argued that the words “having neither beginning of days” cannot be taken literally since every being in the universe except God the Father has a beginning. It is in this context that he wrote, “And as to the Son of God, he would be excluded also, for he had God for his Father, and did, at some point in the eternity of the past, have a beginning of days.”⁷

Finally, in the 1865 edition of the book *Thoughts, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Revelation*, Uriah Smith called Christ “the first created being.”⁸ However, by the time the 1882 edition was published, he had modified his view. Concerning the phrase “the Beginning of the creation of God” in Revelation 3:14 he wrote, “Some understand by this language that Christ was the first created being . . . But the language does not necessarily imply that he was created . . . he himself came into existence in a different manner, as he is called ‘the only begotten’ of the Father.”⁹

Our pioneers clearly held Arian or Semi-Arian views in regard to the person of Christ. They understood “firstborn over all creation” (Col 1:15) and “only begotten Son” (John 3:16) in a literal sense. The Father, therefore, was first and superior, and the Son, who had a beginning sometime in eternity, was subordinate to the Father. A corollary of this view was the belief that the Holy Spirit is an influence or the power of God, but not a person.

⁶ Ibid., July 6, 1869, 11.

⁷ Ibid., September 7, 1869, 84.

⁸ *Thoughts, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Revelation* (Battle Creek: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1865), 59.

⁹ Ibid. (Battle Creek, 1882), 74. Smith, however, never abandoned his semi-Arian views. In 1898, five years before his death, he published the book *Looking Unto Jesus* (Review and Herald, 1898). In the chapter on “Christ as Creator,” he wrote, “With the Son, the evolution of deity, as deity, ceased. All else, of things animate or inanimate, has come in by the creation of the Father and the Son” (13).

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The Position of Ellen G. White

During the early decades of our church, Ellen White made statements that could be interpreted as anti-Trinitarian. She at times referred to the Holy Spirit as “it,”¹⁰ and in the context of her description of the fall of Satan, she wrote,

A special light beamed in his [Satan’s] countenance, and shone around him brighter and more beautiful than around the other angels; yet Jesus, God’s dear Son, had the pre-eminence over all the angelic host. *He was one with the Father before the angels were created.* Satan was envious of Christ, and gradually assumed command which devolved on Christ alone.

The great Creator assembled the heavenly host, that he might in the presence of all the angels confer special honor upon his Son. . . . The Father then made known that it was ordained by himself that Christ, his Son, should be equal with himself; so that wherever was the presence of his Son, it was his own presence. . . . His Son would carry out His will and His purposes, but would do nothing of himself alone.¹¹

This seems to imply that after the angels were created, they did not know or recognize that Christ was equal with the Father and it took a special “heavenly council” to inform them of this.

On the other hand, if Christ’s equality was a “special honor” which was conferred upon him, the implication is that he was not equal to the Father before that time.¹² In the book *Patriarchs and Prophets* (1890) she wrote, “He [Satan] was beloved and revered by the heavenly host, angels delighted to execute his commands, and he was clothed with wisdom and glory above them. *Yet the Son of God was exalted above him,* as

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 9 vols. (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1948), 1:124; *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials* (Washington: The Ellen G. White Estate, 1987), 1249; Ellen G. White, “Special Testimony to the Battle Creek Church,” *Pamphlet* 154 (Battle Creek, 1896), 4.

¹¹ Ellen G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 4 vols. (Washington: Review and Herald, 1969), 1:17–18 (emphasis supplied).

¹² A similar statement is found as late as 1904. At that time Ellen White wrote, “God is the Father of Christ; Christ is the Son of God. To Christ had been given an exalted position. He has been made equal with the Father. All the counsels of God are opened to His Son” (White, *Testimonies*, 8:268). This statement appears immediately following a quote from Hebrews 1:1–5, where reference is made to the fact that Christ after his ascension is “appointed heir of all things” and is “being made so much better than the angels.” Her statement in this context can be seen as an elaboration of the text in Hebrews that refers to Christ after his ascension.

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one in power and authority with the Father.”¹³ Two paragraphs further on she explains,

There had been no change in the position or authority of Christ. Lucifer’s envy and misrepresentation and his claims to equality with Christ had made necessary a statement of the true position of the Son of God; but this had been the same from the beginning. Many of the angels were, however, blinded by Lucifer’s deceptions.¹⁴

Nevertheless, these kinds of statements are used today to support the semi-Arian position that some Adventists have recently begun to advocate. Could it be that these passages express Ellen White’s understanding of Christ’s position in heaven at that time and that as time progressed, she received more light, which eventually led to her very clear Trinitarian statements in the late 1890s?¹⁵

Carsten Johnson’s Explanation

Carsten Johnson, one time professor of theology at Andrews University, taught that God’s glory consisted not of his supreme might and majesty, but rather of his humility and self-effacement. His glory was his “going down” to the level of his creation. And this glory did not become visible only in Christ’s incarnation, but God has been like that all the time.

The attribute of “going down” is not an attribute of God developed only at the critical moment when such “going down” became a desperate necessity, an emergency measure for the sake of our salvation. It is not limited to the accident of our father Adam’s fall into sin in the Garden of Eden. It is an effulgence of God’s very being, all the time. God’s descent

¹³ Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1958), 37.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 38.

¹⁵ Another case of increasing light leading to a clearer understanding are her statements on the eating of pork. In 1858 she wrote, “If God requires His people to abstain from Swine’s flesh, He will convict them on the matter” (White, *Testimonies*, 1:207). At that time most Adventists ate pork. After receiving more light on the subject, she wrote in 1868, “You know that the use of Swine’s flesh is contrary to His express command, given not because He wished to especially show His authority, but because it would be injurious to those who should eat it.” (Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Diet and Foods* [Washington: Review and Herald, 1946], 392).

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into the depths of creation and redemption is an expression of
His constant nature¹⁶

Thus, Johnson believed that when the angels were created Christ was already concealing his glory in humility. From the fact that “the angel of the Lord” (Judges 6:22) is a divine being, and Michael is called an angel (1 Thess 4:16), he concluded that Christ at the creation of the angels identified himself with them. Therefore, when Satan became jealous of Christ, God was forced to lay bare all the facts. It was in this context that the events portrayed in *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 36–38, took place.

A Principle of Interpretation

Whatever the case, we should not forget that in contrast to the two or three statements in the books *The Spirit of Prophecy* (1858) and *Patriarchs and Prophets* (1890), there are a number of passages where Ellen G. White emphasizes that Christ was equal with the Father from the beginning¹⁷ and that he was God essentially and in the highest sense.¹⁸

As is the case with ambiguous texts in Scripture, we need to clarify ambiguous passages in Ellen White with clear statements on the topic. As we shall see below, during the 1890s several statements came from the pen of Ellen White that clearly support the Trinitarian concept of God.

There were also changes in the understanding of the Godhead in the writings of other Adventist authors as the nineteenth century progressed. By about 1880 the idea of Christ as a created being began to fade away, and the concept of Christ as the “begotten” Son of God became more prominent.¹⁹ The word “begotten” was taken literally, which meant that

¹⁶ Carsten Johnson, “How Could Lucifer Conceive the Idea of a Rivalry with Jesus Christ” (Unpublished paper, 1976), 9.

¹⁷ In 1909 she wrote, “In [the Word] we may learn what our redemption has cost Him who from the beginning was equal with the Father” (Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* [Nashville: Southern Publishing, 1923], 536); the same thought in the same year appears in Letter 64, 1909 (Idem, *Mind, Character and Personality*, 2 vols. [Nashville: Southern Publishing, 1977], 1:352); and on p. 13 in her book *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1943), first published in 1913.

¹⁸ In 1906 she wrote, “Christ was God essentially, and in the highest sense. He was God from all eternity, God overall, blessed forevermore.” (Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 3 vols. [Washington: Review and Herald, 1958], 1:247).

¹⁹ In the 1882 edition of his book *Thoughts, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Revelation* (Battle Creek: Review and Herald, 1882) Uriah Smith wrote on p. 74, “Some

Christ at some point in eternity proceeded from the Father, and was therefore subordinate to Him.

A Time of Transition

The rise of the Trinity doctrine in our church was the outworking of a slow process that occurred over many years. It was not imposed on the church arbitrarily; it evolved slowly from within. The first positive reference to the Trinity in Adventist literature appeared in the *Bible Students' Library* series in 1892. The *Bible Students' Library* was "a series of pamphlets, designed for the public, containing brief and pointed essays on Bible doctrines, the fulfillment of prophecy, and other aspects of SDA teachings."²⁰ Pamphlet number 90 was entitled "The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity." What is significant is the fact that the author, Samuel Spear, was not an Adventist. The pamphlet was a reprint of an article from the *New York Independent* of November 14, 1889.²¹

While teaching the doctrine of "one God subsisting and acting in three persons,"²² Spear insisted on the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father. "The subordination of Christ, as revealed in the Bible," he said, "is not adequately explained by referring it simply to His human nature . . . His subordination extends to His *divine* as well as His human nature."²³ Although this pamphlet was certainly an improvement on previous positions, it still fell short of the true picture of the Trinity. Nevertheless, the fact that it was printed by Pacific Press indicates that the concept of the Trinity was beginning to be accepted by the church.

Although Ellen White had asserted Christ's equality with the Father in 1869²⁴ and James White had basically said the same in 1877,²⁵ the breakthrough came with the publication of Ellen White's article "Christ

understand by this language that Christ was the first created being . . . But the language does not necessarily imply that he was created . . . he himself came into existence in a different manner, as he is called 'the only begotten' of the Father." In a similar vein, E. J. Waggoner wrote in 1890, "The point is that Christ is a begotten Son, and not a created subject" (*Christ and His Righteousness* [Oakland: Pacific Press, 1890], 22).

²⁰ Don F. Neufeld, *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, rev. ed. (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1976), s.v. "Bible Students Library."

²¹ This pamphlet is reproduced in M. L. Andreasen, *The Book of Hebrews* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1948), 115–124.

²² Samuel Spear, "The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity," *New York Independent* (November 14, 1889), 9.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁴ White, *Testimonies*, 2:200.

²⁵ *Review and Herald*, November 29, 1877, 172.

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the Life-giver” in *Signs of the Times* in 1897²⁶ and *The Desire of Ages* in 1898. In “Christ the Life-giver,” after quoting John 10:18, “No one takes it [life] from Me, but I lay it down of Myself,” she says, “In Him was life, original, unborrowed, underived.”²⁷ In *Desire of Ages*, in the chapter “The Light of Life,” she quotes Jesus’ answer to the Jews in John 8:58, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.” Then she comments:

Silence fell upon the vast assembly. The name of God, given to Moses to express the idea of the eternal presence, had been claimed as His own by this Galilean Rabbi. He announced Himself to be the self-existent One, He who had been promised to Israel, ‘whose goings forth have been from of old, from the days of eternity.’ Micah 5:2 margin.²⁸

A few pages further in the book, in the chapter “Lazarus, Come Forth,” she repeats her statement from 1897, “In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived.”²⁹ These statements clearly describe Christ as God in the highest sense. He is not derived from the Father as most Adventists up to that time believed, nor has divinity been bestowed upon him. He is the self-existent One, equal to the Father in every respect. In fact, Ellen White had said that much already in 1897: “He was equal with God, infinite and omnipotent . . . He is the eternal self-existing Son.”³⁰

In spite of these clear statements from the pen of Ellen White, it took many years before this truth was accepted by the church at large. Not only did Uriah Smith, editor of the *Review and Herald*, believe until his death in 1903 that Christ had a beginning, but during the first decades of this century there were many who held on to the view that in some way Christ came forth from the Father, i.e., he had a beginning and was therefore inferior to Him.

During the 1919 Bible Conference, for example, Elder W. W. Prescott made a presentation on “The Person of Christ.” In the ensuing discussion, the question of the Trinity was raised. L. L. Caviness voiced his concern and said,

²⁶ *Signs of the Times*, April 8, 1897, 6–7.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁸ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1940), 469–470.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 530.

³⁰ Manuscript 101, 1897, in *Manuscript Releases*, 21 vols. (Silver Spring: E. G. White Estate, 1981–1993), 12:395.

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I cannot believe that the two persons of the Godhead are equal, the Father and the Son,—that one is the Father and the other the Son, and that they might be just as well the other way round. . . . In praying he [Christ] said it was his wish that the disciples might see the glory which he had with the Father, and which the Father had given him. It was not something he had all through eternity, but the Father had some time given to him the glory of God. He is divine, but he is the divine Son. I cannot explain further than that, but I cannot believe the so called Trinitarian doctrine of the three persons always existing.³¹

Elder Prescott then raised the question, “Can we believe in the Deity of Christ without believing in the eternity of Christ?”³² Some of those present said, “Yes.” W. T. Knox suggested that Christ was the eternal Son in the same sense that Levi was in the loins of Abraham. He said, “There came a time—in a way we cannot comprehend nor the time that we cannot comprehend, when by God’s mysterious operation the Son sprung from the bosom of his Father and had a separate existence.”³³

This discussion indicates that twenty years after Ellen White’s clear statement on the eternal divinity of Christ and his absolute equality with the Father, many in the church still held on to the idea that Christ, although divine, had a beginning.

The 1931 “Statement of Fundamental Beliefs”

In 1930 church administrators in Africa requested that the General Conference include a statement in the Yearbook of what Seventh-day Adventists believe. “Such a statement,” they said, “would help government officials and others to a better understanding of our work.”³⁴

A committee of four (M. E. Kern, E. R. Palmer, C. H. Watson, and F. M. Wilcox) was appointed to draft such a statement. They produced a 22-point statement that in 1931 was printed in the *Adventist Yearbook*. Fundamental Beliefs three and four stated:

That the Godhead, or Trinity, consists of the Eternal Father, a personal, spiritual Being, omnipotent, omnipresent,

³¹ Report of 1919 Bible Conference (July 6, 1919), 57. The report can be accessed under <http://www.adventistarchives.org/documents.asp?CatID=19>

³² *Ibid.*, 62.

³³ *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁴ *General Conference Committee Minutes* (December 29, 1930), 195.

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

That Jesus Christ is very God, being of the same nature and essence as the Eternal Father. While retaining His divine nature He took upon Himself the nature of the human family, lived on the earth as a man, exemplified in His life as our Example the principles of righteousness, attested His relationship to God by many mighty miracles, died for our sins on the cross, was raised from the dead, and ascended to the Father where He ever lives to make intercession for us. John 1:1, 14; Heb. 2:9–18; 8:1, 2; 4:14–16; 7:25.³⁵

These statements fully expressed the biblical doctrine of the Trinity.³⁶ Christ is described as “very God,” self-existent and eternal, and the Holy Spirit is identified as the third person of the Godhead.

The 1980 Dallas Statement of Fundamental Beliefs

Prior to the 1980 General Conference in Dallas, a proposed statement of 27 Fundamental Beliefs was sent to the world divisions.³⁷ At the conference itself a revised version, incorporating the many suggestions from the world field, was discussed and eventually voted as an expression of the fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Fundamental Belief number two on the Godhead states,

³⁵ *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1931), 377.

³⁶ For an Adventist defense of the biblical doctrine of the Trinity, see Raoul Dederen, “Reflections on the Doctrine of the Trinity,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 8 (January 1970): 1–22; Fernando L. Canale, “The Doctrine of God,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. R. Dederen (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2000), 120–138; Hatton, 11–137; W. W. Whidden, “The Biblical Evidence for the Full Deity of Christ, the Personality of the Spirit, and the Unity and Oneness of the Godhead,” in W. W. Whidden, J. Moon, and J. W. Reeve, 16–119; Gerhard Pfandl, “The Trinity in Scripture,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14.2 (Autumn 2003): 80–94.

³⁷ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . .* (Silver Spring: Ministerial Association, 1988), v. The members of the committee of 194 persons from the ten world divisions mentioned on this page consulted with the theologians in their fields and passed on their recommendations to the smaller working committee. I was one of the Bible teachers at Bogenhofen Seminary, in Austria, at that time, and I remember when the Union president, who belonged to the 194-person committee, came to the Seminary to go through the proposed 27 fundamental beliefs with us.

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There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal Persons. God is immortal, all-powerful, all-knowing, above all, and ever present. He is infinite and beyond human comprehension, yet known through His self-revelation. He is forever worthy of worship, adoration, and service by the whole creation.³⁸

Fundamental Belief number two, as voted at the 1980 General Conference in Dallas, expresses the present position of the church on the doctrine of the Trinity. It is supported by Scripture and the writings of Ellen G. White.

Seventh-day Adventist Anti-Trinitarians

In recent years a number of anti-Trinitarian publications have appeared in our church.³⁹ The tenor of all these publications is that “the church as a whole rejected the doctrine of *the Trinity*, and it was not until many years after the death of Ellen G. White that the Adventist church changed their [sic] position in regards to *the Trinity*.”⁴⁰ The doctrine of the Trinity is seen as “the ‘omega’ of doctrinal apostasy within the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.”⁴¹ Therefore, to remain true to God, they claim, we need to return to the faith of our pioneers and reject the Trinity.

Apart from a few biblical arguments, most of the arguments advanced to promote this idea are historical, with the focus on our pioneers and Ellen White:

1. All Our Pioneers, Including Ellen White, Were Anti-Trinitarians. Fred Allaback, in his booklet *No New Leaders . . . No New Gods!* writes, “It is no mystery to the studios, that the early Adventist pioneers were categorically anti-Trinitarian and the modern Seventh-day Adventists Church today is an ‘avowedly Trinitarian church.’”⁴² Concerning Ellen White’s position on the topic, he says, “If Ellen White always believed and taught the Trinitarian doctrine, these teachings [sic] would be reflected in her writings, which they are not. . . . There is no

³⁸ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . .*, 16.

³⁹ For example, Fred Allaback, *No New Leaders . . . No New Gods!* (Creal Springs: Fred Allaback, 1995); Lynnford Beachy, *Did They Believe in the Trinity?* (1996); Rachel Cory-Kuehl, *The Persons of God* (Albuquerque: Aggelia Publications, 1996); Allen Stump, *The Foundation of Our Faith* (Welch: Smyrna Gospel Ministries, 2000).

⁴⁰ Beachy, 1.

⁴¹ Allaback, 38.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 11; See also Stump, 63.

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evidence to conclude that Ellen White was not in harmony with the non-Trinitarian teachings of all her friends and co-workers.”⁴³

Answer: It is true that in the beginning most of our pioneers expressed their understanding of the Godhead in anti-Trinitarian terms. Anti-Trinitarianism at that time was based on three leading ideas: (1) There once was a time when Christ did not exist.⁴⁴ (2) Christ inherited divinity from the Father and was therefore inferior to him.⁴⁵ (3) The Holy Spirit is not the third person of the Godhead but only the power or influence of God and Christ.⁴⁶

All of these ideas were originally held by our pioneers. However, it is also a historical fact that the understanding of our pioneers changed over time. For example:

a. In 1846 James White referred to “the old unscriptural trinitarian creed, viz., that Jesus is the eternal God.”⁴⁷ But in 1876 he wrote that “S. D. Adventists hold the divinity of Christ so nearly with the Trinitarians, that we apprehend no trial here.”⁴⁸ And a year later he declared his belief in the equality of the Son with the Father and condemned any view as erroneous that “makes Christ inferior to the Father.”⁴⁹

⁴³ Ibid., 32

⁴⁴ J. M. Stevenson, in 1854, pointed out that “If the inspired writers had wishes to convey the idea of the co-etaneous existence, and eternity of the Father and the Son, they could not possibly have used more incompatible terms.” (“The Atonement,” *Review and Herald*, November 14, 1854, 105). And J. N. Andrews, in 1869, wrote that “the Son of God . . . had God for His Father, and did, at some point in the eternity of the past, have a beginning” (*Review and Herald*, September 7, 1869, 84)

⁴⁵ J. N. Andrews, *Review and Herald*, Jan 27, 1874, 52. D. M. Canright, after quoting Heb 1:4, “having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they,” says, “Christ, being the Son of God, has inherited the name, the nature, and the glory of God his Father” (*Review and Herald*, June 18, 1867, 2).

⁴⁶ D. M. Canright, in 1878, wrote, “The Holy Spirit is not a person . . . [He is] a divine influence proceeding from the Father and also from the Son, as their power, energy, etc.” (“The Holy Spirit Not a Person, but an Influence Proceeding from God,” *The Signs of the Times*, July 25, 1878, 218). Similarly, Uriah Smith in 1890 wrote concerning the Holy Spirit, “The Bible uses expressions which cannot be harmonized with the idea that it is a person like the Father and the Son. Rather it is shown to be a divine influence from them both, the medium which represents their presence and by which they have knowledge and power through all the universe, when not personally present” (*Review and Herald*, October 28, 1890, 664)

⁴⁷ *The Day-Star*, January 24, 1846, 25.

⁴⁸ *Review and Herald*, October 12, 1876, 116.

⁴⁹ Ibid., November 29, 1877, 172.

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b. Originally Uriah Smith and others taught that Christ was the first created being. Later he adopted the position that Christ was begotten not created (see page 3).

c. In 1896, W. W. Prescott wrote,

As Christ was twice born, once in eternity, the only begotten of the Father, and again in the flesh, thus uniting the divine with the human in that second birth, so we, who have been born once already in the flesh, are to have the second birth, being born again in the Spirit . . .⁵⁰

Twenty-three years later, at the 1919 Bible Conference, during a discussion on the divinity of Christ, he admitted,

I was in the same place that Brother Daniells was, and was taught the same things [that Christ was the beginning of God's creative work, that to speak of the third person of the Godhead or of the trinity was heretical] by authority, and without doing my own thinking or studying I supposed it was right. But I found out something different.⁵¹

When he raised the question, "Can we believe in the deity of Christ without believing in the eternity of Christ?" One of the participants answered, "I have done so for years." To this Prescott replied,

That is my very point—that we have used terms in that accommodating sense that are not really in harmony with Scriptural teaching. We believed a long time that Christ was a created being, in spite of what the Scripture says. I say this, that passing over the experience I have passed over myself in this matter—this accommodating use of terms which makes the Deity without eternity, is not my conception now of the gospel of Christ. I think it falls short of the whole idea expressed in the Scriptures, and leaves us not with the kind of Savior I believe in now, but a sort of human view—a semi-human being. As I view it, the deity involves eternity. The very expression involves it. You cannot read the Scripture and have the idea of deity without eternity.⁵²

As we can see, our pioneers were not locked into one particular interpretation. When new understanding came, they changed their views,

⁵⁰ Ibid. (April 14, 1896): 232.

⁵¹ Report of the 1919 Bible Conference (July 6, 1919), 58.

⁵² Ibid., 62.

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even though at times it took a long time. Furthermore, we must note that some of their views as to what was involved in the Trinity were erroneous, e.g., they thought the Trinity was three persons in one person,⁵³ or that Jesus and the Father were one and the same.⁵⁴ Another misconception was the idea that the Trinity teaches the existence of three Gods.⁵⁵ Many also held the view that belief in the Trinity would diminish the value of the atonement, i.e., if Christ was the self-existing God, he could not have died on Calvary. If only his humanity died, then his sacrifice was only a human sacrifice.⁵⁶ These misunderstandings contributed to the rejection of the Trinity.

2. Only After Ellen G. White's Death Was the Trinity Doctrine Introduced Into the Church. Under the title "How Do We Know Our Adventist Pioneers Were Not Trinitarians?" Allaback writes, "It can be demonstrated that the Seventh-day Adventist Church did not believe in the doctrine of the Trinity until long after the death of Ellen G. White. How can this be proven?"⁵⁷ He provides three reasons:

"1) Many Seventh-day Adventist scholars, theologians and church historians candidly admit that early Adventists did not believe nor teach the doctrine of the Trinity. (see appendix p. 42).

2) Every statement of Adventist belief was distinctly non-Trinitarian prior to the 1931 statement of beliefs and the 27 fundamental beliefs voted in 1980. (see appendix p. 45).

⁵³ "If Father, Son, and Holy ghost are each God, it would be three Gods; for three times one is not one, but three. There is a sense in which they are one. But not one person, as claimed by Trinitarians" (J. N. Loughborough, "Questions for Bro. Loughborough," *Review and Herald*, November 5, 1861, 184).

⁵⁴ "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" (Joseph Bates, *The Autobiography of Elder Joseph Bates* [Battle Creek: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1868], 205).

⁵⁵ "How the doctrine of the trinity of three Gods, can be reconciled with these positive statements [1 Tim 2:15; Deut 6:4] I do not know" (D. M. Canright, "The Personality of God," *Review and Herald*, August 29, 1878, 218).

⁵⁶ "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" We not only find that our Saviour calls his Father his God but that God had forsaken him. It is here asserted by Trinitarians that the God-head had left him. If this is the case then Christ was alive after the God-head left him. Then it was only the humanity that died and we have only a human sacrifice" (D. W. Hull, "Bible Doctrine of the Divinity of Christ," *Review and Herald*, November 17, 1859, 201).

⁵⁷ Allaback, 11.

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3) The personal letters, periodical articles, pamphlets and books written by Seventh-day Adventists prior to the death of Ellen G. White (1915) are distinctly non-Trinitarian. (see appendix p. 48).⁵⁸

Answer: The historic facts plainly contradict this statement. As indicated above, Ellen White in 1897 and 1898 taught that in Christ “was life, original, unborrowed, underived.”⁵⁹ This can only be true if he was God in the highest sense and did not derive his existence from the Father. In regard to the Holy Spirit she told the students at Avondale College in 1899, “We need to realize that the Holy Spirit, who is as much a person as God is a person, is walking through these grounds.”⁶⁰

In the context of the Kellogg crisis, Ellen White in 1905 wrote a warning to our workers connected with the medical work in which she unambiguously endorsed the Trinity doctrine.

The Father is all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and is invisible to mortal sight. *The Son is all the fullness of the Godhead* manifest. . . . The Comforter that Christ promised to send after He ascended to heaven, is *the Spirit in all the fullness of the Godhead*, making manifest the power of divine grace to all who receive and believe in Christ as a personal Savior. *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.⁶¹

Only someone who believed the Trinity doctrine would speak of “three living persons in the heavenly trio.” Anti-Trinitarians would not use such language.

Furthermore, her bold statements on the Trinity took many by surprise. M. L. Andreasen recounts, “I remember how astonished we were when *Desire of Ages* was first published, for it contained some things

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ White, *Selected Messages*, 1:296.

⁶⁰ Idem, *Evangelism*, (Washington: Review and Herald, 1970), 616.

⁶¹ Ibid., 614–615, emphasis supplied.

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that we believed were unbelievable; among other things the doctrine of the trinity which was not generally accepted by Adventists then.”⁶²

During 1909, Andreasen spent three months at Elmshaven, where he was able to look at her handwritten manuscripts. He wrote,

In her own handwriting I saw the statements which I was sure she had not written—could not have written. Especially was I struck with the now familiar quotation in *Desire of Ages*, page 530: “In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived.” This statement at that time was revolutionary and compelled a complete revision of my former view—and that of the denomination—on the deity of Christ.⁶³

This clearly took place long before Ellen White’s death. Thus, the charge that only after Ellen G. White’s death was the Trinity doctrine introduced into the church cannot be sustained.⁶⁴

3. The Book *Evangelism* Has Been Manipulated to Support the Trinity. After quoting the statement “We need to realize that the Holy Spirit, who is as much a person as God is a person, is walking through these grounds,”⁶⁵ from the book *Evangelism*, Allaback says, “This ‘un-contextual’ quotation is a classic example of bold ‘alteration’ and ‘manipulation’ in order to spread Trinitarian misinformation. In other words, an attempt to ‘force’ Ellen White to endorse and approve of the modern Adventist position on the Trinity.”⁶⁶

Answer: The editorial changes which are found in *Evangelism* do not alter the meaning of the statements. Two examples should be sufficient to prove the point:

a. “We need to realize that the Holy Spirit, who is as much a person as God is a person, is walking through these grounds.”⁶⁷ Allaback gives the larger context, which is as follows:

⁶² M. L. Andreasen, “The Spirit of Prophecy,” an unpublished chapel address given at Loma Linda, California, November 30, 1948; quoted in Holt, 20.

⁶³ Testimony of M. L. Andreasen, Oct. 15, 1953, White Estate Document File 961.

⁶⁴ Another strong evidence for this fact is F. M. Wilcox’s statement in 1913, “Seventh-day Adventists believe,—1. In the divine Trinity. This Trinity consists of the eternal Father . . . of the Lord Jesus Christ, the son of the eternal Father . . . the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead . . .” (“The Message for Today,” *Review and Herald*, October 9, 1913, 21).

⁶⁵ White, *Evangelism*, 616.

⁶⁶ Allaback, 69.

⁶⁷ White, *Evangelism*, 616.

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The Lord instructed us that this was the place in which we should locate, and we have had every reason to think that we are in the right place. We have been brought together as a school, and we need to realize that the Holy Spirit, who is as much a person as God is a person, is walking through these grounds, that the Lord God is our keeper, and helper. He hears every word we utter and knows every thought of the mind.⁶⁸

Allaback claims that the fact that the sentence in *Evangelism* starts in the middle of the original sentence, and the comma after “grounds” is replaced by a period, changes the meaning of the statement. He says,

The original and intended meaning of the quotation is NOT to prove the Holy Spirit to be “another God” along with the Father and His Son. But rather, that the “Lord” who “instructed us,” “the Holy Spirit” who “is walking through these grounds,” the “Lord God” who “is our keeper” and “helper” and who “hears every word” and “knows every thought,” is one and the same person—The glorified Jesus Christ. . . . Ellen White is saying the same thing as the Bible. Jesus, “is as much a person” as God the Father “is a person.” Jesus “is walking through these grounds.” Jesus “is our keeper, and helper.” Jesus “hears every word we utter and knows every thought of the mind.”⁶⁹

Allaback identifies the Holy Spirit with the Lord God and refuses to acknowledge that there are two persons referred to in this quote. In fact, in his pamphlet he gives the Holy Spirit three separate and distinct identities in a vain attempt to prove that He has no personal existence. In the above quotation he identifies the Holy Spirit with Christ. On p. 62 he identifies the Holy Spirit with the Father, and on p. 65 with the angels. He writes, “the term ‘Holy Spirit’ or ‘ghost’ in these ‘three’ quotations [referring to Ellen White’s statements on the three heavenly powers], are including (not excluding) the ministering angels as the ‘third’ power in heaven.”⁷⁰

b. Ellen White writes,

The *Father is all the fullness of the Godhead* bodily, and is invisible to mortal sight. The *Son is all the fullness of the Godhead* manifest. . . . The Comforter that Christ promised to

⁶⁸ Idem, *Manuscript Releases*, 7:299.

⁶⁹ Allaback, 69.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 65.

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send after He ascended to heaven is *the Spirit in all the fullness of the Godhead*, making manifest the power of divine grace to all who receive and believe in Christ as a personal Savior. *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.⁷¹

Allaback says, “The above quotation is misinterpreted to mean: ‘There is a “trio” of three living Gods in the “God family,” who all have the same qualities and divine powers.’” He cannot accept three persons in the Godhead, so he paraphrases the whole passage to give “the correct interpretation.” The sentence, “There are three living persons of the heavenly trio,” is paraphrased in this way:

Here we see the three great powers of heaven who manifest, represent and personify God the Father. 1) God the Father Himself, 2) The Son of God as a representative of His Father, 3) The Holy Spirit of God and Christ working in and through holy angels, personifying their character to lost humanity.⁷²

It is sad to see how a perfectly simple English sentence is reinterpreted to mean something completely different from what it actually says.

4. The Trinity Doctrine Is Pagan. “The pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church clearly recognized the Pagan origin of the Trinity doctrine,” writes Allaback.⁷³ He then quotes J. B. Friesbie, who said that the Sunday-god (the Trinity) came from the same source as Sunday-keeping,⁷⁴ and J. N. Loughborough, who stated that the origin of the Trinity is “pagan and fabulous.”⁷⁵

Answer: The doctrine of the Trinity is based on Scripture,⁷⁶ not on pagan religions or human philosophy. Similar triadic constellations in other religions, such as Brahma, Siva, and Vishnu in Hinduism; Osiris,

⁷¹ White, *Evangelism*, 614–615 (emphasis supplied).

⁷² Allaback, 71.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁷⁴ “The Sunday God,” *Review and Herald*, March 7, 1854, 50.

⁷⁵ “Questions for Bro. Loughborough,” *Review and Herald*, November 5, 1861, 184.

⁷⁶ See James R. White, *The Forgotten Trinity* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1998). For Adventist material on this topic see footnote 36.

Isis, and Horus in the Egyptian religion; or Nimrod, Ishtar, and Tammuz in Babylon are based on the family concept—father, mother, and son—which is not the case in the Christian religion. If there is any parallelism at all, it would be evidence for a satanic counterfeit such as we find in the book of Revelation (the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet).

5. The Doctrine of the Trinity Is Catholic [Papal] in Origin. In response to the question, “Why were the Adventist pioneers not Trinitarians?” Allaback gives four reasons, one of which is that “the Trinity doctrine is of Catholic origin.”⁷⁷ The other three reasons are that the doctrine is unscriptural, of pagan origin, and that it degrades our understanding of the atonement.⁷⁸

Answer: The historical record gives us a different picture. Although the concept of the Trinity is scriptural, the doctrine was formulated at the ecumenical Council of Nicaea in AD 325. The Council, summoned by Emperor Constantine, assembled in Nicaea (Asia Minor) to deal with the Arian controversy. Of the 318 bishops,⁷⁹ only seven came from the West.⁸⁰ The rest were from the Eastern churches, where the bishop of Rome had very little influence. The bishop of Rome himself was not even present—he sent two priests to represent him.⁸¹ This clearly contradicts the claim that the Trinity is of Roman Catholic origin. This does not deny that theologians of the Roman Catholic Church heavily influenced later developments of the Trinity doctrine.⁸²

Summary and Conclusion

Most early Adventist pioneers were anti-Trinitarians. In the late 1890s, Ellen White published articles and books in which she made strong statements supporting the Trinity concept, although she never used the word “Trinity.” Because many in the church remained opposed to it, more than three decades would pass before the church at large accepted the doctrine. In 1931 the *Adventist Yearbook* contained a statement of twenty-two fundamental beliefs, one of which was the Trinity.

⁷⁷ Allaback, 11.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. by C. F. Cruse (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998), 390.

⁸⁰ Hans Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church*, trans. B. L. Woolf, 4 vols. (Cleveland: World, 1961), 3:116.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² See Whidden, Moon, and Reeve, 151–159.

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The 1980 Dallas statement of Fundamental Beliefs again reiterates that “there is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal Persons.”⁸³

Modern Seventh-day Adventist anti-Trinitarians seek to recover the heritage of our pioneers in regard to the Trinity. They believe that only after Ellen White’s death did the doctrine of the Trinity enter the church and that her books have been manipulated and changed. As we have seen, the evidence does not support these charges.

While the Trinity is a divine mystery, and no mortal man will ever be able to understand it fully, the Scriptural evidence clearly indicates the equality and eternal co-existence of the three persons in the Godhead. While human reason may not understand it, by faith we can believe it.

Gerhard Pfandl is an Associate Director of the Biblical Research Institute. He holds M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in Old Testament from Andrews University. A native of Austria, he has worked as a pastor in Austria and in the Southern California Conference. From 1977–1989 he was Professor of Religion at Bogenhofen Seminary in Austria. Prior to joining the Biblical Research Institute in 1999, he served for seven years as Field Secretary of the South Pacific Division in Sydney. He has published many articles for scholarly and popular journals in German and English and is the author of vol. 1 of the Adventist Theological Society Dissertation Series, *The Time of the End in the Book of Daniel*, and of *Daniel: The Seer of Babylon* (Review & Herald, 2004). PfandlG@gc.adventist.org

⁸³ Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . , 16.