

Where is the third person?

21 min read



By David Clayton

In studying the word of God we sometimes encounter passages which seem to contradict each other, or to be in conflict. One example of this is the two statements by the apostles Paul and James concerning justification. Paul says:

“... A man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.” (Rom. 3: 28)

“For by Grace are ye saved through faith ... Not of works lest any man should boast.” (Eph. 2 : 8,9)

But James says:

“... By works a man is justified and not by faith only.” (James 2:24)

Do these statements contradict each other? At first sight they may seem to. The person who has little faith will say, “see the Bible is not dependable. It contradicts itself.” However, the person who knows that the Bible is the true infallible word of God, will say, “well, here is something that needs to be examined more carefully. Let me see how these two verses. can be harmonized with each other.”

Which of these two attitudes is the proper one? Of course it is the second one. Such a person will find that the Bible is indeed in perfect harmony with itself when it is properly understood. He will find that it is he who needs understanding and not the Bible which needs correcting. He will discover that what at first seemed to be contradictory and puzzling was really the Avenue to a richer and deeper understanding of God and his ways.

Why don't we apply the same rule when studying the subject of the godhead? Why is it that so many of us seem to believe that the subject is taboo and must not be discussed? Why is it that we cling to the popular long-accepted theory and refuse to examine all of its contradictions? Is this the true spirit of a learner, of a humble Bible student, of a child of God?

As soon as the subject of the godhead is raised and the inconsistencies of the popular belief are pointed out, one word is trumpeted:

Mystery! Mystery!

This is supposed to cover all. This word is the end of all discussion and the end of all reasonable examination of the subject. However, this is not a safe attitude to take towards any doctrine of the Scriptures. The moment we take that attitude that is the moment when our learning comes to an end. We may expect such a response from dogmatic institutions such as the Papacy and others which are of a similar spirit. But this, surely is not the spirit of the Protestants who broke the mental shackles of popery by daring to examine the Scriptures and to accept what they found there.

Today our discussion focuses on the spirit of God and it is imperative that we approach the subject with a willingness to apply the principles just mentioned.

Does the Bible teach that there is a third Being in the godhead called The Holy Spirit? There are some Scriptures which may seem to suggest that there might be such a being. On the other hand, there are many Scriptures which indicate that there is no such person. What are we to do with these Scriptures? As believers in the truth of God's word, let us examine them without bias and without traditional leaning and see if we can find how these verses harmonize with each other. We will also examine statements from the pen of Ellen G. White to help us in reaching our conclusions.

Trinitarian Verses?

Let us first of all examine some of the more popular verses which are said to teach that the Holy Spirit is a third member of the godhead, separate from God the Father and His Son.

1. And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.... (Gen 1:26)

Here we find that God was talking to somebody, but not necessarily to more than one person. Who was He talking to?

"After the earth was created, and the beasts upon it, the Father and Son carried out their purpose, which was designed before the fall of Satan, to make man in their own image. They had wrought together in the creation of the earth and every living thing upon it. And now God said to His Son, "Let us make man in our image." – The Story of Redemption, p. 20-21.

Notice, there was no third Person there.

2. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: (Mat 28:19)

In this verse we are told that we should baptize in a certain name. A name in the Bible, of course, indicates authority and character. The apostles went out and baptized in the name of Jesus. (Acts 2:38; Acts 19:5) Were they disobedient to the command of Christ? No. They knew that Christ was not emphasizing a particular formula, but rather the different elements of our salvation which must be accepted by every believer. They understood that what He meant was that every new believer should accept the authority, character and work of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in his life. The Father Gave His Son and His life to mankind. We must accept the gifts of His love in the gift of His Son, and His life and power in His Holy Spirit. If we fail to receive one or the other, then our salvation would not be complete. Is there any teaching here that the Holy Spirit is a third Being separate from Father and Son? No. Only if we read something into the Scriptures which they do not say.

3. And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. (Mat 3:16,17)

Here, we are told, there were the three members of the godhead all in one place. The Son was baptized, the Father spoke, and the Holy Spirit descended on the Son in the form of a dove. Let us see once again how Ellen White explains this passage.

“Never before had angels listened to such a prayer as Christ offered at His baptism, and they were solicitous to be the bearers of the message from the Father to His Son. But, no! Direct from the Father issues the light of His glory. The heavens were opened and beams of glory rested upon the Son of God and assumed the form of a dove, in appearance like burnished gold. The dovelike form was emblematical of the meekness and gentleness of Christ. . . . From the opening heavens came these words: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” . . . Notwithstanding the Son of God was clothed with humanity, yet Jehovah, with His own voice, assures Him of His sonship with the Eternal. In this manifestation to His Son, God accepts humanity as exalted through the excellence of His beloved Son”.That I May Know Him- 31

Again we see that there is a Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But what is the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is an extension of the Father. It comes directly from the Father. In Luke 11:20, Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as “The Finger of God.”

But if I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you. (Luke 11:20)

4. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen. (2 Cor 13:14)

In this verse, three powers are mentioned, but notice, only one of them is called God. One is the Lord, and the other is the Holy Ghost (spirit) through which we have communion or fellowship with God and Jesus. A little later we will see how other Bible passages explain this one very clearly.

5. For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. (8) And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one. (1 John 5:7-8)

The Seventh day Adventist Adult Sabbath School Quarterly has taught us that this verse does not belong in the Bible. An abundance of historical evidence indicates that this verse was added to the Bible during the 15th Century. (See SDA Adult Sabbath School Lesson Quarterlies for April – June, 1997, p.86 and October – December, 1991, p.33.)

The SDA Bible Commentary also comments on 1 John 5: 7. it says,

“The passage as given in the KJV is in no Greek MS earlier than the 15th and the 16th centuries. The disputed words found their way into the KJV by way of the Greek text of Erasmus (see Vol. V, p. 141). It is said that Erasmus offered to include the disputed words in his Greek Testament if he were shown even one Greek MS that contained them. A library in Dublin produced such a MS (known as 34), and Erasmus included the passage in his text. It is now believed that the later editions of the Vulgate acquired the passage by the mistake of a scribe who included an exegetical marginal comment in the Bible text that he was copying. The disputed words have been widely used in support of the doctrine of the Trinity, but, in view of such overwhelming evidence against their authenticity, their support is valueless and should not be used.”

However, even if we were to accept this verse as a legitimate part of Scripture, does it teach three Beings? In verse 8 we are told that there are three that bear witness in earth, the spirit, the water and the blood. Here we see that one does not have to be a living person to bear witness. The water bears witness and the blood bears witness, yet no one would suggest that the water and blood are persons. Why then should we insist that because the spirit bears witness in heaven it must be a living person?

There are three ways in which witness is borne to the truth in heaven. These witnesses are one, or they bear a united

witness. It does not mean that they are one person, one being, or one God. Jesus explained what this oneness means when He prayed that we all might be one as He and His father are one. Not that we might become one human, but simply that we might be in perfect harmony even as He and His Father are in perfect harmony.

In heaven, God bears witness to the truth, so does Christ, and so does the holy spirit! However, while God and Jesus may witness audibly by the words they speak, the holy spirit, whether in heaven or on earth, witnesses by making impressions on the hearts of those who are willing to learn, giving them understanding of the truths of the plan of salvation. In heaven there are three avenues of witness, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, on the earth, there are three, the water, the spirit and the blood. Are the three in heaven a trinity because they are mentioned in the same breath? By this reasoning we would have to conclude that the water, the spirit and the blood are also a trinity, and that the water and the blood are persons.

The Third Person is Missing

Let us now examine some of the places where the Holy Spirit is missing. In these places, the Holy Spirit would have to be present if he were a third member of the godhead.

1. Jesus answered and said unto him, If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him. (John 14:23)

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2. And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. (Rev 21:22)

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3. And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent. (John 17:3)

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4. That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:3)

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5. All things are delivered to me of my Father: and no man knoweth who the Son is, but the Father; and who the Father is, but the Son, and he to whom the Son will reveal him. (Luke 10:22)

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6. I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me. (John 17:23)

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Note also these quotes from the pen of Ellen White:

“Before the assembled inhabitants of heaven the King declared that none but Christ, the Only Begotten of God, could fully enter into His purposes, and to Him it was committed to execute the mighty counsels of His will.” – Patriarchs and Prophets, p.36

“Christ the Word, the Only Begotten of God, was one with the eternal Father,- one in nature, in character, and in purpose, – the only being in all the universe that could enter into all the counsels and purposes of God.” – The Great Controversy, p.493

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Harmonizing The Scriptures

If we are to fully accept all that we have examined thus far, we would have to conclude that the godhead consists of three POWERS, but only two BEINGS. How can we explain that? Ellen White’s Son, Willie, had an explanation for it which may shed some light on the matter.

“The statements and the arguments of some of our ministers in their effort to prove that the Holy Spirit was an individual as are God the Father and Christ, the eternal Son, have perplexed me and sometimes they have made me sad. One popular teacher said ‘We may regard Him, (the Holy Spirit) as the fellow who is down here running things.’

“My perplexities were lessened a little when I learned from the dictionary that one of the meanings of personality, was Characteristics. It is stated in such a way that I concluded that there might be personality without bodily form which is possessed by the Father and the Son.

“There are many Scriptures which speak of the Father and the Son and the absence of Scripture making similar reference to the united work of the Father and the Holy Spirit or of Christ and the Holy Spirit, has led me to believe that the spirit without individuality was the representative of the Father and the Son throughout the universe, and it was through the Holy Spirit that they dwell in our hearts and make us one with the Father and with the Son...” (Letter by Willie White, April 30, 1935)

While Ellen White has made statements which in the eyes of some, seem to support the idea of a Trinitarian God, a careful comparison of various statements made by her leads to the conclusion that her seemingly Trinitarian statements were not intended to say what many are concluding that they say, today. One of the problems is that most people either do not have access to many of her writings, or else do not study them carefully along with the Bible, seeking to harmonize both. Here are some statements concerning the holy spirit which are in perfect harmony with the Bible and which help to clarify other statements made by her.

1.The Holy Spirit emanates from the Father:

It is His purpose that the highest influence in the universe, emanating from the source of all power, shall be theirs. They are to have power to resist evil, power that neither earth, nor death, nor hell can master, power that will enable them to overcome as Christ overcame. – Desire of Ages, p.679

2.The Holy Spirit is the Father’s life:

All things Christ received from God, but He took to give. So in the heavenly courts, in His ministry for all created beings;

through the beloved Son, the Father's life flows out to all; through the Son it returns, in praise and joyous service, a tide of love, to the great Source of all. And thus through Christ the circuit of beneficence is complete, representing the character of the great Giver, the law of life. – Desire of Ages, p.21

3.The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Saviour:

The sap of the vine, ascending from the root, is diffused to the branches, sustaining growth and producing blossoms and fruit. So the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit, proceeding from the Saviour, pervades the soul, renews the motives and affections, and brings even the thoughts into obedience to the will of God, enabling the receiver to bear the precious fruit of holy deeds. – Acts of The Apostles, p.284

4.The Holy Spirit is the life of Christ:

“The Indwelling of the Spirit. –The influence of the Holy Spirit is the life of Christ in the soul. We do not see Christ and speak to Him, but His Holy Spirit is just as near us in one place as in another. It works in and through every one who receives Christ. Those who know the indwelling of the Spirit reveal the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith” – SDA Bible Commentary, Vol. 6, p.1112

5.The Holy Spirit is the presence of Christ Himself:

“Cumbered with humanity Christ could not be in every place personally, therefore it was altogether for their advantage that He should leave them to go to His Father and send the Holy Spirit to be His successor on earth. The Holy Spirit is Himself, divested of the personality of humanity and independent thereof. He would represent Himself as present in all places by His Holy Spirit.” – Manuscript Release #1084

The truth is, there are times when the holy spirit is referred to as “he” in the Scriptures. Why is this so? The reason is that the Holy Spirit is not just a force, but is actually the very real presence and personality of both the Father and the Son.

Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. (2 Cor 3:17)

Jesus answered and said unto him, If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him. (John 14:23)

I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. (John 14:18)

God the Father and Jesus Christ are with us, but not in a form where we can see, or touch them, but in an invisible, intangible, but very real spiritual form. Because this is the presence of God, it is holy. Because it is in a spiritual form, it is spirit. Hence, The Holy Spirit.

This is the only explanation of the godhead which will fit all the facts. God has a Son, and He has a Spirit. The Son proceeded from God:

“Jesus said unto them, If God were your Father, ye would love me: for I proceeded forth and came from God; neither came I of myself, but he sent me. (John 8:42)”

But the Holy Spirit proceedeth from God:

“But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me: (John 15:26)”

The Son is a separate Being from the Father, while the Holy Spirit is an extension of the Father, by means of which He is present everywhere.

Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? (Psa 139:7)

All things Christ received from God, but He took to give. So in the heavenly courts, in His ministry for all created beings; through the beloved Son, the Father’s life flows out to all; through the Son it returns, in praise and joyous service, a tide of love, to the great Source of all. And thus through Christ the circuit of beneficence is complete, representing the character of the great Giver, the law of life. – Desire of Ages, p.21

The Father dwells in His Son by His spirit. Thus, they are one. Then the Son dwells in us by that same spirit, so we also are one in God, as He and His Son are one:

That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. (John 17:21)

And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: (John 17:22)

I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me. (John 17:23)

Jesus is seeking to impress upon them the thought that in giving his Holy Spirit he is giving to them the glory which the Father has given him, that he and his people may be one in God. Our way and will must be in submission to God’s will, knowing that it is holy, just, and good. – Signs of The Times, 10-03-92

Ellen White says that there are three living persons in the godhead. At least, that is how the quote appears in present day editions of her writings. However, it is most interesting to note that in the original statement written in her own handwriting, Ellen White herself crossed out the word persons and replaced it with the word, personalities. Surely, it is evident that in her mind, there was a difference between a person and a personality. Her concept of the Holy Spirit was not properly described by the word person but rather by the word, personality. Let us note that a person may be said to have more than one personality. The term split personality is a popular one nowadays, referring to a person who has more than one way of expressing or revealing himself. This is exactly what Ellen White was saying when she stated that there were, not three persons, but three personalities in the godhead.

Ellen White also says that there is no Being in the universe apart from Jesus who can enter into the counsels of God. Assuming that Ellen White was not confused and contradicting herself, this must mean one of two things. Either,

a. The Holy Spirit is a Being, but is not able to enter into the counsels of God. This would mean that the Holy Spirit would be a lesser being than God, or,

b. The Holy Spirit is a person (personality), but not a Being. This is clearly the proper explanation.

As Willie White pointed out, the word person can be used to refer to a particular role of someone, or to the characteristics of an individual. In this sense, one individual may have more than one person-ality, The word person is not often used in this sense nowadays. Generally, today, it is used as a synonym for the word, being. However, 100 years ago when Ellen White wrote, "There are three living persons in the godhead..." the other usage of the word was evidently well understood, for it was she also who wrote, "Christ the Word, the Only Begotten of God, was one with the eternal Father,- one in nature, in character, and in purpose, - the only being in all the universe that could enter into all the counsels and purposes of God." - Great Controversy, p. 493

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