

## How clear views of Jesus developed in the Adventist Church

by Gilbert Valentine

Discussions on the doctrine of the Trinity are again rippling the surface of Adventist reflection on the nature of the Godhead. Adventists as a whole have not always been Trinitarian in belief, as a number of recent authors<sup>1</sup> have pointed out. Some Adventists still think that we should not be Trinitarian.

Many early Adventist pioneers such as James White, Joseph Bates, J. H. Waggoner, and R. F. Cottrell were, in fact, strongly anti-Trinitarian. They came from Disciples of Christ or similar church backgrounds and brought their strong anticreedal, anti-Trinitarian theology with them. This was how it came to be that semi-Arian concepts of Christology were fairly deeply imbedded in early Adventist beliefs and literature.

When did the change to Trinitarianism occur?

As Jerry Moon points out, "an irreversible paradigm shift" occurred in the Adventist Church in the 1890s, spurred along by the church's publication of Ellen White's *The Desire of Ages* in 1898. This influential book on the life of Christ reflected Mrs. White's own developing understanding and called attention "to scriptures whose significance had been overlooked." Its publication contributed to a "complete reversal" of Adventist thinking on the Trinity, and it became a kind of "continental divide."<sup>2</sup>

Because theological concepts are interconnected and interrelated, the paradigm shift inevitably had a deep and far-reaching impact on the church's understanding of other parts of its theology as I show in my biographical study of leading church theologian W. W. Prescott. The development enabled the church to give its distinctive message in a new gospel context.<sup>3</sup>

### How did change come?

The change did not happen quickly, of course. It took many years. But how did the change happen? Did Ellen White simply initiate the changes in the late 1890s through some special burst of revelation or insight? Or did the development occur as the result of some sort of focused Bible study on the topic occurring in the church? Was there some sort of "agitation and discussion" happening somewhere in the background?

M. L. Andreason and others advanced the first explanation. Andreason clearly gave this impression in his repeated recalling of his own and the church's astonishment at reading in *The Desire of Ages* the "revolutionary" statement on the self-existent deity of Christ, "in Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived."<sup>4</sup>

To Andreason this was clearly an unexpected burst of new light with no prior background discussion "of any sort."<sup>5</sup> Andreason's surprise was apparently quite common in the experience of others in the denomination at the time.

*Ministry* editor Leroy Froom, on the other hand, suspected there was more to it than that. As he understood things, "the Spirit of prophecy [the work of Ellen White] was never the instrument to initiate doctrine, or other truths among us." Rather, new perspectives and understandings "have come from study," he suggested. Froom's inquisitiveness in the mid-1940s led to his seeking out witnesses of what had been happening during the period

when the changes occurred.<sup>6</sup>

## **Doctrinal development**

How and why does doctrinal development occur? Cambridge University scholar Maurice Wiles in his study of doctrinal development in the earlier patristic period observes three underlying motivations at work.

First, apologetics played an important part. This involved the need for believers to express truth in a form that met the questions of the surrounding world, defensively, on the one hand, to explain what really was meant by a doctrinal statement and to correct misunderstanding and challenges; and offensively, on the other hand, to recommend the faith evangelistically, persuading and convincing unbelievers.

A second motivation was to protect against heresy within the church. This motivation was concerned to protect against some unbalanced overemphasis on one part of a doctrinal statement at the expense of another important aspect of the whole. Protecting against heresy involved clarification of terminology or rejection of the use of inappropriate language to express the faith. This tended to result in an ever increasing precision of doctrinal statement.

A third motivation arose from the natural desire of Christian believers to think out the implications and meaning of the full spectrum of biblical teaching. It involved the community in an ongoing study of Scripture and a seeking for effective language to adequately express the understanding of truth. This was often related to some personal or community spiritual crisis. And frequently it involved the role of a "genius."<sup>7</sup>

Doctrinal development in the Adventist Church shows the same motivations and factors. The changes in Adventism may be seen first of all as arising from efforts within the community to correct a pronounced "heretical" drift toward legalism at both the practical and doctrinal level.<sup>8</sup> The clearer Understandings of justification by faith that developed around 1888 underscored this effort and led to further clarifications in doctrinal expression.

Second, development occurred in response to apologetic concerns about the effectiveness of mission and the clarity of Adventism's evangelistic witness.

Underscoring these concerns was the third factor, the desire to understand correctly the full teaching of Scripture with regard to these issues. And the process related to a community in crisis (the church faced the possibility of schism following 1888), and it involved "gifted" Adventist minds.

The details of the unfolding drama behind the profound changes form a fascinating window on history through which we can see how theological development has occurred and will probably continue to occur in the church.

## **People precipitating change**

The immediate context for the developments in Adventism involved a well-known preacher, an evangelistic campaign, the writing of a Sabbath School lesson quarterly series, a Bible conference, and a landmark publication venture by Ellen White. The events revolved around a visit to Australia in 1895-1896 by one of the church's leading thinkers. Professor W. W. Prescott at the time was education secretary for the church, and he was on his first visit overseas.

While in Melbourne he engaged in a very effective new style of evangelistic outreach. At the same time he was involved in researching and writing a year-long Sabbath School lesson study series on the Gospel of John.

Professor Prescott's theological emphasis had changed radically since 1888. Events following Minneapolis had led him into a new religious experience that centered on a "personal relationship with Christ." As a result, he

came to see the whole range of church doctrines from a quite different perspective.

As he explained to delegates at the 1919 Bible Conference years later, the change had come to him "almost like a personal revelation, like a person speaking to me." When he first "started out" in the work in the early 1880s, he had thought that "the thing to do was to prove the doctrines. ... As I had observed and heard." The preacher's task was "simply to demonstrate the truthfulness" of church teachings through careful argumentative use of proof texts.

Following his "new vision" however, he had "cast the whole thing aside and started in the simplest way presenting Christ."<sup>2</sup> Church doctrines, he now believed, should be presented as "simply the gospel of Christ rightly understood." They should "grow out of a belief in Jesus Christ as a living personal Saviour."<sup>10</sup>

This approach was not merely some sugar coating that Prescott thought was necessary to give Adventist teaching a superficial gospel flavor. Rather, it was a genuine, total reorientation of his belief structure. For him, this gospel-centeredness was a personal spiritual and theological paradigm shift, and it set the pattern for the rest of his ministry.

To lead other Adventist preachers to the same conviction and perspective became his lifelong burden. "That ye might know Him, whom to know is life eternal" (ARV), became his hallmark text of Scripture, remembered long afterwards by generations of his students.<sup>11</sup> According to *Voice of Prophecy* broadcaster H. M. S. Richards, who attended some of the professor's later ministerial institutes, Prescott's "legacy to Adventist preachers" was that "Christ must be the center of every sermon."<sup>12</sup>

But Australian Adventism in the 1890s was still untouched by the message of 1888. Prescott's new message stirred both the hearts and minds of the people.

### **The evangelistic series—"apologetics" and change**

The story of the evangelistic camp meeting in the Melbourne suburb of Armadale in late 1895 illustrates the "apologetic" motivations behind doctrinal development and highlights clearly the kind of impact produced by the new thrust in Prescott's preaching. Pitched in the center of a prominent middle-class suburb, not far from the city center, in full view of a major city railway line, the 65-tent encampment presented a striking novelty for the community.

As the meetings progressed, the regular congregation of two hundred camping church members was augmented during evenings and week-ends by an inquisitive public. Evangelist John Corliss and Ellen White shared in the preaching, but it was Prescott who dominated with his charisma. Undoubtedly, the professor's legendary, richly resonant voice attracted the ears of the Aussie "colonials," but the real attraction that drew in the crowds in ever increasing numbers was the Christ-centered content of his sermons.

Church workers were astonished at the interest, particularly in the light of the widespread prejudice against Adventists in the community. Uriah Smith's *Thoughts on Daniel and Revelation* had been widely distributed by colporteurs, and its semi-Arian teaching on the pre-existence of Christ had caused many to view Adventists as a heretical, sub-Christian sect that denied the divinity of Christ.<sup>13</sup>

These apologetic concerns led Prescott to respond by preaching sound Christian doctrine. "His theme from first to last and always is Christ," reported an enthusiastic William C. White.<sup>14</sup> Prescott even managed to turn the traditional Adventist Saturday-Sunday polemic into a remarkable gospel presentation. Prescott had preached "with a clearness and power that exceeds anything I have ever heard in my life," W. C. White reported.

The truth had been presented "with a freshness and a brightness" never seen before. White recalled that he had not even once heard Prescott preach "what we are accustomed to call a doctrinal sermon" on "the old lines."

"The old lines of work" of getting up an "interest" by "presenting the prophecies" must "be abandoned," he asserted. "The whole thing" must receive "a new setting." He longed to see "every one" of the ministers emulate Prescott in "preaching Christ and him crucified."<sup>15</sup>

Ellen White was also ecstatic over Prescott's sermons and the quality of the people—society's "very best class"—who were drawn by his "exaltation of Jesus." "Unbelievers turn pale and say, that man is inspired," she reported to her son Edson.<sup>16</sup> She saw in this Christ-centered evangelism a pattern for the whole church. Clearly Ellen White applauded Prescott's refocusing of the denomination on Jesus in this fresh new way.

"Preaching Jesus as Professor Prescott has done," added local conference president Arthur G. Daniells, "seems to have completely disarmed the people of prejudice." He felt that the public image of Adventists had been "completely revolutionized."<sup>17</sup>

But it was more than just the public image of Adventism that had been changed. Adventism itself was changing. The Armadale meetings with their demands for clearer public witness to educated, informed people helped lead to profound shifts in Adventist thinking and understanding on Christology.

A. G. Daniells, president of the World Church, was a convert to the new perspective. It was as if someone had switched the lights on for him. Under Prescott's mentorship he became a new person. His evangelistic preaching took on new power as he used the same paradigm for teaching the doctrines in his next series of meetings conducted after Prescott left.<sup>18</sup>

A quiet revolution was underway. It took a long time, however, before many others caught the same vision. Prescott in this, as in some other things, was ahead of his time.

### **A Bible institute and a Sabbath School lesson series**

Some time after the Melbourne meetings, Prescott spent three months at Cooranbong, north of Sydney, working with Mrs. White and the founders of the soon to be established Avondale College. When the start of school was delayed by legal problems, it was decided to have school for the waiting teachers. Ministers were invited as well.

Thus in April 1896, Prescott conducted a Bible institute attended by about 40 ministers and teachers. The Cooranbong Bible Institute is noteworthy not just for the charter it produced for Avondale's educational development, but also because it crystallized profound new developments emerging in Adventist theology.

Prior to his journey to Australia, the professor had been commissioned to write a four-quarter Sabbath School lesson series for 1896-1897 on the Gospel of John. He considered this to be "no small task." Thus, while en route to Sydney he took time for an intensive study of the Gospel.

After his arrival at Cooranbong, W. C. White, with whom Prescott shared the developing manuscript, was impressed. The lessons were "more appropriate" than former ones, he thought, and he urged the Battle Creek Sabbath School Association to accept them. As might be expected, the fourth Gospel provided the content for much of Prescott's preaching during this time.

One of the questions that grew out of Prescott's study of John was the pre-existence and eternal deity of Christ and the implications of this for the church's generally accepted teaching on the Godhead. Many Adventists at the time associated the doctrine of the Trinity with creedalism and other undesirable outside influences. But was that necessarily a valid linkage?

Prescott visited a secondhand bookstore shortly after first landing in Sydney in August and bought himself a copy of Augustus Neander's classic, *Lectures on the History of Christian Dogmas*. The book, now in Andrews

University Library, is extensively underlined by Prescott's editorial blue pencil. The chapters marked are those that deal with Christological controversies of the early centuries. Prescott had been rigorously trained in Greek and Latin in the United States (Dartmouth) and he now became interested at least to see how the church had, in the development of the historic church statements about Christ, grappled with problems of appropriate language in the expression of complex ideas.

In spite of the strong anticonfessional stance of many in the church, he was at least prepared to consider what the creeds had to say. The professor studied intently the specific issues of Arianism, the deity of Christ and the Trinity.

As noted above, the widespread prejudice against Adventists in the community that had been reported in Melbourne and which arose from the circulation of Uriah Smith's *Thoughts on Daniel and Revelation* bothered the professor and the ministers who studied with the new converts in their homes. They needed help. Adventism was not a sub-Christian sect. And that they should be perceived thus was unfortunate.

The Arian slant on the pre-existence of Christ was not a "test" teaching of Adventism and it no longer seemed adequate. In the light of his study of the fourth Gospel with its strong emphasis on the divinity of Christ things began to look clearer.

Prescott's three months at Cooranbong were, in effect, a research and study leave. For the previous six months he had been constantly involved in intense evangelistic work and constant counseling regarding the perplexities of church administration. He was exhausted. His return to Cooranbong was planned as a retreat. His purpose: to write out the materials he had been using in preaching, complete his Sabbath School lesson series on John, spend time with Mrs. White and, at her specific request, assist in the editorial work on her voluminous life of Christ publication project.

As a result of his continued studies in John, Prescott's preaching at the Cooranbong institute specifically emphasized the implications of the "I Am" claims of Jesus, the full eternal sonship of Christ and the need for Adventist teaching to have a clear Christological focus.

Daniells, who spoke at the evening meetings, chose to speak on the theme of the Holy Spirit.<sup>19</sup> Following the Armadale camp meeting and prior to the Cooranbong institute, the ministers in Melbourne, under Daniells's leadership, had followed up the interest stimulated by Prescott and had been studying the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in their daily workers' meeting. Daniells had also perused the secondhand bookstores and found Andrew Murray's *The Spirit of Christ*. He found the book helpful in nurturing his own personal devotional life and used it as a guide for the workers' study of Scripture on the topic.

The work and the person of the Holy Spirit were thus also being actively discussed among the ministers during this period.<sup>20</sup>

### **The publication project**

Both doctrinal themes were highly lauded by Mrs. White, who attended the institute meetings along with her secretary, Marian Davis, and her other literary helpers. W. C. White commented shortly afterwards that while the institute "was a big interruption" of Mrs. White's editorial work on the life of Christ, nevertheless it was a "grand success" and "it has been a blessing to all her household and especially her literary helpers."

Mrs. White was thankful at this time for "the best set of workers she has ever had."<sup>21</sup> As already noted, at the time her team was focused on work on the manuscript that eventually became *The Desire of Ages*. She solicited Prescott's help in critically reading her manuscript from a literary, biblical, and theological perspective. Why? Help was needed in organizing the material. And, it seems clear, it was important that the new emphasis Prescott was giving was properly presented.<sup>22</sup>

According to H. Camden Lacey, W. C. White's brother-in-law (who was one of the young Avondale teachers at the time), Marian Davis was having a hard time with the arrangement of material for the first few chapters of *The Desire of Ages*. She found the professor's help invaluable.

Prescott's assistance and emphasis brought about a clearer and more decided presentation of Christ's deity in the book, reported Lacey. "Professor Prescott's interest in the 'Eternity of the Son' and the great I AM's' coupled with the constant help he gave Sr. Davis in her preparation of the *The Desire of Ages* may serve to explain the inclusions of the above-named teachings in that wonderful book."<sup>23</sup>

Lacey had been at the Armadale meetings and in the later Melbourne meetings with Daniells. His particular responsibility had been the nurture of new believers at Armadale.<sup>24</sup> He reports that his own interest at the time had been in emphasizing "the personality of the Holy Spirit" and that this new emphasis had also been an important part of the doctrinal and theological agitations at the time.<sup>25</sup>

Lacey, connected to Mrs. White's extended family circle through marriage, was, in a sense, part of the "inner circle" as it were, and is an important witness. Lacey's aged parents had moved to Cooranbong from Tasmania to be with their children and grandchildren, and they bonded with Mrs. White and her family. Lacey's reports, although written out in the 1940s, are consistent with the primary source documentation available from the period. He does not seem to have overstated his case, nor did he see Prescott's help as undercutting Mrs. White's claim to inspiration.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

The impact of the new emphasis in *The Desire of Ages* lingered long in M. L. Andreason's mind. "I remembered how astonished we were," he wrote, "for it contained things that we considered unbelievable: among others the doctrine of the Trinity."<sup>27</sup> Andreason was apparently unaware of the extensive background to the doctrinal developments that *The Desire of Ages* reflected. Those developments did not occur in a vacuum but were motivated by a desire to better understand the teachings of Scripture, more adequately confess them, and more effectively communicate them to the world.

As Prescott left Australia in 1897 he probably did not realize how long a shadow his study and preaching would cast. The events of 1896 set a solid foundation for further development. But many decades were to pass before the church developed a common mind or anything that approached a unanimity of conviction on the eternal deity of Christ and its implications for the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>28</sup> Even as late as the 1940s Prescott was still being viciously attacked for his Trinitarian views.<sup>29</sup>

If the promise Jesus gave about the work of the Holy Spirit is true, then, as the Spirit of Truth does His work, He will continue to guide the church into deeper and broader understandings of truth (John 15:12). There will, of a certainty then, continue to be doctrinal developments.

There will continue to be new understandings unfolding on the mind of the church. Apologetics will continue to be a powerful motivation. The church will need to continue to make sure it is using the best language and the best thought forms to express and confess the full orb of truth.

Adventists as a community must continue to study the Word in its fullness, seeking to correctly understand, discarding inappropriate understandings, and searching for appropriate and meaningful language to effectively confess to the world the beauty of the truth "as it is in Jesus." As Bernhard Lohse has observed, "A faith which no longer knows how to confess, and which can no longer express this confession doctrinally will lose its vigor and become weak. For every epoch must answer anew the question which the Lord of the Church and of the world puts to it: 'Who do you say that I am?'"<sup>30</sup>

Adventism has successfully weathered earlier periods of development. Under the Spirit's leading it will surely continue successfully in this pilgrim journey to the kingdom.

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**1** Woodrow Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John W. Reeve, *The Trinity* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2002); Gerald Wheeler, *James White, Innovator and Overcomer* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2004); George Knight, *Joseph Bates: The Real founder of Seventh-day Adventism* (Washington, D.C.; Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2004); Merlin Hurt "Demise of Semi-Arianism and Anti-Trinitarianism in Adventist Theology, 1888-1957," unpublished research paper, 1996 AUHR. See also Russell Holt, "The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination: Its Rejection and Acceptance," unpublished paper, Andrews University, 1969. [[back](#)]

**2** Whidden, Moon, and Reeve, 189. Moon shows clearly how Ellen White's understanding in this particular area of doctrine developed. Her statements over the years evidence a clear progression "from the else and explicit" (196, 206, 208). [[back](#)]

**3** See *W. W. Prescott: Adventism's forgotten Giant ami Shaper of the Second Generation* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., forthcoming). [[back](#)]

**4** M. L. Andreasen, "Unpublished Chapel Talk," at Loma Linda University, November 30, 1948: "Testimony of M. L. Andreason," October, 1953. The frequently quoted statement from *The Desire of Ages* is a loose paraphrase of a sentence from John Cuming, *Sabbath Evening Readings on the New Testament: St. Iohn* (London: Arthur Hall, Virtue & Company, 1857), 6. [[back](#)]

**5** Leroy Froom (LEF) to H. Camden Lacey (HCL), August 8, 1945. [[back](#)]

**6** LEF to HCL, September 26, 1945. [[back](#)]

**7** F. Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967). [[back](#)]

**8** George Knight shows how this strand in Adventism was laid down by Joseph Bates in *Joseph Bates: The Real Founder of Seventh-day Adventism* (Washington D.C.; Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2004), 83-88. [[back](#)]

**9** "1919 Bible Conference Transcript," July 13, 1919. [[back](#)]

**10** *GC Bulletin*, February 23, 1893, 350. [[back](#)]

**11** Author's interview with former Union College student George S. Hutches, February 11, 1981. [[back](#)]

**12** H. M. S. Richards to G. M. Valentine, May 21, 1981. [[back](#)]

**13** W. C. White to O. A. Olsen, October 24, 1895. [[back](#)]

**14** W. C. White to Brethren, November 21, 1895. [[back](#)]

**15** W. C. White to S. McCulloch, November 5, 1895; W. C. White to A. J. Breed, November 22, 1895. [[back](#)]

**16** E. G. White to S. N. Haskell, November 6, 1895. [[back](#)]

**17** A. G. Daniells to O. A. Olsen, November 22, 1895. Daniells acknowledged that his own spiritual experience had in fact been turned around under the impact of Prescott's preaching and spiritual mentoring. They became lifelong friends. [[back](#)]

**18** A. G. Daniells to W. W. Prescott, March 3, 1896. [[back](#)]

- 19 "The Cooranbong Institute." *RH*, June 16, 1896, 378. [[back](#)]
- 20 A. G. Daniells to W. W. Prescott, March 3, 1896; H. Camden Lacey to A. W. Spalding, June 2, 1947. [[back](#)]
- 21 W. C. White to O. A. Olsen, May 1, 1896. [[back](#)]
- 22 This was Ellen White's pattern. She had earlier asked A. T. Jones to read manuscript for her from a biblical and theological perspective to help ensure that the expression of ideas was correct. W. C. White to C. H. Jones, May 18, 1887. [[back](#)]
- 23 H. Camden Lacey to L. E. Froom, August 30, 1947. See also W. W. Prescott to O. A. Olsen, February 10, 1896; E. G. White "Diary" February 1896 and April 1896. The *Life of Christ* manuscript was actually reworked and not published for another two years. [[back](#)]
- 24 A. G. Daniells to W. W. Prescott, March 3, 1896; H. Camden Lacey to A. W. Spalding, June 2, 1945. [[back](#)]
- 25 Interestingly, when Daniells reports to Prescott about the helpfulness of Andrew Murray's book in his Armadale workers meetings, he still refers to the Holy Spirit by the impersonal pronoun. ". . . we studied about the Holy Spirit and prayed for its indwelling presence, we felt assured that *it* came to us and truly blessed us . . ." A. G. Daniells to W. W. Prescott, March 3, 1896. The usage may simply indicate that issue of the personality of the Spirit came up in the later meetings at Cooranbong rather than in Melbourne. This latter suggestion is implied in Lacey's correspondence with Froom. L. E. Froom to H. Camden Lacey, August 8, 1945. [[back](#)]
- 26 Lacey's report to Froom was called out by a request from Froom specifically enquiring if there was any background of agitation or discussion" of any sort that was occurring in Australia at the time the much dearer statements on the eternal deity of Christ appeared in *The Desire of Ages*. L. E. Froom to H. Camden Lacey, August 8, 1947. In Lacey's response to an earlier enquiry from Arthur Spalding on the same issue, Lacey cited some of the changes Adventists had adopted in the lyrics of some of the "outstanding hymns of the Christian Church" to avoid overt references to the Trinity and the personality of the Holy Spirit (as well as some references to righteousness by faith). He was glad that the 1941 hymnal had reverted to the original wordings. The changes to the wording had bothered his Anglican church musician mother when she first became an Adventist. [[back](#)]
- 27 Unpublished chapel talk, November 30, 1948; E. G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, 530. [[back](#)]
- 28 Although *Review* editor F. M. Wilcox was able to say in a doctrinal summary in the *Review* in 1913 that Adventists believed "in the divine Trinity," his language sidestepped the issue of the eternal self-existent deity of Christ and was still sufficiently vague as to be able to include both the traditional semi-Arians and the Trinitarians. Jesus was simply "the son of the Eternal Father." But the Holy Spirit was the third "person" of the Godhead. "The Message for Today" *RH* October 9, 1913, 21. [[back](#)]
- 29 See Judson Washburn, "The Trinity," 1939. [[back](#)]
- 30 Bernhard Lohse, *A Short History of Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1985), 22. [[back](#)]

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