

THE ADVENTIST TRINITY DEBATE PART 1: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

JERRY MOON
Andrews University

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

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

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

¹Erwin R. Gane, “The Arian or Anti-Trinitarian Views Presented in Seventh-day Adventist Literature and the Ellen G. White Answer” (M.A. thesis, Andrews University, 1963).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Antitrinitarian Dominance, 1846-1888

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁴Gane, 109.

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁸Cottrell, “The Doctrine of the Trinity.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

²¹Bates, 205.

²²Gane, 104.

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

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

²⁵Gane, 105.

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

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

Fifth, the fact that Christ is called "Son of God" and "the beginning of the creation of God" (Rev 3:14) was thought to prove that he must be of more recent origin than God the Father.²⁸ Sixth, it was argued that "there are various expressions concerning the Holy Spirit which would indicate that it [*sic*] couldn't properly be considered as a person, such as its being 'shed abroad' in the heart [Rom. 5:5], and 'poured out upon all flesh' [Joel 2:28]."²⁹ These arguments, however, depended on giving a very literal interpretation to expressions that could also be seen as figures of speech. These arguments made sense within an overall antitrinitarian paradigm, but when that paradigm was called into question, these points were recognized as being capable of fitting either interpretation.

None of these is a valid objection to the basic trinitarian concept of one God in three Persons.³⁰ Yet all of them were based on biblical texts. Adventists eventually changed their view of the Godhead because they came to a different understanding of the biblical texts.

Dissatisfaction with Antitrinitarianism, 1888-1898

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

³¹Waggoner, 19.

³²Ibid., 21-22.

³³Ibid., 22-23, 25.

³⁴Ibid., 44.

³⁵Bourdeau, 707.

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

In 1898, Uriah Smith prepared *Looking Unto Jesus*, the most comprehensive and carefully nuanced exposition of the nontrinitarian view among Adventists. Smith emphatically repudiated his earlier view that Christ had been created, but still held that “God [the Father] alone is without beginning. At the earliest epoch when a beginning could be,—a period so remote that to finite minds it is essentially eternity,—appeared the Word.” Through some means not clearly revealed in Scripture, Christ had been “brought forth,” “begotten,” or “by some divine impulse or process, not creation,” Christ had been given existence by the Father. In one paragraph Smith comes surprisingly close to a trinitarian statement: “This union between the Father and the Son does not detract from either, but strengthens both. Through it, in connection with the Holy Spirit, we have all of Deity.”³⁷ But this slow struggle toward a fuller understanding was eclipsed by the bold declarations of *The Desire of Ages*, published in the same year. *Desire of Ages* produced a paradigm shift in Adventists’ perceptions of the Godhead.

Paradigm Shift, 1898-1913

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴²White, *Desire of Ages*, 669-671.

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

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

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

Decline of Antitrinitarianism, 1913-1946

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴⁸Prescott, 33.

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

⁵⁰Froom, 413-414.

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

expositors” continued to “uphold the ‘old’ view” until his death in 1968.⁵²

Trinitarian Dominance, 1946 to 1980

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

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

⁵²Burt, 54.

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

⁵⁴See note 3, above.

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

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

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

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

⁵⁹Maxwell, 119-122.

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

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

— I —

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

— II —

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

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

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

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 33.

⁶²*Ibid.*

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

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

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 2-3.

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

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

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

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

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

⁶⁸Ibid., 147.

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

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

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

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

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

That the Godhead, or Trinity, consists of the Eternal Father, a personal, spiritual Being, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, infinite in wisdom and love; the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Eternal Father, through whom all things were created and through whom the salvation of the redeemed hosts will be accomplished; the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead, the great regenerating power in the work of redemption. Matt. 28:19.⁷⁴

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

Renewed Tensions and Continuing Debate, 1980 to the Present

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 13, 21.

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

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

⁸²*Ibid.*, 150.

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

⁸⁵Ibid., 70.

⁸⁶Ibid., 151.