

A Few Reflections on the Trinity

One of the fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the doctrine of the Trinity. The book Seventh-day Adventists Believe, explains it this way: "Seventh-day Adventists believe: There is one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal Persons." (Seventh-day Adventists Believe, p. 23)

In recent years this doctrine has come under some criticism by certain groups within the church. Some have even gone so far as to say that the Seventh-day Adventist Church has become Babylon because of its teaching on the Trinity. The main argument that is used against this doctrine is that our pioneers did not believe in it because they perceived that it came into Christianity from paganism in the days of Constantine the Great.

It is an undeniable historical fact that some of our pioneers were anti-Trinitarian. Among these were some notable men including James White, Joseph Bates, J. N. Andrews and Uriah Smith. But it is true also that in the course of time the church came to realize that this doctrine is firmly based on Scripture. Perhaps an analogy will be helpful.

Most of our pioneers were opposed to church organization and adopting a denominational name. For example, on February 15, 1844 George Storrs categorically affirmed: "Take care that you do not seek to manufacture another church. No church can be organized by man's invention but what it becomes Babylon the moment it is organized." The main reason they were opposed to church organization and adopting a name was because the builders of the Tower of Babel had organized and adopted a name in rebellion against God. Thus they perceived that organizing and incorporating the church and adopting a name would be equivalent to the rebellion of the Babel builders.

In the course of time, however, after studying Scripture and following the guidance of the Spirit of Prophecy our pioneers discovered that there was organization in the New Testament church and that the original believers first called themselves Christians in Antioch. In this way they reached the conclusion that church organization was necessary and they even adopted a name: Seventh-day Adventists. The point is that they grew in their understanding and changed course upon further Bible study. Under the guidance of Ellen White they adopted our name and organized as a body even incorporating the church legally. A similar process can be seen in the adoption of the doctrine of the Trinity — with the passing of time and deeper Bible study the church grew in its understanding of the Godhead.

Ellen White has some rather categorical statements about the eternal Deity of Christ, the distinction between his human and divine natures, the personality of the Holy Spirit, and yes, the Trinity. Let's begin with her statements on the eternal Deity of Jesus.

In John 8:58 we find Jesus affirming to a startled Jewish crowd: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, before Abraham was, I am." Here Jesus was claiming to be the great I AM of the burning bush. Ellen White's comment is quite enlightening:

“Silence fell upon the vast assembly. The name of God, given to Moses to express the idea of the eternal presence, had been claimed as His own by this Galilean Rabbi. He had announced Himself to be the self-existent One, He who had been promised to Israel, "whose goings forth have been from of old, from the days of eternity." Micah 5:2, margin. The Desire of Ages, pp. 469, 470.

A few pages later in The Desire of Ages, Ellen White made another startling statement:

“In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived. "He that hath the Son hath life." 1 John 5:12. The divinity of Christ is the believer's assurance of eternal life.” The Desire of Ages, p. 530.

It is not too difficult to understand what is meant by “original, unborrowed, underived.” When Ellen White wrote these words she had gained a significant command of the English language and therefore it is inconceivable that she did not understand the dictionary meaning of these words. If Jesus received His life from anyone else, even from His Father, then it could not technically be said that it was original, unborrowed and underived.

She further categorically stated on the eternal deity of Jesus:

“Christ is the pre-existent, self-existent Son of God. . . In speaking of His pre-existence, Christ carries the mind back through dateless ages. He assures us that there never was a time when He was not in close fellowship with the eternal God. He to whose voice the Jews were then listening had been with God as one brought up with Him. Signs of the Times, August 29, 1900.

And the following statement leaves no doubt about the eternal pre-existence of Christ before He came to this earth:

“If Christ made all things, He existed before all things. The words spoken in regard to this are so decisive that no one need be left in doubt. Christ was God essentially, and in the highest sense. He was with God from all eternity, God over all, blessed forevermore. The Lord Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God, existed from eternity, a distinct person, yet one with the Father. He was the surpassing glory of heaven. He was the commander of the heavenly intelligences, and the adoring homage of the angels was received by Him as His right.” Selected Messages, volume 1, p. 247.

What did Ellen White have to say about the relationship between the human and divine natures of Christ? The answer is that she gave an explanation similar, as we shall soon see, to the affirmation at the Council of Chalcedon:

“In Christ were united the divine and the human--the Creator and the creature. The nature of God, whose law had been transgressed, and the nature of Adam, the transgressor, meet in Jesus--the Son of God, and the Son of man.” Lift Him Up, p. 345.

“In Christ, divinity and humanity were combined. Divinity was not degraded to humanity; divinity held its place, but humanity by being united to divinity withstood the fiercest test of temptation in the wilderness.” Selected Messages, volume 1, p. 408.

“Was the human nature of the Son of Mary changed into the divine nature of the Son of God? No; the two natures were mysteriously blended in one person--the man Christ Jesus. In Him dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. When Christ was crucified, it was His human nature that died. Deity did not sink and die; that would have been impossible.” Lift Him Up, p. 76.

What did Ellen White have to say about the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit? Did she believe that the Holy Spirit is merely an energy force that comes from God? Let's see.

Speaking to the students at Avondale College, Ellen White stated: “We need to realize that the Holy Spirit, who is as much a person as God is a person, is walking through these grounds.” Manuscript 66, 1899.

“The Holy Spirit is a person, for He beareth witness with our spirits that we are the children of God. When this witness is borne, it carries with it its own evidence. At such times we believe and are sure that we are the children of God. . . . The Holy Spirit has a personality, else He could not bear witness to our spirits and with our spirits that we are the children of God. He must also be a divine person, else He could not search out the secrets which lie hidden in the mind of God. "For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? Even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God." Manuscript 20, 1906.

Did Ellen White have anything to say about the Trinity?

“The eternal heavenly dignitaries--God, and Christ, and the Holy Spirit--arming them [the disciples] with more than mortal energy . . . would advance with them to the work and convince the world of sin.” Manuscript 145, 1901.

“We are to cooperate with the three highest powers in heaven--the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, --and these powers will work through us, making us workers together with God.” Special Testimonies, Series B, No. 7, p. 51.

“There are three living persons of the heavenly trio; in the name of these three great powers --the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit--those who receive Christ by living faith are baptized, and these powers will co-operate with the obedient subjects of heaven in their efforts to live the new life in Christ.” Special Testimonies, Series B, No. 7, pp. 62, 63.

“Let those who received the imprint of God by baptism heed these words, remembering that upon them the Lord has placed His signature, declaring them to be His sons and daughters. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, powers infinite and omniscient, receive those who truly enter into covenant relation with God. They are present at every baptism, to receive the candidates who have renounced the world and have received Christ into the soul temple. These candidates have entered into the family of God, and their names are inscribed in the Lamb's book of life.” God's Amazing Grace, p. 143.

Is it true that the doctrine of the Trinity is of pagan origin? Did the early church councils introduce pagan ideas into Christian theology on this subject?

It is true that there were some significant debates on the Godhead from the days of Constantine till the Council of Chalcedon (451 A. D.). Various groups within Christianity fought one another on issues such as: Was Jesus a created being, what kind of humanity did He possess, was He fully God and fully man, how did His human and divine natures relate to each other and was the Holy Spirit as much a person as the Father and the Son are persons. Several famous church councils made significant pronouncements on these issues among which the most famous were the Councils of Nicaea (325 A. D.), Constantinople (381 A. D.), Ephesus (431 A. D.) and Chalcedon (451 A. D.).

Once again I reiterate the question: Did these church councils introduce pagan heresy into the Christian church with regards to the Godhead? To answer this question, let's take the Council of Chalcedon as an example and then make a few remarks about the Council of Nicaea.

The Council of Chalcedon affirmed that Jesus was perfect in Godhead and manhood, that He was truly God and truly man, that He was consubstantial with the Father in Godhead and that He was consubstantial with us in our manhood in all things except sin. It also affirmed that the two natures of Jesus were "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation, the difference of the two natures being by no means removed because of this union, but the property of each nature being preserved."

Was the council wrong on these pronouncements? I think not! Both the Bible and Ellen White contain similar statements.

Someone might object that the same council called the Virgin Mary *Theotokos* ("the one who gave birth to God") which would appear to be heresy. But closer scrutiny reveals that this title which was given to Mary at the council has been misunderstood by both Protestants and Catholics.

It is rather obvious that the theologians who attended the council knew that Jesus, as God, pre-existed Mary. They knew that Mary was not the mother of the divine, pre-existent Christ. A careful reading of the pronouncement of the council reveals that Jesus was "begotten from the Virgin Mary, the *Theotokos*, as regards His manhood. . ." You see, the council was not saying that Mary was the mother of God in the technical sense of the phrase. The fathers of the council were no fools; they knew that no human being could give origin to God!

What, then, motivated the council fathers to refer to Mary as the *Theotokos*? A brief review of the historical circumstances will help us comprehend the reason. You see, there were heretics at that time who were teaching that Jesus was born into this world from Mary as a mere man and that at His baptism He was adopted into the divine family. Because of this heresy, the council fathers wanted to underline the fact that Mary did not bring a mere man into the world but rather one who was both God and man.

The Council of Nicaea in 325 A. D. pronounced that Jesus was begotten by his Father rather than created (as were the angels, as taught by Arius) or adopted into the divine family (as was taught by the Adoptionists and Monarchianists). Part of the Nicene Creed reads like this:

"I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made."

I believe that it is impossible for us to even begin to plumb the full implications of what it means that Jesus was begotten by the Father. This is a mystery that is enshrouded in the secret councils of God. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever . . ." Deuteronomy 29:29.

One thing we can know for certain, though, and that is that this pronouncement that was made at the Council of Nicaea is in full harmony with the Bible and also with the following quotation from the Spirit of Prophecy:

"A complete offering has been made; for "God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son,"-- not a son by creation, as were the angels, nor a son by adoption, as is the forgiven sinner, but a Son begotten in the express image of the Father's person, and in all the brightness of his majesty and glory, one equal with God in authority, dignity, and divine perfection. In him dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." Signs of the Times, May 30, 1895.

I have read the Nicene Creed carefully and I can find nothing heretical in it. In fact, it was meant as a corrective answer to various heresies that were swirling around the Christian church at that time.

Let's deal a little more extensively with the issue of paganism and its relationship to the Trinity. Is the doctrine of the Trinity polytheistic as some have hastily assumed? It goes without saying that most ancient pagan religions were polytheistic. Many of them believed in a divine father a divine mother and a supernatural Son. I think the question that begs to be asked is this: Where did the ancients get this idea from? Could it perhaps be that Satan knew that Jesus would be born of a woman as the supernatural son from a supernatural Father and therefore sought to counterfeit the event before it happened?

In Genesis 3:15 God told Satan that He was going to send a Seed to the world born of a woman and that this Seed would crush his head. I believe that the devil chose to counterfeit this idea very early in human history by creating multiple religions that have a divine father, a divine mother and a supernatural son. Are we to reject the story of Jesus simply because we have a Father figure, a mother figure and a Son figure? Did the Bible borrow the idea of a father, mother and son figure? To the contrary! Paganism, influenced by Satan who knew the prophecy of Genesis 3:15, sought to preempt the fulfillment by creating a counterfeit. You see, sometimes the counterfeit precedes the genuine.

Satan was also once in heaven and he knows that the Godhead is a Trinity. Would we expect Satan to counterfeit this doctrine and create a caricature of it? It is no coincidence that Revelation 1:4-6 depicts the Godhead as a Trinity while Satan is described in the same book as having a counterfeit trinity Revelation 16:13:

“John, to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, 6 and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

“And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs coming out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet.”

The distance between the polytheism of the pagans and the monotheism of the Biblical Trinity is as broad as the Grand Canyon. What did the pagans believe about their gods? The answer is that their gods were selfish, greedy, obnoxious, combative and hateful. There were no two who got along. They fought wars with one another in order to gain the ascendancy. Each one of them had their own agenda and sought to impose his/her will.

How different is the Biblical doctrine of the Trinity? According to the Biblical view the one God is composed of three distinct persons who worked in perfect harmony to create the universe. Then they cooperated with one another to sustain the universe and to redeem man. In the heavenly Trinity there is never any discord or strife or desire to gain the ascendancy. They are all one in power, in character and in purpose and they are all characterized by the law of loving service. The Son does the bidding of the Father and the Holy Spirit does the bidding of the Son. None of them are ever on an ego trip.

There is an indissoluble link between the Father, and the Son. When Phillip asked Jesus to show him the Father, Jesus stated: “Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?” (John 14:9, 10) Jesus also said “. . . the Father is in Me and I in Him.” (John 10:38). Jesus was saying that He and His Father were in perfect unity. On another occasion Jesus said: “I and my Father are one.” (John 10:30). Far be it to think that Jesus was saying that He and His Father were the identical person!

There is also an indissoluble link between the Son and the Holy Spirit. When Jesus went to heaven He promised to send another Comforter just like Himself. That is to say, the Son is like the Father and the Holy Spirit is like the Son. The link among the three can be seen by the fact that the Father sends the Holy Spirit in the name of the Son (John 14:26). In the heavenly economy Jesus does the bidding of the Father and the Holy Spirit does the bidding of the Son. There is no rivalry, no jealousy, no strife no demanding of rights! Regarding the role of the Holy Spirit Ellen White has explained:

“The Holy Spirit is Christ's representative, but divested of the personality of humanity, and independent thereof. Cumbered with humanity, Christ could not be in every place personally. Therefore it was for their interest that he should go to the Father, and send the Spirit to be his successor on earth. No one could then have any advantage because of his location or his personal contact with Christ. By the Spirit the Savior would be accessible to all. In this sense he would be nearer to them than if he had not ascended on high.” The Review and Herald, November 19, 1908.

Yet many wonder. How is it possible to speak of one God and still have three distinct persons? Is this not the same as saying that we believe in three Gods? Not at all!

When Jesus created Adam and Eve and married them we are told that He said that they had become one flesh (Genesis 2:24). And when Jesus came to this earth He went even further by saying that Adam and Eve were no longer two but one (Matthew 19:4-6). It is obvious that Adam and Eve were still two persons but they were to be one in the sense of having a harmonious, loving, and intimate relationship.

In His High Priestly prayer of John 17 Jesus prayed that His disciples might become one even as He and His Father were one. Was Jesus saying that He and His Father are the same person? Of course not! He was simply stating that there was unity of purpose and character between the two of them. Regarding the intimate unity between Jesus and His Father in John 17, Ellen White explained:

“The unity that exists between Christ and His disciples does not destroy the personality of either. They are one in purpose, in mind, in character, but not in person. It is thus that God and Christ are one.” The Ministry of Healing, p. 422.

So when the Old Testament says that God is one, we are not to understand this numerically but rather relationally. Theologically, one plus one plus one equals one. In this sense, perhaps it would be better to speak of the doctrine of the Tri-unity rather than the doctrine of the Trinity.

Someone might ask: What is the relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity? What difference does it make? The answer is that the existence of love demands a subject and an object, a giver and a receiver. If there ever was a time when the Father was alone, who could He have loved? As I see it, the doctrine of the Tri-unity guarantees the eternal existence of divine love. There never was a time when God was alone and therefore there was never a time when God was not love! Throughout eternity past there were always three co-eternal persons who shared an intimate and harmonious love relationship.

And this is the pattern that God would have husbands and wives and church members follow. We should all be one in love in Christ Jesus, not numerically but relationally:

“So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself.” Ephesians 5:28.

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:28.