

The 1+1+1=One God

Is this a biblical understanding of God or simply philosophical speculation?

Section one

Past theology, straw men and startling realisations

<https://www.adventistworld.org/february-2010>

The above link will take you to an article called “1+1+1=One”. It was published in the February 2010 issue of ‘Adventist World’. As the title suggests, it was written in support of the trinity doctrine – which as most Seventh-day Adventists will realise is No. 2 of our fundamental beliefs.

This article was written by Norman Gulley. He is research professor in systematic theology at Southern Adventist University. As explained at the end of the article, he is currently working on the fourth and final volume of his systematic theology published by Andrews University Press.

Significant to note is that although Gulley attempts to show the trinity doctrine to be biblical, he does not explain it in any detail. This is rather unfortunate because if it was explained – even if only as far as the basics are concerned - it would probably be viewed in a different light.

The author does say that both the Old and New Testaments speak of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit but as we shall see in the next section, this does not constitute a trinity doctrine. The latter is far more involved.

Gulley attempts to lead his readers to believe that this 1+1+1=One teaching (the trinity doctrine) is the mainstay teaching of the Christian faith. He says it is ‘The keystone of biblical theology’. In other words - Gulley is saying - this three-in-one doctrine regarding God is the foundational teaching that holds up (supports/props up etc) every other teaching of the Bible.

Early Seventh-day Adventists did not see it this way. We know this because throughout the entire 71 years of Ellen White’s ministry (1844-1915) they rejected the trinity doctrine. Very interesting is that never once did Ellen White complain of their rejection of it – neither did she object to what they were teaching concerning the relationship between God, Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Even for decades beyond the death of Ellen White, the SDA Church was still a non-trinitarian denomination. It was not until 'more recent times' that to speak of God as a trinity - as is done today in our fundamental beliefs - became anything like normative within Seventh-day Adventism.

As we shall see in section three - by 'holding on' to their non-trinitarian faith for this length of time, Seventh-day Adventists were heeding the advice that came through Ellen White. We shall see also that she did warn of wrong views concerning God and Christ that were on their way into Seventh-day Adventism.

This was in 1905 when we were still a non-trinitarian denomination. She maintained that what we were teaching then concerning God and Christ was the truth. Never did she say that what we professed in our published fundamental beliefs was error. Later in this section we shall be taking a look at these beliefs. We shall see that it was said that these fundamentals were considered to be held unanimously throughout the denomination. In other words, amongst Seventh-day Adventists, there was no major dispute concerning these beliefs.

When Ellen White gave these warnings, which was many years prior to our denominational acceptance of the trinity doctrine, we simply taught that God, as is His Son, is an individual personal being – meaning that God is a person and Christ is a person - two separate divine personalities (two distinct individual personages). We taught also that because Christ is the Son of God (begotten of God) He is God Himself in the person of His Son. Putting this in another way – it was believed by Seventh-day Adventists that because Christ is begotten of God (meaning of the Father), then in Christ we behold the Father in the person of His Son (see John 1:18, 14:8-11).

A 'straw man'

Never has the Seventh-day Adventist Church disputed the belief that Christ is divine. It has always upheld the belief that He was, in His pre-existence, fully and completely God – albeit not the Father. A quick browse of our past denominational literature, found in the Seventh-day Adventist archives, would certainly lead to this being confirmed.

In our present trinity debate, this fact tends to get obscured – particularly by the trinitarians amongst us. This is because they usually posit (put forward/submit) the idea – which is often accepted as being true by those who do not know any differently - that in our past non-trinitarianism, because we taught that Christ is truly the Son of God (begotten of God), He is not fully God (not fully divine).

It is usually maintained, by the Seventh-day Adventist trinitarians, that if it is taught that Christ is begotten of God, then this must make Him some sort of a lesser divine being than God, whilst some, in their total ignorance of what is believed by those who hold to the begotten concept, will even say that this reasoning makes Him a created being (like an angel). Thus it is erroneously maintained, by the trinitarians, that the past non-trinitarians of Seventh-day

Adventism did not believe that Christ was fully and completely divine but taught instead that He was some sort of a 'lesser God'. These trinitarians will also say the same of today's non-trinitarians.

This idea is simply a 'straw man' that some trinitarians like to set up and then take pleasure in knocking down. This they do in an attempt to make it appear that our past theology (our past non-trinitarianism) was error and that this is one of the reasons why it was necessary for trinitarianism to be brought into Seventh-day Adventism.

This reasoning is totally false. Our past literature reveals that as a denomination, even when we were non-trinitarians believing in the Sonship of Christ, we did not regard Christ as any less God than the Father. Those who say that we did regard Christ as less than God are misrepresenting the facts of our past theology.

The Seventh-day Adventist non-trinitarians believed that because the Son was 'brought forth' of the Father, He is God Himself begotten (John 1:18, Proverbs 8:22-31, John 3:16, 8:58, 9:35-37, 16:28, 17:8). This is why it is said that Christ is God Himself in the person of His Son (Hebrews 1:1-3, 8). In fact Jesus Himself said that His church would be built upon the belief that He is the Son of God (Matthew 16:13-18).

It can only be said that to deny that Christ is truly the Son of God is to deny His true identity. The very fact that He is begotten of the Father is also enough to tell us that He is fully God.

Past theology concerning Christ

By our past non-trinitarian members, even by our very early pioneers, Christ was said to be both God and equal with God – which as you will appreciate is in perfect accord with what the Bible reveals (John 1:1, Colossians 2:9, Philippians 2:6, Hebrews 1:3, 8).

In 1863, Joseph Waggoner (the father of Ellet Waggoner) wrote

"The divinity and pre-existence of our Saviour are most clearly proved by those scriptures which refer to him as "the Word." (J. H. Waggoner, Review and Herald, October 27th 1863 'The Atonement')

He then said

"In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made." Jno. i, 1-3. This expresses plainly a pre-existent divinity." (Ibid)

Note the year. It was 1863 – only 19 years after the great disappointment of

1844. This shows that even in our 'very early' years we taught that Christ is fully God. This was never in question in Seventh-day Adventism.

Five years later in the Review and Herald (July 1868), there was an answer given to a question asked by someone referred to simply as "A. S.". This person had wanted to make sure that as a denomination we did not deny the divinity of Christ. The reply to the questioner said

"To A. S. You are correct in saying we do not deny the divinity of Christ. If those who assert such a thing are acquainted with our faith they know better; if they do not know they are guilty of speaking evil of the things they know not" (*Review and Herald, July 14th 1868*)

These are very strong words. It may well have been that someone had suggested to "A. S" that because Seventh-day Adventists were not trinitarian we did not believe in the divinity of Christ. If this did happen, it would have been a normative trinitarian suggestion.

It is said here that anyone knowing anything about Seventh-day Adventism knew we believed that Christ is divine. As has been said previously, Christ's divinity was not an issue within Seventh-day Adventism.

In 1877, just 4 years before he died, James White, the husband of Ellen White wrote (please note the title of the article)

"The inexplicable Trinity that makes the Godhead three in one and one in three, is bad enough; but that ultra Unitarianism that makes Christ inferior to the Father is worse. Did God say to an inferior, "Let us make man in our image?" (*James White, Review and Herald, November 29th 1877, 'Christ Equal with God'*)

It is quite apparent that James White, although an ardent non-trinitarian, did not believe that Christ is any less God than the Father. He maintained that Christ was equal with God – which is in agreement with Scripture (John 1:1, Philippians 2:6). Note too that James White realised that the word 'Godhead' does not have the same meaning as 'trinity'.

In a later expanded version of his 'The Atonement' article (see above), J. H. Waggoner wrote in 1884 (this was after saying that many theologians believe the dignity and efficacy of the atonement rests upon the trinity doctrine but that this was not believed by Seventh-day Adventists)

"They [the trinitarian theologians] take the denial of a trinity to be equivalent to a denial of the divinity of Christ. Were that the case, we should cling to the doctrine of a trinity as tenaciously as any can; but it is not the case." (*J. H. Waggoner, 'The Atonement in Light of Nature and Revelation', 1884 Edition, chapter 'Doctrine of a Trinity Subversive of the Atonement'*)

In one form or another, Waggoner's publication had five different printings spread over 21 years (1863-1884). This shows how highly this work was regarded in Seventh-day Adventism.

Like the other early Seventh-day Adventists, Waggoner did not believe that rejecting the trinity doctrine was the same as rejecting the divinity of Christ. Again please take note of the chapter title. He then added

“They who have read our remarks on the death of the Son of God know that we firmly believe in the divinity of Christ; but we cannot accept the idea of a trinity, as it is held by Trinitarians, without giving up our claim on the dignity of the sacrifice made for our redemption.” (*Ibid*)

Again Waggoner confirmed that Seventh-day Adventists believed that Christ was divine. He also maintained that the trinity doctrine denied “the dignity of the sacrifice made for our redemption” - hence the chapter title. This is very important. We shall return to this thought in section two.

Like the vast majority of Seventh-day Adventists living at that time (perhaps even all of them), Waggoner did not regard it necessary to believe in the trinity doctrine to believe that Christ is divine. Christ's divinity is proven by Scripture - not by the trinity doctrine

In the early literature of Seventh-Adventists, more quotes can be found saying much the same thing (a denial of the trinity doctrine but a belief in the divinity of Christ) but perhaps in summary of them all, the following from Russell Holt will suffice.

Holt wrote this statement in a term paper he produced in 1969 for Dr. C. Mervyn Maxwell. The paper dealt with the history of the rejection and acceptance of the trinity doctrine within Seventh-day Adventism.

After quoting from James White, Holt summarised regarding the beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists up to 1881 - which was the year that James White died.

“A survey of other Adventist writers during these years reveals, that to a man, they rejected the trinity, yet, with equal unanimity they upheld the divinity of Christ.” (*Russell Holt, “The doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination: Its rejection and acceptance”, A term paper for Dr. C. Mervyn Maxwell, June 2nd 1969*)

Take note that this was up to 1881 – which was 7 years before the famous Minneapolis Conference (1888). Holt then said of the beliefs of our early pioneers

“To reject the trinity is not necessarily to strip the Saviour of His divinity. Indeed, certain Adventist writers felt that it was the trinitarians who filled the

role of degrading Christ's divine nature." (*Ibid*)

It was the doctrine of the trinity that the early Seventh-day Adventists rejected not the divinity of Christ. To express the divinity of Christ correctly does not necessitate a confession of the trinity doctrine. This is very important to remember.

Later reasoning

In his book 'Christ and His Righteousness' (1890) - which is said to be representative of his message at the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference session – Ellet J. Waggoner, the son of Joseph Waggoner, expounded what was then the faith of Seventh-day Adventists regarding the divinity of Christ. On page 8 of his book he said of Christ

“He must receive the same honor that is due to God and for the reason that He is God. The beloved disciple bears this witness, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John 1:1. That this Divine Word is none other than Jesus Christ is shown by verse 14: "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the Only-begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth." (*E. J. Waggoner, Christ and His Righteousness, page 8*)

He also wrote referring to John 1:18 (this was after quoting John 1:1, 14 and saying that Christ is God manifest in the flesh)

“Note the expression, "the only-begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father." He has His abode there, and He is there as a part of the Godhead, as surely when on earth as when in heaven. The use of the present tense implies continued existence. It presents the same idea that is contained in the statement of Jesus to the Jews (John 8:58), "Before Abraham was, I am." And this again shows His identity with the One who appeared to Moses in the burning bush, who declared His name to be "I AM THAT I AM." (*Ibid, page 15*)

There is no mistaking that early Seventh-day Adventists maintained the belief that Christ is truly and fully God. This is even though they were not trinitarians. Obviously there may have been the 'odd one or two' who believed differently than the majority (every denomination has these) but the denominational faith of Seventh-day Adventists was that Christ is God Himself in the person of the Son. Waggoner later wrote

“Christ “is in the bosom of the Father;” being by nature the very substance of God and having life in Himself, He is properly called Jehovah, the self existing one and is thus styled in Jer. 23:56, where it is said that the righteous Branch, who shall execute judgment and justice in the earth, shall be known by the name of Jehovah-tsidekenu -- THE LORD, OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.” (*Ibid, pages 23-24*)

As can clearly be seen here, Ellet Waggoner said that Christ is fully God. This was the very basis of his message at Minneapolis. It was also then the denominational faith of Seventh-day Adventists. Neither Waggoner nor the Seventh-day Adventist Church was then trinitarian.

The year previous to when the latter book was published, Ellet Waggoner wrote a series of articles in the 'Signs of the Times' called 'The Divinity of Christ'.

Waggoner wrote these articles – which were spread over six issues of the Signs of the Times - because we were asked by the Methodists to review a book they had published. It had been written to show that the beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists were error – particularly the Sabbath. Unfortunately, in the preface to this book, it stated that we denied the divinity of Christ. It was this erroneous allegation that Waggoner chose to address in these articles. Near the very beginning of the article Waggoner wrote

“But when the doctor states that Seventh-day Adventists deny the divinity of Christ, we know that he writes recklessly.” (E. J. Waggoner. Signs of the Times, March 25th 1889, article ‘The Divinity of Christ’)

Apart from writing “recklessly”, Waggoner also made it clear that it was realised that the author knew differently than what he was alleging. Waggoner continued

*“We are fully persuaded in our own mind that he [Briggs] knows better; but be that as it may, the statement has been made so often by men who professed to know whereof they were speaking, that many have come to believe it; and for their sakes, as well as for the benefit of those who may not have given the subject any thought, we purpose to set forth the truth.”
(Ibid)*

Notice first of all that this claim we did not believe in the divinity of Christ was made “often” – and that because of this, many had come to believe it to be true. This is the way error is often believed to be true. It is by repeatedly stressing it. As it is said – say something enough times and people will begin to believe it – even if it is not true. Note also that this misrepresentation of our beliefs was made by those who made a profession of ‘knowing what they were talking about’ – which obviously was not true.

As Waggoner said, it is very sad that many had come to believe this error. Again it can only be said that this misunderstanding was probably due to the fact that we were not trinitarians. Needless to say, those making the allegations – and those believing them to be true - had not taken the time to find out what we really did believe. This is the really sad part.

The same could probably be said today of many of the trinitarians who say that Seventh-day Adventist non-trinitarians do not believe in the full and complete divinity of Christ. Unfortunately, this is a lie which has been perpetuated by some

to discredit the non-trinitarians – and many believe it.

Whilst space here does not permit quoting everything that Waggoner wrote in defending our denominational belief that Christ was fully God (remember that his defence of our beliefs was spread over six issues of the Signs of the Times), this one statement summarises it perfectly. He said

“We believe in the divinity of Christ, because the Bible says that Christ is God.” (Ibid)

This is just about as plain and simple as it gets.

Even when we were non-trinitarian, we did not deny the divinity of Christ. This accusation really is a ‘straw man’ – usually set up by people who ought to know better – and who often profess to know of what they are speaking.

For more details regarding the beliefs of the past non-trinitarian Seventh-day Adventists concerning Christ, also how it was sometimes misunderstood that we did not believe that He was fully divine - please see here (period 1890-1899)

[Development of SDA theology_part_2](#)

This includes when Waggoner defended the faith of Seventh-day Adventists against the allegations found in the previously mentioned Methodist book.

Regarding the Holy Spirit

Through the leading of Ellen White, Seventh-day Adventists came to believe that the Holy Spirit is a personality (which was once disputed in Seventh-day Adventism) but even so, this realisation still did not lead them to believe that God is a trinity – at least not as depicted by the trinity doctrine (1+1+1=1). They simply believed, as do the non-trinitarians amongst us today, that there are three personalities of the Godhead – which is saying something entirely different. We shall return to this thought later.

As far as the Holy Spirit is concerned, Ellen White wrote in 1911 (please note the emphasis)

“It is not essential for us to be able to define just what the Holy Spirit is. Christ tells us that the Spirit is the Comforter, “the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father.” John 15:26, 16:13” (Ellen G. White, ‘Acts of the Apostles’ pages 51-52, 1911)

Ellen White did not say that we do not know WHO the Holy Spirit is. She says we cannot define “just what” He is. This is saying two entirely different things. Along with her fellow Seventh-day Adventists, she believed that the Holy Spirit is both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ.

Note here also from whom Jesus said the Holy Spirit proceeds. He said the Holy Spirit (the Comforter) proceeds “from the Father”. This is one of the reasons why early Seventh-day Adventists believed that the Holy Spirit, as well as being Christ omnipresent, was also the Father omnipresent (see John 14:18, 23). Ellen White also added

“The nature of the Holy Spirit is a mystery. Men cannot explain it, because the Lord has not revealed it to them. Men having fanciful views may bring together passages of Scripture and put a human construction on them, but the acceptance of these views will not strengthen the church.” (*Ibid*)

The latter sentence is well worth reading again. Her conclusion was

“Regarding such mysteries, which are too deep for human understanding, silence is golden.” (*Ibid*)

During the time of Ellen White’s ministry, Seventh-day Adventists did not regard the Holy Spirit to be a person exactly like the Father and the Son. This was even though they came to believe He is a personality. They believed instead, as was said here by Ellen White, that His nature was a divine mystery (something that could not be understood by humanity). They did though, in accordance with what is revealed in Scripture, regard Him as the personal presence of both the Father and the Son when they - the Father and the Son - were both bodily in Heaven.

This is in keeping with how the Holy Spirit is portrayed in the Scriptures (see John 14:18, 23, Romans 8:9-11, John 17:23, also Matthew 18:19-20, John 20:22, 1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19. 1 John 1:3 and 2 John 3, 9). As I am sure you will agree, this Scriptural understanding of the Holy Spirit (being *both* the Father and the Son omnipresent) does not lend itself to readily believing that He is a person exactly like the Father and the Son. As was said by Ellen White, His nature is an unexplainable mystery.

Even in their earlier days, before it was generally accepted that He is a personality, it was a prevalent belief within Seventh-day Adventism that in some mysterious way, the Holy Spirit is the presence of both God and Christ (the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ together – see Romans 8:9). This is probably one of the main reasons why our early members found it very difficult to imagine Him as a person.

In brief, also in summary of what has been said above, whilst these early Seventh-day Adventists believed in the three personalities of the Godhead (meaning that they believed each of the three is fully divine), God was not regarded as a trinity – at least not as expressed by the trinity doctrine.

Seventh-day Adventism today

Today it is very much different within Seventh-day Adventism. Today, as Gulley says in his article, we teach that the ‘one God’ is the trinity three-in-one God (the

1+1+1=One God). In other words, as a denomination, we have changed our beliefs from what they were when Ellen White was alive.

This is why George Knight - now professor emeritus of church history at Andrews University – in 1993 wrote

“Most of the founders of Seventh-day Adventism would not be able to join the church today if they had to subscribe to the denomination's Fundamental Beliefs.” (George Knight, *‘Ministry’ magazine, October 1993, page 10, ‘Adventists and Change’*)

In this ‘Ministry’ article, George Knight was attempting to explain the reason why, since the death of Ellen White, the Seventh-day Adventist Church had changed its beliefs. As I am sure you will agree, this is a most startling realisation – and he did add

“More specifically, most would not be able to agree to belief Number 2, which deals with the doctrine of the Trinity.” (*Ibid*)

This is very plain speaking. It is saying that because of the introduction of the trinity doctrine into the beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the majority of our founding members would today be prohibited from becoming members of the denomination which they founded. This reveals how much, over the years, our beliefs have changed.

On the basis of my personal studies, I have drawn the conclusion that George Knight’s statement is very much of an understatement.

I would say that the vast majority of Seventh-day Adventists who lived prior to the 1930’s/1940’s would not accept what we teach today regarding Christ or the Holy Spirit, neither would they accept our three-in-one teaching regarding God (fundamental belief No. 2). This would mean that all of these hundred’s of thousands of our past loyal members would today be prohibited from joining the Seventh-day Adventist Church (as George Knight admits here concerning our pioneers). On the other hand, it is quite possible that because of these changed beliefs, especially our adoption of the trinity doctrine, these past members would not wish to join it. They would probably say we have returned to the teachings of Babylon.

So what is this fundamental belief No. 2 that George Knight said all these Seventh-day Adventists would not accept? It must be a very recent arrival – and it must be controversial. It says

“There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal Persons”. (*Seventh-day Adventists Believe ... A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines, page 16*)

This belief, as it is detailed here, was first voted in as part of our fundamental beliefs at the 1980 General Conference session held at Dallas, Texas. This definitely makes it a very 'recent arrival'.

Please note very carefully the "unity" part of this belief. It is very important. It is this that makes it a trinity doctrine.

Without this unity belief (the oneness) it could only be said, as it does in Scripture – also as was professed by our past non-trinitarian Seventh-day Adventists - that there are three persons of the Godhead. To put this in another way (and this may be a surprise to some), simply making a profession of a belief in the three persons of the Godhead is not making a profession of the trinity doctrine. This is why those early Seventh-day Adventists, even though they eventually came to believe that there are three divine persons, were not trinitarian. It is also why today they would not be allowed to become Seventh-day Adventists – even if they wished to do so.

This must be a startling realisation. It shows that what we profess today, in our fundamental beliefs, is not an expansion (a further understanding) of what we once believed but a rejection of it. In other words - the trinitarians are saying today – what we taught concerning God, Christ and the Holy Spirit whilst Ellen White was alive is error. This is why it is now rejected. The latter is what Seventh-day Adventists today are being asked to believe.

Note also that as described in the current No.2 of our fundamental beliefs, this "one God" is not referring to the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit. The beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists concerning these three personalities are detailed in fundamental beliefs No. 3, No. 4 and No. 5 respectively. This "one God" belief (No. 2) is referring to the trinity God – meaning the 1+1+1=One God.

We need to ask here, if in our fundamental beliefs we only listed what we believe concerning the Father (belief No. 3), also what we believe concerning the Son (belief No. 4), also what we believe concerning the Holy Spirit (belief No. 5) – therefore omitting belief No. 2 referring to God as a trinity - would we be 'losing something' by it? To put this in another way, just by speaking of the three personalities of the Godhead - as do the Scriptures, also as did those early non-trinitarian Seventh-day Adventists – would we be unfaithful to what God has revealed?

The answer to this is a definite 'no'. This is because if we go any further than this and say that the three are *indivisibly united* as the "one God" - as stated in our fundamental belief No. 2 (remember the 'unity/oneness') - then we go beyond what God has revealed. This would mean we would find ourselves in the realms of speculation (outside of divine revelation).

This same No. 2 fundamental belief then further describes this unity (trinity) "one God" by explaining

“God is immortal, all-powerful, all-knowing, above all, and ever present. He is infinite and beyond human comprehension, yet known through His self-revelation. He is forever worthy of worship, adoration, and service by the whole creation” (*Ibid*)

I would ask you here to note the use of the personal pronouns ‘He’ and ‘His’. This denotes a personal being yet this ‘He’ is said to comprise of the three persons of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This would be the same as saying ‘three persons in one person’ – which leaves us to wonder just what this three-in-one God looks like. Very often, trinitarians will say that the three are not really ‘persons’ as we think of a person but add that this is probably the best word we have to describe them.

Please remember that this belief is not speaking of the Father – which is belief No. 3, neither is it speaking of the Son or the Holy Spirit (beliefs No. 4 and No. 5). It is speaking of the ‘unity three-in-one God’ - the “one God” of the No.2 fundamental belief of Seventh-day Adventists.

We shall see in section three that this ‘personal pronoun use’ was commented on at the 1980 General Conference session. This was when it was being discussed how our beliefs concerning the three personalities of the Godhead should be expressed.

Past fundamental beliefs

Prior to the doctrine of the trinity being voted in at the 1980 General Conference session, the word ‘trinity’ was used in our published fundamental beliefs but not in the sense it is used today.

Our published beliefs had said previously (this was compiled in 1931 and included in our yearbook but was never voted upon at a General Conference session)

“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.” (*1931 Yearbook, ‘Fundamental beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists’, page 377*)

Some may say that here we were professing the trinity doctrine but this is far from being true. All that is being said here is that there are three persons of the Godhead – not that they are united together as ‘one God’ (1+1+1=1).

The word ‘trinity’ was only used here as an alternative word for ‘Godhead’ but the truth of the matter is that these two words are not synonymous. It must also be said that as we do in our fundamental beliefs regarding the 1+1+1=1 God, no

one would ever refer to the Godhead as 'He'. Even in this small matter it shows that the 1931 and the 1980 statements are totally different to each other.

It is very important to realise that the word 'Godhead' does not contain any three-in-one connotation. In fact it is not really a true translation of the Greek words found in the extant manuscripts (for its usage in the KJV see Acts 17:29, Romans 1:20 and Colossians 2:9) although it is very understandable why it was used. This recognition of the word 'Godhead' not being an accurate translation was noted at the 1980 GC session. This we shall see in section three.

The two words 'trinity' and 'Godhead' have two entirely different meanings. Many modern translations of the Bible do not use the word 'Godhead' but instead use something like, 'divinity', deity' or 'divine nature'. Never could the Greek be translated as 'trinity'. This is why to use the phrase "Godhead, or Trinity", as in the above statement of beliefs, is very misleading.

In reality there is a world of difference between this 1931 statement of beliefs and our present fundamental beliefs – although the introduction of the word 'trinity' was a major step in changing our beliefs to what they are today. This is why, as we shall see in section three, there was a vibrant discussion of this at the 1980 General Conference session.

At the 1980 General Conference session, the belief eventually 'voted in' was not a modification of our past held beliefs but a change of them. Instead of the Father being the 'One God', it was now the trinity (1+1+1=1) God that took this place of honour. In other words, instead of the 'three persons of the Godhead' it was now three persons in the one indivisible triune God. This is the belief that could never be accepted by our pioneers. This is why they were non-trinitarian.

Whilst Ellen White was alive

Interesting is how this 1931 statement of fundamental beliefs differed from how our beliefs were expressed whilst Ellen White was alive. In our 1905 yearbook – this was under the heading of 'Fundamental Principles of Seventh-day Adventists' - it said

*"Seventh-day Adventists have no creed but the Bible; but they hold to certain well-defined points of faith, for which they feel prepared to give a reason "to every man that asketh" them. The following propositions may be taken as a summary of the principal features of their religious faith, upon which there is, so far as is known, entire unanimity throughout the body."
(1905 Seventh-day Adventist yearbook, 'Fundamental Principles of Seventh-day Adventists', page 188)*

Note here the underscored. It is very important. This is saying that what was to follow was the "principal features" of the 1905 faith of Seventh-day Adventists - which at that time were regarded as being held **unanimously** throughout the entire denomination. What followed therefore, putting it very simply, was the

1905 denominational faith of Seventh-day Adventists. This was the faith that in section three we shall see that Seventh-day Adventists were told to 'hold on to' by Ellen White.

So what was this 'faith'? Fundamental belief No.1 stated

"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 every where present by his representative, the Holy Spirit. Ps. 139: 7." (*Ibid*)

Note particularly the underscored. This was followed by belief No.2 which said

"That there is one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Eternal Father, the one by whom he created all thing's, and by whom they do consist;" (*Ibid*)

There is no mention in this statement of God being a trinity - also, apart from what is mentioned in belief No 1, there is no definitive statement regarding the Holy Spirit. This was even though by that time, the Holy Spirit would have been recognized by many as a personality.

This strongly suggests that even by then (1905), the Holy Spirit was not regarded denominationally as a person like God and Christ. Interesting is that these beliefs, as listed here in this 1905 yearbook, remained in our yearbooks right through to 1914 – which was the year before Ellen White died. The year she died (1915), through until 1931 when the word 'trinity' was used for the first time, these beliefs were not listed.

As far as I know, the reason for this has never been disclosed although some have suggested it was because there was discord amongst the brethren regarding these beliefs. As we noted above, when Ellen White was alive, it was said regarding them that there was "entire unanimity throughout the body". I cannot imagine this situation changing very quickly. This would take decades to change.

In the above principles of faith, God, as is His Son, is said to be a personal being. It was also when the "one God" was said to be the Father. This was when the belief was also that Christ is truly the Son of God (begotten of God) therefore He is God Himself in the person of His Son. The Holy Spirit was said to be both the Father and the Son omnipresent when the latter two were not physically present.

As expressed above, this was once the denominational faith of Seventh-day Adventists. This was as it was held throughout the entire time of Ellen White's ministry – also for decades beyond her death.

In section two we shall be taking a look at the trinity doctrine itself – meaning

how it is expressed today within Seventh-day Adventism. We shall see also that Ellen White condemned illustrations that made God appear to be three-in-one. We shall also see what the Bible has to say about the 'one God'.

Section two

The trinity doctrine explained – also Ellen White condemns three-in-one illustrations of God

In the previous section we took note of the past non-trinitarian beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists. These were held whilst Ellen White was alive and obviously before the trinity doctrine was 'voted in' as one of our fundamental beliefs. The very first time the trinity doctrine was 'voted into' our fundamental beliefs was in 1980. This was at the General Conference session held at Dallas, Texas.

In the next section we shall be taking a look at the discussions that took place at that conference – at least the ones regarding the trinity doctrine. I am sure you will find them very interesting.

In the section you are now reading, we shall be taking a look at the trinity doctrine itself – also a testimony in which Ellen White condemned trinity illustrations of God. We shall also see what the Bible says about the 'one God'.

The trinity doctrine

So what is the trinity doctrine exactly – as accepted and understood by Seventh-day Adventists?

This was recently explained by Ekkehardt Mueller – Associate Director of the Seventh-day Adventist Biblical Research Institute – who for the previous 6 years had been editor of the institute's newsletter. It was in this newsletter, which is only available to such as pastors, theologians and administrators of the church, that Mueller published this explanation.

On some points the trinity doctrine held by the Seventh-day Adventist Church differs from orthodoxy but regarding the basic premise – meaning that the One God is three persons in one (or as Norman Gulley says - $1+1+1=One$) - it is exactly the same.

Mueller's explanation of God is that which Seventh-day Adventist ministers are expected to believe for themselves – also teach the members of their various congregations – so don't be surprised if this is believed and taught by your local Seventh-day Adventist minister.

It will be seen in the next section that Mueller's explanation of the trinity doctrine is the same as the basics of the Athanasian Creed. This is the creed upon which the entirety of the Roman Catholic faith is built.

This creed says that anyone not believing that God is a trinity will not be saved. Hopefully, present-day Seventh-day Adventist ministers are not saying this about our version of the trinity doctrine – meaning that if our version is not believed a person will not be saved. If this is happening it would be a very sad for Seventh-day Adventism.

In the Athanasian Creed (the Roman Catholic Creed) it says that the ‘one God’ is three divine personalities in one indivisible substance or essence. This is now the ‘official faith’ of Seventh-day Adventists. Mueller wrote

“There is only one God (Deut. 6:4), however, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all called God (Matthew 27:46, John 20:28: Acts 5:3-4). Consequently, we do not worship three Gods, but one God who reveals Himself in and consists of three “persons”.”(Ekkehardt Mueller, *Biblical Research Institute, Reflections newsletter, July 2008, Page 9, ‘Scripture Applied, - A Bible Study’*)

He concluded

“The three persons share one indivisible nature.” (*Ibid*)

It is this “one indivisible nature” part of the teaching which is problematic. This is because it is maintained that this constitutes the ‘one God’ (1+1+1=1).

Where in the Scriptures does it say such a thing? As you are probably aware, it cannot be found. It is simply an assumption based on human logic. Please note that this ‘one nature’, or as it is sometimes called ‘one substance’ or ‘one essence’, is said to be “indivisible”. This accentuates the problem. This is because it is interpreted as meaning – by those who are trinitarian – that none of the personages in this substance can change or cease to exist. This is the One God.

It is quite possible that one day we shall realise that in this ‘oneness teaching’ there is a certain amount of truth but the way that this is interpreted by trinitarians is not sustainable by Scripture. It must also be said that as far as the gospel is concerned, the implications of their interpretation of it are horrendous. Allow me to explain.

Trinity implications

Many do not realize it – even some who profess to be trinitarians - but the trinity doctrine teaches that the pre-existent divine Son of God did not die at Calvary. It teaches instead that only human nature died - which at the best provides only a human sacrifice as atonement. This is why I believe most trinitarians will maintain that Jesus had a perfect human nature. They realise that if this is not said, then they only have an imperfect sacrifice.

Ever since the death of Jesus, it has always been the intention of Satan to

pervert what Christ achieved in His incarnation (meaning in our Saviour's life and death). Obviously the adversary can do nothing about that which Christ actually achieved, so in various ways he has attempted to do the next best thing – which is to pervert our understanding of it.

Since the death and resurrection of Jesus, one of the main aims of Satan has been to promote the belief that the divine person of Christ did not actually die at Calvary. In attempting to reach this goal – particularly by reason of the trinity doctrine – he has had great success. In other words, through the trinity doctrine, Satan has managed to pervert what God, through the death of His Son, actually accomplished at Calvary (if you remember – we noted in section one that this was one of the reasons why J. H. Waggoner was so much against the trinity doctrine. He said it was subversive of the atonement).

Satan also aims to pervert how much it cost God in sacrificing His Son. If only human nature suffered and died, as the trinity doctrine teaches, then the divine Christ remained untouched (unscathed/unharmed/unaffected).

The trinity doctrine also teaches that in becoming incarnate, no risk was taken regarding the divine Son of God. This is because according to trinitarianism, the pre-existent Son of God (or the Second Person of the Godhead as the trinitarian Seventh-day Adventists now like to call Him) is always an integral part of the one God's "one indivisible nature" (the one indivisible substance/essence of God) - the latter being the $1+1+1=1$ God who cannot possibly cease to exist or even change. The divine Son of God therefore is said to be immutable (unchangeable).

In other words, whatever the circumstances, the pre-existent Son of God is always alive (has His existence) in the one indivisible substance of God. This is why trinitarians will say that even when Christ was here 'on earth' He was also 'on high' with His Father.

To put it another way again, trinitarians will say that the Son of God is always at His Father's side. This is why they say He never really died at Calvary. It is also why they say that even if He had sinned, which trinitarian Seventh-day Adventists still seem to maintain could have happened (which is not generally accepted by orthodox trinitarians), He would not personally have suffered the consequences. In other words, according to the trinitarians amongst us, even if Christ had sinned, He would still have maintained His existence in the 'one being' of the three-in-one ($1+1+1=1$) God.

A denial of the Sonship of Christ

In their explanation of the 'One God' being a trinity, the Seventh-day Adventist Church denies that there really is a divine father and a divine son – which according to the Scriptures is the epitome of false teaching. I say this because according to the Word of God, a denial of both the Father and the Son is antichrist (see 1 John 2:22-24). Notice that John says nothing here about

denying the Holy Spirit.

The Scriptures tell us that the Father Himself addressed Christ as His Son (Matthew 3:17, 17:5). They also tell us that Jesus categorically stated that He was the Son of God (John 9:35-37, 10:36). The Jews knew exactly what Jesus was saying. They said that in making this claim to Sonship He was making Himself equal with God (John 5:18). At one point they even said that He was making Himself God (John 10:33).

Christ's claim to divine Sonship is why He was said to be worthy of death (John 19:7). The Jews obviously knew that He was not making reference to His birth at Bethlehem but rather to His divine Sonship with the Father.

Even the demons acknowledged Jesus as the Son of God (Matthew 8:29, Mark 3:11, 5:7 and Luke 4:41). These demons are considered the fallen angels (2 Peter 2:4, Jude 6). They are depicted as 'possessing' (controlling) people. Like Satan, they knew Christ prior to the incarnation (before He became flesh).

An inseparable threesome

Ekkehardt Mueller also wrote (remember this newsletter is addressed to pastors, theologians and administrators etc so expect your local minister to agree with what Mueller says)

“Each person of the Godhead is by nature and essence God, and the fullness of the deity dwells in each of them. On the other hand, each person of the Godhead is inseparably connected to the other two.” (*Ibid*)

Again this is typical trinity reasoning but there is no evidence of this in Scripture. It is only an assumption based on the also assumed 'one substance' (one nature/essence) reasoning. Needless to say, if the assumption is error, then any belief that rests upon that assumption is also likely to be error. Nothing can be trusted which is based upon an assumption.

This 'inseparableness' theory is that which prohibits the belief that in becoming incarnate there was a risk involved regarding the existence of the pre-existent Son of God. Mueller says that the Son is “**inseparably connected to the other two**” - meaning inseparably united to the Father and the Holy Spirit. This is depicting them as something like conjoined triplets. If your local minister confesses allegiance to the trinity doctrine, then what Mueller said here is what he will believe and teach. Whether you believe this is entirely up to you. Mueller concluded regarding what he had said

“This concept of God surpasses our experiences and our intellect.” (*Ibid*)

It certainly does. It also surpasses (exceeds) everything that through the Scriptures God has revealed. It is simply philosophical speculation – an unnecessary attempt to 'delve into' something which God has chosen to keep

secret. We must never speculate concerning the things that God has chosen not to disclose (Deuteronomy 29:29). This will very often amount to the production of error.

According to the Word of God, Mueller's speculative reasoning is error. This is because the Scriptures clearly teach that if Christ had sinned – which they reveal was possible (see Hebrews 2:16-17, 4:14-15) - then like Adam He would have forfeited (lost) His eternal existence (Ezekiel 18:4, 20). He cannot therefore be “[inseparably connected](#)” to the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Christ was the ‘last Adam’ (1 Corinthians 15:45). This means that the very same divine wrath that came upon Adam (when he sinned) would have come upon Christ (if He had sinned). This would not only have come upon His human nature (as Seventh-day Adventist theology seems to teach) but upon the divine Son of God Himself. If this had not been the outcome (if Christ had sinned) then Christ becoming incarnate was only a ‘theatrical farce’.

It would also make God to be inconsistent – meaning He would have one rule for us and another for His Own – which would make Him a ‘respector of persons’ – which Peter said He was not (see Acts 10:34).

The trinitarians - even those who believe that Christ could have sinned - would deny that this ‘risk factor’ was even possible. They say that because He is part of the divine trinity (the 1+1+1=1 God), it is impossible for the divine Christ to cease to exist.

Having said this, it must also be said that a great deal of people - especially the non-trinitarians amongst us, might agree in one sense with Mueller's reasoning (you may like to read the last part again). This is because this type of ‘three-in-one God’ (the 1+1+1=1 God) is very difficult to imagine – particularly as a personal being. In fact how could this ‘triune God’ be described as a personal being at all? He would be more like a nonentity – a nothingness. This is obviously why so many trinitarian denominations teach that God does not have a physical form (body and parts) – which as we know is contrary to Scripture (see Genesis 1:26, Exodus 33:21-23, Matthew 18:10, John 5:37 etc).

Ellen White condemns three-in-one speculation

You are probably aware that nowhere in Scripture is God spoken of as explained by Ekkehardt Mueller - meaning as three-in-one (a trinity). Neither is He spoken of this way in the writings of Ellen White. In fact as we shall now see, Ellen White condemned illustrations that make God appear to be three personalities in one essence (three-in-one). She wrote (this was after citing certain trinitarian three in one essence illustrations which we shall look at later)

[“All these spiritualistic representations are simply nothingness. They are imperfect, untrue. They weaken and diminish the Majesty which no earthly likeness can be compared to. God can not be compared with the things His](#)

hands have made. These are mere earthly things, suffering under the curse of God because of the sins of man. The Father can not be described by the things of earth. The Father is all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, and is invisible to mortal sight.” (*Ellen G. White, Special Testimonies Series B No. 7 pages 62, ‘Come out and be separate’*)

I would ask you to note first that when Ellen White said that “God can not be compared with the things His hands have made” this was synonymous with her saying that “The Father can not be described by the things of earth”.

In her reasoning, as was the reasoning of the vast majority of Seventh-day Adventists living at that time, God the Father was considered the source of all life. He was therefore considered the source of the Son. In other words, it was believed that Christ had no existence separate from the Father.

Christ was believed to be the begotten Son of God – therefore He was said to be God Himself in the person of His Son. The Holy Spirit was believed to be both the Father and the Son omnipresent.

To some Seventh-day Adventists therefore, especially to those who had a leaning towards trinitarianism, there would probably have been seen a certain amount of light (truth) in these trinity illustrations. As we now know though, Ellen White condemned them. This was not because they depicted God the Father as the source of all life – or as being the source of the Son (which when this testimony was written was the denominational belief of Seventh-day Adventists) - but because they represented God as being three persons in one essence. It was the Father who was said by Seventh-day Adventists to be the ‘One true God’. This is what Ellen White is saying here.

This testimony was written concerning John Harvey Kellogg. He was the senior physician and a very influential figure within Seventh-day Adventism – who, as far as I can tell, was the very first Seventh-day Adventist to openly confess that he had come to believe in ‘the trinity’. This was in 1903.

The trinity doctrine, so he said, helped him to explain how God was personally ‘in’ nature. Ellen White referred to Kellogg’s views as ‘akin to pantheism’ (pantheism teaches that ‘all is God’).

It appears that Kellogg came to believe that the Holy Spirit is a person exactly like God the Father and Christ - which led him to say he believed in the trinity doctrine. He said it was the Holy Spirit who pervaded all of nature. In this way, according to Kellogg’s reasoning, without saying that the Father was in everything, it could be said that God was in everything. In other words, in his thinking, Kellogg had managed to ‘separate’ the Holy Spirit from the Father. This could not be done in the theology then generally held amongst Seventh-day Adventists.

Allow me to explain.

If Kellogg had continued to believe - as was then generally believed by Seventh-day Adventists - that the Holy Spirit was both God and Christ omnipresent, this would have been the same as saying (in one sense) that both God and Christ were in nature. Kellogg needed therefore to divorce himself from this generally accepted understanding of the Godhead.

Ellen White said that by his beliefs, Kellogg was making both God and Christ a nonentity. This is understandable seeing that at that time, Seventh-day Adventists believed that the Holy Spirit was both God and Christ omnipresent (the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ). She did not say that Kellogg was making the Holy Spirit a nonentity.

At one time, like so many of our pioneers, Kellogg had spoken out against the trinity doctrine.

Kellogg's confession of coming to believe in 'the trinity' was in 1903. This was when the Seventh-day Adventist Church was still a decidedly non-trinitarian denomination. Note that Ellen White referred to these three-in-one illustrations as "[spiritualistic representations](#)". Later we shall see that she also called them "advanced scientific ideas".

It cannot simply be coincidence that (a) Kellogg claimed to have come to believe in the trinity – and (b) in writing this testimony concerning Kellogg that Ellen White quoted and condemned these trinity illustrations. This would be stretching the imagination much too far. Obviously there must be a connection. Prior to quoting these illustrations, Ellen White had written

["I am instructed to say, The sentiments of those who are searching for advanced scientific ideas are not to be trusted."](#) (*Ibid*)

In speaking out against these types of illustrations, Ellen White was not voicing her own opinion but was writing that which God had instructed her to write. In other words, it was God who had told her to condemn these theories concerning Himself. It was not her idea.

Please note her reference to "[advanced scientific ideas](#)". These are 'notions' (ideas) that go beyond what God has revealed and are used by some to try to explain how the three persons of the Godhead relate to each other (have their existence in relation to each other) – which in the finality depict God as a trinity (three-in-one).

Ellen White then detailed the illustrations which we have seen above she condemned. This she did by saying

["Such representations as the following are made: "The Father is as the light](#)

invisible; the Son is as the light embodied; the Spirit is the light shed abroad." "The Father is like the dew, invisible vapor; the Son is like the dew gathered in beautiful form; the Spirit is like the dew fallen to the seat of life." Another representation: "The Father is like the invisible vapor; the Son is like the leaden cloud; the Spirit is rain fallen and working in refreshing power." (*Ibid*)

These are ideas concerning God that Ellen White termed “advanced scientific ideas” – meaning ideas that attempt to explain God but go beyond what God has revealed. This means that they are nothing but speculation – or as Ellen White put it “imperfect, untrue” and “nothingness” (see above).

We can see that in each of these illustrations there are three things that are one in essence. With regard to applying these illustrations to God and how He exists in the personages of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, these were condemned by Ellen White.

The above illustrations are found in a book called ‘The Higher Christian Life’ (1858) – which in its time it was a world-wide best seller. It was written by a Presbyterian minister by the name of William Boardman. Ellen White was quoting from his book.

Needless to say, Boardman promoted the idea that the ‘one God’ was ‘triune’ (a trinity). He refers to the ‘tri-personality of the one God’ but does admit that these illustrations were imperfect as to revealing this ‘tri-personality’ itself although he did say that they illustrate the ‘official relations’ that exist between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (meaning how the three relate to each other). He also said they reveal that the fullness of God dwells in each of the three persons of what he terms ‘the triune God’ (see page 104 ‘The Higher Christian Life’).

In her testimony concerning Kellogg, Ellen White made a direct reference to what Boardman had written. In fact she used his words but modified them.

We shall now see that in modifying Boardman’s wording, Ellen White changed it from a trinitarian view of God to a view which is non-trinitarian. This brought it into line with what was then, in 1906 when this testimony was published, believed by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Our denomination was still then non-trinitarian.

Three living persons of the heavenly trio (non-trinitarianism not trinitarianism)

Following the condemnation of the above ‘three in one essence’ illustrations, Ellen White detailed what can only be described as her most comprehensive statement regarding the three persons of the Godhead.

What she wrote is only as much as the Scriptures reveal - meaning it stops short of speculation. This is why it does not depict God as a trinity – at least not as

purported by the trinity doctrine.

As has been said, Ellen White used Boardman's wording but she modified it. As we will see, this modification tells us a great deal about how Ellen White regarded the trinity doctrine – even though she does not mention the word 'trinity'.

Boardman wrote

“THE FATHER is ALL THE FULNESS OF THE GODHEAD INVISIBLE.

THE SON is ALL THE FULNESS OF THE GODHEAD MANIFESTED.

THE SPIRIT is ALL THE FULNESS OF THE GODHEAD MAKING MANIFEST.” (*William Boardman, The Higher Christian Life, page 105, Chapter 'Divine personalities'*)

In comparison Ellen White wrote (after quoting Boardman's three-in-one illustrations)

“The Father can not be described by the things of earth. The Father is all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, and is invisible to mortal sight.” (*Ibid*)

She also added

“The Son is all the fulness of the Godhead manifested. The Word of God declares Him to be "the express image of His person." "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Here is shown the personality of the Father.” (*Ibid*)

This was in keeping with the begotten faith of Seventh-day Adventists. It was that Christ was brought forth (begotten) of God and was the person of God made manifest to fallen humanity. Note particularly the latter sentence. Regarding the Holy Spirit she explained

“The Comforter that Christ promised to send after He ascended to heaven, is the Spirit in all the fulness of the Godhead, making manifest the power of divine grace to all who receive and believe in Christ as a personal Saviour.” (*Ibid*)

As has been said above, the trinity illustrations Boardman had given may have been seen to be in keeping with these beliefs expressed here by Ellen White but as we shall now see, there was a difference.

See now how Ellen White summarised her reasoning in comparison with Boardman's summary. Boardman had written

“The persons are not mere offices, or modes of revelation, but living persons of the living God.” (*Ibid*)

Take particular notice of the last part of this sentence. This is trinitarianism. Now notice what Ellen White wrote. In summary of what she had written she said

“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. . . .” (*Ibid*)

Some may say that like Boardman, Ellen White is here confessing the trinity doctrine but this is not true. As we have seen above, the trinity doctrine is much more involved. We have also seen that the trinity doctrine is very much in keeping with the three-in-one illustrations that in this same testimony were condemned by Ellen White. The fact is that Ellen White was here denying the trinity doctrine – not upholding it. If this is not clear then please allow me to explain.

Boardman had written that there are three “living persons of the living God”. This is a trinitarian statement (three-in-one) – meaning that the one God is $1+1+1=1$. This explanation of God is exactly the same as the present Seventh-day Adventist view of God. This is as it is portrayed in their fundamental belief No. 2.

In contrast to this, even though she used in her testimony the basic words that Boardman had written, Ellen White modified these words to say there “are three living persons of the heavenly trio”.

Can you see the difference? Boardman’s statement was trinitarian. Ellen White changed it to make it non-trinitarian.

Ellen White did not say that the three persons make up the ‘one God’ (as did Boardman) – which is trinitarianism. She obviously modified Boardman’s wording to bring it into line with what God had instructed her to say – which is non-trinitarianism (there is no unity of substance spoken of). This shows that in making this statement, Ellen White was denying the three-in-one ($1+1+1=1$) idea of God. Certainly she was not upholding it. This is obviously why she condemned those three in one essence illustrations. It was this ‘one essence’ part of Boardman’s reasoning that Ellen White rejected.

It cannot be coincidence that Ellen White condemned these three in one essence illustrations – also that she changed Boardman’s wording from trinitarianism to non-trinitarianism. This would be taking things too far. We must not be naïve in our reasoning.

This is why it must not be said that Ellen White was here supporting the idea that God is a trinity. If she wanted to depict God as a trinity, as in the trinity doctrine, then all she needed to do was to quote Boardman without changing his wording. As it is, by modifying his words, it can be seen that she consciously and deliberately avoided depicting God as a trinity. This is not usually pointed out by the trinitarians amongst us – although they continually quote this passage from Ellen White’s writings in support of their three-in-one essence/substance/nature reasoning.

Quite obviously, God was seeking here to stop this kind of three in one essence reasoning from being introduced into Seventh-day Adventism. Apart from it being error, He knew the problems it would cause.

Some may say that Ellen White was not here condemning the idea of the ‘One God’ being three in one but was condemning the idea that the Father is the source of all life (including the Son). In the light of what she wrote concerning the three personalities (see above), this would make no sense; neither would it answer the question as to why she changed Boardman’s words from three “[living persons of the living God](#)” to “[three living persons of the heavenly trio](#)”. Personally speaking I believe the answer is obvious. She was denying the trinity doctrine. What else could she have been doing?

This having been said, notice there is no suggestion here from Ellen White that in any of these three divine personalities there is a ‘partial indwelling’ of the Godhead. It is just as though she is saying that 100% of the Godhead is present in all three.

Please note also the following very important observation.

This testimony was written in 1905 – which was 7 years after the publication of ‘The Desire of Ages’. This is the book in which many of our pro-trinitarian leaders say Ellen White spoke of God as a trinity.

This is obviously not true – else why, in this testimony, by changing Boardman’s wording, did she deny the trinity doctrine. We shall also see in the next section that Ellen White told Seventh-day Adventists to ‘hold on to’ their 1905 beliefs concerning God and Christ – which today’s trinitarian Seventh-day Adventists say were error. In other words, today’s trinitarian Seventh-day Adventists are saying that at that time, Ellen White was telling us to hold on to error. Can you believe this to be true? I certainly cannot!

Three persons of the Heavenly Trio (of the Godhead) – adequate theology

I did ask above that if by setting out in our fundamental beliefs only what we believe concerning the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – meaning without any trinity doctrine embellishments – would we be losing something by it. I ask this again because this is all that Ellen White wrote in the above testimony. Having said this, what she wrote must constitute the most comprehensive

statement made by her concerning the three personalities of the Godhead – and remember – she said that God had instructed her to say these things. It is just as though God is saying “this is enough for you to know. Just leave it there. Don’t go beyond what I have revealed”.

We must ask therefore, if it was adequate enough for God to have Ellen White only detail beliefs concerning the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit without confessing Himself to be a trinity (as in the trinity doctrine), then why cannot it be adequate for us today to do the same? In other words, why do we need to go further than what Ellen White wrote - also further than what God has revealed - and say that God is three-in-one ($1+1+1=1$) as in the trinity doctrine? This surely is a very important question.

The trinity doctrine does nothing to enhance a person’s Christian experience. In fact it can only do the opposite. What it does achieve is to put us on a par with many of the other churches. These are the churches we once referred to as Babylon. These denominations regard the trinity doctrine as the most important teaching of the Christian faith – which is exactly the opposite to the thinking of our early and present-day non-trinitarians.

Regarding the trinity doctrine, the present leadership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church - also its theologians – now reason as do the other churches – meaning they confess that this teaching is the core belief of the Christian faith. This is why Gulley said in his article that this $1+1+1=1$ doctrine is the keystone of Biblical theology. We shall now return our thoughts to his article.

Is the ‘trinity God’ a person?

Very near the beginning of his ‘ $1+1+1=One$ ’ article Gulley wrote

“What do we forfeit if God is only one Person? (Norman R. Gulley, Adventist World, February 2010, ‘ $1+1+1=One$ ’)

This is rather an intriguing question – and it must be seen in the context that Gulley believes that the “one God” is three persons in one ($1+1+1=One$).

He then says (explaining what we would lose if God were one person and not $1+1+1=One$)

“For one, Christ could not be our Savior. It took the Holy Spirit to bring Christ to Mary. It took the Father to answer Christ’s prayers and give Him needed help. That’s how important the Trinity is to us. Our eternal life depends upon this truth.” (Ibid)

To what “truth” is Gulley referring – also what “truth” is so important (according to him) that our eternal life depends on it? Is it that there are three persons of the Godhead – as revealed in the Scriptures – also as expressed by Ellen White and believed by the non-trinitarian Seventh-day Adventists? Obviously not!

Gulley is saying that our eternal life depends on God being a trinity (1+1+1=One) and not being just one person - although having said that – if this “one God” (the three-in-one trinity God) is not a person then what is He?

In our fundamental beliefs as seen above, the ‘one God’ (the three-in-one God) is described as a personal being (remember the ‘He’ and the ‘His’). As I said above, this is why so many denominations say that this three-in-one God has no form or physical being.

This leaves us to ask a question.

In order to meet the requirements that Gulley lays out in his statement, why is it necessary for God to be depicted as 1+1+1=1? To put it in another way, why wouldn't it suffice to profess a belief in the three personalities of the Godhead – without making them into a trinity? We would still have the same three – namely the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – and they could all be seen to carry out exactly the same functions as said by Norman Gulley. We can see therefore that this speculation about God being 1+1+1=1 is completely unnecessary. Wouldn't you agree?

Mueller continues his trinity reasoning

After giving a number of Bible texts which he claims gives support to Seventh-day Adventist trinity reasoning (which as we have noted in section one did necessitate a change in beliefs from what was believed by Seventh-day Adventists whilst Ellen White was alive), Mueller does admit that certain three-in-one illustrations fail to do justice in explaining how God is a trinity. These he explained were such as - God being like ‘The family’ - or being like the ‘roles that individual people play such as spouse, parent and child’ - or being like ‘a triangle (a musical instrument)’.

At least by saying this much, Mueller was in harmony with what we have just seen was said by Ellen White (this was when she condemned three-in-one explanations of God) but he still went on to say immediately afterwards

“We do not believe in three Gods but one God in three persons. These three personalities participate in one substance. In the divine unity there are three coeternal and coequal persons, who, though distinct, are the one undivided God.” (*Ekkehardt Mueller, Biblical Research Institute, Reflections newsletter, July 2008, Page 9, ‘Scripture Applied, - A Bible Study’*)

Here we are returned to the ‘one substance’ and ‘indivisible three-in-one teaching’ (1+1+1=1). How much difference is there between this and what was condemned by Ellen White? Not a lot it seems. It is still saying that the three are of the one essence/substance etc – or to put it another way - make up an indivisible whole (1+1+1=1), Mueller then says

“This doctrine of God is a biblical doctrine. However, it surpasses our understanding. We accept it because it is taught by God’s Word and because we have to expect that God is not just a superman. He is and remains God, and surpasses our feelings, our will and our intellectual capacities.” *(Ibid)*

This is far from being true. Even at its very best, the trinity doctrine is only an assumed doctrine. Certainly there is no mention of it in Scripture. If it is there, no one has ever found it.

All that we find in Scripture is what we have been told concerning the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – which in itself does not constitute a trinity doctrine. Mueller concludes his study by saying

“The doctrine of the trinity allows us to understand the plan of salvation and other biblical doctrines.” *(Ibid)*

How this is reasoned I have no idea but it is more or less the same as was said by Gulley in his ‘Adventist World’ article. The latter said that this 1+1+1=One reasoning concerning God is the “keystone of Biblical theology”.

Serious allegations

When we were a non-trinitarian denomination, certainly we were teaching the truth regarding God and Christ (in the next section we shall see that in 1905 Ellen White told us to ‘hold on to’ our non-trinitarian faith concerning God and Christ). This was when Seventh-day Adventists maintained, including Ellen White, that Christ really is the Son of God – therefore He is God Himself in the person of His Son.

There is also something else to consider here.

As has been said already, the trinity doctrine cannot be found in the Bible. It is only a speculative teaching (an assumed doctrine). Is Mueller saying therefore that what we find in the Bible is not enough for us to understand the plan of salvation and other biblical doctrines? If this is being said, then this is quite a statement. It is like saying that the ‘Bible only’ is inadequate to accomplish these things.

It must also be remembered that for the first 100 years of our denominational existence we did not teach that God is ‘a trinity’. Are we therefore saying regarding these early non-trinitarian Seventh-day Adventists – which amounted to hundreds of thousands of loyal and very spiritual members – that none of them understood the plan of salvation? Are we saying also that anyone who is not a trinitarian today and who only believes what the Bible reveals, does not understand it either? This is also quite a claim.

Some will even say that without the trinity doctrine the divinity of Christ is not expressed correctly but if this were the case, then because we know the trinity doctrine cannot be found in the Scriptures, this would be the same as saying that the Bible alone is inadequate to do so (meaning not adequate to express the divinity of Christ correctly). As Seventh-day Adventists, is this now what we are saying? One is left to wonder!

What the Scriptures reveal

Strangely enough, at least in comparison to what is said here by Ekkehardt Mueller and Norman Gulley - also in contrast to our fundamental beliefs - Jesus said (just before His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane)

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

This was the prayer of Jesus to His Father. He was praying that His followers “might know” both His Father and Himself. This said Jesus is “life eternal”.

Note Jesus said that “the only true God” is His Father. He did not say it is the trinity three-in-one God as purported by the trinitarian theologians – also by our fundamental beliefs.

Expressed here by Jesus was the faith as expressed in our fundamental beliefs whilst Ellen White was alive (see section one).

Note also that Jesus did not say it was essential to know and believe that God is a trinity (1+1+1=One) neither did He mention anything about knowing the Holy Spirit – and this was immediately following our Saviour’s discourse on the coming of the Comforter (see John chapters 14, 15 and 16). From what Jesus said here, we can see that the essentials of salvation are to know the Father and Himself.

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the apostle Paul wrote

“But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him.”
1 Corinthians 8:6

Here again we are told in Scripture that the “one God” is “the Father” – which is much the same as was said by Jesus (see John 17:3). This is far different than what is said by Ekkehardt Mueller and Norman Gulley, also fundamental belief No. 2 of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. They say that the 1+1+1 God (the three-in-one God) is the “one God” (see above).

Notice too that this says that the Father is the source of all things whilst Christ is the one through whom all things came to be.

In the third and final section of this study we shall be taking a look at how the trinity doctrine, as explained above by Ekkehardt Mueller and Norman Gulley, was first voted in to our fundamental beliefs at the 1980 General Conference session held at Dallas Texas. We shall also see how this put us on a par with the Papacy – at least regarding our explanation of God.

We shall also see that when we were still a non-trinitarian denomination, Ellen White warned that wrong views concerning God and Christ would make their way into Seventh-day Adventism. It will also be seen that she comments on the ‘oneness’ between God and Christ.

Section three

The 1980 General Conference session – plus warnings from Ellen White

In the previous section we looked at an explanation of the trinity doctrine. This is as it is held today by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In this section we shall see how this teaching was first voted into the beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists - which happened in 1980 at the General Conference session held at Dallas Texas.

We shall also see in this section that when we were still a non-trinitarian denomination, Ellen White warned that wrong views concerning both God and Christ were on their way into Seventh-day Adventism. She said that what we were then teaching concerning God and Christ was the truth. This was in 1905.

Seventy-five years later – in 1980 - we officially said it was error. Such is how Seventh-day Adventism has changed over the years.

The 1980 General Conference session – the president addresses the delegates

On April 21st, which was approximately mid-way through the 1980 General Conference session, this proposed trinity belief, along with our other fundamental beliefs, was discussed.

Prior to this taking place, Neal C. Wilson, then the General Conference president, addressed the delegates by saying

“For some time we have been considering a refinement of our Statement on Fundamental Beliefs. I think you have that document in your hands. No doubt you have done both some studying and some praying.” (*General Conference Bulletin, Review and Herald, April 23rd 1980, ‘Seventh Business Meeting, Fifty-third General Conference session’*)

Notice the president used the word ‘refinement’. This implies making a finer distinction of something that is already stated (in this case – that which is already believed). As we shall see later, as far as our Godhead beliefs were concerned,

this was not a refining of our beliefs but a change of them. He then added

“We have heard a variety of interesting rumors. Some, it is said, understand that the church leaders want to destroy completely the foundations of the church and set the church on a course that would be un-Biblical, contrary to the tradition of the past and to historical Adventism. My fellow delegates, there is nothing that is further from the truth.” *(Ibid)*

Obviously there were some who had very serious concerns regarding the purpose behind the re-wording of our fundamental beliefs – even being worried that our past beliefs were about to undergo change. The president also said later

“We are not suggesting changing any belief or doctrine that this church has held. We have no interest in tearing up any of the foundations of historical Adventism. This document is not designed to do that, nor to open the way so that it can be done.” *(Ibid)*

He then made the comment

“It should be clear that we are not adding anything nor are we deleting anything in terms of historical Adventist theology. We are trying to express our beliefs in a way that will be understood today.” *(Ibid)*

To everyone who has taken the time to study what was once the faith of Seventh-day Adventists, it is obvious that over the years our beliefs have changed (and dramatically) – particularly those beliefs regarding God and Christ – so why the General Conference president made these remarks is left to the imagination. More so than anyone else he should have known about this change.

As we noted in the previous section, George Knight said that because of our much-changed beliefs, the vast majority of our pioneers would not today be permitted to join our church.

“Most of the founders of Seventh-day Adventism would not be able to join the church today if they had to subscribe to the denomination's Fundamental Beliefs. More specifically, most would not be able to agree to belief Number 2, which deals with the doctrine of the Trinity.” *(George Knight, 'Ministry' magazine, October 1993, page 10, 'Adventists and Change')*

The very next year, which was 14 years after the 1980 General Conference session, William Johnsson (as editor of the Review) unabashedly informed Seventh-day Adventists that

“Some Adventists today think, that our beliefs have remained unchanged over the years, or they seek to turn back the clock to some point when we

had everything just right. But all attempts to recover such “historic Adventism” fail in view of the facts of our heritage.” (*William Johnsson, Adventist Review, January 6th 1994, Article ‘Present Truth - Walking in God’s Light’*)

He concluded

“Adventists beliefs have changed over the years under the impact of present truth. Most startling is the teaching regarding Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord.” (*Ibid*)

The latter is referring to the belief once held by Seventh-day Adventists that Christ is truly the Son of God (the begotten concept). He also said of this belief

“Only gradually did this false doctrine give way to the Biblical truth, and largely under the impact of Ellen Whites writings in statements such as “In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived. (Desire of ages p 530)” (*Ibid*)

This “false doctrine” - as William Johnsson calls it - is the belief that Christ is truly the Son of God. This was a crucial aspect of what was once the non-trinitarian faith of Seventh-day Adventists. This was held throughout the entire time of Ellen White’s ministry – also for the immediate decades beyond. It was also one of the reasons why the trinity doctrine was rejected.

Note that Johnsson says that our change in beliefs concerning Christ is “Most startling”.

As was pointed out in the first section, the suggestion is - by the trinitarians - that our past non-trinitarians did not believe in the full and complete divinity of Christ but as we also noted, this is nothing but a straw man set up by the trinitarians. The past non-trinitarians – just like the non-trinitarians today - believed that Christ is God Himself in the person of His Son. It is obvious here that by this time (1994), the leadership of our church was getting very bold in their erroneous allegations against the early Seventh-day Adventists.

In an article written in 2002, Angel Manuel Rodriguez – who is the director of the Seventh-day Adventist Biblical Research Institute (BRI) - wrote of our once rejection of the trinity doctrine – also of the changed faith of Seventh-day Adventists.

“Some Adventists have discovered that practically all of our pioneers were anti-Trinitarian and have concluded that the church today should reject the doctrine of the Trinity. The truth is that the Lord guided this movement to a more biblical understanding of God. Today, based on the Bible, we affirm the truth of one God in a plurality of Persons.” (*Angel Manuel Rodriguez, Article, ‘The Holy Spirit and the Godhead, 11th July 2002*)

By saying “we affirm the truth of one God in a plurality of Persons”, Rodriguez is obviously agreeing with our present fundamental belief that the “one God” is a trinity of persons (1+1+1=1).

Here again is also the confession that we were once a non-trinitarian denomination. This shows that there have been massive changes to the beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists – which according to Rodriguez came about because of God’s leading. Many obviously dispute this reasoning. We noted in the previous section that under instruction from God, Ellen White said that this depicting God as ‘three-in-one’ was a wrong thing to do. She said that these views were misrepresentative and untrue.

Before we move on there is something very important to note. This is that the non-trinitarians today are not saying that we should return to the Godhead beliefs of early Seventh-day Adventists simply because they were taught by them. They are saying we should return to these beliefs because they were - and still are - the truth that God gave to us. This is saying two entirely different things.

So who is telling the truth here? Is it George Knight, William Johnsson and Angel Manuel Rodriguez who all say our beliefs have dramatically changed over the years or was it Neal C. Wilson who said they haven’t changed? Quite obviously they cannot all be correct.

Rodriguez is also saying that our past beliefs concerning God were not biblical. This is what our present leadership is asking Seventh-day Adventists today to believe.

In other words – we are being asked to believe - that during the entire time of Ellen White’s ministry, not only did we have it wrong about God – which included having it wrong about Christ – but that God Himself, even though He had His messenger in the church - never once through her told us that we were wrong. In other words, God allowed us to go on teaching serious error concerning Himself and His Son - not only in our preaching and teaching but also throughout our publications - without saying anything about it. This is what you are being asked to believe.

In direct contrast to this, we shall see later in this very section that Ellen White said that what Seventh-day Adventists believed concerning God and Christ was the truth that God had given to them – also that they should hold on to it. Again this is a case of ‘who do we believe’?

The 1980 General Conference session – the delegate’s discussions regarding the trinity doctrine

Prior to the final vote being taken regarding our fundamental beliefs, some of the delegates commented on the proposed fundamental belief No. 2. These comments were made public by reason of the General Conference bulletins published in the Review and Herald.

We begin with Leif Hansen who said

“In this discussion of the Trinity, which is always a difficult matter to discuss, I wonder if a certain misunderstanding could be eliminated by saying "a unity in purpose" so that the matter of physical unity may be eliminated.”
(General Conference Bulletin, Review and Herald, April 23rd 1980, ‘Seventh Business Meeting, Fifty-third General Conference session’)

It should go without saying that in Hansen’s thinking, a physical unity of the three persons of the Godhead could not be proven scripturally. It also seems that he was concerned that our beliefs should not depict any physical oneness. This is THE main problem in the trinity debate – meaning it is stated by the trinity doctrine that the three personalities physically constitute the ‘one God’ (that all three are of one indivisible substance/essence). We noted this in the previous section. Neal C. Wilson as chairman replied

“I see your point there. Maybe we ought to make it a unity in purpose rather than a physical unity.” *(Ibid)*

The president obviously knew, just as did Leif Hansen, that on this matter of “physical unity”, the Scriptures are totally silent. Anything said in this direction can only be speculation. J. G. Bennett then said

“The statement about the Godhead and the Trinity goes on to use the pronoun He. Later as the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost are discussed, we use the same pronoun He.” *(Ibid)*

We noted in the previous sections that the personal pronoun is applied to each of the three divine personalities – namely the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (fundamental beliefs No. 3, 4 and 5). We have also seen it is applied to the trinity three-in-one God (fundamental belief No. 2) – which must be admitted is rather strange. Bennett was querying the very same thing. How can the three be individual persons – also the three collectively be a person? One is left to wonder. He continued

“I do recognize and accept the Trinity as a collective unity, but I would have a little difficulty in applying the pronoun He to the Trinity or the Godhead.”
(Ibid)

I think that this would be the same for most people. How can a ‘collection’ of people, no matter how many there are, be referred to as ‘He’? It is no wonder that Bennett said he would find “difficulty in applying the pronoun He to the Trinity or the Godhead”.

It appears that as long as the word ‘trinity’ was used only in a collective sense, Bennett was quite happy to use it – but not identified as a person. Note he uses the word ‘trinity’ as though it is synonymous with the word ‘Godhead’ - which as

mentioned in section one is not really a correct thing to do. These are two different words. They have two entirely different meanings. As there is in the word 'trinity', there is no suggestion in the word 'Godhead' of three-in-one.

Regarding the use of the personal pronoun to the word 'trinity', he then added "For me this has deep theological implications." (*Ibid*)

Bennett was obviously referring to the 'three collectively' being called 'He'. This application of the personal pronoun – referring to the three together as the 'One God' - is why today there is a trinity dispute within Seventh-day Adventism. If it is said that there are 'three persons of the Godhead' there would not be so much to debate.

Nothing more was said about these "deep theological implications" but they obviously bothered Bennett. They also bother people today. This is why this trinity debate still exists within our denomination. As we noted in the previous section, as far as the gospel is concerned, the implications of the trinity doctrine are horrendous.

W. G. C. Murdoch contributed to the discussion by saying

"I would suggest that we use the expression "The Godhead or Trinity" rather than "Trinity." (*Ibid*)

If accepted, this suggestion would have made our fundamental beliefs more or less the same as the 1931 statement of beliefs (we noted these in section one) but this would not have suited those who wanted to depict the 'one God' as a trinity. Obviously, because today we are aware of the outcome of these discussions, we know that Murdoch's suggestion was rejected. Again the two words 'Godhead' and 'trinity' are used as though they mean the same.

Paul C. Chima made the comment

"I would suggest that when this goes back to the committee, Sister White's writings be studied to see what term she used to describe God the Father and the Holy Spirit. Let us use a lot of her terminology to define this. Whatever decisions are made and expressions found, let us be content with them." (*Ibid*)

This would have been a rather fruitless exercise. This is because Ellen White never used any inclusive term to describe "God the Father and the Holy Spirit". All she ever said was that there are three persons of the Godhead. I notice here for some reason, the Son of God was not included in Chima's remarks.

W. R. Leshar also commented (this was after saying that the expression "consisting of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" seems to introduce a limiting factor)

“It is much more in harmony with the mystery of God to simply say there is one God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. My same observation would apply to the expression "a unity of purpose." We assume that there is a unity of purpose in the Godhead. Still, God is a mystery.” *(Ibid)*

He then said

“And we do not know in what ways that unity might exist other than in purpose.” *(Ibid)*

This latter statement is very true. This is why the trinity doctrine is only an assumed doctrine. It attempts to define this physical unity (oneness) between the three persons of the Godhead when nothing of this has been revealed. This is also why the trinity doctrine should not have been included in the fundamental beliefs of God’s remnant people. We are delving into something which God has not revealed – meaning we are speculating.

After accepting all these comments from the floor, Neal C. Wilson then said

“I would like now to appoint a committee to do some editing for us with these suggestions in mind.” *(Ibid)*

These were suggestions regarding the various fundamental beliefs that had been discussed and not just the ones referring to the Godhead – although obviously they did include the latter.

On the final business day of the conference (April 25th), Charles Upshaw asked (this was just before the final vote was taken regarding our fundamental beliefs)

“I have a question on Article 2, "The Trinity." (*General Conference Bulletin, Review and Herald, May 1st 1980. 'Fifteenth Business Meeting, Fifty-third General Conference session'*)

He then said

“I believe when we first studied the document the term was Godhead.” *(Ibid)*

These ‘suggested beliefs’ were sent to the delegates before the conference took place. This was so that prior study and thought could be given to them. As of yet I have not come across this document.

What I have come across is how these ‘suggested beliefs’ were submitted in the Review and Herald for everyone to see and upon which they could comment. These had been formulated by the General Conference Committee at the 1979 Annual Conference.

Under the heading of “The Trinity”, No.2 belief said

“That there is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a self-existing Unity in Trinity. God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent, transcendent and immanent, the absolute Reality whose infinite and personal being is a mystery forever beyond human comprehension. (Deut. 6:4; Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 4:4-6; 1 Pet. 1:2; 1 Tim. 1:17; Rev. 14:6, 7.)” (*Review and Herald, February 21st 1980, ‘Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists’*)

Here again the personal pronoun is used (“whose”) but not ‘He’ or ‘His’. It also says that the “personal being” of this “one God” is a “mystery forever beyond human comprehension” – which is only the same as saying that the three make up one person. Upshaw continued

“My objection to the use of the word Trinity is the fact that in many Christian congregations it refers to one God and also means one person. Yet in our explanation we refer to three co-eternal persons, and in Article 13 we refer to a triune God. I would like to suggest that we either change the title to "The Godhead" or "The Triune Godhead." (*General Conference Bulletin, Review and Herald, May 1st 1980. ‘Fifteenth Business Meeting, Fifty-third General Conference session’*)

Here is an objection to the word ‘trinity’ itself. It was because other “Christian congregations” used it to describe the “one God” – which interestingly we do today as well. Notice too that the objection was also because this “one God” was described by other denominations as a person – which again we do now.

Once again we return to the fact that in our fundamental belief No. 2, the trinity God (the 1+1+1=1 God) is referred to by the personal pronouns ‘He’ and ‘His’. Have we not therefore fallen into line with the “many Christian congregations” mentioned here by Upshaw?

Upshaw said that we should have just used the term “Godhead” or “Triune Godhead”. If this had been done then it would not denote a ‘person’ or the ‘one God’. The personal pronoun could not be applied to ‘Godhead’. These terminologies would simply have denoted collectiveness. We know today that this suggestion was rejected. W. Duncan Eva replied

“We discussed this back and forth. We had both, and we did not like that. Now we have used one of them and this isn't popular.” (*Ibid*)

There was obviously frustration creeping in here. He then added

“We had "Godhead" in the old Manual and we didn't like that. I think it would be better just to ask the folk to express what they would prefer. Trinity to me seems to be a perfectly good word, even though we don't like some of its connotations. Many other words have connotations we are not happy with either! (*Ibid*)

So why did this problem exist at the 1980 General Conference session?

For one reason it was because this belief was new to Seventh-day Adventism. It had never been previously discussed like this at this level. Never before in our fundamental beliefs had we referred to the three divine personalities collectively as 'He'.

It is also because on this point of physical unity, God has been totally silent. This is why this debate is still ongoing. All that we have ever been told is that there are three persons of divinity (of the Godhead). We should leave it there.

In formulating a trinity doctrine, the attempt is being made to define how the three divine personalities have their existence in relation to each other (metaphysics) – and then referring to the three together as 'the one God' (a personal being). This is something that God has never said and why today there is still a debate in progress.

Eva never mentioned what he believed these “connotations” to be but to some they were obviously well known. They were probably the same as the “deep theological implications” stated by J. G. Bennett (see above).

This leaves us to wonder how many of the delegates realised that there were implications. After all, the trinity doctrine was eventually voted in as part of our fundamental beliefs – although as we can see, there was certainly reluctance by some to have God depicted as a trinity (1+1+1=1). Richard Hammill then replied

“We used the word Godhead here earlier because it was a Biblical term. When we really checked it in the Greek New Testament, we found it was not an accurate translation. The word that appears in the King James Version as Godhead is really Deity. Because it was not a Biblical term, we felt we should leave this word that is Biblical, as it is better understood in the Christian world at large.” (*Ibid*)

We noted this in section one. This is why it is extremely misleading to say 'Godhead or Trinity'. This is because there is a suggestion in this phraseology that the two words are synonymous – which they are not. The report then recorded that Neal C Wilson

“Requested an expression”, also that “No change was indicated.” (*Ibid*)

Wilson commented

“We should have been out of this hall now. Our brethren will be under extreme pressure to get everything moved to the Grand Hall unless we are out within 15 or 20 minutes.”

George T. L. Atiga then moved that the revision of our fundamental beliefs be accepted and that any further editorial matters be referred to the editorial committee. Neal C. Wilson responded

“There seems to be quite a number who would like to proceed that way. The chair will be guided by this group. We have tried to give ample opportunity for expression. Our time is gone, but I don't want to force or hurry this if someone feels that what he wishes to suggest will clearly affect the beliefs of this church. I appreciate that motion and will accept it as soon as we have listened to the few individuals who feel they have something greatly important to say.” *(Ibid)*

Shortly following this he said

“Now I am going to do something that I dislike to do, but I feel I must in view of the fact some of our brethren have been charged with the responsibility of getting the equipment set up in the Grand Hall for tonight. I will ask whether you feel you want to vote now, or discuss this longer. [The opinion expressed was to vote.]” *(Ibid)*

Wilson then said

“We had a motion, seconded by several, that we accept this as the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.” *(Ibid)*

He then added

“May I suggest that we prayerfully study these great truths so that they will become very much a part of our lives, our homes, and our institutions.” *(Ibid)*

The report then recorded

“I will call for the vote. [The motion carried overwhelmingly.]” *(Ibid)*

So it was, in 1980, for the very first time in the history of Seventh-day Adventism, that the trinity doctrine was voted into its fundamental beliefs. The finalised version we can see in our fundamental belief No.2.

As we have just seen, this acceptance did not happen without valid objections being made by some of the delegates. Some who knew of the theology of the trinity doctrine realised that there were serious implications regarding this teaching. It seems that if the word ‘Godhead’ had been used (which could never have the personal pronoun applied to it – which would not have suited the trinitarians), then many of the objections would not have been made. As it was, these objections were totally ignored. Now we have a doctrine that describes the

'one God' as a person who is three-in-one (1+1+1=1).

Warnings from Ellen White

We will now turn our thoughts to another General Conference session. This one took place 75 years previously – which was whilst Ellen White was alive. This was in 1905 when we were still very much a non-trinitarian denomination – also when all of our denominational literature revealed it. She said in a talk to the delegates

"And truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ." All through the Scriptures, the Father and the Son are spoken of as two distinct personages. You will hear men endeavoring to make the Son of God a nonentity. He and the Father are one, but they are two personages." (*Ellen G. White to the delegates at the 1905 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Takoma Park Washington D. C., May 25th 1905 Review and Herald 13th July 1905, 'Lessons from the first Epistle of John'*)

She did warn though

"Wrong sentiments regarding this are coming in, and we shall all have to meet them." (*Ibid*)

She had previously said to the delegates

"Christ is one with the Father, but Christ and God are two distinct personages. Read the prayer of Christ in the seventeenth chapter of John, and you will find this point clearly brought out." (*Ellen G. White to the delegates at the 1905 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Takoma Park Washington D. C., May 19th 1905, Review and Herald, June 1st 1905, 'The Work in Washington'*)

This prayer referred to here by Ellen White we noted in the [previous section](#) (see in particular John17:3).

Note again also that she refers to God as a personal being (the Father). Note too, in all the above statements, the emphasis she was giving to God and Christ being **two separate** divine personalities. There must have been a reason for her making this appeal. She had not done this earlier in our history – at least not to this extent.

It was just as though she was speaking out against the attempted blending or blurring of the individuality of these two divine personalities. She emphasised that God and Christ are "two distinct personages". This was even though, as she said, Christ was one with the Father.

When Ellen White said these things, the Seventh-day Adventist Church was still a non-trinitarian denomination. It was also when they believed that Christ was

truly the Son of God and that the Father, as we are told in the Scriptures, is the “one God” (1 Corinthians 8:6, see also John 17:3) – which today is not professed by Seventh-day Adventists. It was also when the Holy Spirit was regarded as the personal presence of both the Father and the Son when the latter two personalities were bodily in heaven. This reasoning, as once held by Seventh-day Adventists, is today condemned as heresy – at least by the leadership and the theologians of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Note here that Ellen White said that “Wrong sentiments” regarding God and Christ (as two personal distinct beings) were **on their way** into Seventh-day Adventism. She did not say that what we then believed about God and Christ was wrong. She obviously believed that what Seventh-day Adventists were then teaching was the truth. I say this because to the delegates at this conference she also said

“Let not any man enter upon the work of tearing down the foundations of the truth that have made us what we are.” (*Ellen G. White to the delegates at the 1905 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Takoma Park, Washington D. C., May 24th 1905, "A Warning against False Theories," MR 760*)

She then assured the delegates

“God has led His people forward step by step, though there are pitfalls of error on every side. Under the wonderful guidance of a plain "Thus saith the Lord," a truth has been established that has stood the test of trial. When men arise and attempt to draw away disciples after them, meet them with the truths that have been tried as by fire.” (*Ibid*)

Here at the 1905 General Conference session – this was whilst the Seventh-day Adventist Church was still a non-trinitarian denomination, also when they still believed that Christ was truly the Son of God - Ellen White was telling its members that their faith (beliefs), as they held it then, was the truth that “**step by step**” God Himself had given to them. She also said that it had “**stood the test of trial**” and had “**been tried as by fire**”.

Many attempt to say that Ellen White was only making reference here to what was believed concerning the sanctuary but this is not true.

We know this because after appropriately quoting from God’s message to the church at Sardis (this was with respect to ‘holding fast’ to the faith that they then had – see Revelation 3:1-6) Ellen White said

“Those who seek to remove the old landmarks are not holding fast; they are not remembering how they have received and heard.” (*Ibid*)

In principle, this is exactly what God said to the believers at Sardis (see Revelation 3:1-3). Just as they were told to ‘hold on’ to their faith, so too in 1905, Seventh-day Adventists were being told to ‘hold on’ to what they then believed. She then added

“Those who try to bring in theories that would remove the pillars of our faith concerning the sanctuary or concerning the personality of God or of Christ, are working as blind men. They are seeking to bring in uncertainties and to set the people of God adrift without an anchor.” (*Ibid*)

Here we can see that in these “old landmarks”, Ellen White included not only what was then believed by Seventh-day Adventists concerning the sanctuary but also what they then believed regarding the separate **personalities of God and Christ**. This simply means that regarding the beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists in 1905 concerning both God and Christ, Ellen White did include in the “foundations of the truth that have made us what we are”. She also included these beliefs as one of “the pillars of our faith”.

If you remember also (see section one), our beliefs concerning God and Christ, as quoted in the 1905 yearbook, were said to be held unanimously throughout the entire Seventh-day Adventist Church. Ellen White was saying here that these beliefs were correct. How else can her words be interpreted?

Note here the reference to “uncertainties”. These would be things that cannot be proven from Scripture – meaning speculation. Is it possible here that Ellen White had in mind the trinity doctrine? It is more than likely.

Whatever we perceive from these remarks, it does show that Ellen White was telling Seventh-day Adventists that regarding their beliefs concerning God and Christ, which were decidedly non-trinitarian, they were to hold on to them. They believed then that Christ is begotten of God, meaning that He is truly the Son of God and therefore God Himself in the person of His Son. This is not believed today by Seventh-day Adventists – at least not according to their fundamental beliefs. They deny that He is begotten of God – therefore denying His divine Sonship.

When Ellen White gave these warnings (1905), the acceptance of the trinity belief - which necessitated a dramatic change in these long held beliefs - was still very much in the future for Seventh-day Adventists. We had been warned though, as we have seen above, that regarding God and Christ, error was going to be introduced into Seventh-day Adventism.

We need to think seriously concerning these warnings. I say this because today we are teaching that Christ is not begotten (brought forth) of God therefore we are saying He is not truly the Son of God. We are also teaching that the three personalities of the Godhead are united indivisibly in the ‘one God’ – seemingly as a person. This is in direct contrast (exactly the opposite) to that which was

believed by Seventh-day Adventists at the time when Ellen White said that we were to 'hold on to' our beliefs concerning God and Christ (1905). Is this telling us something important today? She also told the delegates

“Many will grasp false science, teaching it as truth. But we need not be led astray. God wants us to cherish the truth in the simplicity in which we have received it from Christ.” (*Ellen G. White to the delegates at the 1905 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Takoma Park Washington D. C., May 25th 1905 Review and Herald 13th July 1905, 'Lessons from the first Epistle of John'*)

Note Ellen White's comparison of “simplicity” and “false science”. This reminds us of when in condemning those three-in-one trinity illustrations (see [section two](#)) she wrote

“I am instructed to say, The sentiments of those who are searching for advanced scientific ideas are not to be trusted.” (*Ellen G. White, Special Testimonies Series B No. 7 pages 62, 'Come out and be separate', 1905*)

This was written only months after the 1905 General Conference.

Again there must be seen a connection between this “false science” and the “advanced scientific ideas” depicting God as three-in-one. This is referring to speculation – a going beyond the simplicity of what God has chosen to reveal.

In the Review and Herald three years later, Ellen White spoke of a dream that she had in which she saw that our denominational publications should be circulated amongst God's people near and far. She also wrote of the dangers of 'speculative study' – also of the 'false sentiments' - that some were weaving into sermons and discourses. These sentiments she explained, Seventh-day Adventist ministers were obtaining from certain books they were reading.

“Again and again we shall be called to meet the influence of men who are studying sciences of satanic origin, through which Satan is working to make a nonentity of God and of Christ.” (*Ellen G. White, Review and Herald, 6th August 1908, 'Circulate the Publications No. 1', see also Testimonies Volume 9, page 68, 'Literature in Service'*)

She also added

“The Father and the Son each have a personality. Christ declared: "I and My Father are one." Yet it was the Son of God who came to the world in human form.” (*Ibid*)

Notice very carefully her wording. She first refers to God and Christ and then refers to the same two personages as the Father and the Son. In her thinking therefore, “God” is “The Father” whilst “Christ” is the “Son”. She did not regard

God as a trinity of persons but as an individual personal being.

One final thought regarding the 1905 General Conference.

Can you imagine what the delegates thought regarding what they had heard said by Ellen White? They would have thought she was confirming their beliefs concerning the Godhead – which she was doing. What else would they have thought? This is the message that these same delegates would have taken back to their various congregations and local churches in the various parts of the world where they lived.

So it was that the church, by word of mouth and by what they would have read in the General Conference bulletins published in the Review and Herald, would have come to the realisation that the messenger of God had told them to ‘hold on to’ their beliefs concerning the separate personalities of God and Christ. In other words, Seventh-day Adventists living in 1905 had been told that concerning God and Christ, they had their beliefs correct.

Very interesting is that over 30 years later in 1936, seven quarters of Sabbath School Lesson Studies were designed to explain our denominational beliefs. One particular study was concerning our Godhead beliefs. You can read about that here

[The 1936 official beliefs of SDA's](#)

It will be seen that then, in 1936, it was still the Seventh-day Adventist denominational belief that Christ was truly the Son of God (truly begotten of God). This teaching today is said by the Seventh-day Adventist leadership to be false. Again this shows how much, over the years, our beliefs have changed. At that time (1936), these studies were endorsed by the General Conference.

On a par with Roman Catholicism

The wording of our current (2010) fundamental belief No.2 is indicative of the Roman Catholic Trinity Creed. This is the creed that begins by saying

“Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith. Which Faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.” (*The Athanasian Creed*)

This is followed by an explanation of that “faith”. It says

“And the Catholic Faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity. Neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance.” (*Ibid*)

This is the Roman Catholic ‘faith’ concerning God.

As is emphasised in the above quote (the bold and underlined), this is exactly the same as is said today by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It seems therefore that in this respect – which is detailed in our official explanation of God (fundamental belief No. 2) - we are now on a par with the Papacy.

This ‘trinity reasoning’ was once rejected by Seventh-day Adventists. This was not simply because it was a Roman Catholic teaching but because it was considered unscriptural. It was said to be a fruit of the apostasy from the Christian faith – a teaching of Babylon.

As well as being the core doctrine of the Catholic faith, a great number of protestant denominations also hold to this same trinity profession of God. This also puts us on a par with them – at least as far as our explanation of God is concerned. In other words, it gives us a bond of unity with them.

In the Athanasian Creed, as believed by the Roman Catholic Church, it also says that anyone who does not believe in this trinity teaching will “**perish everlastingly**” (meaning they will not be saved). I would like to think that Seventh-day Adventists have not arrived at this particular conclusion – albeit it must be said that some of our members are being censured today for not believing it. I even know that those of the ministry, because of refusing to accept this three-in-one teaching, are having their ministerial credentials withdrawn – also that some members have been disfellowshipped for not believing it – perhaps even being told that because of this disfellowshipping they are outside of the body of Christ.

This reasoning is certainly not Scriptural – neither was it - whilst Ellen White was alive - taught by Seventh-day Adventists. It was not even taught during the decades immediately following her death. This type of reasoning denies the Biblical understanding of justification by faith.

Being justified by God does not depend on believing any one particular teaching – neither does it depend on any assent (profession/consent etc) to any particular set of doctrines (list of fundamental beliefs). The latter idea of salvation is what I term ‘creedal reasoning’ or ‘creedal soteriology’. Let’s just hope and pray that those of the Seventh-day Adventist ministry are not saying today (as does the Roman Catholic Church) that those who do not believe in the trinity doctrine are heading for ‘damnation’ (“**perish everlastingly**”). If this is happening, then this is an extremely sad day for Seventh-day Adventism – yet it would be in keeping with the views of many who uphold the trinity doctrine.

We need to keep in mind what was said by Jesus – meaning that life eternal is to know the Father and Himself (John 17:3).

One important thing to remember

We need to remember here that truth can never become error; neither can error ever become the truth. Each will always remain what it is – either truth or error.

The reason why I say this is because some may think that what we believe today, as a denomination, is only a going on – an expansion or progression (a progressive revelation) – of what we once believed. This cannot be. This is because what we once believed (non-trinitarianism) is diametrically opposed to what we believe today (trinitarianism). In other words, our church is saying today, that what was once our denominational faith is error.

This means that no matter what is done with it, whether it is added to, expanded upon, turned inside out or upside down, it will never become what is said today in our fundamental beliefs. In other words, if it was error when Ellen White was alive (which is what is being said by our church today) it is still error today. This is because error will always remain error – no matter what is done to it.

As Ellen White once said

“The truth of God is not in harmony with the traditions of men, nor does it conform to their opinions. Like its divine Author, it is unchangeable, the same yesterday, today, and forever.” (*Ellen G. White, 5th Volume Testimonies, page 62, ‘The Testimonies slighted’*)

She then added

“Those who separate from God will call darkness light, and error truth. But darkness will never prove itself to be light, nor will error become truth.” (*Ibid*)

If what Seventh-day Adventists taught whilst Ellen White was alive is the truth, then it is still the truth today – on the other hand, if it was error whilst Ellen White was alive, it is still error today. We need to make up our minds which one it is – either truth or error.

Ellen White and Godhead ‘oneness’

Ellen White well understood what the trinity doctrine teaches but she never made a profession of it. She did say that there are ‘three living persons of the heavenly trio’ (of the Godhead) but as we have seen, this is not making a profession of the trinity doctrine.

In the early 1900’s (this was when John Harvey Kellogg came to profess a belief in the trinity doctrine) she must have realised that within Seventh-day Adventism there was talk of ‘oneness’ between God and Christ.

I say this because in 1906 she wrote (remember it is this ‘oneness’ that is the major problem with the trinity doctrine)

“There are light and glory in the truth that Christ was one with the Father before the foundation of the world was laid. This is the light shining in a dark place, making it resplendent with divine, original glory.” (*Ellen G. White, Review & Herald 5th April 1906 ‘The Word made Flesh’*)

She followed by saying

“This truth, infinitely mysterious in itself, explains other mysterious and otherwise unexplainable truths, while it is enshrined in light, unapproachable and incomprehensible.” (*Ibid*)

Ellen White says here that there is a sense in which before the foundation of the world, “Christ was one with the Father” but she also added that this is a oneness that - whilst helping us to understand things which otherwise would remain unexplainable - it cannot be comprehended (understood) by humanity. Concerning this oneness she said “it is enshrined in light, unapproachable and incomprehensible”.

This means that to fallen humanity, this oneness is a ‘no go area’. She is also saying that even if it were explained by God it still would be beyond our comprehension. How therefore can it be said that Ellen White was a trinitarian? Obviously she was not!

Note that this was said by her the year following the 1905 General Conference – which was also 8 years after the publication of her book ‘The Desire of Ages’. This is the book that many of our leading trinitarians say led Seventh-day Adventists to become trinitarians – meaning that in it Ellen White spoke of God as a trinity. How can this be if 8 years later she was saying that we cannot understand the oneness between God and Christ?

We would do well to leave it there as Ellen White says and not invent an ‘indivisible physical oneness’ as in the trinity doctrine. This is where theologians have gone far too far.

With respect to ‘how’ God exists, they have attempted to explain something about which God has chosen to be silent. Notice here that in this oneness Ellen White does not mention the Holy Spirit.

You can read the entire article here

[The Word made flesh \(1906\)](#)

A God-given prerogative

It should go without saying that everyone is blessed with the God-given prerogative to believe what they wish to believe. As for me I will stay with what God has revealed through the Scriptures – also what He has shown me through the writings of Ellen White. In these inspired writings I find that God the Father, just like His Son, is always spoken of as an individual personal being. I do not find any such philosophical speculation as found in the trinity doctrine. Certainly God is never described as 1+1+1=One.

I will leave this needless speculating to others because as far as I am concerned, it only serves to cause problems and controversy - also, in various ways, it ultimately destroys the gospel.

Terry Hill

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