

At the beginning of July 2017, I received an enquiry regarding the trinity doctrine. The following was my response

Hi xxxx

You said in your original email

“Whenever I look at the Trinity area, I always get confused, even though I have a lot of background in spiritual things. It seems apparent that people are using the term "Trinity" to mean a variety of beliefs.”

You are quite correct – people do use the word ‘trinity’ to mean different beliefs - but let me share these thoughts with you.

There is only one explanation of the trinity doctrine (that the one God is a tri-unity of divine persons). This is as it is contained in the orthodox view of this teaching – or as you call it, the ‘standard view’. Anything short of this is not a genuine trinity doctrine. I will explain what I mean.

For a teaching to be truly trinitarian it must say that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit together make up the ‘one being’ (one trinitarian being – not person) of God. This is expressed by saying that all three are of the one and the same indivisible substance. Outside of this there is no such teaching as a trinity doctrine. In the past there have been those who have disagreed with me on this point but when I have asked for another explanation (of a trinity doctrine) they are unable to give one. This in itself says quite a lot.

Seventh-day Adventist theologians agree with this ‘one substance’ reasoning. This is why they say

“**The three persons share one indivisible nature.** 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.” (*Ekkehardt Mueller, Biblical Research Institute newsletter Reflections, July 2008*)

“Trinitarianism is the orthodox belief that there is but one living and true God. Nevertheless this one God is a unity of three persons, **who are of one substance,** power and eternity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” (*Gerhard Pfandl, Associate Director, Seventh-day Adventist Biblical Research Institute, 'The Doctrine of the Trinity among Adventists', 1999*)

“In Scripture God has revealed His transcendent nature as Trinity, namely three distinct divine Persons who act directly and historically in history **and constituting the one divine Trinitarian being.**” (*Dr. Fernando Canale, the Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology, the Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopaedia Volume 12, page 138*)

The above are explanations of the Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental belief No. 2 which says

“**There is one God:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, **a unity of three coeternal Persons.** 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." (*Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual, page 156, 2010*)

Notice here it is said that the "one God" is "a unity of three coeternal persons".

The Seventh-day Adventist Church may claim that their beliefs concerning the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are different from orthodoxy but the trinity doctrine itself (that the three are of one indivisible substance of God – one trinitarian being) is exactly the same. The Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church puts it this way (referring to the Athanasian Creed)

"Now this is the Catholic faith: We worship one God in the Trinity and the Trinity in unity, without either confusing the persons or dividing the substance; for the person of the Father is one, the Son's is another, the Holy Spirit's another; but the Godhead of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is one, their glory equal, their majesty coeternal. Inseparable in what they are, the divine persons are also inseparable in what they do." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, Part one, The Profession of Faith, No.'s 266, 267*)

As you probably know, because the Seventh-day Adventist Church now teaches that Christ is not begotten, also that the Holy Spirit does not proceed, they are compelled to come up with an alternative explanation. This explanation is that all three divine persons are only role-playing their various parts. Think about it for a moment: If these divine personalities are not what Bible says they are (a father, a son and a holy spirit) then what other explanation can be given other than to say they are role-playing? There cannot be one. They are either what the Bible says they are or they are not. It has to be one way or the other.

Remember though; to have a trinity doctrine it must be said that all three persons (role playing persons in the case of Seventh-day Adventism) are of one divine trinitarian being (of one indivisible substance). Now ask yourself this question: Where in the Bible can we find the evidence for such reasoning? I have never seen any. Have you?

Some may say that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit constitute 'one Godhead' but the word 'Godhead' is not the equivalent of 'trinity'. In fact the two words bear no resemblance to each other.

In the KJV of the Scriptures the word 'Godhead' is used three times (Acts 17:29, Romans 1:20, Colossians 2:9). It is translated from three different but similar Greek words. Each time though the Greek simply means divinity or pertaining to divinity etc. Just as 'manhood' is the essential nature (being) of man, so 'Godhead' (Godhood) is the essential nature (being) of God. There is nothing in the Greek words (translated Godhead) to suggest a unity of three as in the trinity doctrine.

Many translations of the Bible such as the NIV, the NASB, the RSV, the Complete Jewish Bible, the Holman Christian Standard and Weymouth translations, do not even use the word 'Godhead'. There are also probably many other translations that do not use it. In its place they use such as divine nature, God's nature, divinity, deity and divine essence etc.

A begotten Son

There is something else to which I would draw to your attention, albeit because of time

and space it will need to be said very briefly.

The Bible is very clear that Christ is the divine Son of God. This is irrefutable. As you know for yourself (so I will not quote them all here), there are many texts of Scripture that show it. The Bible also says of Christ that He is the only begotten of God, also that He is brought forth of God (John 3:16, Proverbs 8:22-31). This is what makes Him a Son. Without this begotten concept He would not be a son. This is exactly what Seventh-day Adventists taught throughout the entire time of Ellen White's ministry. As we shall see, God's messenger agreed with what they were teaching.

In the Review and Herald of April 17th 1883 (this was under the heading "Christ not a created being"), the following question was sent in by one of its readers

"Will you please favor me with those scriptures which plainly say that Christ is a created being? (Question No. 96, Review and Herald, April 17th 1883, The commentary, Scripture questions, 'Answers by W. H. Littlejohn')

W. H. Littlejohn, a prolific author and preacher who answered questions sent in by readers of the Review, who also that year became President of Battle Creek College, replied

"You are mistaken in supposing that S. D. Adventists teach that Christ was ever created. They believe, on the contrary, that he was "begotten" of the Father, and that he can properly be called God and worshiped as such." (Ibid)

Throughout the time period of Ellen White's ministry, Littlejohn's answer was the accepted belief of Seventh-day Adventists. It was believed that because Christ is begotten of God then He must be both the Son of God and God.

In 1890, Ellet J. Waggoner published a book called 'Christ and His Righteousness'. In this book, Waggoner presented views of Christ that were in keeping with what was then believed and taught by Seventh-day Adventists. This book is also said to be representative of his message at the now famous 1888 Minneapolis General Conference session. Waggoner, along with Ellen White and Alonzo Jones, was one of the main speakers at this conference.

Throughout his book, Waggoner expressed the belief that Christ, in eternity, is begotten of God. He wrote such as

"The Word was "in the beginning." The mind of man cannot grasp the ages that are spanned in this phrase. It is not given to men to know when or how the Son was begotten; but we know that He was the Divine Word, not simply before He came to this earth to die, but even before the world was created.... We know that Christ "proceedeth forth and came from God" (John 8:42), but it was so far back in the ages of eternity as to be far beyond the mind of man." (E. J. Waggoner, Christ and His Righteousness, page 9, 1890)

"The Scriptures declare that Christ is "the only begotten son of God." He is begotten, not created. As to when He was begotten, it is not for us to inquire, nor could our minds grasp it if we were told. The prophet Micah tells us all that we can know about it, in these words: "But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto Me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from the

days of eternity." Micah 5:2, margin. There was a time when Christ proceeded forth and came from God, from the bosom of the Father (John 8:42; 1:18), but that time was so far back in the days of eternity that to finite comprehension it is practically without beginning.

But the point is that Christ is a begotten Son, and not a created subject. He has by inheritance a more excellent Name than the angels; He is "a Son over His own house." Heb. 1:4; 3:6. And since He is the only-begotten Son of God, He is of the very substance and nature of God, and possesses by birth all the attributes of God; for the Father was pleased that His Son should be the express image of His Person, the brightness of His glory, and filled with all the fullness of the Godhead."

The above accurately sums up what Seventh-day Adventists believed at that time (the 1890's). Now note the following quote from Waggoner's book. He says

"It is true that there are many sons of God; but Christ is the "only begotten Son of God," and therefore the Son of God in a sense in which no other being ever was or ever can be. The angels are sons of God, as was Adam (Job 38:7; Luke 3:38), by creation; Christians are the sons of God by adoption (Rom. 8:14, 15); but Christ is the Son of God by birth." (*Ibid page*)

Now compare what Waggoner wrote with the following statement from the spirit of prophecy – which as the Scriptures declare is the testimony of Jesus (Revelation 19:10)

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

Ellen White is saying the same as Waggoner. This is that Christ is begotten of God (a true Son). In fact I would say she was probably using Waggoner's words to express what God had impressed her to write. Notice particularly the words "adoption", "creation" and "begotten". These are verbs (actions). Ellen White speaks of the begetting of Christ as a happening – just like creating (angels) and adopting (forgiven sinners) are happenings.

Ellen White clearly differentiated between the various 'sons of God' that are mentioned in Scripture. She says that whilst forgiven sinners are adopted sons of God, the angels are created sons of God. In contrast to this she says that Christ is the only One who is "a Son begotten in the express image of the Father's person". This certainly makes Him unique (one of a kind).

There are those who either doubt or deny that Ellen White meant that Christ is truly begotten of the Father and is therefore truly the only begotten Son of God but 6 weeks later she wrote

"The Eternal Father, the unchangeable one, gave his only begotten Son, tore from his bosom Him who was made in the express image of his person, and sent him down to earth to reveal how greatly he loved mankind." (*Ellen G. White, Review & Herald 9th July 1895 'The Duty of the Minister and the People'*)

In the penultimate statement, Ellen White wrote that Christ is “a Son **begotten** in the express image of the Father's person” whilst in the latter she says He “was **made** in the express image of his [the Father's] person”. This was the belief generally held at that time by Seventh-day Adventists.

It should go without saying that the word “made” was not used here by Ellen White to denote that Christ was a created being. This is evident from a reading of her penultimate statement. It could only have meant to show that this begetting was an ‘act of God’ (something that God determined should happen).

That these previous two statements refer to Christ’s pre-existence is undeniable. It would be impossible for them to be referring to Christ’s earthly birth at Bethlehem.

Seventh-day Adventists taught this begotten concept (concerning Christ) throughout the entire time of Ellen White’s ministry. As we have seen, she agreed with it. It is no surprise therefore that she wrote (when a schoolteacher claimed that Seventh-day Adventists were not teaching that Christ is divine)

“This man may not have known what our faith is on this point, but he was not left in ignorance. He was informed that there is not a people on earth who hold more firmly to the truth of Christ's pre-existence than do Seventh-day Adventists.” (*Ellen G. White, Review and Herald, 5th December 1893, ‘An appeal for the Australasian field’*)

This really is self-explanatory. It does not require an explanation. Every Seventh-day Adventist who read it would have accepted this as confirmation that what they were teaching about Christ (that in eternity He was begotten of God) is the truth concerning His pre-existence. This was confirmation from the highest possible source. It was the testimony of Jesus Himself. This is one of the reasons why this same ‘begotten faith’ continued for so long in Seventh-day Adventism. In fact in 1936, by the General Conference, it was declared to still be the official faith of Seventh-day Adventists. You can read about this here

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

Needless to say that because a denomination cannot change the faith of its membership overnight, this same faith continued to be published for decades afterwards. Our denominational publications show this to be true. This can be seen in chapter 17 of this study here

[A study of the Godhead – as it pertains to Seventh-day Adventism](#)

The faith of early Christianity

Over the years I have read a great deal of the early Christian writings – and all that I have read so far says exactly the same. This is that the belief amongst these early Christians was that Father is unbegotten whilst the Son is the only begotten of God. I cannot recall any early Christian writer who disputed this point. If you would like to read some of the comments of these early Christian writers you can do so by taking a look at sections 2 and 3 (The witness of Early Christianity – parts 1 and 2) of the ‘Begotten Series’ here

[The Begotten Series](#)

By the time of the Council of Nicaea (AD 325), these very same beliefs (the Father unbegotten, the Son the only begotten of God) had remained unchanged. This was after almost 300 years of Christianity. Important to note is that at Nicaea, no change to these beliefs was recommended. The only 'addition' at Nicaea was that it was said that the Father (the unbegotten) and the Son (the only begotten) were of the one and the same substance. The Holy Spirit was later included in this 'one substance' idea and so it was that the trinity doctrine was born. Eventually this doctrine (the trinity doctrine) became the central (foundational) belief of the fast-developing Roman Catholic Church.

The events of Nicaea are very interesting – as are the letters concerning it that were written around that time. Alexander, the Bishop of Alexandria, wrote one such letter. Along with his presbyter Athanasius, he was the main promoter of what we now refer to as trinitarian theology. In this letter he wrote

“We have learnt that the Son is immutable and unchangeable, all-sufficient and perfect, like the Father, **lacking only His “unbegotten.”** He is the exact and precisely similar image of His Father. For it is clear that the image fully contains everything by which the greater likeness exists, as the Lord taught us when He said, ‘My Father is greater than I.’ (*The Ecclesiastical History of Theodoret, Book 1, Chapter 3, ‘The Epistle of Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria to Alexander, Bishop of Constantinople’*)

Alexander was saying that there is a difference between the Father and the Son. This difference is that the Father is unbegotten whilst the Son is begotten (not unbegotten). He continued

“And in accordance with this we believe that the Son always existed of the Father; for he is the brightness of His glory, and the express image of His Father’s Person. **But let no one be led by the word ‘always’ to imagine that the Son is unbegotten, as is thought by some who have their intellects blinded: for to say that He was, that He has always been, and that before all ages, is not to say that He is unbegotten.”** (*Ibid*)

Again Alexander emphasises that the Son is begotten (not unbegotten). Notice he says that those who say that Christ is not begotten **“have their intellects blinded”**.

Interesting to note is that in a rendering this letter cited in ‘The Two Republics’ (this is a book that was written by A. T. Jones who was one of the main speakers at the 1888 Minneapolis Conference session), it says (note that Theodoret’s history needed to be translated into English therefore there are different translations available)

“But let no one be led from this to the supposition that the Son is unbegotten, **as is believed by some who are deficient in intellectual power:** for to say that He was, that He has always been, and that He existed before all ages, is not to say that He is unbegotten.” (*Ibid, as quoted in A. T. Jones ‘The Two Republics Page 333*)

It can be seen very clearly from this that even though Alexander was the prime mover of trinitarian ‘one substance’ theology’, he still maintained the belief that Christ is begotten of God. He says of those who would say that Christ is not begotten (unbegotten) that they are **“deficient in intellectual power”**.

There are those who attempt to have people believe that it was the Roman Catholic Church that introduced this begotten concept into Christianity but this is sheer

ignorance on the part of those who teach such a thing. It would be better if these people would study the facts of history rather than mislead people by teaching misrepresentations of it. That Christ is begotten of God (therefore He is truly the Son of God, also God) was the teaching of Christianity from the very beginning. This is how it was in Seventh-day Adventism prior to changing to this present role-playing idea.

I hope this may help you to understand how I see things.

God bless

Terry Hill

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