

The intent of this article is to help people better understand the history of the Father and Son debate which is integral to the present trinity controversy within the SDA Church. Everything referred to in this brief overview is detailed in the various articles on my website. If anyone wishes to see where any of these things can be found, please email me.

This article serves to compliment the recently published detailed analysis found [here](#)

[The Development of Trinity Theology within the Seventh-day Adventist Church – part 2](#)

### **A Brief Overview of the History of Father and Son Theology**

There are those who reject, and even mock, the begotten (Sonship) faith concerning Christ but it is very important to note that it was (a) the faith of early Christians, (b) the faith of SDA's for over 100 years, and (c) endorsed as the truth through the spirit of prophecy (confirmed as true by the Holy Spirit).

During the first centuries of the Christian era, the faith of Christians concerning God and Christ was very simple. They simply accepted as true what God had revealed through the Scriptures. This is that God is the Father of Christ, and that Christ is the Son of God. God the Father was referred to as the unbegotten, whilst the Son, in keeping with Scripture, was believed to be the only begotten of the Father (John 1:14). Thus it was accepted, as say the Scriptures, that Christ is the only begotten Son of God (John 1:18, 3:16, 18, 1 John 4:9).

In the early part of the 4th century, a crisis arose within Christianity. This originated at Alexandria in northern Egypt when a theological war broke out between Alexander the Bishop of Alexandria, and Arius, one of the Bishop's presbyters. As in most disputes, people began taking sides – and so the crisis escalated.

Both sides believed that the Father was unbegotten, also that the Son was the only begotten of God. This was not disputed. In fact the Bishop of Alexandria (someone whom today we would call a trinitarian), said that those who did not believe that Christ was begotten had their "intellects blinded", or, as another translation says, are "deficient in intellectual power".

No one today knows exactly (in every detail) what Arius was teaching (this is because the Roman Emperor Constantine ordered his writings to be destroyed) but from a letter he wrote to his friend Eusebius (the Bishop of Nicomedia), we know he believed that Christ, in His pre-existence, was both "perfect God" and "unchangeable". We can also pick up from early historians such as Sozomon, also from the Bishop of Alexandria, and from Athanasius (a presbyter who supported Alexander in his beliefs), that Arius taught that it was possible for Christ, because He had become incarnate, to sin; also, that if He had sinned, He would have become changed. This is no different than was generally believed by early SDA's. This belief was confirmed as true by Ellen White. See [here](#)

## Ellen G. White - The risk taken concerning Christ's existence

It may have been this 'risk' belief that had originally caused this 4<sup>th</sup> century dispute. This is because the Bishop of Alexandria believed that Christ was "incapable of fall". This is probably why the original Creed of Nicaea (which resulted from the council convened in AD 325 by Constantine in order to resolve the dispute), condemns those (like Arius) who say that Christ, because of the incarnation, was "changeable" and "alterable".

At the Council of Nicaea, philosophy was mixed with the pure Word of God. It was said that (a) Christ was everlastingly (without beginning) begotten of the Father, (b) that the Father and Son were of the one and the same substance (consubstantial), and (c) the Son, like the Father, could never change. This of course 'defeated' Arius, but it was only because of the introduction of philosophy (not Scripture).

Fifty-six years later at the Council of Constantinople (AD 381), the Holy Spirit was also deemed to be of the one and the same substance (consubstantial) with the Father and the Son, thus the trinity doctrine was 'officially' born.

It was at this time (the late 4<sup>th</sup> Century) that the Roman Emperor Theodosius 1 (Theodosius the Great) – who had been brought up believing the Creed of Nicaea - threatened all sorts of "severe penalties" upon those who would not accept this faith (see The Edict of Thessalonica AD 380). Those who did not confess it were banned from preaching. This eventually led to this same trinity faith becoming the flagship belief of the Roman Catholic Church (the Papacy). This church, throughout the centuries that followed, persecuted those who would not accept this faith.

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, God's remnant people (that eventually became the SDA Church) refused to adopt the philosophy that was attached to 'the trinity doctrine'. Instead they returned to the pure faith of the Bible (meaning they believed only those things that God has revealed for our edification, also for His divine purposes). They held to the belief that the Father is the source of all life, also that in eternity, in a way not revealed in Scripture, Christ was brought forth (begotten) of God therefore He is truly the Son of God. They also believed, because He was begotten of God, that He is God. This is in keeping with Scripture (John 1:1, 14)

Through the spirit of prophecy, this begotten (Sonship) faith was confirmed as true.

In 1893 when the faith of SDA's concerning Christ was challenged by a schoolteacher who had claimed that SDA's did not believe in the divinity of Christ (probably because we rejected the trinity doctrine, also because of the misinformation he had received about the beliefs of SDA's), Ellen White wrote of him

"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, 5<sup>th</sup> December 1893, 'An Appeal for the Australasian Field'*)

Ellen White's words are so clear that they cannot be misunderstood. She was saying that at that time (1893), SDA's were teaching the truth about Christ's pre-existence. She knew exactly what SDA's then believed and taught. She was therefore confirming them in their sonship (begotten) faith. Not once, in her 71 years of ministry for God, did she say that they were wrong in this belief.

Two years later in 1895, Ellen White again confirmed SDA's in what they were teaching about Christ.

"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, 30<sup>th</sup> May 1895, 'Christ our complete salvation'*)

In further confirmation she wrote 6 weeks later

"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 9<sup>th</sup> July 1895 'The Duty of the Minister and the People'*)

Instead of using the word "begotten" to explain Christ's source of being (as a separate personality from God the Father), Ellen White said that He was "made in the express image" of the Father's person. Her previous statement had said "begotten in the express image of the Father's person". In her mind therefore, *begotten* must have been closely associated with *made*, although we must remember, as she did make very clear (as did other SDA writers), that Christ was not a created being such as angels. She maintained that He was begotten of God, therefore, not only is He the Son of God, but also truly God.

That same year (1895), a camp-meeting was held at Armadale in Western Australia. One of the main speakers was W. W. Prescott. Ellen White was full of praise for this evangelist. She said that God had given him "a special message for the people", also that the truth had come from his lips "in the demonstration of the Spirit and in power". She also said of Prescott that the "inspiration of the Spirit of God has been upon him" also that "We have had the truth presented [by Prescott] in clear lines".

So what, during this time period (mid-1890's), was Prescott teaching about

Christ?

It was no different than what the entire church believed and taught. This was that Christ was begotten of God therefore He is truly the Son of God. Prescott taught that in becoming incarnate, Christ was “twice born”. He said that Christ had been born once of the Spirit in eternity, and again in the flesh here on earth, therefore our Saviour had experienced a “double birth”. He said that Christ was born again so that we might be born again.

Throughout the remainder of Ellen White’s ministry, SDA’s continued to teach this Sonship faith. It was even taught for decades after her death. This shows how deeply this begotten concept was rooted into the beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists. This is hardly surprising seeing that God, through the spirit of prophecy, had confirmed it to be true.

Just a short while after EGW died though, a move was made to change (modify) this faith. This happened in 1919 at a Bible conference held at Takoma Park. Only high-ranking personnel were allowed to attend. This is one of the reasons why it has been described as a “secret” conference.

At this conference, Prescott led out in a series of presentations on the person of Christ. In these presentations he introduced the idea that Christ was, without beginning, begotten of God. Prescott was returning to the same reasoning introduced into Christianity at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. Some agreed with Prescott, some did not. Those who did not agree with him, argued that what we had taught about Christ, while EGW was alive (and was still being taught in 1919), was the truth – and that it should not be changed. Others believed it should be changed.

The next year (1920), Prescott published a book called *The Doctrine of Christ: A Series of Bible Studies for use in Colleges and Seminaries*. The title reveals Prescott’s purposes for writing it. It also shows what was then being taught, in our learning institutions, about Christ.

In this book, Prescott spoke of Christ as existing because the Father wills Him to exist, also that the attributes possessed by Christ were derived from the Father. Prescott spoke of Christ’s personal existence as the result of Him receiving His life from the Father (which is the begotten concept). He continued to maintain though, as he had said at the 1919 Bible Conference, that this had been done without beginning.

In 1934, the General Conference requested that a set of Sabbath School studies should be produced that would clearly set out the official faith of Seventh-day Adventists. The first of these studies was published two years later in 1936. In these studies (appropriately called *Bible Doctrines*), the beliefs concerning Christ were the same as they had been from their denominational beginnings. This was that He was begotten of God in eternity, therefore not only was He truly the Son of God but also truly God.

Three years later in 1939, Judson Washburn, who had been one of the most well-known evangelists in the church, read the notes of a sermon that Prescott had recently preached. Washburn concluded that Prescott was introducing trinitarian concepts into the teachings of the SDA Church. This led to Washburn sending an open letter to the General Conference saying that the trinity doctrine was, as he put it, “seeking to intrude its evil presence into the teachings of the Third Angel’s Message”. It should go without saying therefore that at this time (1939), the beliefs of SDA’s did not include the trinity doctrine.

Washburn’s main objection to the trinity doctrine was that it denies that the divine person of Christ had died at Calvary. He said that this teaching qualified for the “very Omega of apostasy”. He also said that any doctrine that would lead people to believe that the divine Son of God had not died was an “evil doctrine” which had its source in Satan.

This particular objection, to the trinity doctrine, had been ongoing amongst leading SDA writers. This is because it denies that a divine person had made the atonement. Washburn, in keeping with what was then generally taught in our denominational publications, maintained that in eternity, Christ had been begotten of God, therefore He was the only begotten Son of God.

During the 1940’s and 1950’s, this same belief was continued to be published in SDA literature although by this time, moves were taking place, within Seventh-day Adventism, to bring in a theology that would say that God and Christ were not really a father and a son but that they were only role-playing (play-acting) the parts. So it is today, within official SDA publications, that the idea is presented that the terminologies ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ are only metaphors. Such is the place where the SDA Church now finds itself.

In arriving at this place, the SDA Church has distanced itself from early Christianity, distanced itself from the beliefs of the early SDA’s, distanced itself from the simple truths of the Bible, and distanced itself from the SOP. This is a tragic situation.

“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.” (*William Johnsson, Adventist Review, January 6<sup>th</sup> 1994, ‘Present Truth - Walking in God’s Light’*)

“As one line of reasoning goes, either the pioneers were wrong and the present church is right, or the pioneers were right and the present Seventh-day Adventist Church has apostatized from biblical truth.” (*Jerry Moon Ph.D., ‘The Trinity’, page 190, ‘Trinity and anti-trinitarianism in Seventh-day Adventist history’, 2002*)

“One of the remarkable aspects of the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the development of its position of the trinity and the deity of Christ. These doctrines did not become normative in the church until the middle of

the twentieth century". (*Merlin D. Burt, Preface to 'Demise of Semi-Arianism and anti-trinitarianism in Adventist Theology, 1888-1957', 1996*)

"The most recent major theological shift for Seventh-day Adventists was the formal adoption [in 1980] of the doctrine of the Trinity." (*Merlin Burt, Ellen G. White and Sola Scriptura, Page 10, 2007*)

Terry Hill

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