

The Spear article

The following article was written by a Presbyterian minister named the Rev. Samuel Thayer Spear D.D. (1812-1891). It was published in 'The New York Independent' in 1889 whilst 3 years later in 1892 it was included in the Seventh-day Adventist 'Bible Students Library'. The latter was a series of tracts, given to the public in general, explaining what Seventh-day Adventists believed. This reveals just what it was, in the early 1890's, that Seventh-day Adventists believed. This was just a short while after the famous 1888 Minneapolis General Conference. This shows also, following that conference, what was considered to be acceptable doctrine to Seventh-day Adventists. As will be seen, this was non-trinitarianism. It was the same faith that Seventh-day Adventists had always held.

Note that the title of the article is 'The Bible doctrine of the Trinity'. As well as the contents of the article, this title stands in opposition to the extreme non-biblical speculations of the trinity doctrine.

When this article was first published in the New York Independent (a prodigious religious non-Seventh-day Adventist newspaper) it was called 'The Subordination of Christ'. This was in 1889. Two years later when it was published in the Signs of the Times of December 7th and 14th 1891 it carried the same title. When it was reprinted and published as a tract for the Bible Students Library in 1892, the title was changed to 'The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity'. It is more than likely that this was done because the article stood in opposition to the orthodox trinity doctrine.

As you read Spear's article, I would ask you to note something very important. This is that when it was reprinted and included in the Bible Students Library, certain of the wording was omitted. This omission is struck through. Along with the contents of the article, also the title, this shows very clearly that in 1892 there was still animosity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church towards the trinity doctrine. This should tell us that in 1892, the Seventh-day Adventist Church was still predominantly non-trinitarian and that in taking our message to the public, we were very careful not to give the impression that we upheld the trinity doctrine – or – to put it another way, that we did not wish to identify our faith with the faith of Christianity in general, at least not on this point.

The entire article is given to explaining what the ***Bible alone*** has to say concerning the three personalities of the Godhead. It is also given to denying ***the extreme speculations of the trinity doctrine***. It can be seen therefore, when it was published as No. 90 of our Bible Student's Library, why the title was changed to 'The ***Bible Doctrine*** of the Trinity' (note my emphasis).

This article, because in its content it can only be described as being antagonistic to the trinity doctrine (this is particularly with respect to the various speculations involved in this teaching), can only be described as non-trinitarian. In fact I would say that any orthodox trinitarian reading this article would regard it as being decidedly anti-trinitarian. This reveals what was believed by Seventh-day Adventists in 1892. Regarding their views on the Godhead, this is obviously what the Seventh-day Adventist Church wanted the public in general to realise was their denominational stance.

Strange to relate, our church today is saying that the inclusion of Spear's article in the 'Bible Student's Library' is proof that trinitarianism was acceptable to be taught in our church at that time, also that it shows that the anti-trinitarianism was beginning to show some 'cracks'. This could hardly be true seeing that Spear's article was against the extreme speculations of the trinity doctrine.

Before reading the article I would ask you to consider certain comments regarding it that were made in our publications.

In 1894, two years after the including of Spear's article in 'The Bible Students Library', an explanation of this tract was given in the Signs of the Times. It said under the sub-heading of "No.90. The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity"

*"This tract of 16 pages is a reprint of an article in the New York Independent, by the late Samuel Spear, D.D. It presents the Bible view of the doctrine of the Trinity in the terms **used in the Bible, and therefore avoids all philosophical discussion and foolish speculation.**" (Signs of the Times, 28th May 1894, 'Bible Students Library, No.90, The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity')*

These words, also their intent, are very easy to understand. It

would be very difficult to misinterpret them.

Note very importantly the emphasis. It is on the fact, according to our church, that Spear did not get himself involved with “philosophical discussion and foolish speculation”. This is obviously with reference to the philosophical concepts and the speculations of the trinity doctrine. This is what our pioneers and our church was very much against. This is showing how Seventh-day Adventist then regarded the trinity doctrine. This was 6 years after the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference.

This write-up of Spear’s article concluded

“It is a tract **worthy of reading.**” (*Ibid*)

To this I would wholeheartedly agree.

Two years previously (this was when the tract was first introduced to the Bible Students’ Library) it said in the Signs of the Times

“No. 90 is entitled “The **Bible Doctrine** of the Trinity,” by the late Samuel T. Spear, D.D., and is reprinted from the New York Independent.” (*Signs of the Times, April 4th 1892, Volume 18, No. 22, page 352*)

It then added

“While there may be **minor thoughts in this worthy number which we might wish to express differently**, on the whole we believe that it sets forth the Bible doctrine of the trinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit **with a devout adherence to the words of Scripture, in the best brief way we ever saw it presented.**” (*Ibid*)

I would ask you to note here that this write up did not say that Spear’s article “sets forth the trinity doctrine” but said that it “sets forth the Bible doctrine of **the trinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit**”. Rather than referring to the trinity doctrine itself, reference is made to the trinity of divine personalities.

To the accolade given in this write-up, I would give my unreserved support. It is the finest explanation of the three personalities of the Godhead that I have ever had the privilege to read.

This write-up did say that in Spear's article there was certain "minor faults" that Seventh-day Adventists might have wished to "express differently" but these must have been considered so small that they were not regarded as important. It does leave one to wonder though what they were.

When this article was first published in the Signs of the Times (this was under its original title), it was said of it

"We call attention to the article entitled "The Subordination of Christ," by the late Samuel T. Spear, taken from the Independent. It was so long that we found it necessary to divide it. We trust that this ***candid setting forth of the Trinity will be read with care.***" (*Signs of the Times, December 7th 1891*)

The next week, when publishing the second part of Spear's article, it was said

"In this number is included Dr. Spear's article on the "Subordination of Christ". ***To this candid setting forth of the Trinity we believe that no Bible student will object.*** It is worthy of careful reading, not only for the subject matter it contains ***but for the way in which it presented.***" (*Signs of the Times, December 14th 1891*)

To the latter I would certainly agree. Spear's article is an outstanding and exceptional rendering of what the Bible alone says concerning the three personalities of the Godhead. I cannot see how anyone who is seeking the truth can find fault with it. I would recommend it being sent to anyone of any denominational persuasion.

Here now is Spear's article. Read, enjoy and be wonderfully blessed.

The Subordination of Christ

by the Rev. Samuel T. Spear D. D.

(Later published by the pacific Press as 'The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity' and included as No. 90 in 'The Bible Student's Library')

The Bible, while not giving a metaphysical definition of the spiritual *unity* of God, teaches His essential *oneness* in opposition to all forms of polytheism, and also assumes man's capacity to apprehend the idea sufficiently for all the purposes of worship and obedience. John 17:3; 1 Cor. 8:6. The same Bible as clearly teaches that the adorable Person therein known as Jesus Christ, when considered in his *whole* nature, is truly divine and truly God in the most absolute sense. John 1:1-18; 1 John 5:20; Rom. 1:3, 4; 9:5; Titus 2:13.

There is, however, a sense in which the Christ of the Bible, while essentially divine, is, nevertheless, in some respects *distinct* from and *subordinate* to God the Father. He is spoken of, and frequently speaks of Himself, as the Son of God, as the only-begotten of the Father, as being sent by God the Father into this world, and as doing the will of the Father. He is never confounded with the Father, and never takes His place. "My Father" is a phrase that was often on his lips. He not only prayed to the Father, but He described Himself as always doing the things that please Him. John 8:29. He said to Mary Magdalene, after His resurrection, "Go to My brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto My Father, and your Father; and to My God, and your God." John 20:17. He said to the disciples in the upper room, just before His death, "I go unto the Father; for My Father is greater than I." John 14:28. There is no difficulty in finding in His ministry abundant references to God the Father as in some respects *distinct* from and *superior* to Himself, and, hence, involving the idea of His own subordination.

The same fact appears in the writings of the apostles. Paul said to the Corinthians, "And ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's." 1 Cor. 3:23. He also said to them, "And the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God." 1 Cor. 11:3. He further said to this church: "And when all things shall be subdued unto Him, then shall the Son [Christ] also Himself be subject unto Him that put all things under Him, that God may be all in all." 1 Cor. 15:28. God is

said to have “raised him [Christ] from the dead, and set Him at His own right hand in the heavenly places,” to have “highly exalted Him,” after His resurrection, and to have “given Him a name which is above every name.” Eph. 1: 20; Phil. 2:9. These and the like passages do, beyond all question, make a distinction between God the Father and Jesus Christ, and to the former do assign some kind of superiority which implies subordination in the latter. No such superiority is ever assigned to Christ in respect to God the Father.

These facts—namely, the absolute unity of the Godhead, excluding all multiplicity of gods, the absolute divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ and the subordination of Christ in some respect to God the Father—when taken together, have led Biblical scholars to consider the question which relates to the method of harmonizing them. What shall be said on this point? The following observations are submitted in answer to this question:—

1. All the facts above stated rest on the same authority, and, hence, no one of them can be denied without denying *this* authority or misinterpreted the language used.

2. The Bible, while committing itself to the facts, does not assume even any *apparent* disharmony between them, and does not, in express terms, supply any specific theory for harmonizing them. In one class of passages we have the unity of the Godhead; in another class, the absolute divinity of Christ; in still another class, the distinction between God the Father and Christ, and the subordination of the latter to the former; and there is no effort in any of these passages, or anywhere else in the Bible, to harmonize the different statements. So the matter stands in the word of God; and if Christians were to confine their thoughts to simply what that word says, they would never raise any curious questions in regard to the subject, which is, perhaps, on the whole, the best course to pursue.

3. It is not necessary, for the practical purposes of godliness and salvation, to speculate on the point at all, or know what biblical scholars have thought and said in regard to it. It is enough to take the Bible just as it reads, to believe what it says, and stop where it stops.

4. If, however, as some are inclined to do, we undertake to explain

the different statements of the Bible relating to the subject, then we must not, on the one hand, adopt any theory of the trinity of the Godhead, of which the divinity of Christ is one element, that involves the supposition of three gods instead of one, and, on the other hand, we must not adopt any theory of the unity of God, or in respect to Christ, that logically excludes the divinity of the latter. All the statements of the Bible must be accepted as true, with whatever qualifications they mutually impose on one another. The whole truth lies in them all when taken collectively.

The Arian, who regards Christ as more than human but less than divine, and also the Socinian, who regards Him as simply human, are alike at fault in reasoning from those passages that set forth his subordination to the Father, and in omitting to give due and proper force to those that teach His absolute divinity. Neither accepts the whole testimony of the Bible in respect to Christ. This leads both to false though not identical conclusions. Christ is not, as the Socinian affirms, simply a man, and, in his higher nature, is not, as the Arian declares, less than divine. He is a *theanthropic* Christ, being divine and human at the same time, and is, hence, properly designated as the God-man. Great as may be the mystery of the fact, it is, nevertheless, a fact according to His own teaching and that of the apostles.

5. The subordination of Christ, as revealed in the Bible, is not adequately explained by referring it simply to His human nature. It is true that, in that nature, He was a created and dependent being, and in this respect like the race whose nature He assumed; and yet the Bible statement of His subordination extends to His *divine* as well as his human nature. Paul tells us that God “created all things by Jesus Christ,” and that He is the person, or agent,” by whom also He [God] made the worlds.” Eph. 3:9; Heb. 1:2. Neither of these statements can have any relation to the humanity of Christ, and yet in both God is represented as acting in and through Christ, and the latter represented as the medium of such action. So, also, God is described as sending forth His Son into this world, as giving “His only begotten Son” for human salvation, and as not sparing “His own Son” but delivering “him up for us all.” Gal 4: 4; John 3:16; Rom 8:32. These statements imply that this Son who is none other than Christ Himself, existed prior to his incarnation, and that, as thus existing, He was sent forth, given, not spared, but delivered up, by God the Father. The act assigned to God the Father in thus devoting “His own Son” to the work of human

redemption, relates to Him as he was before He assumed our nature in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and supposes in the Father some kind of *primacy* in making this devotement.

We learn also from Paul that when this Son, having been incarnated on earth, and having been subsequently exalted in heaven, shall have had all things put under him, “then shall the Son also Himself be subject unto Him that put all things under Him, that God may be all in all.” 1 Cor. 15:28. This implies subordination on the part of the Son to God the Father; and this subordination, whatever may be its exact nature, obviously relates to the higher nature of Christ, and not simply to His humanity. It was in this higher nature that He descended into the vale of humiliation, and it was in this nature that God “highly exalted Him.” Phil. 2:9.

Christ, when, after His resurrection, giving to His apostles their final commission, said to them, “All power *is given* unto Me in heaven and in earth.” Matt 28:18. The Greek word translated power means authority; and Christ here speaks of this authority as being delegated to Him. By whom was it delegated? — Evidently by God the Father, in respect to whom Christ said, on another occasion, “All things are delivered unto Me of My Father” Matt 11:27. In another passage we have these words “The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into His hand.” John 3:35

These scriptures, taken together, show that the subordination of Christ to God the Father, as stated in the Bible, is not limited simply to his human nature, but extends also in some sense to His higher nature. This is the view expressed by Dr. Meyer, in his comment on the words, “And ye are Christ’s; and Christ is God’s.” 1 Cor. 3:23. He says that it is “precisely on the *divine*, side of His being that Christ is, according to Paul, the Son of God, and, therefore, not subordinate *simply* in respect to His manhood.”

6. The conclusion from all the Scriptures put together is that there is in the Godhead some *essential and imminent distinction as to the mode of subsistence and operation*, in virtue of which Christ is properly spoken of as *subordinate* to God the Father, and also spoken of as divine and equal to the Father in power and glory, and that this distinction, whatever it is, does not conflict with the doctrine of the divine unity as taught in the Bible. This fact in regard to the Godhead makes its appearance in the great plan for human salvation. God, in this plan, is brought before our thoughts

under the *personal* titles of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, with diversity in offices, relations, and actions toward men. These titles and their special significance, as used in the Bible, are not interchangeable. The term “Father” is never applied to the Son, and the term “Son” is never applied to the Father. Each title has its own permanent application, and its own use and sense.

The distinction thus revealed in the Bible is the basis of the doctrine of the *tri-personal* God ~~or tri-une God, which has so long been the faith of the Christian Church~~ [the strikethrough is what was omitted from Spear’s article when it was reprinted and included in ‘The Bible Students Library’ in 1892 as ‘The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity’]. This doctrine, as held and stated by those who adopt it, is not a system of *tri-theism*, or the doctrine of three Gods, but is the doctrine of one God subsisting and acting in three persons, with the qualification that the term “person,” though perhaps the best that can be used, is not, when used in this relation, to be understood in any sense that would make it inconsistent with the unity of the Godhead, and hence not to be understood in the ordinary sense when applied to men. Bible trinitarians are not tritheists. They simply seek to state, in the best way in which they can, what they regard the Bible as teaching.

Our Saviour, in prescribing the formula to be observed in baptism, directed that converts to Christianity should be baptized “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” Matt. 28:19. Here we have the distinct element of *threeness* in three personal titles of the Godhead; and while this implies some kind of distinction between the persons thus designated, the language places them all on the same level of divinity. The baptismal formula, as given by Christ, is a strong argument in favor of this distinction; and yet no trinitarian ever understood Christ as here asserting or implying anything inconsistent with the essential unity of the Godhead.

Paul believed in the unity of the Godhead; yet in his Epistle to the Ephesians, he says: “For through Him [Christ] we both [Jews and Gentiles] have access by one Spirit [the Holy Spirit] unto [God] the Father.” Eph 2:18. Here, in form at least, is a manifest assumption of *tri-personality*. There is a difference, considered with reference to this “access” between the personalities mentioned. The access is *through* the one first named, *by* the second, and *unto* the third. The doctrine of the Trinity, as elsewhere derivable from the Bible,

is here incidentally implied as existing in the apostle's mind. Indeed, the element of *threeness*, in some sense not contradictory of essential unity, is clearly taught in the Scriptures with reference to God.

This *threeness*, moreover, does not, as claimed by those who hold the Sabellian theory, appear to be simply a threefold manifestation of God, as if one were to speak of Him as the Creator, the moral Governor, and providential Ruler of the world. Such a theory does not fairly express the natural and proper import of Bible language, and cannot be applied to that language without rendering it either tautological or absurd. We might say of a man that he is a father, a citizen, and a judge at the same time; yet no candid person, if acquainted with the Bible, would ever think of saying that this is analogous to the use of the titles *Father*, *Son*, and *Holy Ghost*, as employed in the Bible with reference to God. These titles, upon their face, appear to have a *personal* character, and are manifestly so used. The only reason why they must be qualified in such use grows out of the fact that the unity of the Godhead is also revealed in the Bible. If tri-theism were the doctrine of that book, then these titles, without any qualification, would appropriately express the fact.

7. All efforts to explain the precise *nature* of the distinction in virtue of which the God of the Bible is in some respect *tri-personal*, and in virtue of which Christ, while essentially divine, is, in some respect, *subordinate* to God the Father, must end in total failure, and hence had better be omitted altogether. The subject matter involved does not lie within the domain of human thought, and must be left among the things which we cannot know, and with which we should not perplex ourselves.

The theory of the *eternal generation* of the Son by the Father, with the cognate theory of the *eternal procession* of the holy Ghost from the Father, or from the Father and the Son, while difficult even to apprehend, and while at best but a mystical speculation is an effort to be wise, not only above what is written, but also beyond the possibilities of human knowledge. It is quite as great a mystery as that which it seeks to explain, and really explains nothing.

So, also, the theory of a threefold consciousness of the *triune* God—one consciousness for God the Father, another and a different consciousness for God the Son, and a third and a different

consciousness for God the Holy Ghost—is another speculation in respect to which we do not, and in this world, at least, never can know enough to either to affirm or deny. The exact mode in which the revealed Trinity is a fact is and must be to us a perfect mystery, in the sense of our total ignorance on the point. We do not, in order to believe the revealed fact, need to understand this mode.

8. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity—whether, as to its elements, taken collectively or separately — so far from being a dry, unpractical, and useless dogma, adjusts itself to the condition and wants of men as sinners. Paul said to the Ephesians that there is “one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling,” and then added that there is “one Lord,” Jesus Christ, connecting with him “one faith” and “one baptism,” and then, ascending to the climax of thought, added again that there is “one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” Eph. 4:4-6. What Christian head or heart will object to this statement of the Trinity?

To the Corinthians the apostle said: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen.” 2 Cor; 13:14. Who finds fault with the Trinity of the Godhead as set forth in this benedictive prayer? To the same church he also said: “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 Cor. 8:6. The phrase “of whom are all things, and we in Him,” as applied to the “one God the Father,” and the phrase “*by* whom are all things, and we *by* Him,” as applied to the “one Lord Jesus Christ,” differ from each other; and this difference in the preposition used implies a distinction between God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. God the Father appears in this language as the *primal* source, and Christ appears as the *medium*. So, also, the apostle said to the Ephesians “And be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.” Eph. 4:32. Here the forgiveness comes from God, who is one of the personalities of the Trinity, but it comes “for Christ’s sake,” and through Him, who is another personality in the same Trinity. Who has any objection to the doctrine as thus appearing? Who cavils with it when he asks the Father to forgive him for Christ’s sake?

The truth is that God the Father in the *primacy* attached to Him in the Bible, and God the Son in the redeeming and saving *work* assigned to Him in the same Bible, and God the Holy Ghost in his office of regeneration and sanctification – whether considered collectively as one God, or separately in the relation of each to human salvation—are really omnipresent in, and belong to, the whole texture of the revealed plan for saving sinners. In this plan there is nothing superfluous, and nothing that is not adapted to the *felt* wants of man. The simple-minded Christian, when thinking of these wants, and contemplating the divine Trinity, as he finds it in the Bible, has no difficulty with the doctrine. It is a light to his thoughts, and a gracious power in his experience. Content with the revealed facts, and spiritually using them, he has no trouble with them. He does not attempt metaphysically to analyze the God he worships, but rather thinks of him as revealed in His word, and can always join in the following Doxology:

“Praise God, from whom all blessings flow!
Praise Him, all creatures here below!
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host!
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!”

It is only when men speculate outside of the Bible and beyond it, and seek to be wiser than they can be, that difficulties arise; and then they do arise as the rebuke of their own folly. A glorious doctrine then becomes their perplexity, and ingulfs them in a confusion of their own creation. What they need is to believe more and speculate less.

End of article

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