

The Unaddressed Issue

By Terry Hill

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“Remember that Christ risked all; "tempted like as we are," he staked even his own eternal existence upon the issue of the conflict. Heaven itself was imperiled for our redemption. At the foot of the cross, remembering that for one sinner Jesus would have yielded up his life, we may estimate the value of a soul.” (*Ellen G. White, General Conference Bulletin 1st December 1895 'Seeking the Lost'*)

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The Word made flesh

It was at the age of 30 in 1973 that I first encountered the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Whilst there is much that could be said of this experience, the most important aspect of it was that it was here that I began to realise the immeasurable love that God has for fallen humanity.

Looking back on my life, I cannot remember a time when I did not 'believe in God', or when I did not believe that 'Jesus died at Calvary' but it was only when encountering Seventh-day Adventism that I came to the knowledge that in redeeming mankind from sin, God had not only sacrificed His only begotten Son but also, in allowing Him to partake of our human nature, had been willing, if necessary, to allow Him to go out of existence – that is if He had sinned.

This 'risk scenario' is something I came to realise through reading the spirit of prophecy (the writings of Ellen White). As a 'lesser light', this gift (the gift of prophecy) did its divinely ordained work in showing me what the 'greater light' (the Bible) actually reveals.

For me, the possibility of Christ yielding to temptation (sinning) and forfeiting His existence because of it (meaning if He had sinned) was a life-changing realisation. Coupled with the knowledge of Christ's death at Calvary, it revealed that the depth of God's love is far beyond our finite comprehension.

Within Seventh-day Adventism today there is still a great deal of talk regarding the life and death of Jesus but this has been significantly devalued by the acceptance of the trinity doctrine. This is because whilst supposedly upholding His divinity, for two very good reasons it obscures the lengths that God has gone to – also the lengths He was willing to go to - in redeeming mankind from sin. We shall see why this is so in this study.

The problem

Correctly understood, the trinity doctrine teaches that it was not the pre-existent divine Son of God who died at Calvary but only human nature. This is because trinitarianism teaches that when Jesus died, the personage of the divine Son of God was still 'alive' in His divinity whilst the truth of the matter is, He was decidedly dead in His humanity.

In becoming incarnate, Christ had surrendered His divinity to His humanity. This is why He could not awake Himself from death. He needed someone, other than Himself (namely the Father), to do this for Him. Like everyone else in death, the

Son of God did not know anything, neither could He experience anything. He was inanimate -'asleep' - awaiting a resurrection.

If the Father had not awoken (called) His Son from death then today He would still be in the tomb. This is the same as would have happened to Him if He had sinned – meaning that God would have left Him dead in the tomb forever – which is something that our Heavenly Father would have needed to live with forever. Allowing His Son to be made flesh did involve a tremendous risk. This reveals how much He loves us.

It must also be said that if the divine Son of God did not die at Calvary, then as an atonement for sin, our fallen world would only have a human sacrifice and not one that is divine.

Quite recently, in a conversation with a Seventh-day Adventist minister, I explained that this is what the trinity doctrine teaches (that only humanity died). He agreed with me that this is what it did teach – and he said that he believed it. He also said that all that was needed for atonement was a human sacrifice – and not one that is divine. This is something that is not believed by the author of these notes – albeit it is believed and taught by the ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. As we shall see in section four, there is confusion within Seventh-day Adventism today over who and what died at Calvary.

Secondly the trinity doctrine teaches that if God's Son had sinned, which we know from Scripture was possible (see section three), He would still have retained His eternal existence. This, say the trinitarians, is because this 'three-in-one God' can neither cease to exist or be divided. This means that just like the Father, the Son of God cannot cease to exist).

Although mostly belonging to denominations other than Seventh-day Adventism, many trinitarians believe that it had been impossible for Christ to sin. This is why they refer to Him as the impeccable (incapable of sin) Christ. This denies that He overcame sin because if it was impossible for Him to sin then how can it be said that He overcame it? Unless He could have sinned, His 'temptations' were not temptations. That Christ could have sinned has always been generally believed within Seventh-day Adventism.

As we undertake this study, it is important to remember that the trinity doctrine itself cannot be found in Scripture. This is why it is only an assumed doctrine. In other words, it is a man made teaching. This is also why it is not essential to believe as far as salvation is concerned – also why so many people reject it. In addition, there are those who reject it for the reasons specified above. As does the author of these notes, they realise it is actually contrary to Scripture – concluding that it belittles what God, through His Son, has accomplished.

There is one more thing to remember – and it is very important. This is that in speculating about that which God has not revealed (such as the trinity doctrine), we must be very careful not to make void what He has revealed. This may seem obvious but it is very important to remember. Keep this in mind as you continue through this study.

Initial encounters with the trinity debate

It was late in 1999 that I first came face to face with the trinity debate within Seventh-day Adventism. Up to then I had considered myself a devout trinitarian, but when I realised that the trinity doctrine did not allow for the belief that in becoming incarnate the divine Christ could have lost His eternal existence, also that it taught He did not really die at Calvary, I realised that this was not the case. I became aware that I did not really know what trinitarianism was all about. This is even though I had professed it for so many years. This I am sure is how it is with many Christians – even Seventh-day Adventist Christians.

Concerning this trinity debate, I have read a great deal of the literature published by the Seventh-day Adventist Church – much of which has dealt with their justification for changing their beliefs from non-trinitarianism to trinitarianism (we need to note here that throughout the time of Ellen White's ministry, the Seventh-day Adventist Church was strictly a non-trinitarian denomination). As to yet though, in their vindications of the trinity doctrine, I have never read anything that explains why, even if the Son of God had sinned, He would not have lost His eternal existence. This is why this article, written specifically to deal with this question, is called 'The Unaddressed Issue'.

Having made this observation, there was, published recently in the Review (April 2008), an article that did broach this subject, although it made no reference to the trinity doctrine. This was in the form of an editorial by Roy Adams - associate editor of the Review. This editorial was very well written. We shall see what he had to say, also why he said it, in section four.

In fairness to Roy Adams, he probably did not associate the possibility of the divine Son of God losing His eternal existence with the trinity doctrine. Most people do not see the association – neither do they see the conflict between the two beliefs – hence the reason why I have written this article

I have not read anything either that has addressed the issue of the divine Son of God not really dying at Calvary, but as this is dealt with in a previous article called '[Who or what died at Calvary?](#)', I will not go into this in detail again although later in section four we will return our thoughts to it. Obvious to relate, there is a very close link between the latter subject and the one we are dealing with here.

In section three we shall be taking a look at what the Scriptures say regarding the risk taken by Christ in becoming incarnate, also what we have been told through the spirit of prophecy. First though we need to consider the incarnation. This is very important because if we get this wrong, we shall get everything wrong.

The Word made flesh

The incarnation is a key factor in this study. This is why it needs to be asked - what really happened at Bethlehem 2000 years ago? – or, to put it another way, what did John mean when he said that “the Word was made flesh” (John 1:14)? Some may say that this is so obvious it does not need explanation but not everyone would agree. We shall see this now. John opens his gospel with these words

“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.” John 1:1-2

By these opening remarks, John makes abundantly clear the subject matter of his gospel. His entire accent is on “the Word”. It is also to show that this same Word is the pre-existent divine Son of God (John 20:31).

When John wrote his gospel (late 1st century), there were various erroneous beliefs in circulation. The ones we shall centre our thoughts on here are those concerning the nature of Jesus.

The first that comes to mind was the belief of the Docetists. They taught that Christ’s humanity was only an illusion - meaning that He only ‘appeared’ to possess a human body. This was based on the premise, as believed by many Gnostics, that all physical matter was inherently evil therefore a divine person would not have literally allied Himself with human flesh. This led to the belief that the crucifixion was also an illusion, meaning that the divine Son of God only ‘appeared’ to have died. As is said here by J. W. C. Wand (who was once Archbishop of Brisbane and Bishop of London)

“A third widely prevalent type of heretical thought was that of Docetism (from the Greek verb *dokein*, to seem). The Docetics taught that while Jesus was truly God His appearance as man was merely phantasmal. It is against such a view that the Johannine gospel and epistles emphasise over and over again the flesh-and-blood reality of the incarnate Son of God.” (*J. W. C. Wand, A History of the Early Church to A. D. 500, page 21, ‘The Sub-Apostolic Church’*)

Others, such as a man named Cerinthus, taught that the divine Christ entered into the human body of Jesus at His baptism – also vacating it prior to the crucifixion. This teaching maintained that the divine Son of God had His ‘earthly sojourn’ within

a 'human only' Jesus, without human nature actually becoming an integral part of His divine personage.

Important to realise is that in neither of these beliefs does a divine person actually become flesh. This means, according to these beliefs, that (a) the Son of God (the Word) did not really suffer or die at Calvary and (b) there was never any danger of Him losing His existence. As we shall see later, these very same conclusions are perpetuated in the trinity doctrine - albeit in a more subtle and more sophisticated form than in the teachings of the Docetists and Cerinthus.

In denying that the Word had literally become flesh, these false teachings denied the reality of what God had actually sacrificed in the giving of His only begotten Son to humanity. It was the divine purpose of John's gospel to combat these types of heresies.

From reading the writings of the early church fathers, it appears that John wrote His gospel particularly to refute the teachings of Cerinthus (see Irenaeus 'Adversus Haereses' Book III, chapter XI). This is why amongst his opening remarks, this gospel writer did not hesitate to say that a divine person had literally become flesh and had dwelt amongst us (John 1:14).

Note that at the very beginning of his gospel, John was very careful to differentiate between the two personalities of the Father and the Son. This he did by saying that "the Word was with God [Gr. ton qeon], and the Word was God [Gr. Theos], which literally translated says 'the Word was with **the God** and the Word **was God**'. We conclude from this that 'the God' is the Father whilst 'the Word' is the Son of God.

From these words, it is evident that the divine personage of the Word is not the same divine personage as whom He was with (meaning the Father). This is even though they are both God. This is because it is impossible for an individual to be with himself. We are talking here therefore in terms of two divine personages - both of whom are God. In consequence of this, it means that the Word was none other than God Himself in the person of the Son. How this is possible we shall see later.

On many occasion, Ellen White made the very same delineation. This is when she wrote

"In the absence of Moses the congregation demanded of Aaron to make them gods to go before them and lead them back into Egypt. This was an insult to their chief leader, the Son of the infinite God." (*Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church Volume 3, page 339, 'The Great Rebellion'*)

Here Ellen White refers to Christ as "the Son" and to the Father as "the infinite God". Note she is referring to Christ as in His pre-existence.

Twenty-five years later she had not changed her thinking (or her wording). She wrote

“The One appointed in the counsels of heaven came to the earth as an instructor. He was no less a being than the Creator of the world, the Son of the Infinite God.” (*Ellen G. White, Special Testimonies on Education, page 173, ‘The Divine Teacher’ 1897*)

Almost three years following the publication of *The Desire of Ages* she wrote (particularly note the title of this article)

“The Son of the infinite God came to this earth, and honoured it with His presence. He emptied Himself of His glory, and clothed His divinity with humanity, that humanity might touch humanity, and reveal to fallen man the perfect love of God.” (*Ellen G. White, Bible Echo, 14th January 1901, ‘No other gods before me’*)

Regarding the relationship between God and Christ, it will be seen that throughout her writings, Ellen White never changed her views. She maintained that the pre-existent Christ had always been the Son of God whilst the infinite God is His Father. In 1887 she wrote

“Satan well knew the position which Christ had held in Heaven as the Son of God, the Beloved of the Father; and that Christ should leave the joy and honor of Heaven, and come to this world as a man, filled him with apprehension. He knew that this condescension on the part of the Son of God boded no good to him.” (*Ellen G. White, Signs of the Times, 4th August 1887, ‘Christ’s Triumph in our Behalf’*)

She then added

“Satan could not comprehend the mystery of this great sacrifice for the benefit of fallen man. His selfish soul could not understand how there could exist benevolence and love for the deceived race, so great as to induce the Prince of Heaven to leave his home, and come to a world marred with sin and with the traces of the curse.” (*Ibid*)

Apart from being told here that in His pre-existence Christ was “the Son of God”, also that He is the “beloved of the Father” note that Ellen White says He actually vacated Heaven (left His home). As we shall see later, this is very important.

She also wrote 7 years after the publication of *The Desire of Ages*

“In His incarnation He [Christ] gained in a new sense the title of the Son of God. Said the angel to Mary, "The power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). While the Son of a human being, He became the Son of God in a new sense. Thus He stood in our world -- the Son of God, yet allied by birth to the human race. (*Ellen G. White, Signs of the Times August 2nd 1905, 'Christ our only hope'*)

This was no different than she had said in 1895 which was

“The more we think about Christ's becoming a babe here on earth, the more wonderful it appears. How can it be that the helpless babe in Bethlehem's manger is still the divine Son of God? ” (*Ellen G. White, Youth's Instructor 21st November 1895, 'Child life of Jesus No. 1'*)

Ellen White continually spoke of the pre-existent Christ as the divine Son of God, also to the Father as being the infinite God. Never did she confuse these two divine personalities.

God - also equal with God

Returning our thoughts to John and his gospel, this beloved disciple of Christ denied that the pre-existent Christ was, in any way, inferior to the Father. His opening words (John 1:1) make Christ equal to the Father – in fact he says the Word was God. This parallels the rest of the Scriptures because nowhere within them is the pre-existent Christ spoken of as a lesser god (a lesser divine being) than the Father. As the apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Philippi concerning Christ

“Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:”
Philippians 2:6

Again Christ is spoken of, in His pre-existence, as being “with God” - also that He was “equal” with God (meaning equal with the infinite God – the Father). It also says that before coming to earth He was “in the form of God”. This again reveals that God and Christ are two separate personalities, yet both are God. This is why the writer to the Hebrew Christians said

“But unto the Son he [God] saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom.” Hebrews 1:8

In summary of the above, it can be seen that the personage that John referred to as “the Word” is none other than God Himself yet He is not the Father. He is the Son

of God.

John later wrote

“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.” John 1:14

It is important to note here that it was not ‘the God’ (the Father – the infinite God) who was made flesh but the Word although having said this, because Jesus in His pre-existence was God, we can say in truth that He is God manifest in the flesh (1 Timothy 3:16).

A physical reality

Without reservation, John says “the Word was made flesh”. This is no ambiguous or philosophical play on words. This is why when writing to his “little children” he said (remember here that when John wrote this letter - which was late first century - false teachings were being circulated saying that the Son of God had not literally partaken of humanity)

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;”) 1 John 1:2

Here John is emphasising the reality of Christ’s humanity – meaning that Christ had literally vacated Heaven and had become flesh. John is also saying that he, as well as the other early followers of Christ, had seen and touched (handled) Christ.

John wrote this to assure his little flock – also to all those who in the future would read his letter – that believing a divine person had really become flesh was not a fable cunningly devised by Christians but something that had really happened.

John was doing exactly as the apostle Paul had counselled should be done. He was feeding the church of God – meaning protecting them from the specious teachings of “grievous wolves” that would come amongst them to draw them away from the truth (see Acts 20:28-29). These ‘wolves’ were such as Cerinthus and the Docetists (see above)

John was emphasising that Christ bore (possessed) in Himself no make-believe humanity. It was for real. The Greek verb translated “handled” here is the same verb (pselaphao) as used where Jesus invited Thomas to handle Him after the

resurrection (see Luke 24:39).

In this same pastoral letter, which was written around the same time period as his gospel, John also wrote

“Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.” 1 John 4:1-3

The intent of John’s words is so obvious that no lengthy explanation is necessary. He is saying that those who say that Christ had not literally been made flesh should not be believed – whoever it is that says it. He also wrote in another letter

“For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.” 2 John 1:7

Repeatedly John emphasised the reality of the Son of God becoming flesh. He could not have said it any more clearly. According to John’s words – and these were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit - any other belief is “antichrist”.

Through the leading of the Holy Spirit, John was obviously refuting the satanic heresies that were then in circulation amongst Christians - the main one being that the divine Son of God had not really been ‘made flesh’.

Through this beloved disciple, God is telling us something very important. We need to heed what He says. As we have been told through the spirit of prophecy

“Christ took upon himself human nature, a nature inferior to his heavenly nature.” (*Ellen G. White, Signs of the Times, April 26th 1899, ‘The Word made flesh’ Reprinted by request 5th April 1906 Signs of the Times*)

Ellen White also said in the next paragraph

“Christ did not make believe take human nature; he did verily take it. He did in reality possess human nature. "As the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same." He was the son of Mary; he was of the seed of David according to human descent. He is declared to be a man, even the Man Christ Jesus. "This Man," writes Paul, "was counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as he who hath builded the house hath more honor than the house."” (*Ibid*)

Brought forth of God

Many have asked the question - if the Father is God, how is it possible for Christ to be God – seeing that they are two separate personalities? Are there two Gods?

According to Scripture, Christ is the only one who has been brought forth of divinity (Proverbs 8:22-31). This is why He referred to Himself as the one and only Son of God (John 3:16). He also says of Himself that He has no existence separate from the Father (John 5:26, 6:57, 14:11, and 17:21), also that He can do nothing of Himself (John 5:19).

Christ is the wisdom of God brought forth (Proverbs 8:22-31, 1 Corinthians 1:24, 2:7) – God’s thought made audible (John 1:1) – or, to put it another way again – the personality of God shown (John 14:7-9). He is the only begotten of God therefore He is God begotten, the only one who truly knows God therefore He is the only one who can truly declare Him (see John 1:18, John 6:46).

Jesus claimed to be the Son of God (John 9:35-37). This is why the Jews said He was committing blasphemy (John 5:18, 10:33, 36). This is why they said also He should die (John 19:17). Even the demons recognised Him as deity (Luke 4:41, Matthew 8:28. Mark 3:11 and 5:7). The Scriptures tell us concerning Christ being brought forth of God

“The LORD possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth:” Proverbs 8:22-25

Solomon continued

“While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world. When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth: When he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the fountains of the deep: When he gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment: when he appointed the foundations of the earth: Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him; Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men.” Proverbs 8:26-31

These verses are speaking of the Word, the divine pre-existent Son of God. This is not a semi-divine person or a ‘god of sorts’. He is completely and fully divine – divinity Himself. He is the wisdom of God. This wisdom is not personification. These

verses are speaking of a person.

Christ is indeed the wisdom of God brought forth. He is the person of the Father brought forth – the personality of the Father shown. This is why He is no one less than God Himself in the person of His Son. This is how He can be God and yet not God the Father. The ‘language’ used here in these verses in Proverbs chapter 8 is ‘birth language’.

The historical position of Christianity is that these verses in Proverbs chapter 8 are speaking of the pre-incarnate Son of God. This can clearly be seen in the writings of the early church fathers. Ellen White, in her writings, endorsed this same view. She wrote in *Patriarchs and Prophets*

“And the Son of God declares concerning Himself: "The Lord possessed Me in the beginning of His way, before His works of old. I was set up from everlasting. . . . When He appointed the foundations of the earth: then I was by Him, as one brought up with Him: and I was daily His delight, rejoicing always before Him." Proverbs 8:22-30.” (*Ellen G. White, Patriarchs and Prophets, page 33 'Why sin was permitted?' 1890*)

Immediately previous to this she had written (after quoting John 1:1-2 as above)

“Christ, the Word, the only begotten of God, was one with the eternal Father -- one in nature, in character, in purpose -- the only being that could enter into all the counsels and purposes of God. "His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." Isaiah 9:6. His "goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting." Micah 5:2.” (*ibid*)

It was Christ, the only begotten Son of God, who became flesh. This is why it can be said that Jesus was God Himself manifest in the flesh, although He was not the Father (the infinite God).

That Christ is begotten (brought forth) of the Father was not in question with Ellen White. She wrote in 1895 (this is when she was in Australia completing ‘The Desire of Ages’)

“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'*)

Just 6 weeks later she further explained

"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'*)

Eight years after the publication of 'The Desire of Ages', Ellen White addressed the issue of Christ being God made flesh. She wrote after quoting John 1:1 (note the title of the article)

"The world was made by him [the Son of God], "and without him was not anything made that was made." If Christ made all things, he existed before all things. The words spoken in regard to this are so decisive that no one need be left in doubt. Christ was God essentially, and in the highest sense. He was with God from all eternity, God over all, blessed forevermore." (*Ellen G. White, Review and Herald, 5th April 1906, 'The Word made Flesh'*)

Notice in keeping with Scripture Ellen White says that Christ was not only "God essentially" but was "with God". She then added

"The Lord Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God, existed from eternity, a distinct person, yet one with the Father. He was the surpassing glory of heaven. He was the commander of the heavenly intelligences, and the adoring homage of the angels was received by him as his right. This was no robbery of God." (*Ibid*)

Notice too that Ellen White refers to Christ as the "divine Son of God". This she did consistently.

The words "He was with God from all eternity" and "existed from eternity" has led many to believe that Ellen White did not believe that Christ was brought forth of the Father but notice she immediately followed these words by saying

"The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way," he declares, "before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth; while as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world. When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth." (*Ibid*)

These words were penned 8 years after the publication of *The Desire of Ages*. They were in complete harmony with that which was then generally taught by Seventh-day Adventists. It was the denominational view. It was also in harmony with everything that Ellen White had previously written. Remember this was written in 1906.

In the Scriptures there is no other explanation given regarding *how* Christ was brought forth. That which has been said above is all that we know of this divine mystery. Whilst some have termed Christ as being 'generated' by the Father, or being 'born' of the Father' (which words are probably the closest we can get to this 'bringing forth' in human language), the fact remains that because God has revealed no more than the above, it is to the human mind as much a mystery as the incarnation. This is why we must not attempt to delve into it any deeper than the word of God reveals. The same can be said regarding the incarnation.

The incarnation – a mystery

As regards to *how* the incarnation was achieved, the Scriptures are totally silent therefore, just like the bringing forth of the Son, it remains a mystery known to God alone. All that we can do is to marvel in the realisation that God did accomplish it - also that He loves us so much that as a surety for our eternal salvation He sacrificed His only begotten Son.

This 'lack of information' regarding the incarnation does not prevent us contemplating this miracle. Rather it is something upon which our thoughts should continually dwell – not just at Christmas time. Unfortunately, in this contemplating, some have drawn erroneous conclusions. We know this because it has led some to make a dichotomy of Christ.

Allow me to explain.

Some have presented the idea that the 'humanity' of Jesus is something that can be separated from the 'divine person' (similar to the end conclusion of what was taught by Cerinthus). In so doing, they have made it appear as though the divine Son of God was like a puppeteer who was 'inside' the human body of Jesus manipulating it like a puppet. This has given rise to all sorts of wrong ideas concerning the incarnate Christ, one of which is that when He died at Calvary, it was only His humanity that died - and not the divine person. It has also spawned the belief that if Christ had sinned, it would only have been His humanity that would have been lost - and not the divine person. Such is the end result of such unfortunate surmising.

When John wrote that the ["Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us"](#) (John 1:14) he meant it literally. His purpose was to show that the divine Son of God had

actually vacated Heaven and had become what He had not been previously. In other words, in His pre-existence, the Son of God had been a person of one nature (divinity) but by reason of the incarnation (after He had vacated Heaven) He was the very same person with two natures – one divine and the other human.

John was totally silent regarding any explanation of how these two natures were allied together to form the one person of Jesus but in answer to false teachings that still abound today (as they did in John's day) we have been told through the spirit of prophecy

“The divine nature in the person of Christ was not transformed in human nature and the human nature of the Son of man was not changed into the divine nature, but they were mysteriously blended in the Saviour of men.”
(*Ellen G. White, Letter 8a, 1890, pp. 2, 3. To M. J. Church, July 7, 1890 Manuscript Release Volume 6, No. 356*)

Ellen White then said

“He was not the Father but in Him dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and yet He calls to a suffering world, "Come unto me, all ye that labor, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (*Ibid*)

We are also told of the incarnate Christ

“By his obedience to all the commandments of God, Christ wrought out a redemption for man. This was not done by going out of himself to another, but by taking humanity into himself.” (*Ellen G. White, Signs of the Times, April 26th 1899, 'The Word made flesh' Reprinted by request 5th April 1906 Signs of the Times*)

The very year that *The Desire of Ages* was released Ellen White wrote

“Christ's humanity could not be separated from His divinity.” (*Ellen G. White, Signs of the Times, 14th April 1898, 'Christ and the law'*)

She also said in the *Signs of the Times* the following year

“This is the mystery of godliness. The two expressions human and divine were, in Christ, closely and inseparably one, and yet they had a distinct individuality.”
(*Ellen G. White Signs of the Times, 10th May, 1899, 'Christ glorified', see also the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, Volume 5 page 1129*)

As did John the gospel writer, Ellen White is saying here that the Son of God literally became flesh. In Christ these two natures did not mix to form a third nature

but were mysteriously blended to form one person – the man Jesus.

The counterfeit view of the incarnation says that the person of the divine Son of God only inhabited humanity - like a hermit crab inhabiting a seashell. In this counterfeit scenario, regardless of what happens to His humanity, the divine Son of God (the Word) remains unscathed.

This 'puppeteer/puppet view' of the incarnation is very similar to a pantheistic idea of God 'in things'. This is undoubtedly a wrong view of the Word becoming flesh but it is perpetuated in the teaching known as the trinity doctrine.

On earth – not in Heaven

It is generally believed by trinitarians that because Christ is of one substance (one essence) with both the Father and the Holy Spirit, He never actually leaves His Father's side. This is the philosophical and speculative reasoning of trinitarianism. When I asked an Orthodox Priest if it was possible within trinitarianism for the Son to cease to exist, this is what he said to me

"We [orthodox trinitarians] maintain rather the invariability of the Godhead (its simplicity and unity) in the sense that no action can lead to ontological change; namely in this case that the Word, one ousia with the Father and the Spirit, never leaves the Father's side even when He joins with our human nature in the Incarnation." (Email, Father Gregory Hallam to Terry Hill, 16th May 2007)

Notice particularly the final sentence. It is being said that within trinitarianism, it is taught that even when joining with human nature (meaning the incarnation), the divine Son of God "never leaves the Father's side". This is because He is said to be of the same substance as the Father, meaning each having their existence in the one and the same substance. This is known as consubstantiality.

This is opposite to what we have been told through the spirit of prophecy. Ellen White said that Christ literally vacated Heaven and had "exiled Himself from His Father". We shall see this later. Two years previously, on the same subject, I had also asked the following question (stating what I regarded trinitarians as believing)

"Overall, it does seem to me that you [trinitarians] are saying that the second hypostasis in the trinity was still 'alive in the trinity' whilst the human Christ died. If this is correct then it must be then that the 2nd hypostasis (2nd person) of the trinity did not die at Calvary. Is that correct what you are saying or have I got it wrong?" (Email, Terry Hill to Father Gregory Hallam, 4th September 2005)

Father Hallam answered me by saying

“When Jesus died, you are right, Person-Hypostasis/Logos/Word/Eternal Son/divine nature did not die BUT the human nature subsisting as a human body and soul exactly the same as our own in all senses except sin DID die and it is this death that brings the divine nature in the Godhead down to the depths of Sheol and Hell to liberate the Cosmos from the clutches of eternal death in the resurrection.” (Email, Father Gregory Hallam to Terry Hill, 4th September 2005)

Notice first of all, in the first sentence, that divine nature is said to be the same as divine person. This is a mistake. Nature and person are two different things. Saying they are the same is that which leads to the idea that the divine Son of God did not die at Calvary – also that He could never lose His existence. We shall see this more clearly in following sections, especially section four.

In the above explanation of trinitarianism, it is clearly said that the divine Son of God - the Word – did not die at Calvary. It is said that only humanity died. This very same trinitarian view is perpetuated in the hymn ‘A Great and Mighty Wonder’ (a well-known Christmas carol concerning the incarnation), the second verse of which says

“The Word becomes incarnate and yet remains on high,
And cherubim sing anthems to shepherds from the sky.
Repeat the hymn again: “To God on high be glory
And peace on earth to men!”
(St. Germanus, ‘A Great and Mighty Wonder’)”

This is typical trinitarian theology – albeit in song. It says that in the one substance of God, the Son of God is always alive. This has led to the belief that when Jesus was on earth He was also with His Father in Heaven. In orthodox theological circles, the allying of divine nature with human nature is referred to as the ‘hypostatic union’. This is a teaching not spoken of in Scripture.

Jesus made it clear that prior to coming to earth He was in Heaven with His Father. He said to His disciples

“For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me.” John 6:38

“What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before?”
John 6:62

During His time on earth, the Son of God did not flit between Heaven and earth, neither was He in heaven in His divinity whilst at the very same time here on earth

in His humanity. Since His first advent, meaning after He had vacated heaven, He had not returned to His home – at least not until after the resurrection.

As He said to Mary on the morning of His resurrection

“... Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but 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

The Son of God literally vacates Heaven

Through the spirit of prophecy we have been clearly informed that the Son of God literally vacated Heaven. This protects us against philosophical (idealistic) reasoning as in trinity orthodoxy.

“It is important that we each study to know the reason of the life of Christ in humanity, and what it means to us, -- why the Son of God left the courts of heaven,-- why he stepped down from his position as Commander of the heavenly angels, who came and went at his bidding,--why he clothed his divinity with humanity, and in lowliness and humility came to the world as our Redeemer.” (*Ellen G. White, Youth’s Instructor 21st January 1897 ‘Christ’s Mission to Earth’*)

“A way is opened before everyone in the office to engage from the heart directly in the work of Christ and the salvation of souls. Christ left heaven and the bosom of His Father to come to a friendless, lost world to save those who would be saved.” (*Ellen G. White, 3rd Vol. Testimonies page 190 ‘Laborers in the Office’*).

“He exiled Himself from His Father and exchanged the pure companionship of angels for that of fallen humanity, all polluted with sin.” (*Ibid*)

She also said in 1891

“Christ stepped down from his exalted throne, left the royal courts, clothed his divinity with humanity, and became a man among the children of men; he humbled himself even to the suffering and death of the cross, that man might be exalted, that man might become a partaker of the divine nature, be an overcomer, and have a place with Christ upon his throne in glory.” (*Ellen G. White, Signs of the Times. 15th June 1891 ‘He that Hath an Ear, let Him Hear’*)

Repeatedly Ellen White said that in taking to Himself human flesh, the Son of God had literally vacated Heaven. Notice who it was she said actually suffered the agonies of Calvary. It was not simply human nature but the pre-incarnate Christ –

the divine Son of God.

Note well the following statement

“If Christ had studied his convenience, he would never have left heaven to come to our world to die, to hang upon the accursed tree for us.” (*Ellen G. White, Review & Herald, 10th June 1890, ‘Conditions for Obtaining Eternal Riches’*)

That Christ “left Heaven” and “exiled Himself from His Father” is the reality of the gospel. It must not be obscured by philosophical reasoning such as found in the trinity doctrine. Notice here who hung upon the “accursed tree”. It was the pre-existent divine Son of God. As has been said previously, some believe that when Jesus was on earth He was also in Heaven with His Father. As proof of their assertions they quote Jesus as saying

“And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.” John 3:13

Some scholars believe that the latter part of this text (“which is in heaven”) was added by a scribe when translating the Bible. As it says in the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary

“Important textual evidence may be cited (cf. p. 146) for the omission of this clause” (*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, Volume 5, page 929, 1956 edition*)

Interesting also is that certain translations leave out this part of the verse. These include the ‘New International Version’ and ‘The New Jerusalem Bible’. Ellen White though makes this comment

“Though Christ humbled Himself to become man, the Godhead was still His own. His Deity could not be lost while He stood faithful and true to His loyalty. Surrounded with sorrow, suffering, and moral pollution, despised and rejected by the people to whom had been intrusted the oracles of heaven, Jesus could yet speak of Himself as the Son of man in heaven. He was ready to take once more His divine glory when His work on earth was done.” (*Ellen G. White, Signs of the Times, 10th May 1899, ‘Christ glorified’*)

Although not actually quoting the verse in question (John 3:13), it is evident that Ellen White is making reference to it. She is not saying that Jesus was also in Heaven whilst He was here on earth but that when He said “even the Son of man which is in heaven” He was referring to (thinking forward to) “when His work on earth was done”.

Notice here also we are told that Christ could have lost His Deity. We shall return to this quotation in the section three. It is obviously very relevant to our study.

In the next section we shall be taking a look at the trinity doctrine in history. We shall see why it was formulated. Then in section three we shall be taking a look at the Scriptures and the spirit of prophecy to see what they tell us regarding the possibility of Christ sinning – also if He could have lost His existence.

Section two

The trinity doctrine in history

As I once was, there are many today who are unaware of what is taught by the trinity doctrine therefore in this section we shall see why it was originally formulated. This will tell us of its objectives and its purposes.

Why the trinity doctrine was formulated

It was in the 4th century that the trinity doctrine was officially introduced into Christianity. This came about because Arius, a priest in Alexandria, objected to what his bishop (Alexander of Alexandria) was teaching. Many believe that the objection made by Arius was simply concerning the deity of Christ but as we shall see later, it was a far more complex issue.

The initial disagreement between Arius and Alexander led to a 'split' within Christianity, which, if allowed to continue, had looked as though it was going to undo what many believe were the plans of the Roman Emperor Constantine to use Christianity to unite his ailing kingdom. In an effort to heal this controversy, Constantine sent letters to both of them. When all attempts failed – also so that the issue might be resolved - the emperor summoned the bishops of Christianity to a council. This is believed to be the very first Christian ecumenical council. It was held at Nicaea (now Iznik, Turkey) in AD 325.

The majority of those in attendance came from the east. The west was poorly represented. A popular figure given of the total number who attended is 318 although this is disputed. Some say it was a lot less. It has been estimated by some that Constantine invited around 1800 bishops. This means that even if it was 318 that attended, it was less than 1/5 of those invited. We are left to conjecture why the other 1500 did not attend.

Whilst we will not be going into all the details concerning this council here, it will be seen that to defeat Arius, a creed was formulated that became the basis of what we

now know as the trinity doctrine. As we shall also see, in order for it to be formulated, it was necessary to go 'outside' of Scripture. In other words, in the making of the creed, conclusions had to be drawn (speculations really) that cannot be supported by using Scripture alone.

Fifty-six years following the Council of Nicaea (AD 381), at another council held at Constantinople, this same creed was embellished to include beliefs concerning the Holy Spirit (at Nicaea it was only said "we believe in the Holy Spirit"). This became what we know today as the orthodox trinity doctrine.

In order that we can see the reasoning behind why the Creed of Nicaea was formulated, also why it was necessary to go 'outside' of Scripture to formulate it to defeat Arius, we shall now take a look at some of the beliefs held by this popular presbyter. It was these beliefs, in contrast to what Alexander was teaching (trinitarianism) that began the debate. Interesting to note is that as well as being a greatly respected presbyter, Arius was also considered an excellent theologian.

In his church history, Sozomon (c. AD 380 - 450) described Arius as

"A most expert logician (for he is said to have been not without proficiency even in such studies) he plunged headlong into absurd arguments, and had the audacity to preach in church what no one before him had ever suggested, namely, that the Son of God has come into existence 'out of the non-existent' and that 'there was when he was not', that as possessing free will he was capable of virtue or of vice, and that he was created and made, and he gave voice to many other similar assertions which one professing such views might utter." (*Sozomon, taken from A New Eusebius by J. Stevenson, revised by W. H. C. Frend, page 322*)

Sozomon obviously did not agree with the beliefs of Arius. This same historian had previously written

"But even though religion was in a flourishing condition, in this way and all other respects, yet the churches were disturbed by certain sore contentions; for under the pretext of piety, and of seeking a complete discovery of God, certain questions were agitated which had not until then been examined." (*Ibid*)

He then made clear

"Arius was the originator of these disputations." (*Ibid*)

Arius, according to Sozomon, in an effort to make a "complete discovery of God", had been bringing to the fore questions that he (Sozomon) said that up to this time had not been considered. It must be asked here - could Arius, just like the author of

these notes you are now reading, have been seeking to defend the extent that God had been willing to go in order to save mankind from sin, therefore in the process showing the extent of God's love for fallen humanity (see section one).

It is only reasonable to believe that this is more than likely. Arius obviously believed that Christ could have sinned therefore in becoming incarnate (being made flesh) He had put His existence 'on the line'. This shows us how much God and Christ love us but as we noted in section one, trinitarianism, which Alexander was teaching, prohibits this belief. This is obviously why Arius was objecting to his bishop's 'new found' theology.

As far as our study is concerned, note very importantly that according to Sozomon, Arius believed that Christ possessed "free will" therefore in consequence could have sinned ("capable of virtue or of vice"). Sozomon regarded this particular outcome as one of this presbyter's "absurd arguments". Visibly Sozomon did not agree with this reasoning. This is one of the main reasons why the Creed of Nicaea was formulated. It was to prohibit this type of belief. We shall take a look at this creed later.

Concerning the Son of God

From reading the writings of the apostolic fathers, also the writings of early apologists, it can be clearly seen that the belief of early Christianity was that Christ was brought forth of the Father – meaning that He was truly the Son of God. In brief, Christ was described as the begotten of the unbegotten (the Father). This is why this belief, at the Council of Nicaea, was not disputed. In other words, with regards to Christ being the one and only begotten Son of God, all the attendees at the council believed the same – i.e. that Christ has His source in the Father.

Unlike those who opposed him, Arius formed his beliefs based on Scripture alone - which simply says that Christ was brought forth of the Father (we noted the latter in the previous section). Logically he concluded that there must have been a time when as a separate personality from the Father, the Son was not brought forth. Those who opposed him said that Christ was **everlastingly brought forth** (everlastingly begotten) which would obviously make the Son eternally co-existent with the Father.

As we shall see, the beliefs of Arius do not make him say that Christ was a lesser divine being (a lesser god) than God the Father but simply that the Son has His source in the Father. Trinitarians would disagree. This is because Arius would not admit to the Son being of (belonging to) the **same substance** of the Father. This was more than likely because Arius would have believed that if the Son had sinned and have been lost through doing so, he (Arius) could not see how God could be divided – so he said that they were not of the same substance. In trinitarian 'speak',

this 'one substance' theory is known as consubstantiality. This is not spoken of in Scripture although it is evident why so many people believe it. After all, according to Scripture, the pre-existent Christ was God.

From what Sozomon wrote, it can be clearly seen that Arius believed that Christ could have sinned, also that He would have become changed if He had done so. This is in opposition to the belief of trinitarians. They believe that because the personalities of the Godhead are all of **one indivisible substance** (the singular existence of God), the Son is unchangeable (immutable). It follows therefore, taking this teaching to its natural conclusion, that just like the other personalities of the Godhead, it is impossible for the Son to cease to be. In other words, the Son could not have sinned and become lost because of it.

Interesting to note is that the majority of bishops at the Council of Nicaea were what we might term 'middle of the road'. As was said above, they believed that Christ was begotten of the Father (has His source in the Father) but it seems were quite happy to leave it there without pressing the issue any further. History records that the bishops were reluctant to sign the creed that defeated Arius.

History also records that after the council had been dismissed (disbanded), the majority of these bishops did not teach the 'new creed' but continued to teach the same as they had previously taught – hence following Nicaea, the majority teaching concerning Christ was still devoid of trinitarian precepts. It was decades following the Council of Nicaea that trinitarianism (three divine personalities in one indivisible substance/essence) became a prevalent teaching in Christianity.

This 'trinity teaching' eventually became the central doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church (the Papacy) and those who opposed it, in one way or another, were persecuted for their faith. This was the beginning of church/state persecution.

Returning our thoughts to Sozomon – he would not have personally known Arius. This is because he was not born until over 40 years after Arius had died. This means that whatever Sozomon knew of this presbyter, also of his beliefs, was only that which had been passed on by others. This is because at Nicaea, on the orders of Constantine, all of the writings of Arius were destroyed. Arius himself was exiled for his faith but Constantine later ordered the church to re-instate him to his former position.

Concerning who was right and who was wrong in this dispute, the recalling of Arius from exile does not prove anything but it is a fact of history that it happened. Constantine obviously realised that an injustice had been done to Arius. Constantine was later baptised by an 'Arian' bishop. This implies that rather than sympathizing with the beliefs of Alexander (trinitarianism), in the finality he favoured the beliefs of Arius.

Alexander and the beliefs of Arius

Sozomon's remarks concerning Arius are very similar to those of Alexander. He wrote to his namesake in Constantinople

“And do not these words, I begot thee from the womb before the morning plainly show the natural sonship of the paternal birth of One whose lot it is, not from diligence of conduct, or exercise in moral progress, but by individuality of nature? Hence it ensues that the filiation of the only-begotten Son of the Father is incapable of fall; while the adoption of reasonable beings who are not His sons by nature, but merely on account of fitness of character, and by the bounty of God, may fall away, as it is written in the word, ‘The sons of God saw the daughters of men, and took them as wives,’ and so forth.” (*Alexander of Alexandria to Alexander of Constantinople, Theodoret's History, Book 1 chapter 3 page 38*)

As do many trinitarians today, Alexander believed that Christ was “incapable of fall” meaning that it was impossible for Him to sin. This was the same as was said by Sozomon (see above). This is ‘trinitarian reasoning’. Alexander was someone who today we would refer to as a staunch trinitarian. Just like Sozomon, he held to a view of the pre-existent Christ, also of the incarnation, that did not allow for the divine Christ to sin or undergo change. Here he was refuting the beliefs of Arius.

In a letter to his clergy, Alexander more or less expressed the very same sentiments. He wrote concerning the beliefs of the followers of Arius

“Some one accordingly asked them [the Arians] whether the Word of God could be changed, as the devil has been, and they feared not to say ‘Yes: he certainly could; for being begotten and created, his nature is susceptible of change.’ We then, with the bishops of Egypt and Libya, being assembled together to the number of nearly a hundred, anathematized Arius for his shameless avowal of these heresies, together with all such as have countenanced them.” (*Alexander to his clergy, c. AD 319, taken from A New Eusebius by J. Stevenson, revised by W. H. C. Frend*)

These remarks are with reference to a synod (a council) initially called by Alexander to deal with the fact that Arius had objected to what he as Bishop of Alexandria was teaching. This was previous to the Council of Nicaea. At this synod, Arius had been condemned and “anathematized”.

We can see from this that Arius was first “anathematized” because he believed that Christ - “the Word of God” - could have sinned and in consequence, if He had sinned, would have become changed. As this is compared with how “the devil” changed, it could be construed that Arius believed that Christ, in His pre-existence,

could have fallen (sinned) but this would not be in harmony with the evidence of history. We shall discover this now. We shall also see that it was thought that Arius was making the Son of God less than God but again this is not true. This is only reasoned by trinitarians because Arius would not accept the trinitarian concept of Christ, meaning that He, the divine Son of God, is eternally begotten (eternally brought forth) and of the same substance as the Father.

The beliefs of Arius

In a letter recorded in the ecclesiastical history of Theodoret, Arius wrote

“But we say and believe, and have taught, and do teach, that the Son is not unbegotten, nor in any way part of the unbegotten; and that He does not derive His subsistence from any matter; but that by His own will and counsel He has subsisted before time, and before ages, as perfect God, only begotten and unchangeable, and that before He was begotten, or created, or purposed, or established, He was not. For He was not unbegotten.” (*The Ecclesiastical History of Theodoret, Book 1, Chapter 3, ‘Letter of Arius to Eusebius of Nicomedia’*)

Although Arius was here denying the orthodox trinitarian concept of the pre-existent Christ, he did believe, as did the majority of Christians living at that time, that Christ was truly the Son of God, meaning that He is begotten (brought forth) of the Father. In opposition to what many say he believed, Arius did not say that the Son of God was a creature like as angels or humanity are creatures but that “by His own will and counsel” had “subsisted before time, and before ages, as perfect God, only begotten and unchangeable”. This cannot be said of literal ‘creatures’.

From his letter, we can see that Arius believed that the Son of God, in His pre-existence, was no one less or nothing less than “perfect God” and “unchangeable” yet we can see from the other Christian writers that one of this presbyter’s main ‘objected to beliefs’ was that the incarnate Christ could have sinned, also that because of it could have been become changed. This means that Arius must have believed that by reason of the incarnation, Christ had forfeited His natural right to His pre-existent immutability and had subjected Himself to being tempted as is fallen humanity.

In other words, as does the author of these notes, Arius must have believed that by virtue of the incarnation, the divine Son of God became subject to the possibility of sinning, also subject to becoming changed because of it (if He had sinned). On the other hand, the Alexandrians, those whose theology became what we now know today as trinitarianism, disagreed with this reasoning. They said it was impossible for the divine Christ to undergo change. This is the same as believed today by trinitarians.

Trinitarianism

Athanasius was the 'arch opponent' (also arch enemy) of Arius. He was a deacon and also Alexander's 'right hand' man. At the Council of Nicaea he was secretary to Alexander. After Alexander had died he became Bishop of Alexandria. Some say he was a far superior theologian than Alexander. Speaking of the beliefs of Arius, Athanasius wrote quoting portions from 'The Thalia' (written by Arius). He quoted Arius as saying

“And by nature, as all others, so the Word Himself is alterable, and remains good by His own free will, while He chooseth; when, however, He wills, He can alter as we can, as being of an alterable nature. For 'therefore,' saith he, 'as foreknowing that He would be good, did God by anticipation bestow on Him this glory, which afterwards, as man, He attained from virtue. Thus in consequence of His works fore-known, did God bring it to pass that He being such, should come to be.’” (*Athanasius, Discourses against the Arians, Discourse 1, chapter 2, 'Extracts from the Thalia of Arius'*)

During the Council of Nicaea, Alexander and Athanasius were the foremost promoters of present-day trinitarian reasoning although because he was a deacon and not a bishop, Athanasius could not actually be a 'delegate'. Note that Athanasius said that Arius had believed that “the Word Himself is alterable”, also that He had only remained free from sin by the exercise of His own “free will”. Neither Athanasius nor Alexander, believed this to be true.

At the Council of Nicaea therefore, in order to defeat Arius and all who believed the same (that Christ could sin and undergo change), the finally accepted creed said

“And whosoever shall say that there was a time when the Son of God was not, or that before he was begotten he was not, or that he was made of things that were not, or that he is of a different substance or essence [from the Father] or that he is a creature, or subject to change or conversion — all that so say, the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes them.” (*The finally accepted creed of Nicaea*)

This creed refuted everything believed by Arius that had initiated the dispute. This included Christ being brought forth (begotten) of God at a point in eternity (not everlastingly begotten as says orthodox trinitarianism), also that Christ was not of (meaning belonging to) the same substance as the Father (consubstantial with the Father). It was also formulated to deny the belief of Arius that in becoming incarnate, the pre-existent Christ became subject to change because He could have sinned. It was probably the latter that brought about the final and total condemnation of Arius. Trinitarians would pronounce an anathema on all who would dare believe such a thing. They would say, as they said of Arius, that He was

making Christ someone less than God – a creature even.

All credit to Arius, he stood by Scripture alone and did not seek to go beyond what God, through His written word, has revealed. In the finality, this is why he was condemned. It is also why the Church has condemned many people. They have remained loyal to the Scriptures.

In direct contrast to Arius, Alexander and his followers went decidedly beyond Scripture. They delved into the unknown (the un-revealed). In other words, to formulate and substantiate their beliefs (which we know today as trinitarianism), they used words and concepts that cannot be found in Scripture. This was found necessary to do to defeat Arius. Certainly they could not defeat this aging and much loved presbyter by using Scripture alone.

The reason for this was because whilst the Scriptures say that Christ is brought forth of the Father (Proverbs 8:22-31) - and is therefore the Son of God, - they do not tell us that He is 'everlasting' brought forth. They make no mention either of the Father and the Son belonging to (having their existence in) the 'one and the same substance' of God. The Scriptures also reveal that the incarnate Christ could have sinned, also that if He had sinned, because God would have treated Him the same as any other sinner, He would have reaped the end result of all who sin. We shall see this in the next section.

It was this Creed of Nicaea, formulated by using non-Scriptural words and concepts to defeat Arius, which in the finality became the very basis of the trinity doctrine. In its teaching, whilst it upheld the divinity of Christ, it prohibited any possibility of Him forfeiting His eternal existence. This is obviously one of the reasons, perhaps the main one really, why the creed was initially formulated.

Philosophical reasoning versus the gospel

Here I would bring to your attention something that is very important. To do this we shall take a look at a few quotations from a book that I read when I first became involved in the Seventh-day Adventist trinity debate (2000).

Even now, I still regard this book as one of the best I have read that deals with the history of the trinity doctrine although I am not saying it is without fault. Obviously it has a certain amount of bias and needless to say, I do not agree with its author's theology (trinitarianism). It does admit to though – and bring to the fore - some very important facts.

This book is called 'The Triune God'. A Jesuit priest by the name of Edmund J. Fortman wrote it. He believed the trinity doctrine to be the central doctrine of the Christian faith but felt that it was not as appreciated as it should be.

In the introduction to his book, after saying that the trinity doctrine has had “an amazing history”, also that it could only have originated from “divine revelation” (but not stated in Scripture), he asks a very simple question. That question is

“What does the Old Testament tell us of God?” (*Edmund J. Fortman, The Triune God, Introduction, page XV, 1972*)

Fortman then said

“It [the Old Testament] tells us there is one God, a wonderful God of life and love and righteousness and power and glory and mystery, who is the creator and lord of the whole universe, who is intensely concerned with the tiny people of Israel. It tells us of His Word, Wisdom, Spirit, of the Messiah He will send, of a Son of Man and a Suffering Servant to come.” (*Ibid*)

He then admits

“But it tells us nothing explicitly or by necessary implication of a Triune God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” (*Ibid*)

Even though he was an avid supporter of the trinity doctrine, Fortman freely admits that nowhere in the Old Testament does it even imply that God is a trinity let alone explicitly say it. He also says much the same regarding the New Testament Scriptures. He explains

“If we take the New Testament writers together they tell us there is only one God, the creator and lord of the universe, who is the Father of Jesus. They call Jesus the Son of God, Messiah, Lord, Savior, Word, Wisdom. They assign Him the divine functions of creation, salvation, judgment. Sometimes they call Him God explicitly.” (*Ibid*)

He then says of what the New Testament writers say of the Holy Spirit

“They [the New Testament writers] do not speak as fully and clearly of the Holy Spirit as they do of the Son, but at times they coordinate Him with the Father and the Son and put Him on a level with them as far as divinity and personality are concerned.” (*Ibid*)

Again this is being very honest. The Scriptures are not so informative concerning the Holy Spirit as they are of the Son. This is why over the centuries there have been so many disputes regarding this mysterious divine personality.

After saying that the New Testament provides what he terms “a triadic ground plan and triadic formulas” Fortman said

“They [the New Testament writers] give us no formal or formulated doctrine of the Trinity, no explicit teaching that in one God there are three co-equal divine persons. But they do give us an elemental trinitarianism, the data from which such a formal doctrine of the Triune God may be formulated.” (*Ibid*)

Collectively, these statements of Fortman’s are admitting that the trinity doctrine cannot be found in the Scriptures – which is very true. This is why it will always remain an assumed man-made teaching. He is saying though that when considered together, the information (data) in the Scriptures does lend itself to believing that God is a trinity – also that it was on this basis that the trinity doctrine was formulated.

As we shall see in section three, this is an incomplete analysis. I say this because the Scriptures tell us very clearly that Christ could have sinned, also that if He had sinned He would have forfeited His existence because of it. So how is it possible for God to be an indivisible trinity of personalities? Obviously this cannot be true, therefore this assumed doctrine of God being an indivisible trinity must be error. In summary Fortman said on page 32

“There is no formal doctrine of the Trinity in the New Testament writers, if this means an explicit teaching that in one God there are three co-equal divine beings” (*Ibid, Chapter 2, ‘The New Testament Witness to God’, page 32*)

Fortman also says on page 35 (this was after explaining in the first two chapters what the Scriptures say of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit)

“The Biblical witness to God, as we have seen, did not contain any formal or formulated doctrine of the trinity, any explicit teaching that in one God there are three co-equal divine persons. Rather it contained the data from which a doctrine of this kind could be formulated.” (*Edmund J. Fortman, The Triune God, Part two, The Triune God in the Early Christian Church, page 35, 1972*)

He added

“And it would take three centuries of gradual assimilation of the Biblical witness to God before the formulation of the dogma of one God in three distinct persons would be achieved.” (*Ibid*)

This is in harmony with what has been said above. This is that it took 300 years to formulate the trinity doctrine – meaning that it was not an original belief of Christianity but one that was formulated as the established Christian Church declined into apostasy.

A gradual transition

Returning our thoughts to the introduction to Fortman's book, carefully note what he says. It really is very important – especially with regards to our study. After saying that it was the Eastern Church where most of the trinity development took place he said

“The Apostolic Fathers were witnesses to the Biblical data and the traditional faith rather than theologians, but they furnished useful insights into the lines along which the Church's unconscious theology was developing. Most of them indicated quite clearly a belief in the divinity of Christ, less clearly a belief in the distinct personality and divinity of the Holy Spirit. They gave solid evidence of a belief in three pre-existent 'beings,' but they furnished no trinitarian doctrine, no awareness of a trinitarian problem.” (*Edmund J. Fortman, The Triune God, Introduction, page XVI, 1972*)

Here Fortman was referring to the “Apostolic Fathers”. These were Christian authors and leaders such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius and Polycarp etc. These immediately ‘followed on’ from the New Testament writers, also from the first generation of Christians. He is saying that just like the Bible writers, “they furnished no trinitarian doctrine”. These are said to have written in the latter part of the 1st century and the first part of the 2nd century. Some of the earlier Christian fathers are said to have had personal contact with the first generation apostles.

Fortman then spoke of those that ‘followed on’ from the apostolic fathers. These were the early apologists. He wrote

“The Apologists were, in a sense, the Church's first theologians: the first to attempt a sketch of trinitarian doctrine and an intellectually satisfying explanation of Christ's relation to God the Father.” (*Ibid*)

Notice here it is said that the trinity doctrine is an attempt to indulge an “intellectually satisfying explanation” of the relationship of the Son to the Father. This means not being satisfied with what God has chosen to reveal but wanting to intellectually explain the unknown. Can you see a pattern developing? We have now gone from the writers of the Bible and the early church fathers who said absolutely nothing about God being a trinity, to a sketchy view of this teaching formed by the early apologists.

Needless to say, this ‘developing theology’ (or “unconscious theology” as Fortman calls it) eventually evolved into what Alexander was teaching in the 4th century. It was this ‘new theology’ (trinity theology) that brought about the objections from Arius that began the dispute that led to the Council of Nicaea being convened.

Arius must have realized that this 'evolving theology' was destroying what he believed is an important part of the gospel. This was that by reason of the incarnation, the divine Son of God had placed Himself in a position whereby not only could He have sinned but also become changed because of it (if He had sinned). This is why this presbyter made such strong objections to what Alexander, his superior in the church, was teaching. He could see the philosophy of the trinity doctrine obscuring this belief. When this is understood, the reasoning behind the objections made by Arius is seen in a different light.

We can see therefore that the objections of Arius to the beliefs of Alexander are the same as those of the author you are now reading. He believes that the trinity doctrine seriously obscures the love of God as seen in the giving of His Son. Fortman further explained

“To set forth the truths handed down to them from the Apostles they used the terminology and philosophy that were then current, and in the process they christianized Hellenism to some extent. They manifested a belief in the unity of God and in some sort of 'trinity of divinity.' even though they had as yet no distinct conception of 'divine person' and 'divine nature.'” (*Ibid*)

Here we can see it said that in 'intellectually explaining' the relationship between the three personalities of the Godhead (meaning going beyond Scripture), the apologists used “terminology and philosophy” borrowed from Hellenism. Note Fortman says these apologists believed in “some sort of 'trinity of divinity’”. He then adds

“They identified Christ with God, with the Logos, with the Son of God, but they seemed to count His Sonship not from eternity but from the moment of his pre-creational generation. In thus using a two-stage theory of a pre-existent Logos to explain the Son's divine status and His relation to the Father. They Probably did not realize that this theory had a built-in 'inferiorizing principle' that would win for them the accusation of 'subordinationism.'” (*Ibid*)

This was the belief of Christians at the time of the Council of Nicaea but I disagree that Christ was deemed by them to be inferior to the Father. The early Christians regarded the pre-existent Christ as the divine Son of God therefore He was seen as a dutiful Son who understood and respected His relationship to the Father, the latter being the One from whom He was brought forth. It was this son-like respect for the Father that is no doubt regarded as subordination.

History repeating itself

Exactly the same thing that happened in early Christianity has happened within Seventh-day Adventism. It is simply history repeating itself.

In early Seventh-day Adventism, it was believed that Christ was truly the Son of God. This did not make Him to be inferior to the Father but equal to Him. From reading our 'older literature', it can be seen that our pioneers believed that Christ was God Himself in the person of the Son. This was the 'old-time' faith of the Seventh-day Adventist Church - at least it was whilst Ellen White was alive.

After Ellen White had died, there was dissatisfaction shown towards these Godhead beliefs. This is why our theology underwent change. Eventually it was brought into line with that which is known as mainstream Christianity – the latter of whom are all trinitarian. Some have said that this is the reason why we adopted the trinity doctrine – so that we could become like them and be considered part of mainstream Christianity.

The trinity doctrine held by Seventh-day Adventists is not exactly the same as orthodoxy (as the original) but its basic precepts are the same. This concept is that God is an indivisible unity of three divine personalities – meaning that none of them can ever change or cease to be.

What though do the Scriptures say concerning this question?

We know as Forman so clearly said that they do not tell us that God is an indivisible trinity but do they tell us of an incarnate Christ who could have sinned or of one who could not have sinned – and what about the consequences if He could and did sin? Would He have ceased to be?

We shall be taking a look at what the Scriptures say in the third section. We shall also be taking a look at what we have been told through the writings of Ellen White.

Section three

What God has revealed

In this section we shall be taking a look at what the Scriptures and the spirit of prophecy say concerning whether or not the incarnate Christ could have sinned, also if this was possible and He did sin, what would have happened to Him (what would have been the consequences).

Some may say that because Christ did not sin, this is simply hypothetical but as we shall very soon see, this is far from the truth. We have the word of God (the Scriptures) on this one.

Like as we are

Whilst the Scriptures are totally silent as regards to **how** the incarnation was achieved, they make it very clear that in becoming incarnate (becoming flesh) Christ was made to be like us and could have sinned. In writing to the believers in Rome, the apostle Paul wrote

“For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh:” Romans 8:3

The Word of God also tells us concerning Christ

Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.” Hebrews 2:14-15

“For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham. Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.” Hebrews 2:16-17

Christ did not take upon Himself a superior human nature than you and I possess. He took upon Himself the same flesh as we have – weakened by 4000 years of sin. Notice here we are told that “in all things” Christ was “made like unto his brethren”. As we shall now see, this included the possibility of Him sinning. This is why Christ can have empathy with us (be able to succour us) and not just have sympathy. In other words He has totally identified Himself with us. The inspired word also tells us

“Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” Hebrews 4:14-16

Like as we are, Christ was made a little lower than the angels (see Psalm 8:3-5 and Hebrews 2:7-9). This is the same as John meant when he wrote that the Word was made flesh (see John 1:14).

There can be no doubt that the divine Son of God placed Himself in exactly the

same position in which we find ourselves – meaning possessing all the limitations of fallen humanity, also bringing Himself subject to all of its liabilities. This must include being able to sin and be lost because of it. As God has told us, Jesus was “in all points tempted like as we are”. Note the emphasis again on “all”.

We can see from this that the question of the possibility of Christ sinning, when He was here on earth, is far from one that is hypothetical. God tells us very clearly in His word that His Son could have sinned. This is something that we need to believe – if we are to believe what God has told us.

If we are to understand what it was that Christ achieved in becoming human, this ‘risk scenario’ is also imperative for us to believe. If this is not accepted then there is so much of the gospel that does not make any sense (meaning the ongoing temptations of Christ etc). If Christ could not have sinned then what was the point (purpose) of the temptations? They would be meaningless – just as would be the fact that He did not sin. In other words, if Christ could not have sinned then what did He achieve by His ‘sinlessness’? The answer is – absolutely nothing because He proved nothing.

Temptation is not temptation unless a person is able to sin. If Christ could not have sinned then His ‘not sinning’ has no value. For it to have a value, Christ must have been able to sin and must have overcome sin. If He could not have sinned then He did not overcome sin.

In harmony with the Scriptures

In harmony with the above Scriptures, Ellen White wrote in her diary

“Our Lord was tempted as man is tempted. He was capable of yielding to temptations, as are human beings....The divine nature, combined with the human, made Him capable of yielding to Satan's temptations. Here the test to Christ was far greater than that of Adam and Eve, for Christ took our nature, fallen but not corrupted, and would not be corrupted unless He received the words of Satan in the place of the words of God. ” (*Ellen G. White, MS 57, Diary 1890, ‘The Humiliation of Christ’, Volume 16 MR No. 1211*)

God’s messenger concluded

“To suppose He was not capable of yielding to temptation places Him where He cannot be a perfect example for man, and the force and the power of this part of Christ's humiliation, which is the most eventful, is no instruction or help to human beings.” (*Ibid*)

In 1890, there appears to have been conjecture on the part of some regarding Christ's human nature.

“Letters have been coming in to me, affirming that Christ could not have had the same nature as man, for if he had, he would have fallen under similar temptations.” (*Ellen G. White, Review & Herald 18th February 1890, 'How to meet a controverted point of doctrine'*)

She explained

“If he did not have man's nature, he could not be our example. If he was not a partaker of our nature, he could not have been tempted as man has been. If it were not possible for him to yield to temptation, he could not be our helper. It was a solemn reality that Christ came to fight the battles as man, in man's behalf. His temptation and victory tell us that humanity must copy the Pattern; man must become a partaker of the divine nature.” (*Ibid*)

In 1873, Ellen White wrote for the young people of her day (which is just as applicable to our young people today)

“Some may think that Christ, because he was the Son of God, did not have temptations as children now have. The Scriptures say he was tempted in all points like as we are tempted. And Satan made stronger attacks upon Christ than he will ever make upon us. There was much at stake with him, whether Christ or himself should be conqueror.” (*Ellen G. White, Youth's Instructor, 1st April 1873, 'The Life of Christ, No. 5'*)

Note as proof of what she is saying, Ellen White's reference to Hebrews 4:15. She also added

“Satan did not succeed in leading him to sin, he knew that he must lose his power, and finally be punished with everlasting destruction. Therefore Satan worked with mighty power to lead Christ to do a wrong action, for then he would gain advantage over him.” (*Ibid*)

In 1892, Ellen White wrote

“Those who claim that it was not possible for Christ to sin, cannot believe that He took upon Him human nature.” (*Ellen G. White, Bible Echo 1st November 1892, 'Tempted in all points like as we are'*)

This is the bottom line of the argument. Did Christ really become flesh or didn't He? If it is said that He could not sin then it is also being said that He did not truly partake of our human nature. This is exactly what Ellen White is saying here. This is

also why I said in section one that understanding what happened at Bethlehem 2000 years ago is really very important.

From reading the above, it is apparent that Ellen White would have condemned the puppeteer/puppet type understanding of Christ becoming flesh (again see section one). She would have denied that this was a genuine explanation of the incarnation. She maintained that He had truly become flesh. In a letter in 1893 she wrote

“The point you inquire of me is, In our Lord's great scene of conflict in the wilderness, apparently under the power of Satan and his angels, was He capable, in His human nature, of yielding to these temptations?” (*Ellen G. White, Ms 94, 1893, pp. 1-3. "Could Christ Have Yielded to Temptation?" June 30, 1893, 6MR 112.2*)

She then added

“I will try to answer this important question: As God He could not be tempted: but as a man He could be tempted, and that strongly, and could yield to the temptations. His human nature must pass through the same test and trial Adam and Eve passed through.” (*Ibid*)

Here we are told that in His pre-existence as God, Christ could not be tempted but by becoming flesh He could be tempted. This was no different than was believed by Arius (see previous section).

In a letter written to two conference workers in Australia (this was when Ellen White was still residing in Australia), this messenger of the Lord wrote

“Be careful, exceedingly careful as to how you dwell upon the human nature of Christ. Do not set Him before the people as a man with the propensities of sin.” (*Ellen G. White, Letter 8, 1895. written to Brother and Sister W. L .H. Baker, North American workers in Australia, probably from Sunnyside, Cooranbong, New South Wales*)

In counterbalancing this statement (making sure her words were not taken the wrong way) she said in the very same paragraph

“He could have sinned; He could have fallen, but not for one moment was there in Him an evil propensity. He was assailed with temptations in the wilderness, as Adam was assailed with temptations in Eden.” (*Ibid*)

In confirmation of this she 4 years later in the ‘Youth’s Instructor’

“The temptations to which Christ was subjected were a terrible reality. As a free agent He was placed on probation, with liberty to yield to Satan's temptations and work at cross-purposes with God. If this were not so, if it had not been possible for Him to fall, He could not have been tempted in all points as the human family is tempted.” (*Ellen G. White, Youth's Instructor, 26th October 1899, 'Against principalities and powers'*)

This is a very important statement. In His pre-existence, Christ was not on probation. It would have been impossible for Him to work at cross-purposes with God because He was God. This means that prior to Him coming to earth, it had been impossible for Him to be tempted. By virtue of the incarnation though, He voluntarily placed Himself in an entirely different position. During His time on earth He was on probation for His existence. This was the same position held by Adam at creation.

After saying that the only way to reach fallen humanity was by bearing its infirmities and degeneracy, also after quoting Hebrews 2:10, 5:9, 2:17-18 and 4:15, Ellen White wrote in a General Conference Bulletin (note here that most of these verses are the same as quoted above that tell us Christ could have sinned)

“Jesus did not consent to sin. Not even by a thought could he be brought to the power of Satan's temptations. Yet it is written of Christ that he was tempted in all points like as we are.” (*Ellen G. White, General Conference Bulletin, 25th February 1895, 'Extracts from Life of Christ'*)

Note the quoting again of Hebrews 4:15. She also added

“Many hold that from the nature of Christ it was impossible for Satan's temptations to weaken or overthrow him. Then Christ could not have been placed in Adam's position, to go over the ground where Adam stumbled and fell; he could not have gained the victory that Adam failed to gain.” (*Ibid*)

Ellen White is here equating Hebrews 4:15 with the belief that Christ could have sinned. She also explained

“Unless he was placed in a position as trying as that in which Adam stood, he could not redeem Adam's failure. If man has in any sense a more trying conflict to endure than had Christ, then Christ is not able to succor him when tempted.” (*Ibid*)

We are told here that Christ was placed in the very same position as we are in – meaning that His conflict with sin was no less that we endure. As we said above, this is why He can identify with our sin problem. It is also why He can “succour” us. Ellen White concluded

“Christ took humanity with all its liabilities. He took the nature of man with the possibility of yielding to temptation, and he relied upon divine power to keep him.” (*Ibid*)

There are those who say that because we know that Christ did not sin, any reasoning that says He could have sinned is simply hypothetical but here I would totally disagree. This is because it would be taking away from Christ what He risked by becoming incarnate – thus in the process obscuring to a very great extent the depths of God’s love for fallen humanity (note that the word ‘hypothetical’ means theoretical or imaginary).

It would also be saying that what God has said is hypothetical. This is because we have seen through His written word that He has revealed that Christ could have sinned. God does not tell lies. He is not like us.

In helping us to understand why this possibility of Christ sinning is important, allow me to use an illustration. I do this because it helps us to understand that even though Christ did not sin, the fact that He could have sinned shows us what was risked in Christ becoming incarnate. In turn, this reveals how much God loves us. It will also show us that ‘hypothetical’ is a completely misleading word to use – even though Christ did not sin.

Here is the illustration.

A man is out walking one day. He sees smoke billowing from a house. As he rushes towards the house a young lady emerges from the burning building screaming that her two young children are upstairs in a bedroom where, because of the heat of the fire, she cannot reach them.

Without hesitating, the man takes off his coat, puts it over his head and runs into the house. Five minutes later he comes out of the house with the two children safely in his arms. He is very badly burned but the children he had covered with his coat are safe.

By this time, a number of people had gathered outside of the house. They had learned of what was happening inside. When the man emerged with the children there were shouts of praise and joy. He was heralded as a hero and for his unquestionable act of bravery (his achievement) was said by some to be deserving of a medal.

One onlooker regarded the whole thing quite differently. He is heard to say “I don’t see what all the fuss is about – the man is safe”. In amazement someone replies “Didn’t you see what he did. He risked his life for those little children. He could have

died. It was a wonderful act of bravery – an act of incredible love”.

The onlooker replies, “Well he didn’t die – did he – so it does not matter? Whether he could have died is only hypothetical. It is what actually happened that is important not what might have happened”.

Here now is the question.

Do you see any problem with this onlookers reasoning? Do you see it as seriously undervaluing what the man actually did in saving the children from the fire?

The love that the man had for those children was manifested not simply in what did happen (the outcome/what he achieved etc) but what might have happened if things had gone wrong. Any reasonable thinking person would evaluate the situation in exactly the same way. It is not exactly ‘rocket science’.

To the man who risked his life in going into those flames, this was not something that was hypothetical (theoretical or imaginary) but a terrible reality - something that he had to face for real. It was exactly the same for Christ. He might have failed. The risk was immense. His love for us can only be measured by what He might have lost not just by what He achieved.

Certainly the belief that Christ could have sinned is not simply hypothetical. As was said by Ellen White, it was to Him “**a terrible reality**” (see above). Those who say it is only hypothetical fail to realise what Christ really achieved in becoming human, also what He was willing to risk to save humanity. Ellen White wrote of Christ (again with Hebrews 4:15 in mind)

“He could not have been tempted in all points like as man is tempted had there been no possibility of his failing. He was a free agent, placed on probation, as was Adam and as is man.” (*Ellen G. White, Manuscript 29, 1899, pp 4, 5. "Sacrificed for Us", typed March 17, 1899, see also Youth Instructor, 20th July 1899*)

She explained

“Unless there is a possibility of yielding, temptation is no temptation. Temptation comes and is resisted when man is powerfully influenced to do a wrong action, and knowing that he can do it, resists by faith, with a firm hold upon divine power. This was the ordeal through which Christ passed. In his closing hours, while hanging upon the cross, he experienced to the fullest extent what man must experience striving against sin. He realized how bad man may become by yielding to sin. He realized the terrible consequence of the transgression of God's law; for the iniquity of the whole world was upon

him.” (*Ibid*)

From the above, we can see it was consistently said by Ellen White that the divine Son of God could have sinned. This was not simply something she said in a ‘one off’ statement or ‘in a corner’.

Later we shall read what she had to say about what would have happened to Christ if He had sinned but before we do this we shall see that within Seventh-day Adventism today, there is some very strange reasoning taking place. We will see why I say ‘strange’ when we return our thoughts to the Scriptures.

Strange reasoning

Within non-Seventh-day Adventist Christianity, it has always been ‘the norm’ to believe that it was impossible for Christ to sin. As was said in section one, this is known as impeccability although within Seventh-day Adventism, an ‘impeccable Christ’ has not been generally taught.

Within Seventh-day Adventism it has always been the belief that Christ could have sinned. This has never really been an issue. How though does this marry with the trinity doctrine? I ask this because the trinity doctrine says that none of the personalities of the Godhead can possibly lose their eternal existence. This would mean that there would need to be a trinity doctrine that says that the divine Christ could have sinned, but that even if He had done so, it would not have affected His existence. This is because the trinity doctrine maintains that all three personalities of Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the one indivisible God (all of the one substance of God) meaning that it is totally impossible for any of them to lose their existence. This is the three-in one belief of the trinitarian. If it were any different it would not be a trinity doctrine. In other words, a trinity doctrine that says the Son of God could cease to be is not really a trinity doctrine.

If it is said that the trinity doctrine is correct, also that Christ could have sinned yet not lose His existence, there has to be some very adept theological manoeuvring. It either has to be said that the divine Christ never really became flesh (therefore not taking responsibility for the actions of His humanity) or that the Father treats His Son differently than He did Adam.

To arrive at these conclusions there has to be what I would term some very strange (peculiar) reasoning. As we have already dealt with the issue of Christ becoming flesh in the first section we will not go into this again here but what if Christ had sinned? Would God have treated Him any differently than anyone else who sinned? We need to contemplate what God has told us through His written word. As we shall now see, it is His word that is at stake on this issue.

If Christ had sinned

The Scriptures are very clear that the end result of sin is death and separation from God (Romans 6:23). By the latter is meant the second death. Adam reaped this death when he sinned. This means that if Christ could have sinned and have 'got away with it' - it would make it appear that the result of sin is inconsistent – meaning it depends on who commits it. If we conclude that if the divine Son of God had sinned God would have treated Him differently than He did Adam, then this would also make God appear very inconsistent. Certainly it would paint a very poor picture of Him (of His character).

As it is, God is not of such a character. He does not have one rule for Adam and another for His own Son. God is true to His word - meaning that sin does have its inevitable consequences – whoever commits it. As God Himself has told us

“Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law.” 1 John 3:4

Whilst this has its primary application to fallen humanity, in principle it applied to Adam when he sinned. It must never be said that if Christ had sinned it would not have applied to Him. It is obvious that as did Adam, He would have become a transgressor of God's law. In other words, He would have been numbered with all those who have “come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

The consequence of sin is always death – eternal death (Romans 6:23). This is why when Adam sinned it separated him from God and left him totally destitute of the righteousness of God.

When Adam sinned, his nature became corrupt. In this condition he was lost. It can be said that He was 'without' God and in need of redemption. It only needed one sin to bring this condition into force. This is how it would have been with Christ. If Christ had sinned, God would have held Him personally responsible for committing it. We know this because He says in His word that the person who commits sin will die (Ezekiel 18:20). This is the reason why Adam died. He failed to trust God therefore the end result was sin and death. God has assured us in His word

“My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips.”
Psalms 89:34

He also said through Balaam

“God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?” Numbers 23:19

Christ became flesh to show us that if a person trusts God, he or she can live above sin. If Adam had trusted God then he would not have sinned.

If Christ had sinned, God would have been true to His word. He (Christ) would have died as did Adam. This death would not be the death of a sinless sacrifice (the one He did die for others at Calvary) but because of His personal sin.

On earth, unlike when He was in Heaven, Christ was on probation. One sin and He could not have been a sinless saviour. He too would have become a sinner. As it was, Christ did not sin therefore by means of His Son, God did provide a Saviour. If this had not been achieved, the entire human race would have gone into extinction.

It can only be concluded that if Christ had sinned, which we know from God's word was possible (see Hebrews 2:14-17 and 4:14-16 – also see above), the same would have happened to Him as happened to Adam. It would also mean that the plan of redemption would have failed. God had nothing in reserve. When He gave His Son He gave everything. If Christ had sinned, not only would He Himself have been lost but also all of humanity. In fact the whole of Heaven would have been imperilled.

This 'risk scenario' is spoken of a great deal by Ellen White - far more than most people probably realise. Interesting is that I have never read anywhere where in the advocating of their three-in-one theology, the trinitarians ever mention this fact - let alone quote Ellen White regarding it – yet they do quote her where it suits them. Is this treating Ellen White's writings honestly? I ask this because it is blatantly obvious that it cannot be said that this 'ultimate risk' scenario has nothing to do with the trinity debate. It is very relevant to it. What I mean is – if Christ could have gone out of existence then God cannot be an immortal indivisible trinity of personalities.

The ultimate risk

In her book *The Desire of Ages* - which many Seventh-day Adventist trinitarians claim speaks of God as a trinity - Ellen White penned these words

“Satan in heaven had hated Christ for His position in the courts of God. He hated Him the more when he himself was dethroned. He hated Him who pledged Himself to redeem a race of sinners. Yet into the world where Satan claimed dominion God permitted His Son to come, a helpless babe, subject to the weakness of humanity. He permitted Him to meet life's peril in common with every human soul, to fight the battle as every child of humanity must fight it, at the risk of failure and eternal loss.” (*Ellen G. White, The Desire of Ages, Page 49, 'Unto you a Saviour'*)

Within trinitarianism, as applied to the pre-existent Son of God, this idea of “[risk of failure and eternal loss](#)” is totally impossible. This is because the trinitarian three-in-one God is indivisible – whichever version of the trinity doctrine it may be. Ellen White also wrote in the same book

“Never can the cost of our redemption be realized until the redeemed shall stand with the Redeemer before the throne of God. Then as the glories of the eternal home burst upon our enraptured senses we shall remember that Jesus left all this for us, that He not only became an exile from the heavenly courts, but for us took the risk of failure and eternal loss.” (*Ibid page 131, 'The Victory'*)

It is obvious here that Ellen White was referring to the risk taken by Christ concerning His own existence. As was said in section one, it was the realisation that Christ could have failed, also become lost because of it, that led me to fully appreciate the depths of God’s love for fallen humanity. This is why I am now so opposed to the trinity teaching. It forbids this ‘risk’ reasoning.

Note here that Ellen White says that when the redeemed stand “[with the redeemer](#)” they will “[remember](#)” that He “[took the risk of failure and eternal loss](#)”. If we are to “[remember](#)” this truth **when** we enter Heaven, then we must have known it **before we arrived there**.

The very same year that ‘The Desire of Ages’ was published, Ellen White wrote these words

“Could Satan in the least particular have tempted Christ to sin, he would have bruised the Saviour's head. As it was, he could only touch His heel. Had the head of Christ been touched, the hope of the human race would have perished. Divine wrath would have come upon Christ as it came upon Adam. Christ and the church would have been without hope.” (*Ellen G. White, Signs of the Times, June 9th 1898, see also Selected Messages Book 1 page 256*)

There can be no mistaking what is being said here. If Christ had sinned, both He and the church “[would have been without hope](#)”.

From the spirit of prophecy, the answer is clear regarding the question of whether God would have treated His own Son differently than He did Adam – if He had sinned. According to Ellen White, God would have treated Him exactly the same as He did Adam. Again this is in accordance with Scripture – meaning that God is no respecter of persons (see Acts 10:34, Romans 2:11).

No trinitarian can believe such a thing as said here by Ellen White. This is one of the reasons why the trinity doctrine was formulated in the first place. It was to

prohibit this type of 'risk' belief. The trinity doctrine is patently in opposition to what we have been told through the Scriptures and the spirit of prophecy.

Three years previous to the publication of *The Desire of Ages* Ellen White wrote

“Who can estimate the value of a soul? (*Ellen G. White, General Conference Bulletin 1st December 1895 'Seeking the Lost'*)

After saying that we should contemplate Jesus as the events of Gethsemane and Calvary unfolded she then added

“Remember that Christ risked all; "tempted like as we are," he staked even his own eternal existence upon the issue of the conflict. Heaven itself was imperiled for our redemption. At the foot of the cross, remembering that for one sinner Jesus would have yielded up his life, we may estimate the value of a soul.” (*Ibid*)

In this General Conference Bulletin - which was used as a week of prayer reading for December 28th 1895 - Ellen White was asking of Seventh-day Adventists not only to “Remember” that Christ could have sinned but also that in the consequence of this happening, He would have lost His eternal existence. It appears that this was then generally believed by Seventh-day Adventists.

In their adoption of the trinity doctrine, many Seventh-day Adventists have already **forgotten** this wonderful truth. This is even **before** they get to Heaven. In other words, for the sake of speculative trinitarian philosophy, they have forfeited one of the most important aspects of the gospel.

The year following the publication of *The Desire of Ages*, Ellen White wrote in the Signs of the Times

“But although Christ's divine glory was for a time veiled and eclipsed by His assuming humanity, yet He did not cease to be God when He became man. The human did not take the place of the divine, nor the divine of the human. This is the mystery of godliness. The two expressions human and divine were, in Christ, closely and inseparably one, and yet they had a distinct individuality.” (*Ellen G. White, The Signs of the Times, 10th May 1899, 'Christ glorified'*)

“Though Christ humbled Himself to become man, the Godhead was still His own. His Deity could not be lost while He stood faithful and true to His loyalty.” (*Ibid*)

It can only be reasoned that Ellen White was saying here that if Christ had failed, He would have lost His deity. How else can this be understood?

In a letter written the following year, which was also **two years after** *The Desire of Ages* had been published, Ellen White wrote of Christ

“He became subject to temptation, endangering as it were, His divine attributes. Satan sought, by the constant and curious devices of his cunning, to make Christ yield to temptation.” (*Ellen G. White, Letter 5, 1900, as quoted in the Seventh-day Adventists Bible Commentary Volume 7 page 926*)

Even though Ellen White believed that Christ was God, we can see she also believed that He could have lost His deity. Quite obviously, two years after the publication of *The Desire of Ages*, Ellen White was not a trinitarian. Seven years earlier in 1893 she had also written

“To the honor and glory of God, His beloved Son -- the Surety, the Substitute -- was delivered up and descended into the prisonhouse of the grave. The new tomb enclosed Him in its rocky chambers. If one single sin had tainted His character the stone would never have been rolled away from the door of His rocky chamber, and the world with its burden of guilt would have perished.” (*Ellen G. White, Ms. 81, 1893, p. 11, Diary entry for Sunday, July 2, 1893, Wellington, New Zealand*)

We must remember here not to make a dichotomy of Christ. What I mean is - in Jesus there was not two persons (one human and one divine). There was one Christ (one person) with two natures. If this one Christ (one person) had not been released from the tomb, the divine pre-existent Son of God would have ceased to be. This is why it was said in section one that it is important to understand what happened at the incarnation. The incarnate Christ, albeit in a new sense, was still the Son of God. In section four, before we conclude this study, we shall return our thoughts to the two natures of Christ. Two years later Ellen White wrote

“Christ has found his pearl of great price in lost, perishing souls. He sold all that he had to come into possession, even engaged to do the work, and run the risk of losing his own life in the conflict. How then should man regard his fellow man? Christ has demonstrated the way. He says, "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another." (*Ellen G. White, Letter 119, 1895*)

This was written the same year as the General Conference Session Bulletin was published that was mentioned above.

Some may say that over the years Ellen White changed her mind regarding this ‘risk scenario’ but there is nothing in her writings to suggest such a thing. In fact in 1905, in a letter written to her grand-daughter, she said (this was 7 years after the publication of ‘The Desire of Ages’)

“I am now looking over my diaries and copies of letters written for several years back, commencing before I went to Europe, before you were born. I have the most precious matter to reproduce and place before the people in testimony form. While I am able to do this work, the people must have these things to revive past history, that they may see that there is one straight chain of truth, without one heretical sentence, in that which I have written.” (*Ellen G. White, Letter to Mabel White, Letter 329a, pages 1 and 2, November 16th 1905, Manuscript Releases MR No. 532*)

Quite obviously Ellen White did not see herself as changing her mind about that which she had previously written. This risk to Christ was not some small ‘side issue’ but something very important.

From the above, we can see that Ellen White could never have subscribed to the trinitarian view of the Son of God - which says that it would have been impossible for Him to lose His eternal existence. This means that she could never have believed the trinity doctrine. Certainly therefore she was not a trinitarian – at least not as purported by any of the trinity doctrines that are in circulation today.

What though about current Seventh-day Adventist theology? What does this say concerning whether Christ could have sinned and in consequence have lost His eternal existence?

We shall be taking a look at this in the fourth and final section.

Section four

Current Seventh-day Adventist reasoning

In this fourth and final section we shall be taking a look at the current theology of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. As you probably have concluded, this differs from what was once believed by our early church whilst Ellen White was alive.

For the very first time in its history, at the 1980 General Conference Session held at Dallas, Texas, the Seventh-day Adventist Church officially voted in the trinity doctrine. At this conference, as well as prior to it, there was much discussion as to how this ‘three-in-one’ belief should be worded. At the conference there were those who did not like the use of the word trinity. This can be seen in the reports of the conference as detailed in the Review. We shall return our thoughts to this later.

Eight years after this General Conference Session, the book *Seventh-day Adventists believe ...* was published. This is one of the 'official' explanations of the fundamental beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists although because it has never been voted at a General Conference Session, it is not an officially voted in statement. It is said though, rightly or wrongly, to represent what is believed throughout the world by Seventh-day Adventists. Regarding their three-in-one trinity God it says in this book (this was as it was voted in at Dallas)

“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*).

It then 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*)

This is belief No. 2 of their now 28 fundamental beliefs (it was only 27 beliefs at Dallas). This must not be confused with beliefs No's 3, 4 and 5 that detail their beliefs concerning the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Belief No. 2 concerns God being a trinity. Note here it says that this three-in-one unity God “is immortal”.

Note too here the use of personal pronouns ('He' and 'His'). These depict this three-in-one trinity God as a personal being (an immortal personal being). This means that as just as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are spoken of as 'He', so too is this trinity God. This leads one to enquire how many personal beings are there in this one trinity God. If the trinity God is a person in His own right, then it must be said that within this one triune person there are another three individual persons. This would mean that this 'trinity God' is three persons in one person. This seems very strange indeed. Nowhere do the Scriptures speak of God in such a manner. This was picked up on at the General Conference session at Dallas. Charles Upshaw said

“I have a question on Article 2, "The Trinity." I believe when we first studied the document the term was Godhead.” (*Adventist Review, May 1st 1980, 'Fifteenth business Meeting, Fifty-third General Conference session, April 25, 1980, 1:30 P.M. Session proceedings'*)

He then added

“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." (*Ibid*)

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. 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.” (*Ibid*)

As was said above, there was a great deal of discussion over the wording of this belief – seemingly about the word ‘trinity’ itself. Eva then added

“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*)

There was obviously reluctance, by certain of the delegates, to use the word ‘trinity’

In Volume 12 of the Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopaedia that deals with the official theology of our denomination (Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist theology), there is a section devoted to the doctrine of God. Fernando Canale wrote this section. He is Professor of Theology and Philosophy at Andrews University. Note here that like the book ‘Seventh-day Adventists believe...’ this has never been voted upon at a General Conference Session. Under the heading of ‘Immutability’ he says

“Immutability is another characteristic of God’s being that has been an important component of the Christian doctrine of God through the centuries.” (*Fernando Canale, The Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopaedia Volume 12, ‘The Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist theology’ page 109, ‘The Doctrine of God’*)

He adds

“Immutability refers to the absence of change in God. The Bible straightforwardly declares that God does not change (Mal. 3:6; James 1:17).” (*Ibid*)

Note here that as Scriptural proof that “God does not change”, Canale quotes Malachi 3:6 and James 1:17.

The context of these verses tell us that this 'unchangeableness' (immutability) is not referring to the being of God (how God exists – i.e. as three-in-one etc), but rather to His character and purposes. In other words, these verses have nothing to do with God's nature (such as existing as three-in-one). Canale explains on the next page

"The immutability of God – understood not as an impassibility but as the eternal identity of God's being with itself and the historical faithfulness, constancy, and consistency of His relation, purposes, and actions toward us - is the necessary presupposition for theological ideas such as typology, incarnation, cross, and great controversy between God and Satan as presented throughout the Bible." (*Ibid page 110*)

Simply put, this is saying that in drawing conclusions regarding the incarnation of the Son of God at Bethlehem, also of His death at Calvary and the great controversy etc, everything must be understood in the light of God's immutability (unchangeableness). Canale also says on page 120 (this is under the sub-heading "Oneness of God")

"Since God is eternal and immutable, His trinitarian nature has never changed or come into being." (*Ibid page 120*)

On the next page he says

"The "oneness" of God refers to the singleness of His being." (*Ibid page 121*)

This "singleness" of being is trinity 'indivisible oneness'. It is the '*in-one*' part of the 'three-*in-one*' theory. This type of conclusion means that because He is an integral part of this 'oneness' (singleness), the divine Son of God cannot go out of existence. Obvious to relate, if He did go out of existence, this would bring about a change in God's three-in-one being which in trinity reasoning is utterly impossible.

The Seventh-day Adventist theology purported here is typically trinitarian. It is the same as held by orthodoxy – at least regarding this 'singleness of being' and 'indivisible' aspect. This is what makes it a trinity doctrine.

In summary it can be said that the two beliefs, (a) that the Son of God could have lost His eternal existence and (b) that God is three-in-one and that this nature is immutable (unchangeable), are totally incompatible with each other. Both beliefs cannot be true. One of them must be error.

A strange realisation

The strange thing is, at least it seems strange to me, is that today it is still being

taught within Seventh-day Adventism that when Jesus was on earth He could have sinned.

Roy Adams, as associate editor of the Adventist Review, recently made reference to this risk. We mentioned this in section one.

In the Review of December 2007, he had written an editorial called *A Cosmic Gamble*. In it he had quoted Ellen White as saying (as quoted in section three) that God had permitted His Son to come into this world “to meet life’s peril in common with every human soul, to fight the battle as every child of humanity must fight it, at the risk of failure and eternal loss” (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 49).

Based on the reasoning that God is omniscient (therefore knew that Christ would not fail) certain of the Review readers took umbrage at the thought of Christ’s entry into humanity as being a gamble, thus they made their views known to Adams. In response to this, in the April 2008 edition of the Review, Adams again addressed this issue.

This article is extremely well written. It is brief but certainly well worth reading. To be valued correctly it needs to be read as a whole. Here though are some of the things he wrote (space does not allow it to be quoted here completely). With regards to the view that it was impossible for Christ to sin he said

“To say there was no risk in the Incarnation is to argue the biblically untenable position that it was impossible for Jesus to sin. If that were the case, then we’d be into divine playacting of the most cynical kind. And Jesus’ 40-day fast in the desert, His all-night prayer vigils, and His agony in Gethsemane would all amount to a cruel farce.” (Roy Adams, *Advent Review*, April 17th 2008, ‘*An impenetrable mystery*’)

He then added

“No one is talking here about God being surprised by anything. The issue is not that God in His foreknowledge was unaware of the final outcome. The unassailable point, rather, is that *it all could have turned out differently*. Reality is not all cut and dried. And if Jesus was at all an example for us, He had to have come with the same freedom we all have as humans to choose God’s will or to reject it.” (*Ibid*)

Adams said in conclusion

“To say there was no risk would be to say that Jesus could not sin just because God knew that He *would not*.” (*Ibid*)

Whilst I would totally agree here with Roy Adams, the reason why I am saying it is strange that we are still teaching this 'risk' scenario is because if the 'trinity three-in-one God' taught by Seventh-day Adventists is said by them to be unchangeable, what then is being said would have happened to the pre-existent Son of God if He had sinned? As of yet I have never seen this issue addressed within Seventh-day Adventist literature. It is now the time to do so.

Just in passing and as a matter of interest, God's omniscience (knowing everything prior to it happening) does not determine anything. He simply foresees what people's choices are before they make them. A good example is Adam and Eve. God knew that they would sin but this did not mean they were predestined (forced) to do so. It is simply that God foresaw their choice.

It is exactly the same with us. God knows who will be in His kingdom and who will not be there but this does not determine our future. This is totally our own choice. God, because He is omniscient, simply foresees it.

Recent 'Reflections'

For many of our members (particularly it seems our current theologians) the acceptance of the trinity doctrine has changed the reasoning that if the divine Son of God had sinned He would have forfeited His eternal existence.

Quite recently (July 2008), in the Seventh-day Adventist Biblical Research Institute newsletter 'Reflections', our official current understanding of the trinity doctrine was defined. This was in the form of a Bible Study given by Ekkehardt Mueller, Associate Director of the Seventh-day Adventist Biblical Research Institute. Under the heading "One God and Three Persons" Mueller wrote

"The three persons share one indivisible nature." (Ekkehardt Mueller, Biblical Research Institute, Reflections newsletter, July 2008, Page 9, 'Scripture Applied, - A Bible Study')

This is the trinity three-in-one reasoning. It is being said here, as in our fundamental belief No. 2, that the three personalities make up the 'one God' (the trinity God). This is the same in any version of the trinity doctrine. Mueller then added

"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)

This reasoning has a deprecating effect on the gospel. This is because it is saying that even though the Son of God became incarnate, it was impossible for Him to have forfeited His eternal existence – even if He had sinned. This is because as

Mueller says, each of the three is “inseparably connected to the other two” – which is typical trinity theology.

If it were true that Christ could have sinned but not be lost if He had done so, this would make God look as though He has one rule for humanity and another for His own Son. This is because it is making it look as though the divine Son of God could have sinned, which the Bible does tell us was possible (see section three) but that if He had sinned He would have ‘got away with it’. As was said above, if this were true, this would reveal a very serious inconsistency in the character of God – which as Christians we know is not there. This shows that there is something decidedly wrong with the trinity doctrine. Mueller concluded

“In the divine unity there are three coeternal and coequal persons, who, though distinct, are the one undivided God.” (*Ibid*)

Notice particularly the last words of Mueller. He says that the “three coeternal and coequal persons ... are the one undivided God”. This is pure trinity theology.

Appeals to Ellen White

In support of their trinity doctrine, Seventh-day Adventist trinitarians often appeal to the writings of Ellen White (we noted in section two that the trinity doctrine is not found in the Scriptures). Whilst we cannot cite all of these quotations here, the ones we shall look at are those that supposedly say that the divine Son of God did not die at Calvary, also for the same reason, He could not lose His eternal existence. These quotations are often taken out of their context and are used in a way not intended by Ellen White.

It appears that the basic problem is that there is confusion between ‘nature’ and ‘person’. The two are often made to appear the same thing but as we shall see, they are not the same.

In the ‘Youth’s Instructor’ in 1898 (the year that *The Desire of Ages* was published), after quoting the words of Jesus “I am the resurrection, and the life”, Ellen White wrote

“He who had said, “I lay down my life, that I might take it again,” came forth from the grave to life that was in himself. Humanity died: divinity did not die.” (*Ellen G. White, Youth’s Instructor 4th August 1898, see also Youth’s Instructor 3rd January 1905*)

She then added

“In his divinity, Christ possessed the power to break the bonds of death. He

declares that he has life in himself to quicken whom he will.” (*Ibid*)

Often used by trinitarians, this is the quotation used to supposedly show that at Calvary the pre-existent Son of God did not die – meaning that only humanity died. It is also used to show that that a divine person cannot cease to be but is this how Ellen White intended it to be understood?

We shall now see that in speaking of divinity here, Ellen White could not have been making reference to a divine person but to divine nature. In other words, she was not saying that a divine person did not die at Calvary but that divine nature did not die. This is saying two entirely different things.

Just a few months after she made this “divinity did not die” statement, she wrote a letter saying (this would have answered the question as to what she meant by divinity not dying)

“Jesus Christ laid off His royal robe, His kingly crown, and clothed His divinity with humanity, in order to become a substitute and surety for humanity, that dying in humanity He might by His death destroy him who had the power of death.” (*Ellen G. White, Letter 97, page 5, To "My Brethren in North Fitzroy," November 18th 1898*)

Who was it that died in His humanity? It was the pre-existent Christ.

This is how a divine person can die. It is by becoming incarnate and surrendering His divine personage to His human nature. In other words, by acquiescing to His human nature, the person of Christ (the divine Son of God) was able to personally experience death. As Ellen White went on to say

“He could not have done this as God, but by coming as man, Christ could die.” (*Ibid*)

It is being said here that in His pre-existence, because He was God, Christ could not have died so to be able to do this He became incarnate. Those who say that the divine Son of God did not die at Calvary are at odds with this statement. They are saying that even though He became incarnate He still did not die. This is totally opposite to what Ellen White is saying here.

In 1890, Ellen White was asked if Christ, when on earth, meaning in His human nature, could have sinned. Here is the answer she gave

“I will try to answer this important question: As God He could not be tempted: but as a man He could be tempted, and that strongly, and could yield to the temptations. His human nature must pass through the same test and trial

Adam and Eve passed through.” (*Ibid*)

Note first of all that Ellen White regards this question of whether Christ could have sinned as being important. In disagreement with her, some say that it is a hypothetical question – something that is not important. Those who say it is a hypothetical question – and not important - are obviously not in harmony with what we have been told through the spirit of prophecy.

We are told here that in His pre-existence, because He was God, the Son of God could not be tempted. This means that in His pre-existence He could neither sin nor die. For the same reason He obviously could not cease to be.

These two statements that “divinity did not die” and that by becoming human “Christ could die” are not as some have suggested contradictory to each other. The first is referring to divine nature whilst the second is referring to a divine person. These are two different things.

The above statements of Ellen White are very similar to two others she made. The first one is from an article published in the Review and Herald. Ellen White wrote

“Men need to understand that the Deity suffered under the agonies of Calvary. The Majesty of heaven was made to suffer at the hands of wicked men, -- religious zealots, who claimed to be the most enlightened people on the face of the earth. Men claiming to be the children of Abraham worked out the wrath of Satan upon the innocent Son of the infinite God. (*Ellen G. White, Review and Herald, 4th April 1899, ‘After the camp meeting’*)

It is quite obvious here that when speaking of suffering “Deity”, Ellen White was talking in terms of a divine person. This time she was not referring to divine nature. Notice also she refers to the one who suffered and died as “the innocent Son of the infinite God”.

The next quote is from a letter written in 1904 to "Ministers, Physicians, and Teachers". She asked the question

“Was the human nature of the Son of Mary changed into the divine nature of the Son of God? No; the two natures were mysteriously blended in one person -- the Man Christ Jesus. In Him dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.” (*Ellen G. White, September 3rd 1904, Letter 280a to ‘Ministers, Physicians, and Teachers’*)

She then explained

“When Christ was crucified, it was His human nature that died. Deity did not

sink and die; that would have been impossible. Christ, the sinless One, will save every son and daughter of Adam who accepts the salvation proffered them, consenting to become the children of God. The Saviour has purchased the fallen race with His own blood.” *(Ibid)*

Here we must ask a question. Are the two statements (“the Deity suffered under the agonies of Calvary” and “Deity did not sink and die”) contradictory to each other? Of course they are not. The contexts supply the explanation. The first is referring to deity as a person whilst the second is referring to deity as a nature. The two statements are not contradictory, at least not when read as they should be read.

As Ellen White went on to say though (this was after saying that this great mystery will not be understood in its greatness until after the resurrection)

“But the enemy is determined that this gift shall be so mystified that it will become a nothingness. If believers only knew what this means, the work would be done in our churches that must be done if the members ever enter the kingdom of heaven. But when men in responsible positions pervert their reason and give themselves up to Satan's way of thinking, they will surely stand before the world on Satan's side, however great their influence may have been and still is, doing the work that Satan did, led and inspired by his spirit.” *(Ibid)*

This is how it seems to be becoming today within Seventh-day Adventism. Ellen White's statements are being misrepresented to say something that she obviously did not mean to say. We should be very guarded over these things. We should not listen to those who say that at Calvary the divine Son of God did not die or that He could not sin or cease to be because He is divine (Deity). This is the reasoning of the enemy.

So where does all of this leave us?

We are left with the thought that if the unthinkable had happened, meaning that if Christ did sin, then He would have remained in the tomb for eternity. As Ellen White said (we noted this in the previous section)

“To the honor and glory of God, His beloved Son -- the Surety, the Substitute -- was delivered up and descended into the prisonhouse of the grave. The new tomb enclosed Him in its rocky chambers. If one single sin had tainted His character the stone would never have been rolled away from the door of His rocky chamber, and the world with its burden of guilt would have perished.” *(Ellen G. White, Ms. 81, 1893, p. 11, Diary entry for Sunday, July 2, 1893, Wellington, New Zealand)*

In other words, if He had sinned, the divine Son of God would have ceased to be. He would have forfeited His eternal existence. This was the risk taken by Christ in becoming incarnate. This risk is lost to the trinity doctrine. This is why this three-in-one teaching denies and obscures the extent that God was willing to go to in saving mankind from sin. In doing so it obscures the love that God has shown in the giving of His Son.

A mysterious oneness

As has been said throughout this study, the trinity doctrine, for it to be a trinity doctrine, has two indispensable aspects to it. The first is its 'threeness' (the three personalities of the Godhead) whilst the other is the 'oneness' (singleness of God's being). Without either of these component parts there is no trinity doctrine.

Ellen White obviously knew these things. Certainly she was not ignorant of them, yet never did she make any attempt to explain the 'oneness' although on a number of occasions she spoke of the three personalities together.

I will now share with you something interesting.

In 1899 and 1906, there was published in the Review and Herald an article written by Ellen White called 'The Word made flesh'. In the first section we quoted a number of paragraphs from it. I would ask you here to take special note of the words of Ellen White following on from what we previously quoted.

After saying that Christ was "God essentially", also that in His pre-existence He had been "with God from all eternity" (thus denoting again two separate personalities), also after saying that He had been "brought forth" (quoting Proverbs chapter 8), she wrote these words

"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, Signs of the Times, April 26th 1899, 'The Word made flesh' Reprinted by request 5th April 1906 Signs of the Times)

Ellen White did not deny that prior to the creation of our world, "Christ was one with the Father" but rather endorsed it. Notice though she follows this 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)

There is no doubt that Ellen White believed that before our world was created there

was a 'oneness' between God and Christ (notice she does not mention the Holy Spirit) but she said it was a 'oneness' that is totally beyond our comprehension. In other words, we could not understand it even if it were explained to us – which it has not been.

This is the basic problem with the trinity doctrine. It attempts to explain something that God has not revealed. This has led to a number of errors being taught, one being that it denies that the divine Son of God could go out of existence. This is why we know the trinity doctrine is error. It not only goes beyond what God has chosen to reveal but also denies what He has revealed. In doing so, it obscures the love of God as shown through the risk that was taken in making the decision to allow the Son of God to be made flesh. It also denies what really happened at Calvary.

If we are to have any sort of trinity doctrine in keeping with what God has revealed, it must contain a 'oneness' that Christ had with His Father before the creation of the world that whilst unexplainable and incomprehensible to humanity, does not prohibit the Son from ceasing to be.

'Old-time' Seventh-day Adventism

There are many who may not have heard of Charles S. Longacre but he was once a well-known minister in Seventh-day Adventism. Whilst he was greatly respected for the work he did for religious liberty, he also had very strong convictions that the trinity doctrine was disparaging to the gospel.

In a paper called 'The Deity of Christ', he made it very clear that trinitarian concepts of God deny that Christ could have lost His eternal existence. In upholding this belief he wrote

"If it were impossible for the Son of God to make a mistake or commit a sin, then His coming into this world and subjecting Himself to temptations were all a farce and mere mockery. If it were possible for Him to yield to temptation and fall into sin, then He must have risked heaven and His very existence, and even all eternity." (Charles S. Longacre, 'The Deity of Christ', paper presented to the Bible Research Fellowship Angwin, California January 1947, page 13)

He then added

"That is exactly what the Scriptures and the Spirit of Prophecy say Christ, the Son of God did do when He came to work out for us a plan of salvation from the curse of sin." (Ibid)

Longacre obviously had very serious convictions. He also had very serious objections to the trinity doctrine.

The author of the notes you are now reading holds to the very same convictions. He believes that the trinity doctrine seriously distorts the love that God has shown through the giving of His only begotten Son. He also believes that for the reasons given in this study, the Scriptures and the spirit of prophecy say that Christ could have sinned, also that if He had sinned, He would have lost His existence. We can see from this that the objections to the trinity doctrine made in this “Unaddressed Issue” article are far from being new. Longacre wrote his paper in 1947.

Longacre reasoning is ‘old-time’ Seventh-day Adventism. This was when our denomination was still non-trinitarian. This ‘risk scenario’ is impossible in our current trinitarian theology. We have seen this in what we have just read.

Incomplete theological analysis

Realising that the trinity doctrine is not specifically stated in Scripture, it is the normal practise for trinitarians to say that the conclusion that God is a trinity is based upon everything that the Scriptures tell us concerning the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This though is far from being true. Everything is not taken into account. I say this because if the possibility of the Son of God sinning and losing His existence (if He had sinned) is not taken into this reasoning, then obviously everything has not been taken into account.

If by sinning the divine Son of God could have lost His existence, which a correct analysis of what the word of God says could have happened, then it can only be concluded that God is not an indivisible threesome (tri-unity) as purported in the trinity doctrine. This clearly reveals that there is something seriously wrong with the trinity doctrine. It is due time therefore, for the leadership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, also its theologians, to address this unaddressed issue.

The trinity doctrine – possibly not a consensus of belief amongst Seventh-day Adventists

During the last year, there have been those who have emailed me in response to two questions I posed. The first was – “could Christ have sinned?” The second was, “if He could and did sin, would he have lost His existence?”

It is interesting that most who replied were either Seventh-day Adventists, or those who had associations with Seventh-day Adventism. Some were ex-Seventh-day Adventists, a number of who because of their non-trinitarian beliefs had been disfellowshipped from our denomination. Most who replied answered ‘yes’ to both questions. This means that they were not trinitarians (whether they thought they were or not).

Quite possibly, if a survey like this was taken amongst Seventh-day Adventists worldwide, also at the same time sharing with them what we have studied in this

article, the majority would agree that in becoming flesh, the divine Son of God did take the risk that He could have sinned and would have, if He had sinned, become lost because of it.

If this is found to be believed by the majority, it would mean that belief No. 2 of our fundamental beliefs - regarding God being a trinity - was not the consensus belief amongst our membership. This would bring us to ask another question – a very important one in fact. That question is - should our fundamental beliefs reflect the view of our leadership, also of our theologians, or should it reflect the majority belief of our church members. I believe it should be the latter.

If a survey like this could be carried out, also if the results were in favour of the conclusions drawn in this article, then the results would need to be made known at a General Conference Session. This is because it is only here that our fundamental beliefs can be changed. This is carried out by a majority vote of the delegates.

My prayer is that those who have taken the time to read this study have been blessed by it will consider passing it on to others. It may not have provided all of the answers but my hope is that it will at least set a person thinking regarding the trinity doctrine.