

The use of the word *Trinity* within Seventh-day Adventist Publications

By Terry Hill

Today, within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, there exists a great deal of confusion over the way that the word *trinity*, in the past, has been used when expressing our denominational Godhead beliefs. Whilst it is not possible to determine what every individual writer meant when employing this word, its usage, in our declared fundamental beliefs, can be determined. It is the purpose of this study to highlight this usage. First, we shall see how it is used today. We shall then compare it with how it was used in the past. We shall see a distinct difference.

Part A:	<u>The 2020 Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists</u>	<u>Page 2</u>
Part B:	<u>The 1931 Fundamental Beliefs</u>	<u>Page 3</u>
Part C:	<u>F. M. Wilcox explains the 1931 SDA trinity</u>	<u>Page 7</u>
Part D:	<u>F. M. Wilcox's 1913 "divine Trinity" statement</u>	<u>Page 10</u>
Part E:	<u>The 1892 trinity tract</u>	<u>Page 11</u>
Part F:	<u>Closing remarks and conclusions</u>	<u>Page 13</u>

Christ our only hope

A familiarity with the Word of God is our only hope. Those who diligently search the Scriptures will not accept Satan's delusions as the truth of God. No one need be overcome by the speculations presented by the enemy of God and of Christ. We are not to speculate regarding points upon which the Word of God is silent. All that is necessary for our salvation is given in the Word of God. Day by day we are to make the Bible the man of our counsel." (*Ellen G. White, Signs of the Times, August 2nd 1905*)

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The 2020 Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists

In the current SDA church manual, Fundamental Belief No. 2 reads as follows (hereon my emphasis in red)

2. The Trinity

There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three coeternal Persons. God is immortal, all-powerful, all-knowing, above all, and ever present. He is infinite and beyond human comprehension, yet known through His self-revelation. God, who is love, is forever worthy of worship, adoration, and service by the whole creation. (Gen. 1:26; Deut. 6:4; Isa. 6:8; Matt. 28:19; John 3:16; 2 Cor. 1:21, 22; 13:14; Eph. 4:4-6; 1 Peter 1:2.) (*The 2015 SDA Church Manual, 'Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists', page 162*)

This belief was first voted into the official beliefs of the SDA Church at the 1980 General Conference session held at Dallas Texas. This is the first time a trinity doctrine was voted into their beliefs. As we shall see later though, it was not the first time that the word *trinity* was used.

In the above belief, as in any trinity doctrine, there are two major factors. These are oneness and threeness. If either of these factors were absent, there would not be a trinity doctrine. As Paul Petersen (chair of the Religion and Biblical Languages Department at Andrews University) explains

“The core elements of the doctrine of the Trinity are oneness and distinctiveness. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one, yet three. To express this conviction, words and expressions came into use that are not explicitly used in the Bible. **The oneness of God we confess by claiming that God is one in being; the distinctiveness we confess by teaching that there are three persons.**” (*Paul Petersen, Andrews University, May 2015, page 3, 'God in 3 Persons — in the New Testament'*)

This “one in being” is referring to an ontological (metaphysical) oneness.

The SDA trinity doctrine, by the theologians of the SDA Church, is explained this way

“There is only one God (Deut. 6:4), however, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all called God (Matthew 27:46, John 20:28; Acts 5:3-4). Consequently, we do not worship three Gods, but one God who reveals Himself in and consists of three “persons”. **The three persons share one indivisible nature.** Each person of the Godhead is by nature and essence God, and the fullness of the deity dwells in each of them. **On the other hand, each person of the Godhead is inseparably connected to the other two.**” (*Ekkehardt Mueller, Biblical Research Institute, Reflections newsletter, July 2008, Page 8, 'Scripture Applied, - A Bible Study'*)

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

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

“The three persons of the Trinity, however, must be inclusive and not independent of one another. Because there is but one true God, by nature we have to conclude that **He is plural as to persons but single as to substance.**” (*Max Hatton, Understanding the Trinity*, page 20, 2001)

“**Therefore, we must confess that the Trinity is one indivisible God** and that the distinctions of the persons do not destroy the divine unity. **This unity of God is expressed by saying that he is one substance.** Nevertheless, in the divine unity there are three co-eternal and co-equal persons, who, though distinct, are the One undivided and adorable God. This is the doctrine of Scripture.” (*Raoul Dederen, Reflections on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, page 16, Andrews University Seminar Studies)

Notice in each of these statements the *threeness* and the *oneness*. Notice too it says that, “each person of the Godhead is inseparably connected to the other two” (Mueller). This is crucial (pivotal) to trinitarianism. It is saying that all three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are consubstantial (of the one and the same substance).

It is this metaphysical (ontological) oneness that makes the teaching of a tri-personal Godhead trinitarian. According to our present day theologians, this ontological oneness is the “unity” that is referred to in Fundamental Beliefs No. 2 (see above). In this sense (the ontological oneness), the SDA version of the trinity doctrine is in harmony with the orthodox trinity doctrine held by the Roman Catholic Church, also as held by much of Protestantism. As the *Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church* puts it

“266 "Now this is the Catholic faith: **We worship one God in the Trinity and the Trinity in unity, without either confusing the persons or dividing the substance;** for the person of the Father is one, the Son's is another, the Holy Spirit's another; but the Godhead of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is one, their glory equal, their majesty coeternal" (Athanasian Creed: DS 75; ND 16).

267 **Inseparable in what they are, the divine persons are also inseparable in what they do.**” (*Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church, Profession of Faith, No.'s 266 & 267*)

From the above can be seen what the word *trinity* is said to mean in our current (2020) fundamental beliefs. We can now compare this with the way it was used in the past when publishing our beliefs. As will be seen, there is a difference.

The 1931 Fundamental Beliefs

As noted above, the SDA Church, in 1980, voted to accept a set of fundamental beliefs that included a trinity doctrine. This replaced the beliefs that had existed in our yearbooks and our church manuals since the early 1930's. In these 1930's fundamental beliefs, the belief concerning the Godhead read as follows

“**That the Godhead, or Trinity,** consists of the Eternal Father, a personal, spiritual Being, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, infinite in wisdom and love; the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Eternal Father, through whom all things were created and through whom the salvation of the redeemed hosts will be accomplished; the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead, the great regenerating power in the work of redemption. Matt. 28:19.” (*Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists, 1931 Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, page 377)

This statement remained in our yearbooks, also in our church manuals, for almost 50 years. The first time it appeared in our yearbook was in the 1931 edition. It later appeared in the very first SDA church manual (1932). This was until it was replaced by the 1980 statement.

This 1931 statement did include the word *trinity* but it did not constitute a trinity doctrine. This is because, even though it admitted to a belief in the three persons of the Godhead, there is no mention of the three existing together as the one God (as depicted by the trinity doctrine). In other words, this 1931 statement did include threeness, but it lacked the oneness of the trinity doctrine. As noted above, without this oneness there is no trinity doctrine.

This 1931 statement was ambiguous. It could be taken a number of ways. This is because the words *Godhead* and *trinity* are not synonymous (note the belief says “[Godhead, or Trinity](#)”).

The word *Godhead* is an archaic word. It is translated from various Greek words that have the basic meaning of pertaining to *divinity* or *divine nature* etc. It is closely related to the word *Godhood*, meaning the quality of being divine or being God (deity). It has nothing whatsoever to do with oneness or threeness – which is very often the way that the word *trinity* is understood.

In the KJV of the Scriptures, the word *Godhead* appears only three times (Acts 17:29, Romans 1:20 and Colossians 2:9). In a number of other translations, old and new, it is not used. Instead, the translators have employed such as, *divinity*, *divine nature*, *all that God is*, *God’s nature* and *deity* etc.

This 1931 set of Fundamental Beliefs was not official - meaning it was not voted upon before being published in our yearbook and church manual. Its intention, so it is said, was only to display the consensus of beliefs held by SDA’s. As Merlin Burt explained

“1931 Statement of Faith. Throughout their history, Adventists have refused to adopt any creed but the Bible. They have realized that an understanding of truth is never complete. At various times, though, summary statements of faith have been published. **But until the 1946 General Conference session, these were never intended to be the official position of the church.**” (Merlin Burt, *History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on the Trinity*, Andrews Theological Society, page 135)

Merlin Burt is referring to all lists of fundamental beliefs that prior to 1946 were published by our church. None of them were voted upon. They were simply said to be representative of the beliefs held by SDA’s. We will return to this point later.

Jerry Moon explained about the 1931 statement

“**Lest anyone think that Adventists intended to make a creed**, “no formal or official approval” was sought for the statement.” (Jerry Moon, *Andrews university, Faculty Publications 166, The Adventist Trinity Debate - Part 1: Historical Overview (2003), page 123*).

In other words, if these beliefs had been voted upon, they would have constituted a creed.

Leroy Froom, a very notable and highly respected SDA administrator, explains the 1931 statement this way

“It had appeared in our official Church Manual of 1933—similarly without formal adoption—and has been in each succeeding edition. It was therefore by common consent and not by formal voted acceptance that Wilcox's suggested "Fundamental Beliefs," initially released informally through the channel of the annual Yearbook, became our accepted Statement of Faith.” (LeRoy Froom, *Movement of Destiny*, page 419, ‘New Epoch of Unity and Advance. No. 1’)

Notice the words “without formal adoption” (not voted upon).

Froom also said that when researching for information for his book, he consulted with Charles Watson, who, in 1931, was the General Conference President. Watson had been given the responsibility of choosing a committee of four to formulate this 1931 set of Fundamental Beliefs. Froom explained

“Our position in 1861 had been against any creedal statement

That was one of the added reasons, Watson stated to me, that in the thinking of the small committee, no formal or official approval should be sought for the unofficial Wilcox statement of 1931. It was therefore not brought before the General Conference Committee. It had not been prepared as a creed, but as a summary of our fundamental beliefs, to see how it would be received.” (LeRoy Froom, *Movement of Destiny*, page 419, *New Epoch of Unity and advance No. 1*)

Here we are told that in order to avoid this 1931 statement appearing as a creed, it was not, prior to appearing in our yearbook and church manual, voted upon by a recognised body of SDA's. The fact is that up to this time, the declared beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists had never been voted upon. The very first time that this happened was at the 1946 General Conference session. This was when it was decided that changes to the church manual, including the Fundamental Beliefs it contained, should only be changed by a vote at a General Conference session. As it said in the report of the 1946 General Conference session

“That no revision of this Statement of Fundamental Beliefs, as it now appears in the *Manual*, shall be made at any time except at a General Conference session.” (Review and Herald, 14th June 1946, Revision of Church Manual, Fifteenth Meeting, 13th June 1946)

This motion was adopted. This meant that from that time on (1946), the only revision that could be made to our fundamental beliefs would be at a duly appointed General Conference Session. As Jerry Moon explained

“Fifteen years later, when the [1931] statement had gained general acceptance, the General Conference session of 1946 made it official, voting that "no revision of this Statement of Fundamental Beliefs, as it now appears in the [Church] Manual, shall be made at any time except at a General Conference session. ... in 1946, it became the first such statement to be officially endorsed by a General Conference session.” (Jerry Moon, *Andrews university, Faculty Publications 166, The Adventist Trinity Debate - Part 1: Historical Overview (2003), pages 123, 126*)

It appears therefore, since 1946, SDA's have had a creed.

So how did the 1931 set of beliefs initially come to be formulated, and how did it come to be included in our 1931 yearbook, also in our very first church manual (1932)? In the Ministry magazine of June 2004, it was explained about the 1931 statement of belief

“In 1931 F. M. Wilcox prepared a statement of faith on behalf of a committee of four authorized by action of the General Conference Committee. This statement, titled "Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists," had 22 articles. **Although it was never formally adopted**, it appeared in the 1931 Yearbook and in all subsequent year books.” (Ministry, June 2004, ‘*The Fundamental Beliefs and "Growing in Christ": Proposal for a new Fundamental Belief*’)

The phrase “never formally adopted” is only another way of saying that this 1931 statement of beliefs, prior to appearing in our yearbook and in our church manual, had not been voted upon. Jerry Moon reported

“The third statement of "Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists" was prepared under the direction of a committee, **but it was actually written by F. M. Wilcox, editor of the Review and Herald.**” (Jerry Moon, *Andrews university, Faculty Publications 166, The Adventist Trinity Debate - Part 1: Historical Overview (2003), page 126*)

Lawrence Geraty, who played a major part in the initial formulation of the later 1980 Fundamental Beliefs, explained the following about the 1931 statement (quoting from an unpublished paper called *The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Mission: 1919-1979* written by Gottfried Oosterwal)

“The 22 fundamental beliefs that the committee reported were never officially discussed, approved, voted, or formally adopted. According to Gottfried Oosterwal:

Their publication in the *Yearbook* of 1931, and two years later in the *Church Manual*, was a personal accomplishment of Elder Wilcox and his group of four. **Realizing that the General Conference Committee or any other church body would never accept the document in the form in which it was written**, Elder Wilcox, with full knowledge of the group, handed the Statement directly to Edson Rogers, the General Conference statistician, who published it in the 1931 edition of the *Yearbook*, where it has appeared ever since. **It was without the official approval of the General Conference Committee, therefore, and without any formal denominational adoption, that Elder Wilcox's statement became the accepted declaration of our faith.**” (Lawrence Geraty, as quoted in the *Spectrum Magazine*, June 7th 2009, ‘*A New Statement Of Fundamental Beliefs (1980)*’)

Very similarly, LeRoy Froom reported

“**Elder Wilcox felt that he had drawn up a balanced summarizing statement.** With full knowledge and approval of the committee of four, he passed it over to Rogers, who placed it in the 1931 Yearbook (pp. 377-380).^{*} It has appeared there annually ever since. **The authorizing action did not call for submission to any other committee for approval.**” (LeRoy Froom, *Movement of Destiny*, page 414, ‘*New Epoch Of Unity And Advance—No. 1*’)

So as we can see, it was F. M. Wilcox, then editor of the *Review and Herald*, who formulated this 1931 statement of belief. We can see also that these beliefs, before being put into our yearbook and church manual, were not voted upon. The question is though: what did Wilcox

mean by his employment of the word *trinity* – and how, at that time (1931), did he expect SDA's to understand its use? Was it the same as in the later 1980 Fundamental Beliefs? This is something we shall now discover.

F. M. Wilcox explains the 1931 SDA trinity

In the very same year that the 1931 statement of beliefs was inserted into our yearbook, F. M. Wilcox, who had formulated these beliefs, wrote an article called *Modern Liberalism*. It had as a sub-heading *Does It Threaten Seventh-day Adventists?* This article was published in the Review and Herald of September 3rd 1931. The next month it was published in the Australasian Record and the Australian Signs.

In his article, Wilcox was pointing out the dangers of liberalism to Christianity, especially to the message of the SDA Church. After saying that the message for this hour is Christ's righteousness (as opposed to human righteousness), he made this comment

“Christ is set forth as the one and only true God, to whom worship and glory should be rendered...” (*F. M. Wilcox, Review and Herald, September 3rd 1931, 'Modern Liberalism'*)

Up to this time (the 1930's), SDA's had not regarded the Son but the Father as “the one and only true God”. Since the beginnings of Seventh-day Adventism, this had not changed. Their belief concerning Christ was that He was the Son of the one true God (John 17:3).

The above remark by Wilcox did not go unchallenged. We know this because in a follow up article almost 2 months later, he apologised for his mistake. He began by saying

“SEVERAL weeks ago we published an editorial entitled, "Modern Liberalism." In the article we used two expressions referring to Christ which have been called in question, namely, "He is very God as well as Son of man," and "the one and only true God." One brother writes "Christ is spoken of as the Son of God, but never as God—very God." (*F. M. Wilcox, Review and Herald, October 29 1931, 'Christ is Very God'*)

The following is how Wilcox replied

“In reply to this we wish to say that Christ is indeed very God, or He is not the Saviour of man.” (*Ibid*)

Then, after saying that the “modernist” only sees Christ as a “good man” he says

“On the contrary, the Bible represents Christ as very God, as Deity itself; **He partook of the very nature and essence of the Eternal Father.** The Father is represented as addressing the Son as God: "Unto the Son He saith, Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever: a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Thy kingdom." Heb. 1: 8.”

The One here speaking and addressing the Son as God is clearly indicated in the preceding verses. It is the same One who declares in verse 5, "**Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee.**" And again, "**I will be to Him a Father, and He shall be to Me a Son.**" If the Father Himself called Christ God, surely this designation belongs to Him by right.” (*Ibid*)

Notice Wilcox says that Christ “partook of the very nature and essence of the Eternal Father”. The word “partook” involves an action – a past action. This was in keeping with the SDA belief, at that time, that in eternity, Christ was begotten of God. Wilcox would have been understood as endorsing this divine Sonship belief. Remember, this was in 1931.

After quoting Isaiah 9:6-7, also after saying that “Surely all must agree that this scripture applies to the Son rather than to the Father”, Wilcox made his apology

“When we referred to Christ as the "one and only true God," the thought in mind was to contrast Him with the gods of the heathen world.” (*Ibid*)

Wilcox had made no mention of this in his article. Hence he confessed

“The expression was not properly elucidated, and so was unfortunate.” (*Ibid*)

Wilcox admitted that saying Christ is the "one and only true God" was, as he put it, “unfortunate”. He was agreeing therefore, along with SDA’s at the time, that this designation belonged to the Father alone. This is not a conclusion that would be drawn by a trinitarian. Wilcox therefore was not speaking as a trinitarian. For Wilcox to write an apology in the Review and Herald, the objection to what he had said must have been very strong.

After his apology, Wilcox explained what SDA’s believed about the divine trinity. This was under the sub-heading *The Trinity Explained*

“We recognize the divine Trinity,— the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,—each possessing a distinct and separate personality, but one in nature and in purpose, so welded together in this infinite union that the apostle James speaks of them as "one God." James 2:19. This divine unity is similar to the unity existing between Christ and the believer, and between the different believers in their fellowship in Christ Jesus.” (*Ibid*)

This is very important. It explains how, in the 1930’s, SDA’s understood “the divine Trinity”, and remember, Wilcox had made these remarks under the sub-heading of *The Trinity Explained*.

This statement by Wilcox completely invalidates the claim that at that time, he, also SDA’s in general, were believers in the trinity doctrine. This is because in explaining “the divine trinity”, Wilcox says that the “divine unity” between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is similar to the unity between “Christ and the believer”, also as between fellow Christians. No trinitarian would ever make such a statement.

When saying “divine Trinity” therefore, Wilcox could not have been expressing a belief in the trinity doctrine. This is because (as we have seen above on pages 2-3), trinitarians say that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are inseparably united in one indivisible substance (one trinitarian divine being), as the one God. This type of unity (ontological oneness) cannot be said to be the same as, or even similar to, the unity (oneness) between Christ and the believer, neither can it be said to be similar to the unity (oneness) between believers. Wilcox was definitely not speaking as a trinitarian. He later wrote (under the sub-heading *Denominational View*)

“A clear, concise expression of the faith of Seventh-day Adventists regarding the Trinity is found in the following paragraphs, which we quote from the denominational Year Book of 1931: (*Ibid*)

Wilcox then quoted the 1931 statement of Godhead beliefs (as above). What we can see therefore, because of his explanation of “the divine Trinity”, is that this was how he expected SDA’s to understand the phrase “Godhead, or Trinity” as used in those beliefs. After all, he was the one who wrote it. Who better to explain it?

Wilcox followed this by saying (remember he was still in the process of explaining the SDA “Denominational View” of the trinity)

“There has been through the centuries some very unfortunate and speculative teaching regarding the divine Trinity, and these philosophies have created great divisions in the Christian church.” (*Ibid*)

It is a reasonable assumption that Wilcox had in mind the orthodox trinity doctrine (as explained above on pages 2-3). The readers of his article would also have probably reasoned the same way. We were not then a trinitarian denomination, and it is the “philosophies” contained in the doctrine of the trinity that has caused “great divisions” amongst Christians. It is still doing the same today – even within the SDA Church.

Important to note is that Wilcox is admitting that the SDA explanation of the “the divine Trinity” is different to other explanations. This is the reason why, when we see Wilcox, or anyone else for that matter, using the word *trinity*, we must not assume, as many have mistakenly done, that this is referring to the trinity doctrine. Wilcox, when explaining the SDA “divine trinity”, certainly wasn’t doing so.

In further explanation of the SDA trinity, Wilcox also wrote (this was under the sub-heading *Speculation Profitless*)

“As may be expected when one seeks to penetrate the mystery of divinity, it only entails much idle speculation regarding the incarnation of Christ and the precise relationship of the three persons of the Godhead, which the Bible has not clearly revealed, and which makes all theorizing and speculation profitless.” (*Ibid*)

It is more than likely that when referring to “idle speculation” regarding “the precise relationship of the three persons of the Godhead”, Wilcox once again had the orthodox trinity doctrine in mind. This is what the trinity doctrine does. It attempts to define the “precise relationship” between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is particularly with regards to how they exist together ontologically (metaphysically).

It is interesting that in 1947, in a series called *The Pillars of the Christian Faith*, Wilcox explained again that the “divine unity” in “the divine Trinity” (between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit) was “similar to the unity existing between Christ and the believer”, also as between fellow believers (see Signs of the Times, January 14th 1947). This is telling us what was believed and taught, at that time by SDA’s about “the divine Trinity”. After all, it was used by Wilcox to explain the pillars of the Christian faith. Surely therefore it is being said that this is what was believed then, as the 1950’s approached, by Seventh-day Adventists. Certainly this was not a confession of the trinity doctrine.

In conclusion, I believe it is reasonably evident that when writing “Godhead, or Trinity” in the 1931 statement of beliefs, Wilcox could not have been referring to the trinity doctrine. He was

simply using the word *trinity* to show that SDA's believed there are three persons of the Godhead. Wilcox wrote his 'apologetic' article shortly after the 1931 statement of beliefs was first inserted into our yearbook.

It is on this point where many have become confused. They think that each time the word *trinity* is used, it means as in the doctrine of the trinity, when its writer may not have meant any such thing. This is because the word *trinity* was often used to express the belief of a tri-personal Godhead, without the speculative embellishments of orthodox trinitarianism.

F. M. Wilcox's 1913 "divine Trinity" statement

In the Review and Herald of 9th October 1913, its editor, F. M. Wilcox, wrote the following

"For the benefit of those who may desire to know more particularly the cardinal features of the faith held by this denomination, we shall state that Seventh-day Adventists believe,-

1. In the divine Trinity. This Trinity consists of the eternal Father, a personal, spiritual being, omnipotent, omniscient, infinite in power, wisdom, and love; of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the eternal Father, through whom all things were created, and through whom the salvation of the redeemed hosts will be accomplished; the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead, the one regenerating agency in the work of redemption." (*F. M. Wilcox, Review and Herald, 9th October 1913, 'The message for Today'*)

Wilcox gave no explanation as to what he meant by the phrase "divine Trinity" but seeing that 18 years later in 1931, also 34 years later in 1947, when explaining the SDA trinity, he did not mean the trinity doctrine, it is reasonable to assume that in 1913 he did not mean it either. He was simply using the word *trinity* to express a belief in the three persons of the Godhead. This is in keeping with where Ellen White wrote

"There are three living persons of the heavenly trio;" (*Ellen G. White, Special Testimonies Series B, No 7, page 63, 'Come out and be separate'*)

In this statement there is no mention of all three persons existing inseparably together as the one God (as depicted in the trinity doctrine). In other words, the ontological oneness of the trinity doctrine is absent. This is why this statement, in itself, does not constitute a trinity doctrine.

For those who would like to see a detailed explanation of the above "three living persons" statement, there is an article found at the following link. It is called *Ellen White Condemns Trinitarian Reasoning*.

Ellen White condemns trinitarian reasoning

Before we leave this period of SDA history, it is important to note that between 1936 and 1938, the SDA Church officially explained their denominational fundamental beliefs. This they did over 7 consecutive editions of their Sabbath School Quarterly (4th quarter 1936 – 2nd quarter 1938).

In these quarterlies, the word trinity was used three times. Each of these times was in the quarterly that dealt with our Godhead beliefs (4th quarter 1936). Twice it was used as a heading but the third time it was explained

“Since the divine Trinity is composed of three persons, there is established a personal relationship between the Godhead and the one baptized. To such an experience every child of God is invited.” (*SDA Sabbath School Quarterly, 4th quarter 1936, page 31*)

Again this does not constitute a trinity doctrine. This is because no mention is made of the ontological oneness of God, as depicted in the trinity doctrine. No further explanation of the trinity was given.

When this lesson quarterly is studied, it will be seen that the beliefs it contained, also the comments that were made, particularly concerning Christ and the Holy Spirit, would never fit into a trinity doctrine. This is too much to explain here, but a detailed analysis can be found at this link

The 1936 official beliefs of SDA's

There is one other place where the use of word *trinity* needs to be explained. This was not in a published belief such as in our yearbook or church manual, but its usage is still very significant. This was when it was used in a tract, in 1892, explaining the Godhead beliefs of SDA's.

The 1892 trinity tract

In 1889, in the *New York Independent*, a Presbyterian minister by the name Samuel Thayer Spear (1812-1891) published an article called *The Subordination of Christ*. Spear's intention was to show that not only does this subordination apply to the incarnation, but also to Christ's pre-existence. Two years later in 1891, under the same title, it was published in the *Signs of the Times* of December 7th and 14th.

Even though a Presbyterian minister had written the article, the SDA Church regarded it in very high esteem. In fact it was thought of as so closely resembling our own Godhead beliefs, that it was considered fitting to be made available to the public, as a tract, explaining these beliefs. Permission to do this was granted. This led to Spear's article being included in the SDA *Bible Students Library* – which was a series of tracts explaining what SDA's believed regarding numerous Biblical topics.

This particular tract, number No. 90 in the series, revealed what, during the 1890's, was believed by SDA's about the Godhead. This was just a short while after the famous 1888 Minneapolis General Conference. This shows, following that conference, what was considered to be acceptable SDA doctrine. This tract was made available to the public for at least 20 years. This should be telling us a great deal about the beliefs held by SDA's during this time period.

Spear, in his article, did not entertain speculation. The entire article is given over to explaining what the *Bible alone* has to say concerning the three personalities of the Godhead. This would have been why, when the SDA Church published it as a tract, its title was changed to *The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity* (not just *The Doctrine of the Trinity*). It was a Bible only study of the Godhead. As was explained in 1894 when advertising this tract in the *Signs of the Times*

“This tract of 16 pages is a reprint of an article in the *New York Independent*, by the late Samuel Spear, D.D. It presents the Bible view of the doctrine of the Trinity in the terms

used in the Bible, and therefore avoids all philosophical discussion and foolish speculation.

It is a tract worthy of reading.” (*Signs of the Times*, 28th May 1894, *Bible Students’ Library*)
Spear’s article denied the extreme speculations of the trinity doctrine – hence orthodox trinitarians would have regarded it as falling short of a trinity doctrine. Having said that, the word *trinity* would appeal to Christians of other denominations. It would show them what was believed by SDA’s about the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the divine trinity.

Spear began his article with these words

“The Bible, while not giving a metaphysical definition of the spiritual unity of God, teaches His essential oneness in opposition to all forms of polytheism, and also assumes man’s capacity to apprehend the idea sufficiently for all the purposes of worship and obedience. John 17:3; 1 Cor. 8:6. The same Bible as clearly teaches that the adorable Person therein known as Jesus Christ, when considered in his whole nature, is truly divine and truly God in the most absolute sense. John 1:1-18; 1 John 5:20; Rom. 1:3, 4; 9:5; Titus 2:13.”
(*Samuel T. Spear, D. D., New York Independent, November 14th 1889, ‘The Subordination of Christ’*)

Spear realised that nowhere within the Bible is found an explanation regarding how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have their existence together. In other words, with regards to this matter, God has chosen to be silent. This is how it should be with us. We should not make any attempt to explain it. This shows that Spear, in his article, was not promoting trinitarianism. He later commented

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

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

This is extremely good advice. With respect to the Godhead, there is no need for speculation. We simply need to state what the Bible alone tells us.

Spear was very well aware that without attempting to describe the Godhead as depicted by the trinity doctrine (meaning without the speculation of the one indivisible substance idea), that this would make what he had written appear to be tritheism (a belief in 3 Gods). Pre-empting this thought, he made this observation

“This doctrine, as held and stated by those who adopt it, is not a system of tri-theism, or the doctrine of three Gods, but is the doctrine of one God subsisting and acting in three

persons, with the qualification that the term “person,” though perhaps the best that can be used, is not, when used in this relation, to be understood in any sense that would make it inconsistent with the unity of the Godhead, and hence not to be understood in the ordinary sense when applied to men. Bible trinitarians are not tritheists. They simply seek to state, in the best way in which they can, what they regard the Bible as teaching.” (*Ibid*)

Do you see the point Spear is making? The Bible says nothing about how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit metaphysically (ontologically) exist together. All that we have is information regarding the divine persons themselves. This could be interpreted as tritheism. Spear ended his article by saying

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

Very interestingly, when the SDA Church made Spear’s article into a tract, some of the original wording was removed. Spear had originally written

“The distinction thus revealed in the Bible is the basis of the doctrine of the *tri-personal God or tri-une God, which has so long been the faith of the Christian Church*” (*Ibid*)

The words in red were those that were omitted.

If you wish to read the entirety of Spear’s article, also why our church used it as a tract, also view the accolades our church gave to what Spear had written, you can do so by going here

The Spear Article

If you do read it, remember this one thing. This tract was available to the public, also advertised in our official publications, for at least 20 years – all of which was during the time of Ellen White’s ministry. If there had been anything seriously wrong with it, I am sure that God, through His messenger, would have said something about it. Don’t you?

Closing remarks and conclusions

By now, it should be reasonably evident that when SDA’s used the word *trinity* to declare their Godhead beliefs, they were not, each time, expressing a belief in the trinity doctrine. In fact it was not until at least 1980 that this officially happened.

There is also other ample evidence to show that even into the 1960’s, SDA’s in general did not consider themselves to be subscribers to the trinity doctrine. This is because it was generally believed that (a) the divine person of the Son of God died at Calvary, also (b) that when the decision was made for the divine Son of God to become incarnate, a risk was taken concerning His eternal existence. Both of these beliefs are impossible in trinitarianism. As Ekkehardt Mueller explained in the Biblical Research Institutes newsletter of July 2008

“The three persons share one indivisible nature. Each person of the Godhead is by nature and essence God, and the fullness of the deity dwells in each of them. On the other hand, each person of the Godhead is inseparably connected to the other two.” (*Ekkehardt*)

Mueller, Biblical Research Institute, Reflections newsletter, July 2008, Page 8, 'Scripture Applied, - A Bible Study')

This is standard trinitarian reasoning. It reasons that regardless of the circumstances, the divine Son of God is always alive in the one substance of God. This is even when Jesus died on the cross. It was this realisation that led certain SDA writers to speak out against the trinity doctrine. Trinitarianism denies that a divine person made the atonement. Thus trinitarianism reduces the atonement to just a human sacrifice.

As regarding the risk belief, those holding prominent positions in the church (such as conference presidents, leadership and ministry etc.) often spoke of the risk that was taken, in the plan of redemption, by God and Christ. This shows that these SDA's were not trinitarian. Whilst what they wrote would be too much to detail here, it can be read on pages 44-49 of the article found [here](#)

[The Development of SDA Trinity theology - part 1](#)

Those wishing to see what Ellen White wrote about the death of the divine Son of God, also what she wrote about the risk taken in the plan of redemption by God and Christ, can do so at the following two links. On this matter, she agreed with early SDA's. She believed that a divine person did die at Calvary, also that this risk concerning Christ's eternal existence did really exist. She did not therefore write in support of the trinity doctrine but against it.

[Ellen White's comments concerning the incarnation and the death at Calvary of the divine Son of God](#)

[Ellen White's comments on the incarnation of Christ and the risk taken concerning His existence](#)

It was not until around the 1970's that trinitarianism became generally acceptable to Seventh-day Adventists. This shows that previously, when using the word *trinity*, SDA writers, whether it was in our declared beliefs or otherwise, were not always referring to the trinity doctrine. Those who wish to argue this point are denying the evidence of SDA denominational history.

God bless you as you think upon these things.

Terry Hill