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God, the Trinity, and Adventism: An Introduction to the Issues

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Why a symposium on the Trinity? There are several good reasons.

In the last decade or two, there has been a resurgence of Arianism¹ and anti-Trinitarianism, not only in Seventh-day Adventism but also in the wider Christian and Evangelical world.

But Seventh-day Adventist objections to the doctrine of the Trinity are not new. Many of our early pioneers had issues with the doctrine of the Trinity, and it is now commonly known and accepted that many of them were anti-Trinitarian. Representative of such sentiments is Joseph Bates' statement in his autobiography: "Respecting the Trinity, I concluded that it was impossible for me to believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, was also the Almighty God, the Father, one and the same being."² Although Bates' view of the Trinity does not correspond with the traditional orthodox understanding of the triune God, it nonetheless highlights that in early Adventism the doctrine was not accurately understood to start with.

In a recent book on the Trinity, Woodrow Whidden comments that

¹ Arianism holds that the Son was created by nature and did not exist before the Father brought him into existence. As such the Son is subordinate to the Father's authority (subordinationism). Arians have also consistently denied the personhood of the Holy Spirit.

² Quoted in Jerry Moon, "Trinity and Anti-Trinitarianism in Seventh-day Adventist History," in Woodrow Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John W. Reeve, *The Trinity: Understanding God's Love, His Plan of Salvation, and Christian Relationships* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2002), 190.

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Not only are there increasing reports of pockets of anti-Trinitarian revival in various regions across North America, but via Internet its influence has spread around the world. As this grassroots Arian or anti-Trinitarian movement gains ground, local churches increasingly find themselves drawn into debate over the issues.³

While Adventists have been careful and deliberate in their study of many biblical doctrines—for example the doctrines of last day events, justification by faith, the sanctuary, and the atonement—other doctrines have been neglected. One of them, I believe, is the biblical doctrine of the Godhead. And perhaps we are now seeing the results of this neglect. In any case, this conference seeks to address some of the issues that are being raised in regard to our understanding of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

While preparing this introduction, I consulted a theological dictionary to see what it would say about the doctrine of the Trinity. The author of the article stated that although the expression “the Trinity” is not a biblical term, with which I readily agree, “it has been found a convenient designation for the one God self-revealed in Scripture as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”⁴

Likely it is here that the difficulties with the doctrine of the Trinity begin for some people, and some Adventists in particular. First, we have a term that is not found in Scripture, and Adventists are determined to base their doctrines on Scripture only. Second, to our modern, analytical, and mathematical minds, the Trinity is a hard concept to understand. How can three equal one or one equal three?

Yet we do find in Scripture many references to three persons in God, and this adds to the confusion in many people’s minds. Although the Old Testament emphasizes the exclusive unity of God (Deut 6:4; 5:7–11), it also alludes to the plurality of God (Gen 1:2, 26; 11:7; 18:1–33; Exod 23:23). Of all allusions to this plurality of God in the Old Testament, Isa 42:1 and 48:16 come very close to a Trinitarian formulation.

The New Testament does not have any explicit statement on the Trinity—apart from 1 John 5:7, which has been rejected as a medieval addition to the text—but the Trinitarian evidence is overwhelming. Jesus

³ Ibid., 8–9.

⁴ G. W. Bromiley, “Trinity,” in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 1112.

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is clearly described as divine in the gospel of John (John 1:1–3; 20:28), and he himself proclaims his own divinity (John 8:58). In the New Testament we find also clear references to the three persons of the Godhead. All three are mentioned at the baptism of Jesus (Matt 3:16–17); during the Lord’s Supper Jesus comforts his disciples with the thought that he and the Father would send the Holy Spirit to guide them after his departure (John 14:16–17); all three persons are part of the baptismal formula found in Jesus’ great commission to his disciples (Matt 28:19); Paul readily refers to all three persons in many of his epistles (Rom 8:9–11; 2 Cor 13:14; 2 Tim 1:3–14; Eph 1:13–14; 3:14–19); Peter acknowledges the work of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the salvation of people (1 Pet 1:2), and John is a witness of the Spirit’s testimony regarding Jesus, the Son of God (1 John 5:5–9). The book of Revelation also presents three persons involved in the final events of this world (Rev 1:4–5; 22:16–18).

But all these biblical evidences to the triune God become somewhat ambivalent for some people because the Holy Spirit is often referred to with metaphors of objects: a dove (Matt 3:16), the wind (John 3:8), fire (Isa 6:6, 7), water (John 7:37–39), and oil (Matt 25:1–4). Moreover, adding to this ambivalence are some New Testament statements that appear to refer to Jesus as having had a beginning when he is referred to as “begotten” (*monogenes*) or “firstborn of all creation” (*prototokos*) (John 3:16; Col 1:15).

But the history of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity also brings up some issues. Historically, it can be argued that the development of the doctrine of the Trinity is closely connected with the Christological disputes the early church struggled with. When the early church through a series of councils confirmed the eternal divinity of Jesus, it opened the way for a clarification of the relationship between God the Father and Jesus. “The more emphatic the church became that Christ was God, the more it came under pressure to clarify how Christ related to God.”⁵ And along with this, it needed to clarify the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

For the early Church, the fact that Christian faith involved acceptance of Jesus as Savior and Lord meant that the Trinity quickly found its way into the creeds of the church. The Niceo-Constantinopolitan creed confesses in part that

⁵ Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Malden: Blackwell, 1998), 61.

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We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, . . . We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. . . . We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father.⁶ With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.”⁷

Roger Olson comments that “The implications of this confession, especially in the context of monotheism, naturally became one of the first concerns of patristic theology, the main aim being to secure the doctrine against tritheism on the one side and monarchianism on the other.”⁸

The early church fathers gave us the vocabulary we use and discuss today. Irenaeus spoke of the “economy of salvation,” in which each member of the Godhead has a distinct yet related role. In his theology of the Trinity, Tertullian argued that “substance” is what unites while “person” is what distinguishes the members of the Godhead. “The three persons of the Trinity are distinct, yet not divided, different yet not separate or independent of each other.”⁹ The eastern Cappadocian fathers expanded on Tertullian’s thought and tended to emphasize the distinct individuality of the three persons while safeguarding their unity by stressing the fact that both the Son and the Spirit derived from the Father.¹⁰ They spoke of one “substance” (*ousia*) in three “persons” (*hypostases*).¹¹ However, another issue for us today is that much of that vocabulary and thought assumed ancient Greek dualism and metaphysics, which are very distant and confusing to us now.

Augustine grounded his theology of the Trinity on the concept of relationship and on the bond of love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He “developed the idea of relation within the Godhead, arguing that the

⁶ Later western versions of the Nicene Creed added the *filioque* clause here: “who proceeds from the Father *and the Son*.” The addition of this clause was one of the issues that led to the great schism between east and west in 1054.

⁷ Quoted from Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), 195–196.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 196. Monarchianism is a form of modalism that denied the plurality of God. It holds that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are a succession of modes or operations; they are not separate persons.

⁹ McGrath, 62.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 63. Following the Cappadocian fathers, Orthodox theology teaches that the Son is the “only begotten” of the Father and the Holy Spirit “proceeds” from the Father.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

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persons of the Trinity are defined by their relationships to one another.”¹² Augustine rejected any form of subordinationism that treated the Son and the Holy Spirit as inferior to the Father within the Godhead. Although the Son and the Spirit may appear to be posterior to the Father, this judgment only applies to their role within the process of salvation; they may appear to be subordinate to the Father in history, but in eternity all are equal.¹³

By the end of the fifth century, the early church had reached a consensus regarding the doctrine of the Trinity that has remained Christianity’s official position for centuries.

But there has always been strong divergent opinions threatening this consensus. Although the early church councils clearly defined Jesus’ divine-human nature and the relationship between the persons of the Godhead, Arianism and modalism¹⁴ have remained influential beliefs within Christianity. Jaroslav Pelikan believes that during the Reformation, the doctrine of the Trinity was relegated to a secondary position in relation to the immediate moral-religious interest of the Reformers.¹⁵ And this is basically the position it kept in Protestant theology for the following five centuries.

Most devastating to the doctrine of the Trinity was the impact of Enlightenment rationalism and Deism, an impact that is still felt today. For a variety of reasons, during the Enlightenment the doctrine of the Trinity became “a pestilence for rationalistic theologians,” as one thinker said, and the assumption that it was a “revealed doctrine” could no longer be taken for granted in the Christian theology of the nineteenth century. Ever since the Reformation, Socinianism had been criticizing the doctrine of the Trinity on both biblical and rational grounds, but during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the criticisms appeared with growing frequency and insistence also within churches that were professedly Trinitarian in their confessions of faith.¹⁶ Along with Unitarianism, which was gradually beginning to take its place alongside the Trinitarian

¹² Ibid., 71.

¹³ Ibid., 67.

¹⁴ Modalism took many forms. One of them, Sabellianism, teaches that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three different modes or manifestations of the same God at different times. Another form is monarchianism, mentioned earlier in this paper.

¹⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 5: *Christian Doctrine and Modern Culture (since 1700)* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989), 198.

¹⁶ Ibid., 192–193.

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churches, some American denominations, such as the Christian Connection and some Freewill Baptist churches, became anti-Trinitarian.

To some extent, the modern anti-Trinitarian sentiments and the recrudescence of modalism confirmed “the warnings long voiced by orthodox polemics that loss of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity would eventually lead to loss of the reality of God.”¹⁷ These warnings were fulfilled when Christian theology adopted pantheistic and panentheistic views of God in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Traditional Christian theology affirmed a doctrine of God according to which the created world was distinct from its Creator. This doctrine distinguished clearly between a God omnipotent in nature and a God identical with nature. Upon that distinctness depended such fundamentals of the Christian worldview as the very doctrine of creation itself.¹⁸

A hundred years ago, our own Adventist denomination was shaken by a pantheistic controversy. Could it be that such a development was the result of some long held Arian views? That the Holy Spirit was not to be understood as a person within the Godhead but only as a divine force?

Such views were espoused by J. N. Andrews, Joseph H. Waggoner, Daniel T. Bourdeau, R. F. Cottrell, J. N. Loughborough, Uriah Smith, and many others of our pioneers who came from a Christian Connection and Freewill Baptist heritage. But second generation Adventists also held these views, among them E. J. Waggoner, good friend of J. H. Kellogg.

But slowly our denomination reshaped its understanding of the Godhead and moved toward a traditional Trinitarian view in order to take into account the clear New Testament teaching on a triune God and to uphold the validity and full sufficiency of Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice of atonement on the cross. Furthermore, Ellen White certainly had a strong influence in that direction, particularly after the publication of her book *Desire of Ages*.¹⁹

Yet today questions persist, and there is a resurgence of anti-Trinitarian views among Adventists. Some wish to reclaim the teachings of our Adventist pioneers on the Godhead and deny the full and eternally preexistent deity of Jesus and the personal deity of the Holy Spirit.

Our own Adventist theological experience and history can make valuable contributions to this discussion. In many ways the philosophical

¹⁷ Ibid., 193.

¹⁸ Ibid., 200–201.

¹⁹ References in the *Desire of Ages* to the eternal deity of Christ are found on pp. 19, 530, 785, and to the divine personhood of the Holy Spirit on p. 671.

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assumptions and presuppositions of our worldview are different from traditional Christianity and bring different perspectives on some of these old issues. We do not accept the traditional Platonic dualistic worldview and metaphysics that were foundational to the church fathers' theology of the Trinity, one of these being the concept of the immortality of the soul.

It is our hope that the papers presented at this symposium will offer some scholarly answers to many questions and will provide a solid foundation on which to build a biblically and theologically sound doctrine of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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