



THE TRINITY

Understanding God's love,
His plan of salvation,
and Christian relationships

WOODROW
WHIDDEN ♦ JERRY
MOON ♦ JOHN W.
REEVE



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*Dedicated to the memory of the late
Otto H. Christensen,
who deeply cared about these Trinitarian issues.*



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INTRODUCTION

Have you ever had a knock at the door unexpectedly interrupt a relaxing Sunday afternoon? You break away from whatever you are doing and answer the door. Suddenly you realize that it is not some old friend making a surprise visit. Rather, it is an intense couple representing the local Kingdom Hall and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society—the publishing arm of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

You swallow hard, knowing that if you invite them in, it will put your grasp of basic Bible knowledge and doctrine to a rather trying test. Further, it generally takes only one encounter to realize that one of the first items for discussion will be a strong challenge to the doctrine of the Trinity.

But the greater surprise in my life and ministry has not been so much in dealing with zealous Jehovah's Witnesses on the Trinity—rather, it is now having to meet essentially the same anti-Trinitarian arguments coming from fellow Seventh-day Adventists. And they are raising this issue with an intensity not too far removed from the zeal of the Watchtower representatives.

WHY A NEW BOOK ON THE TRINITY?

Some might question the need for a new book on the subject of the Godhead, or the Trinity, at this time. Since the church has seemingly settled the issue with clearly Trinitarian positions in its 27 fundamental beliefs, why reopen the question?¹ The answer is basically threefold.

A Revival of Anti-Trinitarian Thought

First, as already referred to above, new challenges to the doctrine of the Trinity have arisen both from inside and outside of Adventism. Various reports and observations suggest that my own personal expe-

rience with this issue fairly reflects the current situation.

When dealing with the subject of the Godhead and the Trinity, I had always told my Seventh-day Adventist congregations and Sabbath school and college religion classes something like the following:

Whereas Arianism² and anti-Trinitarianism were very strong among many of the pioneer Adventist leaders,³ the Trinitarian view of the Godhead had become the standard view by at least the 1940s, if not earlier. In fact, the view is now the position duly voted in our official statement of the Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists. The most recent action took place at the General Conference session of 1980 in Dallas, Texas.

I had heard about important teachers and denominational leaders who had lived into the 1950s and 1960s while holding strongly anti-Trinitarian views.⁴ Since my college and seminary years in the mid- to late 1960s, however, I was also fond of telling my Adventist audiences, “I have not met an Adventist anti-Trinitarian or Arian in my lifetime.” It was not just dramatic rhetoric on my part, but the honest truth.

Yes, I was really telling the truth—that is, until the early years of the 1990s. I distinctly recall a pleasant afternoon walk across the campus of Andrews University, when two young men passing out pamphlets on the steps of the James White Library suddenly greeted me. Being the curious person that I am, I accepted their material, began looking it over, and asked, “What is it that you are promoting?”

To my great surprise, they proceeded to inform me that they had made a wonderful recovery of precious truth—they had rediscovered what they claimed were the teachings of the Adventist pioneers on the Godhead. Now they promoted ideas that denied the full and eternally preexistent deity of Jesus and the personal deity of the Holy Spirit.

Later I found out from acquaintances around the country that the young men were not an isolated phenomenon. Not only are there increasing reports of pockets of anti-Trinitarian revival in various regions across North America, but via the 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.

The Relative Theological Neglect of the Godhead

The second factor that has raised our interest in the issue of the Godhead is a rather universal, though benign, neglect of the issue by both Adventist scholarship⁵ and the leadership in local Adventist conferences and churches all across the world. The church has widely accepted the Trinity, but reflected little upon the teaching for many decades. As a result, we feel that the time has arrived for a fresh review of the subject.

A New Awareness of the Pioneer Views

The third and final factor in the present revival of interest in the subject of the Godhead is the convergence of Ellen White’s counsel to reprint and study the works of the early Adventist pioneers and their availability on CD-ROMs. The explosion of electronic technology has empowered laypersons (with little investment of time or money) to have immediate access to all the early pioneer statements by simply typing in appropriate words and/or phrases. To put it quite simply, we now have a renewed awareness of the wide-ranging anti-Trinitarian views of the pioneers of the Advent movement.

Our Target Audience

The authors of this book seek to speak to the members of the local church as well as to busy pastors (or administrators) and college students who have faced questions about the Trinity. Indeed, although we will seek to speak from the base of the best scholarship on the issue, it is our purpose to present them in a way that will appeal to all believers, young and old, in Sabbath school classes, college classes, and the pews and pulpits of the local churches around the world.

How Shall We Answer Questions Raised by the Trinity?

Can we answer the questions that swirl around the issue of the Trinity from the Scriptures (our primary authority), the writings of Ellen G. White, sanctified reason, and Christian experience? Is it proper for Seventh-day Adventists to go against the majority of its pioneer thinkers, who were clearly anti-Trinitarian? Upon what grounds can we continue to officially embrace and profess a teaching that has a long history of support and development not only in Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, but also in Protestantism? Would not that involve accepting the traditions that compose the great apostasy called “Babylon”? Would it not be better to follow the lead of our courageous and truth-driven pioneers?

The Bible, Our Primary Authority

In the spirit of the pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the authors of this book firmly hold the following conviction: if we cannot support any teaching biblically, we do not want it.⁶ We humbly take up this project in the spirit of John Nevins Andrews (1829-1883), one of the most able of our pioneer scholars, who exclaimed, “I would exchange a thousand errors for one truth.”

And how shall we know what is the truth about the Godhead and the Trinitarian claims of the majority of Christians? Primarily the truth will emerge from a careful, prayerful search of the Written Word of God.

Furthermore, we claim the promise of Jesus that “if anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority” (John 7:17, NKJV). He promises that those who are willing to follow God in obedience can know the “doctrine” of God. And where shall we go to settle this issue? Again Jesus is very clear: “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” (John 17:17, NKJV).

The reader must also recognize that the settled conviction of the authors of this book is that whatever the expression “Your word” covers,

it at least includes the 66 canonical books of the Holy Bible. We believe that this Written Word contains revealed messages that are sufficient to give us doctrinal clarity on any controverted question—including the issue of the Trinity.

We will be very candid with our readers—if it is not biblical we do not want it, even if the vast majority of authorities in the religious world endorse it (including Adventist pioneers and the theologians of “Babylon”). Thus this book will begin with the biblical evidence.

The Organization of the Book

The first chapter will open the discussion by marshaling the strongest evidence that we have been able to locate regarding the questions of (1) the full divine and eternal nature of Christ, (2) the personhood and deity of the Holy Spirit, and (3) the profound unity or oneness of what Ellen White refers to as the “three living persons of the heavenly trio” (Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 615).

After the initial presentation of the strongest, most straightforward biblical evidence (the author is Woodrow Whidden), we will proceed in succeeding chapters with more detailed presentations of the biblical evidence from the Old and New Testaments (again, the author will be Whidden).

After the biblical evidence, the next sections will trace the history of the development of the Trinitarian doctrine and the teachings of its opponents throughout church history. The historical survey will fall into two main sections: (1) developments from the early second century to the sixteenth century (the author is John Reeve), followed by (2) the unfolding of ideas from the Reformation of the sixteenth century up through the history of Trinitarian and anti-Trinitarian thought in Seventh-day Adventist history (the author is Jerry Moon).

After the historical survey, the book will reflect on the theological implications of our biblical and historical discoveries (the author is Woodrow Whidden). In other words, the opening section will deal with the question *What* is the biblical doctrine? The next two

major sections will deal with *how* Christians came to express these doctrines. Finally, however, we must address the question of *why* they are important for Christian thought and experience. In other words, what are the crucial implications of the beliefs that we might hold about the nature of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and Their relationship to one another?

The Key Questions to Address

What then are the key questions we need to deal with? What issues have divided those who accept the doctrine of the Trinity and those who deny it?

First of all, there appears to be no one involved in the current debate who denies the full and eternal deity of the Father God, the first person of the Godhead. Thus the three remaining areas of contention that cry out for biblical answers are as follows:

The Deity of Christ

This issue concerns the question of whether Christ possessed a divine nature that was, in substance, the same as the Father God. In other words, was the Jesus who was the Son of God just as much God as the Father? Or was He some sort of semideity having a qualified or partial divinity? Did He truly exist as a divine person from all eternity past? Was He not only the “preexistent” but also the “self-existent” Son of God about whom the Bible “assures us that there never was a time when He was not in close fellowship with the eternal God” (*ibid.*)? Did such “self-existence” mean that He really had a divine nature whose life was “original, unborrowed, un-derived” (White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 530)?

The Personality and Deity of the Spirit

The second central issue deals with the questions of the personality and full divinity of the Holy Spirit as a definite “divine person” (White, *Evangelism*, p. 617). Is the Holy Spirit “as much a person as God is a person” (*ibid.*, p. 616)? Does this Holy Spirit truly “walk”

among humanity as a “person” who “beareth witness with our spirits that we are the children of God” (*ibid.*)? Does the Holy Spirit’s “witness” manifest the “power of God” that can hold “in check” the “power of evil” and do this great work as the “third person of the Godhead” (*ibid.*, p. 617)?

The Oneness of the Godhead

Finally, are there “three living persons of the heavenly trio” (also referred to by Ellen White as the “three great powers—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” [*ibid.*, p. 615]) into whose “name” those who receive Christ by living faith are baptized? Furthermore, are these “three great powers” truly divine, personal beings who “cooperate with the obedient subjects of heaven in their efforts to live the new life in Christ” (*ibid.*)? Can we honestly confess that Christ “was equal with God, infinite and omnipotent” (*ibid.*)? Dare we declare that Jesus the Son “is the eternal, self-existent Son” (*ibid.*)? Are these “powers” (“the three highest powers in heaven” [*ibid.*, p. 617]) also referred to as “the eternal heavenly dignitaries—God, and Christ, and the Holy Spirit” (*ibid.*, p. 616), truly one in Their divine nature, possessing “all the fulness of the Godhead” (Col. 2:9)? What saith the Scriptures?

A Helpful Note to the Reader

At the beginning of each section we have placed a glossary of key terms that we will employ. We realize that some of the terminology we use is somewhat technical. Thus we want to make it easy for the reader to quickly clarify what we mean when we use the specialized words and terms that often accompany any discussion of the Godhead. As far as possible we have sought to keep technical or insider jargon to a minimum. Furthermore, the context will explain many of these key terms, and if not, we will give brief explanations in the endnotes of each chapter.