

The Development of Trinity Theology within the Seventh-day Adventist Church

By Terry Hill

Overview

The intent of this study is to present a history of how the Seventh-day Adventist Church changed from a non-trinitarian denomination to one that is trinitarian. In order to accomplish this, the author will highlight the major stages of the development. He will also provide enough information to show how each stage developed. On occasions, for a more detailed analysis, he will provide links to existing articles on his website. This is the first part of the study. It deals with the doctrine of the trinity.

The motivation for this study

The motivation for this study is the ever-increasing confusion over the history of the development of Seventh-day Adventist Godhead theology. This confusion, in the main, has been caused by misinformation that is consistently circulated through various media channels. One primary channel is the Internet.

The author of this study, a Seventh-day Adventist for almost 45 years, has been involved in this Godhead controversy for over 19 years. During this time, he has thoroughly researched this history. Through his website he has also shared his findings with others.

<https://theprophetstillspeaks.co.uk>

Having said that; he is very grateful for all those who did so much research prior to him coming to be involved in this debate. They provided invaluable information that proved to be a solid foundation for further research. Without their work, his own research would have been made so much more difficult. Their contribution was, and still is, priceless.

THE CHURCH TRIUMPHANT

"The work is soon to close. The members of the church militant who have proved faithful will become the church triumphant. In reviewing our past history, having traveled over every step of advance to our present standing, I can say, Praise God! As I see what God has wrought, I am filled with astonishment and with confidence in Christ as leader. We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and his teaching in our past history." (Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, October 12th 1905)

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Part 1: The Trinity Doctrine

A gradual development

From its very beginnings, even until decades after the death of Ellen G. White (1915), the Seventh-day Adventist Church was a non-trinitarian denomination. From the mid-1920's though, more and more literature was produced that led to a change in thinking of many Seventh-day Adventists. This primarily involved changed views concerning God the Father, Christ and the Holy Spirit, without which, the adoption of a trinity doctrine would not have been possible. This will be dealt with more fully in later sections of this study. These changes eventually led to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, for the very first time in its history, voting into its official beliefs a trinity doctrine. This was in 1980.

Time and death were two major contributory factors to this changeover of beliefs. As the non-trinitarian membership passed to their rest, trinitarian membership took their place. As Merlin Burt, in an article explaining the history of SDA views on the trinity, concluded (this was after saying, first it must be acknowledged that as in the case of the doctrine of the Trinity, "the development of Adventist biblical theology has usually been progressive and corrective")

"Second, the development of the Trinity doctrine demonstrates that sometimes doctrinal changes require the passing of a previous generation." (Merlin Burt, Journal of the Adventist Theological Society: Volume 17, Issue 1, Article 9, 2006, page 139 'History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on the Trinity')

This is the admittance that our Godhead beliefs, over the years, have changed – also that it took death, as well as time, to achieve the end result. Burt also explained

"From 1900 to the 1950s the church gradually shifted to the Biblical Christian view on the trinity and deity of Christ." (Ibid)

In another paper he observed

"One of the remarkable aspects of the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the development of its position of the trinity and the deity of Christ. These doctrines did not become normative in the church until the middle of the twentieth century". (Merlin D. Burt, 1996, Preface to 'Demise of Semi-Arianism and anti-trinitarianism in Adventist Theology, 1888-1957')

Without the majority of early Seventh-day Adventists passing from the scene, which did necessitate a considerable length of time, it was not possible for a trinity doctrine to be introduced into the teachings of the SDA Church. This was not only because of the opposition, of these early SDA's, to the principle of the trinity doctrine itself, but because their beliefs concerning the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were diametrically opposed to trinitarian reasoning. So it was, with the passing of time, that slowly but surely via books, periodicals and Sabbath School lesson studies etc., more and more trinitarian theology was filtered down from leadership to laity.

Burt says it was not until the 1950's that the SDA *"view on the trinity"* eventually shifted to the *"Christian view"*, also that this doctrine *"did not become normative in the church until the middle of the twentieth century"* (the 1950's). I would say, after studying the

evidences of history, it was somewhat later than this (the 1950's), that the majority were persuaded to think this way although the point he is making is valid. It was a long-drawn-out process, and it did not happen until the vast majority of early SDA's had gone to their rest. Certainly the doctrine of the trinity was not held as a belief by most SDA's prior to the 1950's. As has been noted, it was not even voted in as a fundamental belief until 1980.

If it is concluded that it was not until the 1950's that our denominational teaching on the Godhead shifted to the "Christian view", then it must also be concluded that prior to this time, we did not teach the "Christian view". This is a very serious claim because it is saying that during the time of Ellen White's ministry (1844-1915), also for decades following, SDA's were, with respect to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, teaching error.

In an article discussing the relationship between Scripture and the writings of Ellen White, Merlin Burt also noted

"The most recent major theological shift for Seventh-day Adventists was the formal adoption of the doctrine of the Trinity." (*Merlin Burt, Ellen G. White and Sola Scriptura, Page 10, 2007*)

This was written in 2007. Burt refers to our adoption of the trinity doctrine (in 1980) as a "major theological shift". This again denotes a change in beliefs – a very serious one.

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https://www.andrews.edu/sem/faculty_staff/faculty/merlin-burt.html

One source aimed primarily at the ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church for the promotion of the trinity doctrine was *The Ministry* magazine (now *Ministry*). Its founding editor was a leading administrator of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, namely LeRoy Edwin Froom (1890-1974). He was editor/co-editor from 1928-1950.

From 1926-1941, Froom was Associate Secretary of the General Conference Ministerial Association. From 1941-1950, he was the Secretary. He was also very involved in the publication of the highly controversial book *Questions on Doctrine* (1957). The latter is recognised by some as helping to cement the trinity doctrine into Seventh-day Adventism. The *Ministry* magazine is reported today to have a monthly subscription circulation of around 18,000 to the ministry of the SDA Church. It also has a gifted bi-monthly subscription to approximately 50,000 non-SDA ministers.

Froom is recognised as a leading figure in bringing trinitarianism into Seventh-day Adventism. As Jerry Moon Ph. D., put it (in his account of the history of the SDA church developing into a trinitarian denomination)

"From the retirement of F. M. Wilcox in 1944 to the publication of *Movement of Destiny* in 1971, L. E. Froom was the most visible champion of trinitarianism among Seventh-day Adventists." (*Jerry Moon Ph. D., Andrews University Seminary Studies, Volume 41, No. 1, 113-129, page 124, The Adventist Trinity Debate, 'Part 1: Historical overview'*)

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In confirmation of Jerry Moon's conclusions, Merlin Burt also said of Wilcox

"Wilcox's articles encouraged Adventists to embrace the "orthodox" Christian view of the Trinity and Christ's deity." (*Merlin Burt, Journal of the Adventist Theological Society: Volume 17, Issue 1, Article 9, 2006, page 137 'History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on the Trinity'*)

As we shall see later, F. M. Wilcox (1865-1951), editor of the Review and Herald for 33 years (1911-1944), did play his part in bringing the trinity doctrine into Seventh-day Adventism, but Froom was the prime mover.

Over the years, through the *Ministry* magazine, much was accomplished by way of promoting the trinity doctrine. This of course influenced the ministry of the SDA Church, who, in turn, influenced the laity. As the years passed by, more and more promotion was given to the precepts of the trinity doctrine.

By 1980, trinitarian theology had taken a very strong grip in the thinking of many Seventh-day Adventists. This was especially amongst the ministry. So it was, in that same year at the General Conference session held at Dallas, Texas, the delegates accepted a set of newly stated fundamental beliefs that included a trinity doctrine. Never before had such a doctrine been voted in as one of the fundamental beliefs of the SDA Church. It is also true to say that since then a controversy has raged. As Jerry Moon, in the same article as quoted from on page 4 above, explains

"The period from 1980 to the present has been characterized by renewed debate along a spectrum of ideas from the reactionary to the contemporary. Soon after the Dallas statement—and perhaps in reaction to it—voices from the "edges" of the church began to advocate that the pioneers' earliest views were correct, that Ellen White's apparently trinitarian statements had been misinterpreted, and that the Dallas statement represented apostasy from the biblical beliefs of the pioneers." (*Jerry Moon op. cit., page 127*)

Notice Moon says that these "voices" appeared "Soon after the Dallas statement", also that they were probably a reaction from the 1980 Dallas statement. If, as some purport, the SDA Church had been a trinitarian denomination for decades prior to this time, then why did the 'big push' to return to the non-trinitarian beliefs of early Seventh-day Adventists only begin soon after this voting in of the trinity doctrine?

As will be seen later, the delegates at the Dallas conference found difficulty in formulating our current trinity belief (Fundamental Belief No. 2). This is another strong indication that the trinity doctrine had not been a belief of SDA's for very long. We shall return to this point later.

So who in this trinity controversy is right and who is wrong? I ask this because it is quite apparent that both camps cannot be correct. This is because the theology of one camp is diametrically opposed to the other camp. It should go without saying that

trinitarianism and non-trinitarianism are two incompatible sets of beliefs. Perhaps it is Jerry Moon who has once again succinctly highlighted the problem.

In the book *The Trinity*, which Moon co-authored with Woodrow Whidden and John Reeve (which in 2002 was published by the SDA Church in order to promote and explain the current position taken by them on their understanding of God being a trinity of persons as portrayed by the trinity doctrine) he penned this statement.

“That most of the leading SDA pioneers were non-Trinitarian in their theology has become accepted Adventist history, surprising as it sounded to most Adventists 40 years ago when Erwin R. Gane wrote an M. A. thesis on the topic.” (Jerry Moon, Ph. D., The Trinity, chapter 13, ‘Trinity and Anti-trinitarianism in Seventh-day Adventist History, page 190, 2002)

From what it says here, “most Adventists”, in the 1960’s, did not realise that early SDA’s had been non-trinitarian but here caution is necessary. As we shall see later, the way that our church once used the word *trinity* is far different to the way it is used today. For decades it was used to simply denote that there were three persons of the Godhead*. It is very likely therefore that this, rather than how it is used in the doctrine of the trinity, is how the majority of the 1960’s SDA’s used it. Today (2019) it is consistently used as in the trinity doctrine.

***Please note: These are two different usages. This is crucial to understand. Unless this difference is realised, the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church regarding the development of ‘the trinity’ will be completely misunderstood. As we proceed, this will become abundantly clear.**

Jerry Moon continued

“More recently, a further question has arisen with increasing urgency: was the pioneers’ belief about the Godhead right or wrong? As one line of reasoning goes, either the pioneers were wrong and the present church is right, or the pioneers were right and the present Seventh-day Adventist Church has apostatized from biblical truth.” (Ibid)

Moon says that this question over trinitarianism has only come to the fore “More recently”. This book was published in 2002. This again is evidence that this trinity controversy did not really begin until the voting in of the trinity doctrine in 1980.

In this statement, at least in principle, Jerry Moon highlights the problem although unfortunately, because of his use of the word “pioneers”, he does tend to obscure the facts somewhat. This is because he could be taken as saying it was only a handful of very early SDA’s who were not trinitarian whereas, as we shall see later, the SDA Church, even in the 1940’s and beyond, was still very much a non-trinitarian denomination. Nevertheless, the problem is evident. As Jerry Moon said, “either the [non-trinitarian] pioneers were wrong and the present [trinitarian] church is right, or the [non-trinitarian] pioneers were right and the present [trinitarian] Seventh-day Adventist Church has apostatized from biblical truth.” Which way it is though, each will need to decide for him or herself. To do this, the facts must be considered.

Jerry Moon understands the seriousness of the situation. So should every Seventh-day Adventist.

From what we have read above, it can clearly be seen there is no argument that the Godhead beliefs of SDA's have changed over the years. This is something that the present leadership of the SDA Church freely admits. As George Knight, a leading SDA historian, wrote in the *Ministry* magazine in 1993

"Most of the founders of Seventh-day Adventism would not be able to join the church today if they had to subscribe to the denomination's Fundamental Beliefs. More specifically, most would not be able to agree to belief Number 2, which deals with the doctrine of the Trinity." (George Knight, *Ministry* magazine, October 1993, page 10, 'Adventists and Change')

Again the reader could be led into thinking that it was only a small group of very early SDA's who were not trinitarian but as we shall soon discover, this is not true. Non-trinitarianism was the stance of the church until decades after the death of Ellen White.

A few months after George Knight had made the above statement, William Johnsson, editor of the *Adventist Review* for 24 years (1982-2006), observed

"Adventists beliefs have changed over the years under the impact of present truth. Most startling is the teaching regarding Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord." (William Johnsson, *Adventist Review*, January 6th, 1994, 'Present Truth - Walking in God's Light')

It is true, also very important to understand, that before a trinity doctrine could be accepted into Seventh-day Adventism, our major belief concerning Christ had to be changed. This belief was that He is truly the Son of God, begotten (brought forth) of God in eternity. This Sonship belief, taught throughout the entire spectrum of our publications for over 100 years, was a major stumbling block to the introduction of a trinity doctrine into the SDA Church. Hence William Johnsson concluded (concerning Christ's Sonship to God)

"Only gradually did this false doctrine give way to the Biblical truth, and largely under the impact of Ellen White's writings in statements such as: In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived." (*Ibid*)

In part two we shall be looking at this claim in detail. It concludes that what SDA's had taught about Christ for over 100 years is "false doctrine". It should go without saying that this is another very serious claim. Notice William Johnsson says that this change in belief "Only gradually" took place. This is very true.

William Johnsson also says that our belief concerning Christ changed "under the impact of present truth", but from what source did this "present truth" emerge? This belief did not change until decades after the death of Ellen White so she could not have been responsible. Up to the time of her death (1915), the beliefs of SDA's concerning Christ were in harmony with what she had written. We shall see this in part two. Johnsson continued

"Likewise, the Trinitarian understanding of God, now part of our fundamental beliefs, was not generally held by the early Adventists. Even today a few do not subscribe to it" (*Ibid*)

Under the sub-heading of “From 1931 to 1957: Acceptance of the Trinitarian View “, Merlin Burt wrote the following

“During the 1940s, an ever-increasing majority of the church believed in the eternal underived deity of Christ and the personhood of the Holy Spirit, yet there were some who held back and even actively resisted the change. This group was mainly comprised of a few older ministers and Bible teachers. Among the more vocal were J. S. Washburn, C. S. Longacre, and W. R. French.”
(Merlin Burt, *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society: Volume 17, Issue 1, Article 9, 2006, page 137 ‘History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on the Trinity’*)

Here again is the admittance, by a senior SDA historian, that over the years our Godhead beliefs have undergone change. Notice the time period that this change is said to have taken place. It is from the 1940’s through to the late 1950’s. This change in beliefs concerned, as Burt notes here, both Christ and the Holy Spirit. In other words, during this time period, many SDA’s began believing differently about these two divine personalities than did earlier SDA’s – although some older ministers refused to change their beliefs. As a movement of people, this was around 100 years after our beginnings (1844).

Apart from anything else, this statement by Burt shows that up to this time period (the 1940’s through to the late 1950’s), the SDA Church did not, as part of its fundamental beliefs, hold to the doctrine of the trinity. If this teaching had been part of our beliefs, Burt’s observations would not make sense. This is because he is saying that during this time period (from the 1940’s through to the late 1950’s), “an ever-increasing majority of the church” were changing their views on Christ and the Holy Spirit”. This change of course was in favour of a trinitarian view. The majority were not therefore, up to this time, trinitarian.

Unfortunately, unless explained, Burt’s statement could easily misrepresent the non-trinitarian beliefs of early SDA’s. While we will not go into this in detail here (this will be done later in this study), early SDA’s did not believe that Christ’s deity (if this means His divinity) was derived. To the contrary, they believed that in eternity He was begotten of God’s own substance therefore His divinity (deity) could only have been original, unborrowed and underived. They believed therefore that Christ, in Himself, was fully and completely divine. In consequence of this, not only did they believe that He was truly the Son of God, but also that He was truly God. What they did not accept was Christ’s pre-existence as depicted by the trinity doctrine. The same is true concerning the Holy Spirit. Early SDA’s came to believe, mainly through the influence of the writings of Ellen White, that the Holy Spirit is a person, but not as depicted by those who believe the SDA trinity doctrine to be true.

Burt’s observations show that up to and including the 1950’s, the trinity doctrine could not have been one of the generally held beliefs of SDA’s. This was a later development that was built upon the previously mentioned change in beliefs. Without these changes taking place, an acceptance of the trinity doctrine was not possible. Eventually, in this changeover, our long-held belief concerning the Father as the one true God was also changed. More about this later.

It would be beneficial here to recall a warning that came through Ellen White. In the early 1900’s she wrote

“The enemy of souls has sought to bring in the supposition that a great reformation was to take place among Seventh-day Adventists, and that this reformation would consist in giving up the doctrines which stand as the pillars of our faith, and engaging in a process of reorganization. Were this reformation to take place, what would result? The principles of truth that God in His wisdom has given to the remnant church, would be discarded. Our religion would be changed. The fundamental principles that have sustained the work for the last fifty years would be accounted as error.” (*Ellen G. White, Special Testimonies Series B No. 2, page 54, ‘The Foundation of our Faith’, 1904*)

Never did Ellen White say that God would suggest that Seventh-day Adventists should change their beliefs. She only said, as she did here, that Satan would suggest it. We need to give this serious consideration.

In an article called *Adventists Finding Identity in God*, Richard Rice observed (after pointing out that certain ‘Important early Adventists’ were against the trinity doctrine)

“In fact, C. Mervyn Maxwell concludes that early Adventists were “about as uniform in opposing Trinitarianism as they were in advocating belief in the Second Coming.” (*Richard Rice, Spectrum, Fall 2013, Volume 41, Issue 4, ‘Adventists Finding Identity in God’*)

This is very true, but it did not remain the status quo. As the same author pointed out

“In contrast, Seventh-day Adventist thinkers today are as uniformly supportive of the idea. They use explicitly Trinitarian language to talk about God and they interpret the concept of Trinity with care and subtlety.” (*Ibid*)

There is no question that over the years the Godhead beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists have changed. With our knowledge today, of the history of the SDA Church, this is not disputed. The only question that remains is, as has been said previously, who in this controversy is right, and who is wrong?

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In 2002, Angel Rodriguez, as Director of the SDA Biblical Research Institute, explained

“Some Adventists have discovered that practically all of our pioneers were anti-Trinitarian and have concluded that the church today should reject the doctrine of the Trinity. The truth is that the Lord guided this movement to a more biblical understanding of God. Today, based on the Bible, we affirm the truth of one God in a plurality of Persons.” (*Angel Manuel Rodriguez, BRI Article, ‘The Holy Spirit and the Godhead, 11th July 2002, see also British Messenger, 3rd June 2016*)

The inference here is that prior to our denominational acceptance of the trinity doctrine, our Godhead beliefs were less than Biblical. We need to remember though, as Ellen White said, it is Satan, not God, who would suggest we should change our beliefs. Thus it must be asked: is it a case of, as Rodriguez is claiming, that the Lord led the SDA Church “[to a more biblical understanding of God](#)”, or was it Satan leading us to believe and teach error?

From 2001, until his retirement in 2011, Angel Rodrigues was Director of the SDA Biblical Research Institute.

As can be seen, there is, in this trinity controversy, two diametrically opposed camps. As Jerry Moon said though; either the early SDA's were wrong and the church today is correct, or the early SDA's were correct and [“the present Seventh-day Adventist Church has apostatized from biblical truth”](#) (see page 6 above). Again it can only be said that which way it is, each individual will need to decide for him or herself. The evidence needs to be very carefully examined.

Trinitarianism cannot be termed a progression in the truth from what early SDA's believed and taught. This is because in order to accept trinitarianism, the non-trinitarian beliefs, of these early SDA's, had to be rejected as error. In other words, to accept trinitarianism, it must be accepted that the non-trinitarian Godhead beliefs, as held by SDA's for around 100 years, 71 of which was the time period of Ellen White's ministry (1844-1915), are false doctrine (heresy). This is what the SDA Church today, through its current beliefs and leadership, is claiming. It is claiming that these long-held non-trinitarian beliefs were, and still are, heretical.

This claim, by those who are seeking the truth, cannot be ignored. It must be realised that an investigation is necessary. As God's messenger wrote

[“If God abhors one sin above another, of which His people are guilty, it is doing nothing in case of an emergency. Indifference and neutrality in a religious crisis is regarded of God as a grievous crime and equal to the very worst type of hostility against God.”](#) (*Ellen G. White, Testimonies Volume 3 page 280, ‘The Laodicean Church’*)

From what we have read so far, it is quite evident that there is amongst us a [“religious crisis”](#). None of us therefore must attempt to remain neutral. To do this, says Ellen White, is [“regarded of God a grievous crime and equal to the very worst type of hostility against God”](#). We each must make our stand on one side or the other. This is our bounden duty. We are all required of God to seek for the truth – and then, when we have found it, take our stand for it. God admonishes each one of us

[“Buy the truth, and sell it not; also wisdom, and instruction, and understanding.”](#)
[Proverbs 23:23](#)

We should not consider the cost of purchasing the truth to be too high; neither should we, when we have acquired it, ever consider selling it (surrendering it). Once we have the truth, we should consider it priceless.

Trinitarianism

From its very beginnings, the Seventh-day Adventist Church was a staunch non-trinitarian denomination. Early Seventh-day Adventists had vehemently spoken out against the trinity doctrine, also against its various concepts and implications. As has been said above, this non-trinitarian theology continued throughout the entire time period of Ellen White's ministry, also for decades beyond.

Before we look at some of the statements of the early SDA's who wrote in opposition to the doctrine of the trinity, we first need to understand what constitutes such a

teaching. Again there is much confusion over this matter.

In any trinity doctrine there are two principle factors. These are *threeness* and *oneness*. To put it another way: A trinity doctrine will always convey the belief that there are three divine persons who are inseparably united in one indivisible substance (one trinitarian being) as the one God. If either of these two factors (threeness or inseparable oneness) is absent, there is no trinity doctrine. It really is that simple. Take for example the SDA version.

In our list of fundamental beliefs, as stated in our current Church Manual, there are four beliefs pertaining to the Godhead. These are No's. 2, 3, 4 and 5. Belief No. 3 concerns God the Father; belief No. 4 concerns the Son of God; and belief No. 5 concerns the Holy Spirit. It follows therefore that if we find everything in the Bible concerning these three divine personalities, this can be placed under belief No's. 3, 4 and 5. When this is done, everything that the Bible says about the Father, Son and Holy Spirit will be contained in these three beliefs. Without further explanation, this should be reasonably evident.

What then is belief No. 2 all about? It cannot be about the individual persons of the Godhead. This is covered under beliefs 3, 4 and 5. Belief No. 2 says

"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*)

Note here the *threeness* and the *oneness*. The three divine persons are said to comprise the "one God". Notice too that this "one God" is said to be a "He" (denoting a personal being). As the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are also considered to be personal beings, it can only be concluded that SDA's are saying that the "one [trinity] God" is three personal beings in one "He" (in one personal being). This trinity belief, 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*)

"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'*)

Notice in each of these statements the *threeness* and the *oneness*. As previously noted, without these two factors in place, there is no such teaching as a trinity doctrine. Notice too it says, "each person of the Godhead is inseparably connected to the other two". This is crucial (pivotal) to trinitarianism. This is because trinitarians say that all three together constitute the one true God. Hatton, Dederen and Mueller all depict this trinity God as a personal being.

The *threeness* should not need an explanation but the *oneness* is described as the three persons sharing "one indivisible nature" (Mueller), that "each person of the Godhead is inseparably connected to the other two" (Mueller), the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are "one substance" (Pfandl and Dederen), the three are "single as to substance" (Hatton), that "the Trinity is one indivisible God" (Dederen), "God is one in being" (Petersen), the three persons constitute "the one divine Trinitarian being" (Canale).

It is this metaphysical (ontological) 'oneness' that makes the teaching of a tri-personal Godhead trinitarian. Without it there would not be a trinity doctrine. 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 Christianity. As the *Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church* renders 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*)

At the 11th Council of Toledo in AD 675, a creed was formulated that in part stated (in summary of the trinity)

“Hence, we recognise the Trinity in the distinction of persons and we profess the unity on account of the nature or substance. Thus, the three are one by nature, not as person. Nevertheless these three persons are not to be considered separable since, according to our belief, none of them ever existed or acted before another, after another, without another. For they are inseparable both in what they are and in what they do...” (*Creed of Toledo AD 675*)

The latter is no different than the SDA trinity doctrine. In this respect (how the three divine personalities constitute the one God) it is identical. As noted, without this type of *oneness* there is no trinity doctrine. Note also that the Roman Catholic trinity is not regarded as a person. Only the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are regarded as persons.

On the website of the SDA Biblical Research Institute, there is an article that is said to have been “Prepared for the dialogue with representatives of the Roman Catholic Church”. It was written by George Reid, then Director of the Institute (1984-2001). After detailing our beliefs, Reid then says (with respect to the doctrine of God)

“A reading of the above statements will show that with respect to their doctrine of God Seventh-day Adventists are in harmony with the great creedal statements of Christendom, including the Apostles’ Creed, Nicea 325), and the additional definition of faith concerning the Holy Spirit as reached in Constantinople (381).” (*George Reid, Seventh-day Adventists: A Brief Introduction to their Beliefs, 2000, https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/sites/default/files/pdf/adventist%20beliefs_0.pdf*)

It was at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 that the basis of the orthodox (traditional) trinity doctrine was formulated. This is when it was deemed that God and Christ were of the one and the same substance. In AD 381, at the Council of Constantinople, the Holy Spirit was also included in this one substance – hence the trinity doctrine was ‘officially’ formulated. The Roman Catholic Church revere these councils.

Note that this document, written by the Director of the BRI, was said to have been prepared for “the Dialogue” with the Roman Catholic Church. This sounds like a specific dialogue. George Reid appears to be saying that regarding the ecumenical councils that formulated this one substance idea, we are now in harmony with them – as is the Roman Catholic Church. How else can this be interpreted?

The trinity doctrine – extracanonical

From the above can be seen exactly what constitutes trinitarianism, but as most theologians will freely admit, the concept of trinity oneness (without which there is no such teaching as a trinity doctrine) is noticeably absent from Scripture. The Bible can be searched from Genesis to Revelation, but it cannot be found. In other words, the oneness of God, as depicted by the trinity doctrine, is only intellectual philosophy.

William T. Hyde, in his *Theology of an Adventist* (this was under the sub-heading of “Essential Nature Unknown”) wrote

“The essential nature of God which corresponds to the physical nature in man -- what God is made of, how He exists, how He can be eternal -- has not been revealed.” (*William T. Hyde, Theology of an Adventist, A Biblical Theology, 1965, part three, page 1*)

Here the entire problem is precisely summarised. With respect of divine being - meaning what God is (in this respect), and the way He eternally exists (metaphysically or ontologically speaking) etc., - the Scriptures are totally silent. Hyde continued

“It may be that it would be beyond our finite comprehension even if it were revealed to us.” (*Ibid*)

This is very true. This is probably one of the reasons (perhaps the main one) why God has never revealed it. Hyde later went on to say

“The lovingkindness of God in His dealings with His creatures, this is the nature of God that is revealed in the Scriptures for our learning, which is a different thing from trying to imagine His mode of existence” (*Ibid*)

Most present-day SDA's have probably never heard of William T Hyde. In his time, he was a very well-known missionary oriented minister. He was also a teacher in the religion department of Pacific Union College where he served for over 30 years. One of the courses he taught was Biblical Theology. He was very conversant with Biblical Hebrew and Greek. He was also one of the contributors to the compilation of the 1966 Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentaries. His brother, Gordon Hyde, is well remembered for his long outstanding service to the Biblical Research Institute. The latter had held the post of leader from 1969-1979.

In the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, Dr Fernando Canale, in his treatise *Doctrine of God*, wrote the following (paragraphs not contiguous)

“Because human philosophy is called to be subject to the Bible, and since divine philosophy is already available in the Scriptures, our understanding of God must stand free from human speculations. What we can know about God must be revealed from the Scriptures.” (*Dr Fernando Canale, Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology, SDA Bible Commentary, Volume 12, page 105, 'Doctrine of God'*)

“Care must be taken to avoid crossing the limit between the revealed and hidden (Deut. 29:29) facets of the mystery, particularly in discussing issues like the Trinity, foreknowledge, and eternity. (*Ibid, page 108*)

This is how it should be. Canale later says though

“The concept of the Trinity, namely the idea that the three are one, is not explicitly stated but only assumed.” (*Ibid, page 138*)

This appears to be somewhat confusing – even contradictory. First Canale says that we must not go beyond what God has revealed in the Bible (“our understanding of

God must stand free from human speculations”). Then he says that the trinity doctrine is only an assumed doctrine. The latter though does precisely sum it up. There is nothing in Scripture to show how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit exist together. Any attempt to explain this, as is done by reason of the trinity doctrine, is only an assumption. In other words, the trinity doctrine is only human speculation. Certainly it cannot be said to be Biblical.

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<https://www.andrews.edu/sem/contact/emeriti/fernando-canale.html>

In keeping with Dr Canale’s remarks (that the trinity doctrine is only an assumed doctrine), Richard Rice explained

"The role of the trinity in a doctrine of God always raises questions. One reason is that the word itself does not appear in the Bible, nor is there any clear statement of the idea. But the Bible does set the stage for its formulation, and the concept represents a development of biblical claims and concepts. So even though the doctrine of the trinity is not part of what the Bible itself says about God, it is part of what the church must say to safeguard the biblical view of God." (Richard Rice, *The Reign of God, An Introduction to Christian Theology from a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective*, page 89, 'A constructive proposal', 1985)

Notice Rice says, “the doctrine of the trinity is not part of what the Bible itself says about God” “nor is there any clear statement of the idea” yet adds that “to safeguard the biblical view of God” the church had to formulate this teaching. Some may say that this also sounds something of a contradiction.

Rice also says, “the Bible does set the stage” for the formulation of the trinity doctrine. This again is the admittance that the trinity doctrine is extracanonical, meaning its existence can only be found outside of Scripture (not contained in the canon of Scripture). Don’t miss the point Rice is making. He says the doctrine of the trinity is what “the church must say” about God. It is not what the Bible says about God.

On the next page, after quoting various Scriptures, Rice makes this comment

“As these passages indicate, the idea of the trinity has precedents in the Bible, even though a full-fledged doctrine of the trinity is not to be found there.” (*Ibid*)

The latter is very true. The trinity doctrine cannot be found in Scripture. It is an invention of the church. As noted previously, Richard Rice is Professor of Religion at Loma Linda University.

<http://www.llu.edu/pages/faculty/directory/faculty.html?uid=rrice>

In 1949, J. A. McMillan wrote an article for the British Present Truth called *Three in One*. In his article he explained

“The doctrine of the Trinity was formulated to define in express terms this revelation of three Persons who act together for the redemption of men.” (J. A McMillan, *British Present Truth*, September 22nd 1949, ‘Three in One’)

McMillan says that the doctrine of the trinity “was formulated”. Again this is saying that this teaching is extracanonical (not in Scripture). He went on to say

“The Bible nowhere presents any formal expression of the Trinity”. (*Ibid*)

Strange as it may seem, he previously had said that the doctrine of the trinity was formulated to define “in express terms” this revelation of the three persons in one God (three in one). The question is though: If the Bible is silent on the matter of how the three persons of the Godhead exist together, then how is it possible to define it “in express terms”? McMillan was the South England Conference President (1950-1958), also British Union President (1959-1967).

In the *Australasian Record* in 1959, Harry W. Lowe, with respect to the Sabbath School lesson for July 11th of that year, made this statement

““Trinity” is not a Bible word, nor is any theological definition of it given in Scripture.” (*Harry W. Lowe, Review and Herald, March 26th 1959, Sabbath School lesson help, ‘God’s transcendent and mysterious nature’*)

This cannot be disputed. This is why the doctrine of the trinity is simply a man-made formula. It is an attempt, by the church, to explain something that God has been totally silent about. Hence it is only speculation.

Harry Lowe (1893-1990) was then the Associate Secretary, General Conference Sabbath School Department. He had moved to the United States in 1947. This was after being the South England Conference President (1933-1935), also British Union Conference President (1937-1946).

In 1977 (3 years before the trinity doctrine was voted into our fundamental beliefs), Don Neufeld, then Associate Editor of the *Review and Herald*, gave an answer to someone who had asked what SDA’s taught concerning the trinity. Here is part of his answer (we will return to his remarks later)

“The term Godhead is often misunderstood. It has nothing to do with God’s being at the head of the affairs in the universe. It means “Godhood,” that is, the state of being God. “Deity” is an appropriate synonym.” (*Don F Neufeld, Review and Herald, October 6th 1977, ‘Bible questions answered’*)

This too is very true. He also explained

“Trinity is a theological term and is variously interpreted and defined. With some interpretations Seventh-day Adventists do not agree. Therefore, if the term is used, it should be carefully defined so that people will not attribute to Adventists some of the faulty notions taught under this heading. It may be better to avoid the term and use instead the Biblical term Godhead or Deity.” (*Ibid*)

Neufeld did not say what these “interpretations” or “faulty notions” are, so we can only conjecture. His ‘advice’ though has certainly been ignored. As a church we now freely and repeatedly use the term *trinity*. This is often done without any explanation as to what is meant by its usage. This is the reason why there is so much confusion amongst SDA’s over its meaning. It means different things to different people. It shouldn’t do so, especially amongst SDA’s, but it does. As Neufeld said, the trinity is “variously

interpreted and defined". Rather than the word "Trinity", Neufeld argues for the use of "Godhead or Deity". This advice, at least with regards to how our fundamental beliefs are listed, has also been ignored (see the 2015 SDA Church Manual page 162). Don Neufeld was an Associate Editor and contributor of the SDA Bible Commentaries. He was also the editor of the SDA Encyclopaedia.

In 1993, in an article called *The Mystery of the Trinity*, Raoul Dederen (then Professor Emeritus, Andrews University) wrote in support of the trinity doctrine

"How can God be one and yet three? How can He be a person and yet consist of three persons? Is this not sheer contradiction?" (*Raoul Dederen, Adventist Review, August 26th 1993, 'The Mystery of the Trinity'*)

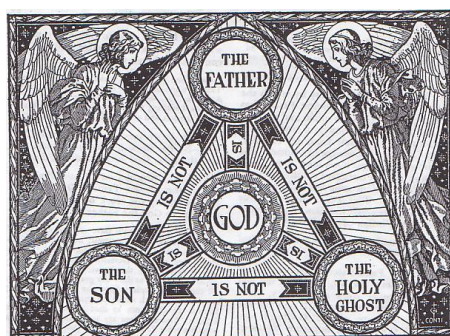
Dederen does conclude that the trinity God is a person. As he went on to say

"Although not a biblical expression, the term Trinity has been found a most fitting way of referring to the one God who has revealed Himself in the Scriptures as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The concept suggests that within the one essence of the Godhead we are to distinguish three persons who are neither three parts nor three modes of God, but coequally and coeternally God. Some will tend to resist this doctrine because it is not found expressly stated in the Scriptures. But although it may indeed at first view seem contradictory, let me urge my modern readers not to reject it prematurely on the premise that it does not make sense, for without it some biblical statements would remain meaningless." (*Ibid*)

Notice the word "Himself" referring to the trinity God.

It must be admitted that three persons making one person does not really make sense, but this is what Dederen, through the Adventist Review, was asking SDA's to believe. Dederen admitted that the trinity doctrine "is not found expressly stated in the Scriptures". Remember though, J. A. McMillan had said (see page 15 above), that the trinity doctrine "was formulated to define in express terms this revelation of three Persons who act together for the redemption of men."

Take note that Dederen said that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not "three parts" of God. This is because in trinitarianism, each is the whole. This is the reason why a pie-chart, divided into 3 sections, is not representative of what is taught by means of a trinity doctrine. In the book *My Catholic Faith* by Bishop Louis LaRavoire Morrow, in the chapter *One God in Three persons*, is found this illustration



This is a typical illustration of God in three persons that is used by the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant denominations. The explanation says

“A good concrete illustration of the Blessed trinity is an equilateral triangle. Such a triangle has three sides equal in every way, and yet distinct from each other. There are three sides, but only one triangle. As we see in this illustration, each Divine Person is different from the other two, but all three are God. Each one is God, distinct from the two others, and yet one with them. The three Persons are equal in every way, with one nature and one substance: three Divine Persons, but only one God.” (*Bishop Louis LaRavoire Morrow, My Catholic Faith, Chapter 11, One God in Three persons*)

The same type of three-in-one illustration is found in the *New Pictorial Aid for Bible Study, Revised and Enlarged* (1987), by Seventh-day Adventist Frank Breaden. Its intent is to help prospective members, also existing members, to understand what the SDA church teaches regarding God being a trinity of persons. It can be found on page 74 of the 1987 edition.



As can be seen, there is no difference between the SDA illustration and the one used by other trinitarian denominations – including the Roman Catholic Church. It is the same.

In the study guides for the Pictorial book, with reference to the above three-in-one illustration, it says under the heading of *The Tri-Unity of God*

“This chart is designed to illustrate the Bible’s revelation of the Tri-une God - as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is true, of course, that no man-made diagrams or definitions can encompass or explain the nature of the Eternal God.” (*Frank Breaden, Instruction Manual for the New “Pictorial Aid”, page 11, 1987*)

Some may ask therefore, why do we use this illustration in an attempt to explain it (the nature of God)? In the same paragraph it explains (emphasis as in the book)

“All that we seek to do here is to show that **the concept of “Three-in-one” is not demonstrably irrational, even on the level of created things**, and that it is in full harmony with what the Bible reveals about the three expressions or manifestations of the “God-head”. Deny the Tri-unity of God, and a 100 puzzling threads of scripture are left untied. As shown in the accompanying study guide (No. 56), the Bible does not attempt to “explain” or proved the Tri-unity of God, it simply takes it for granted, and declares it.” (*Ibid*)

The ontological relationship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – which the trinity doctrine is meant to portray and explain - has not been revealed. In other words, the doctrine of the trinity cannot be found in Scripture. In fact it was not even invented (formulated) until over 300 years after the ascension of Christ. Rather than saying that the Bible writers took “[Tri-unity of God](#)” for granted, it would be much better, also much more truthful, to say that they did not even mention it. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that God is tri-une as depicted by the trinity doctrine. This is why the above illustration is of no value in trying to explain it.

Many statements from non-SDA trinitarians could also be quoted here admitting that the trinity doctrine cannot be found in Scripture, but because space is limited, two will need to suffice. The first is from a book by the late Edmund J. Fortman, who, for 40 years, was a Jesuit priest and teacher.

Fortman’s book is called *The Triune God*. It was published in 1972. As a Jesuit, Fortman believed the trinity doctrine to be the central doctrine of the Christian faith. As it states in the *Handbook for Today’s Catholic* (this is under the heading of ‘Three Persons, One God’)

[“The mystery of the Trinity is the central doctrine of Catholic faith. Upon it are based all other teachings of the Church.” \(*Handbook for Today’s Catholic*, page 249\)](#)

In the introduction to his book (page xv), Fortman says the trinity doctrine has had “an amazing history”, also that it could only have originated from “divine revelation” (although not found in Scripture). Then, in part one, he goes to great lengths to show that this teaching cannot be found in either the Old or New Testaments. In summary of this he says

[“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.” \(*Edmund J. Fortman, The Triune God, ‘The Triune God in the Early Christian Church’, page 35, 1972*\)](#)

Note the words “[could be formulated](#)”. This is the usual claim of trinitarians. He continues

[“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.” \(*Ibid*\)](#)

Fortman is referring here to the ‘official beginnings’ of the trinity doctrine. This was at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. This was almost 300 years after the ascension of Christ. This is when it was deemed that God the Father and Christ were of the one and the same substance. We will not go into this in detail here, suffice to say that 56 years later at the Council of Constantinople (AD 381), the Holy Spirit was also said to be of the same substance; thus the trinity doctrine, by ‘the church’, was given life. As we noted on page 13, George Reid, as Director of the SDA Biblical Institute, said that SDA’s “are in harmony with the great creedal statements of Christendom, including the Apostles’ Creed, Nicea 325), and the additional definition of faith concerning the Holy Spirit as reached in Constantinople (381)”.

The question has been asked: If the trinity doctrine is genuinely based upon the Bible, then why did it take 'the church' something like 350 years to formulate it? This is something else to ponder. For those who would like to read more of how the trinity doctrine was introduced into Christianity, they can do so by going to Section 7 of the following study

<https://theprophetstillspeaks.co.uk/dethis/SDAtrinityhistory.pdf>

Fortman was a devout Jesuit. He absolutely adored the trinity doctrine. Even he admits though that the Bible does not contain such a teaching. He simply says that the Bible "contained the data from which a doctrine of this kind could be formulated". This is the same as said by Richard Rice when he wrote that the Bible "set the stage for its formulation, and the concept represents a development of biblical claims and concepts" (see page 15). This though is not strictly true. The ontological oneness, as depicted by the trinity doctrine, cannot be found in Scripture therefore it can only be regarded as speculation.

The Rev H. Maldwyn Hughes, in his book *Christian Foundations*, had this to say about the trinity doctrine,

"It is a speculative construction of materials provided by revelation and Christian experience. The definition has stood the test of time, mainly because it is believed that the Church was divinely guided in framing it." (*H. M. Hughes, Christian Foundations, An introduction to Christian doctrine, page 141, fourth edition, July 1933*)

Hughes, a Methodist, was the first principal of Wesley House, a Theological College in Cambridge England. It opened in 1921. He held the post until 1937. He also admits that the trinity doctrine "is a speculative construction of materials" formulated by the church – albeit "divinely guided" to do so. He went on to say (about the trinity doctrine)

"But the definition, in its terminology and in its description of processes in the internal life of the Godhead, goes beyond New Testament teaching. These may, of course, be legitimate developments, but it is impossible to deny the speculative elements present." (*Ibid*)

The trinity doctrine is only speculation. It is claimed of course, by those who hold it to be true, that it is based upon what the Scriptures reveal, yet we know that nowhere in Scripture is the ontology (the nature of being) of the three persons of the Godhead revealed. It is therefore, only intellectual philosophy.

We have seen above that the SDA Church, in the past, has freely admitted that the doctrine of the trinity cannot be found in Scripture. In more recent years though, a somewhat different stance has been taken. In 1999, 19 years after the trinity doctrine was first voted into the beliefs of SDA's, Gerhard Pfandl, as Associate Director of the SDA Biblical Institute, wrote an article called *The Trinity in Scripture*. His opening remarks were

"The doctrine of the Trinity (Lat. trinitas "tri-unity" or "three-in-oneness") is one of the most important doctrines of the Christian faith. However, in recent times some Adventists have begun to question its validity." (*Gerhard Pfandl, Biblical Research Institute, 'The Trinity in Scripture', Page 1*)

Early SDA's, unlike Pfandl, did not regard the trinity doctrine as "one of the most important doctrines of the Christian faith". They rejected it. This was on the grounds it was unscriptural. For the first 100 years of our existence, as God's remnant people, it was antagonistic to what we believed and taught. The statement therefore that "in recent times some Adventists have begun to question its validity" is extremely misleading. It makes it sound as though it is only in more recent years (1999) that SDA's have begun to question it.

In the next section called *The Mystery of the Trinity*, Pfandl says

"Although the word Trinity is not found in the Bible (neither is the word incarnation), the teaching it describes is clearly found there. Briefly defined, the doctrine of the Trinity stands for the concept that "God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God."*" (*Ibid* *W. Grudem's, *Systematic Theology*, page 226)

Many would challenge the idea that the trinity doctrine is "clearly found" in Scripture. No one yet has found it. On the same page, Pfandl makes a statement that appears contradictory to his previous remarks

"All attempts to explain the Trinity will fall short, "especially when we reflect on the relation of the three persons to the divine essence ... all analogies fail us and we become deeply conscious of the fact that the Trinity is a mystery far beyond our comprehension. It is the incomprehensible glory of the Godhead."* Therefore, we do well to admit that "man cannot comprehend it and make it intelligible." (*Ibid*, *Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*)

Why therefore, if we "cannot comprehend it and make it intelligible", are we holding the trinity doctrine as a fundamental belief, and why are we making it a test of fellowship? These are questions that the leadership of the SDA Church must answer.

In a 2012 Sabbath School lesson quarterly, under the heading *The Triune God*, SDA's were asked to believe (these two paragraphs are not contiguous)

"Although the word *Trinity* doesn't appear in the Bible, the teaching definitely does. The doctrine of the Trinity, that God is One and composed of three "Persons," is crucial because it is dealing with who God is, what He is like, how He works, and how He relates to the world." (*Sabbath School Quarterly*, 1st quarter 2012, Page 6, 'Glimpses of our God')

"The doctrine of the Trinity, far from being a piece of abstract speculation, is the inevitable conclusion that comes from a systematic survey of Scripture." (*Ibid*, page 11)

This is a complete turn-around from what we, as a church, had said in the past about the doctrine of the trinity. Here it is said that this teaching is found in the Bible. It is also referred to as not being speculative but "crucial". Does this mean that the SDA Church is now teaching that in order to be saved, this doctrine must be believed? If this is what is being said, it would mean we have now fallen into line with Roman Catholicism. The Athanasian Creed (which down through the years has been revered by the Roman Catholic Church) says

“Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith. Which Faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the Catholic Faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity. Neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance.” (*Athanasian Creed*)

In keeping with this, the Catechism of the Catholic Church also says

“The faith of all Christians rests on the Trinity” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, Part 1, Section 2, Chapter 1, Article 1, No. 232*)

This same view appears to be now taken by the SDA Church. An article called *Adventists and the Trinity*, written by Roy Allan Anderson, had as a sub-heading

“Explicit in the New Testament, implied in the Old, the doctrine of the Trinity is fundamental to Adventist faith.” (*Roy Allan Anderson, Adventist Review, September 8th 1983, ‘Adventists and the Trinity’*)

As we shall see later, this was not the confession of early SDA’s. They took a completely different view. They regarded the doctrine of the trinity to be unscriptural. This remained the same for over 100 years.

The Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology

Here I would bring to your attention the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*. I have already quoted twice from this book. Both occasions have been from the *Doctrine of God*, a treatise written by Dr Canale. The reason why I bring this to your notice is to say that the exact thoughts in those quotes may not be those of Dr Canale personally, but they are official SDA theology. Allow me to explain.

This book, now Volume 12 of the SDA Bible Commentary series, was published in the year 2000. In its *Forward*, George W. Reid, Director of the Biblical Research Institute (1984-2001), says that at the 1988 Annual Council held in Nairobi Kenya, the leaders of the SDA Church “wrestled with the challenge of how to strengthen unity” amongst SDA’s. Reid, who wrote the article mentioned above for dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church (see page 13), then says

“The council authorized preparation of a volume to review carefully the biblical teachings undergirding the dynamic Adventist movement. This is that volume. Under the direction of the Biblical Research Institute, the project has been more than 10 years in the making. As the editor notes in his preface, its purpose is to provide for both believers and enquirers a faith-centered, reasoned exploration of these truths as seen by Seventh-day Adventists” (*George Reid, Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology, ‘Forward’, page ix, January 2000*)

In the *Preface* to the book, its editor, the late Raol Dederen (1925-2016), then Professor Emeritus Andrews University (he retired in 1991 as Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology and Dean of the Seminary) began by explaining

“In a time of fast, pluralistic change in all areas of human theory and practice, when believing Seventh-day Adventists have to face the rest of the world with a well-founded understanding of their faith, the leadership of the church decided to

make available to church members and the general public a basic handbook setting forth the main doctrines and practices of Seventh-day Adventists. With the rapid spread of the Adventist movement into virtually every country and culture a work of this kind would reinforce the unity called for in Christ's mandate to His followers. More than 20 years ago the need was recognized, leading to early planning and some effort to prepare such a volume." (*Raoul Dederen, Ibid, 'Preface', page x*)

This was written in the year 2000 so the need for this book, according to Dederen, "was recognized" leading up to 1980. The latter was the year when for the very first time in the history of the SDA Church, a trinity doctrine was voted into its fundamental beliefs. This was when these beliefs were totally re-written. One is left to ponder the connection between these events. In the next paragraph it is noted

"However, the preparation of this work itself was mandated by an action of the 1988 Annual Council Meeting of the General Conference Executive Committee in Nairobi, Kenya. It made the Biblical Research Institute (BRI) responsible for its preparation and overall content. Raoul Dederen was appointed to serve, under the auspices of BRI, as project director and editor of the volume." (*Ibid*)

On the same page the editor says

"The 28 articles that make up this volume have been in process for some 10 years." (*Ibid*)

After explaining that a volume like this could not be produced overnight, he makes clear that

"Although each article is signed, it was agreed from the start that all contributions would be subject to review and suggestions from the Biblical Research Institute Committee (BRICOM), a group of 40 persons predominantly scholars but including a few administrators. With its international composition BRICOM was called to function as an efficient sounding board.

In other words, many shared in the task of planning and writing this book, from consultation on the outline through the writing and revision of successive drafts. This book is not simply a collection of parts written separately by individual contributors. In fact, no part of it is the work of a single author." (*Ibid*)

This is the reason why I am saying that Dr Canale's remarks may not be his own, or at least not exactly as he would like to have them phrased. The same happens with the Sabbath School lesson. One person may initially write it, but its final composition is the work of a committee.

As the above makes clear though (which is far more important), the theology in this book is regarded by the leadership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as official SDA theology. As the editor goes on to say

"We are not arguing a point of view peculiar to a small avant-guard school of Adventist thinking. What is presented here is broadly representative of mainstream Adventist theology and biblical scholarship as they are practiced throughout the world-wide Adventist Church." (*Ibid*)

We know therefore that where it says on page 138 of this book that God has revealed His nature as three divine persons in “the one divine Trinitarian being”, also that this “idea that the three are one, is not explicitly stated but only assumed”, that this is official SDA theology. In other words, the trinity doctrine, as currently held by the SDA Church, is admitted by the church, not to be biblical, but only intellectual philosophy.

Harmless philosophy or deadly heresy?

Some regard the philosophy of trinitarianism to be harmless but arising out of it there are a number of beliefs that are seriously detrimental to the Gospel. The main one is that the divine Son of God did not die at Calvary. This is standard trinity theology. It has been picked up on by a number of early SDA's. One such person is John Loughborough (1832-1924). He was the longest serving SDA pioneer. Amongst other positions held by him, he was president of the Michigan Conference (1865-1868), the Californian Conference (1873-1878 and 1887-1890), the Upper Columbian Conference (1884-1885) and the Illinois Conference (1891-1895).

When answering questions sent in by the readers of the Review and Herald, Loughborough answered one questioner, namely W. W. Giles, who asked

“What serious objection is there to the doctrine of the Trinity? (W. W. Giles, Review and Herald, November 5th 1861, ‘Questions for Bro. Loughborough’)

Loughborough listed various objections. One is the trinitarian belief that at Calvary, only the human nature of Christ died. He explained

“It will not do to substitute the human nature of Christ (according to Trinitarians) as the Mediator; for Clarke says, “Human blood can no more appease God than swine's blood.” Com. on 2 Sam. xxi, 10.” (John Loughborough, Ibid)

Over 20 years later, Joseph Waggoner, with respect to the belief of trinitarians that only the human nature of Christ died at Calvary, made this comment (Joseph Waggoner and his son Ellet Waggoner, were then editor and co-editor of the Signs)

“And so far as the vicarious death of Christ is concerned, this is Socinianism. Thus the remark is just, that the doctrine of a trinity degrades the Atonement, resting it solely on a human offering as a basis.” (Joseph Waggoner, Signs of the times, January 3rd 1884, ‘The Doctrine of a Trinity as Related to the Atonement’)

Socinians believed and taught that Christ was only human (did not have a divine pre-existence) thus they believed that only a human person died at Calvary.

In 1939, one of the most prolific preachers in the SDA Church, namely Judson Washburn, wrote an open letter to the General Conference. In his letter he warned the leadership that the trinity doctrine was, as he put it, “seeking” to find its way into the teachings of the SDA Church.

Judson Washburn (1863-1955) had been baptised by James White. He had also been a very good friend of Ellen White. Wherever he travelled he had kept her informed of how the work was progressing. Washburn spent 10 very productive years in the UK preaching the three angel's messages of Revelation 14: 6-12. He had arrived in the UK in 1891. This was the same year that the church sent Ellen White to Australia. In

his letter to the General Conference he wrote

“Seventh-day Adventists claim to take the word of God as supreme authority and to have “come out of Babylon,” to have renounced forever the vain traditions of Rome. If we should go back to the immortality of the soul, purgatory, eternal torment and the Sunday Sabbath, would that be anything less than apostasy? If, however, we leap over all these minor, secondary doctrines and accept and teach the very central root, doctrine of Romanism, the Trinity, and teach that the son of God did not die, even though our words seem to be spiritual, is this anything else or anything less than apostasy? and the very Omega of apostasy?” (*Judson Washburn, ‘The Trinity’, letter to the SDA General Conference, 1939*)

Note once again the date of this letter. It was written in 1939. By then, the trinity doctrine had not yet become a recognised teaching of the SDA Church. As Washburn stated (concerning the trinity doctrine)

“This monstrous doctrine transplanted from heathenism into the Roman Papal Church is seeking to intrude its evil presence into the teachings of the Third Angel’s Message.” (*Ibid*)

As we shall see later, in 1931, F. M. Wilcox, as editor of the Review and Herald, compiled a revised statement of fundamental beliefs. This had been inserted into our 1931 Yearbook, also in our very first Church Manual (1932). The second belief says

“That the Godhead, or Trinity, consists of the Eternal Father...the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Eternal Father...the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead...” (*SDA Yearbook, 1931, page 377, ‘Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists’*)

Many regard this 1931 Fundamental Belief as a confession of the trinity doctrine but Washburn could not have seen it this way. This is because in 1939, which was 8 years after this statement had been first introduced into our Yearbook, he said that the trinity doctrine was “seeking” to find its way into the message of the SDA church. As did others therefore, he would have regarded the phrase “Godhead or Trinity” as a collective term referring to the three persons of the Godhead, not as a trinity expressed by the trinity doctrine. We shall return our thoughts to this 1931 set of beliefs later.

In an article called *J. S. Washburn: Unsung Hero* (which carried the sub-title ‘*Would British Adventism have survived without him?*’), David Marshall, as Editor of the Stanborough Press, wrote an article about the work of Washburn. This was particularly regarding his achievements in the UK. Whilst it would be far too much to quote all of it here, I will paste a few snippets. They are not contiguous.

“Not until he had instilled that gospel message into the minds of his hearers, Washburn told Ellen White, did he begin a study of the prophetic book of Daniel.” (*D. Marshall, Adventist Review, January 26th 1989, ‘J. S. Washburn: Unsung Hero’*)

“Unprecedented success attended his [Washburn’s] crusades in London, Bath, Bristol, Newport, and Cardiff. This growth in membership left other workers amazed. By 1898 it became necessary to convene a meeting of ministers in Bath to discuss the “division of the British field into conferences.” (*Ibid*)

“By December 1892, Washburn was preaching to congregations of 500, and never less than 160.” (*Ibid*)

“Preachers thundered from their pulpits against Washburn and the Sabbath. They printed tracts against the Adventist faith. Nevertheless, Washburn explained to Ellen White, “all who know anything about us know that we believe in the gospel and that our doctrine is not simply a legal theory.” (*Ibid*)

“His [Washburn’s] return visits to Britain during the 1920s and early 1930s saw him engaged in revival crusades. Many Adventists still living date their conversion to Washburn meetings in dingy public halls under the influence of the Holy Spirit.” (*Ibid*)

All of the above, also much more, can be read in David Marshall’s article found here

<http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/RH/RH19890126-V166-04.pdf#view=fit>

Washburn, in his 1939 letter to the General Conference, concluded

“However kindly or beautiful or apparently profound his sermons or articles may be, when a man has arrived at the place where he teaches the heathen Catholic doctrine of the Trinity, and denies that the Son of God died for us, is he a true Seventh-day Adventist? Is he even a true preacher of the Gospel? And when many regard him as a great teacher and accept his unscriptural theories, absolutely contrary to the Spirit of Prophecy, it is time that the watchmen should sound a note of warning.” (*Judson Washburn, ‘The Trinity’, letter to the Seventh-day Adventists General Conference, 1939*)

If anyone knew what was believed and taught by SDA’s it was Judson Washburn. Needless to say, he regarded the doctrine of the trinity as being destructive to the Gospel. During the 1940’s and 1950’s when many were believing differently than did earlier SDA’s regarding the persons of the Godhead, Washburn refused to change his beliefs (see page 8).

The trinity doctrine, as well as denying that the divine Son of God died at Calvary (by reason of the belief that the persons of the Godhead exist inseparably together in one indivisible trinitarian being as the one immortal God) denies that when the decision was made for Christ to become incarnate, a risk was taken concerning His eternal existence. In other words; by reason of their theology, trinitarians teach that even if the incarnate Christ had sinned (which many trinitarians believe could not have happened anyway), the divine person of the Son of God would not have forfeited His eternal existence. This is a very serious misunderstanding of the Gospel.

Over the years, I have spoken to a number of SDA ministers about the death of Christ, also about the risk taken in redeeming mankind from sin. Two such ministers are Dr Fernando Canale (who wrote the treatise *Doctrine of God* in the Handbook of SDA Theology) and Max Hatton (who wrote the SDA publication *Understanding the Trinity*), both of whom are amongst the SDA trinitarian theologians mentioned above (see pages 11-12). I will now share some of their personal responses to my questions and beliefs. This will help the readers of this study to understand how trinitarians reason. Very often, this does not come to the fore.

My initial contact with Max Hatton was in 2003. This was after I had objected to my local conference President (Don McFarlane), also to the editor of the Stanborough Press here in the UK (David Marshall), about some of the content in Max Hatton's book (*Understanding the Trinity*). David Marshall passed on my remarks to Max Hatton, also to the readers of the book (those who had vetted it and had authorised its publication), one of whom replied to me saying

"Taken as a whole, Hatton's book is a conservative defence of the trinity doctrine. The fact that all the sources he quotes are orthodox themselves would make it unlikely that he is promulgating gross error." (*Email, David Marshall to Terry Hill, 25th February 2003*)

Consequently, Max Hatton emailed me, and since then we have exchanged many emails. It should go without saying that we disagree with each other's theology.

In one email to a very large list of recipients (ministry and laity) decrying my non-trinitarian beliefs, Max Hatton wrote the following (this was concerning my view that the divine Son of God had died at Calvary)

"I made it clear to Terry that as long as I believe that Jesus was Yahweh and as long as I believe in the Trinity doctrine he has no hope of convincing me that the Divine Word died on the cross." (*Max Hatton, email to undisclosed recipients, copy to Terry Hill, 13th May 2014*)

In an earlier email he had explained

"The suffering of Jesus was felt by the Divine human Jesus right up to the point of death. His Divinity experienced the agony of it all just as much as His humanity suffered. At the point of death His humanity died but His Divinity which had suffered everything that death means to anyone could not ease [sic] to live. A Divine Person could not and did not die." (*Email, Max Hatton to Terry Hill, 27th February 2014*)

Two weeks later, Hatton re-emphasised his view

"The Divinity and humanity of Jesus both suffered right from the time of the Garden of Gethsemane right through to the moment of His death on the cross. His Omnipotent Divinity tasted His death but it could not actually experience it. Only His humanity could actually die." (*Email, Max Hatton to Terry Hill 11th March 2014*)

This is present-day SDA trinitarian reasoning. It is also standard trinitarian theology. Now it can be seen why John Loughborough, Joseph Waggoner and Judson Washburn were all so adamant in their rejection of the trinity doctrine. It takes away from the divine Son of God all He achieved in becoming incarnate – and it directly affects the atonement.

In 2007, after reading Fernando Canale's treatise of the *Doctrine of God* published in the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, I wondered how the SDA Church related their trinity doctrine to the belief that by reason of the incarnation, a risk was taken concerning the divine Son of God's eternal existence. I could not see how these two beliefs (the indivisibility of the three persons of the Godhead as portrayed by the

trinity doctrine and the risk belief) were compatible. Seeing that Dr Canale was, and still is, a leading theologian of the SDA Church, also that his treatise was published in support of the trinity doctrine held by SDA's, I decided to ask him. I therefore emailed him saying (after introducing myself)

"I have been wondering how an understanding that God as a trinity is immutable (unchangeable), as is said by you in your treatise, is compatible with the belief that the pre-existent Son of God, if He had sinned, would have gone out of existence. Surely if the latter had happened, which I thought was once believed by Seventh-day Adventists as being possible because of the incarnation, would not this have brought about an ontological change in God as a trinity? Looking at this in another way, is not saying that God is an immutable unity of three divine beings the same as saying that the pre-existent Son could never have lost His existence?

I hope that you can help me understand the present Seventh-day Adventist position on this one." *(Terry Hill, email to Dr Canale, September 14th 2007)*

This, to me, seemed a reasonable request. After all, I reasoned, Dr Canale did write his treatise on behalf of the SDA Church. Who better therefore to answer the question? The same day he very courteously replied saying

"Dear Terry:

Thank you for reading the treatise on the Doctrine [sic] of God. God the son could have sinned but he would not have lost his existence. I do not know where you got the idea that sin would have brought the death of the eternal Son of God. God, because he is God cannot die. Humans can die. Sin in Christ would have determined death for all humans, and would have affected the life of the Son and the trinity in ways we cannot comprehend but will not have caused the death of the Son and change the Trinitarian structure of God's Being.

I hope this helps

Cordially

Fernando Canale" *(Dr Canale, email to Terry Hill, 14th September 2007)*

This is probably now, standard SDA trinitarian theology held by the ministry.

Four months previously I had asked an orthodox trinitarian priest if he would, in a very brief statement, explain what was believed by orthodox trinitarians (we had been conversing together for quite some time). Here is his reply.

"We 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, Orthodox Priest, to Terry Hill, 16th May 2007)*

The word "ousia" means 'substance' or 'essence'. It is explained as

"...a philosophical and theological term, originally used in Ancient Greek philosophy, and also in Christian theology. It was used by various Ancient Greek

philosophers, like Plato and Aristotle, as a primary designation for philosophical concepts of essence or substance....In Christian theology, the concept of θεία ουσία (divine essence) is one of the most important doctrinal concepts, central to the development of trinitarian doctrine." (*Wikipedia, Ousia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ousia>)

The orthodox trinity doctrine says that the Son is of one ousia (one substance/essence) with both the Father and the Holy Spirit therefore they cannot be separated. Note this word *ousia* is said to have been borrowed from Greek philosophy. Remember, this one substance (one ousia) belief was the conclusions of the ecumenical councils of Nicaea (AD 325) and Constantinople (AD 381)

It can easily be seen now why trinity reasoning directly affects the incarnation. It even denies that the divine Son of God actually vacated Heaven, thus denying in the process that He had exiled Himself from the Father, As the orthodox priest stated, the Word "never leaves the Father's side even when He joins with our human nature in the Incarnation".

William T. Hyde, in his *Theology of an Adventist*, had this to say about trinitarian reasoning (we referred to his treatise previously on page 14)

"Is the Divine Essence Indivisible? This may seem to be a question of no real importance, but it is always important when the results of speculation are made tenets of belief. There is nothing in the Bible about the substance or essence of God being indivisible. More importantly, it conflicts with a central doctrine of the Christian faith. As will be shown later, if the essence of the Godhead is indivisible, there can be no real incarnation" (*William T. Hyde, Theology of an Adventist, Part 3 page 5, 1965*)

The latter sentence says everything. We all need to give it some very serious consideration. Hyde is referring to trinitarianism. Did you notice what he said about when "the results of speculation are made tenets of belief"? This is where the SDA Church is today. Our trinity belief is the direct the result of speculation, yet it is a major Fundamental Belief (Belief No. 2). He immediately followed this by saying

"The Athanasian Creed says, "Neither confounding the persons: nor dividing the Substance." Strong says, "The undivided essence of the Godhead belongs equally to each of the persons." Systematic Theology, Part IV., c. 2 (b)" (*Ibid*)

This is basic trinitarianism. It was born out of the ecumenical councils of Nicaea and Constantinople. Hyde also made these remarks (paragraphs not contiguous)

"The source of this almost universal belief is Greek philosophy (*Ibid*)

"In addition to the attractions or philosophical recognition, the early leaders of the church wished to avoid the charge of tritheism, hence they worshipped three. But the effects far outweighed any benefits. Greek philosophy was exalted above the Bible, the reality of the incarnation was made impossible, and men were judged by their attitudes to human creeds, even when these creeds were in conflict with the Bible.

If the Father and Son had one essence, Christ could not have been unconscious

in the tomb, nor could He have been a little child, learning at His mother's knee."
(*Ibid*, part 3 page 6)

This is the same theology as expressed by our current trinitarian theologians. They say that the divine Son of God never actually died (that He was fully conscious in the tomb), also that there was no risk to His existence. This reasoning is why Hyde completed that section by saying (referring to the trinitarian creeds that say the persons of the Godhead are all of one substance)

"The Adventist view that the Word was made flesh so that "all that comprised the life and intelligence of Jesus remained with His body in the tomb," sleeping, would be regarded as "intolerable tritheism" by such, since it entails a complete separation between the Persons of the Godhead. To maintain their own philosophical view that the Prime Mover must be one single being, they are willing to make a virtual denial of the incarnation. If the Word could not be separated from the Father and Holy Spirit, He did not become flesh (John 1:14), but was an extension of part of the divine substance into the man Jesus." (*Ibid* page 8)

Unfortunately, this "Adventist view" is no longer the Adventist view. Now we reason the trinitarian view (an intellectual philosophical view). We now say that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are "one single being" (see pages 11-12). Hyde is describing exactly what has happened within Seventh-day Adventism. By adopting the trinity doctrine, we are denying the reality of the incarnation.

Hyde was expressing himself with respect to what, in 1965, he regarded SDA's as believing (the "Adventist view"). This was not trinitarianism. Hyde therefore did not regard SDA's, in 1965, as reasoning as do the trinitarians. As I said earlier (see page 6), the 1960's SDA's would have understood the word *trinity*, when it appeared in our denominational literature, to have been collectively describing the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – not as used in the trinity doctrine.

It is true that some regard the denial of trinitarian oneness as "tritheism" (a belief in 3 Gods) but to go further than professing there are three persons of divinity, is to add speculation to what God has revealed. Through the Scriptures, also through the writings of Ellen White, God has only told us of Himself, His Son, and the Holy Spirit. He has revealed nothing of their ontological existence together.

Returning our thoughts to Dr Canale's reasoning; it is evident that he, as well as trinitarian reasoning, denies there ever could have been a risk to Christ's eternal existence. What he says is also the equivalent of saying that the divine Son of God, because He is God, did not die at Calvary.

In a later email (this was concerning the idea of there being a risk to Christ existence) he expanded his thoughts by saying

"The idea that Christ will not have resurrected if he had sinned seems contradictory to the fact that he has life in itself. By definition the divinity cannot cease to exist, or to be the fountain of life." (*Dr Fernando Canale, email to Terry Hill, September 16th 2007*)

In similar fashion to Max Hatton, Dr Canale replied to me concerning who and what died at Calvary

“I believe the incarnated Son of God died. I also believe that if he would have sin he will not have resurrected. His death, the death of the incarnated Christ would have been eternal. Yet, I do not believe that this implies the death of the divine Second Person of the Trinity.” (*Dr Fernando Canale, email to Terry Hill, 8th October 2007*)

This could be taken as saying that the incarnate Christ and the divine Son of God are two different persons, either that or the one person experienced two different existences simultaneously (being alive and being dead at the same time). One must reason though: how is this possible? Canale, like Hatton, clearly denies that the divine person of Christ died at Calvary.

To be fair to Dr Canale, I will now quote how he further explained Christ's death. In the same email (I had shown him various statements from Ellen White where she says that the divine person of the Son of God did die at Calvary - also that there was a risk to His eternal existence) he wrote

“I have to confess, from my point of view that some quotations of Ellen White you presented about the death of Christ, especially that he would have not resurrected, gave precision to a conviction I already had, namely, that the one that died is God. God died at the cross. This is essential for our salvation. Yet, God cannot die not [sic] can He be tempted. To experience these he needed to incarnate in human nature. Then he as God (reality) was able to be tempted and die. Still the basic notion that God cannot die [sic] continues as an eternal reality and truth that was not changed by the incarnation. If the incarnation would have changed God the reality of his sacrifice would have been human not divine.” (*Ibid*)

The way I understand what Dr Canale is saying is that because the trinity God can neither die nor change, the divine Son of God did not actually die at Calvary. It is being said therefore that the divine Son of God, because He is God, only experienced death through the human nature of Christ, or, to put another way again, the divine person of the Son of God only experienced death by proxy (not in reality). Canale's reasoning appears to be standard trinitarian theology.

In a sermon called *The Humble One*, Jack Blanco, the author of *The Clear Word*, expressed the same type of reasoning. After referring to the angel rolling the stone away from the entrance to the tomb of Jesus, he said (at a 3ABN camp meeting)

“What did the angel say? Son of God - your Father calls you. Oh! Even obedient in death - when He could have raised Himself. If that's not obedience I don't know what is. Stayed dead until the Father called.” (*Jack Blanco, Sermon: 'The Humble One', 3ABN Fall Camp Meeting, 2010*)

How though could the person of the divine Son of God, if He was dead, have raised Himself from death? If He were dead, He would not have known anything, neither could He have done anything. He could not have been both dead and alive - at least not at the same time. In fact, if He had been alive, He would not have needed a resurrection. Blanco's words are only another way of saying that only humanity died

at Calvary therefore it was only human nature that needed a resurrection – not a divine person. Again this is trinitarian theology.

Blanco, in a paper he presented in 2006 at the Adventist Theological Society Trinity Symposium held at Collegedale, Tennessee, spoke of the submissiveness of Christ. After saying that Christ's mission as the Lamb of God was completed at the cross, he asks "Why did He not rise from the tomb soon after burial? He continued by asking

"Why did he remain in the tomb until Sunday morning? Well we may give numerous reasons, and there may be numerous reasons, but the fact is that He remained in the tomb submissively waiting until an angel came and rolled away the stone, even though He had power to do so. Paul reminds us that it was God who raised Christ from the dead. In other words, Christ submissively waited in the tomb until His Father called Him. Submissiveness in death. The kind of submissiveness - this kind of submissiveness, is more than human. It is divine." (Jack Blanco, Trinity Symposium, Collegedale, Texas, 2006, 'Trinitarian Model for Ministry')

Here we see it claimed that Christ could have released Himself from the tomb. This is because, so it is said here by Jack Blanco, He had the power to do so. It must be reasoned therefore that if Christ could have accomplished this, He must have possessed the ability to use this power. Power without the ability to use it is impotent. Christ, therefore, according to this reasoning, was not really dead. Did you notice that Jack Blanco equates Christ's death with Christ *consciously* waiting for His Father to call Him? This is not death as explained in Scripture.

The Bible tells us that in death there is no knowledge of anything; neither is there the ability to do anything. It is not a case of one part dying (humanity) whilst another part (the spirit) lives on to experience life. Dead people only experience life again after a resurrection. This is the way it was with the person of Christ. He was not both dead and alive at the same time.

It is trinity doctrine reasoning that leads to the belief that when we die, our body of flesh ceases to live whilst our spirit (soul) continues to experience life. This is usually referred to as the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. As we noted above, it says in the Roman Catholic publication *Handbook for Today's Catholic* (under the heading of 'Three Persons, One God')

"The mystery of the Trinity is the central doctrine of Catholic faith. Upon it are based all other teachings of the Church." (*Handbook for Today's Catholic*, page 249)

Here it says that "all" the other teachings of the Roman Catholic Church are based upon the trinity doctrine.

In similar fashion, John Anthony Hardon (1914-2000), a very well known, also very well respected, Jesuit priest, in an article called *Catholic Doctrine on the Holy Trinity*, explained

"The mystery of the Holy Trinity is the most fundamental of our faith. On it everything else depends and from it everything else derives. Hence the Church's constant concern to safeguard the revealed truth that God is one in nature and

Three in Persons.” (Fr. John A. Hardon, *Catholic Doctrine on the Holy Trinity*, page 1)

One of the major beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church is the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. The dangers of trinity doctrine theology therefore are self-evident. Notice here again it says that the oneness of God (the triunity of nature) is not a person. Only the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are said to be persons.

In the August 16th 2019 edition of *Adventist Today*, there is an article called *Dying Deities, Part 1: Did God Die for Our Sins?* Its author, Richard Coffen, is described as a retired vice president of editorial services at Review and Herald Publishing Association.

Throughout his article, Coffen insists that a divine person did not die at Calvary. Whilst everything he said would be too much to quote here, he maintains (under the sub-heading *Pagan Influences*) that those who say that a divine person did die have been “influenced by Greco-Roman ideology” and “other pagan ideas”. Under the sub-heading of *Ellen G. White’s Input*, Coffen makes this comment

“Our prophet insisted that divinity did *not* die on the cross. She wrote of the crucifixion that “Humanity died; divinity did not die.” “Deity did not die. Humanity died.”

Unlike superstitious forebears of millennia past who believed that their deities died and later reappeared alive, we who take Paul and White seriously refrain from affirming that our Judeo-Christian immortal God (YHWH) died on Calvary’s cross. Affirming a dying God who is inherently immortal entails a logical contradiction!” (*Richard Coffen, Adventist Today, August 16th, ‘Dying Deities, Part 1: Did God Die for Our Sins?’*)

Those like Coffen who say that it is impossible for a divine person to die, must reason also that it was impossible for there to have been a risk to the divine Son of God’s eternal existence. The two must go together. It cannot be otherwise.

The above quotations from Ellen White’s writings, as used here by Coffen, have been removed from their context. When they are read within their context, also when they are compared with other comments she made concerning who and what died at Calvary, it will be seen she did not mean, as Coffen is claiming, that a divine person did not die at Calvary. She says very clearly that a divine person did die. On page 35, I have provided links to two articles where it can be read in detail what she wrote on this subject. Coffen’s article can be read here

<https://atoday.org/dying-deities-part-1-did-god-die-for-our-sins/>

The presentations by Jack Blanco can be found at the following two links

[The Humble One](#) (quoted at 52 minutes 43 seconds)

[Trinitarian Model for Ministry](#) (quoted at 18 minutes 35 seconds)

If you wish to listen to the entire presentations of the 2006 ATS Trinity Symposium, go to the following link. Jack Blanco’s presentation is listed as No. 12.

2006 ATS Trinity Symposium held at Collegedale Tennessee

From the above, it can be quite clearly seen that the trinity doctrine does seriously affect the incarnation. It denies a divine person died at Calvary. In consequence therefore, it denies that a divine person made the atonement. It also denies that in redeeming mankind from sin, a risk was taken concerning the divine Son of God's eternal existence. SDA trinitarian theology says that even if He had sinned, He still would have continued to live forever.

It must be remembered that in the incarnation, the divine Son of God did not lose His personal identity. He was now the same person (the divine Son of God) incarnate. There were not two persons in Christ.

During the time of Ellen White's ministry, it appears to have been commonly believed that a divine person did die at Calvary. Ellet J. Waggoner (1855-1916), in what many have regarded as the most famous of his books (written two years after the famous Minneapolis General Conference session where his preaching took a prominent role), made this very clear.

"If anyone springs the old cavil, how Christ could be immortal and yet die, we have only to say that we do not know. We make no pretensions of fathoming infinity. We cannot understand how Christ could be God in the beginning, sharing equal glory with the Father before the world was and still be born a babe in Bethlehem. The mystery of the crucifixion and resurrection is but the mystery of the incarnation. We cannot understand how Christ could be God and still become man for our sake. We cannot understand how He could create the world from nothing, nor how He can raise the dead nor yet how it is that He works by His Spirit in our own hearts; yet we believe and know these things. It should be sufficient for us to accept as true those things which God has revealed without stumbling over things that the mind of an angel cannot fathom. So we delight in the infinite power and glory which the Scriptures declare belong to Christ, without worrying our finite minds in a vain attempt to explain the infinite." (*E. J. Waggoner, Christ and His righteousness, page 23, 1890*)

Some things, at least as to how they were achieved, must remain a mystery. It is enough to know that they did happen.

Some may query where Jesus said to the Jews (who had asked Him for a sign after He had cleansed the temple) "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." (see John 2:19). At first glance it looks as though Jesus is claiming that if He died, He would raise Himself to life. This though was not what He meant. As John 2:19 says, He was referring to His body, not to His person. The Scriptures tell us plainly that it was God the Father who raised the person of the incarnate Christ to life (Galatians 1:1). For those who would like an understanding of the compatibility between these Scriptures (John 2:19 and Galatians 1:1), they can do so by reading the sub-section *Only the Father* on page 411 of the study found here

[A study of the Godhead – as it pertains to Seventh-day Adventism](#)

For those who desire to review what SDA's, with respect to the death of Christ, also regarding the risk factor, have been told through the writings of Ellen White, please go to the following links. It will be seen she says quite differently than Canale, Blanco,

Coffen and Hatton.

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

Through the spirit of prophecy, Seventh-day Adventists have been very clearly told that the divine person of the Son of God did die at Calvary. In fact they have been told that He was the only One who could have paid the price of our redemption. In addition to this, Ellen White did make clear that if Christ had sinned, which she says was possible, He would have lost His eternal existence.

In 1895, in a General Conference bulletin, she counselled Seventh-day Adventists (revealing she could not have espoused the trinity doctrine nor trinitarian theology)

“Remember that Christ risked all; “tempted like as we are,” he staked even his own eternal existence upon the issue of the conflict.” (*Ellen G. White, General Conference Bulletin 1st December 1895 ‘Seeking the Lost’*)

It appears that this is something that many Seventh-day Adventists, in their acceptance of the trinity doctrine, have failed to remember. Need we say more?

A Bible study on the subject can be found here

The death of Christ and the possibility of Him sinning

Made in the image of God – or not?

There is also something else to consider. This is that if God is a trinity of divine beings as expressed by the trinity doctrine, then what does He look like?

Many trinitarians claim that God is without body and parts – meaning He does not have an outward visible form. This is understandable – especially as they teach that He is three inseparable persons who have their existence in one indivisible trinitarian being (as explained above by Canale, Hatton, Mueller, Dederen, Petersen and Pfandl). After all, if this three-in-one God did have a form, what would constitute the structure of it? It is not imaginable. Having said that, we shall now see how the Seventh-day Adventist Church, with their present trinitarian theology, reason this one.

In the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* – which is said to be the official explanation of the fundamental beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists (see pages 22-24 of this study) – it says that God has a form, but our minds cannot perceive it. This is where is explained the SDA understanding of God as a trinity. With reference to this trinity reasoning, Fernando Canale is attributed as explaining about God

“In Himself He is real and has a form, yet that divine reality and form completely surpass the reality and capability of comprehension of the highest intelligences.” (*Dr Fernando L. Canale, Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology, SDA Bible Commentary, Volume 12, page 113, ‘Doctrine of God’*)

According to present SDA theology therefore, God (the trinity God) does have a form but it is beyond the human mind to even imagine it. If God is a single trinitarian being as taught today by SDA's, this too would be understandable.

Immediately prior to this statement, Dr Canale had explained that although God can perform tasks such as humans can perform, He does not have body members like ours (such as arms etc). He further explained

“Only God can use analogy to reveal Himself without involving vain speculations. Some of the analogies God draws are called anthropomorphisms, that is, they attribute to God characteristics belonging to human beings.” (*Ibid*)

Anthropomorphism is ascribing the characteristics of humanity to something not human. This is what is being said here – that God does not have body and parts like as we have but with the parts He does possess (whatever they may be) He can accomplish the same tasks that we accomplish. Notice here it says that it is God who uses “anthropomorphisms”. Canale continues

“In biblical anthropomorphisms, God reveals what He is and what He can do in terms of human realities.” (*Ibid*)

Once again this is saying it is God who uses “anthropomorphisms”. By way of explanation, Fernando Canale then says

“For instance, when God says that He has an arm (Exodus 15:16; Psalm 89:13), He does not mean that He has exactly or univocally what we call an arm. The expression signifies that God's reality is capable of performing all that can be performed by a human arm and infinitely more.” (*Ibid*)

How would we know that God does not have arms like we do? This again is only speculation. Canale concludes

“We cannot conceive or imagine the actual structure of God's reality that allows Him to perform these acts. Yet the analogical language reveals to us aspects of God's being and divine capabilities, while at the same time guarding the mystery of His divine nature.” (*Ibid*)

According to this reasoning, it is impossible for us to understand what God looks like although from the definition of Him given in the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, He certainly would not look like us. What would a three-in-one being look like anyway? As far as I know, no one has ever seen one. If God does not have body parts like ours, then He would not have arms, legs, face and body etc as we do.

When Moses was upon Mount Sinai (to receive from God the two tables of stone with the Ten Commandments written upon them) he said to God “I beseech thee, shew me thy glory” (Exodus 33:18). God replied to Moses saying

“... I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy ...Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live ...Behold, there is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock: And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I

will put thee in a clift of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen.” Exodus 33:19-23

It can only be assumed that all those who hold to trinitarian three-in-one theology as held today by SDA's, believe that God's face, hand and back parts etc., spoken of here by God Himself, are all “anthropomorphisms”. This reasoning makes God responsible for using anthropomorphisms. This is because it was God who spoke these words to Moses. Moses was simply relating (recording under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) the words he had heard God speak. To put it another way: It was not Moses who chose to say that God had a face, hands and back parts but God Himself. If the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* is correct, then it must be concluded that God was using anthropomorphisms.

I assume the same would be said of Jesus. He said to his disciples

“Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven.” Matthew 18:10

Was Jesus using anthropomorphisms? Does the Father have a face or not? If not, then what does He have?

In 1977, Don Neufeld, then Associate Editor of the *Review and Herald*, gave an answer to someone who had asked what SDA's taught concerning the trinity (we mentioned part of Neufeld's answer earlier on page 16). Here is the question

“What is the Adventist teaching on the Trinity? I have always seen the Trinity as three persons in the Godhead. I have never thought of God the Father or the Holy Spirit as having a material or physical body. Nor do I think the Son had a material body until He became man. As I understand it, He now has a material body. Is this in harmony with Adventist teaching? (*Review and Herald*, October 6th 1977, ‘Bible questions answered’)

Don Neufeld, referring to the statement of beliefs in our Church Manual (please note that this was in 1977 which was three years before the trinity doctrine was voted into the fundamental beliefs of the SDA Church), also after saying that SDA's “have been reticent to speculate as to this aspect of God's nature”, explained

“It is true that in the Bible, God is represented as having ears (Ps. 17:6), nostrils (2 Sam. 22:9), a mouth (Deut. 8:3), a hand (Zech. 2:9), feet (Ps. 18:9), but these are usually considered as being anthropomorphisms, that is, expressions attributing to God human characteristics. They are attempts, it is claimed, to help human beings understand God, who is much above them.” (*Don F Neufeld, Review and Herald*, October 6th, 1977, ‘Bible questions answered’)

In my research so far, this is the very first time I can find, in SDA literature, the word “anthropomorphisms” used when describing God's outward form. I can find it used previously to describe God's passions (like weeping and gasping etc.), also where the Bible says such as “the LORD came down to see the city and the tower” of Babel (Genesis 11:4) but not to describe His outward form. Notice that Neufeld said it is claimed that these anthropomorphisms are “attempts” to help us understand God. This

makes it sound as though these were attempts made by the Bible writers but as we have just seen, it was God, not the Bible writers, who said that He had a face, hands and back parts. Others have also said, in our literature, that we do not look like God.

The reasoning that God is a three-in-one being does bring into question the words spoken by God at creation. This is when He said

“...Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...” Genesis 1:26

If trinitarian reasoning is correct, then the words of God here cannot be taken literally – at least not in any sense referring to outward form. This though would be in complete contrast to what we have been told through the spirit of prophecy – which is that in outward appearance we do look very similar to God. God’s servant wrote

“Man was to bear God’s image, both in outward resemblance and in character. Christ alone is “the express image” (Hebrews 1:3) of the Father; but man was formed in the likeness of God.” (*Ellen G. White, Patriarchs and Prophets, page 45, ‘The Creation’*)

In the book *Education* we find a very similar statement

“Created to be “the image and glory of God” (1 Corinthians 11:7), Adam and Eve had received endowments not unworthy of their high destiny. Graceful and symmetrical in form, regular and beautiful in feature, their countenances glowing with the tint of health and the light of joy and hope, they bore in outward resemblance the likeness of their Maker. Nor was this likeness manifest in the physical nature only. Every faculty of mind and soul reflected the Creator’s glory.” (*Ellen G. White, Education, page 20, ‘The Eden School’*)

Ellen White is addressing herself to Genesis 1:26. Here she says that we were not only made in the image of God’s character but also in “outward resemblance” and “physical nature”. If what Ellen White wrote here is true, then it can only be concluded that what is written in the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* is false. The reverse of course would be equally as true.

Admittedly, no one expects God to look exactly the same as we do in every particular, but from these remarks (“outward resemblance” and “physical nature”), it can only be reasoned that we look very similar to God. If this were not true, then these comments made by Ellen White would be pointless. Certainly what she wrote is nothing like what is written in the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*.

On the other hand, who, in Genesis 1:26, is speaking to who? The Scriptures reveal that God made all things through Christ (John 1:3, Colossians 1:16, Hebrews 1:2). We can safely reason therefore that it was the Father speaking to His Son. This would mean, assuming Ellen White is correct, that in “outward resemblance” and “physical nature” we look like both the Father and the Son. The problem here of course is that trinitarians speak of God as a composite three-in-one trinitarian being, whilst Ellen White is referring to God as an individual person.

On his website, Max Hatton has an article called *Ellen G. White and the Trinity Doctrine*. With respect to what God’s messenger had written in *Patriarchs and Prophets* - that we were to bear God’s image in “outward resemblance” - he says under

the sub-heading “My first encounter with a statement from Ellen White which bothered me” (all emphasis is Max Hatton’s)

“Not long after I became an Adventist I was quite astonished to read a statement from Ellen White which says:

*“Man was to bear God’s image, both in **outward resemblance** and in character.” (emphasis supplied) Patriarchs and Prophets, page 45.*

I was quite puzzled by this. I had recently spent well over a year intensely studying things about God that caused me to become a Trinitarian. Now could I accept that God was much like me to look at? ... Now I can see this was from the pen of Ellen White who had been conditioned to be a Semi-Arian. God looks something like me? How could a single human look something like the Great Spirit Trinity God who is everywhere present at the same time? The statement of our dear lady does fit the Semi-Arian God quite well, but certainly not the Trinitarian God!” (Max Hatton, *Ellen G. White and the Trinity Doctrine*, <http://thetrinitydoctrine.com/articles/ellen-g-white-and-the-trinity-doctrine>)

It appears that Max Hatton, from his beginnings as a Seventh-day Adventist, did not agree with what Ellen White had written. Remember, he wrote the SDA publication *Understanding the Trinity*. It also appears that he does not regard God as a single person (the Father) who is in the sanctuary in Heaven with Jesus. Rather, He refers to God as “the Great Spirit Trinity God who is everywhere present at the same time”.

So how does Hatton explain how Ellen White became “conditioned” to reason the way she did? Earlier in the same article he had explained

“James White, and I guess others, were successful in helping persuade the young Ellen White to accept that God does have body parts. How they could reconcile this with the fact that He is plainly said to be Spirit is quite beyond me. A body would place severe limits on God and confine Him to particular places constantly. ... Our Pioneers were clearly going down a wrong track and for whatever reason Ellen White was now going down the same track with them.” (Ibid)

Later in the same article, Hatton refers to where Ellen White had written

“I saw a throne, and on it sat the Father and the Son. I gazed on Jesus’ countenance and admired His lovely person. The Father’s person I could not behold, for a cloud of glorious light covered Him. I asked Jesus if His Father had a form like Himself. He said He had, but I could not behold it, for said He, “If you should once behold the glory of His person, you would cease to exist.” (Ellen G. White, *Early Writings*, page 54)

“I have often seen the lovely Jesus, that He is a person. I asked Him if His Father was a person and had a form like Himself. Said Jesus, “I am in the express image of My Father’s person.” (Ibid page 77)

Max Hatton commented (this is in the same article as on page 39 above)

“The fact that Mrs White says she saw in vision that Jesus and the Father are quite separate individuals does not fit with the Trinitarian concept found in Scripture.” (*op. cit.*)

Hatton obviously disagrees with Ellen White. He reasons, as a trinitarian, that Jesus and the Father are not separate individuals. Hatton is admitting that Ellen White was writing as a non-trinitarian.

On the very same subject of God’s outward form, Ellen White made this observation

“In the beginning man was created in the likeness of God not only in character but in form and feature”. (*Ellen G. White, Spirit of Prophecy, Volume 4 page 463, ‘God’s people delivered, see also ‘The Great Controversy, page 644)*

Here again we can see that what was written by Ellen White is not in keeping with what it says in the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, or what is said by Max Hatton. Here we are told that we were created not only in the likeness of God’s character but also “in form and feature”. We are left therefore to decide which is true – Ellen White or trinitarian theology? It is quite apparent that both cannot be correct.

It is more than interesting that since it was first written in 1890, Ellen White’s remark - that we were created in God’s image “in outward resemblance and in character” (see above) - has been used in our publications around 90 times. What is even more interesting is that it has been used repeatedly since the trinity doctrine was voted into our beliefs in 1980. Mostly this has been in the Adult Sabbath School Quarterly. In the 3rd quarter of 1999 it was asked of those who partook of these studies

“But what does it mean for us to be created in the "image of God"? (Gen. 1:26, 27; Ps. 8:4-8). Does it refer to a physical or a spiritual resemblance? The Old Testament commentator Gerhard von Rad correctly realized that both are intended here. This view is endorsed by Ellen White. "Man was to bear God's image, both in outward resemblance and in character. . . . His nature was in harmony with the will of God. His mind was capable of comprehending divine things."—Patriarchs and Prophets, p. 45.” (*Adult Sabbath School Quarterly, 3rd Quarter 1999, page 35, ‘God’s Creation’)*

The same year in the Collegiate Quarterly, a similar question was asked (paragraphs not contiguous)

“How could humanity be made in the image of God when God is a spirit? This question is frequently asked by young people. It stems from the general belief that a spirit has no form, but this is not true with God. The Bible gives us evidence of the capabilities of God: voice (Matt. 3:17), hearing (Ps. 3:4), and sight (Prov. 15:3). To strengthen the concept that God has a form, Genesis 3:8 makes a reference to God walking in the Garden of Eden. The story found in Exodus 33:18-23 gives us further irrefutable proof. When Moses asked to see God’s glory (verse 18), God told him that no human being could see His face and live (verse 20). He did tell Moses that He would place him in the cleft of a rock and cover him with His hand while He passed by (verse 22). This would allow Moses to see His back parts but not His face when His hand was removed (verse 3). In addition, Ellen White writes, “Man was to bear God’s image, both in outward resemblance and in character. Christ alone is the ‘express image’... of the Father;

but man was formed in the likeness of God.”

“When God decided to create humanity, He had nothing but excellence—perfection—in His mind. God’s ideal for humankind was supernatural. As we read from the book of Genesis, God created everything, and behold, it was “very good” (Gen. 1:31)—not simply good, but very good. We were indeed made perfect in every aspect. What does it mean, however, for us to be created perfect? Ellen White has described what this means: “Man was to bear God’s image, both in outward resemblance and in character.” (*Collegiate Sabbath School Quarterly*, 2nd quarter 1999, pages 12-14, ‘Our Human Nature’)

The previous year (1998), in the adult quarterly, this comment was made

“We ourselves provide the most telling picture of the Creator. Our wisdom and love can reflect the wisdom and love of God. Our physical form in some small way reflects something of the form of God. Our sense of justice, mercy, and truth is a spark of God’s matchless and holy character. But also in us may be seen the evil image of the enemy who has sought to destroy in us the image of God. The greatest work of the Creator is that of restoring us to His own image. (See 1 John 3:2.) “Man was to bear God’s image, both in outward resemblance and in character. . . . His nature was in harmony with the will of God. . . . He was holy and happy in bearing the image of God, and in perfect obedience to His will.”—Patriarchs and Prophets, p. 45.” (*Sabbath School Quarterly*, 4th quarter 1998, page 16, ‘Our Wonderful God’)

We can see therefore that in our publications up to 1999, even though the trinity doctrine had been voted into our fundamental beliefs almost 20 years earlier in 1980, it was still being said, as Ellen White wrote, that originally, “Man was to bear God’s image, both in outward resemblance and in character”.

Since then (1999), I cannot find it used. Perhaps it has been used, but as of yet I have not found it. It was the following year (2000) that the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* was published. This is where it said on page 113, “We cannot conceive or imagine the actual structure of God’s reality...”. Once again we return to the same question. Who is right and who is wrong?

Non-trinitarianism (anti-trinitarianism) within Seventh-day Adventism

I will now supply, without comment, various statements published in our periodicals that reveal how early Seventh-day Adventists regarded the trinity doctrine.

J. N. Andrews

“This doctrine [the trinity doctrine] destroys the personality of God and his Son Jesus Christ our Lord. The infamous, measures by which it was forced upon the church which appear upon the pages of ecclesiastical history might well cause every believer in that doctrine to blush.” (*J. N. Andrews, Review and Herald*, March 6th 1855, ‘The Fall of Babylon’)

Daniel Baker

“BRO. DANIEL BAKER writes from Tioga Co., Pa.: “After contending against the Trinitarian doctrine and all sectarian disciplines for about sixteen years, and

against the doctrine of the soul's immortality eight years, and for the seventh-day Sabbath three years, it is truly refreshing to find in your paper the same views proved by Scripture. (*Review and Herald, March 13th 1856, Extracts from letters*)

D. W. Hull

"The inconsistent positions held by many in regard to the Trinity, as it is termed, has, no doubt, been the prime cause of many other errors." (*D. W. Hull, Review and Herald, November 10th 1859, 'Bible doctrine of the divinity of Christ'*)

J. N. Loughborough

"Question 1. "What serious objection is there to the doctrine of the trinity?"

Answer. "There are many objections which we might urge, but on account of our limited space we shall reduce them to the three following: 1. It is contrary to common sense. 2. It is contrary to scripture. 3. Its origin is Pagan and fabulous." (*Review and Herald, November 5th 1861 'Questions for Brother Loughborough'*)

W. C. Gage

"Having noticed some of the evil effects of the doctrine of immortal soulism, and the errors growing out of it, we propose to refer briefly to another erroneous belief, equally popular and quite as unscriptural, if not fully as mischievous in its tendency, namely Trinitarianism." (*W. C. Gage, Review and Herald, August 29th 1865, 'Popular errors and their fruits No .5'*)

R. F. Cottrell

"This [the trinity doctrine] has been a popular doctrine and regarded as orthodox ever since the bishop of Rome was elevated to the popedom on the strength of it. It is accounted dangerous heresy to reject it; but each person is permitted to explain the doctrine in his own way. All seem to think they must hold it, but each has perfect liberty to take his own way to reconcile its contradictory propositions; and hence a multitude of views are held concerning it by its friends, all of them orthodox, I suppose, as long as they nominally assent to the doctrine." (*R. F. Cottrell, Review and Herald 1st June 1869 'The Doctrine of the Trinity'*)

James White

"The inexplicable Trinity that makes the Godhead three in one and one in three, is bad enough; but that ultra Unitarianism that makes Christ inferior to the Father is worse. Did God say to an inferior, "Let us make man in our image?" (*James White, Review and Herald November 29th 1877, 'Christ Equal with God'*)

A. J. Dennis

"What a contradiction of terms is found in the language of a trinitarian creed: "In unity of this Godhead are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost." There are many things that are mysterious, written in the word of God, but we may safely presume the Lord never calls upon us to believe impossibilities. But creeds often do." (*A. J. Dennis, 'Signs of the Times' May 22nd 1879, page 162 article 'One God'*)

J. H. Kellogg

“Our reviewer seems to be somewhat displeased at our reference to the doctrine of the trinity, a doctrine which is confessedly in the highest degree unphilosophical, unreasonable, and unreconcilable with common sense, which leads us to conclude that we were not incorrect in supposing him to be a believer in the doctrine. Our only reason for mentioning the doctrine of the trinity was to remind our reviewer that so long as he held a view so utterly at variance with logical reasoning, he ought to have at least a small amount of liberality for other views in which there may at first seem to exist slight difficulties.” (*J. H. Kellogg, Review and Herald, August 19th 1880, ‘The soul -No.2’*)

The above are some of the many anti-trinitarian comments made by early SDA's. It should go without saying therefore that during their time period, which was also the time period of Ellen White's ministry, the SDA Church was recognised as a decidedly non-trinitarian denomination. Nowhere can it be found where Ellen White rebuked these early SDA's for their anti-trinitarian remarks, or for their non-trinitarian beliefs.

Regarding the Godhead, much revelation came through Ellen White but none of it, whilst she was alive, was said to have provided reason for adopting the trinity doctrine. In fact in the early 1900's, E. J. Waggoner, as editor of the *British Present Truth*, wrote the following. This was in answer to questions that readers had sent in asking whether SDA's were trinitarians. The first was the same year he became President of the newly formed South England Conference.

“You ask what we teach about the Trinity. Inasmuch as we find no such expression in the Scriptures, we do not teach anything about it. But as to the Being of God, - the Godhead, - Divinity as revealed in the Father, the Word (the Son), and the Holy Spirit, we believe and teach just what the Bible says, and nothing else. No man can by searching find out God. No creature can understand the Almighty to perfection. The finite mind cannot comprehend infinity. Therefore, in discussions about the Trinity, about the nature of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, are manifestations of gross presumption.” (*E. J. Waggoner, Present Truth February 6th 1902, ‘The Editor's Private corner’*)

“If I knew what you meant by the term [trinity], I might tell you; but from the days of Athanasius until now all discussion about the Trinity has been an attempt to define the indefinable and the incomprehensible. Thousands have been put to death for not professing belief in a formula which even its professors could not comprehend, nor state in terms that anybody else could comprehend.” (*E. J. Waggoner, British Present Truth, 30th July 1903, ‘The editor's private corner’*)

It is reasonable to assume that Waggoner would not have described himself as a trinitarian, neither did he reason that SDA's were trinitarian – even though by then Ellen White had said that the Holy Spirit is a person. He is saying that we cannot understand these things. He says they are “indefinable” and “incomprehensible” – which is what the author of this study is saying.

Bartlett, a later editor of the same periodical, reasoned the same as Waggoner. This again was in answer to readers who asked about the trinity doctrine. Note the dates.

“While the Bible speaks clearly of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and tells us all we need to know, or can understand of their relation to one another, it does not define any of them within exact limits, as men have tried to do... God does not wish us to spend time in guessing at His Divine and Infinite Being.” (*W. T. Bartlett, Present Truth, Questions and Bible Answers, March 10th 1904, page 149, 'The Trinity'*)

“With regard to your further question concerning the Trinity, we shall better understand the Bible the more closely we hold to its teaching. The ideas of the Trinity which are found in the Creeds are human attempts to define an incomprehensible mystery, and bewilder rather than assist the mind... The truth concerning the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost is altogether too large to be bound about by any definitions that created minds can frame.” (*W. T. Bartlett, January 11th 1906, 'Questions and Bible Answers, 'The Unpardonable Sin'*)

We can see that even with the passing of the years, SDA's had still not adopted, as one of their principle beliefs, the doctrine of the trinity. This was even in the light of the many revelations that came from God through Ellen White. This was almost a decade after the *Desire of Ages* had been published (1898). It is evident that this book had not changed the non-trinitarian reasoning of SDA's. This was even after Ellen White had said that the Holy Spirit is a person. More about this in later sections.

Apart from his time as co-editor and editor of the *Present Truth*, Bartlett, from 1930-1932, was the President of the North England Conference. From 1932-1941 he was Field Secretary of the Northern European Division. He was also its Sabbath School division Secretary. He completed his ministry at Newbold College in England where he taught Bible for 6 years.

Some SDA's, with the acceptance of the doctrine of the trinity, have developed an unfortunate attitude towards those who were – and are today – non-trinitarians. Raoul Dederen, in a paper he wrote for Andrews Seminary, concluded

“If the doctrine of the Trinity is true, then those who deny it do not worship the God of the Scriptures.” (*Raoul Dederen, Reflections on the Doctrine of the Trinity, page 16, Andrews University Seminar Studies*)

As do the majority of the present-day SDA ministry, Raoul Dederen believed the doctrine of the trinity to be true. This therefore is a very severe criticism of early church members. It would be saying because they did not accept this teaching, they did “**not worship the God of the Scriptures**”. This would apply of course to those such as James White, J. N. Andrews, John Loughborough, Uriah Smith, Ellet Waggoner and the countless thousands of past SDA's who did not accept this teaching. This would also include Ellen White, who from what we have seen above, also denied trinitarian reasoning. It would also include those today who do not accept it. The question must be asked though: has anyone the right to make such a judgment as did Dederen?

Further evidences of past non-trinitarianism (the risk factor)

As we have seen above, trinitarian reasoning denies that in the making of the decision for Christ to become incarnate, a risk was taken concerning His eternal existence. This was not the view taken by Ellen White (see links on page 35 above), neither was it the view that was generally presented in our various publications. This was not only while

she was alive, but also after she had died. We shall see this now.

At the 1893 General Conference session, R. A. Underwood (1850-1932), delivered a series called 'Christ's Ownership'. In No. 2 of the series he asked

"We now enquire, What was the price paid for man's redemption? Was it gold or silver, or the most costly sparkling diamonds of earth? - Oh no, it was the life of the only begotten Son of God. And this not only embraced the death of Christ, but he must live for man, and conquer for man with all the disabilities of the fallen race upon him. In doing this he runs the risk of losing his own existence as well as the existence of all he had created and upheld." (*R. A. Underwood, General Conference Bulletin, February 5th 1893, 'Christ's Ownership – No. 2'*)

Underwood clearly believed there was a risk to Christ's existence. After quoting various Scriptures showing that Christ could have sinned, also doing the same from the writings of Ellen White, he had this to say

"It is clear from these statements that Christ, in order to purchase man, must take man's nature, capable of yielding to temptation, and that he must be "tempted in all points like as we are." In this he takes upon himself the risk of a possible failure, for man had failed. You see at once that this involves the possibility of losing his own existence and all that he upheld." (*Ibid*)

Underwood was also honest to admit

"I cannot explain how the divine Son of God, who was the Creator and the upholder of the universe, could do this. That is the "mystery" that "the angels desire to look into." 1 Pet. 1:12. But when the Bible declares it to be so, I believe it." (*Ibid*)

For 35 years (from 1885 until his retirement in 1920), Underwood was a member of the SDA Executive Committee. During his time he held many important posts. This included President of conferences such as Ohio (1882-1889), Wisconsin (1893), Pennsylvania (1895-1897 and 1899-1903), Northern Union (1904-1912), West Pennsylvania (1913-1914) and Central Union (1914-1920). Underwood well understood what was believed and taught by Seventh-day Adventists.

In the Australian Union Gleaner of December 1896, A. G. Daniells (1858-1935), then the President of the Central Australian Conference, made this observation (paragraphs not contiguous)

"At an infinite cost the Son of God redeemed man and his lost possession, from the hand of the enemy. This not only took the life of Christ, but it imperilled His eternal interests. Had He failed, as it -was possible for Him to do, He would have perished, At this cost He rescued what was lost. It is now all His. Says Paul, -"Ye are not, your own, for ye are bought with a price.'"

"When we were held by Satan in a cruel bondage from which we never could have freed ourselves; when we were lost, irretrievably lost, the Son of God, at the risk of losing His own existence, came to this earth, suffered, and died to set us free and to save us. He wrenched all things from the grasp of the prince of darkness, and now claims them as His own." (*A. G. Daniells, The Australian*

Daniells, amongst other positions he held, had been president of both the New Zealand Conference (1889-1891) and the Australian Conference (1892-1895). In 1895 he became the first president of the Central Australian Conference. In 1901 he assumed the office of General Conference President. In 1922, Daniells became the first secretary of the General Conference Ministerial Association. This was a post he held until 1931.

During his tenure of General Conference President, Daniells did not change his views (about the risk taken by Christ). We know this because in 1917, which was 16 years after he became president, also 2 years after the death of Ellen White, he wrote in the Church Officer's Gazette (paragraphs not contiguous)

"In undertaking to redeem what was lost at the fall, the Son of God took the fearful risk of losing his own existence forever. Inspiration plainly declares that when Christ came to this world, he took upon himself man's fallen nature, with all its liabilities. Rom. 8 : 3 ; Heb. 2 :16-18 ; 4 :15. In this he accepted the fearful risk of possible failure. Had he failed, he, with man, would have been lost forever. This thought is almost overwhelming. It seems incredible that Heaven would condescend to purchase sinful, ungrateful man at such an infinite price."

"At an infinite cost the Son of God redeemed man and his lost possession from the hand of the enemy. This not only took the life of Christ, but it imperiled his eternal interests. Had he failed, as was possible, he would have perished. At this cost he rescued what was lost, and it is now all his." (*A. G. Daniells, The Church Officers' Gazette, October 1917*)

There can be no mistaking what the President is saying. He certainly did not believe the trinity doctrine – neither did he reason as do our current theologians. This was now 19 years after the publication of the *Desire of Ages*. This book had not changed his views about the risk that had been taken.

In the Australian Bible Echo (now Australian Signs), there was a series of Editorials called 'Questioning God's Ways'. In No. 3 of this series it said

"It is not possible to fully express in words all that the fall of man involved. It may be pondered, but it cannot be comprehended. It may be talked of, but it cannot be fully stated." (*Australian Bible Echo, November 22nd 1893, Editorial, Questioning God's ways - No. 3*)

Then, after saying that sin led to man losing his innocence and all that God had given him, also that it involved the life of Christ, the following was made clear

"The fall of man led the Son of God to imperil his eternal interests. It led Him to take the fearful risk of losing his own existence forever." (*Ibid*)

Following on from this, various verses from Scripture were quoted. These showed how, in the incarnation, Christ had taken our human nature, also our liabilities etc. After quoting Hebrews 4:15 which says that Christ was "in all things made like unto his brethren", also that He was "in all points tempted like as we are" therefore in doing so had put Himself on our place, this conclusion was drawn (paragraphs not

contiguous)

"The entrance of sin had jeopardised the well being of every creature. In order to secure every one, in order to make it possible that not one need perish, the Son of God imperilled his own existence. He could have yielded to temptation; but had He done so, all would have been lost. How far-reaching and how terrible are the results of sin!" (*Ibid*)

"Had He made one mistake, his mission would have been a failure, man would have perished for ever, and the Son of God could never have returned to his Father." (*Ibid*)

This is in keeping with what we have been told through Ellen White (see link on page 35).

In the next edition of the same paper, No. 4 of the series returned to the same thought. After explaining that Christ, by His death and resurrection, had purchased back the dominion that sin had lost to Satan, it said (paragraphs not contiguous)

"Thus the earth, which God gave to Adam at creation (Ps. 115:16), and which Adam bartered away to Satan, was recovered by the Son of God. He purchased it with his own blood, and at the risk of losing his existence. It is therefore called the "purchased possession." Eph. 1:14." (*Australian Bible Echo, December 1st 1893, Editorial, Questioning God's ways - No. 4*)

"When we were held by Satan in a cruel bondage, from which we never could have freed ourselves; when we were lost, irretrievably lost, the Son of God, at the risk of losing his own existence, came to this earth, and suffered and died to set us free, and to save us." (*Ibid*)

How much clearer can anything be written?

Lionel H. Turner (1907-1993) was a well-known, also very well respected, long-serving SDA educationalist. In his early days, in 1931, he wrote the following about God

"Somehow out of the wreckage He would save man. So He devised a plan for his salvation; a plan that involved such a magnificent sacrifice that the whole universe wondered when they saw it in operation. It meant that this sin-cursed earth must lie accused beneath the spectacle of the universe every night for thousands of years, the one blot on the peerless beauty of His dominions; for its destruction must be deferred. It meant, too, that the Son of God must divest Himself of His mantle of power, and become a man, with a man's power to fight the battle with sin and keep Himself uncontaminated, come down to this rebel world where His name was hated, and risk His own eternal existence, in order that He might save some ere the hour of destruction came." (*Lionel H. Turner, Australian Signs of the Times March 30th 1931, 'The Most Wonderful Story'*)

As we have seen above, trinitarianism denies that there could be a risk to Christ's eternal existence. Turner though disagreed with this reasoning. He said that in order to save "some", the risk had to exist. Turner therefore was not speaking as a trinitarian. Later that same year, he again spoke of the risk taken in the plan of redemption

“Thus our Redeemer, at the risk of His own eternal existence, put a new and wondrous meaning into His memorial of the Sabbath. All through the long, long night of sin it was to be man's assurance and hope.” (*Lionel H. Turner, Australian Signs of the Times, November 16th 1931, ‘God’s Code Requires a Rest Day: Has He defined it?’*)

As the years progressed, even though trinitarian theology was being introduced amongst SDA's, Turner had not changed his views. We know this because 45 years later, with reference to Christ, he made this comment (Dr Turner was now in his 70's)

“At His baptism, He had challenged the powers of evil and the spectre of death. And now, less than four years later, in a gesture whose heroism no earthly courage had matched, He wagered His eternal existence against the possibility of restoring to man the primeval character of life with day succeeding day for ever.” (*Dr L. Turner, Signs of the Times. August, 1976, ‘A Time to Remember’*)

It is quite apparent that Dr Turner was not a trinitarian such as Dr Canale and Max Hatton etc (see pages 26-33).

In 1949, E. F. Hackman (1898-1951), who from 1947 until the year of his death had been the President of the Inter-American Division (he had also been President of the South-East Californian Conference 1934-1940, also Northern Californian Conference President 1940-1943, also Southern Union President 1943-47), wrote the following

“We badly need additional funds with which to make new advances into the kingdom of darkness; but our most outstanding need is to have that spirit of sacrifice in our hearts which led our blessed Lord to risk His eternal existence and finally yield up His life for our salvation. If we were all possessed of this one essential thing, it would answer all our problems over night.” (*E. F. Hackman, Inter-American Messenger, November 1949, ‘Love Gives All’*)

Hackman is pointing out that to regain the spirit of sacrifice amongst us, as shown in the life of Jesus, we need to realise that Christ, in order to provide for our salvation, did “risk His eternal existence”. Hackman said that if Christians realised this, “it would answer all our problems over night”. In 1949, Hackman was a high-profile minister. He was not though, speaking as a trinitarian.

Dr Lionel Turner, E. F. Hackman, A. G. Daniells and R. A. Underwood were all very prominent SDA's. They all spoke of the risk taken by God and Christ in redeeming mankind from sin. These leaders therefore were all non-trinitarian. None of them would have believed what the present SDA Church is teaching (that there was no risk).

In my research I did come across quite a number of other statements that spoke of the risk that Christ took in becoming incarnate, but space permits only the following to be quoted. The first is from W. H. Branson who was then the GC vice-president who later became President

“It is a most wonderful thought to me, that the Creator of this world so loved man that He risked all heaven to save him; ...” (*W. H. Branson, Inter-American Division Messenger, June 1943, ‘The New Covenant Part one’*)

“In order to make this righteousness available to us, Jesus risked His own existence. Faced with the possibility of failure and eternal loss to Himself, He undertook to live a sinless life in human flesh.” (S. A. Kaplan, *The Ministry*, September 1955, ‘Christ’s Righteousness in a Jewish Tradition’)

“I was a lost sheep, having strayed far away from the fold of the Good Shepherd. Out into the blackness and tempest of the stormy night the Saviour came to seek me. Into the abysmal depths of the yawning chasm He descended, not stopping to consider the return. He risked His life to save me, and that is how I know He loves me.” (Elva Zachrisson, *Signs of the Times*, June 7th 1932, ‘The Incarnate God’)

“No earthly friendship can begin to compare with that which exists between our Elder Brother and those for whom He risked heaven and eternal life.” (M. S. King, *The Lifeboat Magazine*, December 1928, *I Have Found a Friend*)

“Is there in your heart a taint of selfishness or a desire to sacrifice less for the Master? Consider Christ's sacrifice through those hours of suffering. Look upon the cross, and hear that cry of anguish, " My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me? " Look upon the crown of thorns, the riven side, the marred feet, and remember in this Christ risked all for us." (J. L. Shaw, *Review and Herald*, November 21st 1929, ‘Awake to the needs of the hour’)

“It was not crucifixion that took the life of the Son of God. Death from crucifixion was a long, slow process, often taking several days. Jesus died from the weight of your sins and mine, from the tearing anguish of making the decision He did. Never forget that that decision must be measured by the value of the life He risked.” (Our Times, VOP Broadcast, April 1965, ‘Why did Jesus die?’)

“See Him, weak and trembling, bearing His cross on Calvary's hill, cruel nails are driven through His hands and His feet. He hangs on the cross, the suffering Prince of heaven amidst the railing priests and the jeering rabble, alone, forsaken by man and left alone by God, to die, to tread the bitter wine-press alone. And in the endeavor He risked all, He might have failed and "suffered eternal loss." (P. E. Brodersen, Assistant editor, *South American Bulletin*, November 1925, ‘The value of a soul’)

We can see from the above, as Richard Rice pointed out (after showing that certain important SDA's were antagonistic towards the trinity doctrine)

“In fact, C. Mervyn Maxwell concludes that early Adventists were “about as uniform in opposing Trinitarianism as they were in advocating belief in the Second Coming.” (Richard Rice, *Spectrum*, Fall 2013, Volume 41, Issue 4, ‘Adventists Finding Identity in God’)

This cannot be denied. The question that remains for each of us though is this: Who in this debate do we believe to be correct? The trinitarians will deny that by consenting to become incarnate, the divine Son of God took the risk of losing his eternal existence. They will also deny that He gave His life at Calvary. This surely must be a complete denial of the Gospel. It takes away from the divine Son of God all that He risked, also all that He achieved, in becoming incarnate. Early SDA's reasoned far differently than today's trinitarians. There is no comparison between their Godhead beliefs.

The use of the word *trinity* in Seventh-day Adventist literature

This is where many have become confused. This is particularly regarding the actual time when the Seventh-day Adventist Church accepted the doctrine of the trinity as one of its official fundamental beliefs. This is because they regard the employment of the word *trinity*, in our past publications, as referring to the trinity doctrine, when in reality, nothing could be further from the truth. We shall now consider two of the occasions when the word *trinity* was used that has caused confusion.

1: The Spear article

The first positive use of the word *trinity*, when officially explaining our denominational Godhead beliefs, was in a tract that in 1892 we published for the general public. Interestingly it was not a Seventh-day Adventist who had compiled it but a Presbyterian minister. His name was the Rev. Samuel Thayer Spear. It was an article written by him that three years earlier had been published in a prestigious newspaper called *The New York Independent*.

Even though a Presbyterian minister had written the article, the SDA Church regarded it in very high esteem. It was thought of as so closely resembling their own beliefs that it was considered fitting to be given to the public as a tract explaining these beliefs. Permission to do this was requested and granted.

When the article appeared in *The New York Independent*, it carried the title, *The subordination of Christ*. This aptly conveyed the thoughts contained in the article. As Spear explained

“The subordination of Christ, as revealed in the Bible, is not adequately explained by referring it simply to His human nature. It is true that, in that nature, He was a created and dependent being, and in this respect like the race whose nature He assumed; and yet the Bible statement of His subordination extends to His divine as well as his human nature.” (Rev. Samuel T. Spear, D. D., *New York Independent*, November 14th 1889, ‘*The Subordination of Christ*’)

This “subordination of Christ”, in his divine nature, is that which then, in 1892, was generally believed amongst SDA’s. It was believed that in eternity, before anything existed apart from God (before anything was created), He was begotten (brought forth) of God therefore He is fully divine, truly God, and truly the Son of God. This subordination does not mean that Christ is not equal with God, neither does it mean He is less than God. We shall see this in part two.

When Spear’s article was published as a tract for the public, it was re-named *The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity*. Notice it does not say ‘The Doctrine of the Trinity’. The emphasis of the article was on what the *Bible alone* has to say about the persons of the Godhead. The word *Trinity* though would appeal to Christians of other denominations. It would show them what was believed by SDA’s concerning the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (the divine trinity). In the article, no speculation was entertained. As was explained in the *Signs of the Times* when promoting this tract

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

and foolish speculation.” (*Signs of the Times*, 28th May 1894, *Bible Students Library*, No. 90, *The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity*)

It is more than likely that the latter remark was aimed at the speculations of the trinity doctrine. Two years earlier it was said of the same tract

“While there may be minor thoughts in this worthy number which we might wish to express differently, on the whole we believe that it sets forth the Bible doctrine of the trinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit with a devout adherence to the words of Scripture, in the best brief way we ever saw it presented.” (*Signs of the Times*, April 4th 1892, Volume 18, No. 22, page 352)

Note it says that Spear’s article was “a devout adherence to the words of Scripture”, also that the trinity referred to here is “the trinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit”. It is not the trinity doctrine. This is saying two different things. Notice too it says that Spear’s article “sets forth the Bible doctrine of the trinity”; thus it was given this very same title. The article explained what the Bible alone says about the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – which as we noted above, falls short of a trinity doctrine. Very significantly, concerning this tract, Merlin Burt noted in 1996

“The title, *Bible Doctrine of the Trinity*, implied that the work would be sympathetic to the doctrine of the trinity. Upon reading the tract, one finds almost nothing which nineteenth-century Adventists would have found objectionable.” (*Merlin Burt, ‘Demise of Semi-Arianism and anti-trinitarianism in Adventist Theology, 1888-1957’, pages 5-6, December 1996*)

Burt is pointing out the fact that Spear’s article falls short of a trinity doctrine. This is one of the reasons why it was published as a tract for the public explaining the beliefs of SDA’s. These beliefs were of course, at that time, non-trinitarian.

Along with Burt, certain of our theologians have correctly recognised that the article falls short of a trinity doctrine. One of them is Gerhard Pfandl, who, as Associate Director of the SDA Biblical Research Institute, noted when explaining the history of the trinity doctrine among SDA’s

“Although this pamphlet was certainly an improvement on previous positions it still fell short of the true picture of the Trinity.” (*Gerhard Pfandl research paper ‘The Doctrine of the Trinity among Adventists’, page 4 June 1999*)

This I would say is what Spear intended it to do. This is also the reason why his article was acceptable to explain the non-trinitarian Godhead beliefs of SDA’s. It fell short of trinitarianism. Others have drawn the same conclusion.

At the very beginning of his article, Spear had written

“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.” (*Rev. Samuel T. Spear, D. D., published in the New York Independent on November 14th 1889 as ‘The Subordination of Christ’, and by the Pacific Press in 1892 as a tract called ‘The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity’*)

Spear refused to be drawn into speculation concerning the oneness of God as purported by the trinity doctrine, thus it's true to say that his article falls short of trinitarianism. Some may say though that a failure to teach this oneness results in teaching tritheism – a belief in three Gods (as also noted by William Hyde, see pages 29 and 30). This was fully understood by Spear. He addressed this problem by saying

“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*)

This is perfectly correct. Nothing is revealed in the Bible as to how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit exist together. All that we have is revelation concerning the three individual divine personages themselves. To go further than this would necessitate adding speculation to what the Bible reveals which would only be, when all is said and done, intellectual philosophy. Hence Spear closes his article with this thought

“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 engulfs them in a confusion of their own creation. What they need is to believe more and speculate less.” (*Ibid*)

Any trinity doctrine, whatever version it is, must “speculate outside of the Bible” (see pages 13-22). This is because it must speculate about how all three persons have their existence together as the ‘one God’ – which the Scriptures are totally silent about.

It is interesting that when Spear’s article was made into a tract, certain of the wording was removed. This is where he had written (the strikethrough was removed)

“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*)

It appears that the SDA Church did not wish to give the impression that their Godhead (trinity) belief was the same as what was generally believed by Christianity – which would have been as in the orthodox (traditional) trinity doctrine. Take note that Spear said that what he had written was the “basis” for the doctrine of the “*tri-une God, which has so long been the faith of the Christian Church*”. He did not say what he had written was the doctrine of the “*tri-une God, which has so long been the faith of the Christian Church*”. By saying “basis”, Spear was repeating the claims of the trinitarians. They say that whilst the doctrine of the trinity cannot be found in Scripture, its basic elements are present. To have a trinity doctrine though, speculation needs to be added to what the Scriptures reveal. We have seen this above (see pages 13-22).

Spear’s article was free from all trinitarian speculation. This is one reason why SDA’s regarded it as aptly representing their beliefs. It was true to Scripture therefore non-trinitarian. As a tract, it was advertised throughout our various publications for at least 20 years. This reveals the value that SDA’s placed upon it. The entirety of Spear’s article, also how the SDA church regarded it, can be read here

[The Spear article](#)

Whilst we are on the subject of Spear’s article: It is interesting that in 1948 at the age

of 72, Milian Lauritz Andreasen, a very high-profile SDA minister, gave a chapel talk at Loma Linda. In this talk he said

“I remember how astonished we were when *Desire of Ages* was first published, for it contained some things that we considered unbelievable, among others the doctrine of the Trinity which was not then generally accepted by the Adventists. (M. L. Andreasen, *Chapel Talk, Loma Linda, California, November 30th 1948*)”

Andreasen did not get baptised until his late teens (1894). He first attended Battle Creek School – when training for the ministry - in 1899. This was the year following the publication of *Desire of Ages* (1898). In other words, when this book was first published, Andreasen was not in the ministry. He was working in a young people’s home just outside Omaha.

Andreasen’s words, by the trinitarians, are often presented in such a way as to give the idea that the ministry of the SDA Church were ‘shook up’ when the *Desire of Ages* was published. This is because, as Andreasen had said, in this book was found the doctrine of the trinity – which at that time (1898), was not a belief generally held by SDA’s. When Andreasen said in his testimony “we” though, he could not have been identifying himself with the ministry. By then (1898), he had not even gone to college in order to train for the ministry. This means that when the *Desire of Ages* was published, the vast majority of the ministry would not even have heard of him. This though is not what I want to bring to your attention.

What I want to bring to your attention is that in the same year as his chapel talk (1948), Andreasen had a book published called *The Book of Hebrews*. This is important because in it, in its entirety, he included Samuel Spear’s article *The Subordination of Christ*, which, as we have seen, falls far short of a trinity doctrine. As we noted, Spear avoided speculating about the ontological relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, thus it was devoid of trinity oneness as depicted by the trinity doctrine. So when Andreasen said that the *Desire of Ages* contained the trinity doctrine, he would not have been using the word *trinity* as it is used by trinitarian theologians (see pages 10-13). His concept of the trinity would have been as in Spear’s article - which as Gerhard Pfandl said “fell short of the true picture of the Trinity” (see page 51 above). This again shows we need to be careful when we see the word *trinity* used in SDA literature. It did not always mean as in the doctrine of the trinity.

I do have other thoughts about Andreasen’s chapel talk but it would be too much to detail here.

2: The Wilcox ‘divine trinity’ statement of 1913

There is a great deal of confusion over this statement. It was published in the Review and Herald in 1913. This was when its editor, F. M. Wilcox, wrote

“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’)

First and foremost - and I believe that most who are in a position of authority in the church would agree with me - this statement by Wilcox was not an official declaration, by our church, of our fundamental beliefs. In other words, this was not ‘the church at large’ saying what constituted the official fundamental beliefs of Seventh-day Adventism. In fact up to then (1913), we did not even have a list of officially voted fundamental beliefs. We simply had a list of principles, published in our Yearbook in certain years (as shown later on page 63), which were said to be the consensus of beliefs held by us throughout the world as a people. As near as they could be, these were the ‘official’ beliefs of SDA’s. These beliefs of course did not constitute a trinity doctrine; neither did they contain the word *trinity*. They did not even include a separate belief for the Holy Spirit.

The list of beliefs, as written by Wilcox, bore no resemblance to the official list in our Yearbook. Instead of 28 beliefs, as in the Yearbook, Wilcox listed only 15 – and even these were not the same as in the Yearbook. For reasons best known to himself, Wilcox made no mention (as it did in the Yearbook) of the three angel’s messages of Revelation 14, the 2300 days of Daniel chapter 8, 1844 and the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary (the investigative judgment etc), the state of the dead; neither did he mention it was the Papacy that had thought to change God’s times and laws. Wilcox’s list was a product of his own imagination. There is no way it could be said to be official. He just made it up himself.

Wilcox said that what he had listed were the “[the cardinal features of the faith](#)” held by SDA’s. It is apparent he did not count those things he had omitted as being amongst those “[cardinal features](#)”. Many SDA’s would have disagreed with him.

Note too, because of what Wilcox had written in the first line, that this list of beliefs was aimed at non-Seventh-day Adventists who, in the main, if they were already Christians, would probably have been trinitarian. The words “[Seventh-day Adventists believe...In the divine Trinity](#)” would have made a very good impression upon them. Seeing that Wilcox had omitted so many of our very important doctrines, one is left to wonder if this list was meant to be a public relations exercise. If it was, it would be in line with that edition of the Review. This is because its main thrust was on overseas missionary work.

Wilcox was the editor of the *Review and Herald*. This means that when making this statement he had ‘carte blanche’ to say what he wanted to say. Even if someone objected to what he had written it would be far too late. It would already have been in print. I believe too it should go without saying that just because someone, even an editor, makes a pronouncement in the Review and Herald (or in any other of our denominational publications), this should not be accepted as an official fundamental belief of our denomination.

Having said that, I would ask you to take note of the exact wording used by Wilcox. He said that what he had listed were the “[cardinal features](#)” of the faith of the SDA Church. He did not refer to his list as the ‘Fundamental Principles’ of SDA’s (as it said in the Yearbook); thus no one could accuse him of re-writing these principles. His list

was just a 'cut down version' explaining certain aspects of our faith.

Wilcox said that SDA's believe in "the divine Trinity", also that "This trinity consists" of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He did not say that SDA's believed in the doctrine of the trinity, neither did he say that the 'one God' is an inseparable trinity of divine persons – which is what SDA's are teaching today (see pages 11-12). This again is saying two entirely different things. Wilcox chose his words very carefully.

Theologians would say that Wilcox's statement fails to constitute a trinity doctrine. He could have substituted the word *Godhead* for *trinity*, and it still would have said the same (that there are three persons of the Godhead). This though would not have constituted a trinity doctrine.

Whether Wilcox intended it to look as though we were a trinitarian denomination (believing the doctrine of the trinity) is not for me to say. What we do know is that Ellen White, by then, had clearly stated that the Holy Spirit is a person. This gave Wilcox, or anyone else for that matter, good reason to say that SDA's believed in "the divine Trinity" – which is what Wilcox wrote.

Some have pointed out that immediately preceding his article, Wilcox, as editor of the *Review and Herald*, had chosen to display certain paragraphs from the chapter *Go Teach all Nations* found in Ellen White's *Desire of Ages*. Wilcox though did not give any indication that these paragraphs were from her book, thus it looks as though it is an article written by her when it was not (at least not as quoted in this issue of the *Review and Herald*). It was simply a compilation of selected paragraphs taken from a chapter in *Desire of Ages*. Many paragraphs were also omitted (as written in *Desire of Ages*) but there was no indication that this had been done either. This was very poor scholarship, especially for an editor.

These paragraphs (from *Go Teach all Nations*) did fall into line with the foreign missions emphasis of this *Review*. As Knox, the GC treasurer (also Vice-President to the North American Division), explained (this was under the heading of *To the Public*)

"All the proceeds derived from the distribution of this issue are dedicated to foreign missions. The distributors who carry them with official solicitors' cards are authorized to solicit donations in behalf of the Seventh-day Adventist Mission Board; and we assure the donors that the funds contributed to such persons will be transmitted through the regular denominational agencies to the treasurer of the Mission Board." (*W. T. Knox, Ibid, 'To the Public'*).

It has been suggested that by quoting these various paragraphs, Wilcox was attempting to make it look as though Ellen White approved of what he had written. We are left to conjecture about that one. What we do know is that in this extract, Ellen White had quoted Matthew 28:19 (the commission of Christ to His disciples) which says

"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost".

This of course does tie in with Wilcox's words "Seventh-day Adventists believe... In the divine Trinity" (see above).

Over 20 years later, Wilcox helped to formulate a set of beliefs that the General Conference declared to be the official beliefs of the SDA Church. As we shall see later though, what was said about the Godhead, in those beliefs, was certainly not trinitarian. Wilcox therefore could not have been saying over 20 years earlier (in 1913) that one of the cardinal features of the SDA was the doctrine of the trinity – even if it did look as though this is what he was saying. He was simply saying that SDA's believed in three persons of the Godhead – which is very true, but this does not constitute a trinity doctrine. It never has done: neither will it ever do so. The inseparable oneness, as the one God, portrayed by the doctrine of the trinity, is missing. Unless this is included, there is no doctrine of the trinity.

We noted above that Judson Washburn, in 1939, wrote a letter to the General Conference saying that the trinity doctrine was “seeking” to find its way into the teachings of the SDA Church (see page 24-26). It seems reasonable to assume therefore that he did not regard Wilcox's 1913 statement (of 26 years earlier) as saying that SDA's held the trinity doctrine as one of its fundamental beliefs. The same could be said of Washburn's views of the tract *The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity* (see pages 50-53). He could not he have regarded it as promoting the trinity doctrine. This tract was first published in 1892. This was 47 years before he wrote his letter to the General Conference.

If Washburn had considered either of these (Wilcox's 1913 *divine trinity* statement, or the tract *The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity*) as saying that SDA's held the trinity doctrine as one of their official beliefs, then why did he say in 1939 that the trinity doctrine was “seeking” to find its way into the message of the SDA Church? As Merlin Burt concluded (see page 3), the trinity doctrine did not become normative in Seventh-day Adventism until the 1950's, - and remember, it did not even get voted in until 1980. Certainly it was not a fundamental belief of SDA's in 1913.

What I find very interesting is that LeRoy Froom, who did so much by way of promoting the trinity doctrine, did not, in his voluminous work *Movement of Destiny*, even mention Wilcox's 1913 trinity statement. It does not seem therefore that he regarded it with any significance – which is hardly surprising. This should tell us a great deal.

After the death of Ellen White (The 1919 Bible Conference)

Shortly following the death of Ellen White, the General Conference Committee convened a Bible Conference. At this conference, two of the main subjects considered were *The Person of Christ* and *The Eastern Question* (the king of the north etc.). Various other areas of prophecy were also considered – as were the two covenants. It was also decided that after this conference there would be a Bible and History Teacher's Council.

A number of attempts had been made to hold this conference, but it was on May 1st 1919 that the General Conference Committee took an action that led to it being held during the summer of that year. The minutes for that day read

“That a Bible Conference be held at an early date for prayerful study of the Word, the following committee being asked to recommend the date, topics for study, and men to give consideration to topics named: W. W. Prescott, M C Wilcox, J L Shaw, W E Howell, F M Wilcox.” (*General Conference Committee minutes, May 1st 1919, page 273, 'Bible Conference'*)

Three days later it was decided that this conference should run from July 1st to 21st although including the Bible and History Teachers Council it ran until August 1st. At the latter meeting, the writings of Ellen White were discussed.

After several suggestions were made as to where these meetings should be held, it was decided on May 23rd (less than 6 weeks before the conference was to begin) that the best place would be Takoma Park.

Only those holding high-ranking positions were permitted to attend. These were such as the members of the General Conference Committee, Bible and history teachers of SDA schools and colleges, also leading editors of our publishing houses etc. These delegates were 'hand-picked' to attend. No one, not even those of the ministry, could attend without an invitation.

Understandably, fears were registered over this council – which probably, in the main, were from the ministry. In his opening remarks, the chairman of the conference, namely A. G. Daniells (who was then the GC President), addressed himself to these fears. After explaining it was only invitees who were allowed to attend, he said

“Another thing is that a good many people feel very much afraid of what we are going to do. They wonder if we are going to fix up a creed for them to subscribe to. They are much disturbed about it.” (A. G. Daniells. *The 1919 Bible Conference, Takoma Park, July 1st 1919, page 11*)

This council has been referred to as a 'secret' Bible council. This is not only because a 'select body' of people were permitted to attend but also because at the end of the conference, it was decided by the delegates that the discussions were not to be made public. This is the reason why the stenographer's reports of the discussions were immediately confined to the archives of the SDA Church. They were not 'discovered' until 1974 – which was 55 years after the conference had taken place.

In 1979, Robert Olson (1920-2013), as Director of the Ellen White Estate (1978-1990), reported

“In 1974, at the urging of Don Mansell, who had somehow learned of the 1919 Conference, Dr Donald Yost sought for and found the detailed stenographic report of the proceedings.” (Robert W. Olson, *The 1919 Bible Conference and Bible And History Teachers' Council*, pages 3-4, Published by the White Estate, September 24th 1979)

Unfortunately, not everything said at the conference was recorded. Olsen explained (after saying that certain of the discussions at the Teacher's Council were not considered important enough to be willed to posterity)

“Nor were all the deliberations of the Bible Conference reported. For example, at one point the stenographer wrote, "Elder Daniells said for us not to transcribe the rest of this meeting, which would take over 60 pages of typewriting" (p. 2142). Again, there is a notation, "Elder Wilcox continues the reading of his paper" (p. 726), but his paper failed to find its way into the record.

On page 1067 the comment is made that B. G. Wilkinson's paper "is not in shape to be copied yet." It does not appear in the minutes of the meeting. On page 275,

there is a note to the effect that the first part of C. M. Sorenson's lecture on the Eastern Question was not reported "by direction of the chairman." These and other similar notations inform us that the records of the 1919 Bible Conference and Teachers' Council, though voluminous, are not complete." (*Robert W. Olson, The 1919 Bible Conference and Bible And History Teachers' Council*, pages 3-4, Published by the White Estate, September 24th 1979)

A synopsis of the main discussions concerning Christ can be found in sections 35 and 36 at the following link. It would be far too much to detail here.

Sections 35 & 36 - The 'Secret' 1919 Bible Conference (parts 1 & 2)

When the above two sections are read, it will be seen that some of these high-ranking delegates were saying that what we, as a church, had been teaching about Christ during the entire time of Ellen White's ministry, was error (false doctrine). These leaders were 'pushing' for a trinitarian view of Christ. As we shall see later though, this did not have an immediate effect. We know this because for decades following the conference, the church continued to teach what it had always taught. This was that in eternity, before anything was created, Christ was begotten (brought forth) of God therefore He is fully divine and truly the Son of God. This is in direct opposition to what the present SDA Church is teaching. Today, through its various publications (this is in support of their version of the trinity doctrine), it teaches that Christ is only a metaphorical Son. In other words, according to the current trinitarian theology of the SDA Church, Christ is only role-playing (acting out) the part of a son. We shall speak more of this in part two of this article.

One well-known minister – namely L. L. Caviness (then Associate Editor of the Review and Herald) – had arrived late at the conference. In response to what he had managed to hear though, he made this comment

"I missed a good deal of this discussion and I do not know whether the idea is that we are to accept the so-called Trinitarian doctrine or not". (*L. L. Caviness, Notes on the discussions of the 1919 Bible Conference and Teachers Meeting held at Takoma Park in Washington D.C. July 6th, page 56*)

Caviness, even though he had missed much of the discussions, had quickly come to the realisation that attempts were being made, by some, to persuade the delegates to depict Christ as in the trinity doctrine.

Here then we can see clearly that at the time of this conference (1919), the SDA Church was still very much a non-trinitarian denomination. This was even though there were now very strong suggestions that a change was necessary. Notice how Caviness referred to the trinity doctrine as "[the so-called Trinitarian doctrine](#)". It appears that he did not regard it with much respect. It should go without saying that if the SDA Church had then held the doctrine of the trinity as one of their beliefs, there would have been no need to change what was believed about Christ. This was now 6 years after F. M. Wilcox had made his "divine Trinity" statement in the Review and Herald of 9th October 1913 (see page 53). Needless to say, SDA's were not then, in 1913, trinitarians.

Leon Leslie Caviness (1884-1955), amongst other positions he had held, taught languages at Union College (1906-1913). He was also was professor of Greek at Washington Missionary Seminary (1913-1915), and, from 1931 until his retirement in

1952, professor of Biblical languages at Pacific Union College. He had also been Sabbath School and educational secretary of the European Division (1924-1928), also of the Southern European Division (1928-1932). He was a very well known, also very well respected, minister.

Caviness continued to explain why he could not accept the trinitarian view of Christ, after which the stenographer's reported

"Elder Daniells here made some suggestions as to the delegates not becoming uneasy because we are studying a subject that we cannot comprehend. He asked that these be not transcribed." (*A. G. Daniells, Ibid, page 58*)

We are left to wonder what Daniells had said to the delegates (in response to the remarks of Caviness) but because he did not allow the stenographers to record his words we shall never know. What we do know is that as the afternoon's discussions drew to a close, the President said to those in attendance

"Perhaps we have discussed this as long as we need to. We are not going to take a vote on Trinitarianism or Arianism, but we can think". Let us go on with the study. (*A. G. Daniells, Ibid, page 67*)

The word "[Arianism](#)", used here by Daniells, is very misleading. It can mean all sorts of different things. It is normally based upon the misconception that Arius, a 4th century priest, believed that Christ, rather than a divine person, was 'a creature' created by God. In the main, 'Arianism' is an expression used to stigmatise all those who do not accept the divinity of Christ as expressed in the trinity doctrine. It is quite possible that this is how Daniells used it here (as a stigmatisation). What we do know is that SDA's did not believe that Christ was a created being. They believed and taught He was the divine Son of God, begotten (brought forth) of God in eternity, therefore He was God.

Here we can see that whilst Daniells tried to persuade the delegates it was not the intention of the conference to take a vote either way ("[Trinitarianism or Arianism](#)"), it was, so he said, something to think about for the future.

As it was, no matter what they had voted it would not have made any difference. This is because the beliefs of SDA's were not, at that time, determined by a vote. This is whether it was a vote by the General Conference committee, the delegates at a General Conference session, the ministry, or anyone else. This 'voting in' of beliefs would not take place for another 27 years (1946). This was when for the very first time in our denominational history, our beliefs were voted upon at a General Conference session. This was when it was decided that the Church Manual, which listed those beliefs, could not be changed except at a General Conference session

A little later Daniells added

"Now we will go on. Now let's not get a bit nervous or scared." (*Ibid*)

So what was it that Daniells was telling the delegates not to get scared or nervous about? His next words reveal the answer. Realising that amongst the delegates, over this issue, there were a mixture of feelings he said

"Don't let the conservatives think that something is going to happen, and the

progressives get alarmed for the fear that it won't happen." (*Ibid*)

We can see from what Daniells said that there were those who wanted change in respect to what we, as a denomination, then taught about Christ. At the same time there were others who resisted the change. This will be discussed more fully in part two of this study. Take note that the General Conference Committee did not convene this meeting until after Ellen White had died. We must ask: is this significant?

It is quite possible that neither Daniells, nor anyone else for that matter, was pushing for a trinity doctrine as such, at least not as explained by our present-day theologians (see pages 11-12). They were more concerned with simply changing our denominational views concerning the pre-existence of Christ. Daniells, two years before the conference, when referring to how grateful we should be concerning what God has done for us through His Son, had made this comment (we noted this above)

"In undertaking to redeem what was lost at the fall, the Son of God took the fearful risk of losing his own existence forever. Inspiration plainly declares that when Christ came to this world, he took upon himself man's fallen nature, with all its liabilities. Rom. 8 : 3 ; Heb. 2 :16-18 ; 4 :15. In this he accepted the fearful risk of possible failure. Had he failed, he, with man, would have been lost forever. This thought is almost overwhelming. It seems incredible that Heaven would condescend to purchase sinful, ungrateful man at such an infinite price." (A. G. Daniells, *The Church Officers' Gazette*, October 1917)

No true trinitarian would believe such a thing. Trinitarianism denies that there could possibly be a risk to Christ's existence (see pages 24-35). We noted on pages 44-49 that it was generally believed amongst SDA's, even during the decades after this Bible Conference, that this risk had existed. From the above therefore, we know that up to the time of this Bible Conference (1919), the SDA Church was not trinitarian. We also know that for decades to come, its theology was still in opposition to the trinity doctrine. Referring to the time period up to the 1930's, Merlin Burt made the following remark

"The use of the word "Trinity" in describing God continued to be avoided in print except for rare exceptions." (Merlin Burt, *History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on the Trinity*, *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 2006)

Notice Burt said that the word *trinity* "continued" to be avoided – meaning that this 'avoiding' had been ongoing. This was even in the 1930's. This is not the action of a denomination that has had the trinity doctrine as one of its fundamental beliefs for a length of time. Burt also noted

"Doctrinal summaries were carefully avoided during the first decades of the twentieth century, due in part to conflict on the Trinity." (Merlin Burt, *The Trinity in Seventh-day Adventist History*, 2006)

No one could possibly conclude from this, that the trinity doctrine, by the 1930's, was a fundamental belief of the SDA Church. As we shall see later (on page 76), the General Conference, in 1936, in a series of studies on all our major points of belief, declared to the world the 'official' beliefs of SDA's. In these studies, the beliefs concerning the Godhead could only be described as non-trinitarian. In fact, these beliefs were the very same beliefs as held by SDA's during the time of Ellen White's ministry. In this respect, nothing had changed.

Early statements of beliefs

Up to the time of Ellen White's death (1915), the SDA Church did not have a church manual. Over the years, the possibility of having one had been discussed, but was rejected on the grounds that 'rules and regulations' such as normally found in church manuals would restrict the moving (leading) of the Holy Spirit. There was also the concern that a church manual would eventually become a creed. At the 1861 General Conference session, J. N. Loughborough made the following comment. This was when fears were expressed by some about having organised churches

"I am still of the opinion I advanced sometime since through the *Review*: The first step of apostasy is to set up a creed, telling us what we shall believe. The second is, to make that creed a test of fellowship. The third is to try members by that creed. The fourth to denounce as heretics those who do not believe that creed. And, fifth, to commence persecution against such. I plead that we are not patterning after the churches in any unwarrantable sense, in the step proposed." (*J. N. Loughborough, Review and Herald, October 8th 1861, 'Doings of the Battle Creek General Conference, October 1861'*)

A great deal of effort was put into discussing the possibility of having a church manual. As it says in the book *Issues: The Seventh-day Adventist Church and Certain Private Ministries*

"The General Conference of 1882 had appointed a committee to prepare a church manual, suggesting that it first be published serially for discussion and criticism. As a result, 18 articles appeared in the *Review and Herald* from June 5 to October 9, 1883." (*"Issues: The Seventh-day Adventist Church and Certain Private Ministries, page 40, Chapter 3, 'Historic Adventism – Ancient Landmarks and the Present Truth'*)

After months of setting out those things that a church manual would contain, it was brought before the delegates at the 1883 General Conference session. This was to decide whether the SDA Church should have one or not. Here is what the minutes of that conference reveal was advised by the committee that was set up to deal with this possibility

"It is the unanimous judgment of the committee, that it would not be advisable to have a Church Manual. We consider it unnecessary because we have already surmounted the greatest difficulties connected with church organization without one; and perfect harmony exists among us on this subject. It would seem to many like a step toward the formation of a creed, or a discipline, other than the Bible, something we have always been opposed to as a denomination. If we had one, we fear many, especially those commencing to preach, would study it to obtain guidance in religious matters, rather than to seek for it in the Bible, and from the leadings of the Spirit of God, which would tend to their hindrance in genuine religious experience and in knowledge of the mind of the Spirit. It was in taking similar steps that other bodies of Christians first began to lose their simplicity and become formal and spiritually lifeless. Why should we imitate them? The committee feel, in short, that our tendency should be in the direction of simplicity and close conformity to the Bible, rather than in elaborately defining every point in church management and church ordinances." (*Minutes of the 1883 General Conference Session, Battle Creek, 1883*)

The minutes then recorded

“On motion, this report with reference to the church manual was accepted.” (*Ibid*)

So it was, at the 1883 General Conference session, the decision was made that Seventh-day Adventists should not have a church manual. Following this it was voted that the General Conference President, namely G. I. Butler, “be requested to write an article for the Review, explaining the action of the Conference” (see 1883 GC minutes). This the President did. You can read his article at the following link

No Church Manual

Butler concluded his article by saying

“Thus far we have got along well with our simple organization without a manual. Union prevails throughout the body. The difficulties before us, so far as organization is concerned, are far less than those we have had in the past. We have preserved simplicity, and have prospered in so doing. It is best to let well enough alone. For these and other reasons, the church manual was rejected. It is probable it will never be brought forward again.” (*G. I. Butler, Review and Herald, November 27th 1883, ‘No Church Manual’*)

Eventually, the SDA Church did produce a church manual. It was first published almost 50 years later in 1932 – 17 years after the death of Ellen White.

Although throughout the entire time period of Ellen White's ministry (1844-1915) we did not have a church manual, we did agree to have a Yearbook. This had been voted at the 1882 General Conference session held at Rome (December 7-19th). This was the first General Conference session held outside of Michigan. Since 1883, except for the years 1895-1903 (when the information generally found in the Yearbook was published in the General Conference Bulletin), a Yearbook has been published every year.

Prior to 1946, the beliefs found in those Yearbooks, also eventually in church manuals, were never, as they are today, ‘voted in’ at a General Conference session. This all changed though in 1946. This was when at that year's General Conference session, it was voted that the Church Manual, which did include a list of those beliefs, could only be changed by a vote at a General Conference session. This automatically prohibited any change to the beliefs listed in the manual.

In the bulletin of the 1950 General Conference session held at San Francisco, it was reported that

“Upon recommendation of the committee that has been appointed to revise the Church Manual, and in harmony with the action of the 1946 Session of the General Conference that no change is to be made in the statement of Fundamental Beliefs as appears in the Church Manual except by approval of a session of the General Conference” (*Review and Herald, July 23rd 1950, Proceedings of the General Conference, ‘Fifteenth meeting, July 20th 1950*)

So it was, in 1950, that it was officially voted that the fundamental beliefs listed in our Church Manual could only be changed at a duly called General Conference session.

During the time period of Ellen White's ministry, the beliefs of SDA's, in certain years, were published in the Yearbook. These beliefs were called *Fundamental Principles*. Important to note is the preamble to this list of beliefs. It said (under the heading of *Fundamental Principles of Seventh-day Adventists*)

"Seventh-day Adventists have no creed but the Bible; but they hold to certain well-defined points of faith, for which they feel prepared to give a reason " to every man that asketh " them. The following propositions may be taken as a summary of the principal features of their religious faith, upon which there is, so far as is known, entire unanimity throughout the body." (*The 1914 yearbook of Seventh-day Adventists*, page 293)

These beliefs had not been 'voted in'. They were presented in the Yearbook, also in other places, as a consensus of beliefs held by SDA's throughout the world. Note it says that as far is known, these beliefs were held with "entire unanimity throughout the body". Note too they are referred to as "certain well-defined points of faith".

There then followed a list of these beliefs, the first two of which read

1. That there is one God, a personal, spiritual being, the Creator of all things, omnipotent, omniscient, and eternal; infinite in wisdom, holiness, justice, goodness, truth, and mercy; unchangeable, and everywhere present by his representative, the Holy Spirit. Ps. 139:7
2. That there is one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Eternal Father, the one by whom he created all things, and by whom they do consist; ..." (*Ibid*)

This list of beliefs did not contain a trinity doctrine; neither did it contain the word *trinity*. There was no separate belief either for the Holy Spirit although it did say, in belief No. 1, that God was everywhere present by the Holy Spirit.

These Godhead beliefs, as listed here, appeared in the Yearbook for the first time in 1889. This was the year after the famous Minneapolis General Conference session (1888). Previously they had appeared in a tract for the public. This tract was called, *A Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by the Seventh-day Adventists*. Uriah Smith had written out these beliefs. They had also appeared three times in the *Signs of the Times* (June 4th 1874, January 28th 1875, February 21st 1878), the *Review and Herald* twice (November 24th 1874, August 22nd 1912), the *Gospel Sickle* (April 1st 1888) and the *British Present Truth* (August 16th 1888).

After being listed in the 1889 Yearbook, these beliefs were not listed again, in a Yearbook, until the 1905 edition. They were also published in each edition from 1907 to 1914. The latter is the final time they appeared. This was the edition prior to Ellen White's death (1915). Never once though, in all the 42 years of the publication of these beliefs (1872-1914) did Ellen White say that they were error. Never, either, did she say they should be changed. In 1912 they were published in the *Review and Herald*. This was when F. M. Wilcox was its editor.

From 1915 (the year Ellen White died) through to 1931, there was no list of beliefs published in our Yearbooks. In that latter year though, F. M. Wilcox, still then editor of the *Review and Herald*, put together a newly formed set of beliefs. These were included in the 1931 yearbook. They were also listed in our very first Church Manual

(1932). We shall speak more of this later.

During the time of Ellen White's ministry (1844-1915), SDA's, in their declared beliefs, would go no further than what is revealed in the Bible. In the *New York Indicator* in 1907 (this was when advertising the coming camp meeting to be held at Rochester later that month) there was an article explaining who SDA's were and what they believed. Under the heading *The Bible our Creed* it said

"The people at the camp have no creed but the Bible. That book they believe to be the word of God, that what the Bible says God says, and what God says is so. They believe the Scriptures teach that there is one God, a personal, spiritual being, who is the Creator of all things; that there is one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Eternal Father, the one by whom He created all things." (*The New York Indicator, August 21st 1907, 'Who we are'*)

The same was published the next year. Again this was when advertising the annual camp meeting. This one was held at Norwich. The article humorously began (this was under the heading of "To the Citizens of Norwich")

"Have you heard of the strange; erroneous,, and dangerous doctrines held by Seventh-day Adventists? Come and listen for yourself to the evening sermons and lectures which will be a setting forth by able speakers of the fundamental doctrines of this people. Have you been advised not to attend? Remember that prejudice is like a cork in a bottle. It lets nothing out, it lets nothing in. Remove the cork, and allow what you have that is good, pure, and true to flow out and be a blessing to other lives, and be open to receive light-and truth from every source." (*The New York Indicator, September 2nd 1908, 'To the Citizens of Norwich'*)

Even in these early decades of the 1900's, Seventh-day Adventists would still not go beyond what God has revealed in Scripture. They still taught, as it says above, that "there is one God, a personal, spiritual being, who is the Creator of all things; that there is one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Eternal Father, the one by whom He created all things". This far they went, but no further.

Wilcox and the 1931 statement of beliefs

Another statement that has caused confusion – which again was formulated by F. M. Wilcox – is the 1931 statement of beliefs. Here it is

"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. 3." (*The 1931 Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual, page 377, Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists'*)

This is almost word for word the same as Wilcox's 1913 Review and Herald statement (see pages 53-56), and it still does not constitute a trinity doctrine. This is even though the word *Trinity* is used.

In Christian theology, the word *trinity* conveys the idea of an indivisible unity of three divine persons who together comprise *the one God*. We have seen this above (see pages 11-12). The word *Godhead* has no such connotation. It simply means pertaining to divinity. It is derived from the old English word 'Godhood', meaning, that which can quite rightly be termed God. It has nothing to do with a unity of three persons. In fact it has nothing to do with any kind of unity. That particular meaning is totally absent from it. At the very best, Wilcox's statement is the confession of a three-person Godhead. This is because it lacks an explanation of the oneness of God as in the trinity doctrine.

This statement, prior to being put into the 1931 Yearbook, was not, by Wilcox or anyone else, submitted for church approval: neither was it voted upon by an official body of SDA's. Without seeking any kind of official approval, Wilcox had it inserted into the Yearbook. It was therefore, as was his '1913 trinity statement' (see pages 53-56 above), unofficial. In an article explaining the development of SDA Godhead beliefs, Lawrence Geraty describes what happened

"On December 29 of that year [1930], the General Conference Committee "voted, that the chair [C. H. Watson, the president of the General Conference] appoint a committee of which he shall be a member, to prepare such a statement for publication in the Year Book." Watson appointed M. E. Kern, associate secretary of the General Conference, E. R. Palmer, general manager of the Review and Herald Publishing Association, and F. M. Wilcox, editor of the *Review and Herald*. Wilcox was assigned the task of drafting the statement. The 22 fundamental beliefs that the committee reported were never officially discussed, approved, voted, or formally adopted." (Lawrence Geraty, *Spectrum*, July 1980, 'A new statement of beliefs')

Lawrence Geraty, as a member of the Andrews University Seminary faculty, participated in the original phrasing of the 1980 new statement of beliefs (prior to it being given to the attending delegates). He continued in his article by quoting Gottfried Oosterwal (the footnote refers to this as written in an unpublished paper called *The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Mission: 1919-1979*)

"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." (*Ibid*)

Notice it says here that "Elder Wilcox and his group of four" realised that neither the General Conference Committee, nor any other church body, would have accepted the document in the form in which it was written.

Leroy Froom explains the insertion of this "Godhead, or Trinity" belief into our listed Fundamental Beliefs 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')

This 'new statement' had first appeared in the 1931 Yearbook. It was also included in our first Church Manual (1932)

As has been said already, even though this 1931 statement contained the word *Trinity*, it fell far short of a trinity doctrine. This is the reason why it was not acceptable for the 1980 revised beliefs. If it had constituted a trinity doctrine, there would have been no need to replace it. The fact that the 1980 fundamental belief did replace this 1931 fundamental belief is proof that the latter was not considered adequate as a trinity doctrine. By 1980, it had been in our Yearbook, also the Church Manual, for almost 50 years.

At the General Conference Committee meeting of January 14th, 1932, it was voted that the beliefs listed in our Yearbook should be used as a leaflet for the public. Five years later (1937), the same committee voted that a statement should be prepared that could be submitted to the publishers of the various leading encyclopaedias. This was to correct misunderstandings over our beliefs. This statement was to be based upon the 1931 statement. As it says in the minutes

“That the Chair appoint a committee of five to give the matter attention, reviewing a number of statements of the fundamental beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists that have already been written, with a view to making selection of one suitable to submit to the publishers of encyclopedias.” (*General Conference Committee minutes, December 30th 1937*)

It was also suggested that a standing committee be appointed to 'watch out' for “erroneous statements that sometimes appear in books and periodicals concerning Seventh-day Adventists” (see the above minutes). There appears to have been a 'tightening up' regarding statements explaining what was believed by SDA's.

Froom and the 1931 statement of beliefs

In his book *Movement of Destiny*, LeRoy Froom wrote extensively on the 1931 statement of beliefs. In one place he admitted (referring to the 1931 *Godhead or Trinity* belief)

“It would have been well-nigh impossible for a statement of "Fundamental Beliefs," such as was drafted by Wilcox in 1931—and published that year and appearing thereafter annually in the SDA Yearbook, and thenceforth in the official Church Manual—to have been issued a score of years, or even a decade prior to 1931, without strong protest by some.” (LeRoy Froom, *Movement of Destiny*, page 418, *New Epoch of Unity and advance No. 1*)

Froom is admitting that up to the 1920's, this statement of beliefs (regarding the Godhead), as in the 1931 Yearbook, would have been “well-nigh impossible” to have been put into our Yearbooks – at least not without strong protest. It cannot be reasoned

therefore that at that time (1920's), the trinity doctrine was one of the fundamental beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists. If it had been, why would it been "well-nigh impossible" for this 1931 statement of beliefs to have been put into the Yearbook?

This also invalidates the claim made by some that when Wilcox wrote in the Review and Herald of 9th October 1913 that "Seventh-day Adventists believe...In the divine Trinity" (see pages 53-56) that this meant that SDA's held the trinity doctrine as one of their fundamental beliefs. If this were true, then what Froom wrote here would be nonsensical. Froom follows this by saying

"But by 1931 so much had been published in periodical, tract, and book form—taking similar positions on the "Three Persons" of the Godhead, the eternal pre-existence and complete Deity of Christ, and the personality of the Holy Spirit—together with a galaxy of confirmatory Spirit of Prophecy declarations now on record, that 1931 was clearly the propitious time for such a public Statement." (*Ibid*)

Notice here the reasons given for the 1931 statement being put into our Yearbook. It had nothing to do with the trinity doctrine. It was all to do with our beliefs concerning the three persons of the Godhead, particularly Christ and the Holy Spirit. The trinity doctrine was a later development which stemmed from these beliefs. If you remember, Merlin Burt had noted that even up to the 1930's

"The use of the word "Trinity" in describing God continued to be avoided in print except for rare exceptions." (*Merlin Burt, History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on the Trinity, Journal of the Adventist Theological Society, 2006*)

"Doctrinal summaries were carefully avoided during the first decades of the twentieth century, due in part to conflict on the Trinity." (*Merlin Burt, The Trinity in Seventh-day Adventist History, 2006*)

Even those who were opposed to the use of the word *trinity* would probably have been able to 'live with' Wilcox's 1931 *Godhead or Trinity* statement. This is because by then (1931), the fact that Ellen White had said that the Holy Spirit is a person was not only well established but probably accepted by the majority. What argument could there be therefore with those who wished to refer to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as a trinity? Those who wanted to use the word *trinity*, would have said that to argue this point would be to deny what Ellen White had written.

In his book *The Two Republics*, Alonzo T. Jones made this observation (this was concerning the controversy that was taking place at Nicaea in AD 325 when the ontological oneness between God and Christ was discussed)

"There was no dispute about the fact of there being a Trinity, it was about the nature of the Trinity. Both parties believed in precisely the same Trinity, but they differed upon the precise relationship which the Son bears to the Father." (*A. T. Jones, The Two Republics, pages 332 – 333 'Establishment of the Catholic faith'*)

Jones is saying here that everyone at Nicaea believed in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as a "a Trinity" but not all held the same theology concerning how the three were united (ontologically speaking). This is attempted by means of the trinity doctrine. If the Bible revealed this unity – which it doesn't - there would not have been a dispute.

That there are three persons of the Godhead is not in dispute. It is the trinity doctrine that is in dispute. Hence amongst SDA's, the belief concerning there being three persons of the Godhead, as stated in the 1931 statement of beliefs, appears to have gone virtually unchallenged. The development of this into a trinity doctrine though is something entirely different. This today is challenged.

Froom goes on to relate a conversation he had in 1956 with Charles Watson, who, in 1931, had been the General Conference President (1930-1936). Watson had been chosen by the General Conference Committee to appoint a 4-member committee to formulate this 1931 set of beliefs. Watson was to be one of the four. This was along with M. E. Kern, associate secretary of the General Conference, E. R. Palmer, general manager of the Review and Herald Publishing Association, and F. M. Wilcox, editor of the *Review and Herald*. Under the sub-title *Concern Over Dangers of Fixed Creeds*, Froom relates the conversation he had with Watson.

“At the same time the hangover of that long-existent concern was still felt, by some, over any such move, lest such a statement should come to be regarded as a fixed creed, instead of recognizing that truth is ever progressive. 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. To this end the committee of four had been given power to act.” (*LeRoy Froom, Movement of Destiny, page 419, New Epoch of Unity and advance No. 1*)

Now we can see why this newly formed set of beliefs was initially formulated and inserted into the 1931 Yearbook. It was to ‘test the water’. It was to see what the reaction of the membership would be to it. This again is telling us that by this time (1931), the trinity doctrine could not have been one of the generally accepted beliefs amongst SDA's. If it had been, there would have been no need, with this 1931 statement, to ‘test the water’. That much should be reasonably evident.

We can also see the reason given for this statement not being brought before any official committee for approval. It was because, at least so it is said, of fears that a “[formal or official approval](#)” would look like setting up a creed (as opposed to the setting out of a consensus of beliefs held amongst SDA's). Remember, up to then, these listed beliefs were not voted in at a General Conference session. They were intended to portray the consensus of beliefs held by SDA's throughout the world.

In confirmation of the conversation that Froom had with Watson, he wrote

“Such were the illuminating disclosures of C. H. Watson, former president of the General Conference, made to me personally in 1956 — twenty-five years after 1931.” (*Ibid*)

From what we have seen so far, it should go without saying that up to 1931, the trinity doctrine could not have been one of the fundamental beliefs of the SDA Church although from time to time, the word *trinity* was used to give expression to the three personalities of the Godhead.

Unfortunately, Froom was not totally honest about our denominational history. We know this because when referring to early Seventh-day Adventists, he made certain misleading comments. Amongst these were such as

“A majority of our founding fathers had a true concept of the eternal Christ and the Godhead—having come out of Trinitarian churches....Ellen White was of this group. But a minority of strong minds held and came to teach publicly certain variant views on these great gospel primaries through their published writings. They were men of prominence. But these were their personal views. And decades were required before we came into unity thereon.” (*Leroy Froom, Movement of Destiny, page 35, ‘Pushing back our horizons’*)

“The majority were Trinitarians, and held to the complete Deity of Christ, as did the Spirit of Prophecy with consistency. A few were Arian....Then in the 1860's and 1870's a few began to put into print their personal, minority Arian views on Christ, and denied the Trinity and the personality of the Holy Spirit.” (*Ibid, Page 73, ‘No. 2 Chart’*)

“A majority of our own founding fathers were likewise evidently Trinitarian.” (*Ibid, Page 147, ‘Reasons for cautious early advances’*)

Froom gave totally the wrong impression. We know this because almost all (if not all) of our pioneers came to embrace a non-trinitarian view of the Godhead. This is regardless of their beliefs prior to becoming Seventh-day Adventists. As we have seen above, early SDA's were devotedly antagonistic to the trinity doctrine.

Froom's attempted perversion of our history has been duly recognised. Woodrow Whidden wrote (concerning our non-trinitarianism)

“Some, such as prominent Adventist historian/apologist Leroy Edwin Froom, have been so embarrassed that they have even sought to distort the Arian historical record by making it appear that such views were something like an “encapsulated cancer”—certainly there, but not very widespread” (*Woodrow Whidden, a paper presented to The Tenth Oxford, MI [USA] Institute of Methodist Theol. Studies Working Group titled ‘Arianism, Adventism and Methodism: The healing of Trinitarian Teaching and Soteriology’*)

Merlin Burt also wrote of Froom

“Arthur White, secretary of the Ellen G White estate, even tried in 1955 to correct Froom's position writing “I think that we will have to concede that our early workers were not trinitarians”. (*Merlin Burt, ‘Demise of Semi-Arianism and anti-trinitarianism in Adventist Theology, 1888-1957’, page 46, December 1996*)

“One is left with the impression that Froom chose not to present the facts, possibly out of fear that it might undermine someone's faith or of jeopardizing the Church's evangelical standing.” (*Ibid, page 47*)

In the SDA publication *The Trinity* (that we have spoken of previously), Jerry Moon commented

“Froom’s final word was his 700-page *Movement of Destiny*, published in 1971. Despite “instances of special pleading” and problems of historical bias that “diminish the work as dependable history” (Maxwell), it thoroughly documents the progression of Adventist theology toward a biblical Trinitarian consensus.” (Jerry Moon, ‘The Trinity’ chapter ‘Trinity and Anti-Trinitarianism in Seventh-day Adventist History, page 200-201, 2002)

Everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion but to insert falsehood in amongst the truth is a very effective way of deceiving people. Froom’s book led countless of thousands of people, SDA’s and non-SDA’s alike, to have a wrong understanding of the history of the trinity doctrine within the SDA Church. I was one of them. Hence today I am doing all that I can to present a true history. We must remember though, as Jerry Moon wrote

“From the retirement of F. M. Wilcox in 1944 to the publication of *Movement of Destiny* in 1971, L. E. Froom was the most visible champion of trinitarianism among Seventh-day Adventists.” (Jerry Moon Ph. D., *The Adventist Trinity Debate, ‘Part 1: Historical overview’*)

Froom did have a long-term agenda. It was the promotion of the trinity doctrine.

Wilcox explains the 1931 SDA ‘divine Trinity’

In the Review and Herald of September 3rd 1931 (this was the same year the new statement of beliefs was inserted into our 1931 Yearbook), an article was published called *Modern Liberalism*. It had as a sub-heading *Does It Threaten Seventh-day Adventists?* It was also published the next month in the Australasian Record, also the Australian Signs of October 19th. Its author was the editor of the Review and Herald, F. M. Wilcox. It was Wilcox who had recently devised the 1931 statement of beliefs. In this article, he was pointing out the dangers of liberalism to Christianity, especially to the message of the SDA Church. He then writes

“The message for this hour is the message of Christ's righteousness in contrast with the righteousness of human achievement, His law as the standard of righteousness, His life as the expression of that law, the judgment already in session as the determining test of character, His coming in glory as the consummation of the Christian's hope.” (F. M. Wilcox, *Review and Herald, September 3rd 1931, ‘Modern Liberalism’*)

Wilcox then makes this very interesting comment

“Christ is set forth as the one and only true God, to whom worship and glory should be rendered...” (*Ibid*)

Wilcox had said the same in a morning Bible Study he had given at the previous year’s General Conference session held at San Francisco (see Review and Herald May 30th, 1930). The study was called *God’s Message for this Hour*.

Up to this time though (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 (see John 17:3, also 1 Corinthians 8:6).

This remark of Wilcox (that “Christ is set forth as the one and only true God”), did not go unchallenged. We know this because in a follow-up article he published a few weeks later, he apologised for his mistake. This article is called *Christ is Very God*. Wilcox 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*)

This is very true. 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 here that Wilcox says Christ “partook of the very nature and essence of the Eternal Father”. The word “partook” involves an action – a past action. This is in keeping with the SDA belief, at that time, that in eternity, Christ was begotten of God. Wilcox was here endorsing that 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*)

If this is what Wilcox meant he should have said so. As it was, he made no mention of this in his article. Hence Wilcox 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.

At that time (1931), SDA's did recognise that Christ is God, but they did not regard Him as the "one and only true God". How could they? Christ said that this appellation belonged to the Father alone (John 17:3). This is in keeping with the belief, as still held by SDA's in 1931, that in eternity, Christ was begotten (brought forth) of God therefore He is God. This was also the belief of the very early Christians. This can be seen from the writings of the early church fathers. They regarded God the Father as the unbegotten, and Christ as the only begotten (brought forth) of God. This is in keeping with how the Scriptures reveal God and Christ. You will find verification of the beliefs of early Christian writings in the 2nd and 3rd sections of the 'Begotten Series' here

The Begotten Series

After his apology, Wilcox made the following comment. 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. This is because it explains how, in the 1930's, SDA's understood "the divine Trinity". Remember, Wilcox had made these remarks under the sub-heading of *The Trinity Explained*.

This statement by Wilcox completely invalidates the claim made by some that he, also SDA's in general, were, at that time (1931), believers in the trinity doctrine. This is whether as espoused by what is known as mainstream Christianity, or as held by the present-day (2019) SDA Church. 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. How can this possibly be representative of how the trinity doctrine explains this unity? No true trinitarian would ever make such a statement.

Wilcox therefore, when saying "divine Trinity", could not have been expressing a belief in the trinity doctrine. This is because, as we have seen above, trinitarians say that all three personalities of the Godhead are inseparably united in one indivisible substance as the one God in one trinitarian divine being (see pages 11-12). This type of unity (oneness) cannot be said to be the same, 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 went on to explain

"This is well expressed in the prayer of Christ to His Father just before the eventful night of His betrayal in Gethsemane:

"Neither. pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on Me through their word; that they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me." John 17: 20, 21." (*Ibid*)

As noted, this oneness here spoken of by Christ, cannot be the same as the ontological oneness between God and Christ as depicted by the trinity doctrine. This would be impossible.

Wilcox follows on by quoting from a testimony that Ellen White wrote concerning John Harvey Kellogg's book *The Living Temple*. We will be looking at this testimony in more detail later. For the moment though we will see how Wilcox used it in this article. After saying "We may read with profit in this connection the following statement from the servant of the Lord" he quotes her as saying

"God cannot be compared with the things His hands have made. These are mere earthly things, suffering under the curse of God because of the sins of man. The Father cannot be described by the things of earth. The Father is all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and is invisible to mortal sight.

"The Son is all the fullness of the Godhead manifested. The word of God declares Him to be 'the express image of His person.' God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' Here is shown the personality of the Father.

"The Comforter that Christ promised to send after He ascended to heaven, is the Spirit in all the fullness of the Godhead, making manifest the power of divine grace to all who receive and believe in Christ as a personal Saviour. There are three living persons of the heavenly trio; in the name of these three great powers,—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,—those who receive Christ by living faith are baptized, and these powers will co-operate with the obedient subjects of heaven in their efforts to live the new life in Christ."—Mrs. E. G. White, in "Special Testimonies," Series B, No. 7, pp. 62, 63." (*Ibid*)

This statement by Ellen White does not constitute a trinity doctrine. At the best it is saying there are three persons of the Godhead – and as we shall see later, she was, in this testimony, condemning illustrations that are used by trinitarians to depict God as three-in-one as in the trinity doctrine. Wilcox chose not to point this out, thus this testimony, as quoted here by him, loses a great deal of its meaning. He took it out of its context.

Wilcox then 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. What we can see though, because of his explanation in his article of "the divine Trinity", is that this was how he expected his readers to understand the phrase "Godhead, or Trinity" as in this 1931 statement. After all, he was the one who wrote it. Who better to explain it?

From the above, we can see that by 1931 when Wilcox wrote this article (this was the year the word *trinity* was first used in our Yearbook expressing our fundamental beliefs), SDA's were not, in the sense of the trinity doctrine, trinitarians. Again this is quite evident.

Wilcox followed this by saying (remember he was still in the process of explaining the SDA “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, apart from mentioning the beliefs of Sabellius and Arius, had in mind the orthodox trinity doctrine. 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 this phrase (or something similar to it), we must not assume, as many have mistakenly done, that its writer is referring to the trinity doctrine. Wilcox, when he explained the SDA “divine trinity”, certainly wasn’t doing so. As I have mentioned previously (see page 6), this is where many have become confused. They think that each time this phrase is used it means trinity as in the doctrine of the trinity when its writer may not have meant any such thing.

A little further on in his explanation of the trinity he writes (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 trinity doctrine in mind. To what else would he have been referring? Even trinitarians admit this to be true - that the trinity doctrine involves speculation (intellectual philosophy). We have seen this above (see pages 13-22)

Before closing his article, Wilcox made this comment

“We cannot understand the personality of the Holy Spirit, although this is clearly predicated of Him in the Scriptures.” (*Ibid*)

From reading the above, I believe it is reasonably evident that when Wilcox said that SDA’s believed in “the divine Trinity” (in 1913 and 1931), also “Godhead or Trinity” (in the 1931 statement of beliefs), he could not have been referring to the trinity doctrine. He was simply using these expressions to show that we believed there are three persons of the Godhead. Remember, this ‘apologetic’ article was written shortly after the 1931 statement (‘Godhead or Trinity’) was inserted into our Yearbook.

The next year (1932), in an article called *God’s Message for Today* published in the Review and Herald of July 28th, Wilcox said the same (that “Christ is set forth as the one and only true God”). He made the same statement again 12 years later in 1944.

This was the year he retired as editor of the Review and Herald. This time it was in part 2 of a 3-part series called *The Time, the Message, and the Messenger*. This was in the section *Heart-to-Heart talks by the Editor* (Review and Herald March 9th 1944). Unfortunately, he made no explanation (as he did in his apology) of what he meant by saying, “Christ is set forth as the one and only true God” – which means that his remarks were just as misleading as they were previously. It is also interesting that two years later in 1946, Wilcox had the bulk of his 1931 article (minus the explanation and apology) - namely *Christ is Very God* - published in the Review and Herald of January 3rd. This was under the title *The Eternity of Christ*. Wilcox was then an associate editor of the Review. Francis D. Nichol was its editor.

This same article was again published in the *Signs of the Times* of January 14th 1947 – this time under its original title (*Christ is Very God*). It was used in a series devised by Wilcox called *The Pillars of the Christian Faith*. It was No. 2 in the series.

This is where it becomes very interesting because both articles (Review 1946 and the Signs 1947) carried the same explanation as the original. This is 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. This is telling us what was believed and taught, at that time (1947) 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, in 1947, by Seventh-day Adventists. What other conclusion can be drawn?

The editor of the Signs, Arthur S. Maxwell, confirmed this to be true. In the issue that contained the first of this series he explained

“We are happy to announce that Francis McLellan Wilcox, who for more than twenty-five years was editor in chief of the Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, will be a frequent contributor to the Signs of the Times in 1947. His series on “Pillars of the Christian Faith” will cover the most important doctrines taught in the Bible, and will run through the first twelve issues of the new volume. EDITOR”
(Arthur S. Maxwell, *Signs of the Times*, January 7th 1947)

This article therefore (*Christ is Very God*), used as No. 2 in this series, was to explain one of “the most important doctrines taught in the Bible”. This was the doctrine of “the divine Trinity” as believed by SDA’s.

As has been said previously though, this unity in “the divine Trinity”, as explained by Wilcox in his article, is not the unity as purported by the trinity doctrine (three divine persons inseparably united in one indivisible substance as the one God in one trinitarian being). We can see therefore that in 1947, the word *trinity*, also the phrase “divine Trinity”, was not used as in the trinity doctrine. This shows how cautious we need to be when we read in our past publications the phrases *the trinity* or *the divine trinity* etc. Very often they did not mean the trinity doctrine. These phrases were often meant to convey that SDA’s believed there are three persons of the Godhead. This is something entirely different than the doctrine of the trinity. This is one of the reasons why I do not refer to myself as a trinitarian. It would give the impression that I believe the doctrine of the trinity to be true when I only believe, as revealed in the Bible, that God is made manifest in and through three divine personalities.

From the way that SDA's in 1946 and 1947 understood "the divine Trinity", Merlin Burt, in his 1996 paper *Demise of Semi-Arianism and anti-trinitarianism in Adventist Theology, 1888-1957*, could give the wrong impression. This is when he wrote

"One of the remarkable aspects of the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the development of its position of the trinity and the deity of Christ. These doctrines did not become normative in the church until the middle of the twentieth century". (Merlin D. Burt, 1996, *Preface to 'Demise of Semi-Arianism and anti-trinitarianism in Adventist Theology, 1888-1957'*)

The problem again here is with the use of the word "trinity". What is it meant to convey? Is it "the divine Trinity" as explained by Wilcox in his article *Christ is Very God*, or is it the trinity doctrine as held by the present SDA Church as No. 2 of their Fundamental Beliefs? As we have seen, these are two entirely different concepts. If Burt meant it to convey the idea that in the 1950's, the trinity doctrine, as explained by our present-day theologians (see pages 11-12), had become "normative" within Seventh-day Adventism, I would say that this was extremely misleading. At that time, it was nowhere near normative.

Admittedly, in the 1950's, the use of the word *trinity* was becoming normative to collectively describe the three persons of the Godhead, but not as in the trinity doctrine. This is not to say that 'certain' of our ministry or laity were not believers in the trinity doctrine. I am simply saying it was not the belief generally held at that time by SDA's.

The 'struggle' that the delegates at the 1980 General Conference session had in formulating this belief also bears witness to this fact. In other words, if the trinity doctrine was "normative" within Seventh-day Adventism in the 1950's, then why, 30 years later in 1980, did our leadership have such a problem in formulating this belief?

The 1936 Sabbath School Lesson studies

The evidence that the Seventh-day Adventist Church had not, by the 1940's, accepted the trinity doctrine, is a set of beliefs expressed in great detail in our Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly.

In 1934 at their Autumn Council, the General Conference Committee requested the Sabbath School Department to produce a set of studies that would express the official beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists. These studies were to be called *Bible Doctrines*.

Under the heading of *Care for Fruitage in the Mission Fields*, the minutes record (this was also reported in the Review and Herald December 29th, 1934)

"WHEREAS, We have without doubt reached the time when copious showers of the "latter rain" are falling upon the ripening world-wide harvest field; and,

WHEREAS, In recent years there has been an ever-increasing number of new converts and baptized believers in mission fields; and,

WHEREAS, It is a sacred, God-given trust to shepherd properly these thousands of new believers; therefore,

We recommend, The following as ways and means for helping to foster and care

for the large harvest of souls coming into our ranks annually.” (*General Conference Committee Meeting minutes, 1934 Annual Autumn Council, November 6th 1934*)

There then followed a number of recommendations as to how this “ever-increasing number of new converts and baptized believers in mission fields” were to be nurtured. Recommendation No. 4a stated

“That the Sabbath School Department be requested to provide at an early date lessons as follows:

- (1) On Bible doctrines.
- (2) On our world-wide missionary program and the need of advance.
- (3) Lessons which will help to mold the spirit of sacrifice and missionary service among those newly come to the faith.

b. And that in the preparation of these lessons, our large and rapidly growing membership in mission lands be kept in mind, thus making it possible to adapt these lessons to the needs of the native mind.” (*Ibid*)

From this can be seen how important the General Conference Committee regarded this set of Sabbath School lesson studies. They were to nurture newcomers to the faith of Seventh-day Adventists. It was to show them what was truly believed by God’s remnant church of Bible prophecy.

The next year, because of a special request from the Sabbath School Department for help in producing these studies, a number of the members from the General Conference Committee were co-opted onto the Sabbath School team. This of course, apart from anything else, did ensure that these beliefs would not be the biased view of ‘a few’ but a genuine representation of the denomination’s beliefs.

The minutes for December 12th 1935 record (under the heading of Sabbath School Lesson Manuscripts)

“The Sabbath School Department desiring special help in their Lessons Committee during the time when they will be considering the manuscripts for the lessons on Bible doctrines, it was

VOTED, That I. H. Evans, W. H. Branson, O. Montgomery, M. E. Kern, F. M. Wilcox, and W. E. Howell be appointed to read the manuscripts and sit with the Sabbath School Department Lessons Committee when consideration is given to the lessons on Bible doctrines” (*General Conference Committee Meeting minutes, 1934 Annual Autumn Council, November 6th 1934*)

Note that F. M. Wilcox, who was still then the editor of the Review and Herald, was one of the General Conference Committee who was co-opted on to the group of SDA’s who formulated these studies. His input would have been deemed invaluable.

Each Sabbath, church members throughout the world would discuss these studies. For this reason alone, they could not be a distorted representation of our denominational beliefs. It must also be remembered that up to this time (1936), the beliefs of SDA’s had never been voted in at a General Conference session. It was not

until 10 years later in 1946, also in 1950, that this would happen. Prior to this time, the listed beliefs in our Yearbooks and Church Manuals were deemed to be the consensus of beliefs held by SDA's.

A detailed account of these 1936 Godhead beliefs, also the accolades of these studies given by those in authority in the SDA Church, can be found here

The official 1936 (non-trinitarian) Godhead beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists

As will be seen if the above article is read, the Godhead beliefs, as expressed in these quarterlies, were decidedly non-trinitarian. They could not be said to be anything else. These studies, by our church, were not only very well promoted but also highly praised. Such things were said as

"The opportunity of a lifetime is now before us to teach the truth to our neighbors and communities, for the Sabbath school lessons on Bible doctrines are well adapted to that very purpose.

The outline at the close of each lesson will helpfully guide in the matter; and as the present lessons on doctrines are fully authenticated by the lesson committee of the General Conference Sabbath School Department, any one can know that what he teaches as he presents the lesson as a Bible reading or a sermon is correct." (*G. A. Roberts, Review and Herald, December 17th 1936, 'The Sabbath School Lesson'*)

"Beginning with the fourth quarter of 1936, the Sabbath school lessons for the denomination for seven consecutive quarters are to cover the essential doctrines of this message. It was recommended that our people everywhere be encouraged to use these lessons as a basis for conducting Bible readings and cottage meetings in the homes of neighbors and friends, and that Bible training classes be organized in every church for this purpose." (*Carlyle B Haynes, Review and Herald, June 18th 1936, The Closing day of the Conference, 'The Sabbath School Lessons for 1936'*)

These lesson studies were highly approved of by the SDA church although the Godhead beliefs contained within them could never be described as trinitarian. Having said that, the word *trinity* was used twice to describe the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As we have seen above, this was in keeping with how it eventually came to be used (see the 1913 Wilcox statement above, also the 1931 fundamental beliefs, also Wilcox's explanation of the SDA trinity). This appears to have been mainly due to Ellen White saying that the Holy Spirit is a person.

These lessons on *Bible Doctrines* ran for 7 consecutive quarters. This was from the 4th quarter of 1936 until the 2nd quarter of 1938. As can be imagined, they were very detailed. It can also be quite rightly said that they were a detailed explanation of the beliefs of SDA's during the time period immediately following the insertion into our Yearbook and Church Manual of the 1931 statement of beliefs. In other words, as the 1940's approached, the beliefs in these Sabbath School studies were then the beliefs generally held by SDA's throughout the world. This is very important to remember.

It is interesting that in our Sabbath School lesson quarterlies when referring to the Godhead, the word *trinity* (apart from when advertising the Spear tract *The Bible*

Doctrine of the Trinity), was not, until the 1930's, used in any positive sense – and then I can only find it used in 3 quarterlies. Even in the 1940's I can only find it used in one quarterly – and this again was as a collective word for the three persons of the Godhead (not as in the trinity doctrine). In fact it was not until the 1950's (apart from the Spear tract), that the phrase the *doctrine of the trinity* was used – and even then it was only used to say it was one of the 'mysteries' of the Bible that "cannot be comprehended" (3rd Quarter 1953, page 44). This scarcity of usage would have been a very strange happening if the SDA Church, by then, had been a trinitarian denomination. This is more evidence that up to that time, the trinity doctrine could not have been considered a part of the fundamental beliefs of the SDA Church.

A check of the SDA archives will show that this dramatically changed from 1978. From the third quarter of 1978, through to the end of the 1980's, I found that the word *trinity*, as pertaining to the Godhead beliefs of SDA's, was used in at least 18 separate quarterlies. Remember, it was in 1980 that the trinity doctrine was first voted into the fundamental beliefs of SDA's. I believe it is true to say that the Sabbath School lesson studies are a reliable guide as to what was believed and taught, throughout the years, by our church.

Merlin Burt had quite rightly said that even up to the 1930's

"The use of the word "Trinity" in describing God continued to be avoided in print except for rare exceptions." (*Merlin Burt, History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on the Trinity, Journal of the Adventist Theological Society, 2006*)

"Doctrinal summaries were carefully avoided during the first decades of the twentieth century, due in part to conflict on the Trinity." (*Merlin Burt, The Trinity in Seventh-day Adventist History, 2006*)

If, as some say, the trinity doctrine was a belief of SDA's while Ellen White was alive, these comments by Burt would make no sense.

It should go without saying that a denomination's world-wide membership cannot change its beliefs overnight. It would take decades for this to happen. This is the reason why, during the decades that followed the publication of these 1936-1938 lesson studies on *Bible Doctrines*, the same Godhead beliefs, as in these studies, were still taught in our various denominational publications. These were the same non-trinitarian beliefs as held by SDA's during the time of Ellen White's ministry.

The month after the publication of the first of these Sabbath School Quarterlies, Benjamin Wilkinson, a very high-profile minister of that time, wrote in a letter to T. S. Teters

"Replying to your letter of October 13 regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, I will say that Seventh-day Adventists do not and never have accepted the dark, mysterious Catholic doctrine of the Trinity." (*B. G. Wilkinson, letter to T. S. Teters, November 3rd 1936*)

Wilkinson (1872-1968) wrote this letter whilst President of Washington Missionary College (now Columbia Union). He held this position until 1946. He was also author of a number of books, one of which, *Truth Triumphant* (1944), traces in great detail the history of the Christian Church. In this book, Wilkinson has much to say about the

trinity doctrine. It is well worth reading. Another of his books is called *Our Authorized Bible Vindicated* (1930). The latter was written in avid support of the King James Version of the Bible as opposed to more modern versions. In its time, this book was quite controversial.

In a 1979 Collegiate Sabbath School quarterly, this interesting observation was made

“As late as 1942 M. L. Andreasen could state that “The field is divided on the subject of the Trinity”. (*Tim Crosby, Collegiate Quarterly, 4th quarter 1979, quoting from a private letter from M. L. Andreasen to J. L. McElhany and W. H. Branson, December 25, 1942*)

As can be seen, this quote of Andreasen’s is taken from a letter he wrote in 1942 to J. H. McElhany (then General Conference President) and W. H. Branson (then General Conference vice-president). Branson was to follow McElhany as President. This letter was written 6 years after the lesson studies on Bible Doctrines. Andreasen had been given the task of ‘investigating’ the beliefs of the organisation known as the *Davidian Seventh-day Adventists*, or, to give them their popular name, *The Shepherd’s Rod*. To accomplish this, he had visited their headquarters at Mt. Carmel where he had an interview with its founder and leader Victor Houteff. Andreasen, in his letter, was reporting his findings. It would be far too much to quote all of it here, but I will show his “Trinity” remark in its context.

Andreasen had been referring to the influence of Albion Ballenger (1861-1921), a SDA minister who had once caused unrest and controversy in the SDA Church. This was regarding his views concerning the sanctuary, also his severe criticism of what was believed and taught on this subject by SDA’s. Ellen White condemned Ballenger’s teachings. Andreasen then wrote

“As with the sanctuary, so with other doctrines. The field is divided on the subject of the Trinity. The vital doctrine of the 144,000 has ceased to be preached. Fantastic theories in regard to the war, Hitler, and the future, are being promulgated.” (*Letter, from M. L. Andreasen to J. L. McElhany and W. H. Branson, December 25, 1942*)

Enough is quoted here to show that Andreasen’s usage of the phrase “the Trinity” is used in a generic sense. He is referring to discord, in the 1940’s amongst SDA’s, concerning the Godhead. This is in keeping with where Merlin Burt concluded in a paper called *Demise of Semi-Arianism and anti-trinitarianism in Adventist Theology, 1888-1957* (we noted this on page 3)

“One of the remarkable aspects of the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the development of its position of the trinity and the deity of Christ. These doctrines did not become normative in the church until the middle of the twentieth century”. (*Merlin D. Burt, 1996, Preface to ‘Demise of Semi-Arianism and anti-trinitarianism in Adventist Theology, 1888-1957’*)

The 1950’s was the decade that followed Andreasen’s ‘discord’ statement. We can see the pattern emerging.

From what we have concluded, Burt’s “the Trinity” could not be the trinity doctrine as held today by SDA’s as one of their fundamental beliefs. That which was becoming

“normative” was the use of the word *trinity*, in a generic sense, to describe the three persons of the Godhead – which as we have noted many times previously, does not constitute a trinity doctrine. Even if Burt did mean the trinity doctrine, this would show that even a recognised Seventh-day Adventist historian places the date of the acceptance of this teaching far beyond what can be termed ‘early Seventh-day Adventism’. By then, meaning the 1950’s, we had been a movement of people for over 100 years. This cannot be described as ‘early Seventh-day Adventism’.

Baptismal Certificate beliefs

In the 1941 General Conference Bulletin (for June 6th 1941), it was reported that Oliver Montgomery made this observation

“Brother Chairman, during this session some very strong resolutions on the matter of standards have been brought forward and adopted. The question of a church covenant or a baptismal covenant has been raised, but inasmuch as the Plans Committee has finished its work, and it is too late in this session to give careful and thorough study to the matter, I would like to suggest that we request the Executive Committee to appoint a strong committee to give study to this question and bring in a report at the next Autumn Council on the adoption of a uniform church covenant or baptismal covenant, so that there may be uniformity throughout the field. At the present time many different lists of questions are used and printed in different parts of the field. I would, therefore, move that we request the General Conference Executive Committee to appoint such a committee to study this matter and report to the next Autumn Council. The motion was carried.”
(*Review and Herald*, June 10th, 1941, O. Montgomery, ‘*Proceedings of the General Conference*’, Seventeenth session June 6th, 1941)

Consequently, the minutes of the Autumn Council of October 27th reported (under the heading of “Baptismal Covenant”)

“The General Conference in session having recommended the appointment of a committee to study the question of a uniform baptismal covenant, such a committee was appointed by the general Conference Minority Committee, and detailed study has been given to this question.” (*General Conference Committee minutes*, October 27th, 1941, page 152)

This was now 10 years after the ‘Wilcox statement of beliefs’ first appeared in our Yearbook.

In the report of the committee that was appointed to carry out this request it said

“We recommend, 1. That the following baptismal vow be adopted, and that all ministers and church elders be urged to carefully follow the same in examining those who apply for membership in the church.

2. That the attached Certificate of Baptism, and Summary of Fundamental Beliefs, be printed with the baptismal vow, and that a copy be filled out and furnished to all those who are accepted for baptism and church membership.”
(*Ibid*)

This is very interesting because the recommended beliefs on the Baptismal Certificate read differently than in the Yearbook and the Church Manual. This is inasmuch as the Baptismal Certificate beliefs did not mention the word *trinity*.

With respect to the Godhead, here is what was listed in those beliefs (remember, this was 10 years *after* the 1931 statement of beliefs was inserted into our Yearbook)

“Summary of Fundamental Beliefs

The following is a brief summary of the fundamental beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists, together with some of the Scriptural references upon which they are based:

1. The true and living God, the First Person of the Godhead, is our heavenly Father, and by His Son, Christ Jesus, created all things. Matt. 28:18,19; 1 Cor, 8:5,6; Eph. 3:9; Jer. 10:10-12; Heb. 1:1-3; Acts 17:22-29; Col. 1:16-18.

2. Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Godhead, and the eternal Son of God, is the only Saviour from sin; and man's salvation is by grace through faith in Him. Matt. 28:18,19; John 3:16; Micah 5:2;cf, Matt. 1:21; 2:5,6; Acts 4:12; 1 John 5:11,12; Eph. 1:9-15; 2:4-8; Rom. 3:23-26.

3. The Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Godhead, is Christ's representative on earth, and leads sinners to repentance and to obedience of all God's requirements. Matt. 28: 18,19; John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7-15; Rom, 8:1-10; Eph. 4:30.” (*Ibid page 153*)

Note there is a no mention of a trinity doctrine, neither is the word *trinity* used. In fact, this list of beliefs says that “**The true and living God**” is the Father. This had always been the belief of the early non-trinitarian SDA’s. It remained the same therefore in 1941 – even though the Fundamental Belief in the Church Manual said “Godhead or Trinity”. This is in stark contrast to the present trinity doctrine of SDA’s that says the “one God” is a “unity of three coeternal Persons” (see page 162 of the 2015 SDA Church Manual). The latter was voted into the fundamental beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists in 1980. In this trinity belief, unlike in the above statement, there is no first, second or third person. Note very importantly: it is the Father, not the Son, who is referred to as “**The true and living God, the First Person of the Godhead**”.

The same minutes said of the 1941 baptismal vow

“Note: The following questions should be answered in the affirmative before the church by candidates for baptism.

1. Do you believe in God the Father, in His Son Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit?” (*Ibid*)

In this vow, nothing more was said of the Godhead.

This list of beliefs continued to be published in the Church Manual until 2005. They were very important to SDA’s. As it said in the 1951 Church Manual (this was under the heading of *Doctrinal Instruction for Baptismal Candidates*)

“This summary of doctrinal beliefs is especially prepared for the instruction of candidates for baptism. Every candidate should thoroughly familiarize himself with the teachings contained in this outline and with the duties enjoined upon believers...” (1951 *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, page 50, ‘*Doctrinal Instruction for Baptismal Candidates*’)

So why did the beliefs on the baptismal certificate (which said that the Father was “The true and living God, the First Person of the Godhead”) read differently to the Fundamental Beliefs in the Yearbook and Church Manual? We will allow LeRoy Froom to explain.

With respect to the formulating of this 1941 baptismal certificate, also after saying that the ministry was “perturbed” over the “variations” and “certain strange added stipulations” in the baptismal certificates that had been created by various individual unions and conferences, Froom had this to say

“A uniform baptismal certificate was therefore proposed, to be used by all. A representative committee of thirteen was accordingly designated, with General Conference General Vice-President W. H. Branson* as chairman, and when organized, naming this writer as secretary. He is therefore acquainted with the full proceedings.

The commissioned task of this committee was to formulate a uniform "Baptismal Covenant" and Baptismal "Vow," to be printed in the form of an appropriate Certificate. Be it noted that it was based upon our "Fundamental Beliefs" statement of 1931. This Certificate was to be used thenceforth, by all ministers, as the approved "profession of faith" for all candidates seeking admission and membership through baptism, into the Seventh-day Adventist Church.” (LeRoy Froom, *Movement of Destiny*, page 420-421, ‘*New Epoch of Unity and Advance*’)

Froom tells us that the beliefs on the baptismal certificate were “based upon our "Fundamental Beliefs" statement of 1931”. The beliefs on this certificate therefore (which said that the Father was the “true and living God”), were in fact an explanation of the *Godhead, or Trinity* statement in the 1931 Fundamental Beliefs. This is what the baptismal candidates were to be taught prior to their baptism. Note again that this ‘new’ baptismal vow and covenant had been written 10 years after the 1931 statement had been inserted into the Yearbook; thus a considerable length of time had passed to reflect upon what this 1931 *Godhead or Trinity* statement of belief meant to SDA’s. Certainly it was not intended to depict a trinity doctrine as held today by the SDA Church. The latter teaching is a much later innovation.

Previously, Froom had this to say about the beliefs listed in the baptismal certificate (this was under the heading “1931-1941 Constitutes Turning-Point Decade”)

“While 1931 was the crucial year, it was more accurately the decade—embracing the years 1931 to 1941—that marked the pivotal turn of events for unity of belief in our post-1888 history. As seen, this ten-year period was introduced by the appearance of an acceptable Statement of Faith, now received by all. The decade logically closed with the adoption, in 1941, of the uniform "Baptismal Covenant" and "Vow," in Certificate form. This was definitely based upon, but elaborated and accentuated, the now generally accepted "Fundamental Beliefs" declaration of 1931.” (LeRoy Froom, *Movement of Destiny*, page 415)

We can see again that the beliefs listed on the 1941 baptismal certificate were, according to Froom, an “**elaborated and accentuated**” explanation of the 1931 statement of beliefs. These baptismal certificate beliefs though did not, no more than did the 1931 statement of belief, constitute a trinity doctrine. As has been said, the belief that the Father is “**The true and living God, the First Person of the Godhead**” is the belief held by the SDA non-trinitarians.

Like Spear’s article (see pages 50-53), these beliefs ‘fell short’ of a trinity doctrine. We can see therefore that what was meant by the term *Godhead, or Trinity* in that 1931 statement of beliefs, was that SDA’s believed there were three persons of the Godhead, or, as Ellen White phrased it

“There are three living persons of the heavenly trio; in the name of these three great powers--the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit -- those who receive Christ by living faith are baptized...” (*Ellen G. White, Special Testimonies Series B No. 7 page 63, November 1905*)

Now can be seen why I said earlier (on page 6) that it is crucial to understand how the word *trinity* was used in our past publications. As in the 1931 statement of beliefs, it very often did not mean *trinity* as in the trinity doctrine. Froom continued (referring to the 1941 baptismal certificate)

“It was this Covenant and Vow document that completed and implemented the “Fundamental Beliefs” profession of faith, making their declarations obligatory upon all candidates for admission to the church through baptism. Before long this would, of course, automatically embrace all members aside from the old-timers.” (*LeRoy Froom, Movement of Destiny, page 415*)

According to Froom, these beliefs, as stated on the 1941 baptismal certificate, were now “**obligatory**” on *all future* baptismal candidates. He says though they were not obligatory to those he terms “**old-timers**”. These would be SDA’s who had been baptised prior to this time.

This principle (what Froom had said about beliefs not being obligatory to “old timers”) could, in one sense, very well apply to those who were baptised up to 2009. This is because up to then, even though a ‘trinity doctrine’ had been voted in at the 1980 GC session, the explanatory set of beliefs for baptismal candidates, as listed in the Church Manual, were still those which had been listed on the 1941 Baptismal Certificate. These beliefs had not changed. I will explain.

On October 10th, 1988 at the Annual Autumn Council held in Nairobi, Kenya (this was 8 years after the voting in of the trinity doctrine) this recommendation was made

RECOMMENDED, To revise CM 44, Baptismal Vow and Baptism, to read as follows:

BAPTISMAL VOW AND BAPTISM

Baptismal Vow. -- Candidates for baptism or those being received into fellowship by profession of faith shall affirm their acceptance of the following doctrinal beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the presence of the church or

other properly appointed body (see p 43). The minister or elder should address the questions to the candidate(s) whose reply may be by verbal assent or by raising the hand.

COMMITMENT

1. Do you believe there is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal Persons? (*General Conference Committee minutes, October 10th, 1988*)

Here we can see that 8 years after the trinity doctrine was first voted into the beliefs of the SDA Church, a new vow was deemed necessary. This was to bring it into line with this new (1980) trinity belief. Whereas previously the vow had said “Do you believe in God the Father, in His Son Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit?” it now said “Do you believe there is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal Persons”. In other words, it had gone from a confession of belief in three persons of the Godhead to a profession of the trinity doctrine. This is if it is assumed, which it does not actually state, that the “unity” mentioned in this belief is the unity as portrayed by the doctrine of the trinity.

At the next General Conference session, which was held at Indianapolis in 1990, it was voted to have the Church Manual (1990 onwards) read the same. As has been said previously, it was voted in 1946 that it was only at a General Conference session that the Church Manual could be changed.

This is where it becomes very interesting because whilst this ‘new trinity vow and commitment’ have remained the same since that time (1990), there is, in the 1990 manual, also in the three manuals that followed (1995, 2000 and 2005), listed a set of beliefs that prospective baptismal candidates needed to be instructed in prior to baptism. As it says in the 2005 manual

“Prospective members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, before baptism or acceptance on profession of faith, should be carefully instructed from the Scriptures in the fundamental beliefs of the church as presented in chapter 3 (see p. 9) of this Church Manual. In order to assist evangelists, pastors, and others in giving such instruction and making it Scripture-based and practical, a specially prepared summary appears as an appendix on pages 219-223 of this Church Manual and in the Minister’s Handbook.” (*2005 SDA Church manual, page 32*)

Why I say this is very interesting is because these Godhead beliefs that are said here to be a “specially prepared summary” for instructing baptismal candidates, are the very same beliefs that constituted the voted 1941 baptismal certificate. They had been in the Church Manual, and had remained the same, since they were included in it in 1942 (explaining the 1931 *Godhead or Trinity* belief). This means that whilst from 1990 to 2009 the baptismal candidates were to confess that “there is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal Persons, they were also to be instructed that “The true and living God, the First Person of the Godhead, is our heavenly Father”. Some may say that these two confessions of faith are contradictory, but they did exist side by side in the 1990, 1995, 2000 and 2005 Church Manuals. In total, those 1941 beliefs (saying that the Father is the true and living God) had existed in the SDA Church Manual for a span of almost 70 years (the 2005 Church manual was relevant

up until the 2010 issue). This, as everyone must agree, is a very long time indeed.

In the Church Manual published following the voting of a trinity doctrine into the beliefs of SDA's, these "[specially prepared](#)" beliefs, instead of being listed in the main body of the manual, were 'relegated' to an *Appendix*. This was in the 1981 edition. This remained the same up to 2005. It appears though that by 2010, these same beliefs (for baptismal candidates) were no longer acceptable to the SDA Church. This is because in the restructured 2010, also subsequent 2015, church manual, there is no mention of them. They had been effectively phased out.

On May 22nd 2019 I sent a request to the General Conference Secretariat asking why these beliefs had been removed. Two months later, on the 18th July, I received an apology from them for not replying to my enquiry. Apparently, my email had been 'mislaidd'. One week later on the 25th July, after reminding them I had not received a reply, I was informed

["We have researched your query and below is an explanation of what took place when the *Church Manual* was revised in 2010.](#)

[The GC Secretariat office was asked to shorten the book. In that process it was felt that it was unnecessary to re-state the Church's Fundamental Beliefs in summary form in an appendix.](#)

[In addition, the Fundamental Beliefs were carefully written, every word chosen with care, and summarizing them could leave the door open for misinterpretation.](#)

[For these reasons, the summary of the Fundamental Beliefs which appeared in the 2005 Church Manual does not appear in the 2010 and future editions.](#)

[I trust this explanation will prove helpful. If I may be of further assistance, please let me know." \(Email, 25th July 2019, to Terry Hill from Susan Marcellino, Executive Assistant to G T Ng, PhD General Conference Secretariat\)](#)

To be totally honest, as I said in my reply to the secretariat, I could not see the logic in this explanation.

The previous 1931 statement of beliefs (written by F. M. Wilcox) had also been "[carefully written](#)" but for something like 70 years, the baptismal beliefs, in our Church Manual, had served to helpfully explain this statement. Now though, in 2010, these explanatory beliefs had been removed. I could not see the logic either in saying that a set of explanatory beliefs "[could leave the door open for misinterpretation](#)". Those Baptismal Certificate beliefs were to help baptismal candidates understand in more detail our fundamental beliefs.

Truth never changes. This means that if these baptismal certificate beliefs had been true for all those 70 years, then they must still be true today. It is also true to say that if they are wrong today, then they always have been wrong. There is no escaping this reasoning.

At the 2005 GC session it was suggested (initiated by an observation from the South Pacific Division), also voted, that for the benefit of non-SDA's who may be attending a baptismal service, an alternative vow could be used. This vow says

1. Do you accept Jesus Christ as your personal Savior and Lord, and do you desire to live your life in a saving relationship with Him?

2. Do you accept the teachings of the Bible as expressed in the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and do you pledge by God's grace to live your life in harmony with these teachings?

3. Do you desire to be baptized as a public expression of your belief in Jesus Christ, to be accepted into the fellowship of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and to support the church and its mission as a faithful steward by your personal influence, tithes and offerings, and a life of service? (*General Conference Bulletin, Adventist Review, July 14th-28, page 49*)

The full discussions of why this alternative vow was introduced can be read in the 2005 GC bulletin found at the following link. It was far too much to detail in this study.

[General Conference Bulletin, Adventist Review, July 14-28 2005](#)

We will now consider why the 2010 Church Manual was restructured.

The restructured 2010 Church Manual

In 2010, the SDA Church Manual was completely restructured. So how and why did this come about - seeing that it was voted at the 1946 General Conference session that it should not be changed except by approval at a General Conference session?

For an answer to this question (because the General Conference Committee minutes since 2004 are not available in the SDA Archives) it is necessary to rely upon the report of the General Conference session held at Atlanta in 2010. In particular, the Fifth Business meeting held on June 27th. This was when the Church Manual was discussed. The full discussions can be found in the July 7th issue of the Adventist Review here

<https://www.adventistreview.org/archive-3510>

In this 5th business session, the Chairman, Gerry D. Karst, is reported as saying

“Now we are going to move into a section of our agenda book that deals with the Church Manual. The Church Manual can be changed or amended only at a General Conference session, and you have an entire section near the back of your book that deals with the Church Manual. I am going to call on Elder Miranda, who is the chairman of the Church Manual Committee, and Homer Trecartin, associate secretary, who is secretary of this committee, to lead us into these items on the Church Manual.” (*Gerry D. Karst, Adventist Review, July 7th 2010, 'Church Manual Discussion, Fifth Business Meeting'*)

Armando Miranda (Chairman of the Church Manual Committee) replied

“Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As we all know, the Church Manual is the most important document for the administration and operation of the local church. We are going to share the background on how we proceeded to make the re-edited version of the Church Manual. Let me tell you that we are going to introduce to

you 95 new changes in the re-edited Church Manual.

Lines 6-40: “For many years the Church Manual has had pieces added, deleted, or changed in different parts of the book and by various committees and editors. Some felt that it no longer read like a cohesive volume but was more like a patchwork or collage of writings—related in content but not unified inn [sic] style. Then in October 2008 the Annual Council of the General Conference Executive Committee took the following action during its meetings in Manila, Philippines:

“ ‘VOTED, That the General Conference appoint a small study group to look at the Church Manual to determine whether it would be beneficial to write a new Church Manual.’ (*Ibid, Armando Miranda*)

As can be seen, it was proposed that because the Church Manual now looked “like a patchwork or collage of writings”, it was thought that it should be restructured.

There then followed the process by which the ‘new style manual’ came to be re-written. It was also explained that “by various individuals, groups, and committees”, it was extensively checked and re-checked. This included a number of checks by various members of GC Executive Committee, also by the Executive Committee in full. The process can be read in the article. Again it would be too much to detail here. The Chairman replied

“You can imagine that this was a monumental task that was assigned to the committee. They’ve worked hard and diligently to pull this together, but we have 95 proposed amendments. I will turn now to Homer Trecartin to begin the process.” (*Ibid, Gerry D. Karst*)

This was a lot of “proposed amendments”. Homer Trecartin responded

“Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Every attempt was made during the process not to change the content but just to reorganize and re-edit. But there were 95 of those items that have moved through the normal process and are included here, and we want to look at each one of those and take an action on each one of them as we go. And then as we finish a chapter we will take an action on the entire chapter.” (*Ibid, Homer Trecartin*)

Regardless of what is said here, it wasn’t just a case of reorganising and re-editing the Church Manual. Its “content” was changed. The “specially prepared” beliefs for baptismal candidates that had served the church so well for almost 70 years (see pages 85-86) had now ‘disappeared’. This was not mentioned in the report.

So why were these beliefs omitted from the Church Manual?

Regardless of what is explained by the General Conference Secretariat (see page 86) this is where our trinity theology has ultimately led us. It is removing the Father, in our declared beliefs, from His divine status as the “The true and living God” (see John 17:3). As the removed belief said (see page 82)

“The true and living God, the First Person of the Godhead, is our heavenly Father, and by His Son, Christ Jesus, created all things” (*SDA 2015 Church Manual, page 219, ‘Summary of Doctrinal Beliefs’*)

This belief, although now rejected by trinitarian Seventh-day Adventists, is still held as true by the non-trinitarian Seventh-day Adventists.

In these discussions concerning the church manual, remarks were made pertaining to our fundamental beliefs. For your interest, I have included them here without comment.

“HOMER TRECARTIN: On page 13, lines 4-11, are some additions further explaining the role of the General Conference session and the General Conference Executive Committee. Let me read that paragraph: “The General Conference in Session determines the fundamental beliefs of the Church, authorizes establishment of unions and the attachment of field units, revises the Church Manual, elects General Conference and division leadership, performs other functions as outlined in its Constitution and Bylaws, and considers items referred to it by its Executive Committee. The General Conference Executive Committee between Sessions is empowered by the Constitution and Bylaws to act on behalf of the constituents. Thus Church organizations around the world recognize the General Conference as the voice of the Church.” I would move approval of that addition.

GERRY D. KARST: It is moved and seconded. The chair recognizes Robert Brauer.

ROBERT BRAUER: The statement says that the General Conference in session determines the fundamental beliefs. I believe it would be clearer if it said, “The General Conference determines the stated fundamental beliefs.” We do not actually make the beliefs; we simply declare what we believe. Move that we add the word “stated.”

HOMER TRECARTIN: I don’t think there is any problem with that.

GERRY D. KARST: Can we accept by common consent that we will put in the word “stated”? The chair recognizes Suranjeen Pallipamula.

SURANJEEN PALLIPAMULA: The motion changes the church structure from being largely federal to being central and giving importance to the General Conference. This is being done now in the fifty-ninth session. I just want to know if there is anything that led to this thinking.

HOMER TRECARTIN: There is no intention of changing the structure of the church. The practice all along has been that our stated fundamental beliefs are approved by the General Conference in session. But the Church Manual didn’t say that. The General Conference session has always elected division leadership and some of these other things, but the Church Manual didn’t say that. And because of various situations that have been arising, we felt it was important that those be clearly stated. It’s not changing anything; it’s just writing down what has been done all along.

GERRY D. KARST: The chair recognizes Nikolaus Satelmajer.

NIKOLAUS SATELMAJER: Mr. Chairman, I think the word “determines” belongs there, but there is something that is missing. It’s not the General Conference that determines our fundamental beliefs; it’s the Scriptures. I think we need to start

with different wording—the Holy Scriptures determine the fundamental beliefs; the General Conference summarizes or agrees to the main ones. Not having the Scriptures as the first part would be a grave omission. I move to refer that back to the committee.” (*Adventist Review*, July 7th 2010, ‘Church Manual Discussion, Fifth Business Meeting’)

Further observations concerning the use of the word *trinity*

In the October of 1931, in a section of the *Review and Herald* called *Bible Questions Answered*, it is reported that a reader had asked, “Please make plain the doctrine of the Trinity. Are Seventh-day Adventists trinitarians?” The latter would have been a nonsensical question if our fundamental beliefs had expressed a belief in the trinity doctrine. C. P. Bollman, an Associate Editor of the *Review and Herald*, replied (again showing that SDA’s did not then accept the trinity doctrine)

“It is not an easy matter to make plain the doctrine of the Trinity, for there is perhaps no other Christian doctrine about which there has been so much controversy or so many shades of opinion. What this denomination believes concerning the Trinity is thus stated under the heading, “Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists,” on page 377 of the Year Book for 1931, prepared by the General Conference.” (*C. P. Bollman, Review and Herald*, 15th October 1931, ‘Bible questions answered’)

Bollman then set out what we have seen above in the 1931 statement of beliefs. He offered no further explanation; Thus, he completely shied away from offering any thoughts similar to a fully-fledged trinity doctrine as espoused today by the SDA Church. He was certainly not prepared to go to the extremes that our present theologians go (see explanations above from Mueller, Canale, Hatton, Dederen, Petersen and Pfandl on page 11-12). Note that this was in the 1930’s.

Twenty-four years later in 1954 (this was when Francis D. Nichol was editor of the *Review and Herald*), a reader again sent in a letter regarding the trinity. In the section *Bible Questions Answered* it was explained

“A church member writes that he has been hearing of late certain new ideas concerning the trinity. Evidently some—whether clergy or laity, he does not indicate—are attempting to go into details as to the relationship of the Divine Father and Son both before and after the time of Adam’s fall. We need not here set forth the intricacies of the view to which our correspondent refers. But inasmuch as questions concerning the Godhead come to us betimes, we give the substance of our reply.” (*Francis D. Nichol, Review and Herald*, April 1st 1954, ‘From the editor’s mailbag’)

This letter was from a “church member”. From this we can see that “some” (either ministry or laity, or perhaps both) were attempting to explain things about the Godhead that were not then generally believed and taught by SDA’s. The reader said it was “new ideas”. Notice here that what was in question was the relationship between the Father and the Son – before and after the incarnation. From Nichol’s answer, this probably involved trinitarianism, although the Holy Spirit was not mentioned. Notice too that Nichol deliberately avoids going into the details. Here is the answer given to the reader

“Through the long centuries of the Christian Era devout men, and some not so devout, have from time to time speculated on the nature of the Godhead. Not infrequently churchmen have even engaged in most bitter controversy over the mystery of God. One of the chief causes of the split between eastern and western Christendom, which occurred in the eleventh century, was over one aspect of the doctrine of the trinity. Such speculation is both profitless and dangerous. The Bible does not say a great deal that throws light on the mystery of the Godhead. Indeed, I don't believe it would be possible for the Bible to throw much truly helpful light on it, and for the simple reason that the Godhead involves mysteries so profound that human language is incapable of explaining them, and human minds are incapable of understanding them.” (*Ibid*)

Here again we can see the reluctance to explain more than was stated in the 1931 Godhead beliefs – and this was now 1954. Certainly there was reluctance on the part of Nichol to get involved with how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit exist together. This is so unlike it is at present. Today, in our promotion of the trinity doctrine, we have entered into the realms of speculation (see pages 13-22). Nichol refers to this speculation as “both profitless and dangerous”. This is very true. This reply by Nichol is more evidence that the trinity doctrine, as espoused today by the SDA Church, was not then an accepted teaching of our church.

For the promulgation of their beliefs to the general public, the main organ of the SDA Church was, and still is, the Review and Herald (now Review). There were other outlets of course but the latter named was the main one. When this paper is searched via the SDA archives, it will be seen that during the 1940's, 1950's and 1960's, very little was published in the promotion of the trinity doctrine itself. What was published during those decades were 'changed' beliefs that in the main concerned the persons of the Godhead. These changed beliefs were dispersed amongst statements that still promoted the 'old view'. It was these 'changed beliefs' that would eventually lead to the acceptance of the trinity doctrine. This will be covered in part two this article.

The development of the Seventh-day Adventist hymnal

It is interesting that in 1941 when a new hymnal was produced, that the trinitarian references in certain well-known hymns were not included. This should tell us a great deal.

Take for example Reginald Heber's famous hymn, “Holy, Holy, Holy”. The original 1st and 4th verses ended with the line “God in three persons, blessed Trinity”. In the 1941 hymnal, this line was not included. It was replaced with the words “God over all who rules eternity”. The 4th verse was omitted. This is how it was in the previous song book *Christ in Song*.

Another hymn affected was Edward Plumptre's “Rejoice ye pure in heart”. The last two lines in the final verse of the original read “The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. One God forever more.” This verse was not included in the 1941 version of our hymnal, but it is included in the 1985 version.

There are other *trinity* hymns included in the 1985 version that were not in the previous version. These are such as (note the trinitarian references) Hymn No. 2 (“three in one”), Hymn No. 30 (“three we name You; While in essence only one, Undivided God we claim you.”), Hymn No. 47 (“Blest three in one”), Hymn No. 72 (“three in one”) and

Hymn No. 235 (“Ever three and ever one”). As Merlin Burt reported

“The residual tension regarding the Trinity and eternal deity of Christ is revealed in the differences between the official church hymnal of 1941 and the 1985 Hymnal. There were omissions and changes in the original hymns in the 1941 Church Hymnal that were corrected in 1985. At the same time, certain language that included controversial thought was included.” (*Merlin Burt, History of Seventh-day Adventist, Views on the Trinity, 2006 Journal of the Adventist Theological Society, 2006, Page 137*)

Burt says that certain 1941 hymns were “corrected”. This was to bring them into line with the 1985 trinitarian theology of SDA’s. It is interesting he says that in the 1985 hymnal, “certain language that included controversial thought was included”. He does not elaborate further.

Much more could be said about our church hymnals, particularly about the 1985 version, but enough is written here to show that in the 1941 version, the SDA Church did not allow the trinitarian theology of certain hymns. This is because it would have been at variance with what they then taught – which we know was non-trinitarianism.

All of this changed though after the trinity doctrine, for the very first time in SDA history, was voted into our fundamental beliefs at the 1980 General Conference session at Dallas, Texas. Hence 5 years later in 1985 when a new hymnal was introduced, it did include quite a number of hymns with trinitarian theology. The 1985 Hymnal was the result of a 1981 General Conference action. It says in the SDA Encyclopedia

“In 1981 the General Conference set up a 19-member Church Hymnal Committee to compile a new hymnal (*Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia, Volume 10, page 732 ‘Hymnody’*)

This was the year after the trinity doctrine had been voted into the fundamental beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists. This must be regarded as being very significant.

The 1980 General Conference Session

When the reports of the 1980 General Conference session are read, it becomes abundantly clear that the delegates found difficulty in formulating our present fundamental belief No. 2 (The Trinity). This shows it was ‘newish’ to Seventh-day Adventism. If it had been held for decades previously, as some Seventh-day Adventists purport, then why would there be any problem in formulating it? It is evident therefore that it had not been held for decades as a generally held belief.

The General Conference President, Neal C. Wilson (1920-2010), the father of the present President, Ted Wilson, addressed the concerns that some had over the re-writing of our beliefs. In attempting to reassure them that no changes were being made to the historical beliefs of SDA’s, he said to the delegates before the discussions began

“For some time we have been considering a refinement of our Statement on Fundamental Beliefs. I think you have that document in your hands. No doubt you have done both some studying and some praying.” (*Neal C. Wilson, General Conference Bulletin, Review and Herald, April 23rd, 1980, ‘Seventh Business Meeting, Fifty-third General Conference session’*)

Neal C. Wilson served the Seventh-day Adventist Church as General Conference President from 1979 – 1990.

The president here refers to the re-writing of the beliefs as a “refinement”. This implies making a finer distinction of something that is already stated. In this case, that which is already believed. He then explained to the delegates

“We have heard a variety of interesting rumors. Some, it is said, understand that the church leaders want to destroy completely the foundations of the church and set the church on a course that would be un-Biblical, contrary to the tradition of the past and to historical Adventism. My fellow delegates, there is nothing that is further from the truth.” (*Ibid*)

It appears there were some who had very serious concerns regarding the purpose behind the re-wording of our fundamental beliefs – even worrying that our past beliefs were about to undergo change.

The president went on to explain the fears that some had regarding the re-writing of our beliefs. As can be seen, these fears, he said, were not just from the laity but also from theologians and academics.

“We have also heard that any time we touch the Statement on Fundamental Beliefs we would be introducing the Omega, the final confusion of theological and doctrinal positions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I suggest to you that this is also a very unfortunate statement.

I can understand how individuals far removed from where some of these things are being studied, and who may not themselves have been asked to participate in a restudy or refinement of wording, might feel that there is something very sinister, mysterious, and secret going on that will suddenly confront us, and that it may contribute to the ultimate detriment and demise of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. My fellow delegates, I assure you that no one who has been struggling with some of these matters has any such intention.

There are others who think they know why this is being done. They believe it is being prepared as a club to batter someone over the head, to try to get people into a narrow concept of theology, not leaving any opportunity for individual interpretation of prophecy, or any individual views with respect to theology or certain areas of doctrine. This also is unfortunate, because this never has been and is not the intention of any study that has been given to the Statement on Fundamental Beliefs.

Some academicians, theologians, and others have expressed the fear that this statement was being developed so that the church could confront them with a checklist to determine whether they should be disqualified from teaching in one of our institutions of higher education. It is very, very tragic when these kinds of rumors begin to develop.

I fully recognize, and am very willing to admit, that we do need to use extreme care, including a wholesome variety of minds with training and background, to provide input on this kind of statement. However, I do not think anyone should become frightened when the wording of such a document is studied. Perhaps I

should go one step further and say that the Seventh-day Adventist Church does not have a creed as such. Nothing is set in concrete in terms of human words. The time never comes when any human document cannot be improved upon.” (*Ibid*)

The president then went on to make this interesting statement

“We feel that every 20, 30, or 50 years it is a very good thing for us to be sure we are using the right terminology and approach. Schools of theological thought are constantly changing. Certain terms mean today what they did not mean 50 years ago.”

This is what I said about the word *trinity*. As we have seen, in the 1930’s, 1940’s, and 1950’s, it was certainly not taken as expressing a belief in the trinity doctrine as today explained by our present-day theologians (see pages 11-12). Elder Wilson continued

“There are certain presuppositions that people develop, and certain terminology is used to describe these presuppositions. It is extremely important that we should understand what we believe and that we should express it simply, clearly, and in the most concise way possible. We should not only state our beliefs but be certain that those who read them do not misunderstand and that they are unable to read three or four meanings into the same sentences or words.” (*Ibid*)

Whilst all that he said was very interesting, also relevant to our study, it would be too much to detail here. It can all be read on pages 8 and 9 of the Adventist Review of April 23rd 1980 found here

<http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/RH/RH19800423-V157-20.pdf>

In his address, the President did say

“We see only good coming from a careful rearrangement, rewording, and perhaps some restructuring.” (*Ibid*)

Not everyone has seen this the same way. As Jerry Moon said (see page 5 above), since the re-stating of our beliefs in 1980, a controversy has raged about what was voted in concerning the Godhead. Wilson later said

“We are not suggesting changing any belief or doctrine that this church has held. We have no interest in tearing up any of the foundations of historical Adventism. This document is not designed to do that, nor to open the way so that it can be done. It should be clear that we are not adding anything nor are we deleting anything in terms of historical Adventist theology. We are trying to express our beliefs in a way that will be understood today.” (*Ibid*)

This is not in keeping with the facts of our denominational history. We know that our church today rejects “[historical Adventist theology](#)”. Whereas we were once a devoutly non-trinitarian denomination we are now devoutly trinitarian. As our leadership, since this GC session at Dallas, have confirmed

“Most of the founders of Seventh-day Adventism would not be able to join the church today if they had to subscribe to the denomination's Fundamental Beliefs. More specifically, most would not be able to agree to belief Number 2, which deals with the doctrine of the Trinity.” (*George Knight, Ministry magazine, October 1993, page 10, ‘Adventists and Change’*)

“Adventists beliefs have changed over the years under the impact of present truth. Most startling is the teaching regarding Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord.” (*William Johnsson, Adventist Review, January 6th, 1994, Article ‘Present Truth - Walking in God’s Light’*)

“That most of the leading SDA pioneers were non-Trinitarian in their theology has become accepted Adventist history ...” (*Jerry Moon, Ph. D., ‘The Trinity’, chapter, ‘Trinity and anti-trinitarianism in Seventh-day Adventist history, page 190*)

“Some Adventists have discovered that practically all of our pioneers were anti-Trinitarian ...” (*Angel Manuel Rodriguez, Article, ‘The Holy Spirit and the Godhead, 11th July 2002*)

Lawrence Geraty in his report on the 1980 Fundamental Beliefs made a similar comment to that of Neal Wilson

“Friday afternoon, April 25, while the platform was literally being dismantled behind the president of the General Conference presiding over the final business meeting of the 1980 session, the delegates voted to replace a 50-year-old document with a new Statement of Fundamental Beliefs. None of the 27 beliefs were new, of course, but the re-statement was.” (*Lawrence Geraty, Spectrum, 1980, Volume 11 No. 1*)

In 1981, when explaining the background to the 1980 statement of beliefs, R. W. Taylor (Secretary of the Australasian Division) made a similar observation (this was under the sub-heading “No New Beliefs”)

“None of the twenty-seven Statements of Belief were new, but as the preamble stated, “These beliefs, as set forth here, constitute the church's understanding and expression for the teaching of Scripture.” (*R. W. Taylor, Australasian Record, September 14th 1981, ‘Background to the 1980 Statement of Fundamental Beliefs’*)

This is not true. The beliefs of SDA’s have changed over the years. The 1931 statement of belief, as we have seen, could never be described as a trinity doctrine. It is also true to say that this changeover to trinitarianism has been a major theological change (see Merlin Burt page 4). Our present-day beliefs would not be acceptable to multitudes of SDA’s who have gone before us. They would say that these beliefs are not Biblical. As George Knight said (see page 95), they could not become members of the SDA Church.

In Volume 10 of the SDA Encyclopedia, there is a brief explanation of how this revision of our Fundamental Beliefs was initiated. On page 465 it says

“The process of revision was initiated by the president's Executive Advisory and went to the *Church Manual* Committee. The chair of the committee and the president of the General Conference, Robert H. Pearson, following a recommendation from PRADCO, appointed an ad hoc committee, chaired by W. Duncan Eva, to work on the revision of the document. The first revised draft of the statement was circulated among a group of theologians for their input. This document was taken to the Annual Council in 1979 and voted in principle to recommend it to the General Conference session for final approval. The Annual Council also recommended that the statement “receive wide exposure to the world field” and written suggestion should be welcome. Consequently, the document was sent to members of the division committees, to all the unions in North America, and to all the union colleges of the church. In addition, the statement was published in the *Adventist Review* (157:8, February 21st 1980), inviting church members “to consider it carefully and to send comments or suggestions” to the committee. For the first time in the history of the church, the world church was actually involved in the revision of the statement of fundamental beliefs.

Copies of the statement, incorporating the suggestions received from the world field were sent to the delegates in a GC session 6 weeks before the session convened in the summer of 1980.” (*SDA Encyclopedia, Volume 10, page 465, ‘Doctrinal Statements’*)

It should go without saying that it would take a great deal of space here to set out all the relevant Godhead discussions at the 1980 GC session, but for those who would like to read some of them, they are set out in Section 28 at the following link

[A study of the Godhead – as it pertains to Seventh-day Adventism](#)

Various views were submitted by the delegates, some of them conflicting. Leif Hansen is reported as saying

“In this discussion of the Trinity, which is always a difficult matter to discuss, I wonder if a certain misunderstanding could be eliminated by saying "a unity in purpose" so that the matter of physical unity may be eliminated.” (*Leif Hansen, General Conference Bulletin, Review and Herald, April 23rd 1980, ‘Seventh Business Meeting, Fifty-third General Conference session’*)

From what Leif Hansen said here, it appears he realised that a “physical unity” of the three persons of the Godhead could not be proven from the Bible – which is very true – therefore he was concerned that these Godhead beliefs should not depict any such oneness. This is the main problem in the trinity debate. As we noted above, the trinity doctrine says that the three personalities constitute the ‘one trinitarian being of God’ (see remarks by Pfandl, Canale, Mueller, Dederen, Petersen and Hatton above page 11-12).

Hansen’s remarks show that he did not accept the trinity doctrine as explained today by the SDA’s theologians. We are left to wonder how many other delegates reasoned the same way. Our Fundamental belief No. 2 gives no explanation as to what is meant by saying that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are “a unity of three coeternal Persons” (see the 2015 SDA Church Manual, page 162). The question must be asked therefore, when the delegates voted in this doctrine, did they believe they were voting that God

was one physical trinitarian being, also that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are inseparable? We are left ponder this one, but this is how are present-day theologians are explaining what the delegates voted in that day (see pages 11-12).

Neal C. Wilson, as GC President and chairman, responded

"I see your point there. Maybe we ought to make it a unity in purpose rather than a physical unity." (*Neal C. Wilson, Ibid*)

The president was agreeing with Hansen. He realised too that the Bible offers no explanation as to how, ontologically speaking, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit exist together. He reasoned it would be best to leave this alone.

Remember too: Wilson had just said that the leadership of our church was "not suggesting changing any belief or doctrine that this church has held." Putting these two thoughts together could suggest he was saying that we should not go beyond, as was taught for decades, that there are three persons of the Godhead. If the President's advice had been heeded, it is quite possible that at least today we would not have this 'trinity doctrine' controversy.

Neal C. Wilson, like Hansen, was arguing against orthodox trinitarianism. It is evident from what they both said that they did not regard the 1931 statement of belief as depicting the trinity doctrine. If they had, their remarks would have been pointless. It appears quite evident too that at this conference, this trinity belief was in the process of being formulated.

On the final day's proceedings (May 1st, 1980), the wording of belief No. 2 was still being debated. The report of that day reported Charles Upshaw as saying

"I have a question on Article 2, "The Trinity." I believe when we first studied the document the term was Godhead. 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, Charles Upshaw, May 1st, 1980*)

As we noted earlier (see page 11), belief No. 2 that was eventually voted in, says that the one trinity God is a "He", also, according to these same beliefs, three co-eternal persons make up this one trinity God. Upshaw's suggestion was ignored.

Duncan Eva, a General Conference Vice-president, also the chairman of the committee that had initially formulated these 'new' beliefs, was the first to respond. He said (rather frustratingly it appears)

"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. 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, Duncan Eva*)

As far as I know, Duncan Eva did not elaborate further so we do not know what these “connotations” were that he had in mind. We have though already mentioned two of them. One concerns the death of the divine Son of God while the other concerns the risk taken in reclaiming mankind from sin (see pages 24-35). Trinitarianism says that the divine Son of God did not die at Calvary, also that in the plan of redemption, there was no risk taken concerning His eternal existence.

So what was it that initially prompted the revising of our fundamental beliefs? Lawrence Geraty explains

“The 1931 statement was apparently designed to articulate the basic tenets of Adventism for non-Adventists. A strong motive for revising that statement was a desire for an official response to issues increasingly debated within Adventism. In the light of recent controversies, some, particularly in the General Conference, felt the statement suffered from glaring omissions. Others, particularly Bernard Seton, an associate secretary of the General Conference, persistently reminded his colleagues that the statement also had literary inadequacies.

Finally, in late 1978, the officers of the General Conference appointed an *ad hoc* committee referred to as “X-1535 Church Manual Revision ‘Fundamental Beliefs,’” and less than two years later the church would have a new Statement of Fundamental Beliefs. The members of the *ad hoc* committee were all located at the General Conference headquarters in Washington, D.C., with W. Duncan Eva, a General Conference vice president, as chairman.” (*Lawrence Geraty, Spectrum, July 1980, ‘A new statement of fundamental beliefs (1980)’*)

Regardless of these so-called “glaring omissions” and “literary inadequacies”, it needs to be remembered that up to this time (late 1970’s), this previous (1931) statement of beliefs had served the church for over 45 years. As 1980 approached though, it was regarded, by some, as being inadequate to express the beliefs of SDA’s. Notice it says that it was “some, particularly in the General Conference” who were saying these things – not the laity. The ‘push’ for this re-statement of beliefs was from our leadership.

Geraty says that the 1931 statement of beliefs was designed for non-SDA’s but Watson, who was then the General Conference President, told LeRoy Froom that it was written the way it was to see how SDA’s would react to it (see pages 68). Watson had been elected by the GC Committee to appoint a committee to formulate these beliefs. He was also to be one of that committee (see page 68).

Lawrence Geraty’s full report of how the 1980 fundamental beliefs came into existence can be read here

[Spectrum, A New Statement of Fundamental Beliefs \(1980\)](#)

With regards to the re-written 1980 voted fundamental beliefs, Woodrow Whidden, in the Ministry magazine of February 2003, made this comment

“It represents a significant culmination of doctrinal development in denominational history, a development that evolved from a distinctly non-Trinitarian mind-set (often expressed in an anti-Trinitarian spirit) to Arianism, semi-Arianism, and then onto the full triumph of the present Trinitarian

confession of faith.” (Woodrow Whidden, *Ministry*, February 2003, ‘*The Trinity*’)

This once “non-Trinitarian mind-set” believed in the reality of all things. It took God’s Word as it reads rather than placing upon it philosophical interpretations. Whidden’s words show again that over the years, the Godhead beliefs of SDA’s have changed. This is from non-trinitarianism to trinitarianism. As we noted on page 10 though, non-trinitarianism cannot develop (evolve) into trinitarianism. In order to accept trinitarianism, the non-trinitarian Godhead beliefs, as held by early SDA’s, had to be rejected as heretical (not Biblical).

Note Whidden refers to the outcome of accepting the trinity doctrine as a “full triumph”. This shows that there had been a determined effort by some bring the trinity doctrine into Seventh-day Adventism. By Whidden, this was a cry of victory. He also commented

“By the middle of the twentieth century, Seventh-day Adventists had reached the same consensus on these issues as had the church of the fourth century: that there is “one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” who have manifested themselves as a “unity of three co-eternal Persons.” When it comes to confessing that all Three possess divine characteristics of immortality, omnipotence, omniscience, and eternal existence, what can be said about the substance of the Father’s divine nature can also be said about the Son and the Spirit.” (*Ibid*)

Much could be said about this comment by Whidden, but it will need to suffice that he is saying, as did Merlin Burt (see page 3 above), that trinitarianism did not become established within Seventh-day Adventism until the 1950’s. This though, as the facts bear out, is not strictly true. The belief that God was one indivisible trinitarian being, as purported by the trinity doctrine, was not generally held amongst SDA’s until much later. As we have just seen, the trinity doctrine, as now held by the SDA Church, was not even voted into our fundamental beliefs until 1980.

It appears that Whidden is here referring to the ecumenical councils of Nicaea (AD 325) and Constantinople (AD 381). He is saying that by the 1950’s, SDA’s “had reached the same consensus on these issues as had the church of the fourth century”. This reminds us of the document, written in the year 2000 by George Reid (Director of the SDA Biblical Institute), that was prepared especially for dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church (see page 13 above). It is saying that on this subject of trinitarianism, we are now in agreement with the Roman Catholic Church, also all the other protestant denominations who hold to this teaching.

In 2003, Woodrow Whidden Ph. D., was professor of religion at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

Before we close part one of this study, there is one more aspect to cover. This concerns how Ellen White regarded trinitarianism, also speculation concerning God.

Ellen White condemns three-in-one (trinitarian) illustrations of the Godhead

The very first Seventh-day Adventist that I know of who made any sort of profession of a belief in the concept of the trinity doctrine is John Harvey Kellogg. Even then it was done privately. This was in 1903.

In his time, Kellogg was an exceptionally brilliant doctor and surgeon. James and Ellen White had helped him financially with his medical studies. He eventually became the leading physician of Seventh-day Adventism. He was head of the sanitarium at Battle Creek. Unfortunately, he held views of God that the church deemed were out of harmony with Scripture. In fact, Ellen White had told him to keep his views to himself. As she explained (she had told how Kellogg came to her room and related his beliefs to her)

“As I talked about these things, laying the whole matter before Dr Kellogg, and showing him what the outcome of receiving these theories would be, he seemed to be dazed. I said, "Never teach such theories in our institutions; do not present them to the people." (*Ellen G. White to the delegates at the 1905 General Conference, Ms 70, 1905, pp. 3, 4. "A Message of Warning,"*)

On February 18th, 1902, the sanitarium burnt to the ground. To help pay for the rebuilding costs it was agreed that Kellogg would write a book on physiology and health care. The profits from this book would help defray the expense. A. G. Daniells, then the General Conference President, counselled Kellogg not to include in it any of his ‘strange’ beliefs. Arthur White records that Daniells said to Kellogg

“Now look here, Doctor, that book must not contain a single argument of this new theory you are teaching, because there are a lot of people all over the States who do not accept it. I know from what they say, and if it has any of what they consider pantheism they will never touch it.” (*Arthur L. White 'The Early Elmshaven Years' Vol. 5, chapter 21, page 288*)

Kellogg was not teaching pantheism, but it could have been taken as such. Arthur White continued by revealing Kellogg’s response to this warning.

“And the doctor replied, "Oh yes, oh yes, I understand that." And Daniells reiterated the point: "You must leave all that out." (*Ibid*)

In keeping with his promise, Kellogg did write the book. Originally it was called *The Living Temple*. Unfortunately he failed to keep his promise not to include in it his personal views of God. In consequence of this, the church refused to publish it. Not to be defeated, Kellogg himself put an order on the press. He agreed to pay for its publication. Before the book could be published though, the press burnt to the ground. This was in the December of 1902 – 10 months after the sanitarium had been destroyed. The plates for the book which were ready for its printing were destroyed in the fire. Kellogg though was determined to have his book printed. He gave it to a private printer who published it.

In his book, Kellogg presented the idea that God was actually present in the things He had created (in the trees and in the flowers etc). This, Kellogg said, is what makes them grow and flourish. He even claimed that Ellen White’s writings endorsed what he had written. Ellen White denied Kellogg’s claims (see Review and Herald. October 22nd 1903, ‘Teach the Word’, also Special Testimonies Series B, No. 2 page 53).

Kellogg’s book was discussed at the 1903 Autumn Council of the General Conference Committee - the outcome of which was decided when two testimonies, both condemning what this book was teaching, were received from Ellen White. In consequence of this, Kellogg said that he would withdraw his book from the open

market and revise it. This was particularly regarding its theological content.

Kellogg discussed his book with A. G. Daniells (then the General Conference President). In this conversation – also in an attempt to justify himself for what he had written in it - Kellogg said that because he had recently come to believe in ‘the trinity’, he could now much better explain his beliefs – meaning explain how God was actually ‘in things’. We are aware of this conversation because the President wrote to W. C. White (Ellen White’s son) saying

“He [Kellogg] then stated that his former views regarding the trinity had stood in his way of making a clear and absolutely correct statement but that within a short time he had come to believe in the trinity and could now see pretty clearly where all the difficulty was and believed that he could clear up the matter satisfactorily.”
(Letter, A. G. Daniells to W. C. White Oct 29th 1903)

Up to this time (1903), Kellogg, just like the vast majority of past – also then present - Seventh-day Adventists, had been a non-trinitarian. In our publications he had spoken out against the trinity doctrine. We noted this on page 43. This was in reply to the remarks of Rev. N. Wardner, a Seventh-day Baptist, who had controverted our views concerning the teaching of the immortality of the soul. This was especially with regards to some of the things that Kellogg had written in a book called *The Soul and the Resurrection*. In the ongoing discussions three months later, Kellogg, in one reply, said (this was in response to a misunderstanding of Wardner’s)

“The only grounds upon which our reviewer could be justified in making such a statement would be the supposition on his part that we believe in the doctrine of the trinity; but he very well knows, from positions taken and arguments used in previous articles, that we do not agree with him on this subject any better than on that of the nature of the soul. We believe in but one Deity, God, who is a unity, not a compound being.” (J. H. Kellogg, *Review and Herald*, November 25th 1880, ‘Reply to Eld. Wardner’s rejoinder’)

Kellogg also said in the same paragraph

“We repel the charge of "trinitarianism" without the slightest hesitation. We do not believe in a triune God, as before remarked. And we will not, as did our reviewer in a, former article, leave the reader in doubt as to our position on this point. We are utterly at a loss to comprehend how our re-viewer could have blundered so strangely as to suppose us to share in so gross an error as we believe the orthodox doctrine of the trinity to be.” (*Ibid*)

So as we can see, Kellogg, along with SDA’s in general, had rejected the trinity doctrine. Now though, in 1903, he was making the confession that “within a short time”, he had come to accept this teaching. It appears that the reason why Kellogg said he had come to believe in the trinity was so he could say, without making it look as though he meant the Father, that God was ‘in things’. To say the Father was ‘in things’ was to make God appear to be a non-entity (a non-personal being). As Daniells related in his letter to W. C. White

“He [Kellogg] told me that he now believed in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost and his view was that it was God the Holy Ghost and not God the Father that filled all space and every living thing.” (*op. cit*)

This was a dramatic switch in Godhead beliefs for Kellogg. It was also out of harmony with what was then believed by the majority of Seventh-day Adventists – who were of course non-trinitarian. To SDA's at that time, to say 'God' would have been taken as meaning the Father. So to say God was in things was to say the Father was in things.

Four years later in an interview with George Amadon and Augustine Bourdeau (this was just over a month before Kellogg was disfellowshipped from the SDA Church), Kellogg had this to say

"All I wanted to explain in *Living Temple* was that this work that is going on in the man here is not going on by itself like a clock wound up; but it is the power of God and the Spirit of God that is carrying it on. Now, I thought I had cut out entirely the theological side, of questions of the Trinity and all that sort of things; I didn't mean to put it in at all, and I took pains to state in the preface that I did not; I never dreamed of such a thing as any theological question being brought into it." (*J. H. Kellogg, Spectrum, 1990, Volume 20, No. 3, page 58, 'Kellogg vs. The Brethren: His Last Interview as an Adventist October 7, 1907'*)

Ellen White wrote many testimonies against the things that Kellogg had written in his book *The Living Temple*. It is also possible that her son, W. C. White, had conveyed to her what Kellogg had said to A. G. Daniells about coming to believe in the trinity. I say this because in one such testimony in which she condemned Kellogg's views of God, she quoted from a book called *The Higher Christian Life*. This is where its author, an American minister by the name of the Rev. William Boardman, had quoted several three-in-one illustrations from nature in support of the trinity doctrine, Bear in mind that Ellen White was quoting from Boardman's book in condemnation of Kellogg's views of God.

Boardman's book, published in 1858, was an immediate success. It achieved international acclaim. The 1870's *Higher Life* movement in England, which promoted holy Christian living, actually took its name from it. This reveals the popularity of this publication. Along with Dwight L. Moody and Ira Sankey, Boardman held evangelistic campaigns promoting Christian holiness.

In his book, Boardman had used these three-in-one illustrations to help explain how the fullness of the Godhead dwelt within each of the persons of the Godhead. These were the three personalities that he said comprised (using his words), "the living" and "triune God" (see pages 104 and 105 of *The Higher Christian Life*). In this testimony, Ellen White quoted these same three-in-one illustrations. Here is what she wrote

"I am instructed to say," (*Ellen G. White, Special Testimonies, Series B, No. 7, page 62 'Come out and be separate' 1905*)

Ellen White is saying here that it was not her own opinion she was voicing but instruction from God. She continued

"The sentiments of those who are searching for advanced scientific ideas are not to be trusted. Such representations as the following are made: "The Father is as the light invisible; the Son is as the light embodied; the Spirit is the light shed abroad." "The Father is like the dew, invisible vapor; the Son is like the dew gathered in beauteous form; the Spirit is like the dew fallen to the seat of life." Another representation: "The Father is like the invisible vapor; the Son is like the

leaden cloud; the Spirit is rain fallen and working in refreshing power.” (*Ibid*)

These three-in-one illustrations are typical of those used by trinitarians. They are intended to show how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the ‘one God’ as purported by the trinity doctrine. Ellen White then went on to say

“All these spiritualistic representations are simply nothingness. They are imperfect, untrue. They weaken and diminish the Majesty which no earthly likeness can be compared to. God can not be compared with the things His hands have made. These are mere earthly things, suffering under the curse of God because of the sins of man.” (*Ibid*)

These are very strong words – and remember – it was God who had instructed Ellen White to write them (see above). Through her, God was condemning the use of such three-in-one illustrations. I would like to think we would all agree there must be a very good reason for Him doing so. Unfortunately, since the adoption, into our fundamental beliefs, of the trinity doctrine, our church has chosen to ignore this counsel. In 2007, in the 2nd quarter’s Sabbath School lesson study, it said

“What analogies—such as a triangle or a three-pronged fork — can help someone understand the idea of how one God can be composed of three equal Persons? What other examples might help us better understand this deep truth?” (*The SDA. SS Lesson quarterly, 2nd quarter 2006 Sunday March 26th page 7*)

God is like a “three-pronged fork”? I would like to think that most would agree that this does sound disrespectful. The next year, in an article published in the Signs of the Times called *A picture of God*, Trudy Morgan-Cole wrote

“In an attempt to make it easier for us to understand, the Trinity has been compared to many things: a braided rope, a three leafed clover, even a banana!*” (*Trudy Morgan-Cole, Signs of the Times April 2007, ‘A Picture of God’*)

God is like “a banana”? This sounds even more disrespectful. The footnote at the end of the article says, “If you’ll look at a slice of banana carefully, you’ll see that it has three sections”.

More recently, on the main page of the official Seventh-day Adventist website, there was a video of a man who was explaining that God is like an egg (the shell, the yoke and the albumen). Fortunately for everyone, it has now been removed.

This was no different though than was said in the Review of November 22nd, 2007. The writer was explaining how children could be taught that God is a trinity as expressed in the trinity doctrine. This is the suggestion she offered

“If you’re trying to explain the doctrine of the Trinity, show them an egg and ask them to break it open to look at its composition. Ask them, ‘How many parts make up this egg?’ Talk about the shell, the yolk, and the white and how they form one unit.” (*Linda Mei Lin Koh, Adventist Review, November 22, 2007 Growing God’s love in our children’ sub-title, ‘Kid-friendly ways to teach our fundamental beliefs’*)

The writer further explained

“Or you may give children three colored strands of yarn—red, yellow, and blue. Ask them to braid them together. The three colors blend together to form a complete braid” (*Ibid*)

All of these illustrations attempt to show how $1+1+1=1$. For example: 1 yolk + 1 albumen + 1 shell = 1 egg. This is the reason why they are used by trinitarians to explain their belief that their one (trinity) God comprises of three personalities (1 Father + 1 Son + 1 Holy Spirit = 1 God) Ellen White though, under instruction from God, condemned such reasoning. As she said

“All these spiritualistic representations are simply nothingness. They are imperfect, untrue. They weaken and diminish the Majesty which no earthly likeness can be compared to. God can not be compared with the things His hands have made. These are mere earthly things, suffering under the curse of God because of the sins of man.” (*see above*)

Seventh-day Adventists should not have ignored this counsel. It came from God. If they hadn't ignored it, perhaps we should not be in the mess we are in today regarding this trinity controversy. As it is though, SDA's are being disfellowshipped for not accepting what their church is teaching today – that God is a trinity as expressed in the trinity doctrine.

Boardman, after listing his three-in-one illustrations, made the following statement (note the capitalised words are as they are in Boardman's book)

“The Father is all the fulness of the Godhead INVISIBLE.
The Son is all the fulness of the Godhead MANIFESTED.
The Spirit is all the fulness of the Godhead MAKING MANIFEST.”
(*William Boardman, The Higher Christian Life, part ii, How attained, chapter 1, page 105, For me: then what must I do?*)

Ellen White continued her testimony by elaborating upon these words. She explained (this was immediately following her condemnation of Boardman's three-in-one illustrations)

“The Father is all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, and is invisible to mortal sight.

The Son is all the fulness of the Godhead manifested. The Word of God declares Him to be —the express image of His person.” “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” Here is shown the personality of the Father.

The Comforter that Christ promised to send after He ascended to heaven, is the Spirit in all the fulness of the Godhead, making manifest the power of divine grace to all who receive and believe in Christ as a personal Saviour” (*Ellen G. White, Special Testimonies Series B, No. 7, page 62 1906, ‘Come out and be Separate’*)

Ellen White did not say, as Boardman did, that God the Father was “invisible”. She said He was “invisible to mortal sight”. This is saying two different things.” Boardman concluded

“The persons are not mere offices, or modes of revelation, but living persons of the living God.” (*op. cit.*)

This is a trinitarian statement. It is what every trinitarian believes. This is that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the three “living persons of the living God”. Ellen White concluded though (note the very important modification she made to Boardman’s words)

“There are three living persons of the heavenly trio;” (*Ellen G. White, Special Testimonies Series B No.7, page 62 1906 ‘Come out and be Separate’*)

It really is very important to note how Ellen White modified Boardman’s statement. The difference is highly significant – especially with respect to our present trinity debate.

The difference is that Boardman’s statement is trinitarian whilst Ellen White’s statement is not. Boardman said that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were “living persons of the living God”. Ellen White said there are “three living persons of the heavenly trio”. If Ellen White had wanted to depict God as in the trinity doctrine (as Boardman did), then all she needed to do was to quote Boardman’s words as he had written them. As it was, she modified what he had written. This should be telling us that Ellen White deliberately avoided depicting God as in the trinity doctrine.

Many SDA’s, because they have been unaware of the background to this testimony, have mistakenly believed that Ellen White’s “heavenly trio” statement gives support to the trinity doctrine. This though was exactly the opposite of what she was doing. She only said as much as Samuel Spear did in his article (see pages 50-53) – that there are three persons of the Godhead. This far they both went, but no further.

Jerry Moon, in an article comparing Ellen White’s Godhead statements with the traditional trinity doctrine, wrote the following.

“Her [Ellen White’s] concept of the “heavenly trio” differs from the traditional Trinity in that it is based on simple biblical reasoning and biblical presuppositions. It could be called a “biblical” view of the Trinity, and it became clearer and clearer in her mind and writings as the years passed and the revelations to her accumulated.” (*Jerry Moon, Journal of the Adventist Theological Society: Vol. 17, Issue 1, Article 10, page 144, The Quest for a Biblical Trinity: Ellen White’s “Heavenly Trio” Compared to the Traditional Doctrine*)

If you remember, Samuel Spear’s article, when it was used as a tract for the public, had its name changed to “The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity”. This tract was also described as a Biblical view of the trinity. Moon continued

“She [Ellen White] described the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in relational rather than ontological terms. While the traditional doctrine defined the divine unity in terms of “being” or “substance,” she focused on the volitional and relational dimensions of Their unity, a unity of “purpose, mind, and character.” In this sense her concept of the “heavenly trio” is a more humble concept than the traditional Trinity doctrine.” (*Ibid, Page 157*)

From this we can see that Jerry Moon is saying that Ellen White’s view of the Godhead (the heavenly trio) is far different to the traditional view that says the Father, Son and

Holy Spirit constitute – in “ontological terms” - the one trinitarian being of God. Unfortunately, for SDA’s, our fundamental beliefs today, also our theologian’s explanations of these beliefs, have reverted to the traditional (orthodox) view. We now say that God is a single trinitarian being (of one substance). This is describing the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit in ontological terms. This can be seen on pages 11-12 of this study. It should go without saying therefore that Ellen White would not have agreed with the present SDA understanding of the Godhead – particularly Fundamental Belief No. 2. She would have classed this as speculation – which it is.

I will finish this section with two more quotations from the pen of Ellen White. In the first one she gave another warning that never should have been ignored. Here is what she wrote (we noted this previously on page 9)

“The enemy of souls has sought to bring in the supposition that a great reformation was to take place among Seventh-day Adventists, and that this reformation would consist in giving up the doctrines which stand as the pillars of our faith, and engaging in a process of reorganization. Were this reformation to take place, what would result? The principles of truth that God in His wisdom has given to the remnant church, would be discarded. Our religion would be changed. The fundamental principles that have sustained the work for the last fifty years would be accounted as error.” (*Ellen G. White, Special Testimonies Series B No. 2, page 54, ‘The Foundation of our Faith’, 1904*)

Why should Satan suggest that the SDA Church give up the doctrines it had held for the last 50 years (note: this was written in 1904)? It can only be because those doctrines are the truth. He would not suggest a reformation was necessary if they had been error. If this ‘reformation’ were to happen said Ellen White, “The fundamental principles that have sustained the work for the last fifty years would be accounted as error.”

Ellen White would have had in mind the fundamental principles (beliefs) of SDA’s that over the years had been expressed in our various publications. This was such as published in the Review and Herald, also the Signs of the Times, and our Yearbook etc (see pages 62). The first two of these principles stated

“1. That there is one God, a personal, spiritual being, the creator of all things, omnipotent, omniscient, and eternal; infinite in wisdom, holiness, justice, goodness...”

2. That there is one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Eternal Father, the one by whom he created all things, and by whom they do consist; ...” (see page 44 above for references)

These beliefs today, by the SDA Church, are “accounted as error”. Our current fundamental belief No. 2 now says

“There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three coeternal persons.” (*The 2015 SDA Church Manual, page 162*)

Ellen White then went on to say in the previously quoted testimony (this is another of the identifying marks if the so-called reformation did take place)

“A new organization would be established. Books of a new order would be written. A system of intellectual philosophy would be introduced.” (*op. cit.*)

The books published today by the SDA Church are now promoting the trinity doctrine whereas those written by the early SDA's were, in their content, decidedly non-trinitarian. We can safely say therefore that “Books of a new order” have been written. We have also noted above, because the trinity doctrine cannot be proven from Scripture, it is nothing more than “intellectual philosophy”. In this sense, even apart from anything else, we are a “new organisation”. Whereas we were once opposed to the other churches for holding such a teaching we are now in harmony with them. Along with them we are now a trinitarian denomination (see George Reid's article on page 13). I believe that from the above, we can see that this ‘reformation’ has taken place.

As we have also seen from the above, a major part of the trinity doctrine (any trinity doctrine) is the *oneness* of God. In the early 1900's, Ellen White addressed herself to this very issue. In an article called *The Word made Flesh* she explained

“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. This truth, infinitely mysterious in itself, explains other mysterious and otherwise unexplainable truths, while it is enshrined in light, unapproachable and incomprehensible.” (*Ellen G. White, Review and Herald, 5th April 1906, 'The Word made Flesh'*)

Here we are informed that prior to the creation of our world there was a ‘certain oneness’ between the Father and Christ but even if it was explained to us (says Ellen White), we would not be able to comprehend it. This is where we should leave it. We should not make any attempt to explain it. Particularly we should not invent or adopt a teaching such as the trinity doctrine to do so. Notice in this oneness spoken of here there is no mention of the Holy Spirit. This must be considered rather significant – especially as by then Ellen White had said that this was a person. We shall speak more of this later in this study.

Ellen White did say that Christ was of one substance with the Father. This is when she wrote

“With what firmness and power he uttered these words. The Jews had never before heard such words from human lips, and a convicting influence attended them; for it seemed that divinity flashed through humanity as Jesus said, “I and my Father are one.” The words of Christ were full of deep meaning as he put forth the claim that he and the Father were of one substance, possessing the same attributes. The Jews understood his meaning, there was no reason why they should misunderstand, and they took up stones to stone him.” (*Ellen G. White Signs of the Times 20th November 1893, 'The True Sheep Respond to the Voice of the Shepherd'*)

Some may say that Ellen White was here making a trinity confession (that Christ and the Father were “of one substance”) but she qualified what she meant by saying that this was inasmuch as the Father and the Son possessed “the same attributes”. It was not as one substance as in the trinity doctrine. We know this because 13 years later, as we have seen in the previous quote, she said the oneness that Christ had with His

Father before the foundation of the world is incomprehensible. We know too she said that in the incarnation, Christ exiled Himself from His Father, also that there had been a possibility of Christ sinning and losing His eternal existence. None of these things are compatible with 'one substance' trinity theology.

So it is that we have come a full circle. As we noted above, Jerry Moon wrote in the book *The Trinity* in 2002

"More recently, a further question has arisen with increasing urgency: was the pioneers' belief about the Godhead right or wrong? As one line of reasoning goes, either the pioneers were wrong and the present church is right, or the pioneers were right and the present Seventh-day Adventist Church has apostatized from biblical truth." (Jerry Moon Ph. D., *The Trinity*, chapter, 'Trinity and anti-trinitarianism in Seventh-day Adventist history, page 190)

It must be one or the other. As has been noted previously, both camps cannot be correct.

Seventh-day Adventists warned not to enter into speculation concerning God

We noted above (on page 14) that in the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, Dr Fernando Canale, in his treatise *Doctrine of God*, admits the following

"The concept of the Trinity, namely the idea that the three are one, is not explicitly stated but only assumed." (Dr Fernando L. Canale, *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology, Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, Volume 12, page 138, 'Doctrine of God'*)

As we noted too, Richard Rice, in his book *The Reign of God*, draws the same conclusion (see page 15 above). He explained, after quoting various Scriptures

"As these passages indicate, the idea of the trinity has precedents in the Bible, even though a full-fledged doctrine of the trinity is not to be found there." (Richard Rice, *The Reign of God, An Introduction to Christian Theology from a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective*, page 89, 'A constructive proposal', 1985)

Most theologians would make these or similar statements. This is because as Rice admits, nowhere in the Bible can any such teaching as the trinity doctrine be found – meaning it is merely speculation. Why though do people feel it necessary to go beyond what God has revealed?

Through Ellen White, Seventh-day Adventists have been repeatedly warned about speculating. This is especially concerning God's nature. To prove that point, just a small number of statements will be necessary.

Under the subtitle of "A False and a True Knowledge of God Speculative Theories", SDA's have been counselled through the spirit of prophecy

"The revelation of Himself that God has given in His word is for our study. This we may seek to understand. But beyond this we are not to penetrate." (Ellen G. White, *8th Volume Testimonies*, page 279, 'The essential knowledge', 1904)

This is exactly the opposite of what the trinitarians would have us believe. They say it is necessary to speculate about what God has not revealed in Scripture. The servant of the Lord then added

“The highest intellect may tax itself until it is wearied out in conjectures regarding the nature of God; but the effort will be fruitless. This problem has not been given us to solve. No human mind can comprehend God. Let not finite man attempt to interpret Him. Let none indulge in speculation regarding His nature. Here silence is eloquence. The Omniscient One is above discussion.” (*Ibid*)

It is a very serious matter that SDA trinitarians continue to disregard this counsel. We should learn to be silent concerning those things God has chosen not to reveal.

In 1903, Ellen White penned these words

“God's Word and His works contain the knowledge of Himself that He has seen fit to reveal to us. We may understand the revelation that He has thus given of Himself. But it is with fear and trembling and with a sense of our own sinfulness that we are to take up this study, not with a desire to try to explain God, but with a desire to gain that knowledge which will enable us to serve Him more acceptably.” (*Ellen G. White, Manuscript 132, Nov. 8, 1903, "God's Chosen People", 'A right knowledge of God'*)

The instruction given here is that even the things that God has revealed concerning Himself are not to be used in an attempt to explain Him. This of course would invalidate any effort to describe Him as is done by the trinitarians – meaning as in the trinity doctrine. Trinitarians say that their three-in-one teaching concerning God is based upon Biblical revelations (even though the doctrine itself is not found in Scripture) but here we are told not to use this information to such an end. We are clearly told only to use this revealed knowledge to serve God “more acceptably”. We are not to use it to speculate about that which God has chosen not to reveal. Note that Ellen White wrote these things during the Kellogg crisis that we have just spoken about. This is when he claimed to have come to believe in the trinity (see page 101).

There then came a most fearful warning for Seventh-day Adventists.

“Let no one venture to explain God. Human beings cannot explain themselves, and how, then, dare they venture to explain the Omniscient One? Satan stands ready to give such ones false conceptions of God.

To the curious I bear the message that God has instructed me not to frame answers to the questions of those who enquire in regard to the things that have not been revealed. The things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children. Beyond this, human beings are not to attempt to go. We are not to attempt to explain that which God has not revealed” (*Ibid*)

Again there is this emphasis to leave alone the un-revealed. Notice here Ellen White said that this was instruction given to her by God. She later made clear

“The Bible teaching of God is the only teaching that is safe for human beings to follow. We are to regulate our faith by a plain "Thus saith the Lord." (*Ibid*)

This counsel would invalidate the trinity doctrine as being a safe belief to hold. This is because it cannot be proven from Scripture. It is just speculation.

In this same testimony, another fearsome warning came from God's servant

"Let men beware how they seek to look into the mysteries of The Most High. As the ark of the Lord was being taken from the land of the Philistines into Canaan, the men of Bethshemesh, curious to know what made the ark so powerful, ventured to look into it. And God "smote of the men of Bethshemesh, because they had looked into the ark of Jehovah." (*Ibid*)

Repeatedly Ellen White warned not to speculate concerning the things that God has not revealed. Here are a few more comments from God's servant as regards to speculating.

"Our ministers must be very careful not to enter into controversy in regard to the personality of God. This is a subject that they are not to touch. It is a mystery, and the enemy will surely lead astray those who enter into it. We know that Christ came in person to reveal God to the world. God is a person, and Christ is a person. Christ is spoken of in the Word as "the brightness of His Father's glory, and the express image of His person." (*Ellen G. White, Ms 46, May 18th 1904*)

"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, 8th August 1905, 'Christ our only hope'*)

"Matters of vital importance have been plainly revealed in the Word of God. These subjects are worthy of our deepest thought. But we are not to search into matters concerning which God has been silent. May God help His people to think rationally. When questions arise upon which we are uncertain, we should ask, "What saith the Scriptures?"

Christ withheld no truths essential to our salvation. Those things that are revealed are for us and our children, but we are not to allow our imagination to frame doctrines concerning things not revealed." (*Ellen G. White, West Indian Messenger, 1st July 1912, 'Be not troubled over minor matters'*)

Note well the final sentence. This counsel forbids the framing of a trinity doctrine.

Much more from Ellen White could be quoted telling us not to speculate concerning those things that God has not revealed but it would only amount to a further re-emphasising of what we have read above.

Conclusions

There can be no doubt that the changeover from non-trinitarianism to trinitarianism was a very gradual process. It certainly did not happen overnight. It happened in stages.

Immediately following the death of Ellen White, there was a distinct push, by certain of our leadership, to change what we had taught, during the time of her ministry, about Christ. This openly came to the fore at the Bible Conference held at Takoma Park in 1919. Then, in 1931, the word *trinity* was introduced into our fundamental beliefs. A separate belief for the Holy Spirit was also added to our beliefs (which previously had not been done). Along with this, as we shall see later in this study, views of the Holy Spirit underwent change. All of this, in the process of time, eventually led to a full-blown trinity doctrine being voted into the beliefs of Seventh-day Adventism. This was in 1980. Since then, SDA's have been led to believe that God the Father, is not the one true God, that Christ is not really the Son of God, also that the Holy Spirit, instead of being both God the Father and Christ omnipresent, is another person exactly the same as the Father and the Son. This will be covered in later studies. With regards to God therefore, this entire 'reformation', since the death of Ellen White (1915), has led to wholesale changes being made in the thinking of SDA's.

Those desiring this change must have realised that even if it did eventually happen, it would be a long-drawn-out process. The thinking of SDA's worldwide needed changing. This was not only concerning the trinity doctrine itself but also our beliefs concerning God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. Whilst Ellen White was alive, the beliefs of early SDA's, regarding these divine personalities, would never have fitted into a trinitarian concept of God. Before a trinity doctrine could even be contemplated therefore, these beliefs needed changing.

There was also another huge obstacle to overcome. This was the presence of Ellen White. She regarded the non-trinitarian beliefs of early Seventh-day Adventists to be the truth. This is the reason why these beliefs were held for so long. This is also why, before changes could be made to these beliefs, the SDA's who held and taught them had to 'die off'. This is the reason why these non-trinitarian beliefs only gradually died off. It was because those who held them gradually died off. In part two we shall consider these things.

If you have any thoughts you may wish to share concerning this article, or the Godhead controversy itself, please feel free to contact me.

God continue to bless you as you seek for the truth.

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