

Biblical Research Institute Release – 9



GOD IN 3 PERSONS — IN THEOLOGY

Kwabena Donkor
Biblical Research Institute
May 2015

**GOD IN 3
PERSONS —
IN THEOLOGY**

**Kwabena Donkor
Biblical Research Institute
May 2015**

God in 3 Persons — in Theology

Within the past decade or so, the doctrine of the Trinity has become an issue both in the Seventh-day Adventist Church and in the wider Evangelical world.¹ Within the latter, the resurgence of Trinitarian discussions seems to center around the question of subordination with some links to gender issues.² The Seventh-day Adventist Church's situation, however, shows a resurgence of Arianism and anti-Trinitarianism with obvious links to the denomination's history on the subject. Some who take the anti-Trinitarian position have accused the Church of capitulating to what they see as a Roman Catholic doctrine, and therefore charge the Church with apostasy.³ This is a grievous charge that demands a response. This paper is motivated by the present situation in the Adventist Church, but a proper evaluation of the Adventist doctrine of the Trinity requires that it be placed within the wider discussion of the historical development of the doctrine and responses to it.

The doctrine of the Trinity marked the beginning of the development of Christian dogmas, namely those thoughts that have come to be accepted as expressions of the life of the Christian church.⁴ Like most dogmas, the doctrine of the Trinity developed as a reaction to what was perceived to be a theological misrepresentation within the church. Questions about who Jesus was (that is, Christological concerns) drove the Trinitarian discussions. Historically, the doctrine of the Trinity was first taken up by the early church before the doctrine of the nature of Christ became an issue, but the two were related. "The more emphatic the church became that Christ was God, the more it came under pressure to clarify how Christ related to God."⁵ Not surprisingly, the status of the Holy Spirit eventually became part of the discussion. The founda-

¹ See Denis Fortin, "God, the Trinity, and Adventism: An Introduction to the Issues," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17.1 (2006): 4.

² See Millard J. Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2009), 13–14.

³ See Jerry Moon, "The Quest for a Biblical Trinity: Ellen White's 'Heavenly Trio' Compared to the Traditional Doctrine," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17.1 (2006): 141.

⁴ See Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (New York: Touchstone, 1967), xxxviii.

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

tional issue with the doctrine of the Trinity as it developed was not how God is three and one, as if the ultimate concern is a mathematical one. The basic concern of the doctrine was how the one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It was the issues surrounding this basic concern that required attention then as they do for some now. In this presentation, we will provide a statement of the doctrine and trace the key dynamics and moments of its *development* and *reception* throughout Christian history until the present. After this discussion, which will necessarily be brief, the question of the Trinity within Adventism will be addressed.

The Doctrine of the Trinity and its Development

The doctrine of the Trinity, which started to be crafted at the beginning of the fourth century, is a *rational formulation* of who God is. It is a formulation and, strictly, not an explanation in the sense that the concept, which the doctrine seeks to express, entails a mystery. It is rational because the doctrine represents the formulators' attempt to make some conceptual sense of a reality Christians knew to be true on the basis of Scripture.

Early Insights: Apostolic Fathers and Apologists

The need for this formulation arose in connection with answering the question about the identity of Jesus. The New Testament incorporates some basic facts of Christian proclamation about Jesus. At Caesarea Philippi Peter confessed Jesus' divine connection (Matt 16:13–17; John 6:68, 69). In Acts 2 he portrays Jesus as the One who had sent the Holy Spirit from His exalted position on the right hand of God (v. 33). Peter also presents Jesus to the crowd as both Lord and Christ (v. 36). Both of these titles have divine undertones. Especially by calling Jesus *Lord*, Peter here bestows on Jesus the name of the God of Israel. Indeed, Jesus' divine preexistence is declared to predate His human existence (Phil 2:5, 6). These considerations explain the early Christian (mainly Jewish) practice of worshipping Jesus. Jesus was perceived to be divine, but this development was not without some difficulty.⁶ Ascribing divinity to Jesus, the Christ, in the context of Jewish monotheism raised the specter of divine plurality, which scandalized most Jews (John 10:33).

⁶ The practice of worshipping Jesus was not without difficulty even among the early Jewish Christians. One early brand of heretical Jewish Christianity was Ebionism. Not only did the Ebionites hold fast to the validity of the Law of Moses, in their writings ("Pseudo-Clement") they put Jesus on the same level as the prophets. Consequently, Ebionism was one of the first attempts to conceive Jesus Christ in purely human terms. See Bengt Häggglund, *History of Theology*, trans. Gene J. Lund (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 31–32.

As Christianity made its way into Greek culture, the potential was there for the idea of divine plurality to be equally repugnant to the platonically-inclined Gentile intelligentsia. The platonic God was one, simple and indivisible. Yet we find in the writings of the early Christian leaders oblique affirmative references to divinity in terms of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁷ Later Gentile theologians found a way to account for the potential philosophical problem in terms of the Neoplatonic *Logos* concept.

The apologists were the first to employ the *Logos* concept in an attempt to frame the relationship between Christ and the Father in intellectual terms. The concept was familiar to late Judaism and Stoicism. Basically, the idea was that the *Logos*, as divine Mind or intelligence, occupied an intermediary position between the Source of all being and the visible world. Justin Martyr argued along these lines, showing that the *Logos* had assumed shape and become a man in Jesus Christ. The functions of the *Logos*, however, preceded the incarnation, for Justin declared the *Logos* “to be the Father’s agent in creating and ordering the universe, and to reveal truth to men.”⁸ As to its nature, the *Logos* is distinguished from “other things.” The latter are “things made,” or “creatures,” but the *Logos* is God’s “offspring,” His “child,” and “unique Son.”⁹ Justin remarks:

“I shall give you another testimony, my friends,” said I, “from the Scriptures, that God begat before all creatures a Beginning, [who was] a certain rational power [proceeding] from Himself, who is called by the Holy Spirit, now the Glory of the Lord, now the Son, again Wisdom, again an Angel, then

⁷ In 1 Clement 46:6, we read: “Do we not have one God and one Christ and one Spirit of grace which was poured out upon us? And is there not one calling in Christ?” Similarly, in the introduction of Ignatius’ letter to the Ephesians, he writes of the Ephesians as “united and elect through genuine suffering by the will of the Father and of Jesus Christ our God” (quoted in Roger E. Olson and Christopher A. Hall, *The Trinity* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002], 17). In the Martyrdom of Polycarp, we also find the plurality slant. His confession before martyrdom clearly had a triadic tone: “O Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved Son Jesus Christ . . . I bless you because you have considered me worthy of this day and hour, that I might receive a place among the number of the martyrs . . . to the resurrection to eternal life . . . in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit (“*The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 14:1–2” in *The Apostolic Fathers*, 3rd edition, ed. Michael W. Holmes [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007], 321–323). Of the Apostolic Fathers generally, J. N. D. Kelly notes, “Of a doctrine of the Trinity in the strict sense there is of course no sign, although the Church’s triadic formula left its mark everywhere” (J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* [New York: Prince Press, 2003], 95).

⁸ Kelly, 97.

⁹ *Ibid.*

God, and then Lord and Logos; and on another occasion He calls Himself Captain, when He appeared in human form to Joshua the son of Nave (Nun). For He can be called by all those names, since He ministers to the Father's will, and since He was begotten of the Father by an act of will.¹⁰

In spite of Justin's firm belief in God's begetting of the Logos, he at the same time insisted on the equality of the Begetter and the Begotten.¹¹ Other apologists including Tatian, Theophilus of Antioch, and Athenagoras followed similar reasoning like Justin, with Irenaeus summing up their thoughts.¹² Irenaeus, without employing the Logos concept, wrote that "the Father is God, and the Son is God, for whatever is begotten of God is God."¹³ Irenaeus was writing to oppose Gnosticism. Gnostics were convinced that matter is evil, and therefore, devised ideas of intermediary beings designed to distance God from the world. Irenaeus clearly saw the implicit denial of the biblical creation and incarnation in Gnosticism. His response to the Gnostic distancing of God from the world was a proto-Trinity, where the Father works in the world with His "two hands": the Son and the Spirit. And to counter their idea of mediation, he insisted on the divinity of the Son and the Spirit.¹⁴ It should be noted that Irenaeus at this point is reflecting on divinity at the economic level.¹⁵

The apologists employed the Logos concept from contemporary philosophy to explain what would otherwise have been absurd to the Greek mind. Still, some took objection to the Logos formulation precisely because of the Greek concept of the timelessness of God, which elevated Him above change, movement, and diversity. This Greek idea makes it categorically impossible for God to appear and act in history. To get around this philosophical problem, the objectors were led to

¹⁰ "Dialogue of Justin, Philosopher and Martyr with Trypho, a Jew," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols., eds. A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, and A. C. Coxe (reprint of 1885 edition, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:227.

¹¹ Justin explains, "Just as we see happening among ourselves: for when we give out some word, we beget the word; yet not by abscission, so as to lessen the word [which remains] in us, when we give it out: and just as we see also happening in the case of a fire, which is not lessened when it has kindled [another], but remains the same; and that which has been kindled by it likewise appears to exist by itself, not diminishing that from which it was kindled" (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:227).

¹² Kelly, 98–108.

¹³ Quoted in Kelly, 107.

¹⁴ See Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2012), 62–67.

¹⁵ The economic level refers to the roles or functions performed by each Person of the Trinity in creation and redemption.

two divergent theological positions, both embracing a monarchical idea. First, dynamic monarchianism, with Paul of Samosata (Bishop of Antioch, ca. 260) as its chief proponent, suggested that although God's wisdom dwelt with the man Jesus, "it did not form an independent person within Him."¹⁶ Other dynamic monarchianists (e.g., *Theodotus* of Byzantium, 2nd century) suggested that Jesus lived as other men until the time of His baptism when Christ came over Him as a power and became active within Him from that point onwards. The second monarchical development was "modalism," with Sabellius (ca. 215) as its chief proponent. Modalism was keen to emphasize God's oneness. They likened the relationship between the three Persons with the way the sun and its warmth and light are. Sabellius is noted to have remarked that "God, with respect to hypostasis [underlying substance], is only one, but he has been personified in Scripture in various ways according to the current need."¹⁷ Both forms of monarchianism were condemned as heretical¹⁸ and the Logos formulation continued to be by and large embraced.

But, when the apologists employed the Logos concept, they unwittingly imported the implications of the concept. Even if the Logos was of the same divine essence, as they insisted, its begetting (generation) had to be at the beginning of time (Creation). The concept would also imply that the Logos was somewhat subordinate to the Father, notwithstanding the apologists' strong defense of the Logos' preexistence. In no one was this idea perhaps more evident than in Origen of Alexandria. Concerned to establish the uniqueness of God, Origen (ca. 200), perhaps more than others, affirmed the absolutely simple, intellectual nature of God along Greek philosophical lines. Thus he maintained that only the Trinity is truly incorporeal (having no physical body or form).¹⁹ Furthermore, bolstered by the Greek philosophical concept of immutability, even the Father's begetting of the Son could not be what constitutes Him as Father since He does not change—meaning "the Father must eternally be Father, and so the Son must eternally be."²⁰ The same strong philosophical concept of immutability, however, forced Origen, addressing God's redemptive activity in the world through His Son, to slip into sub-

¹⁶ Hägglund, 71.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁸ The bases of the early church's rejection of modalism were the following: on the one hand, dynamic monarchianism denied the church's standard understanding at the time of the Son's consubstantiality with the Father; on the other hand, modalism denied the doctrine of the three Persons, while both denied the doctrine of the Son's birth in eternity.

¹⁹ See Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity*, 74–80.

²⁰ Holmes, 76.

ordinationism (the Son and the Holy spirit are subordinate to the Father).²¹

The Logos formulation seemed to have survived until the challenge of Arius, the radical subordinationist. Before discussing Arius and Nicea, however, we should briefly mention Tertullian's (ca. 200) work in the West. Tertullian's work against Praxeas was most significant for the development of the Trinitarian doctrine, being instrumental in the development of nearly all the technical terminology that would become standard Trinitarian jargon. In *Against Praxeas* Tertullian was attacking someone who seemed to have modalistic monarchian views. Tertullian was particularly horrified by the implication of patripassianism (the notion that the Father suffered). And, while exegetically insisting on real differences between the Father and Son, Tertullian introduced language to help clarify the differentiation. He used the word *persona* in speaking about the Father, Son, and Spirit, and the word *substantia* ("substance") as an indication of something that exists. It is in this sense that the phrase "one substance, three persons" developed. In this, Tertullian went beyond Irenaeus because unlike the latter, his formulation refers to the internal life of God.

Arius, the Trinitarian Problem, and the Trinitarian Solution

Arius (ca. 310), a presbyter in the church of Alexandria, taught a radical form of subordinationism. Arius' point of departure, as with the Monarchians, was the Greek philosophical concept of the timelessness of God. According to this view, it is simply inconceivable that God could impart His essence in any way to anybody. In this metaphysical scheme, one is either a creator or a creature. For this reason Arius could not accept the idea of the eternal preexistence of the Son. Of Arius and others Athanasius remarks:

Now those who became apostates are these, Arius, Achilles, Aeithales, Carpones, another Arius, and Sarmates, sometime Presbyters: Euzoius, Lucius, Julius, Menas, Helladius, and Gaius, sometime Deacons: and with them Secundus and Theonas, sometime called Bishops. And the novelties they have invented and put forth contrary to the Scriptures are these following:—God was not always a Father, but there was a time when God was not a Father. The Word of God was not always, but originated from things that were not; for God that is, has made him that was not, of that which was not; wherefore there was a time when He was not; for the Son

²¹ Holmes, 80.

is a creature and a work. Neither is He like in essence to the Father; neither is He the true and natural Word of the Father; neither is He His true Wisdom; but He is one of the things made and created, and is called the Word and Wisdom by an abuse of terms, since He Himself originated by the proper Word of God, and by the Wisdom that is in God, by which God has made not only all other things but Him also.²²

The Ecumenical Council of Nicea was held in 325, during which time Arius' ideas were condemned. As a way of preserving orthodoxy, the Council adopted a creed, which the Arian party could clearly not subscribe to. The pertinent section of the creed stated, concerning Christ, "The only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father."²³ In an attempt to placate those who were uncomfortable with its Neoplatonic connotations, the creed clearly avoids the word "generation," being replaced with the concept that the Son is *homoousios* ("of the same substance") with the Father. Athanasius, the main opponent of Arius, was a unique Alexandrian theologian because he was not anxious to fit the Christian faith into the Greek philosophical system as his apologist predecessors did. He placed the question within a distinct order of salvation. Man was created in God's image and fell because of sin, whereupon death and corruption took over. Salvation, however, became possible because God's Son, the Logos became involved in humanity to restore man to God's likeness.²⁴ Athanasius made his argument from the order of salvation as follows:

The truth reveals that the Logos is not one of the created things: He is, rather, their Creator. For He has taken upon Himself the created, human body of man, in order that He, likewise a Creator, could renew this body and deify it in Himself, so that man, on the strength of his identity with Christ, might enter the kingdom of heaven. But man, who is a part of creation, could never become like God if the Son were not truly God. . . . Likewise, man would not have been freed from sin and damnation if the Logos had not taken upon Himself

²² "Deposition of Arius," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, 11 vols., eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (reprint of 1890 edition, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 4:70.

²³ www.creeds.net/ancient/nicene.htm, accessed March, 2014.

²⁴ Hägglund, 80–81.

our natural, human flesh. Neither could man have become Godlike if the Word which became flesh had not come from the Father—if He had not been His own true Word.”²⁵

The Nicene Creed, however, did not lay the Arian controversy to rest. By 373, when Athanasius, the staunchest defender of Nicene theology, died, the controversy was still in progress. His contribution, however, prepared the way for what is generally taken to be the final word for the Church on the matter at the Council of Constantinople in 381. The Cappadocian Fathers continued Athanasius’ work in different forms: Basil the Great (d. 379), Gregory of Nyssa (d. 394), and Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 390).

These Fathers approached the issue somewhat differently than Athanasius, beginning with the earlier “Eastern” theology, where the three persons tended to be considered as different expressions in the divine being. The Cappadocians’ work was largely in response to the anti-Trinitarian thoughts of Eunomius (d. 393). Eunomius argued rationally, and on the basis of a particular understanding of language (that words refer to entities), that the authentic essence or nature of God is “ingenerate/unbegotten.”²⁶ On the basis of Eastern Neoplatonic philosophical reflections on God, this ingenerate/ungenerated nature (*ousia*) has to be simple and indivisible. Furthermore, “names, properly used, correspond on a one-one mapping to entities.”²⁷ Therefore, to say God is ungenerated really says everything that can be said about His nature. It follows, then, that the Son has to be “generated/begotten,” *not* of God’s essence or *ousia*, but of His will and action. It is, therefore, categorically impossible for the Father to establish a Son of similar *ousia*.

The Cappadocians first of all denied the possibility of human language to define God’s nature, which they believed is inexpressible. According to Basil the Great, divine names are partial depictions of God. Thus “Father and Son” language does not describe *what* God is (the divine essence being inexpressible), but *how* God is.²⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, on his part showed first of all that the argument that God’s names really have referents leads to logical contradictions since, if that were the case, the several names of God must point to a multiplicity of divine beings. Gregory himself, however, avoids the problem of multiple divine beings when he refers to God as Father, Son, and Spirit, because these names, for him, are *how* God is in His simplicity, and not *what*

²⁵ Athanasius in *Orationes contra Arianos*, Discourse 2, 70, quoted in Hägglund, 82.

²⁶ See Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity*, 97–101, for a discussion on Eunomius’ theology.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 190.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

God is. In this way, the Cappadocian Fathers redefined classical Greek ontology such as *ousia* and *hypostasis* in personal and relational terms. Ultimately, Cappadocian Trinitarianism teaches that “the Godhead is simple and exists thrice over, in *hypostases* distinguished by relations of origin, and not otherwise.”²⁹ And Gregory of Nazianzus would argue that origination does not imply temporal separation any more than the fact that the sun is not prior to its light. Thus, the Son and the Spirit are “from” the Father, but not “after” the Father.³⁰

The Cappadocians went beyond Athanasius in the use of the Greek words *ousia* (“essence”) and *hypostasis* (“person”) to clarify what characterizes the divine nature and the three persons respectively, in and of themselves (the immanent Trinity). As noted in the West, the Church Father Tertullian had earlier constructed a similar model of God, using the Latin terms one “substance” (*substantia*) and three distinct “persons” (*personae*). Here in the East, the Cappadocians used *ousia* (“essence” or “substance”) as that which is common to the three persons, while *hypostasis* marks the special form of existence that distinguishes each of them. Thus the commonly known Trinitarian formula, “one essence, three Persons,” means that while they share a common essence (*ousia*), they each have individual existence, though not as centers of consciousness.

The discussion above provides the background for the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which was adopted at the Second Ecumenical Council held in Constantinople in 381. From the point of view of the Trinitarian discussion, this creed was an endorsement of Nicea, with the addition of an article on the Holy Spirit, describing Him as “the lordly and life-giving one, proceeding forth from the Father, co-worshipped and co-glorified with the Father and the Son, the one who spoke through the prophets.”³¹ The first part, similar to the Nicene Creed, reads:

We believe in one God the Father all-powerful, maker of heaven and of earth, and of all things both seen and unseen. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all the ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father, through whom all things came to be.³²

²⁹ Holmes, 116.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

³¹ Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols. (London: Shed & Ward Ltd., 1990), 1:24.

³² *Ibid.*

Although the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed was to a great extent the solution to a Greek-originated theological problem, Trinitarian reflection was by no means absent in the West. Here, the towering figure was Augustine. In spite of some arguments to the contrary, Augustine stood with the tradition of the East on the core issues of the Trinitarian question.³³ For our purposes, then, we need not get into the details of Augustine's Trinitarian theology, except to mention that he provided unique psychological analogies to the concept of the Trinity in his *De Trinitate*.

Summary of the Orthodox Christian Doctrine of the Trinity

In summary, the doctrine of the Trinity asserts some basic facts: there is one living true God; the one true God is manifested as Father, as Son, and as Holy Spirit; the difference between them is only in regard to their origin as expressed in terms of relations: relationally, the Father is ungenerated, the Son is generated, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, the one God of three Persons is in an absolute unity of being, consciousness, and will. These are the basic facts of the doctrine and the debates over the centuries concerning the issue of how to speak about the three Persons of the one God without contradicting a prior commitment to divine simplicity (that is, the indivisibility of the one God). The formula "one essence, three Persons" summarizes the discussion. But what these Fathers were trying to expound could be clarified by illustrating it in human terms. While the term "man" is common to all men (comparable to *ousia*), each man has distinctive characteristics (comparable to *hypostasis*) marking them off from everyone else. Applying these Greek categories to the divine nature, however, becomes tricky. First, consider the *ousia* of the divine Persons. Whereas the human essence that is common to all men is made up of "stuff"/"material," the Greek conception of the essence of God as "intellectual" or "mind" makes whatever is common to the Persons abstract, impersonal, and elusive. The divine essence or substance that is common to the three Persons is not material. Hence, the divine essence is reduced to attributes (wisdom, power, goodness, etc.). These are what they possess in common. But these ineffable or inexpressible attributes do not really constitute *nature*, and the Cappadocians realized it. Gregory of Nyssa explained:

We, following the suggestions of Scripture, have learnt that that nature is unnamable and unspeakable, and we say that every term either invented by the custom of men, or handed

³³ For a brief discussion on this debate, see Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity*, 129–132; 144–146.

down to us by the Scriptures, is indeed explanatory of our conceptions of the Divine Nature, but does not include the signification of that nature itself. . . . But in each of these terms we find a peculiar sense, fit to be understood or asserted of the Divine nature, yet not expressing that which that nature is in its essence³⁴

Second, consider the Cappadocians' use of the concept *hypostasis*, "person" (*persona* in Latin). Here also, whereas persons as individuals are autonomous in their consciousness and exercise of will, this is not so with God, because

although God's being is characterized by the hypostatic distinctions of Father, Son, and Spirit, all three persons are one in their will and activity. They are not autonomous persons in the modern nuance of "individual," each with its own separate "ego" and "center" of consciousness. Rather, they have always and will always purpose and operate with one will and action. They are one God, not three.³⁵

The Trinity since the Patristic Period

It is generally conceded that the end of the patristic era around 500 to 600 also marked the end of in-depth creative reflection on the Trinity.³⁶ Augustine became definitive for the West while the Cappadocians secured a resolution of the issue for the Greek Church. The rest of the first millennium would be occupied with the question of whether the Holy Spirit proceeded only from the Father or from the Father and the Son (the *filioque* controversy).

For the early centuries of the second millennium, European thinkers such as Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas engaged in philosophical-theological speculations to give logical support for the doctrine of the Trinity. Anselm reinforced Augustine's psychological model, but for some, this approach depersonalized the Holy Spirit. Not surprisingly, Richard of St. Victor attempted to show how the three persons of the Trinity could indeed be distinct persons by developing a social analogy/model of the Trinity in the West. Eventually, Aquinas sought to synthesize Augustine/Anselm's

³⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, "On 'Not Three Gods' to Ablabius," *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, 11 vols., eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York, 1885; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 5:332–333.

³⁵ Olson and Hall, 36.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 51

psychological model with the social model of Richard of St. Victor.³⁷

From the Reformation to the Enlightenment

The period under review marks an attitude towards the doctrine of the Trinity that ranges from unenthusiastic affirmation of the doctrine to its outright rejection.

The Reformation Period

The magisterial Reformers affirmed the traditional view of God's being as of one substance subsisting in three eternal persons—but not without some qualifications. While Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin affirmed the use of extrabiblical terms to protect the doctrine, they did not seem to appreciate the scholastic language and debates over such terms as “procession” and “relations.”³⁸ Calvin seemed to have views on the “persons” of the Trinity that were somewhat new. The orthodox view affirmed by the Cappadocians was that the works of the Trinity outside (*ad extra*) the Godhead were undivided. Calvin, however, saw the work of atonement as a work of God inside the Trinity. He basically did not trust the traditional relational models to adequately distinguish the Persons, and would rather speak of “incommunicable qualities.”³⁹

The radical Reformers, though, would carry their displeasure with the lack of biblical language in the Trinitarian formulation to a full blown anti-Trinitarianism. Michael Servetus (1511–1553), for whom the Bible had a unique absolute authority, was representative of this strand of anti-Trinitarianism. Believing that the use of Greek philosophical categories led to distortion of biblical truth, he became

³⁷ The Augustinian-Anselmian psychological model of the Trinity assumes that the divine being is intellectual in nature. Augustine's view is based on the assumption that the human mind has vestiges of the Triune God. For this reason, and because Augustine's views are rooted in platonic philosophy, it has been criticized as implying a modalistic view of the Trinity. The social model of the Trinity, however, tries to show that there are three genuinely distinct persons in the Godhead. Richard of St. Victor argues from a social understanding of love to assert that God's perfect love must embrace at least two persons. Then, assuming that there is always a tinge of selfishness in the mutual love of two persons, he argues further that God's love is perfected by a third person.

³⁸ See Olson and Hall, 68. Of Luther it is said that “against the medieval scholastic theologians and their heirs the German reformer vehemently rejected speculation into the inner workings of the triune life of the Godhead in eternity. He labeled scholastic metaphysics a ‘seductress’”

³⁹ Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer, eds., *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1988), 694; see also Alan Richardson and John Bowden, eds., *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1983), 588.

the first to question the doctrine of the Trinity during the Reformation era. Faustus Socinus (1539–1604) went further by arguing that the doctrine of the Trinity was unscriptural. While he agreed that it was proper to worship Christ, he held the view that the Bible teaches that Christ, though born of a virgin, was a human being who was used by God prior to His death, resurrection, ascension, and admission into divine glory.⁴⁰ Socinus also believed that the orthodox distinction between “substance” and “person” was artificial and illogical. What he saw as absurdities in scholastic speculations about these matters, he believed, proved his point. John Kent traces the rise of Unitarianism in sixteenth-century England and Hungary as an anti-Trinitarian form of Christianity to Socinus and the Racovian Catechism.⁴¹ Indeed, the founding of Socinus’ Minor Reformed Church of Poland “may have been the first organized expression of Unitarianism.”⁴² Furthermore, Kent suggests that Unitarianism was easily adaptable to the Enlightenment.⁴³

The Enlightenment

Intellectual developments from the period of the Enlightenment in Western Europe up to the end of the nineteenth century were negative towards the doctrine of the Trinity. Particularly damaging was the rise of deism or so-called “natural religion” during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. With its penchant for a universal religion based on human religious sensibilities and not revelation, deism saw the doctrine of the Trinity to be mysterious and even irrational.⁴⁴ De-

⁴⁰ See Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity*, 171. His teachings, preserved in the Racovian Catechism of the Polish Brethren (1605), show “that God is unipersonal, and must necessarily be, since a person is ‘an individual intelligent essence,’ and therefore if God is one in essence, he must be one in person” (Ibid.).

⁴¹ John Kent, “Unitarianism,” in Alan Richardson and John Bowden, 590–591.

⁴² Olson and Hall, 77.

⁴³ See Kent, 591.

⁴⁴ Voltaire’s mocking of the doctrine is a case in point: “There are heretics who might not be viewed as Christians. They happen to regard Jesus as savior and mediator, but they dare to hold that nothing is more unreasonable than what is taught among Christians concerning the trinity of persons in one single divine essence, the second of which is begotten by the first, and the third of which proceeds from the two others. That this unintelligible doctrine is not found in Scripture. That not one passage can be produced to support it, for which a clearer, more natural meaning, a meaning closer to common sense and basic and unchanging truth, can be found without departing from the spirit of the text... That it is a contradiction to say that there is only one God and that nevertheless there are three persons, each one truly God. That this distinction, one in essence, and three in persons, is nowhere in Scripture. That it is obviously false, because it is clear that there are no fewer essences than persons, or persons than essences... That from this it seems that the state of the question between them and the orthodox turns on whether there are three distinctions

ism was a rationalistic response to Christianity in the cultural context of the European Enlightenment, hence its search for a reasonable Christianity. Among the more influential deists who espoused a “reasonable Christianity” were John Locke (1632–1704), John Toland (1670–1772), and Matthew Tindal (1656–1733).

But there was another response to Christianity during the Enlightenment period that, though not rationalistic in nature, gave the Trinitarian doctrine a tepid reception. This response was the brand of Pietism during the European Enlightenment to which Friedrich Schleiermacher (1786–1834), now considered the father of liberalism, originally belonged. Theologically, Schleiermacher sought to subject doctrinal correctness to what he described as human universal “God-consciousness.” While Schleiermacher may not in any way be classed with anti-Trinitarians such as Severus, Socinus, or the deists, the judgment is true that “Schleiermacher’s revision and reconstruction of Christian doctrine represented permission to question classical dogmatic formulations such as the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity without joining the fringe groups that openly rejected classical Christianity.”⁴⁵ The same may be said of Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889). Committed to the Kantian epistemological paradigm,⁴⁶ Ritschl lost interest in what he saw as metaphysical speculation or dogmas about God-in-Godself. Turning to the ethical value of Christianity and its doctrines, he focused, instead, on the moralizing of Christian dogmas.

The net effect of these developments was that by the end of the nineteenth century the doctrine of the Trinity was in a state of neglect.

The Revival of Trinitarianism in the Twentieth Century

Two intellectual currents provided the immediate backdrop for the revival of Trinitarian doctrine at the beginning of the twentieth century. On the one hand, there was a tradition of philosophy that ascribed a common content to the word “God.” The suggestion that all religions of humanity have this core content seemed to make Christianity’s unique dogmas such as the Trinity scandalous. Schleiermacher’s grounding of Christian religious thought in human conscious-

in God of which we have no idea, and between which there are certain relations of which we have no idea either” (Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity*, 178).

⁴⁵ Olson and Hall, 92.

⁴⁶ Immanuel Kant, (1724–1804) in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965), had split reality into the realms of phenomena and noumena. The world of phenomena was the world of sense perception, the world of knowledge. But things-in-themselves that belonged to the world of noumena were beyond reason and could not be known. Metaphysics belonged to this realm.

ness harks back to this tradition. On the other hand, a component of nineteenth-century Roman Catholic natural theology gave credence to the notion of God consciousness in all humanity.

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) inaugurated this revival, going against the current of universal religion and emphasizing the doctrine of the Trinity as that which is unique about the Christian doctrine of God. Barth ties the knowledge of God as triune to revelation: “if God’s Word has the structure of revealer, revelation, and revealedness, then God must also be triune as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”⁴⁷ In other words, God is at once the one who reveals Godself, that which is revealed, and the effect of this self-revelation on the people to whom God reveals Godself. To Barth, then, revelation has a triune structure since, in his own words, “God reveals God by means of God.” Significantly, Barth also brought together the economic and immanent Trinities. His view was that if revelation is truly revelation *of God*, then it must be in some way God Himself.⁴⁸ This latter contribution was significant in the sense that it introduced an element of historicity in the being of God that would be taken up by future theologians.

The German Jesuit priest Karl Rahner, arguably the counterpart to Karl Barth in Roman Catholic theology, espoused a view of the Trinity that has come to be dubbed the “Rahner rule.” “The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity,”⁴⁹ Rahner observed. He offered this view as a solution to a problem he perceived since Thomas Aquinas, where the doctrine of the Trinity has been detached from salvation history. Rahner’s concern was that an overemphasis on the inner life of God had led to a neglect of the Trinity and its connection to the doctrine of salvation. Hence the value of the so-called “Rahner rule” is the dawning of the gesture “towards the narratives of gospel history as key data—perhaps the only data—to which the doctrine of the Trinity must be responsible.”⁵⁰

By insisting on the identity between the economic and immanent Trinities, Rahner was by no means unmindful of the risk of a tritheistic (three gods) interpretation. He himself was concerned about the danger of reading three conscious entities into the patristic use of the

⁴⁷ Olson and Hall, 96–97.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴⁹ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 22; quoted in Olson and Hall, 98. The economic Trinity is the doctrine concerning how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to the world. The immanent Trinity refers to their relationship with each other. The word economic is used from the Greek *oikonomikos*, which means relating to arrangement of activities.

⁵⁰ Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity*, 11.

word “persons.” He expressed himself clearly regarding the three persons of the Trinity—that there are not three consciousnesses in God, but only one consciousness that subsists in a threefold way.⁵¹ Still, it seemed that the move towards a contemporary understanding of the word “person” in Trinitarian discussions would be inevitable.

The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann is one who took Rahner’s rule seriously and developed a Trinitarian theology aimed at taking away Trinitarian thought from “some heavenly and eternal ménage-à-trois’ to the world of history, struggle, sin, pain, and death.”⁵² This historical emphasis by Moltmann leads him to a Trinitarian doctrine that is not only non-hierarchical but also personalistic in terms of the contemporary understanding of “person.”⁵³ Other significant theologians who have explored the theological value of the Trinity in historical terms include John Zizoulas, Leonard Hodgson, and Leonardo Boff.⁵⁴

The Seventh-day Adventist Doctrine of the Trinity

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has succinctly expressed itself on the doctrine of the Trinity in her Fundamental Beliefs numbers two through five. In order to evaluate the charges against the Church mentioned at the beginning of this paper, it will be important to set out clearly what the Church’s position on the Trinity is.

What the Trinity Is

The fourth Fundamental Belief, which deals directly with the Trinity, has only this to say about the being of God: “There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal Persons.” The statement seems to deliberately attempt to state only the basic facts about God’s nature—one eternal God who has been revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It does not elaborate on the nature of God’s eternity; neither does it address how the one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, nor the nature of the unity amongst them. In compari-

⁵¹ Olson and Hall, 99.

⁵² Olson and Hall, 101. Following Barth’s identification of God being with His act, Moltmann closely identified God with the cross that, for Moltmann, is the heart of Christian theology.

⁵³ Thus Moltmann observes, “I myself have tried to think through the theology of the cross in Trinitarian terms and to understand the doctrine of the Trinity in the light of the theology of the cross. In order to grasp the death of the Son in its significance for God himself, I found myself bound to surrender the traditional distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity, according to which the cross comes to stand only in the economy of salvation, but not within the immanent Trinity” (Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* [New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991], 160).

⁵⁴ See Olson and Hall, 103–115, for brief introductions to these theologians’ views on the Trinity.

son with the traditional Christian doctrine, the Adventist statement is significant because in the polemic context of its formulation the traditional doctrine sought to address precisely the very issues that the Adventist statement is silent on. The traditional formula “one essence, three Persons” is an explicatory concept intended to clarify the nature of the unity, identity, and relations of the three Persons. Absent from the Adventist statement is the ontologically pregnant statement of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed, “Light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father.”⁵⁵

In the third, fourth, and fifth Fundamental Beliefs, where the Father, Son, and Spirit are addressed specifically, each of the Persons are simply introduced with the phrase “God the eternal.” Beyond this phrase, what we have are the activities of each of the Persons of the Trinity. The Adventist doctrine, therefore, seems content to state the eternity of the Trinity without elaboration, and to move on to some details of the activities of the three Persons. Here again, there is no attempt to theorize about the relationship between the eternal Trinity and their activities in the economy of creation and redemption. The Adventist doctrine, however, appears to remove any hint of subordination when it affirms in the statement on the Father, “the qualities and powers exhibited in the Son and the Holy Spirit are also revelations of the Father.”

In summary, the Adventist doctrine of the Trinity in the Fundamental Beliefs, unlike the orthodox doctrine, is consciously biblical in its key dogmatic affirmations about the Trinity—God as one is Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, and the three are equally eternal as Persons—and in its lack of speculation. But this fact needs to be shown.⁵⁶

God is One

The biblical evidence for the oneness of God spans the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament Israel’s *shema* is well known: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!” (Deut 6:4, NAS). But equally instructive is the context in which it was given. The *shema* comes on the heels of Moses reminding the people that the miracles that brought about their deliverance from Egypt as well as the theophany at Sinai were to let the people “know that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him” (Deut 4:35, ESV). In the book of

⁵⁵ Tanner, 1:5.

⁵⁶ No full-blown discussion of the biblical evidence in support of the doctrine of the Trinity is intended. We only wish to provide some key biblical support for the basic outline of the Adventists’ affirmation of the Trinity. For a detail discussion, see Fernando Canale, “Doctrine of God,” in Raoul Dederen, ed., *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 105–159.

Isaiah God declares of Himself that before Him no God was formed and neither shall there be any after Him (Isa 43:10).

The Old Testament's concept of God's oneness is carried over into the New Testament. Mark 12:28–34 records Jesus' use of the *shema* to instruct an inquiring scribe of one's duty of love towards God, and John has Jesus referring to the deity as "the only God/the only true God" (John 5:44; 17:3). Theologically, the oneness of God for Paul provides the basis for one method of salvation for all (Rom 3:30).

It is of the utmost importance to notice that these texts assert the oneness of God dogmatically without any hints about the inner structure or nature of this one God. Thus, the Adventist statement on the Trinity is biblical, not only in affirming the biblical fact of God's oneness, but also in desisting from making statements about the nature of the one God.

God is Three

A truth is not only biblical when the Bible directly states it with a proof text. Sound theological reasoning from biblical principles often leads to biblical truth. No text of Scripture specifically says that God is three Persons; but theological reasoning on the basis of biblical principles leads to that conclusion. Edward Bickersteth's theological reasoning around biblical data on this matter is as good as any in establishing the triune Godhead. Speaking of God, he writes:

He reveals himself by his names, his attributes, and his acts. And, therefore, if, combined with assertions that God is one, we find three revealed in scripture to whom the same names, attributes, and acts are ascribed, the same so far as a personal distinction allows; if we look vainly for any fourth Divine one, or any intimation for more than three; if we connect with this the intimate and necessary union affirmed to exist betwixt the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit, as when the Lord Jesus says, "I and my Father are one," and when Paul says, "The Spirit searches the depths of God;" if, then, we find that every Christian is baptized into one name,—the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,—we are led swiftly and irresistibly up to the doctrine (call it by what name you will) of the Trinity in Unity.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Edward Bickersteth, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1965), 150.

Based on the reasoning above, the following summary of biblical evidence becomes pertinent in the establishment of the divinity of the Three:⁵⁸

1. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are eternal (Rom 16:26; John 8:58; Mic 5:2; Heb 9:14; Deut 33:27).
2. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit created all things (1 Cor 8:6; Ps 100:3; Col 1:16; Job 33:4).
3. The Three are each omnipresent (Jer 23:24; Matt 28:20; Ps 139:7; Acts 17:28, 29).
4. The Three are each omniscient (Acts 15:18; John 21:17; 1 Cor 2:10; Heb 4:13).
5. The Three are each true and good (John 7:28; 17:17; Ps 34:8; John 10:11; 14:6; 1 John 5:6).
6. They each have a self-regulating will (Eph 1:11; Matt 11:27; John 17:24; 1 Cor 12:11).
7. They are each the fountain of life (Deut 30:20; Ps 36:9; John 3:8; 5:21; Deut 30:20).
8. They each sanctify us (Phil 4:13; 1 Cor 1:2; Eph 3:16; 1 Thess 5:23; 1 Pet 1:2; Jude 1).
9. Each fills our souls with divine love (1 John 5:1; 2:15; 2 Cor 5:14; Rom 15:30; Col 1:8; Jude 21).
10. Each gives divine law (Neh 8:8; Ps 19:7; Acts 13:2; Rom 8:2; Gal 6:2; Col 3:16).
11. Each dwells in believers' hearts (Eph 3:17; John 14:17; 2 Cor 6:16; Col 1:27; Isa 57:15).
12. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are, each by Himself, the supreme Jehovah and God: (a) "I am Jehovah thy God" (Exod 20:2); (b) "Jehovah our God" (Isa 4:3; cf. Matt 3:3) and "the Highest" (Luke 1:76; Matt 10:11); (c) "Jehovah God" (Ezek 8:1, 3) and "the Highest" (Luke 1:35). Yet God is one (Deut 6:4).

The Three are Persons

The biblical testimony does not just present the Three as sharing names, attributes etc., and therefore derivatively divine in each case; key passages such as Ephesians 1:3–14 and John 14 present them as distinct centers of consciousness. Since the Adventist approach is not burdened by the Greek notion of *ousia* in conceptualizing the being of God as one, a plain historical reading of the biblical text leads to the conclusion that "in the being of God is an essential coprimordial of

⁵⁸ The summary provided is partly adapted from Robert D. Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publication, 2005), 108.

three coequal, coeternal, nonoriginated persons. Moreover, Adventism conceives the idea of persons in its biblical sense, as referring to three individual centers of intelligence and action.”⁵⁹ We should add quickly though that

beyond such a unity of action, however, it is necessary to envision God as the one single reality which, in the very acts by which He reveals Himself directly in history, transcends the limits of our human reason In no way could human minds achieve what the classical doctrine about the Trinity claims to perceive, namely, the description of the inner structure of God’s being.⁶⁰

Given Adventists’ commitment to biblical inspiration, the inability of human reason to describe the inner structure of God’s being should not distract from the fact that “in Scripture God has revealed His transcendent nature as Trinity, namely three distinct divine Persons who act directly and historically in history and constitute the one divine Trinitarian being.”⁶¹ This conclusion has a significant bearing on the oft-discussed concepts of the immanent and economic Trinities. The non-timeless (historical) view of God in the Adventist approach removes, at least intellectually, the need to posit the gap between those two conceptions of the Trinity. “Adventists envisage the relation between the immanent and economic Trinity as one of identity rather than correspondence. The works of salvation are produced in time and history by the immanent Trinity . . . by way of the different Persons, conceived as centers of consciousness and action.”⁶² Thus it appears that Adventists were already ahead of the “Rahner rule.”

What the Trinity is *Not*

On the surface, it would seem that the Adventist view of the Trinity is the same as the traditional Christian concept. With traditional Christianity, Adventists can sing the line in John B. Dykes hymn, *Holy, Holy, Holy*, “God in three Persons, blessed Trinity.”⁶³ But the truth is that the Adventist doctrine of the Trinity is not, theologically, identical with the traditional Christian doctrine. Adventists, therefore, subscribe to the ecumenical creeds on this doctrine only in their

⁵⁹ Canale, 150.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 138.

⁶² Ibid., 150.

⁶³ *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1985), No. 73.

basic affirmation of the triune God, but not to its traditional Christian interpretation.

What “God Is One” does not mean

Traditional Christianity’s affirmation of the oneness of God is accompanied by an attempt to elaborate on the inner structure of the one God. In the Trinitarian debates of the fourth century and medieval period, the opposing parties shared the philosophical notion of the being of God being *simple*. In that context, the notion that Jesus of Nazereth was divine erected an almost insurmountable intellectual barrier. The notion of divine simplicity meant, among other things, indivisibility and un-differentiation. The challenge the orthodox party faced was to show how Jesus and the Holy Spirit could be divine entities and still maintain divine simplicity. The Nicene-Constantinople Creed’s apparent solution was to predicate one essence of God, ensuring that it is intellectual in nature. John Zizoulas’ reading of the history would suggest that the Cappadocians advanced this thought a little bit farther away from the materialistic connotation in the idea of divine essence by recasting *ousia* in personal terms. He takes the view that “St Basil, primarily, and St Gregory Nazianzen and St Gregory Nyssen with him, took the classical language of Greek ontology—*ousia*, *hypostasis*, etc.—and redefined it in personal and relational terms. The basic nature of reality was no longer substance, but relationship.”⁶⁴

On account of this traditional understanding of the oneness of God in the Trinitarian formulation, it seems clear that when Adventists affirm that God is one they mean something different than what the tradition affirms. Without a burden to define rationally God’s oneness, Adventists are uncomfortable with interpreting or defining it with reference to substance in such terms as simplicity, un-differentiation, etc.

What “God Is Three” does not mean

The concept of the simplicity of God particularly challenges the traditional doctrine when it comes to the notion of three Persons. Since the essence (*ousia*) that the three Persons share could not be differentiated, the Persons could not be distinguished on the basis of their essence. The solution of the tradition, especially as enunciated by the Cappadocians, was to employ two series of concepts: first, one divinity, one essence (*ousia*), one nature (*physis*); and the second, three substances (*hypostaseis*) three properties (*idiotetes*), three per-

⁶⁴Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity*, 12–13.

sons (*prosopa, personae*).⁶⁵ In the second concept, the notion of properties became important for distinguishing the three Persons. The Three were distinguished by their special characteristics or properties. Specifically, their characteristics are the following: the Father has the property of being “ungenerated,” the Son has the characteristic of being “generated,” and the Holy Spirit has the characteristic of “proceeding” from the Father. But it is important to make the point that these characteristics are not differences in the divine essence, but only in their *relationships to each other*. When the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) affirmed that “this Holy Trinity, which is undivided according to its common essence but distinct according to the properties of its persons,”⁶⁶ the Council was alluding to the Cappadocian formulation.

Whether the “relations” solution solves the problem is a subject of some debate. Colin Gunton, for example, criticizes Augustine on the issue. He thinks that to view the category of “relation” as a logical rather than an ontological predicate is erroneous, and on that account claims that Augustine “is precluded from being able to make claims about the being of the particular persons, who, because they lack distinguishable identity tend to disappear into the all-embracing oneness of God.”⁶⁷ Be that as it may, in comparison with the Adventist conception of the Three, one cannot avoid sensing the fuzziness in the distinctions being made in the traditional doctrine.

What “God Is Three Persons” does not mean

The Adventist view of the Persons of the Trinity as centers of consciousness and action could not be farther from the traditional notion of “person.” Earlier we noted the summary of Cappadocian Trinity—namely, that the Godhead is simple and exists thrice over, in *hypostases* distinguished by *relations of origin*, and not otherwise. Thus, besides their relations, which we have outlined as “unbegotten,” “begotten,” and “proceeding,” nothing else may be said about these *hypostases* or Persons. The situation was the same with Augustine, who, being uncomfortable with the word “person,” suggested that the term is used “not that it might be [completely] spoken, but that it might not be left [wholly] unspoken.”⁶⁸ Augustine “takes the

⁶⁵ See Tillich, 77.

⁶⁶ Tanner, 1:230.

⁶⁷ Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 38–39, quoted in Olson and Hall, 45.

⁶⁸ Augustine, “On the Holy Trinity 5.9,” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, 14 vols. ed. Philip Schaff (reprint of 1886 edition, Peabody, MA: Hendricksen, 1994), 3:92.

ideas of eternal generation and procession and uses them to define the relations. Persons, thus, are reduced to the relations of begetting and proceeding There are reasons to wonder whether this view does justice to the biblical revelation about three different and independent subjects.”⁶⁹ Besides, the reduction of *hypostases* (persons) to the relations mentioned above leaves open the question of monarchianism.

The Challenge of the Adventist Doctrine

We have said that the defining characteristic of the Seventh-day Adventist approach to the doctrine of the Trinity is to state dogmatically the biblical positions on the relevant points without any great effort at explaining its logic. It seems that the cultural context of the patristic and medieval periods forced the hand of the Church Fathers to indulge in the speculative explanations of the inner nature of the triune God. It seemed impossible, given the common cultural understanding of the notion of divine simplicity, to assert the divinity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit without attempting to explain how that could be. Without the explanation, the challenges posed by Arius, and later by Eunomius, seemed quite cogent. Especially the risk of tritheism seemed real, as the debates showed. The Christian tradition took pains to avoid the risk of tritheism both at the immanent and economic levels of the Trinity. At the immanent level, the Persons were distinguished only in terms of relations of origin, and at the economic level the tradition maintained that divine operations were indivisible because of the indivisibility of the divine nature.⁷⁰

The Adventist position, based on Scripture, effectively eliminates the gap between the immanent and economic Trinity. Moreover, it conceives the Persons as centers of consciousness in opposition to the Christian tradition.⁷¹ It does this not on the basis of logic, but on the force of the testimony of Scripture. The danger of tritheism involved

⁶⁹ Canale, 144.

⁷⁰ Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity*, 108.

⁷¹ On these points there is evidence in the writings of Ellen G. White to support this position. For example, she wrote, “The personality of the Father and the Son, also the unity that exists between Them, are presented in the seventeenth chapter of John, in the prayer of Christ for His disciples: ‘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. The unity that exists between Christ and His disciples does not destroy the personality of either. They are one in purpose, in mind, in character, but not in person. It is thus that God and Christ are one” (Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1963], 421–422).

in the Adventist position is real.⁷² Fernando Canale observes that the danger of tritheism becomes real when the oneness of God is reduced to a mere unity conceived in analogy to a human society or a fellowship of action.⁷³ But it would seem that the mere lack of any relevant human analogies makes any effort at explaining futile. The tradition read about the oneness of God in Scripture, defined it as *ousia*, and worked out an explanation of the three Persons accordingly. The issue is how one may *define* the “One” and relate it to the three Persons without falling into tritheism. It may be that theology needs to acknowledge its impotence in this matter. The answer may be that we should just establish the biblical facts and go as far as the Bible leads us. The Bible seems not to go into the issue of *how* God is One, and we should not either. Just because the Christian tradition dealt with it does not mean we have to do the same. We may state the Bible’s view of God as One and Three without trying to explain it. Referring to late patristic efforts at explanations with words such as *circumcessio* (Latin) and *perichoresis* (Greek),⁷⁴ Robert Culver remarks, “In truth, all the terms *perichoresis* and *circumcessio* provide is names for our ignorance (hardly biblical mystery) in an exalted area of reality too high for us likely ever to learn anything about.”⁷⁵ From a similar perspective Ellen G. White wrote:

“The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever.” Deuteronomy 29:29. 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. 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. None are to indulge in speculation regarding His nature. Here silence is eloquence. The Omniscient One is above discussion.⁷⁶

⁷² See Canale, 150: “Consequently, the indivisibility of God’s works in history is not conceived by Adventists as being determined by the oneness of essence—as taught by the Augustinian classical tradition—but rather by the oneness of the historical task of redemption.”

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ The Greek and Latin words refer to the co-inherence of the persons of the Trinity in one another.

⁷⁵ Culver, 118.

⁷⁶ White, *The Ministry of Healing*, 429.

Recent Anti-Trinitarianism in the Adventist Church

After assessing a number of the anti-Trinitarian publications that have appeared in the Adventist Church in recent times, Gerhard Pfandl takes the view of Lynnford Beachy as expressive of the main tenor of the publications: “The church as a whole rejected the doctrine of *the Trinity*, and it was not until many years after the death of Ellen G. White that the Adventist church changed their [sic] position in regards to *the Trinity*.”⁷⁷ Furthermore, “apart from a few biblical arguments most of the arguments advanced to promote this idea are historical, with the focus on our pioneers and Ellen White.”⁷⁸

The historical validity of this broad charge has been extensively evaluated elsewhere,⁷⁹ and it may not be profitable to go over the arguments here. However, it seems worthwhile to appraise the charge in the context of the present paper’s discussion of the Adventist doctrine of the Trinity vis-à-vis the traditional formulation. Granting that not all the early negative attitudes of our Church towards the Trinity were borne out of a proper biblical interpretation,⁸⁰ we have to begin by asking the question, what did the pioneers reject? It is obvious from the historical evaluations that the pioneers were misreading the classical Christian doctrine of the Trinity.⁸¹ Consequently, the charge that the pioneers rejected the Trinity, and that therefore we should also reject

⁷⁷ Gerhard Pfandl, “The Doctrine of the Trinity Among Seventh-day Adventists,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17.1 (2006): 160.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ For a sample, see Merlin Burt, “History of the Seventh-day Adventist Views on the Trinity,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17.1 (2006): 125–139; Moon, 140–159; Woodrow Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John Reeve, *The Trinity: Understanding God’s love, His plan of salvation and Christian relationships* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002), 190–238; Canale, 148–150.

⁸⁰ Burt, 128: “Early Adventists strove to be true to Scripture. When they read ‘first-born of every creature,’ they took it at face value. Other Bible phrases, such as ‘only begotten Son of God,’ also were understood on a literal English level.”

⁸¹ See Moon, 143, 153–154. Indeed, in thus reacting to the classical doctrine, the evidence shows that many of our pioneers misunderstood it, taking it to mean some form of monarchianism. Furthermore, in their own attempt to defend the deity of Christ, some ended up postulating a Christ who was not altogether divine. For example, Uriah Smith, *Thoughts Critical and Practical on the Book of Revelation* (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1881), 59, wrote, “Moreover he is ‘the beginning of the creation of God.’ Not the beginner, but the beginning, of the creation, the first created being, dating his existence far back before any other created being, next to the self-existent and eternal God.” For a full discussion of the pioneers misunderstanding of the classical Trinitarian doctrine, see Erwin Roy Gane, “The Arian and Anti-Trinitarian Views Presented in Seventh-Day Adventist Literature and the Ellen G. White Answer” (unpublished M. A. thesis, Andrews University, 1963).

it, carries two implications: (1) that the Adventist Church today holds the classical Christian Trinitarian view that the pioneers rejected, and (2) that there cannot be a biblical Trinitarian view that is different from the classical view. Both implications are unwarranted. On the one hand, we have tried to show in this presentation that on the key themes of the Trinitarian doctrine, the Adventist belief as expressed in the statement of Fundamental Beliefs is radically different from the traditional Christian doctrine. The Adventist statement “There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal Persons” is not the same as the Christian tradition’s formulation of God as “one essence, three Persons.” On the other hand, in spite of the lack of specific proof texts on “God in three Persons,” we have presented evidence on how sound theological reasoning leads inevitably to the triune God. In the light of this evaluation, it would seem that to continue to charge the Church with apostasy on the grounds that it believes in “the Trinity” would evidence lack of careful theological thinking.

Conclusion

The doctrine of the Trinity arose in the context of defending the deity of Jesus Christ. The early Christians encountered Jesus of Nazareth as a divine *persona*, and as we have seen, the inspired writers of the New Testament expressed this sense of Him. Although hints of divine plurality were already evident in the Old Testament, it was the incarnation and life of Jesus on earth that brought the question of divine plurality to a head. The early believers linked Jesus’ divinity to salvation—namely, His ability to grant eternal life. In the context of the Gentile mission, however, discussions about Jesus’ divinity were forced to move away from soteriological considerations to philosophical formulations about the inner life of God. In the early debates of the fourth century Athanasius continued to ground his defense of Jesus’ divinity on soteriology, although eventually more philosophical argumentation took over, even well into the modern period. It is this philosophic form of Trinitarian doctrine that the early Adventists encountered. Rethinking of the Trinitarian doctrine has taken a different turn only in the past few decades. As we have noted, although the traditional doctrine is basically biblical in its affirmation of the Godhead, its traditional philosophical cast led most of the early Adventists to oppose it as unbiblical. History shows, however, that eventually the opposition to the basic doctrine of God in three Persons was dropped. Today, Seventh-day Adventists affirm a biblical doctrine of the Trinity shorn of philosophic trappings. They follow the Bible in its dogmatic portrayal of three divine Persons without the burden to offer a rational explanation. The Adventist doctrine of the Trinity resembles

the traditional doctrine only on the surface, but it is radically different in its interpretation or theological formulation. It is a mistake to reject a truly biblical doctrine of the Trinity on the basis of historical philosophical squabbles about the doctrine. That approach would represent a theological equivalent to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. But this should not happen because of the immense value of the doctrine, of which Catherine Mowry LaCugna notes:

Because it is a doctrine about the God who shares life with us in an economy of redemption, it is also a doctrine about salvation. Further, because it uses the idea of “person” and “relation” to affirm that God is essentially personal and relational, the doctrine of the Trinity is also the foundation for a theology of the human person, and a theology of right relationship. Finally, because it affirms that persons, whether divine or human, are made to exist in loving communion with one another, the doctrine of the Trinity is also the foundation for a vision of society and a vision of the church which is to be a sign to the world of the ultimate destiny of all creatures. But even more, out of such a view of the Trinity emerge a number of principles that have a direct bearing on ethics, spirituality, ecclesiology and politics.⁸²

On the significance of a proper understanding of the Trinity for the doctrine of salvation, M. L. Andreasen hit the nail on the head. He seemed to be reflecting on the Adventist pioneers’ postulation of a derived divinity of Christ when he wrote:

If Christ is not God essentially in the highest sense, if He is not self existing, then we have a saviour who is not God in himself, who owes his life to another, who has had a beginning and may, therefore, have an end. Thus Christ’s saving work sinks into insignificance. This is belittling and degrading to God and to His character.⁸³

⁸² Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “The Practical Trinity,” *Christian Century* 109.22 (1992): 681.

⁸³ M. L. Andreasen, *The Faith of Jesus* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1949): 22.

Biblical Research Institute
General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

12501 Old Columbia Pike

Silver Spring, MD 20904-6600

Website: adventistbiblicalresearch.org

E-mail: biblicalresearch@gc.adventist.org

Phone: 301.680.6790

Fax: 301.680.6788

