

History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on the Trinity

Merlin D. Burt

The last decade has seen an increased anti-Trinitarian agitation within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Though this agitation is significant, it has remained on the margins of the movement. There are perhaps many reasons for the increased interest in the Trinity. I will mention three. (1) The availability of information through the Internet has provided a platform to disseminate anti-Trinitarian perspectives more effectively. (2) Several other Adventist groups that emerged from the Millerite movement have continued to hold to an anti-Trinitarian perspective. Examples include the Church of God, Seventh Day (Marion Party); the now defunct World-wide Church of God; and the Church of God, Atlanta, Georgia (formerly Oregon, Illinois, or the “Age to Come” Adventists). It should be noted that the Advent Christians, like Seventh-day Adventists, have embraced the Trinitarian view. (3) Perhaps most significant, over the last few decades some Seventh-day Adventists have thought to return to a historical Adventist faith or what might be called neo-restorationism. They argue that historic Adventism was a purer faith and that current Adventism has been drifting towards Roman Catholicism or at least away from Scripture. Part of the problem is that they do not recognize the dynamic nature of Seventh-day Adventist theology. Adventists have always sought a clearer understanding of Bible truth. Throughout their history, their doctrines have grown from their original distinctive core of the Three Angel’s Message and kindred concepts. A small though significant and growing segment of “historic” Adventists are advocating a return to an anti-Trinitarian stance.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

This brief study provides a survey of the Adventist historical progression from anti-Trinitarianism to a Biblical Trinitarian view.¹ History shows that Ellen White played a critical role in the development of the doctrine of the Godhead or Trinity within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It also shows that the change was difficult for Adventists and was only settled during the middle years of the twentieth Century. We will trace our topic chronologically: (1) Up to 1890—anti-Trinitarian period; (2) 1890 to 1900—emergence of Trinitarian sentiment; (3) 1900 to 1931 and the *SDA Yearbook* statement of faith—transition and conflict; and (4) from 1931 to the publication of *Questions on Doctrine* in 1957—acceptance of the Trinitarian view.

Up to 1890: Anti-Trinitarian Period

Until near the turn of the twentieth century, Seventh-day Adventist literature was almost unanimous in opposing the eternal deity of Jesus and the personhood of the Holy Spirit. During the earlier years some even held the view that Christ was a created being. Theological tension within Adventism began during the Millerite movement and is illustrated by the two principal leaders, William Miller and Joshua V. Himes.

Miller, being a Baptist, was a Trinitarian. He wrote, “I believe in one living and true God, and that there are three persons in the Godhead. . . . The three persons of the Triune God are connected.”² Himes, a close associate of William Miller, was of the Christian Connection persuasion. The northeastern branch of the Christian church almost unanimously rejected the Trinitarian doctrine as unscriptural. Himes wrote, “There is one living and true God, the Father almighty, who is unoriginated, independent and eternal . . . and that this God is one spiritual intelligence, one

¹ This paper is largely based on a longer document by the author. Merlin D. Burt, “Demise of Semi-Arianism and Anti-Trinitarianism in Adventist Theology, 1888–1957” (Research Paper: Andrews University, December 1996); see also Woodrow Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John Reeve, *The Trinity: Understanding God’s Love, His Plan of Salvation and Christian Relationships* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2002); Erwin Roy Gane, “The Arian or Anti-trinitarian Views Presented in Seventh-day Adventist Literature and the Ellen G. White Answer” (M.A. thesis, Andrews University, 1963); Russell Holt, “The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination: Its Rejection and Acceptance,” term paper, Andrews University, June 2, 1969; Christy Mathewson Taylor, “The Doctrine of the Personality of the Holy Spirit as Taught by the Seventh-day Adventist Church up to 1900” (B.D. thesis, Andrews University, 1953).

² Sylvester Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller, Generally Known as a Lecturer on the Prophecies, and the Second Coming of Christ* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1853), 77–78.

BURT: HISTORY OF SEVENTY-DAY ADVENTIST VIEWS

infinite mind, ever the same, never varying.”³ Millerite Adventists were focused on the soon coming of Jesus, however, and did not consider it important to argue on subjects such as the trinity.

Two of the principal founders of the Seventh-day Adventist church, Joseph Bates and James White, like Himes, had been members of the Christian Connection and rejected the doctrine of the Trinity. Joseph Bates wrote of his views, “Respecting the trinity, I concluded that it was an impossibility for me to believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, was also the Almighty God.”⁴

James White wrote: “Here we might mention the Trinity, which does away the personality of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ.”⁵ Arthur White, grandson of James White, correctly argued that while James White rejected the doctrine of the Trinity, he did believe in the three great powers in heaven.⁶ The first Hymn book compiled by James White—in 1849—contains the Doxology, “Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”⁷ While James White was opposed to the Trinity, he did not believe that Christ was inferior to the Father. In 1877 he wrote, “The inexplicable trinity that makes the godhead three in one and one in three, is bad enough; but the ultra Unitarianism that makes Christ inferior to the Father is worse.”⁸

Uriah Smith, long time editor of the *Review and Herald*, believed during the 1860s that Jesus was a created being. He was “the first created being, dating his existence far back before any other created being or thing, next to the self-existent and eternal God.”⁹ By 1881 Smith had changed his view and concluded that Jesus was “begotten” and not created.¹⁰

³ Joshua V. Himes, “Christian Connection,” in *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. J. Newton Brown (Brattleboro: Brattleboro Typographic Company, 1838), 363.

⁴ Joseph Bates, *The Autobiography of Elder Joseph Bates* (Battle Creek: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing, 1868), 205.

⁵ James White, “Preach the Word,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, December 11, 1855, 85.

⁶ Arthur L. White to Hedy Jemison, July 2, 1969.

⁷ James White, comp., *Hymns for God’s Peculiar People, That Keep the Commandments of God, and the Faith of Jesus* (Oswego: Richard Oliphant, 1849), 47.

⁸ James White, “Christ Equal with God,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, November 29, 1877, 72.

⁹ Uriah Smith, *Thoughts, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Revelation* (Battle Creek: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing, 1865), 59.

¹⁰ Uriah Smith, *Thoughts, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Revelation* (Battle Creek: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing, 1881), 74.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

A selective list of Adventists who either spoke against the Trinity and/or rejected the eternal deity of Christ include J. B. Frisbie,¹¹ J. N. Loughborough,¹² R. F. Cottrell,¹³ J. N. Andrews,¹⁴ D. M. Canright,¹⁵ and J. H. Waggoner.¹⁶ W. A. Spicer at one point told A. W. Spalding that his father, after becoming a Seventh-day Adventist (he was formerly a Seventh Day Baptist minister), “grew so offended at the anti-Trinitarian atmosphere in Battle Creek that he ceased preaching.”¹⁷

In surveying the writings of the various pioneers, certain concerns frequently appear. In rejecting the trinity, some saw the “orthodox” Christian view as pagan tri-theism. Others argued that the trinity degraded the person-hood of Christ and the Father by blurring the distinction between them. It should be noted that while the early positions on the trinity and deity of Christ were flawed, there was a sincere attempt to oppose certain legitimate errors. 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.

By 1890 Adventists had come to a harmonious position that rejected the idea of Jesus as a created being and viewed Him the “begotten” or originated divine Son of God. He was seen as the Creator with the Father. The nature of the Holy Spirit was lightly discussed, though He was generally considered to be the omnipresent influence from the Father or the Son rather than a person.

From 1890 to 1900: Emergence of Trinitarian Sentiment

The period after the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference saw a new emphasis on Jesus and the plan of salvation. This emphasis naturally

¹¹ J. B. Frisbie, “The Seventh Day Sabbath Not Abolished,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 7, 1854, 50.

¹² J. N. Loughborough, “Questions for Brother Loughborough,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, November 5, 1861, 184.

¹³ R. F. Cottrell, “The Trinity,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 6, 1869, 10–11.

¹⁴ [J. N. Andrews], “Melchisedec,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 7, 1869, 84. This is an unsigned article, J. N. Andrews was the editor of the paper.

¹⁵ D. M. Canright, “The Personality of God,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, August 29, 1878, 73–74; September 5, 1878, 81–82; September 12, 1878, 89–90; September 19, 1878, 97.

¹⁶ J. H. Waggoner, *The Atonement: An Examination of the Remedial System in the Light of Nature and Revelation* (Oakland: Pacific Press, 1884), 164–179.

¹⁷ A. W. Spalding to H. C. Lacey, June 2, 1947.

BURT: HISTORY OF SEVENTY-DAY ADVENTIST VIEWS

led to a consideration of His deity and what it meant for the redemption of humanity. A. T. Jones was among the first to use vocabulary that suggested that Christ was eternally pre-existent. Jones emphasized the idea that in Christ was the “fullness of the Godhead bodily.” At the 1895 General Conference he repeatedly emphasized Colossians 2:9.

Possibly for the first time in Adventist literature (with the exception of Ellen White), Jones described Christ as “eternal.” “The eternal Word consented to be made flesh. God became man.”¹⁸ Two days later, speaking of Christ, Jones said: “In view of eternity before and eternity after, thirty-three years is not such an infinite sacrifice after all. But when we consider that he sank his nature in our human nature to all eternity,—that is a sacrifice.”¹⁹

A. T. Jones avoided referring to the Godhead as the “Trinity.” Yet in 1899 he wrote a nearly Trinitarian statement, “God is one. Jesus Christ is one. The Holy Spirit is one. And these three are one: there is no dissent nor division among them.”²⁰

Ellen White played a prophetic role in confirming the eternal deity of Jesus and the idea of a three-person Godhead. In *Desire of Ages* Ellen White wrote with clarity on the eternal deity of Christ. “[Christ] announced Himself to be the self-existent One” and “In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived.”²¹ She also said of the Holy Spirit: “Sin could be resisted and overcome only through the mighty agency of the Third Person of the Godhead, who would come with no modified energy, but in the fullness of divine power.”²²

Tim Poirier, in a paper presented on April 3, 2006, at a Symposium on Ellen White and Current Issues” at Andrews University, compared Ellen White’s published statements on the Godhead, the eternal deity of Jesus, and the personhood of the Holy Spirit with interlineated original

¹⁸ A. T. Jones, “The Third Angel’s Message Number 17,” *General Conference Bulletin*, February 25, 1895, 332.

¹⁹ A. T. Jones, “The Third Angel’s Message Number 20,” *General Conference Bulletin*, February 27, 1895, 382.

²⁰ A. T. Jones, editorial, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 10, 1899, 24.

²¹ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1898), 530. Ellen White drew the wording of this statement from John Cumming, *Sabbath Evening Readings on the New Testament: St. John* (London: Arthur Hall, Virtue & Co., 1857), 6.

²² *Ibid.*, 671.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

copies and her handwritten originals.²³ He has presented compelling evidence that Ellen White's published views were truly hers and not changed by editors, publishers, or literary assistants.

Curiously, for years after the publication of *Desire of Ages*, the church generally avoided these and other statements. Even previous to 1898, Ellen White made clear statements affirming the underived divine nature and eternal pre-existence of Christ. While she never used the term "Trinity" in her published writings, she repeatedly conveyed the concept. A selected chronological collection of her clearer statements are provided.

[1878] "The unworthiness, weakness, and inefficiency of their own efforts in contrast with those of the eternal Son of God, will render them humble, distrustful of self, and will lead them to rely upon Christ for strength and efficiency in their work."²⁴

[1887] "This injunction is from the eternal Son of God."²⁵

[1893] "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."²⁶

[1897] "He was equal with God, infinite and omnipotent. . . . He is the eternal, self-existent Son."²⁷

[1900] "Christ is the pre-existent self-existent son of God. . . . In speaking of his pre-existence, Christ carries the mind back through dateless ages. He assures us that there never was a time when He was not in close fellowship with the eternal God."²⁸

²³ Tim Poirier, "Ellen White's Trinitarian Statements: What Did She Actually Write?" paper read at "Ellen White and Current Issues" Symposium, April 3, 2006, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

²⁴ Ellen G. White, "An Appeal to Ministers," *Review and Herald*, August 8, 1878, 49, 50.

²⁵ Ellen G. White, "Search the Scriptures, John 5:39," *Youth's Instructor*, August 31, 1887, 165.

²⁶ Ellen G. White, "The True Sheep Respond to the Voice of the Shepherd," *Signs of the Times*, November 27, 1893, 54.

²⁷ Ellen G. White, "The True High Priest," Manuscript 101, 1897, 9.

²⁸ Ellen G. White, "Resistance to Light, No. 3," *Signs of the Times*, August 29, 1900, 2-3.

BURT: HISTORY OF SEVENTY-DAY ADVENTIST VIEWS

[1906] “Christ was God essentially, and in the highest sense. He was with God from all eternity, God over all, blessed forevermore.”²⁹

[1907/1908] “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.’ . . . 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.”³⁰

From 1900 to 1931: Transition and Conflict

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the church was divided in its position on the deity of Christ. The idea of Christ as the “eternal” Son appeared in print occasionally. The first person after 1900 to prominently promote the eternal pre-existence of Christ was W. W. Prescott.

Prescott became editor of the *Review and Herald* in February, 1902.³¹ Almost immediately he began an editorial series entitled, “Studies in the Gospel Message.” Throughout this series, and in other articles, Prescott sought to lift up Jesus. In three articles toward the end of 1902 he emphasized the equality and eternal nature of God the Father and God the Son.³² In many other published statements he promoted the equality, personhood, and eternal nature of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.³³ During the 1890s he had been slower than Jones to embrace the full eternal

²⁹ Ellen G. White, “The Word Made Flesh,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 5, 1906, 8.

³⁰ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church Containing Messages of Warning and Instruction to Seventh-day Adventists Regarding the Dangers Connected with the Medical Work*, Series B. No. 7 (Published for the Author, n.p., n.d.), 62–63.

³¹ General Conference Committee Minutes for February 15, 1902. Cited in Gilbert Murrey Valentine, *William Warren Prescott: Seventh-day Adventist Educator* (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 1982), 351.

³² W. W. Prescott, “Studies in the Gospel Message,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 2, 1902, 4; idem, “Our Place as Sons,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 23, 1902, 6; idem, “The Eternal Purpose,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, December 23, 1902, 4.

³³ [W. W. Prescott], “Our Personal Saviour Jesus Christ,” *Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly*, first quarter, 1921, 2, 9, 20; idem, *The Doctrine of Christ: A Series of Bible Studies for Use in Colleges and Seminaries* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1920), 3, 20, 21.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

deity of Jesus.³⁴ At the 1919 Bible Conference he and others more carefully defined what they believed on the deity of Jesus.

1919 Bible Conference. The July 1–19, 1919 Bible Conference held at Takoma Park, Washington, D.C., was an open exchange of ideas between a select group of church leaders, editors, Bible teachers, and history teachers. The purpose of the conference was to discuss questions and points of difference, particularly on the “eastern question.” The frank discussions and controversial nature of some of the papers led A. G. Daniells, then president of the General Conference, to not release the transcripts. It was not until 1974 that they were found in the General Conference Archives.³⁵

W. W. Prescott presented a series of eight devotionals for the conference titled “The Person of Christ.” While affirming the eternity of the Son, he also said that He derived his existence from the Father. He said:

There is a proper sense, as I view it, according to which the Son is subordinate to the Father, but that subordination is not in the question of attributes or of His existence. It is simply in the fact of the derived existence, as we read in John 5:26: “For as the Father hath life in himself, even so gave he to the Son also to have life in himself.” Using terms as we use them, the Son is co-eternal with the father. That does not prevent His being the only-begotten Son of God.³⁶

During the afternoon discussion on July 6, 1919, Prescott found himself in an awkward position. Those arguing against the eternity of Christ wondered how Christ could be “begotten,” and also “co-eternal” with the Father.³⁷ Others who agreed with Prescott on Christ’s eternity wondered about his use of the word “derived.”³⁸ Finally, at the end of the discussion, Prescott borrowed an idea shared at the conference by H. C. Lacey with the following summary statement regarding Christ: “One with the Father, one in authority, in power, in love, in mercy, and all the attributes—equal with him and yet second in nature. I like the word ‘second’

³⁴ W. W. Prescott, “The Christ for Today,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 4, 1896, 232.

³⁵ Donald E. Mansell, “How the 1919 Bible Conference Transcript Was Found,” Unpublished Paper, Ellen G. White Estate Document File, July 6, 1975.

³⁶ 1919 Bible Conference transcript, July 2, 1919, afternoon discussions, 20.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

BURT: HISTORY OF SEVENTY-DAY ADVENTIST VIEWS

better than ‘inferior,’—second in rank.”³⁹ Prescott’s view was held by several at the conference.

L. L. Caviness, who came late to the discussion, expressed a fear that the church might be heading towards the Trinitarian doctrine. He said plainly,

I cannot believe that the two persons of the Godhead are equal, the Father and the Son,—that one is the Father and the other the Son, and that they might be just as well the other way around. . . . In praying he [Christ] said it was his wish that the disciples might see the glory which he had with the Father, and which the Father had given him. It was not something he had all through eternity, but the Father had some time given to him the glory of God. He is divine, but he is the divine Son. I cannot explain further than that, but I cannot believe the so called Trinitarian doctrine of the three persons always existing.⁴⁰

Soon the meeting became so tense that A. G. Daniells, the General Conference president, suggested the “delegates not become uneasy” and requested that some of the comments not be transcribed.⁴¹ A little later Daniells reminded everyone that they were not voting a position on “trinitarianism” or “arianism” at the meeting.⁴² As the meeting came to a close, John Isaac blurted out in frustration,

What are we Bible teachers going to do? We have heard ministers talk one way. Our students have had Bible teachers in one school spend days and days upon this question, then they come to another school, and the other teacher does not agree with that. We ought to have something definite so that we might give the answer. I think it can be done. We ought to have it clearly stated. Was Christ ever begotten, or not.⁴³

Daniells concluded by saying: “Don’t let the conservatives think that something is going to happen, and the progressives get alarmed for fear it won’t happen. Let’s keep up this good spirit. Bring out what you have.”⁴⁴

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, July 6, 1919, 57.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

A total of 36 delegates were seated at the 1919 Bible Conference. Others joined the conference as it continued and some left early. The following chart outlines the positions of some of the participants according to their views on the eternal deity of Christ.

1919 Bible Conference on Deity of Christ

Supported Eternal Deity	Resisted Eternal Deity	Uncertain
W. W. Prescott J. N. Anderson H. C. Lacey G. B. Thompson	C. P. Bollman T. E. Bowen L. L. Caviness W. T. Knox C. M. Sorenson	A. G. Daniells W. E. Howell John Isaac E. R. Palmer A. O. Tait Charles Thompson W. H. Wakeham M. C. Wilcox

Prescott clearly articulated his eternal but subordinate position on the Son of God in his book *Doctrine of Christ*.⁴⁵ During the first decades of the twentieth century others besides Prescott published statements affirming the eternal pre-existence of the Son of God.⁴⁶ It remains unclear how many also shared Prescott's subordination view. There were of course many who continued to hold to the pre-1890s view.⁴⁷

From 1900 to the 1930s, opinion on the eternal self-existent deity of Christ remained split in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The use of the word "Trinity" in describing God continued to be avoided in print except for rare exceptions. As editors of the *Review and Herald*, Prescott and then F. M. Wilcox promoted the new view of Christ as eternal. The opposing positions continued as a source of theological conflict in the church.

⁴⁵ W. W. Prescott, *The Doctrine of Christ: A Series of Bible Studies for Use in Colleges and Seminaries* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1920), 20, 21.

⁴⁶ M. C. Wilcox, "Sermon," *General Conference Bulletin*, April 22, 1901, 400; "Topical Bible Studies," *Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly*, first quarter, 1918, 3; G. B. Starr, *Bible Studies: A Series of Illustrated Readings* (Melbourne: Signs Publishing, n.d.), 7.

⁴⁷ O. A. Johnson, *Bible Text-Book* (Battle Creek: Review and Herald, 1900), 23, 41, 71; idem, *Bible Doctrines: Containing 150 Lessons on Creation, Government of God, Rebellion in Heaven, Fall of Man, Redemption, Prophecies, Millennium, End of Sinners and Satan, Paradise Restored, etc., etc.*, 4th rev. ed., (College Place: n.p., 1917), 34. The 1921, 5th rev. ed. has the same statements; S. N. Haskell, *Bible Handbook* (South Lancaster: Bible Training School, 1919), 3; idem, *The Cross and Its Shadow* (South Lancaster: Bible Training School, 1914), 75.

BURT: HISTORY OF SEVENTY-DAY ADVENTIST VIEWS

During the first decades of the twentieth century, Adventists found themselves battling higher criticism and the “new modernism” growing in Christianity. Protestant Fundamentalists were resisting this trend, and Adventists often found themselves battling side by side with them against teaching evolution in public schools and against liberal efforts to undermine the authority of the Bible. Modern liberalism rejected the deity of Jesus and his virgin birth. As a result, Adventist articles defending the deity of Christ began to appear in church papers on a more frequent basis. Irrespective of individual differences on details, Adventist ministers pulled into line against dangerous liberal views.

The natural result was an increased appreciation of the full deity of the Son of God as the teaching came under attack. Quite understandably, even those who rejected the eternal pre-existence of Christ did not want to speak of His beginning and thus weaken their argument against higher criticism. Even articles on the Trinity were tolerated. The resistance against the use of the term seemed to weaken as the battle against liberalism continued.⁴⁸

1931 Statement of Faith. Throughout their history, Adventists have refused to adopt any creed but the Bible. They have realized that an understanding of truth is never complete. At various times, though, summary statements of faith have been published. But until the 1946 General Conference session, these were never intended to be the official position of the church.⁴⁹

Curiously, doctrinal summaries were consistently avoided during the first decades of the twentieth century, at a time when they were most needed by a rapidly growing world church. L. E. Froom wrote, “Certain of these historic variances of view [on Christ’s eternal pre-existence] still persisted. And chiefly because of these differences, no Statement of Faith or Fundamental Belief had appeared in the annual *Yearbook*.”⁵⁰ This changed in 1931, when an “unofficial” statement of “Fundamental Beliefs” was included in the Adventist *Year Book*. F. M. Wilcox was the

⁴⁸ Stemple White, “What is Meant by the Trinity,” *Canadian Watchman*, September 1923, 18; C. P. Bollman, “The Deity of Christ,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 15, 1923, 4; Lyle C. Shepard, “Christ: A Divine or a Human Saviour?” *Canadian Watchman*, September 1927, 12.

⁴⁹ Robert Olson and Bert Haloviak, “Who Decides What Adventists Believe: A Chronological Survey of Sources, 1844–1977,” Ellen G. White Estate Shelf Document, February 24, 1977. The 1946 General Conference session required any changes in the “Fundamental Beliefs” statement to be approved by a General Conference session.

⁵⁰ L. E. Froom, *Movement of Destiny* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1971), 413.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

person principally responsible for the statement. He was “respected by all parties for his soundness, integrity, and loyalty to the Advent Faith—and to the Spirit of Prophecy—he, as editor of the *Review*, did what probably no other man could have done to achieve unity in acceptance.”⁵¹

The second and third statements of Fundamental Beliefs in 1931 made significant progress toward the Church’s present view but were carefully crafted to leave ambiguities. They read thus:

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.

That Jesus Christ is very God, being of the same nature and essence as the Eternal Father. While retaining His divine nature He took upon Himself the nature of the human family, lived on the earth as a man, exemplified in His life as our Example the principles of righteousness, attested His relationship to God by many mighty miracles, died for our sins on the cross, was raised from the dead, and ascended to the Father where He ever lives to make intercession for us. John 1:1, 14; Heb. 2:9–18; 8:1, 2; 4:14–16; 7:25.⁵²

These statements left certain details undefined. While the Father was “eternal,” Jesus was the “Son of the Eternal Father.” A specific statement of belief about the Holy Spirit was omitted, though He was referred to as the “third person of the Godhead.” The theologically loaded couplet “very God” made Christ and the Father equally self-existent and eternal, but the vocabulary was couched in theological terms not generally understood by Adventists and functionally left room for interpretation.⁵³ The portion of the 1931 statement of “Fundamental Beliefs” referring to the Godhead and person of Christ was reprinted unchanged in the *Year Book*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 415.

⁵² *1931 Year Book of the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination*, Prepared by H. E. Rogers (Washington: Review and Herald, 1931), 377.

⁵³ T. M. French’s use of the term “very God” in the 1936 Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly.

BURT: HISTORY OF SEVENTY-DAY ADVENTIST VIEWS

until the 1980 General Conference Session revision and expansion of Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Beliefs.⁵⁴

From 1931 to 1957: Acceptance of the Trinitarian View

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.

In 1944 Wilcox wrote in an editorial, “When we come to the study of the Scriptures we find that Christ is the great dominating figure. The infinite Son of the infinite Father is very God in His own right. He is the great ‘I Am’ existing from everlasting to everlasting.”⁵⁵ In this simple but clear statement, Wilcox presented to his readers that Christ was both eternal and intrinsically divine like the Father. Wilcox did not depend upon his own opinions in promoting his view. He made it a point to use the Bible as authority for his position and quoted from statements by Ellen White. His January 3, 1945, editorial entitled “The Eternity of Christ” is largely a collection of Bible and Ellen White quotes.⁵⁶ Wilcox’s articles encouraged Adventists to embrace the “orthodox” Christian view of the Trinity and Christ’s deity.

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. In the 1941 hymnal the familiar hymn, “Holy, Holy, Holy” (number 73) only had three verses. The fourth and last verse, which ends with, “God in three persons, blessed trinity,” was omitted.⁵⁷ The verse was restored in the current *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, published in 1985.⁵⁸ Other hymns as well were modified in the 1941 hymn to omit Trinitarian ideas but were restored to their original form or adjusted to

⁵⁴ “Session Actions,” *Adventist Review*, May 1, 1980, 23–27.

⁵⁵ F. M. Wilcox, “Christ as Creator and Redeemer,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 23, 1944, 2.

⁵⁶ F. M. Wilcox, “The Eternity of Christ,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 3, 1945, 5–6.

⁵⁷ *The Church Hymnal* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1941), 59.

⁵⁸ *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1985), 73.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

include Trinitarian language in 1985.⁵⁹ Examples from the 1941 hymnal that preserved controversial language include “Praise Ye the Father” (number 9), which ends with the words “Praise ye the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Praise the Eternal Three!” Also the first verse of hymn number 366, “Soldiers of Christ, Arise,” includes the phrase, “Through His eternal Son.”⁶⁰

For many, Uriah Smith’s *Daniel and the Revelation* held a nearly inspired status. His book had been read and studied by nearly every Adventist for over sixty years. In Smith’s discussion of the seventh church in Revelation 3, he made the following comment: “The Son came into existence in a different manner, as he is called ‘the only begotten’ of the Father. It would seem utterly inappropriate to apply this expression to any being created in the ordinary sense of that term.”⁶¹ This statement was removed in the 1944 edition.⁶² Naturally, some were unhappy that *Daniel and the Revelation* had been tampered with.

Consideration of the final resolution of the Trinity doctrine cannot be completed without mentioning the role of the book *Questions on Doctrine*. It anchored the doctrine of the Trinity or Godhead.⁶³ *Questions on Doctrine* affected Adventist theology in several ways. A further study of this is beyond the scope of this paper. But it must be noted that while the book produced conflict in other areas, there was virtually no dissent on the book’s clear teaching of the Trinity.

The book affirmed:

As to Christ’s place in the Godhead, we believe Him to be the second person of the heavenly Trinity—comprised of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who are united not only in the Godhead but in the provisions of redemption. . . . Christ is one with the Eternal Father—one in nature, equal in power and authority, God in the highest sense, eternal and self-existent, with life original, unborrowed, underived; and that Christ existed from all eternity, distinct from, but united with, the Father, possessing the same glory, and all the divine attributes.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ *The Church Hymnal*, 1941, 10, 63, 487,

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 16, 286.

⁶¹ Uriah Smith, *Daniel and the Revelation: The Response of History to the Voice of Prophecy* (Nashville: Southern Publishing, 1941), 400.

⁶² Uriah Smith, *The Prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation* (Nashville: Southern Publishing, 1944), 391.

⁶³ *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1957), 30, 31, 36.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

BURT: HISTORY OF SEVENTY-DAY ADVENTIST VIEWS

The lack of negative response to the book's clear defense of the Trinity demonstrates that the church at large had accepted what had previously been known as the "new view."

From 1900 to the 1950s the church gradually shifted to the Biblical Christian view on the trinity and deity of Christ. This change seems to be due to a collection of influences: (1) Repeated published biblical studies on the topic; (2) Ellen White's clear statements; (3) Adventist response to the attacks of "modern liberalism" on the deity of Christ and his virgin birth; and (4) F. M. Wilcox's statement of "Fundamental Beliefs" and his *Review and Herald* editorials.

Conclusion

So what can we learn from the history of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventh-day Adventist church?

First, we must acknowledge that the development of Adventist biblical theology has usually been progressive and corrective. This is clearly illustrated in the doctrine of the Trinity. The leading of the Holy Spirit is dynamic and not static. Other doctrinal concepts, such as the time to begin the Sabbath (1855), the Great Controversy theme (1858), and tithing (1878) developed in a similar manner.

Second, the development of the Trinity doctrine demonstrates that sometimes doctrinal changes require the passing of a previous generation. For Seventh-day Adventists, it took over 50 years for the doctrine of the Trinity to become normative.

Finally, Adventist theology is always supremely dependant upon Scripture. It is always necessary to engage in careful Bible study. Adventist doctrinal beliefs were built on a biblical foundation during the Millerite movement, during the formative period of Sabbatarian Adventism after 1844, and continuing down to the present.

Merlin D. Burt teaches Church History at the S.D.A. Theological Seminary and is Director of the Center for Adventist Research and the Ellen G. White Estate Branch Office, Andrews University. He holds a Ph.D. in Adventist Studies from Andrews University.
burt@andrews.edu