
Reflections on the Trinity Conference Keene, TX (February 21-23, 2019)

By Ingo Sorke, Ph.D. - updated March 27, 2019

Note: I attended the entire symposium in person (except for Thursday, 1 pm). The symposium can be viewed by searching YouTube -> Trinity Conference 2019.

My comments are written in a spirit of kindness and constructive dialogue, and are based on hand-written notes taken during the meetings. I approach this topic with my shoes off, my face veiled, and altogether as a learner more so than a lecturer.

Format: First I provide the presenters' thoughts, followed by my "Comments".

I. Matthew Tinkham (Andrews University Seminary Ph.D. student)

Thur, Feb 21 1:00 pm

Tinkham: The Trinity is "a fundamental teaching of Christianity." Tinkham posits the Trinity as solution to the deep fracturing of our world at our most fundamental level: "The Trinity is the answer to all those broken relationships."

Elohim: The word *elohim* indicates "a plural quality to His nature" - simultaneously and mysteriously both plural and singular.

The spirit of God: "a distinct person but not separated from Elohim"; likewise Jesus: "distinct, but not separate . . ." "He is one God in 3 persons . . . Father, Spirit, and Son."

1 John 4:8 Since "God is love" . . . "love is the most fundamental quality of God . . . Such love is only possible if God is a Trinity." "God's ontology of love requires mutual reciprocity."

Subsequently, "we are analogously like God" in our human relationality. Tinkham later cautions against this analogy (even rejects it), but in this first meeting builds on it.

"Singularity in plurality, plurality in singularity, unity in diversity, diversity in unity . . ."

Comment:

- As throughout the entire weekend conference, the term "trinity" remained undefined.
- No evidence is provided for the classic one = three, three = one concept of the Trinity.
- While much can be agreed upon, in the end I failed to see a Scriptural base for "one God in three persons". That is the aspect of the Trinity I just don't see anywhere in Scripture. The analogy to one humanity in the diversity of male and female is fraught with a most dangerous fallacy, ultimately allowing polytheism. Tinkham actually rejected the male/female analogy later in the weekend. The plurality of *Elohim* I will address in the context of the other speakers (see below).

I left with the impression of lots of speculation and assumptions, couched in philosophic-academic jargon.

“Jesus “passed by...the renowned seats of learning” (DA 68). “People should be educated to search the Scriptures for themselves, to dare to think for themselves, taking the Bible as their guidebook, their standard of faith” (CTr 332.5). The Bible “was not written for the scholar alone...it was designed for the common people...We should not take the testimony of any man, but should study the words of God for ourselves” (SC 89f.; 5T 388; Prov 8:8-9; 18:33; 30:5-6; Lk 24:45).

“Those who listened to his teaching did not need to consult a dictionary to find out his meaning. His words were so simple that a child could grasp his meaning. He did not take a text and then give a discourse on science, though he could have opened the mysteries of science to the world. . . . Ministers of the gospel who believe that the end of all things is at hand, preach the gospel in simplicity to the people, preach the truth as it is in Jesus” (ST April 16, 1894, par. 3).

Interestingly, Tinkham closed his presentation with a prayer to the “triune God”.

II. John Reeve, Ph.D. (Andrews University, Chair, Church History Dept.) Fri, Feb 22 7:30 pm

An engaging exposition of the historical development of trinitarian thought, well presented (though minimal use of Scripture, which might be indicative of the development of trinitarian thought?!). Dr. Reeve’s teaching style is cordial and approachable. Reeve walked us through the modalist maze of Sabellius and his “extreme oneness”, where the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are really different manifestations of 1 singular person. Then he moved to Origen’s Platonic “otherness”, where the Logos is “God” by participation, not nature.

2 Corinthians 13:14

Reeve began his presentation a much-quoted verse: “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you” (2 Cor 13:14).

Comment: Interestingly, 2 Cor 13:14 designates only the Father as God, and the verse neither suggests nor defines a Trinity. Reeve admitted that there is “no proof text on the Trinity in Scripture” - another scholar who concedes that we don’t have a “Thus sayeth the Lord” when it comes to the Trinity.

Jesus’ Baptism

Reeve: “We have Jesus in the flesh coming out of the water, we have the holy spirit **in flesh coming down as a dove**, and you have God the Father speaking from heaven. All three at the same time“ [bold emphasis here and throughout mine].

Comment: No actual dove came out of heaven at Jesus’ baptism. Note Ellen White’s perspective of the event:

“...the Father Himself will answer the petition of His Son. Direct from the throne issue the beams of **His [the Father’s] glory**. The heavens are opened, and upon the Saviour’s head descends a **dovelike form of purest light**, — fit emblem of Him, the meek and lowly One“ (DA112).

Again, no dove “in the flesh” appeared. Interestingly, we find 3 manifestations of 2 persons at the baptism:

- 1) the Father’s visible presence through His glorious light - in the form of a dove, but not an actual dove.
- 2) His Son, “the meek and lowly One”.
- 3) the Father’s audible voice speaking, “This is my Son.”

Creeds

In the context of the Nicean Creed, Reeve revealed an appropriate dislike for creeds:

Reeve: “I don’t like creeds. They are not what is true. Our perception of what is true changes. . . . Truth cannot be legislated.” After all, “Scripture is what is true, not our statements about Scripture.”

Comment: Amen. On what basis, then, do we legitimately disfellowship, considering that our statements can change and have been changed (at least reworded) at every General Conference? The opening points of our fundamental beliefs in particular were non-trinitarian for over 100 years (I myself was baptized based on a non-trinitarian baptismal certificate - in 1986!).

This is confirmed by the introductory paragraph to our fundamental beliefs:

“Indeed Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed and hold certain fundamental beliefs to be the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. These beliefs, as set forth here, constitute the church’s understanding and expression of the teaching of Scripture. Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference Session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God’s Holy Word.”

Here is the statement of our fundamental principles, 1872, followed by a baptismal certificate prior to 1980:

1872: IN presenting to the public this synopsis of our faith, we wish to have it distinctly understood that we have no articles of faith, creed, or discipline, aside from the Bible. We do not put forth this as having any authority with our people, nor is it designed to secure uniformity among them, as a system of faith, but is a brief statement of what is, and has been, with great unanimity, held by them.

I. That there is one God, a personal, spiritual being, the creator of all things, omnipotent, omniscient, and eternal, infinite in wisdom, holiness, justice, goodness, truth, and mercy; unchangeable, and everywhere present by his representative, the Holy Spirit. Ps. 139:7.

II. That there is one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Eternal Father”

Simple. Biblical. Sufficient.

Here our Pre-1980 Summary of Doctrinal Beliefs:

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

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

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

While the phrase "the second person of the Godhead" is absent from Scripture and Spirit of Prophecy, no trinitarian language is introduced.

Deuteronomy 6:4

Reeve: The text states *that* God is one, not *how* He is one. We have to be careful with the distinction of describing God vs defining God.

Comment: Deuteronomy 6:4, the famous Jewish credo, leaves us with no hint of a trinitarian 3-in-1 God. The text only states that God is one, in contextual contrast to polytheism (Deut 6:14). Interpreting this oneness in the sense of trinitarian oneness is superimposing a philosophical construct onto the text that is not present in the text itself. Of course, the Father chose to grant His Son all of His authority, and bestowed on His Son all the prerogatives of His honor - after all, God's name is in Him [the Son] (Ex 23:21). "**Jehovah is the name given to Christ**" (ST May 3, 1899). Jesus = Ye-shua = Yahweh saves. God dealt with the ancients "through Christ" (ST Aug. 5, 1889, par. 5). "Man was so dear to the Creator of the world that he spoke to him through Jesus Christ" (ST Oct. 15, 1896). Jesus is the full and fully authorized representation of God the Father and thus carries His prerogatives and titles.

Arius

Reeve: According to Arius, Father and Son are different from each other. For Arius, the Son had a beginning: "There was when he was not."

Comment: Reeve suggested that the definition of deity/divinity must be "having no beginning", but didn't provide any Bible text for this assumption. Significantly, we have few, if any, original sources of Arius. Scholars rarely make the necessary careful distinction between "created" and "begotten". Non-trinitarians are, for the most part, not Arian but semi-arian. And: the term "forever" can take on several definitions, including a beginning but no ending, and a beginning and an ending. Divinity itself is infinite, but a divine person can have a beginning (Proverbs 8!). Non-trinitarians do NOT deny the divinity of Christ!

Love

Reeve: Our God is not a narcissist. He is a God of love, and He doesn't spend that love on Himself, but on three and then on us.

Comment: This is a common trinitarian argument (used by Dwight Nelson, Ty Gibson, etc.), based on philosophical reasoning and possibly dating as far back as Augustine (subject to verification). But no Bible text is provided. The Father indeed loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father. But where

does Scripture inform us of the Father's love for the Spirit, or the Son's love for the Spirit, or the Spirit's love for either the Father or the Son?

More significantly, I would hesitate to limit God's nature and ability to love to a humanly devised concept and philosophical logic. At the least I would be exceedingly cautious in categorically stating, even hinting, that God cannot love if/unless . . . This is outside our realm to safely assess or assert.

"God is love; God is in Himself, in His essence, love" (Ms39-1891.3).

The Nature of God

Reeve: "The Bible doesn't reveal *how* three (or two) are one."

Comment: The Bible actually does reveal aspects of this oneness (John 17, *Ministry of Healing* pp. 409 onward = ch. 35).

Ellen White articulates the oneness between the Father and the Son very nicely and clearly:

"The Scriptures clearly indicate the relation between God and Christ, and they bring to view as clearly the personality and individuality of each. . . . (Heb 1:1-5 quoted). 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" (MH 421-422).

It is NOT a oneness of being (as our Fundamental Belief #2 suggests, along with all traditional and customary definitions of Trinity). This, to me, is the crux of the matter.

Interestingly, none of the presenters referred to 1 Corinthians 8:6 until requested during Q&A, and even then the comments did not address this key text directly (see below, Q&A):

"But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him" (1 Cor 8:6).

III. Larry Lichtenwalter (Middle Eastern University)

Sabbath, Feb. 22, 9 am

LL: "We cannot explain the trinity" . . . It is "largely a triune experience with God".

Comment: Again, the terms "trinity" and "triune" remained largely undefined over the course of the weekend. Of course our Christian experience involves the Father, the Son, and their Holy Spirit. That is not the issue, though.

Lichtenwalter then repeatedly emphasized the experiential, subjective aspect of the Holy Spirit.

Lichtenwalter pointed out that “grace and peace” (Rev 1:4) come from 3 entities: “spiritual things include a triune dimension.” He asked, “What part of our Christian journey is viable without a triune mindset?” After all, “a life of commitment to Jesus is a triune commitment.”

Comment: Again, “triune” remains undefined. Several texts used list three divine entities, but not a single one indicates - even hints! - that they are together one God, as expressed in traditional trinitarian definitions, as well as our Fundamental Belief #2. This was a key shortcoming of the conference, even for a mostly trinitarian audience, and is a persistent shortcoming in defense of the doctrine of the Trinity. The debate is not whether there are three, but whether those three are one, and one in what sense. Ironically, but understandably, a repeat emphasis on the fact that we cannot really understand the Trinity.

Ultimately, why use a formulation in our fundamental beliefs with wordings that are not found in Scripture?! Why not leave our fundamental beliefs within the realm of biblical language? Was the pioneer formulation really that insufficient?

It is fine not to understand God completely, but it is necessary to speak correctly of Him if we do speak of Him. If we go beyond the words of Scripture, we risk that “Ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right” (Job 42:7).

I suspect the root of the trinitarian push after Ellen White’s death (and then in 1980) lies in a misguided motivation: the move towards Trinitarianism was really a covert ecumenical move, to make us theologically more acceptable within Christian circles.

IV. Jiri Moskala (Andrews University)

Sabbath, Feb. 22, 11:30 am

Moskala established that our greatest need is the Holy Spirit: “Here is our greatest need” (RH Feb 9, 1892 p. 21).

Moskala: The function of the Holy Spirit is “pointing to the other members of the divine We in the plurality of fellowship, in the Trinity.” The Holy Spirit “is now the communicator and the closest friend to us!”

Comment: A plurality of fellowship a Trinity doesn’t make; it is the notion of 3 persons = 1 God that defines Trinity.

Moskala then pursued whether the Holy Spirit is a person or an influence, presenting some well-researched statistics on the word Spirit and its uses.

Comment: No trinitarian defense is complete without presenting the Holy Spirit as a person, rather than a mere influence. I hear this at every conference, and read it in every trinitarian book. Few non-trinitarians, however, actually argue that the Spirit is only an influence. At the same time, presenters routinely ignore scores of quotes and aspects of the Holy Spirit (within the realm of revelation).

JM then pointed to Zech 4:6 (“not by might, nor by power, but by a Person”).

Comment: the contrast in Zech 4:6 is not power vs person, but human power vs divine power. In both cases persons are involved!

JM quotes Rom 8:14: “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.”

Comment: Rom 8:16 should be included, where interestingly the spirit of a person is not a separate person: “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God” (Rom 8:16). So also Paul’s argument in 1 Cor. 2.

V. Matthew Tinkham (Andrews University)

Sabbath afternoon, 3 pm

Tinkham’s presentation was loaded with philosophical language, terms, and argumentation. This quickly becomes problematic, as biblical reasoning falls by the wayside.

“God will have a people on the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines...The opinions of learned men...the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils...” none are “evidence for or against any point of religious faith. Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain ‘Thus saith the Lord’ in its support” (GC 595).

“One sentence of Scripture is of more value than ten thousand of man’s ideas or arguments” (7T 71).

1 Corinthians 11:3

Tinkham’s base argument was that 1 Corinthians 11:3 does not establish (or confirm) a *hierarchy*, but a *chronology*. Accordingly, “head” is a mistranslation of the Greek κεφαλή *kephale* and should be rendered “source”. “The persons of the Trinity stand on a horizontal plane” = no hierarchy, no subordination, neither between male/female, nor between the divine entities. (Tinkham actually argues against using the gender relations as a hint of the relations within the Godhead, though 2 other speakers employed this logic during the weekend via Gen 2:24).

Comment: Unfortunately, Tinkham relies exclusively on 3rd party authors to establish his case here (granted, he was given less time than anticipated).

The argument that “head” should be translated as “source” has been addressed by various scholars, esp. during the ordination debate (TOSC). Here just a few pointers, none of which were addressed by the speaker:

- In 1 Timothy 2-3, Paul utilizes Adam as the source of Eve as reason for authority/headship.
- Biblical headship is neither negative, nor a new theology - it has been around since the Garden of Eden!
- The translation of “head” makes sense in the comparison to Eph 1:22-23; 4:15; 5:23; Col 1:18; 2:19, and, more immediately, in the immediate context of 1 Cor 12. In Paul’s analogy of the church to the human body, the head is obviously exactly that - a head, which includes a sense of authority, not source. The head is not the source of the body.
- Ellen White: “In early times the father was the ruler and priest of his own family, and he exercised **authority** over his children, even after they had families of their own. His descendants were taught to look up to him as their **head**, in both religious and secular matters. This patriarchal system of government Abraham endeavored to perpetuate, **as it tended to preserve the knowledge of God**. It was necessary to bind the members of the household together, in order to build up a

barrier against the idolatry that had become so widespread and so deep-seated. . . It was a wise arrangement, which God Himself had made, to cut off His people, so far as possible, from connection with the heathen, making them a people dwelling alone, and not reckoned among the nations” (PP 141-142).

- The church “is to obey Christ **as its head**” (DA 414).

MT: Based on Phil 2:6-11, “Jesus was fully equal to God prior to the incarnation” and therefore did not have to learn or operate under a model of obedience or submission. He only had to learn obedience as a human.

Comment: The equality of Jesus as the Son of God is an equality that was granted to Him by His Father. Consider these intriguing quotes:

“This fact the [fallen] angels would obscure, that **Christ was the only begotten Son of God**” (Lt 42, 1910). The other angels “clearly set forth that Christ was the Son of God, existing with Him before the angels were created” (SR 15). “In His incarnation He gained in a new sense the title of the Son of God” (1SM 226) - Jesus was truly the Son of God before the incarnation.

“Christ was the only begotten Son of God, and Lucifer . . . **got up a warfare over the matter**, until he had to be thrust down to the earth” (Ms 86, Aug. 21, 1910). “Satan was well acquainted with the position of honor Christ had held in Heaven **as the Son of God**, the beloved of the Father” (RH March 3, 1874).

This is the Gospel and the heart of the Great Controversy!

“The Eternal Father...gave his only begotten Son, tore from his bosom **Him who was made** in the express image of his person, and sent him down to earth” (RH July 9, 1895). *Did you notice the sequence of events?!* “Christ the Word, the Only Begotten of God, was one with the eternal Father,- one in nature, in character, and in purpose,-the only being in all the universe that could enter into all the counsels and purposes of God” (GC 493; PP 34). “Lucifer in heaven, before his rebellion, was a high and exalted angel, next in honor to God’s dear Son” (SR 13).

“Jehovah is the name given to Christ” (ST May 3, 1899).

“Christ is declared in the Scriptures to be the Son of God. **From all eternity He has sustained this relation to Jehovah**” (Ms22-1905.4).

“The Son of God was **next in authority** to the great Lawgiver” (RH December 17, 1872, par. 1).

“God is the Father of Christ; Christ is the Son of God. To Christ **has been given** an exalted position. He **has been made equal** with the Father. All the counsels of God are opened to His Son” (8T 268.3; Ms111-1903.5).

“...but God’s Son, who is one with the Father, **equal in authority** with the Father, paid the debt for us” (RH, July 29, 1890 par. 8). [Notice that the Son of God is both next in authority and at the same time, equal in authority with the Father. He is next in authority on account of having received His authority from His Father but He is equal in authority from our standpoint. God has given us an illustration of this in our earthly families – the mother is next in authority to her husband, but from the standpoint of the children the parental authority is equal.]

“The great Creator assembled the heavenly host, that he might in the presence of all the angels confer special honor upon his Son. The Son was seated on the throne with the Father, and the heavenly throng of holy angels was gathered around them. The Father then made known that it was **ordained by himself that Christ, his Son, should be equal with himself**; so that wherever was the presence of his Son, it was as his own presence. The word of the Son was to be obeyed as readily as the word of the Father. **His Son he had invested with authority** to command the heavenly host. Especially was his Son to work in union with himself in the anticipated creation of the earth and every living thing that should exist upon the earth. His Son would carry out his will and his purposes, but would do nothing of himself alone. The Father's will would be fulfilled in him. Satan was envious and jealous of Jesus Christ.... Why should Christ thus be honored before himself?... There was contention among the angels. Satan and his sympathizers were striving to reform the government of God. They were discontented and unhappy because they could not look into his unsearchable wisdom and ascertain **his purposes in exalting his Son Jesus, and endowing him with such unlimited power and command**. They rebelled against the authority of the Son” (1SP17-22; ST January 9, 1879, Art. B, par. 3).

MT later made the case for the use of clear Scripture vs complex texts.

Comment: Who determines which texts are clear and which are complex?! In listening to several speakers on this topic over the years, I have found that the clear texts are those that support my theory and opinion, and the complex texts are those that challenge my viewpoint!

VI. Jiri Moskala (JM), Andrews University (Sabbath afternoon, 4 pm)

Moskala: “Our first task as pastors, teachers, and preachers of the Word of God is to present correctly our God . . .”, also reminding of Deut 29:29: “We are using a limited human language to describe an infinite God - an impossible task!”

Comment: Indeed, we are highly limited in our understanding of God. All the more reason to

- a) limit our language to that of the Bible, and
- b) to faithfully explore that which God has revealed about Himself.

Non-trinitarians often point out that the term “Trinity” is not in the Bible. In turn, and without fail, the counter-argument is made by Trinitarians that we use non-biblical terms such as “millennium” and “investigative judgment”. But “millennium” is simply Latin for 1,000 years and therefore doesn’t qualify as an example of using a non-biblical term. And ‘investigative judgment’ is descriptive for a process and reality in Scripture and is used by the Spirit of Prophecy. “Trinity”, however, and “God the Son”, and “God the Spirit” are *never* used in Scripture or Spirit of Prophecy. Scholars readily admit that:

- The trinity “cannot be clearly detected within the confines of the canon” (*Oxford Companion to the Bible* 1993, p. 782).
- “In the New Testament there is no explicit statement of the doctrine” of the trinity (Bromily, BEDT, p. 1112).
- “The concept of Trinity...that the three are one, is not explicitly stated but only assumed” (F. Canale, SDABC 12:138).

- “No text of Scripture specifically says that God is three Persons” (K. Donkor, *Theology*, p. 20).

God has revealed much about Himself and we should study it, but leave our conclusions within the parameters of His revelation:

“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“ (MH 429, 438: cf. AA 52). And yet the wording of Fundamental Beliefs #2 has prompted an enormous discussion of God, which was previously unnecessary in its current form. “We must know Him as He reveals Himself . . . All depend upon a right knowledge of God. This is the knowledge that is essential preparation both for this life and for the life to come” . . . “A knowledge of God is the foundation of all true education and of all true service” (MH 409). “It is essential to have an intelligent knowledge of the truth” (RH July 1, 1884). “If asked to explain certain statements, they can only answer: ‘It is so presented in the Scriptures’” (5T 700).

Ironically, a speaker at another Trinity conference (which I attended on my own dime) quoted the above MH 429, only to proceed with discussing the Omniscient for an hour! If we had left our fundamental beliefs alone, maybe just tweaked the language here and there but not introduced trinitarian concepts and language, all this would be a non-issue. We would have less independent ministries and movements, and scores of fellow believers wouldn’t find themselves disfellowshipped right now.

Again, the risk of Job 42:7 comes to mind: “Ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right.”

Acts 5:3-4, 9

JM used Acts 5:3-4, 9 to defend the divinity of the Holy Spirit.

Comment: While the divinity of the Spirit is really not in question, Acts 5:3-4, 9 doesn’t make the Holy Spirit “God the Spirit”. Parallels do not necessarily determine identity:

- Mt 25:40 “As ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” But the brethren are not Jesus!
- Acts 9:4 “Why persecutes thou me?” But Christ is not the same as Christians.
- 1 Cor 8:12 “When ye sin so against the brethren...ye sin against Christ.” But again, the brethren are not Christ.

Elohim

JM: The plural word Elohim hints at a plurality within the Godhead.

Comment: This is a common argument made, and no trinitarian conference would be complete without it, but it suffers from serious logical and linguistic fallacies:

- The corresponding verb “made” in Gen 1:1 is both singular in Hebrew (אָרָא) as well as in the Septuagint (ἐποίησεν), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures.

- The word *theos* [God] in the Septuagint is singular - the Jewish translators did not retain the plural of *elohim*.
- In Gen 33:20, Jacob calls the altar he erects for God אֱלֹהֵי אֵל *el elohe*. The first word for God is singular, the second plural - both referring to the same singular God.
- Most importantly, Exodus 7:1 employs the plural *elohim* for a singular person, Moses. While JM argued that “this is a completely different context”, the fact remains that *elohim* can be used by Bible writers for a singular entity, with no hint of a plurality within that being.
- In 1 Sam 28:13, the witch of Endor saw *elohim* ascending from the earth - really counterfeiting the appearance of one person, Samuel.
- *Elohim* is used for humans in Gen 23:6 (Abraham); also in Judges 21:6; 22:8; 1 Sam 2:25; Psalm 82:1, 6. The same is true for the Greek *theos* (John 10:34-35) - *theos* is used for humans!
- In context, the plurality of Elohim is best seen as a plurality of greatness, respect, honor, might, majesty (I’m aware of scholarly articles to the contrary). Consider this important text: “For the LORD your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward” (Deut 10:17). Notice also Exodus 12:12, “For I will pass through the land of Egypt this night, and will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods [elohim] of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the LORD.

Genesis 1:26 “Let US make man”

JM: This plural formulation occurs 5x in 4 texts: Gen 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; Isa 6:8. This means “We, God”. He displayed several interpretations but then declared that the option of the Father speaking to the Son is [actual quote!] “not the best interpretation”.

Comment: The interpretation that it is the Father speaking to His Son is actually Ellen White’s perspective of the text (1SP 24, 25; ST Jan. 9, 1879)!

The presenter later softened his statement and said that “the Father speaking to the Son” in Gen 1:26 is “not an exhaustive interpretation.” In the absence of clear evidence, however, I’d rather go with an inspired prophet of God than human conjecture. Despite the presence of the Spirit in Gen 1:2, the Father speaking to the Son is a reasonable and sensible interpretation of the text, with no actual argument presented against this interpretation.

JM: “If God is one, that is selfish.”

Comment: I won’t go there . . . Even a hypothetical argument along those lines goes, in my humble estimation, beyond what humans are permitted to contemplate.

The argument that “God cannot be love” unless He has a subject to love is pure conjecture, based on human philosophical reasoning. Again, I really hesitate to tell God that He cannot be or do something unless this and that is the case.

And again, "God is love; God is in Himself, in His essence, love" (Ms39-1891.3).

Isaiah 7:14 and 9:6

JM: Isaiah 7:14: “God with us” . . . Isaiah 9:6: “Mighty God, Everlasting Father”!

Comment:

“God with us”: Yes, Jesus is God with us in that He is fully divine, and fully represented the Father. Jesus is God by His nature by inheritance (Heb 1:4).

“Mighty God”: An acknowledgement of the divinity of Jesus.

“Everlasting Father”: Jesus was the father of creation, including the human race: “Jesus is...our ‘everlasting Father’” (DA 483) but He is not God the Father: **“the man Christ Jesus was not the Lord God Almighty”** (5BC 1129).

The true relation and unity between Father and Son

Of course, the attributes of the Father are bestowed upon His Son Jesus; after all, “...my (the Father’s) name *is* in him (the Son)” (Ex 23:21).

It is thus that Jesus receives the adoration worthy of the Father:

“The crowning glory of Christ’s attributes was his holiness. The angles bow before him in adoration exclaiming, Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty. He is declared to be glorious in his holiness. Study the character of God. By beholding Christ, by seeking him in faith and prayer, you may become like him” (RH March 12, 1908, par. 4).

We discover what God is like through the life of Christ on earth. The following texts and quotes highlight the relationship of Father and Son and their unity:

“His desire for them was that they might increase in a knowledge of the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom He had sent” (AA 262).

“God was His Father” (John 5:18).

John 14:10

“Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? the words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but **the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works.**”

2 Corinthians 5:19

“To wit, that **God was in Christ**, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.”

Ellen White also states,

"In Christ was the embodiment of God himself" (3SP 186.1).

"The Father then made known that it was ordained by Himself that Christ, His Son, should be equal with Himself; **so that wherever was the presence of His Son, it was as His own presence**" (SR 13.2).

"Had God the Father come to our world and dwelt among us, veiling His glory, humbling Himself, that humanity might look upon Him, the history that we have of the life of Christ would not have been changed in unfolding its record of His own condescending grace. **In every act of Jesus, in every lesson of His instruction, we are to see and hear and recognize God. In sight, in hearing, in**

effect, it is the voice and movements of the Father. But language seems to be so feeble! I refrain, and with John exclaim, "Behold what manner of love hath the Father bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God; therefore the world knoweth us not because it knew him not." [1 John 3:1.] (Lt83-1895.25).

"Christ alone was able to represent the Deity. He who had been in the presence of the Father from the beginning, he who was the express image of the invisible God, was alone sufficient to accomplish this work. No verbal description could reveal God to the world. Through a life of purity, a life of perfect trust and submission to the will of God, a life of humiliation such as even the highest seraph in heaven would have shrunk from, God himself must be revealed to humanity. In order to do this, our Saviour clothed his divinity with humanity. He employed the human faculties, for only adopting these could he be comprehended by humanity. Only humanity could reach humanity. He lived out the character of God through the human body which God had prepared for him. **He blessed the world by living out in human flesh the life of God,** thus showing that he had the power to unite humanity to divinity" (RH June 25, 1895, par. 3).

"We have only one perfect photograph of God, and this is Jesus Christ" (Ms70-1899.15).

"As legislator, Jesus exercised the authority of God; his commands and decisions were supported by the Sovereignty of the eternal throne. The glory of the Father was revealed in the Son; Christ made manifest the character of the Father. **He was so perfectly connected with God, so completely embraced in his encircling light, that he who had seen the Son, had seen the Father. His voice was as the voice of God.** Mark Christ's prayer before his crucifixion: "And now, O Father, glorify thou me with **thine own self** with the glory which I had with thee before the world was." Again he says, "**I am in the Father, and the Father in me.**" "No man knoweth the Son but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him." "**He that hath seen me hath seen the Father**" (RH January 7, 1890, par. 2).

And two big ones:

"God is the Father of Christ; Christ is the Son of God. To Christ has been given an exalted position. He has been made equal with the Father. All the counsels of God are opened to His Son" (8T 268).

"Our great Exemplar was exalted to be equal with God. He was high commander in heaven. All the holy angels delighted to bow before Him" (2T 426).

Proverbs 8:22-31

Comment: In the context of Proverbs 8, Moskala omitted PP 34, which identifies Christ as the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24):

"The Sovereign of the universe was not alone in His work of beneficence. He had an associate—a co-worker who could appreciate His purposes, and could share His joy in giving happiness to created beings. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God." John 1:1, 2. Christ, the Word, the only begotten of God, was one with the eternal Father—one in nature, in character, in purpose—the only being that could enter into all the counsels and purposes of God. "His name shall be called Wonderful,

Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.” Isaiah 9:6. His “goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.” Micah 5:2. **And the Son of God declares concerning Himself:** “The Lord possessed Me in the beginning of His way, before His works of old. I was set up from everlasting.... When He appointed the foundations of the earth: then I was by Him, as one brought up with Him: and I was daily His delight, rejoicing always before Him.” Proverbs 8:22-30. (PP 34).

“The Lord possessed [קָנָה] me in the beginning of his way”; Septuagint: κτίζω=create. Verses 24-25: “I was brought forth” [חִלַּ] = used for birth in Psalm 51:5!

In short, Christ as the wisdom of God in Proverbs 8 cannot simply be dismissed.

3 Persons

Again, a sequence of texts is used that present 3 persons, in defense of the Trinity, but none of the texts define a 3-in-1 God.

VII. John Reeve (JR), Andrews University (Sabbath afternoon, 5 pm)

JR claims that the idea of the Holy Spirit only being a force is “rampant”.

Comment: Though I did not arrive at my non-trinitarian conclusions via the anti-trinitarian movement, I have had enough exposure to state that I have not found this to be the case. The contention the anti-trinitarian movement has with the doctrine of the Trinity is of a different nature than addressed by the symposium (and most of our current literature and rebuttals, for that matter).

JR presented an intriguing history behind the idea that the Holy Spirit was not a person, but the philosophical and academic jargon most likely exceeded the capacity of a 5 pm Sabbath afternoon crowd, and did not address anti-trinitarian concerns. I understand the need and place for academia, but it so often comes at the expense of biblical truth.

How many Bible scholars in this world get the Sabbath right? The state of the dead? The health message, the heavenly sanctuary, 1844, the gift of prophecy? Point made.

VIII. Question & Answer (Sabbath afternoon, 6 pm)

As is usually the case during such conferences, not sufficient time was allocated to Question & Answer, and many questions (as other participants indicated to me) were left unanswered. And no actual dialogue, clarification, let alone rebuttal was possible. The congregation is left with a one-sided presentation, void of other perspectives and lacking many key texts and quotes.

Q&A: Please explain John 17:3; 1 Cor 8:6 (one could add Eph 4:6; 1 Thess 1:9-10; 1 Tim 2:5; 2 John 3).

Comment: I have yet to find a scholar who will deal with John 17:3 and 1 Cor 8:6 directly during a symposium. I have tried, face to face, by phone, at symposiums, but so far to no avail. Over this weekend, these texts simply remained untouched, again.

It should be pointed out that the quote below (a trinitarian favorite!) is in the context of Jesus vs idols:

“The redeemed will meet and recognize those whose attention they have directed to the uplifted Saviour. What blessed converse they have with these souls! “I was a sinner,” it will be said, “without God and without hope in the world, and you came to me, and drew my attention to the precious Saviour as my only hope. And I believed in him. I repented of my sins, and was made to sit together with his saints in heavenly places in Christ Jesus,” Others will say, “I was a heathen in heathen lands. You left your friends and comfortable home, and came to teach me how to find **Jesus, and believe in him as the only true God**. I demolished my idols, and worshiped God, and now I see him face to face. I am saved, eternally saved, ever to behold him whom I love. I then saw him only with the eye of faith, but now I see him as he is. I can now express my gratitude for his redeeming mercy to him who loved me, and washed me from my sin in his own blood” (RH January 5, 1905, par. 13).

Q&A: If, as JR indicated, we should exercise restraint when it comes to theological differences, why do non-trinitarians get disfellowshipped so quickly?

Disfellowship?

JR: “We are slow to disfellowship.”

Comment: This is true in regards to many sins in the church, but the axe falleth quickly on those who question fundamental belief #2 in particular. It would be interesting to objectively track the time frames from “coming out as non-trinitarian” to the point of disfellowshipping. One Conference leader actually stated that “we will hunt you down” - not the language of Christian courtesy and forbearance - especially since non-trinitarian sentiments are neither new light, nor were they viewed heretical in our pioneer movement for over 100 hundred years!

A number of faithful Seventh-day Adventist lay members have told me that after a short period of consideration, business meetings were convened, and dismissal from membership happened quickly, with new opportunity to defend one’s view, and at times without prior notice of such vote.

In my own case, the need for resignation from denominational employment came swiftly (mind you, in an academic setting, with no publications or contrary preaching or teaching on my part, and no departmental review, no peer-review process or committee proceedings as prescribed by the IBMTE, etc.).

Interestingly (and ironically), in talking to dozens of lay people about this issue, I have come to the conclusion that many faithful Adventists don’t actually believe in the Trinity. To many, “Trinity” simply means a reference to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Some are indeed surprised to read the formulation of fundamental belief #2 in particular, and see the risk of tritheism in #4 and #5. We shall not disfellowship all these faithful folk, shall we?

Our historical platform

Our movement was founded on the following platform:

“God is leading out a people and establishing them upon the one great platform of faith, the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus. He has given His people a straight chain of Bible truth, clear and connected. This truth is of heavenly origin and has been searched for as for hidden treasure. It has been dug out through careful searching of the Scriptures and through much prayer” (3T 447).

In the *Signs of the Times* June 4, 1874, our 25 Fundamental Principles (principles!) were introduced as:

“In presenting to the public this synopsis of our faith, we wish to have it distinctly understood that we have no articles of faith, creed, or discipline, aside from the Bible. We do not put for this as having any authority with our people, nor is it designed to secure uniformity among them, as a system of faith, but is a brief statement of what is, and has been, with great unanimity, held by them.”

1872 (non-trinitarian): “IN presenting to the public this synopsis of our faith, we wish to have it distinctly understood that we have no articles of faith, creed, or discipline, aside from the Bible. We do not put forth this as having any authority with our people, nor is it designed to secure uniformity among them, as a system of faith, but is a brief statement of what is, and has been, with great unanimity, held by them.

I. That there is one God, a personal, spiritual being, the creator of all things, omnipotent, omniscient, and eternal, infinite in wisdom, holiness, justice, goodness, truth, and mercy; unchangeable, and everywhere present by his representative, the Holy Spirit. Ps. 139:7.

II. That there is one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Eternal Father”

“Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein” (Jer 6:16).

“We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history” (LS 196).

“Those who stand as teachers and leaders in our institutions are to be sound in the faith and in the principles of the third angel's message. **God wants His people to know that we have the message as He gave it to us in 1843 and 1844.** We knew then what the message meant, and we call upon our people today to obey the word, "Bind up the law among My disciples." In this world there are but two classes,--the obedient and the disobedient. To which class do we belong?” (GCB April 1, 1903 par. 42).

“The warning has come: Nothing is to be allowed to come in that will disturb the foundation of the faith upon which we have been building ever since the message came in 1842, 1843, and 1844. I was in this message, and ever since I have been standing before the world, true to the light that God has given us. **We do not propose to take our feet off the platform on which they were placed as day by day we sought the Lord with earnest prayer, seeking for light**” (GCB, April 6, 1903 par. 35).

“God is not giving us a new message. We are to proclaim the message that in 1843 and 1844 brought us out of the other churches” (RH, January 19, 1905 par. 22). *1905!*

“Temptations are being brought in by men who have been long in the truth. The truths that we received in 1841, '42, '43, and '44 are now to be studied and proclaimed. The messages of the first, second, and third angels will in the future be proclaimed with a loud voice. They will be given with earnest determination and in the power of the Spirit” (15MR 317.1).

“All the messages given from 1840-1844 are to be made forcible now, for there are many people who have lost their bearings. The messages are to go to all the churches” (21MR 437.1).

“God bids us give our time and strength to the work of preaching to the people the messages that stirred men and women in 1843 and 1844. . . .My brethren, take your position where God bids you. Leave alone those who, after light has been repeatedly given them, have taken a stand on the opposite side. . . . Take up the work which has been given us. With the Word of God as your message, stand on the platform of truth and proclaim the soon coming of Christ. Truth, eternal truth, will prevail” (Ms 125, 1907).

“We are to repeat the words of the pioneers in our work...Let that which these men have written...be reproduced” (1MR 63; 2MR 440; Lt 229, 1903; RH May 25, 1905).

But Ellen White warned,

“The principles of truth that God in His wisdom has given to the remnant church, would be discarded. Our religion would be changed. **The fundamental principles that have sustained the work for the last fifty years would be accounted as error.** A new organization would be established. Books of a new order would be written” (1SM 204).

Here the current SDA Fundamental Beliefs:

#2 There is one God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal Persons.

God is immortal, all-powerful, all-knowing, above all, and ever present. He is infinite and beyond human comprehension, yet known through His self-revelation. He is forever worthy of worship, adoration and service by all of creation. (Deut. 6:4; Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 4:4-6; 1 Peter 1:2; 1 Tim. 1:17; Rev. 14:7.)

#4 God the eternal Son became incarnate in Jesus Christ. Through Him all things were created, the character of God is revealed, the salvation of humanity is accomplished, and the world is judged. Forever truly God, He became also truly human, Jesus the Christ. He was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He lived and experienced temptation as a human being, but perfectly exemplified the righteousness and love of God. By His miracles He manifested God’s power and was attested as God’s promised Messiah. He suffered and died voluntarily on the cross for our sins and in our place, was raised from the dead, and ascended to heaven to minister in the heavenly sanctuary in our behalf. He will come again in glory for the final deliverance of His people and the restoration of all things. (Isa. 53:4-6; Dan. 9:25-27; Luke 1:35; John 1:1-3, 14; 5:22; 10:30; 14:1-3, 9, 13; Rom. 6:23; 1 Cor. 15:3, 4; 2 Cor. 3:18; 5:17-19; Phil. 2:5-11; Col. 1:15-19; Heb. 2:9-18; 8:1, 2.)

#5 God the eternal Spirit was active with the Father and the Son in Creation, incarnation, and redemption. He is as much a person as are the Father and the Son. He inspired the writers of Scripture. He filled Christ's life with power. He draws and convicts human beings; and those who respond He renews and transforms into the image of God. Sent by the Father and the Son to be always with His children, He extends spiritual gifts to the church, empowers it to bear witness to Christ, and in harmony with the Scriptures leads it into all truth. (Gen. 1:1, 2; 2 Sam. 23:2; Ps. 51:11; Isa. 61:1; Luke 1:35; 4:18; John 14:16-18, 26; 15:26; 16:7-13; Acts 1:8; 5:3; 10:38; Rom. 5:5; 1 Cor. 12:7-11; 2 Cor. 3:18; 2 Peter 1:21.)

Interchangeable Roles?

JM: "The roles among the three members of the Godhead are interchangeable."

Comment: This is a misreading of the following quote:

"Had God the Father come to our world and dwelt among us, veiling His glory, humbling Himself, that humanity might look upon Him, the history that we have of the life of Christ would not have been changed in unfolding its record of His own condescending grace. In every act of Jesus, in every lesson of His instruction, we are to see and hear and recognize God. In sight, in hearing, in effect, it is the voice and movements of the Father. But language seems to be so feeble! I refrain, and with John exclaim, "Behold what manner of love hath the Father bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God; therefore the world knoweth us not because it knew him not" (Lt83-1895.25).

It is important to note that

- a) the statement is truly hypothetical
- b) the point is that our view of Christ and the Father would not change.
- c) the quote does not state that the Father could have taken on the role of Son.

In the end . . .

Many key texts and quotes dear to non-trinitarians remained untouched throughout the weekend, and the actual wording of our fundamental beliefs (esp. #2) was never addressed. This is the crux of the matter, but is rarely, if ever, addressed. Top-tier church leaders, scholars, and administrators have admitted to me (when gently pressed) that the current wording of our Fundamental Beliefs could, at least, be seen as problematic, esp. since our wording has changed so dramatically over the years on this belief.

A most welcome comment was made by one presenter [quote]: "We might find a better way to word it in the future."

Comment: I wonder, Would we "undisfellowship" then if this new wording could embrace our pioneer view that remained valid and acceptable for over 100 years after 1872?

Conclusion

Overall, the same old arguments were presented. This was my second symposium on the Trinity that I attended in person, and many of the genuine and legitimate concerns of the non-trinitarian

movement simply do not get addressed, nor is there an opportunity for robust, constructive dialogue (as the pioneers practiced). Regretfully, and I mean this sincerely and respectfully, most scholars make for poor listeners. We become all-too-quickly defensive. I have appreciated the few exceptions in this regard.

I suspect the purposes of these conferences is not academic pursuit per se but administrative motivation; that is, to stem the renewed tide and momentum of anti-trinitarianism. I am afraid that the current format and content will NOT achieve this desired goal. To the contrary, the rift will unfortunately grow, and independent ministries will continue to flourish.

An Appeal

What the church needs is an actual respectful dialogue among the different parties, not a single-sided, ill-informed lecturing with an academic sophistication beyond the level of lay-people. To this end, we should avoid the academically overloaded format (and ordeal) of the TOSC committee (on ordination, 2012-2014). We drowned in papers and footnotes and academia, at the expense of collegiate Bible study.

A mechanism that actually fosters discovery, not debate and defense. No committees. No premature, artificially (and hastily) contrived consensus statements. On TOSC we produced a consensus statement before we had studied the Bible and knew how to spell ordination! No presentations, even. They put speakers under too much public pressure, and then we only defend what we said instead of actually studying the Bible together. TOGETHER! Studying the Bible! Small circles. One text at a time. Lay people and scholars. Even peer-reviewed articles suffer from dialogue limitations (I have written dozens of peer reviews). No pressure to publish. Let us talk, calmly, slowly, and listen. And learn. And love, genuinely.

Again, a few scholars, colleagues, and lay people have engaged me on this level, and it was fruitful. You are the exception. I appreciate you very much. I will call you and write you again - just drowned the last few months in inquiries and other issues, and getting my feet back on the ground. The daily treadmill leaves so little time for this much needed dialogue. But you are not forgotten - I have a list!

Can we limit ourselves to the Bible, the Spirit of Prophecy, and the pioneer writings? To ultimately work on a rewording of Fundamental Beliefs #2-5 and 14, as they are a departure from the biblical roots of our movement? This is desirable, achievable, and constructive. Non-trinitarianism is an academically viable and historically acceptable interpretation, and deserves another look outside the emotionally charged dynamics currently paralyzing the church and its conversation in this regard.

“I know and understand that we are to be established in the faith, in the light of the truth given us in our early experience. At that time one error after another pressed in upon us, and ministers and doctors brought in new doctrines. We would search the Scriptures with much prayer, and the Holy Spirit would bring the truth to our minds. Sometimes whole nights would be devoted to searching the Scriptures and earnestly asking God for guidance. Companies of earnest, devoted men and women assembled for this purpose. The power of God would come upon me, and I was enabled clearly to define what is truth and what is error. As the points of our faith were thus established, our feet were

placed upon a solid foundation. We accepted the truth point by point, under the demonstration of the Holy Spirit” (Lt50-1906.4-5).

“We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and his teaching in our past history.”

“Grace be with you, mercy, and peace, from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love” (2 John 3).

Ingo Sorke, Ph.D.

Joshua, updated March 27, 2019
