

Modern Adventist Anti-Trinitarianism: Hermeneutical Reflections (Alberto R. Timm)

A Review by Ingo Sorke, PhD

Introduction

Alberto Timm, a respected Associate Director of the Biblical Research Institute of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, offers a critique of modern Adventist Anti-Trinitarianism by analyzing the varied approaches and explanations in relation to

- 1) The Divinity of Christ
- 2) The Divinity of the Holy Spirit
- 3) Tradition and New Light
- 4) The Trustworthiness of the Bible
- 5) The Reliability of Ellen White's Writings
- 6) The Hermeneutical Approach
- 7) The Apostasy From the Truth

My response to Dr. Timm's assessment is intended as a cordial approach and constructive invitation to collegiate dialogue - in the spirit of Jude 3:

“Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

In essence, I would suggest a focus on the trinity issue itself, in particular the formulation of Fundamental Belief #2, rather than assessing the veracity of a message based on the diversity of methodologies - which is present in all groups, within our without the church. The issue matters and is of great concern because

“His Church must be kept free from all false doctrine” (Ms 46, 1905 par. 6).

Initial Observation: Frankly, I was surprised by the literature cited. Though I have been non-trinitarian for almost 10 years now, with broad exposure to the movement, many anti-trinitarian writers cited by Timm I have never heard of, and many published “household names” and content creators are absent from Timm's study (like Nader Mansour, Daniel Mesa, Dustin Butler, Allen Stump, Gary Hullquist, John Witcombe, Ken LeBrun, Ryan Tacklin, Jason Smith, Ricky Bokovoy, Michael Presečan, Luis Castro, Andy Whitehurst, Vasko Belovski, Jason Hernberg, etc.). My own writings are mentioned once, in passing, without analysis of my actual argument and data.

On a minor note: footnotes would be helpful, as looking up endnotes is tedious and inefficient. Some key quotes could be identified within the text for the convenience of the interested reader.

1) The Divinity of Christ

Timm suggests that a possible origin and beginning of Christ has its roots in “human logic” and Arianism by pointing to J. M. Stephenson’s understanding (1854). This overlooks the evidence from Scripture (Proverbs 8 in particular) and numerous statements by Ellen White. But the greatest oversight is that anti-trinitarians do not deny the divinity of Christ.

Unfortunately we cannot ask Uriah Smith for clarification on his statements now, but Timm’s claim that “Ellen White quoted many times the expression ‘only begotten Son’ but never portrayed Christ as having had a beginning” (p. 1) does not match the evidence (see below). Timm quotes Ellen White, which anti-trinitarians affirm: “as a member of the human family he [Christ] was mortal, but as a God he was the fountain of life to the world” (RH July 5, 1887, 417). This harkens at the divine nature of Christ, not at an ontological-dogmatic formulation of a trinitarian God who is a composite of 3 divine beings. Ellen White simply clarifies that “there is a personal God, the Father; there is a personal Christ, the Son” (1SM 293). *Divinity - not Trinity!*

DA 530

In rebuttals by both sides it is inevitable that DA 530 is cited (possibly the most misunderstood quote on this issue): **in Christ “was life, original, unborrowed, underived.”** While Timm references John Cumming as the origin for this quote, this historical factor remains unexplored. It was actually William E. Channing who coined the language of this phrase; ironically, the words in question were presented under the title “Unitarian Christianity”:

“We earnestly maintain...that our Father in heaven is **originally**, essentially, and eternally placable, and disposed to forgive; and that his **unborrowed, underived**, and unchangeable love is the only fountain of what flows to us through his Son” (*The Works of William E. Channing*, 1882, p. 371).

Interestingly, though love is in focus in the above quote, the Son acts as an intermediary. Ellen White employed similar thoughts in 1896, then published in *Signs of the Times* a year later:

“In Him was life, original, unborrowed, underived. This life is not inherent in man. He can possess it only through Christ. He cannot earn it; it is given him as a free gift if he will believe in Christ as His personal Saviour. ‘This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom through hast sent’ (John 17:3). This is the open fountain of life for the world” (Ms2-1896?; ST April 8, 1897).

In other words, humans may possess “original, unborrowed, underived” life! And John 17:3 is quoted! Indeed, the purpose and context of the DA 530 statement is clear: “The divinity of Christ is the believer’s assurance of eternal life. ... He who Himself was soon to die upon the cross stood with the keys of death, a conqueror of the grave, and asserted His right and power to give eternal life” (DA 530). Therefore “He that hath the Son hath life.” 1Jn 5:12.

“In contemplating the incarnation of Christ in humanity, we stand baffled before an unfathomable mystery, that the human mind cannot comprehend. The more we reflect upon it, the more amazing does it appear. How wide is the contrast between the divinity of Christ and the helpless infant in Bethlehem’s manger! How can we span the distance between the mighty God and a helpless child? And yet the Creator of worlds, He in whom was the fullness of the Godhead bodily, was manifest in the helpless babe in the manger. Far higher than any of the angels, equal with the Father in dignity

and glory, and yet wearing the garb of humanity! Divinity and humanity were mysteriously combined, and man and God became one. It is in this union that we find the hope of our fallen race. Looking upon Christ in humanity, we look upon God, and see in Him the brightness of His glory, the express image of His person" (ST July 30, 1896; 5BC 1130.5).

Here it becomes clear that Ellen White's point is divinity, not trinity as Christ is "the express image of His person".

Specifically, the life that Christ had that was original, unborrowed, underived was specifically the Father's life: "For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself" (Jn 5:26). "The Father's life flows out to all; through the Son it returns" (DA 21).

The pioneers understood these dynamics. For example:

- J. Adams Stevens: "Immortality is a fact, but it is an inherent characteristic of God alone, which He has shared with His Son, Jesus the Christ" (*Signs of the Times*, Jan 15, 1929).
- W.G. Turner: "we find the Son to be equal to the Father in everything except that which is conveyed by the terms 'Father' and 'Son'. But inasmuch as the Father possesses these divine attributes from Himself alone, whereas the Son possesses them as derived from the Father, in this real sense and in this sense only, the Father is greater than the Son" (*Signs of the Times*, June 3, 1929).

"There never was a time when He was not in close fellowship with the eternal God"

Frequently, ST August 29, 1900, is quoted: "there never was a time when He was not in close fellowship with the eternal God."

Timm criticizes Allaback's phrasing of "the Father's only begotten Son was a duplication of Himself" (Allaback, 1995), and expresses surprise that Allaback "even exceeded the aforementioned ecumenical creeds in explaining the unexplainable divine nature of Christ" (p. 2).

I have never encountered a non-trinitarian who denies, let alone questions, the divinity of Christ. Not one, not once.

Biblically, Christ is "the image of the invisible God", as confirmed by Ellen White. These are not trinitarian statements:

COL 115: "Christ Himself is the pearl of great price. In Him is gathered all the glory of the Father, the fullness of the Godhead. He is the brightness of the Father's glory and the express image of His person. The glory of the attributes of God is expressed in His character."

Ed 131: "As a personal being, God has revealed Himself in His Son. Jesus, the outshining of the Father's glory, "and the express image of His person" (Hebrews 1:3)."

Do these quotes not suggest, at least permit, a "duplication of Himself"? I am not sure what Timm's argument against Allaback is here, except that he might see the literal Sonship of Christ in contradiction to His divinity? Timm proposes a false contrast, in which "Christ is either self-existent (as Ellen White stated) or He was begotten (as held by anti-Trinitarians)" (p. 2).

But if Christ was begotten and *thereby* had the (self-existent) nature of His Father, where is the contradiction? How does a literal Sonship cancel His divinity? *To the contrary, the literal Sonship of Christ establishes, even highlights and upholds His divinity!*

The Literal Sonship of Christ

It must be stated upfront that the literal sonship of Christ is not the central point of the anti-trinitarian movement. It is rather the unbiblical formulation of Fundamental Belief #2. I include the following defense only for the sake of underlying that we have a reasonable case in our understanding (“through a glass, dimly”) of the literal Sonship of Christ; it shall not distract from our major concern over the Fundamental Beliefs, however.

I must agree with Ken LeBrun (recently terminated over this issue) that “the life of the Father and the life of the Son is one” (LeBrun, 2023), meaning the same divine life, original with God the Father. I thank Timm for his honorable mention of me: “the war in heaven started over the real (not metaphorical) Sonship of Christ and still “incites the fury of the enemy” (p. 2; www.ingosorke.com). Curiously, no further content of a paper specifically about the Sonship of Christ is analyzed.

But my statement is not really a personal opinion; it is based on the following Ellen White quotations, which appear to articulate the core of the Great Controversy (all emphases supplied):

- “When Christ first announced to the heavenly host His mission and work in the world, He declared that He was to leave His position of dignity and disguise His holy mission by assuming the likeness of a man, **when in reality He was the Son of the infinite God**” (Lt 303, 1903).
- **“Christ was the only begotten Son of God, and Lucifer, that glorious angel, 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 3/3 1874).
- “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” (8T 268).
- “This fact the [fallen] angels would obscure, **that Christ was the only begotten Son of God**” (Lt 42 1910). Others “**clearly set forth that Christ was the Son of God, existing with Him before the angels were created**” (SR 15).
- “The Eternal Father, the unchangeable one, 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 to reveal how greatly he loved mankind” (RH July 9, 1893 par. 13).

These articulations point towards a literal Sonship of Christ prior to the incarnation. The evidence is not scant; consider that “Satan rebelled in heaven. He was one of the honored angels there, but he was jealous of the Son of God” (Lt11-1870.17).

“When **God said to His Son**, ‘Let us make man in our image,’ Satan was jealous of Jesus. He wished to be consulted concerning the formation of man, and because he was not, he was filled with envy, jealousy, and hatred” (EW 145.1). (Incidentally, the fact that it was God the Father speaking to

His Son in Gen 1:26 was lost in the May 11 Sabbath School Quarterly, 2nd Quarter on the Three Angels' Messages, obscuring precise identities and contradiction the inspired record of Ellen White).

"Disaffection began in heaven because Satan could not have the place he coveted" (Lt66-1909.4).

"And coveting the glory with which the infinite Father had invested His Son, this prince of angels aspired to power that was the prerogative of Christ alone" (PP 35.2).

"His desire for supremacy returned, and envy of Christ was once more indulged" (PP 36.3).

"The heavenly councils pleaded with Lucifer. The Son of God presented before him the greatness, the goodness, and the justice of the Creator, and the sacred, unchanging nature of his law.... Lucifer allowed jealousy of Christ to prevail, and he became the more determined" (GC494.2).

"The creation of our world was brought into the councils of heaven. There the covering cherub prepared his request that he should be made prince to govern the world then in prospect. This was not accorded him. Jesus Christ was to rule the earthly kingdom... Lucifer was jealous of Christ and this jealousy worked into rebellion and he carried with him a large number of the holy angels" (Ms43b-1891.3).

Timm faults anti-trinitarians with relying on arguments from silence (none of which he disputes), but then resorts to the same defense in claiming that Ellen White, while using the term "begotten" many times, "never portrayed Christ as having had a beginning". However, Ellen White did write that God "gave his only-begotten Son, —**not a son by creation, as were the angels, nor a son by adoption, as is the forgiven sinner, but a Son begotten in the express image of the Father's person**, and in all the brightness of his majesty and glory, one equal with God in authority, dignity, and divine perfection" (ST May 30, 1895 par. 3).

There is only one Son of God who is both "not created" and "not adopted"--He was begotten: "The only begotten of God" (PP 34).

He is "the firstbegotten" that was brought "into the world" (Heb 1:6, 1John 4:9).

"God had promised to give the Firstborn of heaven..." (DA 51).

"The divine Son of God, joined himself to humanity" (ST April 11, 1895).

"The divine Son of God came into our world" (Ms 104, Sept 28, 1897).

Ellen White repeatedly writes that it was the Son of God that was incarnated; He didn't become the Son of God by incarnation:

"...the incarnation of the Son of God in humanity" (RH Oct 22, 1895).

"But by the incarnation of the Son of God, the purpose of heaven is fulfilled" (DA 161).

"...the most marvelous thing that ever took place in earth or heaven--the incarnation of the Son of God" (Ms 76, 1903; 7BC:904). And when that took place, the Son of God became the Son of man:

“He clothed His divinity with humanity and thus became the Son of man, a Saviour and Redeemer” (RH March 8, 1881; FW 30).

“He became flesh, even as we are. He was hungry and thirsty and weary. He was sustained by food and refreshed by sleep. He shared the lot of man; yet He was the blameless Son of God. He was God in the flesh” (DA 311).

He became flesh, yet He was [already] the Son of God.

Timm takes issue with Paul Chung’s figurative reading of “there never was a time when He was not in close fellowship with the eternal God” (ST Aug 21, 1900 par. 15), misunderstanding the function of “never” in this particular quote. Ellen White emphasizes Christ’s close relation to the Father. By feeble comparison, Eve did not always exist, *but as long as she existed*, “there never was a time when Eve was not in close fellowship with Adam” - until that fateful separation from her husband.

“The Lord Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God, existed from eternity” (RH Apr 5, 1906; Mic 5:2!): “His divine life could not be reckoned by human computation. The existence of Christ before His incarnation is not measured in figures” (ST May 3, 1899). The formulation “How long He [our Creator=Christ] has had existence” at least permits a beginning (7BC 919; Ms 13 1888 16).

Again, this is not the focal point of the anti-trinitarian movement and should not be turned into a case against it.

The Divinity of the Holy Spirit

The title of this section is a misnomer; based on its content, Timm defends the *personhood* of the Spirit, not the Spirit’s *divinity*.

Timm takes issue with the anti-trinitarian notion of “their Spirit”, or “the Spirit of the Son as well as of the Father” (Anselm of Canterbury). Anti-trinitarians do not argue historically, however, but rather biblically, and based on the Spirit of Prophecy. *I doubt any, myself included, have read Anselm of Canterbury on the Spirit.*

Note the biblical record, however, with Spirit of Prophecy confirmation:

“But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed **the Spirit of God** dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have **the Spirit of Christ**, he is not His” (Rom 8:9).

“**The Father gave His Spirit without measure to His Son**, and we also may partake of its fullness” (GC 477). “By His Spirit He [God] is everywhere present” (Ed 132). “Christ gives them the breath of His own spirit, the life of His own life” (DA 827; MH 159). A search for “Spirit of Christ” AND “Holy Spirit” shows a number of quotes that equate the two (i.e., PP 372; 3SM 20; RH Aug 16, 1892 par. 5; Ms 56-1890).

Ellen White’s famous statement on the Third Person of the Godhead must be read in its larger context (Timm, p. 3): “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” (DA 671). In context, Ellen White defines this Third Person precisely: “Christ has given **His Spirit** as a

divine power to overcome all hereditary and cultivated tendencies to evil, and to impress His own character upon His church”, only to identify Him as **the Spirit of God**: “No amount of education, no advantages, however great, can make one a channel of light without the co-operation of **the Spirit of God**” and “**The power of God**” which comes from the Father: “**The Holy Spirit** was the highest of all gifts that He could solicit **from His Father** for the exaltation of His people.”

In short, there is one Spirit, the Spirit of the Father which He gave to His Son: “one God • one Savior • one Spirit - the Spirit of Christ” (9T 189) = *their* Spirit.

“as much a person as God is a person”

Here we find another quote that calls for a more precise context than is often given: “We need to realize that the Holy Spirit, who is as much a person as God is a person, is walking through these ground [of Avondale School]” (Ms 66, 1899, so cited in Ev 616 and referred to by Timm). Unfortunately, Ev 616 truncates the quote by placing a period where the original has a comma and continues reading:

“. . . , and we need to realize that the Holy Spirit, who is as much a person as God is a person, is walking through these grounds, unseen by human eyes, that the Lord God is our Keeper and Helper. He hears every word we utter and knows every thought of the mind.”

Note that a) the quote continues after “grounds”, and b) Ellen White identifies the Spirit with the “Lord God” Himself as He is the one who “hears every word we utter”. Ellen White elsewhere attests that “Christ walks unseen through our streets” (MH 107).

Timm’s generalization that “Even so, modern Adventist anti-Trinitarians deny the personhood of the Holy Spirit” is simply false. How various ministries and personalities in the movement understand this personhood is a different matter, but any generalization equals misrepresentation.

Again Timm finds fault with the anti-trinitarian notion of “the Holy Spirit as being at the same time the Spirit of the Father and of Christ” (p. 3). In a larger framework, when have minute formulations of the Spirit mattered when “silence is golden” in regards to the nature of the Spirit (AA 52)? Do we have to define the Spirit precisely beyond the revelation of inspiration? Is a dogmatic insistence helpful here? We would like to say less of the Spirit in this regard, not more, and as a safeguard limit ourselves to more biblical verbiage than credal human wordings - products of committees that can change at every General Conference in session.

Next, Timm finds himself in opposition to David Clayton’s understanding of “the Holy Spirit as being ‘the life of Christ’ and ‘Christ Himself glorified’” (formerly of Smyrna Gospel Ministries).

But these are the words of Ellen White herself, from *The Desire of Ages*:

“The impartation of the Spirit is the impartation of the life of Christ” (DA 805).

“Christ gives them the breath of His own spirit, the life of **His own life**” (DA 827; MH 159).

One quote that has been dismissed by top-tier SDA leaders as faulty at Trinity Symposiums (in my hearing!) is Letter 66, April 10, 1894: “We want the Holy Spirit, which is Jesus Christ.”

One of the best articulations in this regard is again found in *The Desire of Ages* is Lt 119, 1895:

“Cumbered with humanity, Christ could not be in every place personally; therefore it was altogether for their advantage that He should leave them, go to His Father, and send the Holy Spirit to be His successor on earth. **The Holy Spirit is [Christ] Himself, divested of the personality of humanity, and independent thereof**” (Lt 119, 1895; see also DA 669; 1 Cor 15:45; 2 Cor 3:17).

It is unfortunate that the BRI article references John 14:16-17, 26 but not verse 18, after capitalizing ANOTHER. After speaking of this other comforter, Christ refers back to Himself in verse 18: “I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you. Ellen White confirms, “Christ was the spirit of truth” (SW October 25, 1898, par. 2). In this vein, “The Saviour is our Comforter. This I have proved Him to be” (Ms 34, 1892, par. 30).

In quoting Ellen White, accuracy is of the utmost importance, as is literary and historical context. The quote stating that “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” (Ev 615; Ms 21, 1906 par. 11) deserves further comment. Here Ellen White echoes trinitarian William Boardman, but shies away from the term Trinity! *Trio does not mean Trinity and is specifically coined contrary to a trinitarian formulation!* Most importantly, nowhere in these quotes does Ellen White define God as a composite of three. To this end, I recommend this short 6-minute research of Ellen White’s Heavenly Trio quote contra a trinitarian understanding: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UXeLAXm5k0g> (Youtube “Forgotten Pillar Project Heavenly Trio”).

Tradition and New Light

Timm expresses the following caution:

“Modern Adventist anti-Trinitarians quote some Adventist pioneers because they believe they had a more biblically correct view on the issue and because they are in support of their position. In doing so, however, there is the danger of a subtle tendency to have a similar Roman Catholic mindset when they attribute to the Adventist pioneers a similar degree of authority as the church fathers have in Roman Catholic theology” (p. 4).

This assessment brushes over the significant caveat “because they believe they had a more biblically correct view on the issue”. It is because a) the pioneer view coincides with the biblical record that anti-trinitarians uphold the writings of these pioneers, b) the Advent movement, despite its ups and downs, was led by God, c) Ellen White affirms the understanding and witness of the pioneers. *Without suggesting a wholesale endorsement, it does not appear that Ellen White thought of the pioneer tenor as heretical.*

It seems a bit disingenuous to insinuate a Catholic methodology in anti-trinitarianism when trinitarian formulations across Christendom, including Adventism, use verbatim Catholic phraseology, and when SDA leaders like Mark Finley (*Studying Together, rev. ed.*) and Ganoune Diop find affinity between Adventism and Rome specifically in the SDA understanding of the Godhead.

The persistent adherence to pioneer theology is not by chance; it is rooted in inspired affirmation.

Pioneer Affirmation

Significantly and specifically, “Those who seek to remove the old landmarks are not holding fast; they are not remembering how they have received and heard. Those who try to bring in theories that would remove the pillars of our faith concerning the sanctuary or concerning the the personality of God or of Christ, are working as blind men. They are seeking to bring in uncertainties and to set the people of God adrift without an anchor” (MR 760:9, 1905).

“When men come in who would move one pin or pillar from the foundation which God has established by His Holy Spirit, let the aged men who were pioneers in our work speak plainly, and let those who are dead speak also, by the reprinting of their articles in our periodicals” (Ms 62 May 24, 1905; in MR 1:55).

In 1903 she wrote: “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...Do you think that I could give up the light that God has given me” (General Conference Bulletin, April 6, 1903, p. 35)?

She asks, “What influence is it that would lead men at this stage of our history to work in an underhanded, powerful way to tear down the foundation of our faith...? Upon this foundation we have been building for the past fifty years” (*Testimonies Containing Letters to Physicians and Ministers*, p. 58).

Similarly, “Let none seek to tear away the foundations of our faith—the foundations that were laid at the beginning of our work by prayerful study of the word and by revelation. Upon these foundations we have been building for the last fifty years” (8T 297, 1904).

“The Lord has declared that the history of the past shall be rehearsed as we enter upon the closing work. Every truth that He has given for these last days is to be proclaimed to the world. Every pillar that He has established is to be strengthened. We cannot now step off the foundation that God has established. We cannot now enter into any new organization; for this would mean apostasy from the truth” (Ms 129, 1905; in 2SM 390). *Note: the goal posts of SDA theology have been moved! Many anti-trinitarians do not wish to leave the church; they feel the church has left them!*

“I have been pleading with the Lord for strength and wisdom to reproduce the writings of the witnesses who were confirmed in the faith in the early history of the message. After the passing of the time in 1844, they received the light and walked in the light, and when the men claiming to have new light would come in with their wonderful messages regarding various points of Scripture, we had, through the moving of the Holy Spirit, testimonies right to the point, which cut off the influence of such messages as Elder A. F. Ballenger has been devoting his time to presenting. This poor man has been working decidedly against the truth that the Holy Spirit has confirmed. When the power of God testifies as to what is truth, that truth is to stand forever as the truth. No after suppositions contrary to the light God has given are to be entertained” (*Loma Linda Messages*, Dec 11, 1905 p. 149, 150).

“We are not to receive the words of those who come with a message that contradicts the special points of our faith. They gather together a mass of scripture, and pile it as proof around their asserted theories. This has been done over and over again during the past fifty years. And while the Scriptures are God’s word, and are to be respected, the application of them, if such application moves one pillar of the foundation that God has sustained these fifty years, is a great mistake” (Ibid.).

This move has occurred with Fundamental Belief #2 in particular. A grave mistake we suggest.

“The past fifty years have not dimmed one jot or principle of our faith as we received the great and wonderful evidences that were made certain to us in 1844, after the passing of the time” (*New York Indicator*, Feb, 1906 p. 4).

“We are to carry forward the work of God in the same spirit of simplicity that has marked our efforts for the past fifty years. But while our work is to be done in simplicity and meekness, we are stand firmly for the principles of the faith” (*The Australasian Union Conference Record*, Dec 30, 1907).

“Wherein are those who are designated as departing from the faith and giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils, departing from the faith which they have held sacred for the past fifty years? (Ms 21, 1906; in *Special Testimonies series B* vol. 7, p. 61).

The above quotes fly in the face of Timm’s claim that “their continuous references to the Adventist pioneers appears to be giving them an authority that is more important than Scriptures” (p. 4). This is simply not the case as our argument against the doctrine of the Trinity is built on *Sola Scriptura* (i.e., John 17:3; Romans 15:6; 1 Cor 8:4-6; 11:3; Eph 4:4-6; 1 Thess 1:9-10; 1 Tim 2:5; 2 John 3; Rev 3:12, etc.), and only then confirmed by the pioneer record (and the Spirit of Prophecy). Regretfully, rarely do dogmatic discussions and apologetics explore actual Scripture, in detail and in context.

This fact invalidates Timm’s repeat accusation that “Apparently, modern Adventist anti-Trinitarians attribute to some Adventist pioneers the same level of authority that Roman Catholics attribute to the ancient church fathers” (p. 4). We are simply highlighting the fact that our entire SDA history originated, lived, breathed and functioned without the modern trinitarian formulation as found in Fundamental Belief #2. *The Advent movement was fundamentally and historically non-trinitarian (see NAD admission below). For over 130 years it was permissible, even promoted, to function as a Seventh-day Adventist without a trinitarian understanding of God. This includes this author’s own baptismal certificate and vows (1986), which are void of any mention of a Trinity.*

Timm laments the fact that “modern Adventist anti-Trinitarians label as ‘progressive error’ any new refinement in the understanding of the Godhead” (p. 5). But the formulation of the Trinity, where God becomes a composite plurality of 3 divine beings, but is then referred to by singular pronouns, is not a refinement but a fundamental (and fundamentally wrong) reformulation of God, His Son, and the Holy Spirit, with pronounced Catholic overtones and ecumenical echos. It is to this we object so vehemently.

GC 595

Interestingly, trinitarians and non-trinitarians utilize the same quotes at times. Timm cites GC 595, but only the first sentence: “But God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reforms.”

It is worthwhile reading a bit further; here the extended quote: “The opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils, as numerous and discordant as are the churches which they represent, the voice of the majority—not one nor all of these should be regarded as 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.”

Scholarly Consensus

Our own scholars admit that the doctrine of the Trinity precisely lacks this “Thus saith the Lord”, as “truth is God’s basis for the unity of his people” (GW92 391). This scholarly consensus is striking - and inevitably embarrassing, given the current situation:

- “That most of the leading SDA pioneers were non-Trinitarian” is “accepted Adventist history...either the pioneers were wrong and the present church is right, or the pioneers were right and the present Seventh-day Adventist Church has apostatized from biblical truth” (J. Moon, *The Trinity*, 190).
- “Most of the founders of Seventh-day Adventism would not be able to join the church today if they had to subscribe to the denomination’s Fundamental Beliefs...most would not be able to agree to belief number 2” (the Trinity) (G. Knight, *Ministry*, 10/93, 10).
- “Adventist beliefs have changed over the years under the impact of ‘present truth’. Most startling is the teaching regarding Jesus Christ...The Trinitarian understanding of God, now part of our fundamental beliefs, was not generally held by the early Adventists. Even today a few do not subscribe to it” (W. Johnsson, *AR* Jan. 6, 1994, p. 10).
- 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* 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).
- “No single Scripture passage states the doctrine of the Trinity, it is assumed as a fact...only by faith can we accept the existence of the Trinity” (*AR* 158:31 4).

No “Thus sayeth the Lord!” In contrast, truth “would bring into the fold of Christ thousands upon thousands” (GC 598)!

The Trustworthiness of the Bible

“So, ‘the Word of God is infallible; accept it as it reads; look with confidence to God’” (p. 5; quoting Ellen White). *Amen.*

The anti-trinitarian movement has to indeed sort out where it stands on the issues brought up in this section. I, for one, along with many non-trinitarian colleagues, uphold the veracity of Matthew 28:19. We believe everything Scripture and Spirit of Prophecy state on the given subject.

However, a misnomer should be pointed out and corrected: trinitarians speak of “the Trinitarian baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19” (p. 5). This is indeed a misnomer, as no Trinity is formulated by Christ’s baptismal injunction; it is not a “Trinitarian baptismal formula”. In Matthew 28:19 God is not defined as consisting of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Baptizing “in the name of” is conveying the

authority under which believers are baptized. Our non-trinitarian pioneers saw no conflict in baptizing along the lines of Matthew 28:19; neither do many modern non-trinitarians.

The Reliability of Ellen White's Writings

Here, too, non-trinitarians must admittedly come to terms with the veracity of all of Ellen White's writings. However, the White Estate has partially contributed to this problem of some factions not trusting her writings as authentic. Here just a few examples:

This author remembers a scholar from Group 2 during TOSC (Theology of Ordination Study Committee, 2012-2014) providing a quote that seemed to solve the issue of women's ordination! After some scrutiny it was found that the original quote was worded quite differently from the modified wording in an edited devotional.

In reference to the Holy Spirit, the pronoun "it" has on occasion been replaced with "he". Regardless of the trinitarian debate, I would favor preserving her original wording.

Some editions of the Great Controversy refer to Christ's "divinity" (GC 88 524), whereas others write "deity" (GC 524). What did Ellen White actually write?

We lament two further issues: the lack of access to all of her actual writings. It would be best practice to digitize historical sources and provide facsimile reproductions online to the public (the Dead Sea Scroll went through such a prolonged process, under the persistent protest of scholars world wide).

We would like to see everything in the vault!

Some quotes, predominantly in *Evangelism*, are truncated and subtitled with an apparently trinitarian agenda. They were, however, written in a non-trinitarian context!

Translations should be vetted more carefully. For example, where the English original reads "The Father and the Son, attended by a multitude of angels, were present upon the mount" (PP 339.1), the German translation reads, "Gott Vater und Gott Sohn waren mit vielen Engeln auf dem Berge gegenwärtig" (PP 314.1 legacy.egwwritings.org German). [Translation: "God the Father and God the Son were present on the mountain with many angels"]. This exceeds faithful translation and introduces dogmatism beyond the original intent, and should become part of an intentionally corrective effort.

Interestingly, the similar articulation from the *Signs of the Times* offers additional (and decidedly non-trinitarian) details:

"When the law was spoken, **the Lord, the Creator** of heaven and earth, **stood by the side of his Son**, enshrouded in the fire and the smoke on the mount.... What condescension was this, that **the infinite God should stand side by side with his Son**, while the law, which is the foundation of his government, was given. He would give his people an intelligent knowledge of his will. He does not command men to obey him when they do not understand what he requires. Here was displayed his wisdom, power, and love. **Man was so dear to the Creator of the world that he spoke to him through Jesus Christ, with an audible voice**, giving unmistakable evidence of his presence and majesty" (ST Oct. 15, 1896).

Additionally, some quotes should be clearly identified as later publications, and not from the handwriting of Ellen White. For example, Timm's reference to "fall down and worship the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (p. 6; Ellen White, "Sermons/Thoughts on Matthew 4," Ms 139 [July 24], 1906) deserves clarification. Was this written by Ellen White herself or a stenographer? When was it published?

In any case, the above quote does not formulate a trinitarian composite.

Ellen White herself counseled, "And now to all who have a desire for truth I would say: Do not give credence to unauthenticated reports as to what Sister White has done or said or written. If you desire to know what the Lord has revealed through her, read her published works. Are there any points of interest concerning which she has not written, do not eagerly catch up and report rumors as to what she has said" (5T 696.1).

The Hermeneutical Approach

With Timm we say Amen to "We say, Let us have a whole Bible, and let that, and that alone, be our rule of faith and duty" (p. 7; James White, editorial note, RH Oct. 3, 1854, 62).

Curiously, James White was a staunch anti-trinitarian, and his Bible would have presumably included the longer version of (the Comma Johanneum) 1 John 5:7-8, which is decidedly non-trinitarian in its emphasis of three witnesses and their agreement amongst each other, in contrast do a dogmatic-ontological formulation of a Trinity.

Matthew 28:19 and Baptism in Jesus' Name (Book of Acts)

The debate over baptizing according to Matthew 28:19 vs "in Jesus' name" according to the Book of Acts is indeed a point of conflict among non-trinitarians. This author sees no text-critical issue in Matthew 28:19, nor a conflict with the Lukan formulations. An academic exploration of this issue is warranted nonetheless due to the apparent contradiction in baptismal methodology between Matthew 28:19 and the Book of Acts. Variance within the anti-trinitarian movement does not negate the need to re-visit Fundamental Belief #2 and the Doctrine of the Trinity itself.

The Apostasy From the Truth

I appreciate Timm including R. F. Cottrell's warning of the wine of Babylon: "In 1869 R. F. Cottrell argued that to hold the doctrine of the Trinity is an evidence of being intoxicated 'from that wine of which all the nations have drunk' and from 'one of the leading doctrines, if not the very chief, upon which the bishop of Rome was exalted to the popedom'" (p. 8).

I recently discovered this link myself, connecting

- a) the highest Jewish confesison, the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4
- b) with the highest command (Deut 6:5 and Matt 22:34-39 and Mark 12:28-34)
- c) with the highest parental responsibility (Deut 6:6-7)
- d) with the awesome injunction to place the above on **hand** and **forehead** (Deut 6:8) reminiscent of the Passover command (Deut 6:9).

This purports with the Mark of the Beast in Rev 14:9-10, with a substitute mark on hand and forehead, thus replacing the truth of monotheism with a counterfeit. Curiously, immediately after warning of the Omega of Apostasy, Ellen White cites John 17:3! (1 SM 197).

In this context Timm uses an argument from silence (Ellen White not including “the Trinity among the false doctrines of Roman Catholicism as listed in chapters 17-19 of *Spiritual Gifts*, volume 1 [1858]” - p. 8), while in the same paragraph castigating anti-Trinitarians for using arguments of silence!

“. . . they should reconsider their postulates, being as silent on this matter as Ellen White was” (p. 8).

Exactly. Ellen White did NOT formulate a trinitarian theology, even avoided the term in a doctrinal sense. It would have been well for the church to remain silent on the matter as well and leave our simple formulations about God, the Son and the Spirit alone. At the same time, in context, some of Ellen White’s formulations are actually decidedly non-trinitarian:

“I feel my spirit stirred within me. I feel to the depth of my being that the truth must be borne to other countries and nations and to all classes. **Let the missionaries of the cross proclaim that there is one God**, and one Mediator between God and man, who is Jesus Christ **the Son of the Infinite God. This needs to be proclaimed throughout every church in our land**” (Ms40-1891.78; Ellen White 1888 Materials) 886.3).

Ironically, my adherence to this quote prevents me from putting it into practice!

In the Kellogg crisis Ellen White spoke pointedly on the personality of God as a mission-critical issue:

“I gave him [Kellogg] the history of how that was treated by the Spirit of God, and how we as a people must escape the sophistries and delusions. And it was ministers that were deceiving the people with these sophistries. **I will not tell you what they led to—it may have to come;** but I will not tell you now what they led to; **but I will tell you what this sophistry leads to: It leads to the nonentity of Christ, to the nonentity of God, his personality, and brings in,— what shall I call it? —a sort of manufactured theory of God and Christ.”** {EGW, Ms70a-1905.11; 1905}

In the Kellogg crisis she expressed this issue as the “personality of God.”

“Few can discern the result of entertaining the sophistries advocated by some at this time. But the Lord has lifted the curtain, and has shown me the result that would follow. The spiritualistic theories regarding the personality of God, followed to their logical conclusion, sweep away the whole Christian economy” (EGW, SpTB02 54.1; 1904).

Timm correctly concludes, “Regarding the tension between tradition and new light, both Ellen White and the Adventist pioneers were open to new and deeper understandings of God’s Word. Distinctively, modern anti-trinitarians stay with the non-Trinitarian views of the pioneers and consider any move away from those views as unacceptable apostasy” (p. 8).

By adhering to Scripture and the older view of the pioneers, I am surprised to find myself not just at theological odds with the “new” formulation, but apparently in a camp of heretics, disenfranchised,

ostracized, career-terminated, and for many, disfellowshipped and shunned. Was the pioneer view that heretical and unscriptural that personal and professional functionality within the Adventist church is no longer possible?!

“Undeniably, some Adventist pioneers included the doctrine of the Trinity among the false teachings of the great post-apostolic apostasy of the Christian church, but Ellen White never endorsed this view. On this matter, modern anti-Trinitarians are in line with some pioneers but not with Ellen White” (p. 8).

This is again an argument from presumed silence, against which Timm himself speaks. But Scripture and Ellen White are very meticulous in their depiction of the personality of God and of Christ. The founding leaders of the Advent movement, including Ellen White herself, operated without a formulation of the modern doctrine of the Trinity. This is tacitly acknowledged by a most astounding concession of the church:

“If Adventism is to meet the needs of all people around the world, the landmarks must remain simple and straightforward. The Bible will be our only creed. **Complex theological definitions, the Trinity, for example, may serve the church well in general but cannot be imposed as a test for all Adventists everywhere.** Adventism can expect fresh insights into truth, 'present truth' that will enhance the appreciation of old landmarks. Such an expectation has always been a part of historic Adventism and is reaffirmed in the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs voted in 1980. When 'present truth' is of a complex nature, however, it may be more helpful for some in the church than for others. **In such a case it cannot be imposed on the church as a whole. Remembering our non-Trinitarian past** as well as the simplicity of our landmarks should encourage a certain humility in the church and lead us to resist any attempt by one segment of the church to impose its views on the rest” (*Issues: The Seventh-day Adventist Church and Certain Private Ministries (NAD 1977, with later updates?)*, p. 50 - sent to me as a pastor by Alfred McClure in 1992).

Elder Neal Wilson issued the following comfort to the delegates of the 1980 General Conference in Dallas:

“There are others who think they know why this is being done. They believe it is being prepared as a club to batter someone over the head, to try to get people into a narrow concept of theology, not leaving any opportunity for individual interpretation of prophecy, or any individual views with respect to theology or certain areas of doctrine. This also is unfortunate, because this never has been and is not the intention of any study that has been given to the Statement on Fundamental Beliefs. Some academicians, theologians, and others have expressed the fear that this statement was being developed so that the church could confront them with a checklist to determine whether they should be disqualified from teaching in one of our institutions of higher education. It is very, very tragic when these kinds of rumors begin to develop” (<https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/RH/RH19800423-V157-20.pdf>)

Obviously we have moved from rumors to reality, with swift terminations over this matter, while other aberrant beliefs and practices remain unaddressed and inconsequential.

I can concur with Elder Timm when he appeals to the church,

“We need a clear understanding of what the Bible and the writings of Ellen White, as a whole, have to say about the Godhead. But we should never forget that ‘it is those who have no experimental knowledge of God who venture to speculate in regard to Him. Did they know more of Him, they would

have less to say about what He is. The one who in the daily life holds closest communion with God, and who has the deepest knowledge of Him, realizes most keenly the utter inability of human beings to explain the Creator” (p. 9 - quoting Ellen White, *Medical Ministry*, p. 92).

Amen! I can attest that my discovery of the scriptural witness of God and His Son has clarified, deepened, but also simplified my understanding of the Godhead. My communion with God is much closer now. Technically speaking, non-trinitarians indeed wish that our dogmatic formulation of God would say less about Him, in more biblically-formulated language, not more. We are afraid our modern Fundamental Belief #2 explains too much about God, in language and conceptuality that cannot be substantiated by Scripture or Spirit of Prophecy.

The Real Issue Remains Unaddressed

In the end, a critique of the Anti-Trinitarian movement’s fragmentation leaves unaddressed the real elephant in the room: the prevailing issue with Fundamental Belief #2 in particular:

2. The Trinity ... There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three coeternal Persons. God is immortal, all-powerful, all-knowing, above all, and ever present. He is infinite and beyond human comprehension, yet known through His self-revelation. (Gen 1:26; Deut 6:4; Isa 6:8; Mt 28:19; Jn 3:16; 2 Cor 1:21, 22; 13:14; Eph 4:4-6; 1 Pet 1:2.)

The formulation is problematic on multiple levels, even non-sensical biblically and grammatically:

1) God is “one God” and simultaneously three entities, but subsequently addressed as a *singular* “He”, “His”. This violates Scripture and the understanding of Ellen White, who in MH 422 clearly articulates that Father and Son “are one in purpose, in mind, in character, **but not in person**. It is thus that God and Christ are one” (MH 422). The doctrine of the Trinity clashes with this inspired premise.

“The Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of the Father, is truly God in infinity, **but not in personality**” (Ms 116, 1905, par. 19). The doctrine of the Trinity obscures, if not violates, the last phrase.

I have found there is no consensus whatsoever among lay people, scholars, administrators or pastors on Point 1); nevertheless it has become the #1 point of disenfranchising and disfellowshipping faithful Seventh-day Adventists. One pastor told me that he believed in God A, God, B, God C, who at some point agreed on which role each would play.

Even more strikingly, most administrators and academics, when pressed, admit that Fundamental Belief #2 has serious issues.

“Let the Scriptures be read in simple faith, and let each one form his conceptions of God from His inspired Word” (Letter 214, 1903, Oct. 9, to P. T. Magan and E. A. Sutherland).

2) The Son is included in the term “God”, often explained by Trinitarians as not a literal Son but a metaphorical Son, with Sonship the exclusive reality of the incarnation. But then God is defined as immortal, thereby inadvertently invalidating the death of Christ on the Cross!

3) None of the Bible texts referenced in support of Fundamental Belief #2 lead to a trinitarian formulation as found in said Fundamental Belief #2 - to the contrary; several texts uphold the strict monotheism of Scripture (i.e., Deut 6:4; Eph 4:4-6). 2 Cor 13:14 is a shot in the foot, so to speak, as it lists the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but only identifies the Father as God.

Apart from a resolution of the trinitarian conundrum itself it would be well for the church at large to consider these points, as they present a departure from the typical Adventist reliance on a "Thus sayeth the Lord".

Concluding Remarks

In the end, truth can only be judged by Scripture itself, not by its adherents. The fragmentation among non-trinitarians is a regretful reality. But is it any different within the organized denomination, and thus a yardstick of truth? After all, we find no unity on any given topic within the Adventist church itself, be it women's ordination, creation, faith & science, Sabbath(-keeping), 1844, the heavenly sanctuary, the investigative judgment, worship styles (including music), vaccination (!), etc. Christianity at large has been divided on its understanding of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the inspiration of Scripture, soteriology, etc. for the last 2,000 years, but this does not invalidate Christianity's basic claims.

Ironically, no consensus exists on the doctrine of the Trinity within the church either. Some prefer "Godhead", some limit their understanding to "Father, Son, Holy Spirit", some concede Catholic overtones here, some deny that, some insist on "silence is golden", while others write books on the topic - what gives?

It took our pioneers many years to figure out the beginning of Sabbath, systematic benevolence, the health message, etc. Anti-trinitarianism, while not new, is a relatively (re)newed movement within Adventism; it takes time to sort things out, especially in the absence of the structured mechanisms that the organized church affords, and with the painful reality of damaged emotions and broken trusts. As faithful Seventh-day Adventists we find ourselves outside the camp of Jerusalem (like Jesus! - Heb 13:13), weeping, sincerely trying to avoid a "root of bitterness" (Heb 12:15).

Thank you for your kind consideration of these points of issue, which often remain unheeded.

**"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)**

Kind regards,

Ingo

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