

THE GODHEAD

The biblical doctrine of God, theologically known as The Godhead or The Deity, is at once both grand and challenging. It entails great mysteries which finite minds cannot fully comprehend. Throughout the Christian Era, many ideas and theories about the nature of God were formulated. By far, the teaching on The Godhead known as The Trinity has been viewed for centuries as the “orthodox” position. The doctrine of The Trinity is fast becoming the central theme in today’s ecumenical movement. “The faith of all Christians rests on the Trinity” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, page 62, Paulist Press, 1994). And while “the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead” (Romans 1:20), none the less, that which is to be known supremely of God has been shown to us in the Scriptures: “The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever” (Deuteronomy 29:29a). A careful study of the Bible and an understanding of historical information on The Godhead, is a necessity to point out truth and error.

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD BEFORE THE INCARNATION

To understand the biblical teaching of The Godhead, a starting point is needed that deals with time before the creation of all things. “In the beginning **was** the Word, and the Word **was** with God, and the Word **was** God” (John 1:1). “Was” in Greek (ἦν) is a verb in imperfect tense and expresses continuous action in past time. Occurring three times in John 1:1, it describes the Word as eternal, always together with God from the days of eternity, and eternally God. All three instances denote that there wasn’t a time that the Word was not. Since “the Word was **with** God,” this declares that the Word (Logos) is distinct from God (the Father).

John 1:3 states the Word created everything that came into being. Colossians 1:16, 17 elaborates further – “For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.” The Word as the Creator, is mentioned in Psalm 90:2 of being in existence “from everlasting to everlasting” – no beginning, no end. In the book of Isaiah, Christ is “called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, **The everlasting Father**, The Prince of Peace” (9:6) “Literally, it is the Father of eternity...as if even *everlasting duration* owed itself to his paternity. There could not be a more emphatic declaration of strict and proper eternity.” (Albert Barnes, Notes on the Old Testament. Isaiah, volume 1, page 193, Heritage Edition – Baker Books, emphasis in original). Moreover in Isaiah, Christ is “the high and lofty One that **inhabiteth eternity**, whose name is Holy” (57:15). Christ, in His preexistence, “was in the beginning **with** God” (John 1:2).

Furthermore, John 8:58 acclaims eternity of the Word, “Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, **I am**.” This is also stressed in Exodus 3:14, “And God said unto Moses, **I AM** [self-existent] **THAT I AM** [ever-existent]: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, **I AM** hath sent me unto you.” Along the same line is the expression “Alpha and Omega,” which God the Father and Christ declare Themselves to be. “I am Alpha and Omega,

the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty" (Revelation 1:8). The context, by comparison with verse 4 of the same chapter, identifies this as God the Father. Christ makes the same declaration in Revelation 1:11 and again in 22: 12, 13, "And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last."

With their foreknowledge of sin, the hope of eternal life was promised by God and the Word before the world began (Titus 1:2, compare with Revelation 13:8). At the counsel of peace "between the Two of Them" (Zechariah 6:13 Hebrew), they knew that One of Them would need to come into the world to save sinners, and during this consultation, an agreement was made, God became the 'Father,' while Christ became the 'Son' - "I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son" (Hebrews 1:5). Comparing this New Testament passage with the Old Testament texts from which it is quoted (2 Samuel 7:12-15; 1 Chronicles 17:11-13; 22:7-10; 28:2, 5, 6; and Psalm 89:20, 26, 27), shows that the Father-Son relationship was an assumed relationship, not a literal procreation of the One by the Other. Consider 1 Chronicles 28:6 for example. David desired to build the temple, but the Lord commanded that the work would be committed to Solomon his son. The Lord proclaims, "Solomon thy son, he shall build my house and my courts: for I have chosen him to be my son, and I will be his father." How can the Lord claim Solomon to be His son, when Solomon came forth from the bowels of David? Was Solomon God's own literal procreated son? Absolutely not! "And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, **I will set up thy seen after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels**, and I will establish his kingdom...I will be his father, and he shall be my son" (2 Samuel 7:12, 14a). By declaring Solomon as a son of God, he became God's representative during his reign. "Then Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord as king instead of David his father, and prospered; and all Israel obeyed him" (1 Chronicles 29:23). Thus, Christ was sent to earth to represent God in character. Jesus Himself declared: "he that hath seen me hath seen the Father;" (John 14:9b, compare with John 12:45). As being equal with God, Christ could be the only one to represent God correctly.

The Father-Son relationship between God and Christ was bound by a divine decree - a mutual decision reached by Them back in eternal ages, "I will declare the **decree**: the Lord hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee" (Psalm 2:7). In the New Testament, the just mentioned text is referred to in Acts 13:33. In context, it's part of a discourse given by the Apostle Paul in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia during his first missionary journey. After giving a brief history of Israel from the days of the "fathers" down to King David, the apostle says: "From this man's seed, [David] according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Savior - Jesus -" (Acts 13:23 N.K.J.V.). From this verse onward to verse 32, Paul relates to his audience certain key events in the life of Jesus beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist down to Jesus' resurrection from the dead. He then continues: "And we declare to you glad tidings - that promise which was made to the fathers. God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm: 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.'" (Acts 13:32, 33 N.K.J.V.). According to the Apostle Paul, the 'day' the 'Son' was "begotten" was fulfilled when God "**raised up JESUS**". And while there are some differences of opinion as to whether this refers to the incarnation of Jesus, or to His resurrection from the dead, or possibly to His entire earthly life; it is absolutely clear that it does **NOT** refer to any "begetting" of the **preincarnate** Christ. In fact, throughout this entire discourse the subject of the preexistence of Jesus Christ is not even mentioned. Any attempt to interpret the begetting of the Son in Psalm 2:7 as a literal type of procreation of the preincarnate Christ by the Father, either from all eternity

past (eternal generation) or at some point in eternity past (subordinationism), is to deny the **inspired** interpretation of it made by the Apostle Paul in the New Testament.

How does the Holy Spirit fit into the picture when John 1:1 mentions two – God and the Word? In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit is almost exclusively referred to as “the Spirit of God” or “the Spirit of the Lord” – with the corresponding shorter phrases “my Spirit” (when spoken of by God) and “his Spirit”, “thy Spirit” (when spoken of by men). Before the incarnation of Christ, the Holy Spirit (the Spirit of God) was the active agent in the creation of the world. “... And the **Spirit of God** moved upon the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2). In the New Testament, Jesus is referred to as the Creator. “And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by **Jesus Christ**” (Ephesians 3:9). The Holy Spirit spoke prophecy to holy men. “For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the **Holy Ghost**” (2 Peter 1:21). In the Old Testament, Gabriel confirmed unto Daniel: “I will shew thee that which is noted in the scripture of truth: and there is none that holdeth with me in these things, but **Michael your prince**” (Daniel 10:21). By comparison, these texts show that the Word (the preincarnate Christ, Michael) and the Holy Spirit were one and the same. There is no reference of a third person in the Godhead in the Old Testament, but that changes at Christ’s incarnation.

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD AFTER THE INCARNATION

The glory of the Godhead was revealed in Christ Jesus, for He represented the Father. Heaven came down to men, as “God was manifest in the flesh” (1 Timothy 3:16) through Jesus, the Eternal Word. The preincarnate Christ was made flesh to “destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). The time had come for Them (God and the Word) to fully carry out that mysterious communing – “the counsel of peace” (Zechariah 6:13) – “which hath been hid from ages and from generations...Christ in [us], the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:26,27). “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

Christ “who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:6-8 N.A.S.B.) Not **EVERYTHING** that Christ was before the incarnation was united to humanity at the incarnation. In “taking the **form** of a bond-servant” the preincarnate Christ (the Logos) “emptied Himself” of “the **form** of God.” The Greek word for this use of ‘form’ is *morphē*. In considering its meaning in the context of Philippians 2:6-8, Gifford makes the following pertinent observation: “*morphē* is therefore properly the nature or essence, not in the abstract, but as actually subsisting in the individual, and retained as long as the individual itself exists...Thus in the passage before us *morphē Theou* is the Divine nature actually and inseparably subsisting in the Person of Christ ... For the interpretation of ‘the form of God’ it is sufficient to say that (1) it includes the whole nature and essence of Deity, and is inseparable from them, since they could have no actual existence without it; and (2) that it does not include in itself anything ‘accidental’ or separable, such as particular modes of manifestation, or conditions of glory and majesty, which may at one time be attached to the ‘form,’ at another separated from it...The true meaning of *morphē* in the expression ‘form of God’ is confirmed by its recurrence in the corresponding phrase, ‘form of a servant.’ It is universally admitted that the two phrases are directly antithetical, and that ‘form’ must therefore have the same sense in both.” (Gifford, “The Incarnation,” pages 16, 19, 39 quoted

in W.E. Vine, A Comprehensive Dictionary of the Original Greek Words with their Precise Meanings for English Readers, pages 463, 464).

Clearly the term *morphē* means more than just outward look or exterior appearance as some believe. In fact, the Apostle Paul uses another Greek word in Philippians 2:8 which more closely expresses this concept: “And being found in **fashion** [GR. *schēma*] as a man”. In contrasting *morphē* with *schēma*, Thayer makes the following important observation: “[*morphē*] form differs from [*schēma*] figure, shape, fashion, as that which is intrinsic and essential, from that which is outward and accidental.” (J.H. Thayer, The New Thayer’s Greek – English Lexicon of the New Testament, page 418). Likewise, Earle remarks: “...*morphē* means ‘what He is in Himself’ – truly God become truly servant – but *schēma* indicates ‘what He *appeared* in the eyes of men’...The former word refers to the inner being, the latter to the outer appearance. Christ not only *appeared* to be a servant in His incarnation; He *was one*.” (Ralph Earle, Word Meanings in the New Testament, page 337).

The emptying Himself of the form of God was a voluntary act on the part of Christ. He “did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped” – in this sense that which is to be retained at all cost (compare with 2 Corinthians 8:9). His state of being as God, revealed through the manifestation of Deity (form of God) before the incarnation, was poured out (emptied) to take on the state of being as human, revealed through the manifestation of a man (form of a bond-servant) after the incarnation. This did not mean however, that Christ ceased to be God. There is biblical proof that Jesus was still God while walking upon the earth. His name shall be “Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.” (Matthew 1:23). As a young child, He was worshipped by the wise men from the east. The wise men had studied prophecy and were waiting for the predicted Messiah. As astrologers, they followed the indications of God’s providence as revealed in the heavens. Upon this, they saw the heavens illuminated with a star and were led to Balaam’s prophecy in Numbers 24:17, “there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Scepter shall rise out of Israel.” By faith, they went out to search for the heavenly King and when “they saw the young child with Mary his mother, [they] fell down, and worshipped him” (Matthew 2:11). The divinity of Jesus was also recognizable to others. After His baptism, a leper, a certain ruler and a woman of Canaan worshipped Jesus. Each one of them knew that Jesus, as the Son of God, could help their situations and was the only One to be revered and worshipped. Of their worship, Jesus willingly received it because He and His Father are one, **The Uncreated**. Compare this to Peter and an angel who declined to be worshipped due to the fact that they were **beings brought into existence**. “And as Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him, and fell down at his feet, and worshipped him. But Peter took him, saying, **Stand up; I myself also am a man**” (Acts 10:25, 26). “And I fell at his feet to worship him. And He said unto me, **See thou do it not: I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: worship God**: for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Revelation 19:10). Jesus manifested His power on earth to forgive sins through the healing of a paralytic at Capernaum. Upon the many to witness the event were the Pharisees. By their own words, they admitted that Jesus possessed a power ascribed to God alone, “who can forgive sins but God only?” (Mark 2:7). Furthermore, those around Him recognized His claims about Himself as being that which only God could rightly make (see John 5:17, 18; 8:58, 59; 10:30-33).

If Jesus was truly God as a man upon the earth, if “in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Colossians 2:9), then **HOW** could He have emptied Himself of the intrinsic qualities of God and still be God? The answer to this question lies in what the Bible reveals about what makes God, God. Obviously one aspect of Himself as God is that which His form (*morphē*)

reveals about His divine being. The power, glory and majesty made known through this aspect of God is expressed and manifested by those attributes which belong solely to God – omnipotence (all powerful), omniscience (all knowing), and omnipresence (everywhere present). This can clearly be illustrated in the book of Job. After a lengthy discussion with his ‘friends,’ Job still did not understand his dilemma and was powerless to do anything about it. Finally the Lord (the preincarnate Christ, the Creator) intervenes. Christ’s discourse with Job from the whirlwind gives an overview of Himself concerning certain things that made Him equal with God (the Father); things that were laid aside when He took humanity. “Where wast thou [omnipresence] when I laid the foundations of the earth [omnipotence]? declare, if thou hast understanding [omniscience]” (Job 38:4). This verse sets the entire tenor of the discourse which continues on through to the end of chapter 41. Here, Christ reveals His omnipresence, His omnipotence, and His omniscience. Through numerous examples the power, glory and majesty of the infinite God, as expressed through these attributes; is contrasted with the finite, mortal nature of man as expressed through his very limited presence, power and knowledge. In Job 40:10, Job is asked to put on (if he can!) four qualities that Christ is clothed with – majesty, excellency, glory and beauty. This discourse gave Job a clear understanding of the superiority of God and the wretchedness of man (see Job 42:1-6).

There is, however, another aspect of God which makes Him God. This aspect of His divine being is revealed through His ego and expressed by His character. In Exodus 33:18, Moses asks the Lord to show him His glory. The Lord informs Moses that he cannot look upon His “face” (His form) and live. The next morning, however, the Lord reveals His glory to Moses. It is not the glory revealed through His form (omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence), but the glory expressed by His Name (character). God is merciful, gracious, longsuffering, good, truthful, forgiving and an executor of justice (Exodus 34:4-7). Later, in recalling this incident, Moses equates these character attributes of God with His power (see Number 14:17, 18). In the New Testament, the Apostle John sums up this aspect of God’s divine being with the all-inclusive statement “God is love” (1 John 4:8b). “Not only is God loving; ‘God **is** love’ (1 John 4:16). The attribute of love is a veritable part of His essential nature; without it He would not be ‘God’” (The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, volume 1, page 675, comments on Exodus 34:7). Very clearly, God’s power, glory and majesty are as truly expressed through the attributes of His character as they are through the attributes of His form (omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence).

“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The term “only begotten” (GR. *Monogenēs*) needs to be explained in relation to God and His Son. Says Thayer: “[*Monogenēs*]...used of Christ, denotes *the only son of God* or one who in the sense in which he himself is the son of God has no brethren. He is so spoken of by John not because *ho logos* [the word] which was *ensarkōtheis* [God manifest in flesh] in him was eternally generated by God the Father (the orthodox interpretation), or came forth from the being of God just before the beginning of the world (Subordinationism), but because by the incarnation (*ensarkōtheis* [becoming flesh]) of the *logos* [word] in him he is of nature or essentially Son of God, and so in a very different sense from that in which men are made by him *tekna tou theou* [children of God] (John 1:13). For since in the writings of John the title *ho huios tou theou* [the Son of the God] is given only to the historic Christ so called, neither the Logos alone, nor Jesus alone, but *ho logos ho ensarkōtheis* [the word of God manifest in flesh] or Jesus through the *logos* [word] united with God, is *ho monogenēs huios tou theou* [the only begotten Son of God].” (J.H. Thayer, The New Thayer’s Greek – English Lexicon of the New Testament, pages 417 and 418). When Jesus was

upon the earth, He was the Son of God (truly God) and the Son of man (truly human). Defying full explanation, the divine and the human were united together in the One Person, Christ Jesus. Only begotten, meaning **unique, one of a kind**, refers to Jesus at His incarnation. Again, this word as used by the Apostle John does **not** refer to a literal type of procreation of the preincarnate Christ by the Father either from all eternity past (eternal generation) or at some point in eternity past (subordinationism). Rather it is used to describe Jesus as the unique, one of a kind God-man, a being which never before had existed and the only one who holds a unique relationship as “Son” with God the Father.

In order to become a true man, it was absolutely necessary for Christ to empty Himself of His omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence. The pouring out of these attributes of His divine being (His form) did not mean that His form ceased to exist. In order for that to happen, Christ Himself would have had to cease to exist (see Gifford’s comments on *morphē* quoted earlier in this paper). Yet at the incarnation, with His form no longer subsisting in Himself, Christ took the form of a bond-servant. This was accomplished by the Holy Spirit coming upon Mary and the power of the Highest overshadowing her (see Luke 1:35). In this text, the power of the Highest is the power of the Holy Spirit, “for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 1:20b). It is the Holy Spirit that “fathered” the conception of the divine-human Christ. And while it is certainly acknowledged that the incarnation is a mystery that will never be totally fathomed by finite minds, scripture reveals that with the incarnation, the revelation of God changes from that of two divine persons to that of three. No longer are Christ and the Holy Spirit one and the same person – rather they are two distinct persons. The form of God that Christ emptied Himself of continued in the Holy Spirit. The close union between Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit is that of an “alter-ego relationship” (The Expositor’s Greek Testament, volume 5, page 195).

PRESENT ISSUES

The World Council of Churches (WCC) was inaugurated in 1948, with one of its main aims, to bring about Christian unity. At the New Delhi assembly in 1961, a basis for membership was developed and approved. It reads: “The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of Churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill their common calling to the glory of one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” (The Encyclopedia of Religion, volume 5, page 20, 1987 edition). In a recent publication of the WCC, much is being said to promote the goal of Christian unity through the term *koinonia*, of which is called “the most promising theme of contemporary ecumenical theology.” (One World, page 15, October 1993). The WCC’s Seventh Assembly (Canberra, 1991), defined how *koinonia* will reach its fullness: “...when all the churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.” (ibid, page 15). The theme of *koinonia* (a new catch word meaning community, fellowship, solidarity) was addressed by an Orthodox theologian, saying “...the notion of the church as koinonia is rooted in faith in God as Trinitarian.” (ibid, page 15). A report from a recently held meeting in Santiago depicted Christians fellowshipping together “...as rooted in the Triune God.” “Difference is not a factor to exclude anyone from the koinonia of the church,” thus, “...unity and diversity are inseparable.” (ibid, page 15).

Another major player to manifest unity upon all Christians is the Roman Catholic Church. This was brought about during the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), with one of its chief reforms being a new ecumenical openness toward other Christian churches. Even before this council, Pope John XXIII “...steered the Roman Catholic church toward the eventual goal of reunion with other Christians, creating (1960) the Secretariat for Christian Unity.” (The 1995 Grolier Multimedia

Encyclopedia, article on John XXIII, Pope). “The mystery of the Trinity is the central doctrine of Catholic Faith” (Handbook for Today’s Catholics, page 11) and of the “...Christian faith and life.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, page 62). “The Church studied this mystery with great care and, after four centuries of clarification, decided to state the doctrine in this way: in the unity of The Godhead there are three Persons – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – truly distinct one from another.” (Handbook for Today’s Catholics, page 11). From the journal, The Pope Speaks, volume 40, No. 2, the Catholic Church will carry out a vast program aimed at ecumenical unity. A strictly preparatory phase will take place from 1997 to 1999. “The thematic structure of this three-year period, centered on Christ, the Son of God made man, must necessarily be theological, and therefore Trinitarian.” (ibid, page 105).

SOME HISTORY

ANCIENT. The early Christians believed that the true God had revealed Himself supremely in the Person of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1, 2). The theological implications of what Jesus said about Himself, and what His disciples wrote about Him, along with His relationship to God the Father were overshadowed by the proclamation of the good news of a crucified and risen Saviour. As time moved further away from the Apostolic Age, heresy took root in the church. Simple faith began to be replaced by complacency and intellectual speculation.

The first errors the Christian Church faced concerning The Godhead dealt with an understanding of the nature of Christ. One of the earliest of these errors introduced during late Apostolic times was Docetism. The main tenet of this teaching was a denial of the human reality of Christ. Christ had come, but not in human flesh. Docetists held a dualistic concept of the universe. The material (matter) was evil, while the immaterial (spirit) was good. Thus Christ had only an apparent body. They could not conceive of “god” (a celestial being) as being associated with matter – in this case flesh.

Docetism found an able ally in Gnosticism, an esoteric religious movement which in greater or lesser degrees generally considered itself to be Christian. Gnosticism was basically a blend of various pagan philosophies (Mithraism, Zoroastrianism and Platonism) with certain heretical Christian beliefs and teachings. It promised its followers a secret knowledge of the divine realm!

“The common characteristics of nearly all the Gnostic systems are (1) Dualism; the assumption of an eternal antagonism between God and Matter. (2) The demiurgic notion; the separation of the creator of the world or the demiurgos from the proper God. (3) Docetism; the resolution of the human element in the person of the Redeemer into mere deceptive appearance” (Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church, volume 2, page 452). Gnosticism flourished during the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. Its Docetic view of the nature of Jesus Christ, however, was not the only teaching within its system creating confusion about the true nature of The Godhead. Gnosticism’s dualistic world view was also introducing into Christianity concepts about The Godhead which were just as confusing and untrue.

“To explain the origin of the material universe, the Gnostics developed a complicated mythology. From the original unknowable God, a series of lesser divinities was generated by emanation. The last of these, Sophia (“wisdom”), conceived a desire to know the unknowable Supreme Being. Out of this illegitimate desire was produced a deformed, evil god, or demiurge, who created the universe. The divine sparks that dwell in humanity fell into this universe or else were sent there by the supreme God in order to redeem humanity...Reawakened by knowledge, the divine element in humanity can return to its proper home in the transcendental spiritual

realm” (Funk and Wagnalls New Encyclopedia, volume 12, page 10, Article: “Gnosticism-Mythology”, copyright 1986). Gnostic “theology” taught that the lesser divinities (called Aeons) were all part of a type of spiritual “unity” called the Pleroma. Moreover, the Pleroma itself was a tripartite divided into an Ogdoad, a Decad and a Duodecad. The first group of Aeons, which the original Supreme God had generated through emanation, in turn emanated another group of Aeons and these Aeons, in turn, emanated yet another final group of Aeons. The Gnostics that professed to be Christian generally identified the original Supreme God as the Father, the Unbegotten; while Christ and the Holy Spirit are usually identified as one of the (begotten) Aeons, respectively. The details of the interplay between the Aeons along with the amalgamation of this mythology with Christian concepts differed somewhat from one Gnostic sect to another. (For a comprehensive exposition of this subject, see The Ante-Nicene Fathers, volume 1, pages 315-358, Article: “Irenaeus Against Heresies”, Book 1). The idea that the Supreme, Unbegotten God generated other deities by emanation, is a Gnostic concept.

The success of this system in early post-apostolic times was due in no small part to the difficulty mainstream Christianity was having in incorporating the more recently established Christian revelation (which applied names and titles of Deity to Jesus of Nazareth and even the Holy Spirit) with the monotheistic teachings of their own Scriptures – the Old Testament. Though unorthodox, to the Greek thinker the Gnostic doctrine of God at least appeared to systematically and logically answer the question to this dilemma.

A backlash against the multiplicity of gods in the Gnostic systems and the developing multi-personal concept of God in more orthodox Christianity, came in the form of a teaching known as Monarchianism. As the term implies (a monarch is the sole ruler of a realm), Monarchianism was an attempt to enforce within Christianity a unipersonal interpretation of Old Testament monotheism. The Monarchians taught that the essential unity of The Godhead could only be maintained and safeguarded by a strict understanding of God as consisting of one person only. From this premise, two distinct views emerged. One view, Dynamic Monarchianism, totally denied Christ any proper deity of His own. Instead, Christ was considered as simply a mere man who was raised to a level of deity by a divine power which animated the human body of Jesus. This was entirely accomplished by God (the Father) who had chosen Jesus to be the Messiah. A variant of this teaching (Monarchian Adoptionism) also believed that Christ was a mere man (through admittedly of miraculous birth) until His baptism when the Holy Spirit made Him the Son of God by adoption. Dynamic Monarchians did not recognize any divine relationship between the Father and the Son, other than by election or adoption.

The other view, Modalistic Monarchianism or Patripassianism (Latin *patris*, “father”; *passus*, “to suffer”) believed the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit to be but three different manifestations or modes of the single divine God. First existing as the Father, at the incarnation He became the Son and subsequently suffered and died as the Christ. Afterward, at the resurrection, the Son became the Holy Spirit. The most well-known of the Patripassians, the Roman Christian prelate, Sabellius, popularized this teaching and therefore it is also known as Sabellianism. Modalistic Monarchians did not recognize the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit as three separate persons. Rather, they taught “...that one cannot believe in One Only God in any other way than by saying that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are the very selfsame Person.” (The Anti-Nicene Fathers, volume 3, page 598, Article: Tertullian, part second, chapter seven, “Against Praxeas”). The idea, within Christianity, that the oneness of God (monotheism) must somehow be understood as unipersonal is basically a Monarchian concept.

The most prominent and controversial of all the teachings on The Godhead during the first 400 years of Christianity was a doctrine known as Arianism. In A.D. 319, Arius, a presbyter in charge of a parish church in Alexandria, became involved in a dispute with his bishop, Alexander, over the unity of the “Holy Trinity”. Both men believed in the idea that there **WAS** a Trinity, but they disagreed sharply on the exact **NATURE** of the Trinity. More precisely, the debate was Christological - what is the exact relationship which the Son bears to the Father? Alexander taught that the Son was begotten of the very essence of the Father, and is therefore of the **same** substance (Gr. *Homoousion*) with the Father, while Arius taught that the Son was begotten by the Father, not from His own essence, but from nothing; and that when He was thus begotten, He was, and is, of precisely the **like** substance (Gr. *Homoiousion*) with the Father. Theologically, both men came to their respective positions concerning the substance of the Son by applying the biblical term “only begotten” (Gr. *monogenēs* – see John 1:18) to Christ’s preincarnate, preexistent nature. In other words, the biblical concept of Christ being the only begotten Son of God was understood by **both** views as describing the nature and relationship that Christ had to the Father **BEFORE** the incarnation. Based on this assumption, the Arian concept of begotten was that of created – the sense of which means to make from nothing, to bring into existence from non-existence. Thus, the preincarnate Christ “...does not derive his subsistence from any matter; but that by his own will and counsel he has subsisted before time, and before ages, as perfect God, and only begotten and unchangeable, and that he existed not before he was begotten, or created, or purposed, or established...the Son had a beginning ...he is from nothing...he is neither part of God, nor any subjacent matter.” (Theodoret’s Ecclesiastical History, book 1, chapter 5).

Likewise, based on the same assumption, the Alexandrian concept of begotten was understood as a type of procreation – the sense of which means to emanate from, to proceed from, to reproduce. Thus, the pre-incarnate Christ “...proceeded from the Father; for he is the reflection of the glory of the Father, and the figure of his substance.” (Theodoret’s Ecclesiastical History, book 1, chapter 4). Moreover, “The Son is of the essence of the Father, not by division or diminution, but by simple and perfect self-communication. This divine self-communication of eternal love is represented by the figure of *generation*, suggested by the biblical terms *Father* and *Son*, the *only-begotten* Son, the *firstborn*. The eternal generation is an internal process in the essence of God, and the Son is an immanent offspring of this essence...God, to be Father, must from eternity beget the Son, and so reproduce himself; yet he does this in obedience not to a foreign law, but to his own law and the impulse of his will.” (Philip Schaff, History of The Christian Church, volume 3, pages 658, 660, emphasis in original).

Again, both views were another attempt to explain the New Testament revelation of the divine persons (Father, Son, and later the Holy Spirit), in the context of a unipersonal monotheism. With Arianism, both the subsistence (Personhood) and essence (Deity) of the Son (and later the Holy Spirit) were created out of nothing. First, the Father created the Son, then the Son created the Holy Spirit. As a result, the unipersonal emphasis is on the Personhood of the Father. He singularly is unbegotten (not created), therefore He alone is the Supreme God.

With the Alexandrian view, the subsistence (Personhood of the Father, Son and the later the Holy Spirit) is consubstantial – in and of one and the same being or essence (Deity). Because of the numerical unity of the essence (one substance of the same kind) rather than a generic unity of the essence (a triad of substances of the same kind), the unipersonal emphasis appears to be solely on the essence itself – and then only in the sense that the Deity alone is the only singular entity. However – and more true to the term – this view also has a unipersonal emphasis regarding the subsistence (Personhood). The Father alone is unbegotten (meaning not generated

or not procreated). And while all three Persons are said to be coequal: “The stress on equality, however, was never understood as detracting from a certain primacy of the Father – from whom the other two persons derive, even if they do so eternally.” (Funk and Wagnalls New Encyclopedia, volume 26, page 47, Article: “Trinity”, copyright 1986). Alexander and his more immediate contemporaries understood this as a certain type of subordinationism – not of the essence, but of the Personhood. Thus, “Father, Son, and Spirit all have the same divine essence, yet not in a co-ordinate way, but in an order of subordination. The Father has the essence originally and of himself, from no other; he is the primal divine subject, to whom alone absoluteness belongs, and he is therefore called preeminently God, or the principle, the fountain, and the root of Godhead...The Nicene fathers thought the idea of the divine unity best preserved by making the Father, notwithstanding the triad of persons, the monad from which Son and Spirit spring, and to which they return.” (Philip Schaff, History of The Christian Church, volume 3, pages 681-682). And although the word “subordination” and some of the related terminology associated with it was eliminated about a century later – primarily through the efforts of the theologian Augustine, bishop of Hippo – “Yet he too admitted that the Father stood above the Son and the Spirit in this: that he alone is of no other, but is absolutely original and independent; while the Son is begotten of him, and the Spirit proceeds from him, and proceeds from him in a higher sense than from the Son.” (Philip Schaff, History of The Christian Church, volume 3, page 685; see also Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, volume 3, page 225).

The debate between Arius and Alexander spread rapidly, and soon agitation over their doctrine engulfed practically all of Christendom, East and West. Finally, to settle the dispute, Constantine I, emperor of Rome, convened an ecumenical council – the first of its kind – in the city of Nicaea. Of the 1800 bishops in the Roman Empire, 318 attended the council. After much quarreling between the two rival parties, the issue eventually centered in whether or not the word Homoousion favored by the party of Alexander and Athanasius (an even more zealous promoter of Alexander’s doctrine than Alexander himself) should be inserted into the text of a creed. The creed, submitted by Eusebius of Caesarea, was one which had generally been in use before the dispute between the two parties began. (For the full text as originally presented at the council, see Philip Schaff, The Creeds of Christendom, volume 2 – The Greek and Latin Creeds, pages 29, 30). The Arian faction did not want the word inserted, the Alexander/Athanasius faction did. The decision to settle the dispute rested with Constantine I, a pagan who professed to be a Christian for political reasons. Accordingly, the decision was not a difficult one for the emperor. He ruled in favor of the majority party and order the word inserted into the creed. Now that they were assured of the authority and approval of the emperor, the victorious party of Alexander and Athanasius required that additional phrases be also inserted into the creed before they would adopt it as the official, orthodox view. The modifications were designed to be written into the final draft of the creed in such a manner so as to make it difficult for the Arians to submit to it without first abandoning their view. Thus when the rewritten creed was finally presented before the council, Constantine I urged it upon the Arian faction; ultimately threatening those who would not submit to it with banishment. It was under these circumstances that the **original** Nicene creed was accepted as the orthodox position and an end (or so it was supposed) to all further theological controversy on the subject. (For the full text of the original Nicene creed of A.D. 325, see Philip Schaff, The Creeds of Christendom, volume 1 – The History of Creeds, pages 28, 29). Arius was banished and his teachings condemned as heresy. The impact of this council on the doctrine of the Godhead cannot be overstated. The original Nicene creed became the first to be universally accepted in Christendom – its status as dogma confirmed by the ban on Arianism, enforced by the

State. The main focus of the dogma was an important theological concept – the idea of consubstantiality – the “orthodoxy” of which was ultimately determined by a pagan Head of State. The criteria to decide whether any teaching on the Godhead was orthodox or heretical would be defined within the context of this dogma.

The First Council of Nicaea concerned itself primarily with the relationship between the Father and the Son. By adopting the doctrine of Alexander and Athanasius to interpret this relationship, the council gave to the Orthodox party (as they were afterwards called) their first victory. The next logical step in the Trinitarian controversy dealt with the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Father and Son. Again, the dispute was with Arianism. Since their defeat in A.D. 325, the Arians had continued to strive and attempt to gain the ascendancy over the Orthodox. This was accomplished in A.D. 359 when Arianism became the official position of the Empire. Soon after, however, quarrels among themselves led to their dividing into two factions – the semi-Arians and the neo-Arians. Both groups, though now divided themselves, rejected the Nicene dogma of consubstantiality.

By A.D. 379, the Orthodox were again in the ascendancy due to the favor of the newly crowned Eastern Roman Emperor, Theodosius I. The Nicene Orthodoxy was re-established and the opportunity arose for the Orthodox to finalize the victory won at the First Council of Nicaea. This time, the debate over the **NATURE** of the Trinity dealt with the Holy Spirit. “The Arians made the Holy Spirit the first creature of the Son, and as subordinated to the Son as the Son to the Father. The Arian trinity was therefore not a trinity immanent and eternal, but arising in time and in descending grades, consisting of the uncreated God and two created demi-gods...among the adherents of the Nicene orthodoxy an uncertainty still for a time prevailed respecting the doctrine of the third person of the Holy Trinity...Gregory Nazianzen who for his own part believed and taught the consubstantiality of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son, **SO LATE AS [A.D.] 380 MADE THE REMARKABLE CONFESSION:** ‘Of the wise among us, some consider the Holy Spirit an influence, others a creature, others God himself, and again others know not which way to decide, from reverence, as they say, for the Holy Scripture, which declares nothing exact in the case.’” (Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church, volume 3, pages 663, 664, emphasis supplied).

In A.D. 381, Emperor Theodosius I convened the First Council of Constantinople with the purpose of uniting the church of the whole empire under the Orthodox faith. The Arians were not represented at the council (indeed, the emperor, a year earlier, had driven the Arians out of all the churches of the capital and had issued an edict requiring his subjects to confess the Orthodox faith). It was his hope that the council would provide him with the ecclesiastical support necessary to give these measures sanction of law. This it did, and more: “The 150 bishops meeting at the council condemned various religious sects as heretical, reaffirmed the resolutions of the first ecumenical council of Nicaea (325), defined the Holy Spirit as consubstantial and coeternal with the Father and the Son in divine Trinity, and proclaimed the bishop of Constantinople second in precedence to the bishop of Rome.” (Funk and Wagnells New Encyclopedia, volume 7, page 150, Article: Constantinople, Councils of, First Council of Constantinople, copyright 1986). By reaffirming the Nicene dogma and defining the doctrine of the Holy Spirit within its context, the council of A.D. 381 completed and finalized the Orthodox doctrine of the “Holy Trinity”. The original Nicene creed was retained with few revisions – the most major of which being the addition of added phraseology explaining the consubstantial and coeternal relationship of the Holy Spirit with the other persons in the Trinity. (For the full text of the Constantinopolitan creed along with a side by side comparison of it with the original Nicene creed, see Philip Schaff, History of The Christian Church, volume 3, pages 668, 669).

This decision by the Orthodox bishops concerning the Holy Spirit is interesting in light of the fact that just a year earlier, the “wise” among them were uncertain and divided on the issue. Whatever their reasons, the unity among them at the council brought the Trinitarian controversies to an end. “The emperor ratified the decrees of the council, and as early as July, 381, enacted the law that all churches should be given up to bishops who believed in the equal divinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and who stood in church fellowship with certain designated orthodox bishops. The public worship of heretics was forbidden. Thus Arianism and the kindred errors were forever destroyed in the Roman empire” (Philip Schaff, History of The Christian Church, volume 3, page 640).

The addition of the Holy Spirit within the already formulated dogma of the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father, required additional theological explanation along with a more precise definition of terms. Originally, the question of **how** the Son was consubstantial with the Father was explained by a particular understanding of the biblical term “begotten”, in connection with other biblical terms like “Father”, “Son”, and “first born”. The concept that emerged was the Son was consubstantial with the Father by a process of eternal begetting of the Son by the Father. Early on, the term “begotten” was synonymous with words like “emanate”, “proceed”, and “generate”. As time passed, and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit developed, it became clear that the process of how the Holy Spirit is consubstantial could not be identical with the process of how the Son is consubstantial. Since the word “begotten” in association with the words “Father” and “Son”, carried the connotation of procreation – “the Father eternally reproducing himself,” and since Christ is the **only** begotten Son – the only one so reproduced – to apply the same terminology to the Holy Spirit would at least imply that the Father had **two** Sons! Yet, by its very nature, the process by which the Holy Spirit partakes of one and the same essence as the other Two Persons do, must be similar. The solution was to explain the process using distinct, more exclusive terminology for each Person of the Godhead. Thus the Father, unbegotten, the Son, begotten, and the Holy Spirit, proceeding. The Son was eternally generated (the word “generate” now used exclusively to describe the term “begotten”) of the Father and the Holy Spirit was eternally proceeding from the Father (either **through** the Son or also **from** the Son). So stated, the eternal generation of the Son carried the connotation of a type of procreation, to whereas the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit (though not as definitely defined), carried the connotation of a type of emanation. Therefore, by so explaining the process of consubstantiality, the Nicene Fathers were able to systematically formulate the orthodox dogma of the Trinity.

The influence of the first two ecumenical church councils (Nicaea and Constantinople) on the whole of Christianity is staggering. Trinitarianism, as stated in the Constantinopolitan creed and interpreted by Nicaea/Constantinople councils, through the ages and down to our time, has become the official, universally accepted, teaching on the Godhead – defining that which is “orthodox” from that which is “heresy”; those who are “Christian” from those who are not.

ADVENTIST - 1844 TO PRESENT. The Great Second Adventist Awakening which arose during the first half of the nineteenth century, achieved the most prominence in North America under the leadership of William Miller and his associates. For the early Adventists (Millerites), the doctrine of the Godhead was not a subject of immediate importance. They were largely comprised of Protestants holding membership in various denominational affiliations – both Trinitarian and non-Trinitarian. For the most part, their doctrinal differences were lost sight of in the all-absorbing belief that the second coming of Jesus Christ was literally going to occur soon during

their time. Because of this, the evidence suggests that there was no general consensus of belief concerning the Godhead among the Advent believers prior to the Great Disappointment of 1844. The view they held individually was probably the same view the denomination they came from held. For instance, William Miller was a laymen with no denominational background.* The second article of his statement of faith written at Low Hampton, New York, September 5, 1822, says:

“I believe in one living and true God, and that there are three persons in the Godhead – as there is in man, the body, soul, and spirit. And if any one will tell me how these exist, I will tell him how the three persons of the Triune God are connected.” (James White, Sketches of the Christian Life and Public Labors of William Miller, Battle Creek, Michigan: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1875, page 59).

This statement is clearly Trinitarian in nature – “**one** living and true God...**three** persons **in** the Godhead...**Triune** God.” On the other hand, Joshua V. Himes, a close associate of William Miller, was a minister with a background in the denomination known as the Christian Connection. In the Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, published in 1835, an article written by Himes on the “Christian Connection” says:

“At first, they were generally Trinitarians; subsequently they have, almost unanimously, rejected the Trinitarian doctrine as unscriptural.”

He then goes on to list the doctrines generally accepted by this organization:

“That there is one living and true God, the Father almighty, who is unoriginated, independent, and eternal, the Creator and Supporter of all worlds; and that this God is one spiritual intelligence, one infinite mind, ever the same, never varying...That Christ is the Son of God, the promised Messiah and Saviour of the world...that the Holy Spirit is the power and energy of God, that holy influence of God by whose agency, in the use of means, the wicked are regenerated...” (Joshua V. Himes, “Christian Connection”, Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, ed. T. Newton Brown, Boston: Shattuck and Co., 1835, pages 362, 363).

The former statement is plainly an anti-Trinitarian position. Trinitarianism is “rejected...as **unscriptural**.” The latter statement is clearly non-Trinitarian in nature. The Father **alone** is “unoriginated, independent, and eternal.” By implication, Christ then was originated, dependent, and brought into existence by the Father; whereas the Holy Spirit is the “**power** and **energy** of God, that holy **influence** of God.”

The Great Disappointment of 1844 splintered the Seventh Month Movement (the second phase of the Great Awakening) into several different groups. The group that considered themselves the true spiritual successors of the Movement gave birth to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Their theological emphasis remained centered on eschatology. Nevertheless, discussion on the Godhead did appear in Seventh-day Adventist literature from early denominational history onward. Agitation on the subject did exist among Adventists though the extent of it is difficult to determine accurately.

It is not within the scope of this article to exhaustively present every statement written in denominational literature on the Godhead doctrine; nor to present or discuss the Ellen G. White/Spirit of Prophecy position on the topic (indeed that is a separate position paper of its own).

Based on the evidence available, writers such as Joseph Bates, James White, J.M. Stephen-

* later, in 1833, the Baptists gave him a ministerial license to preach and he was thereafter affiliated with the Baptists.

son, J.B. Frisbie, D.W. Hull, Uriah Smith, J.N. Loughborough, S.B. Whitney, D.M. Canright, A.J. Dennis, J.H. Waggoner, G.W. Morse, T.R. Williamson and E.J. Waggoner took a position on the Godhead which is definitely anti-Trinitarian. Most of them were well respected denominational pioneers and leaders. Their influence, along with the absence of any evidence to the contrary, indicated that prior to the late 1890's the prevailing opinion in the Seventh-day Adventist Church on the nature of God was – with the possible exception of Ellen G. White – anti-Trinitarian. The reasons why Trinitarianism was rejected during this time is perhaps best illustrated by Elder J.N. Loughborough. In answer to the question, "What serious objection is there to the doctrine of the Trinity?", published in the Review and Herald, November 5, 1861, Loughborough replied:

"There are many objections which we might urge, but on account of our limited space we shall reduce them to the three following: 1. It is contrary to common sense. 2. It is contrary to scripture. 3. Its origin is Pagan and fabulous." (J.N. Loughborough, "Questions for Bro. Loughborough", Review and Herald, XVIII, November 5, 1861, page 184).

In explanation, Loughborough enlarges on the first objection by opposing the idea that three are one and one, three. He reasons that there would be three Gods if the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were each God.

In considering the second objection he notes that scripture speaks of the Father and the Son as two distinct persons. The oneness between them, according to John chapter 17, is the same as that between Christian believers. Loughborough urged that belief in the Trinity meant acceptance of the concept that "God sent himself into the world, died to reconcile the world to himself, raised himself from the dead, ascended to himself in heaven..."

As for the third objection, he argues that Trinitarianism came into the church about the same time as image worship and Sunday observance in 325 A.D. He views it as simply a renovation of the pagan Persian religion and observes that by about 681 A.D. Trinitarianism became an established doctrine in most of the Christian world.

The views expressed by Loughborough in this Review and Herald article are highly representative of nearly identical views held by other Adventist authors throughout the entire time period. Their perception of Trinitarianism (as illustrated by the first two objections) was a misunderstanding of what the doctrine actually teaches.

The explanation of objection one, confuses Trinitarianism with Tritheism. Trinitarianism states that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each God not because there is plurality of essences (three Gods) but rather because there is a singularity of essence which the three subsist in.

Likewise, objection two confuses Trinitarianism with Patripassianism – the Sabellian form of Monarchianism. Trinitarianism teaches that singularity of essence ("one" God) is not unipersonal, but rather tri-personal; Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three distinct persons which subsist in one and the same substance.

The third objection associates Trinitarianism with other post-Apostolic, pagan influenced doctrines promoted by the Church Councils and absorbed into Catholicism as papal dogma.

In addition, other objections saw Trinitarianism as depreciating the efficacy of the atonement (if Christ was Absolute God in the same sense as the Father, then His divine nature could not die and therefore the sacrifice would have been merely a human one; inadequate to atone for sin); and also divesting God of bodily parts and form (an extreme position advocated by certain Trinitarian denominations).

The same denominational literature which opposes Trinitarianism also shows uniform agreement on certain views concerning the Godhead that Adventists of the time considered

fundamental – 1. The Father alone possesses absolute Deity and is Eternal in the fullest sense of the term. 2. Christ is subordinate to the Father. 3. The Holy Spirit is not a person, but rather a mere influence.

The exact understanding of these views – particularly the relationship of Christ to the Father – differed somewhat. In 1854, J.M. Stephenson wrote:

“The idea of Father and Son supposes priority of the existence of the one, and the subsequent existence of the other...Col. 1:15 ‘The first born of every creature.’ Creature signifies creation; hence to be the first born of every creature, (creation) he [Christ] must be a created being; and as such, his life and immortality must depend upon the Father’s will just as much as angels, or redeemed men...” (J.M. Stephenson, “The Atonement”, Review and Herald, VI, November 14, 1854, pages 128, 133).

These statements appear to indicate a **true** Arian position. The terms “Father” and “Son” are understood as conveying the idea of existence of one prior to the later existence of the other. In other words, the Father had always existed, but there was a time when Christ did not exist; He had a beginning. Furthermore, this “subsequent existence” (beginning) is at creation. Colossians 1:15 is understood as teaching that Christ “must be a **created** being”. As the first created of all creation, His coming into existence is in the same category as the coming into existence of “angels, or redeemed men”, as well as “every creature (creation).”

Likewise, Uriah Smith appears to take a true Arian position in the first issue of his commentary on Revelation. Speaking of Christ in his exposition of Revelation 3:14-22, Smith wrote:

“Moreover he is ‘the beginning of the creation of God. Not the beginner, but the beginning, of the creation, the first created being, dating his existence far back before any other created being or thing, next to the self-existent and eternal God.” (Uriah Smith, Thoughts Critical and Practical on the Book of Revelation, Battle Creek, Mich.: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1865, page 59).

Again, Christ is said to be “the first **created** being” in conjunction with “**OTHER created** being[s] or thing[s]”; He is “Not the beginner, but the beginning of creation.”

Over the years, Uriah Smith would modify this view and move away from a true Arian position in his Christology. In the 1899 edition of Thoughts on the Book of Daniel and the Revelation, the comment on Revelation 3:14-22 stated:

“Others, however, and more properly we think, take the word [arche] to mean the ‘agent’ or ‘efficient cause,’ which is one of the definitions of the word, understanding that Christ is the agent through whom God has created all things, but that he himself came into existence in a different manner, as he is called ‘the only begotten’ of the Father. It would seem utterly inappropriate to apply this expression to any being created in the ordinary sense of the term.” (Uriah Smith, Thoughts on the Book of Daniel and the Revelation, Battle Creek, Mich.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1899, page 371).

With this exposition, Smith completely reverses the position held in 1865. Christ **now** is the “beginner” of the creation – “the agent through whom God has created all things” – and **not** the “beginning” of the creation – “the first created being.” And while He still has a “far back” in the past beginning, He did not come into being in a way similar to that which is created. Now Christ “came into existence in a different manner” not like “any being created in the ordinary sense of that term;” He was “begotten of the Father.” An understanding of this terminology appeared a year earlier in Elder Smith’s work, Looking Unto Jesus, He wrote:

“Thus it appears that by some divine impulse or process, not creation, known only to Omniscience, and possibly only to Omnipotence, The Son of God appeared.” (Uriah Smith, Looking Unto Jesus, Battle Creek, Mich.: Review and Herald Publishing Company, 1898, page 10).

Clearly Smith understood the word begotten as “some divine impulse or process, not creation” by which the preincarnate Christ, at some point or period in the extreme far distant past, came into existence. Compared to the 1865 view, this later view of the doctrine of Christ in relation to the Godhead is a move closer to the Trinitarian concept.

Significantly in 1890, while also expounding on the nature of Christ in relation to the Father, Elder E.J. Waggoner wrote:

“There was a time when Christ proceeded forth and came from God, from the bosom of the Father (John 8:42; 1:18), but that time was so far back in the days of eternity that to finite comprehension it is practically without beginning.”

“But the point is that Christ is a begotten Son, and not a created subject...And since He is the only-begotten Son of God, He is of the very substance and nature of God, and possesses by birth all the attributes of God, for the Father was pleased that His Son should be the express image of His Person, the brightness of His glory, and filled with all the fullness of the Godhead. So He has ‘life in Himself;’ He possesses immortality in His own right, and can confer immortality upon others.” (E.J. Waggoner, Christ and His Righteousness, 96 pp., Students Library, No. 72, pages 21 and 22).

Waggoner’s view is ever closer to Trinitarian Christology (at least in definition) than Smith’s view. “Christ proceeded forth...from the **bosom** of the Father...is a **begotten** Son...and possesses by **birth** all the attributes of God.” There is no doubt that Waggoner’s understanding of the term begotten is defined as a proceeding and coming forth from the bosom, a birth; or in other words a type of procreation. This definition of begotten is essentially the same as the Trinitarian definition of it. However, with Waggoner’s view the procreation of the Son by the Father was a process which happened once at some point in the far distant past; whereas with the Trinitarian view the procreation of the Son by the Father is a perpetual process by which the Father eternally communicates essence or self to the Son.

In summary, the evidence indicates that during this period in Seventh-day Adventist history (from shortly after 1844 up to the late 1890’s) there was a non-Trinitarian view of the Godhead that was generally held, **unofficially** by most within the church (it must be remembered that there wasn’t an official statement on the doctrine produced by the church throughout this time).

The position taken was:

1. There is only one supreme God, the Father. He alone is fully Eternal and absolute Deity.
2. There is only one divine Son of God, Christ. He is next, in power and authority, to the Eternal Father. He is not fully Eternal and absolutely Divine because there was a time in which He did not exist. His existence and His deity were dependent upon the Father. Christ is therefore inferior to the Father because His eternity is limited and His divinity delegated to Him.
3. The Holy Spirit is not a person and not a member of the Deity. Rather, “It” is the force and power of God; a divine influence which emanates from the Father and the Son. It is the agent which represents their presence when they personally are not present.

By the 1890’s, the prevailing anti-Trinitarian sentiment within the Seventh-day Adventist Church began to wane. In 1892, the Pacific Press reprinted an article by a non-Adventist writer entitled, The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity, by Samuel T. Spear. The article is not wholly orthodox – it makes certain contradictory statements about the divinity of Christ and denies the eternal

generation of the Son by the Father and the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father. As a result, the article presented a more agreeable form of Trinitarianism to Adventists.

From 1898 and onward, the Adventist Church began publishing literature on the Godhead that increasingly reflected a Trinitarian perspective. In 1898 and 1900, three articles from “The King’s Messenger” were printed in the Review and Herald entitled, “The God-Man” (September 20, 1898, page 598), “The Third Person” (January 16, 1900, page 35, and “Blended Personalities” (April 3, 1900, page 210). The articles have a definite Trinitarian flavor; especially focusing on the personality of the Holy Spirit – the last article even using the term “triune God.” In 1898, R.A. Underwood wrote:

“It seems strange to me now, that I ever believed that the Holy Spirit was only an influence, in view of the work he does.” (R.A. Underwood, “The Holy Spirit A Person”, Review and Herald, LXXV, May 17, 1898, page 310).

Statements like these began an evolution of thought among Adventists away from non-Trinitarian theology to a gradual acceptance of the doctrine of the Trinity. Whatever other reasons for this shift in theology, there can be little doubt that Ellen G. White played an important role in the transition. Her statements on the Godhead published in 1898 in her book, The Desire of Ages, with similar statements throughout her writings which follow afterward, appear to have had a profound impact among Seventh-day Adventists. Whether or not she **actually** teaches Trinitarianism (Orthodox or otherwise), the fact remains that many Adventists – then and now – **perceive** that she does.

The decades following the turn of the century saw the Adventist Church moving further into the Trinitarian camp. Finally, in 1931 a new statement of beliefs was prepared under the direction of the General Conference Committee. The statement, first printed in the 1931 Yearbook, declares in belief number two:

“That the Godhead, or **Trinity**, consists of the Eternal Father, a personal, spiritual Being, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, infinite in wisdom and love; the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Eternal Father, through whom all things were created and through whom the salvation of the redeemed hosts will be accomplished; the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead, the great regenerating power in the work of redemption. Matt. 28:19.” (“Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists”, Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook, Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1931, page 377, emphasis ours)

This is the first time ever that the word “Trinity” appears in any statement of belief or Yearbook previous to this. A year later, the same statement of beliefs was printed in the Church Manual. In 1946 it became **official** when the General Conference session voted that it, as well as any other portion of the Church Manual should be revised only at a General Conference session. The doctrine of the Trinity became the official position of the Seventh-day Adventist Church on the Godhead.

In 1957 a very interesting statement appeared in the book Questions on Doctrine. In reply to the question, “Do you (Adventists) believe in the Trinity?”, the following answer was given:

“Seventh-day Adventists base their belief in the Trinity on the statements of Scripture rather than on a **historic creed**.” (Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine, Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1957, page 37, emphasis ours). If the “historic creed” mentioned here is the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of A.D. 381, this statement would seem to indicate that the Adventist form of Trinitarianism might not be the same as the Orthodox form of it. As later developments would show, however, this was not the case.

In 1980, a new statement of beliefs was voted in at the General Conference session held at Dallas, Texas. Belief number two – The Trinity – reads:

“There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal Persons...” (Seventh-day Adventists Believe, Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1988, page 16).

This particular wording leaves no doubt as to which form of Trinitarianism the Seventh-day Adventist Church officially professes faith in. J.N.D. Kelly in the book Early Christian Doctrines, pages 87, 88, notes:

“The doctrine of one God, the Father and creator, formed the background and indisputable premise of the Church’s faith...The problem for theology was to integrate with it, intellectually, the fresh data of the specifically Christian revelation... The Church had to wait for more than three hundred years for a final synthesis, **for not until the council of Constantinople (381) was the formula of one God existing in three co-eternal Persons formally ratified.**” (emphasis ours). The theological explanation of this “formula” is a questionable interpretation of certain Scriptural passages combined with mystical speculation. This system was officially completed and “ratified” at the council of Constantinople; where in a more simplified language it was embodied in a creed, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. The nearly identical wording of the 1980 statement with that of the Constantinopolitan formula leaves no doubt that the Orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is the form of Trinitarianism the denomination accepts. This is **not** a biblical doctrine that was officially adopted in 1980, rather it’s Creedal doctrine.

The inclusion of the Orthodox Trinitarian formula within the statement of beliefs, put the Seventh-day Adventist Church directly in line with the ecumenical movement. Organizations like the World Council of Churches promote the teaching as a basis for visible unity among all the churches. Its Constitution states:

I. Basis: The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the Scriptures and therefore **seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.**

II. Membership: Those churches shall be eligible for membership in the World Council of Churches which **express their agreement with the Basis** upon which the Council is founded and satisfy such criteria as the Assembly or the Central Committee may prescribe...” (World Council of Churches, So Much in Common, Geneva, Switzerland, 1973, page 40, emphasis ours).

To actually achieve its goal of visible unity, the World Council of Churches is relying heavily on its Faith and Order Commission. The Commission’s By-Laws declare their objective is “to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship.” (Faith and Order Paper, #111, pages vii, viii). The first major step toward this objective was the adoption of the statement on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry at Lima, Peru, in 1982. The next step (and of more present concern) is a second Faith and Order study – “Toward the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today”:

“For the study, the Faith and Order Commission has chosen the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of A.D. 381 – already officially recognized by many churches – as a summary of the apostolic faith.” (One World, No. 132, page 15).

[The “many churches” mentioned here include the Seventh-day Adventist Church]. In connection with this study, Faith and Order Paper #153 – Confessing the One Faith – is “An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as it is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)”. In the preface, a **Roman Catholic cleric**, Jean-Marie Tillard OP, and Moderator of the Apostolic Faith Steering Committee of the Faith and Order Commission wrote:

“The coming together of all Christians in an authentic communion of faith, evangelical life and mission **requires the common confession of the apostolic faith.**” (page vii, emphasis ours).

This “common confession” is the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. Throughout this study, this creed is equated with “the apostolic faith.”

When consideration is given to the fact that since 1967 the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been “unofficially” recognized by the World Council of Churches through the appointment of a Seventh-day Adventist **individual** to membership in its Faith and Order Commission, the present situation becomes grave. The Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches have the same goal – visible unity. Since 1980, the Seventh-day Adventist Church stands poised for entry and official membership in the World Council of Churches. It behooves every Adventist who holds membership in the denomination to determine for themselves where their loyalties really lie.

Added to this, is the agitation on the doctrine of the Godhead by Adventists largely outside the denomination. Denouncing the Trinitarian stance of the regular Church, it is obvious that most of the independents promoting an anti-Trinitarian position know little of what Orthodox Trinitarianism **actually** teaches. By advocating the same basic position held by many of the pioneers before the 1890’s, they are closer in their Christology to Orthodox Trinitarianism than they even realize. Worse than that, the “begotten means a type of procreation” concept has taken some of these dissidents to preposterous extremes – everything from God having sex organs, to the idea that there is a heavenly “mother”! Couple this with related “winds of doctrine” such as the “Yahweh movement” and the femininity of the Holy Spirit and the only conclusion that can be drawn is that the Babylon of confusion **outside** the denomination is as great as the Babylon of confusion **inside** the denomination.

Whatever else might be said about the doctrine of the Godhead, one thing is clear – the need for a heart-felt, prayerful study of the Bible is desperately needed now more than ever. Instead of relying on the past interpretations of others, Seventh-day Adventists need to know for themselves what is truth today. If truth is progressive, then surely God has something to teach His servants about His nature that will dispel the confusion existing everywhere at this present hour.

In the Godhead, there is unity within plurality in respect to both persons **and** essence. The Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are working in oneness to carry out the plan of salvation. One truth after another has been corrupted when the Scriptures are interpreted by human speculation. This has been done to a large degree on the doctrine of the Godhead, which in turn, has served only to darken “counsel by words without knowledge” (Job 38:2). “We ought not to suppose that the Godhead is like gold or silver or stone, a representation by human art and imagination, or anything constructed or invented” (Acts 17:29, Amplified Version). Let the Bible speak for itself when it comes to the make- up of the Godhead.

(All other emphases added unless otherwise noted; all Scripture texts are from the KJV version of the Bible unless otherwise stated).

Prepared by:
Gary Patrick & Dennis Tevis
c/o Remnant Seventh Day Adventist Church
P. O. Box 172
Nora Springs, IA 50458

