

The official 1936 (non-trinitarian) Godhead beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists

By Terry Hill

This article reveals the Godhead beliefs that were held by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1936. It also shows the reason *why* they were believed. All of this is revealed in a set of Sabbath School lesson studies designed by our church to 'show the world' what we, as a denomination, officially believed and taught. This set of studies was called 'Bible Doctrines'. They play an important part in understanding the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, particularly the Godhead controversy that is still ongoing within the church today.

Why the lesson studies?

Shortly following the death of Ellen White (1915), a Bible Conference was convened. This took place in 1919 at Takoma Park. It had been authorised by the General Conference. Whilst it is not the purpose of this article to detail these discussions here (it would be far too much), suffice to say that the objective of some at this gathering was to promote a change to what we, as a denomination, were then teaching about Christ.

You will find two sections (No. 35 and 36) dealing with this Bible Conference here

<http://theprophetstillspeaks.co.uk/SBDH.htm>.

At that time (1919), just as it had been throughout the entire time of Ellen White's ministry, the majority belief was that Christ really is the divine Son of God. It was believed that He was begotten of God in eternity. During this time period also, the trinity doctrine was rejected. It was not until decades afterwards that this teaching was accepted by our denomination.

Following the death of Ellen White, our denominational beliefs concerning Christ were being challenged. This challenge came particularly from our church leadership. Nevertheless, even W. W. Prescott (who could be described as one of the 'leaders' of those at the 1919 conference who wanted change) could not deny that Christ was begotten.

This dispute appears to have been ongoing. This is possibly one of the reasons why the General Conference Committee decided in 1934 that a series of Sabbath School lesson studies should be produced detailing the official beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It could also have been because some were disputing the still 'fairly new' 1931 statement of beliefs that had been put into our Yearbook - also into the newly produced church manual in 1932. This being true would mean there was controversy and division at 'high level' over what we, as a denomination, taught.

Whatever the reasons for these Sabbath School studies, they were designed (as we shall now see) to make absolutely clear, especially to newcomers to the church, what we, as a denomination, officially believed and taught. This was as opposed to what a minority said we believed and taught – albeit that minority may have been some of our 'very persuasive'; also what we could term 'progressive', church leadership. These beliefs therefore, set out in these studies, were the 'official doctrines' of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (as opposed to the personal views of some).

The General Conference recommends

In the General Conference Committee meeting notes of November 8th 1934 it is recorded

“We recommend, The following as ways and means for helping to foster and care for the large harvest of souls coming into our ranks annually:” (*General Conference Committee meeting minutes. November 8th 1934, page 1401*)

One of these “ways and means” was to produce a set of Sabbath School lessons explaining what were the official beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists. As the minutes went on to explain

“That the Sabbath School Department be requested to provide at an early date lessons as follows: On Bible doctrines.” (*Ibid*)

So it was that for the “foster and care” of people coming into our church, a set of Sabbath School lessons was to be prepared detailing our denominational beliefs. These studies were to be known as “Bible Doctrines”. The same minutes also recorded the request

“That in the preparation of these lessons, our large and rapidly growing membership in mission lands be kept in mind, thus making it possible to adapt these lessons to the needs of the native mind.” (*Ibid*)

The next year (1935) at a General Conference Committee meeting on December 6th, it was reported under the heading of “Sabbath School Lesson Manuscripts”

“The Sabbath School Department desiring special help in their Lessons Committee during the time when they will be considering the manuscripts for the lessons on Bible doctrines, it was

VOTED, That I. H. Evans, W. H. Branson, O. Montgomery, M. E. Kern, F. M. Wilcox and W. E. Howell be appointed to read the manuscripts and sit with the Sabbath School Department Lessons Committee when consideration is given to the lessons on Bible doctrines,” (*General Conference Committee Minutes, December 6th 1935*)

This was over a year after the original decision to produce these studies. Remember, the Sabbath School had been requested for them to be provided “at an early date”. Why then were they now asking for help? Had they not started putting

these studies together as yet or was it because they had come to a 'sticky point' on a certain teaching? The minutes do not say but what we do know is that these leading figures of Seventh-day Adventism (as named above), all of whom were on the General Conference Committee, were voted to give "special help" to those compiling the studies. These people together would know for sure what Seventh-day Adventists believed – thus it was assured that no mistake would be made in detailing these beliefs. Note that two of the 'helpers' were F. M. Wilcox and M. E. Kern. They were amongst those who had been nominated to formulate the 1931 statement of beliefs.

The above reveals how important these Sabbath School studies were to the General Conference. It appears that our church leadership did not wish these beliefs to contain even the smallest of errors. As we shall now see, these studies were intended to 'tell the world' what was officially believed by Seventh-day Adventists. They were to commence from the 4th quarter 1936. They were to continue for seven consecutive quarters (one and three-quarter years). The final quarter of these studies therefore was the 2nd quarter of 1938.

Promoting the Sabbath School lesson studies on Bible Doctrines

Just four months prior to the first of the above lesson studies actually being published (October 1936) they were spoken of at the General Conference Session held that same year in San Francisco. This took place during the final day's proceedings (Monday June 8th 1936).

After discussing a number of other items, recommendations were made concerning the Sabbath School work. This included the "urging greater efforts toward the reaching of Sabbath School goals and standards" also "greater care in the selecting of Sabbath School teachers and officers" (Review and Herald, June 18th 1936). There appears to have been concern that our teachings in our Sabbath School lesson studies were not being presented as they should have been presented. Other recommendations were made including the encouraging of branch Sabbath Schools.

In the afternoon session, the future Sabbath School Lessons on 'Bible Doctrines' came up for discussion. In the report of the conference it said

*"Beginning with the fourth quarter of 1936, the Sabbath school lessons for the denomination for seven consecutive quarters are to cover **the essential doctrines of this message**. It was recommended that our people everywhere be encouraged to use these lessons as a basis for conducting Bible readings and cottage meetings in the homes of neighbors and friends, and that Bible training classes be organized in every church for this purpose." (Carlyle B Haynes, Review and Herald, June 18th 1936, Report of the final day's session at the 1936 General Conference held at San Francisco, 'The Sabbath School Lessons for 1936')*

We can now see why these studies were so very high profile. It was said that they were to explain "the essential doctrines" of our message. These studies were also recommended as a basis for conducting Bible studies and organised cottage

meetings etc. They were in fact then, the 'officially taught doctrines' of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Remember, this was 1936.

Four weeks later in the Review and Herald there was a report of the recent councils of the secretaries of the Home Missionary Department. It said

"A great deal of time was required for the consideration of a topic of unusual interest,—how to make the most effective missionary use of the Sabbath school lessons on Bible doctrines which the Sabbath School Department has provided to be used beginning with the fourth quarter of 1936 and covering a period of seven consecutive quarters. The chairman explained that these lessons are prepared in a form which provides a simple outline for a Bible reading on each doctrinal subject. He said :

"For years there has been a demand from many parts of the field for a series of doctrinal Sabbath school lessons framed in such a way that our church members could use them as outlines for Bible studies in the homes of friends and neighbors. Now that we have such a set of lessons, we should thank God, and improve the opportunity to lead all our people into the broad field of Bible evangelism.'" (*Grace D. Mace, Review and Herald, July 16th 1936, 'Home Missionary Department Meetings'*)

This observation was also made

"It is estimated that there are about 100,000 Sabbath school teachers in our churches throughout the world, who will stand before their classes each week and give instruction on all doctrinal subjects. It would be wonderful if these hundred thousand Sabbath school teachers would spend a little time each week in teaching the lesson to groups of people or to individuals upon whose pathway the light of truth has not yet dawned." (*Ibid*)

These lesson studies were regarded as a blessing from God. They were believed to be having His divine approval. It was said that "we should thank God" for them. As we can also see, these lesson studies were also very much in demand from "the field". The chairman also explained

"But this is not all that we should aim to accomplish. Every member of each Sabbath school class should be encouraged to make contact with some person who is seeking for a better understanding of God's word, and in an informal way give him a Bible study each week on the lesson which he has already studied and received personal instruction upon in the Sabbath school class. What can we do, brethren, to lead the entire 'church at study' into the place where it becomes the entire 'church at work'?" (*Ibid*)

The report added

"It was also recommended that our publishing houses provide a suitable loose-leaf notebook binder for preserving this special series of doctrinal Sabbath School Lesson Quarterlies, to serve as a permanent textbook of Bible studies

for the special benefit of lay members” (*Ibid*)

In the Review and Herald of December 17th 1936 (this was when the first quarter's lessons on 'Bible Doctrines' were actually being studied) G. A. Roberts spoke of the Sabbath School work. After making the appeal that the time had come when we should take what we learn from our Sabbath School lesson studies to a further audience than our Sabbath School classes and teachers etc. he said

“Has not the time come when each Sabbath school student who studies the Seventh-day Adventist Sabbath school lesson should recite or teach that Seventh-day Adventist Sabbath school lesson to some one who is without its blessing of truth - to a neighbor, to some friend, to a group in a cottage meeting, as a Sunday night sermon in a tent or hall, or in some other way to some other persons?

Should not each Sabbath school pupil lift up his eyes and look on the field of his own neighborhood or circle of acquaintances that is white to harvest, and carry to that field the message contained in the present Sabbath school lessons? Should not each thus become an open channel as well as a reservoir of truth.

The opportunity of a lifetime is now before us to teach the truth to our neighbors and communities, for the Sabbath school lessons on Bible doctrines are well adapted to that very purpose.

The outline at the close of each lesson will helpfully guide in the matter; and as the present lessons on doctrines ***are fully authenticated by the lesson committee of the General Conference Sabbath School Department, any one can know that what he teaches as he presents the lesson as a Bible reading or a sermon is correct.***” (G. A. Roberts, Review and Herald, December 17th 1936, ‘The Sabbath School Lesson’)

There was no mistaking what Roberts was saying. These studies had been “fully authenticated by the lesson committee of the General Conference Sabbath School Department”. As he says, what is being taught in them is “is correct.”. It was that which Seventh-day Adventists then officially believed.

There then followed an appeal that every Sabbath School teacher should be an instructor of the truth to those seeking baptism.

“With the instruction gained from week to week, when several quarters have passed the Sabbath school teachers should be competent instructors for baptismal classes, and can easily take charge of such classes for the evangelists. If there is no evangelist or pastor, the Sabbath school teacher can prepare candidates for baptism from the membership of his Sabbath school class, and then request that a minister be sent to baptize them.” (*Ibid*)

According to what is being said here, if the Sabbath School teacher instructed an individual in the teachings found in these 1936 lesson studies, this would be a

preparation for baptism. It should go without saying that the beliefs contained in these studies were regarded as of prime importance. Baptismal candidates were to be taught them as being the beliefs of the church they were seeking to join. This is why they had to be so detailed and so accurate. No mistake could be made.

In other of our publications, the report of the San Francisco Conference promoting these studies was repeated but there is no value in repeating it here. I will though share with you other comments. Here are some I found. Please note the paragraphs are not necessarily contiguous.

In the Columbian Union Visitor when promoting these studies, George Butler began by saying

“For at least twenty-one months, beginning Sunday, September 27, the entire church will be studying Bible doctrines.- Seven volumes of the Sabbath School quarterly will outline these lessons clearly as an aid to every member in giving Bible studies.” (*George Butler, Columbian Union Visitor, October 1st 1936, ‘Special to every Ohio member’*)

He also made this particular observation

“A very interesting and valuable additional feature will be the weekly appearance in the Signs of the Times of an able articles and outline synchronizing with the weekly Sabbath School lesson. How convenient it will be to be able to place a copy of the Signs in the hands of your Bible readers, giving them in print the subject you have studied this evening” (*Ibid*)

I will return to this point about the 'Signs' articles later. Butler concluded

“Never since we came on the stage of action was their a step taken along the lines of educating the laity so great a scale as is happening in the form of these lessons and Signs articles. Truly, every intelligent member (all members are) should avail himself of these valuable aids and endeavor to prepare that he may be able to give a reason for the hope that is in him, with meekness and efficiency. The opportunity lies before us. What shall Ohio members do with it? (*Ibid*)

Two weeks later the following remarks are found in the same paper

“We have now entered upon the last quarter of the year 1936 and it was with pleasure that we turned to the new series of Sabbath school lessons planned by the General Conference for the coming twenty-one months.” (*Eloise F. Williams, Columbian Union Visitor, October 15th 1936, ‘The Soul-Winning Sabbath School’*)

“While we all have a keen knowledge of the message, a course in Bible Doctrines will prepare us for the great work of the closing scenes of this world's history. So, as never before, the Sabbath school will be the "The Church at Study." The beauty of these lessons will be found in its form, for while they are

brief, each one is complete in itself, and those who are faithful in study will be prepared to present these truths in a way that will bring light to those not familiar with the Bible.” (*Ibid*)

Under the sub-heading 'The Branch Sabbath School', the following was in the Jamaican Visitor of October 1936

“The wonderful lessons on the Life of Christ have come to a close and now a set of lessons on Bible Doctrines has been started. What a wonderful opportunity is given our members to present our doctrines through these Sabbath school lessons to those-in their communities! At the recent General Conference recommendations were passed to urge our members to go out and start branch schools and in this way increase the membership of the schools and make them the soul-winning agency they are designed to be. I am passing these resolutions on to you and I trust each school in the conference will follow the suggestions and organize branch schools among their neighbours and friends. God will bless your efforts.” (*Mrs C. E. Andross, The Jamaican Visitor, October 1936, 'Sabbath School Dept.'*)

A few months later (January 1937) there was an advertisement in the Review and Herald for a binder in which to keep these lessons on Bible Doctrines. It said

“It will preserve all your lesson pamphlets, covering Bible Doctrines as outlined in the Sabbath school lessons for seven full quarters. These lessons have been prepared under the careful supervision of the Sabbath School Department, and you will want to keep them. They are invaluable for continuous reference.” (*Review and Herald, January 14th 1937, 'Preserve your Lesson Quarterlies on Bible Doctrines'*)

So as we can see, these sets of lesson studies were said to contain the truly authentic faith of Seventh-day Adventists. This was as it was during the time period leading up to the 1940's. Notice how much care was taken in the preservation of these studies. They were said to be “invaluable for continuous reference”.

After reading the above, it can be seen that by the General Conference in the late 1930's/early 1940's, these studies on “Bible Doctrines” was rated as extremely important – especially as an outreach to non-Seventh-day Adventists. They were to be used as teaching ‘the truth’ to all those who had not yet received our message, also to the care of those who came into the church. According to the General Conference, this set of studies contained the “essential doctrines” of the faith of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. We can safely assume therefore that in the 1940's and 1950's, these very same doctrines were still the predominant faith of our membership worldwide. This conclusion is based upon the premise that a denomination cannot change the beliefs of its entire membership overnight. It takes time and death to do it – particularly the latter. Those coming into the church during the late 1930's and 1940's etc. would have been taught these beliefs. It would have taken decades for all of these people to die off.

There is one more point to make before we see what was actually in the lesson

studies themselves.. This concerns what it was that *determined* the official faith of Seventh-day Adventists.

I believe it is only reasonable to conclude that what was in these lesson studies were the beliefs (doctrines) that were then held by the majority of Seventh-day Adventists living throughout the world. It could not have been the minority view of just 'some'. Can you imagine the outcry amongst church members if what they they were being taught in their Sabbath School lesson books was not in accordance with what they believed was the true faith of Seventh-day Adventism? It is too ridiculous to even contemplate. These studies were said to be the official faith of Seventh-day Adventists. It would not have been the official faith if it was only the beliefs of a minority. In reality, what was in these studies was only the same as what was believed during the time of Ellen White's ministry. During the 1940's and 1950's etc., this would remain the ongoing faith of Seventh-day Adventists.

So what did these lesson studies say concerning the Godhead?

The Godhead

In the third week's study of October 17th (which had the title 'The Godhead') the word 'trinity' was used twice. It was used once as a heading (page 9) and once as a sub-heading (page 11). In the following week's study of October 24th (which carried the title 'Deity and pre-existence of Christ) it was not mentioned.

The only other time during that quarter it was mentioned was in Lesson No. 10 of December 5th (which had the title 'The Promise and the Work of the Holy Spirit'). On page 31 it said

"Since the divine Trinity is composed of three persons, there is established a personal relationship between the Godhead and the one baptized" (Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly, 4th quarter, 1936, page 31)

Notice the words *"the divine Trinity"*. It did not say trinity doctrine. This is saying two different things. The word 'trinity' is being used here just to convey the belief of three divine persons of the Godhead.

At that time (1936), Seventh-day Adventists had not accepted the trinity doctrine. This is no more than I accept it today. This is even though I believe there are three persons of the Godhead. For those who would like to see why I reason this way, the following link will be of help. It is a document I sent to the White Estate. It also shows that Ellen White was not a believer in the trinity doctrine therefore she was not a trinitarian. Like me, as also this 1936 lesson study, she just confessed to believing there are three persons of the Godhead..

<http://theprophetstillspeaks.co.uk/Godhead/whiteestate.pdf>

Nothing else was said in these studies concerning the word 'trinity'. It was not therefore very high profile. The phrase 'trinity doctrine' or 'doctrine of the trinity' was not used in any of the 7 quarterlies. In fact the word 'trinity' was not used again after the first set of studies (4th quarter 1936) – meaning for the next 6 quarters (18

months) it was not mentioned. The lesson study for the 4th quarter 1936 can be viewed here

<http://documents.adventistarchives.org/SSQ/SS19361001-04.pdf>

The Godhead study (study No. 3) began by saying that the true God is the creator of this world (quoting Isaiah 42:5 and 45:18). It then asks (this was under the heading 'The Trinity')

"What three powers wrought in the work of creation? Eph. 3:9; John 1:3; Gen. 1:2." (*Ibid page 9*)

The note was then added

"These scriptures make it plain that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit wrought together in creation. God "created all things by Jesus Christ," and "the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" in bringing order out of chaos." (*Ibid*)

The study also asked

"In what threefold name are Christians baptized? Matt. 28:19." (*Ibid*)

The note to this said

"Baptism is a most solemn renunciation of the world. Those who are baptized in the threefold name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, at the very entrance of their Christian life declare publicly that they have forsaken the service of Satan, and have become members of the royal family, children of the heavenly King."—*Id.*, vol. , p. 91. VI" (*Ibid, page 9-10*)

The study then asks these three questions together

"What term does Paul use in speaking of God? Eph. 1:3, 17.

"How does the Father address the Son? Heb. 1:8.

"What is the Holy Spirit called in the Scriptures? Acts 5:3, 4; 2 Chron 15:1; Rom. 8:9." (*Ibid page 10*)

Interestingly the note said

"It will be noticed that in Acts 5:3, Peter says, "lie to the Holy Ghost," while in verse 4, he says, "thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God," thus using the two names interchangeably. In the other references, the Holy Spirit is appropriately called "the Spirit of God." Hence in the scriptures cited in questions 7 to 9, we learn that the name God is used of the Father, of the Son, and of the Spirit—a kind of heavenly family name. These three constitute the Godhead." (*Ibid*)

The study also quotes from the spirit of prophecy

"The Godhead was stirred with pity for the race, and the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit gave themselves to the working out of the plan of redemption."—"Counsels on Health," p. 222." (*Ibid*)

More was said of the working together of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit but you can read this for yourself at the above link. Enough has been given here to show the reasoning of that time. Nothing was said of the trinity doctrine.

The study then moved on to referring to Christ. It asked (this was under the heading 'Unity of the Godhead')

"How is the place of the Son in the Godhead emphasized? (*Ibid*)

As Colossians 2:9 is cited, the answer must be that in Christ "dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily."

The next question asks

"How is the unity of the Godhead expressed? John 10:30; 14:11." (*Ibid*)

Here was the perfect place to express a belief in the trinity doctrine but nothing was mentioned. It was not even implied. All that the study said was

"NOTE.—The Father is in the Son, and the Son is in the Father. The Spirit is "the Spirit of God" and "the Spirit of Christ." Hence all three dwell together, and the three are one." (*Ibid*)

This was the answer in totality. Nothing more was said of this oneness. The next question asked

"How may the believer enter into this unity?" (*Ibid*)

As Ephesians 3:17 and 1 John 4:15 are cited, it can be seen that this has nothing to do with trinity oneness but the believer's spiritual experience in Christ. Interestingly the lesson study also stated (under the heading 'Lesson Outline')

"[The Godhead is a most interesting study. All that God wishes to reveal to us should satisfy us, and we do not need to indulge in fancy or speculative theories. The lesson presents a simple chain of thought.] (*Ibid*)

Was this said with the trinity doctrine in mind? It does not say so but it is quite possible.

Deity and pre-existence of Christ

The next week's study (lesson No. 4) was called 'Deity and Pre-existence of Christ'. It began with the memory verse

“Who is the image of the invisible God, the first born of every creature: . . . and He is before all things, and by Him all things consist.” Col.1:15, 17.”

Then, under the sub-heading 'Deity of Christ', the first question of the study was

“Of whom was Christ begotten? (*Ibid, Lesson 4, page 12*)

This shows that the ‘begotten faith’, held by Seventh-day Adventists whilst Ellen White was alive was still then, in 1936, the accepted denominational faith of its members. This was 21 years after her death (1915), also 38 years after the publication of her book *Desire of Ages* (1898). This is the book that our church today uses to promote the trinity doctrine and to deny the belief that Christ is begotten. However, it is quite apparent that in 1936, this was not then the reasoning of our church.

Remember, these were the official beliefs of Seventh-day Adventism, not just the personal views of a certain minority – albeit the minority may have been some of the church leadership. Some of this minority (who would disagree with these beliefs) would have been amongst the committee that had approved these beliefs for these studies.

The above question (“Of whom was Christ begotten”) was asked of all those who participated in these lesson studies – meaning those participating as students and those who were teaching the studies. This was ministry and laity alike. It must also be remembered that these very same studies went around the world not only to Seventh-day Adventists but also to non-members. This was not simply as teaching what was accepted by ‘the few’ as the truth concerning Christ but as detailing what was then, in 1936, the denominational faith of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This ‘begotten faith’ therefore, in 1936, was still the worldwide faith of Seventh-day Adventists. It was this belief that the newcomers to the church were to be taught.

As containing the answer to this ‘begotten’ question (“Of whom was Christ begotten”), the lesson study cites Psalms 2:7 and John 1:14. This means that the expected answer is that Christ was begotten of God therefore He is God. Today, by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, this begotten belief is deemed to be false doctrine (heresy).

We have seen that the General Conference endorsed these studies. We have also seen that these studies were deemed by the conference to explain the *official* denominational faith of Seventh-day Adventists. This means that in the 1940’s – also the 1950’s - this faith must still have been our official faith. This is because no denomination can change the preponderant belief of its entire worldwide membership overnight. It does take time and death. This ‘begotten’ belief was to be held by Seventh-day Adventists for many more years to come.

One more thing before I move on. I did say previously that I would come back to where George Butler wrote concerning the studies

“A very interesting and valuable additional feature will be the weekly

appearance in the Signs of the Times of an able articles and outline synchronizing with the weekly Sabbath School lesson. How convenient it will be to be able to place a copy of the Signs in the hands of your Bible readers, giving them in print the subject you have studied this evening" (*George Butler, Columbian Union Visitor, October 1st 1936, 'Special to every Ohio member'*)

It is important to remember that it was not the articles in the Signs that depicted the official faith of Seventh-day Adventists but the studies in the Sabbath School lessons. The articles in the Signs did not, as did the studies, have General Conference approval. The articles are the expressions and views of the individuals who wrote them. They were not the expressions and views of the church at large. The latter are found in the lesson study.

If you do happen to read the articles in the Signs that corresponded to the two weeks studies we have looked at above (lessons 3 and 4), you will see a decided leaning (in the articles) towards the trinity doctrine whereas the lesson studies in their content were not in keeping with this teaching. In themselves therefore, the articles did not compliment the lesson studies. In the first of these articles there is a very heavy emphasis on the trinity doctrine whereas in the lesson study there is none. In the second article there is no mention of Christ being begotten of God in eternity whereas in the lesson study it is the emphasis of the study. The only mention of the word 'begotten' in the second article is where John 1:14 and 3:16 is quoted. There is no other mention of it. There is no way therefore that this article can be said to compliment the lesson study of that week.

If you want to read these Signs articles you will find them here

<http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/ST/ST19361006-V63-39.pdf>

<http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/ST/ST19361013-V63-40.pdf>

There appears to have been a decided tension between what said in the Sabbath School lessons and what was said in these articles. The former was definitely non-trinitarian whilst the latter was very pro-trinitarian. This reveals the tension between certain individuals of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (who were in a position to get their thoughts and ideas into print) and the church at large.

A startling change

Today, as a denomination, we deny that Christ is begotten – therefore denying in the process that He is truly the Son of God. Our church today therefore condemns the 1936 church - also the 1936 church leadership - for promoting such a belief. Members today are being censured (even disfellowshipped) for believing that Christ is begotten of God. In the 1940's we were saying that this teaching was an essential doctrine of Seventh-day Adventism. Today we are saying it is heresy. Such is the change that has been made to the beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists. This led to William Johnsson (long-time editor of the Review) to write in 1994

“Adventists beliefs have changed over the years under the impact of present truth. **Most startling is the teaching regarding Jesus Christ**, our Saviour and Lord.”(William Johnsson, *Adventist Review*, January 6th 1994, Article ‘Present Truth - Walking in God’s Light’)

Johnsson went on to say concerning Christ being the divine Son of God, begotten of God in eternity (as taught in the 1936 Sabbath School lesson study)

“Only gradually did this **false doctrine** give way to the Biblical truth, and largely under the impact of Ellen Whites writings in statements such as “In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived. (Desire of ages p 530)” (*Ibid*)

Regardless of the claims of many, it is evident from what we have just read above that by 1936 this had not happened. Our beliefs by then had definitely not changed. We still believed then, as a denomination, that Christ was truly the Son of God.

We can see though that by the trinitarians today, particularly by our church leadership and ministry, the belief that Christ is truly the Son of God is classed as “**false doctrine**”. We can also see that our church is using the writings of Ellen White in support of this claim.

Merlin Burt commented regarding the above statement from the Desire of Ages

“Curiously, for years after the publication of Desire of Ages, the church generally ignored these statements. There continued to be plenty of oblique statements which stopped short of taking a clear position. Also there are inferential comments which suggest the traditional view.” (*Merlin D. Burt, ‘Demise of Semi-Arianism and anti-trinitarianism in Adventist theology, 1888-1957 page 10, Chapter 2, ‘A time of transition: 1888 to 1900’, 1996*)

I don't believe for one moment that our church ignored what Ellen White had written. They just did not see this 'life original, unborrowed' statement as having any effect on their views concerning Christ. Why would they? They already believed that He is God. This is the begotten concept. There is nothing curious here at all. It is what I believe as a non-trinitarian.

The evidence of history is very clear. By 1936, Ellen White's writings had not changed the beliefs of our church – even though some today, even those of the ministry and leadership, try to make it look as though they had.

Burt refers to “**inferential comments which suggest the traditional view**”. This “**traditional view**” was that Christ is begotten of God. I think we can safely say that the remarks in this 1936 Sabbath School lesson study were a little bit more than just “**inferential**”. Burt also says that it was “**years after the publication of Desire of Ages**” that we allowed these statements to change our theology but we can see here that almost 40 years later our church was still teaching – and officially – that in eternity Christ was begotten of God.

Later in his study Burt made this observation

“During the 1930’s there continued to be statements teaching the “old view”. As we shall see later in the chapter, this largely changed during the 1940’s. The fourth quarter of 1936 Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly was prepared by T. M. French. French concluded regarding Christ’s pre-existence with these words: “He was therefore no part of creation but was ‘begotten of the Father’ in the days of eternity, and was very God Himself”. It seems that French was mixing Wilcox’s fundamental beliefs reference to Christ as “very God” with the “old view” of a “begotten” Christ.” (*Ibid, page 40*)

French may have been the main contributor of this study but these lessons had been validated and approved by the Sabbath School Committee, also by the 'special help' given to them by members of the General Conference Committee (see above). It was 'the church' that was declaring these beliefs to be the official beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists, not French.

French was not mixing the 'new view' with the 'old view'. This 'old view' (the begotten belief) was – and still is - that because Christ is begotten He is God. This is the begotten concept.

By saying “During the 1930’s there continued to be statements teaching the “old view”, Burt could be taken to mean these 'statements' were far and few between but as we can see here, from this 1936 study, this begotten (Sonship) belief was still the **official faith** of Seventh-day Adventists. This cannot be denied.

Some will say that those who believe that Christ is begotten do not believe that He is God. As can be seen, this is a deceptive conclusion. It is a deception that Satan has pawned off onto Seventh-day Adventists – and many, unfortunately, are believing it. Its design is to put in a bad light those who believe in the Sonship of Christ. They are made to look as though they believe heresy when they do not. This begotten belief, as held by Christians since Christ ascended to His Father, has always maintained that Christ is God. It has never been any different. It was this that was believed by Seventh-day Adventists throughout the time of Ellen White's ministry and as we have seen, it was still the official faith of Seventh-day Adventism in 1936. It was also to remain the same for many years to come.

In 1999, after referring to certain statements Ellen White had made in ‘The Desire of Ages’ (this of course included the ‘life original unborrowed statement’) also those in other places, Gerhard Pfandl, Associate Director of the Seventh-day Adventist Biblical Research Institute wrote

“These statements [from Ellen White] clearly describe Christ as God in the highest sense. He is not derived from the Father as most Adventists up to that time believed, nor has divinity been bestowed upon him.” (*Gerhard Pfandl, Seventh-day Adventist Biblical Institute, ‘The doctrine of the trinity among Adventists’ 1999*)

Pfandl is implying that those who believe Christ is begotten do not believe He is “God in the highest sense”. This is far from being true. This is just the continuing perpetration of the deception of which I have just spoken. The begotten belief

teaches that Christ is God Himself in the person of the Son.

Pfandl's remark "up to that time" refers to when 'The Desire of Ages' was published (1898). This means he is saying that up to then, because almost all Seventh-day Adventists believed that Christ was begotten of God, they all had it wrong concerning His pre-existence. He is saying they did not believe Christ to be fully God. This is quite an accusation. As we can see from this study, it is definitely not true.

This 'begotten concept' was denominationally taught even in the 1940's and 1950's. This means that Pfandl is saying, as did William Johnsson (see above), that what was officially taught by Seventh-day Adventist Church during this time period concerning Christ is false doctrine. This really is a very serious claim. This allegation is aimed at the church itself – meaning those who authorised and approved these lesson studies.

In the next paragraph Pfandl says

"In spite of these clear statements from the pen of Ellen White, it took many years before this truth was accepted by the church at large." (*Ibid*)

These "many years" extended into the 1940's and even beyond. What Pfandl refers to as "this truth" is the belief that Christ is not begotten of God therefore He is not truly God's Son. This portrays current Seventh-day Adventist thinking (the trinitarian view). It is now being said that what we declared in 1936 to be the official faith of Seventh-day Adventists is false doctrine (heresy). It is also of course saying that what we taught as a church concerning Christ during the entire time of Ellen White's ministry was also false doctrine (heresy). This really is quite an accusation.

The question must be asked though, if by this "In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived" statement Ellen White was denying this begotten (Sonship) belief, then why, in 1936, which was almost 40 years after she said it, had our church not recognized it? This I believe is a fair and reasonable question to ask.

A few reflections from the spirit of prophecy

As I have studied this claim of our church (that it was Ellen White's 'Desire of Ages' that led us to abandon this begotten concept), I have found that it is quite a recent innovation. Mostly it has come about since the adoption of the trinity doctrine in 1980. This was when this three-in-one teaching was voted in at the General Conference session held that year at Dallas.

In the 'Ministry' magazine of June 2002 we find these words.

"Church publications are now saying more clearly that only with the publication of The Desire of Ages (1898) did a full trinitarian theology burst upon the Adventist scene." (*Andrew Bates, Ministry, June 2002, 'The use and abuse of authority'*)

So did Ellen White say anything specific about Seventh-day Adventists when they

were teaching that Christ was begotten of God in eternity? She certainly did. Note it very well.

In 1893 when speaking of a schoolteacher who was promulgating the idea that as a church we did not believe in the divinity of Christ (this is when she was in New Zealand), Ellen White made very clear (for the entire world to see)

*“This man [the schoolteacher] may not have known what our faith is on this point, but he was not left in ignorance. **He was informed that there is not a people on earth who hold more firmly to the truth of Christ's pre-existence than do Seventh-day Adventists.**” (Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, 5th December 1893, ‘An appeal for the Australasian field’)*

How can anyone mistake or misunderstand what Ellen White is saying here? It would be almost impossible. She is saying that whatever Seventh-day Adventists were then teaching about Christ's pre-existence is the truth.

Any Seventh-day Adventist reading this statement could only conclude that God, through the spirit of prophecy, was endorsing the begotten (Sonship) belief. What other way could this statement been understood? This was when we still rejected the trinity doctrine – also when we were still teaching that Christ was begotten of God – just as would still be doing over 40 years later in 1936. Certainly she was not saying that this begotten belief is false doctrine.

To be able to fully appreciate this statement by Ellen White, it would need to be seen what Seventh-Adventists were then, in 1893, actually teaching about Christ. Whilst it would be too much to explain here, in the very near future I shall be pasting a link at this point that will show it in detail. At the moment the article in question is still under construction.

The year after making the above statement, Ellen White addressed the youth of our church by asking

*“Who is Christ? He is the only begotten Son of the living God.” (Ellen G. White, *Youth's Instructor*, 28th June 1894, ‘Grow in grace’)*

This is emphatic. Every Seventh-day Adventist living at that time (1894) would have understood what God's messenger meant by it. It was in keeping with what was then taught by our denomination. Notice very importantly that Ellen White differentiated between whom she describes as “**the only begotten Son**” and “**the living God**”. She says (note my emphasis) that Christ is “**the only begotten Son of the living God**”.

The following year (1895), Ellen White again confirmed the Sonship (begotten) belief of Seventh-day Adventists. She wrote

*“A complete offering has been made; for "God so loved the world, that he 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. In him dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." (*Ellen G. White, Signs of the Times, 30th May 1895, 'Christ our complete salvation'*)

Notice here there are three 'actions' (acts) of God. An angel is a son by "creation" (an act of God). The forgiven sinner is a son by "adoption" (an act of God). Christ is a son because He is "begotten" (an act of God). These words are describing three different acts of God. The word 'begotten' is used here as a verb (an action). It is not used as an adjective (a describing word). Notice too, very importantly, that Ellen White did not regard begotten as being created. She regarded this as two different things.

Just 6 weeks later in confirmation of what she had written earlier (as above), she again explained

"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." (*Ellen G. White, Review & Herald 9th July 1895 'The Duty of the Minister and the People'*)

Take note that in the penultimate quote, Ellen White said that Christ was "a Son ***begotten*** in the express image of the Father's person" whilst in the next quote she said He was "***made*** in the express image" of the Father's person. This is with reference to Hebrews 1:3.

By 1905, 7 years after the publication of the Desire of Ages, Ellen White was still confirming the begotten belief. She wrote

"The Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of the Father, is truly God in infinity, but not in personality." (*Ellen G. White, Manuscript 116, Dec. 19, 1905, 'An Entire Consecration'*)"

Again this is the begotten concept. God and Christ are two separate personalities: also Christ is "truly God in infinity". The statement that Christ is not God in personality completely invalidates the trinity doctrine.

In a sermon in 1910 Ellen White spoke these words

"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." (*Ellen G. White, Ms 86 1910, Sermon, August 21st 1910*)

It was a denial of Christ's Sonship (that Christ was begotten of God) that served to expel Lucifer from the courts of heaven, also from the direct presence of God. This is something that those today who deny Christ's Sonship (that Christ is not begotten of God) would do well to remember.

“Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son.” 1 John 2:22

The Deity of Christ

Concerning what the Scriptures tell us about Christ and His deity, the 1936 Sabbath School lesson study had this to say

“The teaching of the scriptures in this lesson is little short of over whelming in its marvelous meaning to us in the personal life. The Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and God Himself, who existed with the Father "from the days of eternity," who made the world and all things therein—even this Jesus "gave Himself for our sins," and by believing on the name of this Son of God, we obtain the gift of eternal life, and may share it with Him throughout the eternal ages, world without end.” (*Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly, 4th quarter, 1936, Lesson 4, page 13*)

This is the begotten concept. It is that Christ is “the Son of God, and God Himself”.

From the above we can see that concerning Christ, God had, through the spirit of prophecy, endorsed what Seventh-day Adventists were then teaching. This is that in eternity He was begotten (brought forth) of God. It is no wonder then that in 1936 when officially declaring to the world what we believed, this belief had remained unchanged. We were then still standing by what God had revealed through Scripture and through the spirit of prophecy.

Previously the study had asked

“What did the Father call His Son? (*Ibid, page 12*)

As Hebrews 1:8 is cited, the expected answer was that the Father called His Son ‘God’.

The lesson then notes (because the Son is begotten of the Father)

“Hebrews 1:4 tells us that the Son's name, God, was "a more excellent name" than the angels received, because He obtained it "by inheritance," that is, as "heir of all things.” (*Ibid*)

Christ received this “inheritance” because He was begotten of the Father. This is why some of the early Christian writings say “very God from very God”, ‘true God from true God’. As the study explained

“A son is the natural heir, and when God made Christ His heir, He recognized His sonship.” (*Ibid*)

This is with reference to Christ’s pre-existence – meaning when He was begotten of the Father. This is referring to in eternity when this happened. The Sabbath School lesson study concluded

“This is why the Son bore the same name as His Father.” (*Ibid*)

Here again we see the past ‘begotten faith’ of Seventh-day Adventism. It is that Christ is truly the Son of God and is therefore God Himself in the person of the Son. As God says of Christ, ‘my name is in Him’ (see Exodus 23:21). The lesson then asked

“When Jesus was born in the flesh, by what name was He called? Matt. 1:23. NOTE.—Here again the Son is called by the Father's name, "God." This is because He "was God." John 1:1” (*Ibid*)

Again this is exactly the same as was taught by Seventh-day Adventists whilst Ellen White was alive – that Christ “was God”.

After asking how did the apostle Paul affirm the deity of the Son (in 1 Timothy 3:16), the lesson says

“Paul's language is equivalent to John's when the latter says, "The Word was made flesh." John 1:14. He affirms that the Jesus who was "born of a woman" was really God.” (*Ibid*)

Here then is the main overall emphasis of the 1936 Sabbath School lesson study. It is that because Christ is begotten of God He is “really God”. Repeatedly throughout this study this same belief is stressed. From this we can see that the remarks some have made recently saying that the begotten concept denigrates Christ is totally misrepresentative of what is really believed by those who hold to this belief.

This same study then asks (with reference to the baptism of Jesus and the transfiguration)

“What public announcement of His Son's deity did the Father make on two different occasions?” (*Ibid*)

As Matthew 3:17 (the baptism of Christ) and 17:5 (Christ's transfiguration) is cited as containing the answer to this question, we can see that it is being said that the Father confirmed “His Son's deity” by calling Him ‘His Son’ (“this is my beloved son”).

The lesson study then helps us to realise just what it was concerning Christ's ‘origins’ that Seventh-day Adventists in 1936 believed and taught. After asking, “What testimony concerning His deity did Christ Himself give”, also citing John 16:27, 28 and 8:58 as containing the answer, the study notes said

“The direct statement of Jesus, "I came forth from the Father," reads literally, "I came out of the Father." Putting with this, His testimony in John 10:38, "The Father is in Me, and I in Him," we have His personal witness that He truly was "begotten of the Father," as John says in 1:14.” (*Ibid*)

This is another striking realisation. This reveals that in 1936, Seventh-day

Adventists still maintained - just as they had done so during Ellen White's ministry - that Christ literally "came out of the Father". This means, "He truly was "begotten of the Father". This was also an affirmation of deity. The fact that Christ 'came out' of the Father is showing that He is God but notice that the study cites John 8:58 (see above). This is where Jesus said to the Jews "before Abraham was I am". This is when the Jews, realising what our Saviour was claiming, wanted to stone Him.

On the next page, the following question was asked (this was under the heading of 'Pre-existence of Christ')

"What is the source of the Son's life? John 5:26." (*Ibid, page 13*)

As John 5:26 tells us "For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself", the expected answer must be the Father.

The 'Note' in the 1936 lesson study said with reference to John 5:26

"It is plain that the Son possesses the same kind of life as the Father —called here "life in Himself." (*Ibid*)

This would be the same 'life' that in the Desire of Ages, Ellen White described as "life, original, unborrowed, underived" (page 530). As she says earlier in the same book

"All things Christ received from God, but He took to give. So in the heavenly courts, in His ministry for all created beings: through the beloved Son, the Father's life flows out to all; through the Son it returns, in praise and joyous service, a tide of love, to the great Source of all." (*Ellen G. White, The Desire of Ages, page 21, 'God with us' 1898*)

The source of this "life" is the Father ("the great Source of all). The life itself is "the Father's life". No wonder Ellen White refers to it as "life, original, unborrowed, underived". It is this life that flows from the Father through the Son to us.

In the 1936 Godhead studies on 'Bible Doctrines' (4th Quarter 1936), the "In Christ is life, original" statement was not used. In fact I cannot find this statement anywhere in the entire 7 quarter's lesson studies. When searching through the archives of our Sabbath School Lesson Study Quarterlies between 1898 (when the Desire of Ages was published) and 1952, I could only find this statement used four times. Four times in 54 years does not constitute very high usage.

I also searched through the online archives of our entire publications. Unless I have made a mistake, I cannot find it used anywhere in the 1920's or 1930's – the latter being the decade these lesson studies were produced. I can only find it used with any regularity (and then not very much) in the 1940's. This was 2 years after these Sabbath School studies were finished. During that decade (the 1940's) it was used a few times in the 'Ministry' magazine which was started by LeRoy Froom in 1928. He is recognised as being one of the foremost instigators of the trinity doctrine being brought into the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The next question in the lesson study asks

“When does the prophet say the life of the Son began? Micah 5:2. margin.”
(*Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly, 4th quarter, 1936, Lesson 4, page 13*)

Again this is very revealing. It shows that in 1936 it was still the preponderant belief of Seventh-day Adventists that the personality of the Son came out from the Father but as we have seen, this did not make Him a lesser divine being than God. It is because Christ is begotten of God that He is God. This is the begotten belief. Throughout the entire Sabbath School study, this was the stress of its authors. We then find these words

“While we cannot comprehend eternity - without beginning and without ending - yet it is clearly affirmed here that the life which Christ possesses is "from the days of eternity.”” (*Ibid*)

This is a reference to Micah 5:2 but not exactly as quoted in the KJV. Instead of the words “from everlasting” as used in the KJV, the margin notes are employed (“*from the days of eternity*”). This was common practise within Seventh-day Adventism. Ellen White did this on a number of occasions. The margin note is nearer to the meaning of the original Hebrew.

The 1936 lesson study also made clear

“Cumulative evidence that the Son existed with the Father before creation is abundant in the Scriptures. In the few passages we have studied here, we find that Christ was with the Father "before the world was," "from the days of eternity," "before the foundation of the world," "before all things." He was therefore no part of creation, but was "begotten of the Father" in the days of eternity, and was very God Himself.” (*Ibid*)

Over and over again this 1936 lesson study conveyed the belief that Christ was truly begotten of the Father therefore He was truly the Son of God - also as this lesson stated, “*very God Himself*”. Note it makes clear that Christ was “*no part of creation*”.

Some may like to express the view (insist even) that because Christ is begotten of God, then there was a time when He did not exist. It is here that I would like to offer a word of caution.

I do not believe that what we have in Scripture is a complete revelation of God. I believe though that what God has revealed of Himself is enough to take us through the 6000-year 'emergency situation' that we are still in today.

The Bible is very clear, as is the spirit of prophecy, that Christ is God's only begotten Son but this is as far as we can go. In other words, how God had His existence prior to this we have not been told therefore we must not conjecture. It is not given to us to speculate.

Regarding the Holy Spirit

In the final set of studies on "Bible Doctrines" (this was in the Sabbath School lessons for the 2nd quarter of 1938) it had as a sub-title to one section (just as I have it here)

*"CHURCH MEMBERS SHARE FELLOWSHIP OF FATHER AND SON"
(Sabbath School Lesson Studies, Bible Doctrines, Lesson 9 for May 28, 1938,
page 26)*

You may be asking "why do I regard this as significant?" I will explain. Ask yourself this question – Why didn't the lesson study say "Church Members Share Fellowship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit"? The answer is that just as it was during the time of the pioneers, the Holy Spirit, in 1936, was still not regarded as a divine person exactly like God and Christ are persons. He was said to be of a nature we cannot understand. In fact in the first quarter's lesson study it said

"NOTE.—The Father sends the Spirit in the name of the Son, that is, as the Son's representative. The Spirit "proceedeth from the Father," to do His work in the earth." (Sabbath School Lesson Studies, Bible Doctrines, 4th Quarter 1936, Lesson 3, page 11)

It then says

"Hence the Father sends the Spirit, and the Son sends the Spirit. The Son speaks what the Father gives Him to speak, and the Spirit speaks what the Son gives Him to speak. The Spirit is both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ. How could there be more perfect accord, more complete unity? (Ibid)

On the previous page it said (with reference to Romans chapter 8)

"In verses 8-11, the Spirit is called both "the Spirit of God" and "the Spirit of Christ." (Ibid, page 10)

The belief that the Holy Spirit was both God the Father and Christ omnipresent was the faith of the non-trinitarian Seventh-day Adventists. By 1936, this belief had not changed – even though regarded as a person. This is exactly the same as I believe today – as a non-trinitarian.

It is in keeping with when Jesus told his disciples that even after He had returned to His Father He would still be with them. He said

"I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you." (John 14:18)

Jesus was the coming Comforter. Commenting on this Ellen White wrote the following

"That Christ should manifest Himself to them, and yet be invisible to the world, was a mystery to the disciples. They could not understand the words of Christ in their spiritual sense. They were thinking of the outward, visible

manifestation. They could not take in the fact that they could have the presence of Christ with them, and yet He be unseen by the world. **They did not understand the meaning of a spiritual manifestation.**" (Ellen G. White, *Southern Watchman*, 13th September 1898, 'Christ's representatives')

This is in keeping with numerous places where she wrote such as

"In giving His commission to His followers, Christ did not tell them they would be left alone. He assured them that **He would be near them. He spoke of His omnipresence in a special way.** Go to all nations, He said. Go, to the farthest portion of the habitable globe, **but know that My presence will be there....The assurance of His abiding presence was the richest legacy Christ could give His disciples**" (Ellen G. White, Ms 138 1897, December 2nd 1897, 'The Gospel')

The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead, is Christ omnipresent. It is Christ without His humanity.

What does the Seventh-day Adventist Church teach today?

In the 'Seventh-day Adventist Handbook of Theology' (which is the SDA Encyclopedia Volume 12), Fernando Canale wrote the treatise 'The Doctrine of God'. After lengthy discussion on the Sonship of Christ, as seen in Scripture, he concluded

"There is, therefore, **no ground within the biblical understanding of the Godhead for the idea of a generation of the Son from the Father.**" (Fernando Canale, *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopaedia*, Volume 12, page 125, 'The doctrine of God')

In other words, according to Canale (and present-day Seventh-day Adventist theology), the Bible does not say that Christ is begotten of God, meaning of course that the Bible does not say that He is really the Son of God. This being the case, what therefore do Seventh-day Adventists teach today?

In their trinitarian theology, Seventh-day Adventists teach today that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not really a father or a son or a holy spirit but are three divine beings who are just role-playing these parts. As it said in our Sabbath School quarterlies in 2008

"But imagine a situation in which the Being we have come to know as God the Father came to die for us, and the One we have come to know as Jesus stayed back in heaven (we are speaking in human terms to make a point). **Nothing would have changed, except that we would have been calling Each by the name we now use for the Other.** That is what equality in the Deity means" (*Seventh-day Adventist Sabbath School Quarterly*, page 19, Thursday April 10th 2008, 'The Mystery of His Deity')

This role-playing idea means that any of the three divine persons could have played the role of the Son. In other words, the One we know as the Holy Spirit could have

taken the role of the Son whilst the One we know as the Father could have role-played the part of the Holy Spirit. This would have left the One we know as the Son to take the part of the Father. It is not surprising therefore that J. N. Andrews wrote of the trinity doctrine

“This doctrine destroys the personality of God and his Son Jesus Christ our Lord. The infamous, measures by which it was forced upon the church which appear upon the pages of ecclesiastical history might well cause every believer in that doctrine to blush.” (J. N. Andrews, *Review and Herald*, March 6th 1855, ‘The Fall of Babylon’)

From a comparison of this 2008 Sabbath School quarterly with the 1936 Sabbath School quarterly, we can see how much the beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists have changed over the years. This role-playing idea was introduced with trinity doctrine reasoning. As we can see, it was certainly not found in these 1936 Sabbath School studies.

Who is right and who is wrong?

In the book ‘The Trinity’, which is an official publication of the Seventh-day Adventist Church published with the prime purpose of explaining (a) the Seventh-day Adventist version of the trinity doctrine also (b) the history of why and when our denomination changed from being non-trinitarian to trinitarian

“That most of the leading SDA pioneers were non-Trinitarian in their theology has become accepted Adventist history, surprising as it sounded to most Adventists 40 years ago when Erwin R. Gane wrote an M. A. thesis on the topic. More recently, a further question has arisen with increasing urgency: was the pioneers’ belief about the Godhead right or wrong?” (Jerry Moon, ‘The Trinity’, chapter, ‘Trinity and anti-trinitarianism in Seventh-day Adventist history, page 190)

The following gives an insight to the entire problem. Moon concluded

“As one line of reasoning goes, 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.” (*Ibid*)

This statement though, whilst true in itself, tends to mislead the unwary reader. What I mean is: even in the 1930's and 1940's, our denomination was still not trinitarian. That much can be seen from these 1936 Sabbath School studies. This non-trinitarian faith therefore was not just the belief of our pioneers but also the belief of our church at large in 1936. It would have been much better therefore if, instead of saying 'pioneers', Jerry Moon had said 'our church in 1936'. In other words, if instead of asking if our pioneers were correct, he should have asked if our officially stated denominational beliefs in 1936 were correct – also if since then, meaning since 1936, have we **“apostatized from biblical truth”**? This would have given the present situation its true perspective. If you are not sure what I mean, read his statement again and substitute the word 'pioneers' with the words 'our church in 1936'.

That Christ is truly begotten of God is, according to this 1936 lesson study, the overwhelming evidence that He is none other than God Himself. This 'begotten' faith, as it was explained in our Sabbath School lesson quarterly in 1936, was undoubtedly a continuation of the faith of our pioneers and early Seventh-day Adventists. As we have just seen, in 1936 it was still the 'official' denominational faith of Seventh-day Adventists.

The question remains therefore. Who is right and who is wrong? Did the early church and Ellen White have it wrong or has the church today got it wrong? You decide.

From the 1936 Sabbath School Lesson study, it can be very clearly seen that at that time the Seventh-day Adventist Church was not a trinitarian denomination. In other words, it did not have the trinity doctrine as one of its fundamental beliefs. It is also reasonably obvious that our church, well over 40 years after the publication of the book the Desire of Ages, had not abandoned the begotten concept.

God bless you as you consider these things

Terry Hill

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"When a man who is honestly mistaken hears the truth, he will either quit being mistaken or cease to be honest!" (Source unknown)

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