

## FACT AND FICTION

by Terry Hill

In an article in the *Signs of the Times* of July 14<sup>th</sup> 1936, George Smisor wrote

“For a thousand years the medieval church argued and fought over the nature and deity of Christ. In the fourth century after Christ, Arius, a presbyter of Baucalis, a suburb of Alexandria, starting from the essentially pagan conception of God as a Being absolutely apart from His creation, propounded the doctrine of the nature of Christ, which later became known as Arianism. Arius taught that the Son of God, being isolated from the Father, was a finite, created creature of a different essence from the Father. By nature, therefore, the Son was liable to change, and even capable of sin.”  
(G. T. Smisor, *Signs of the Times*, July 14<sup>th</sup> 1936, ‘Who is the Devil’)

Arius did not believe that Christ was a “created creature”. He believed, as say the scriptures, that Christ was begotten of God therefore He was God (John 1:1, 1:14, 1:18, 3:16, 3:18, 1 John 4:9). Yes. I agree. It does appear that Arius believed that Christ was capable of sinning, but then again, so did Ellen White and the other early SDAs (Hebrews 2:16-18, 4:14-16). They reasoned also that if Christ had sinned, He would have lost His eternal existence. It is more than likely that Arius believed the same. This is because the scriptures do say that “The soul that sinneth it shall die” (Ezekiel 18:4, 20). I have never found any hard evidence though where Arius actually wrote that Christ could have lost His eternal existence. Perhaps somewhere he did write it. Unfortunately, the Roman Emperor Constantine ordered all of his writings to be destroyed, so perhaps we shall never know. What we do know is that Arius, in a letter to his good friend Eusebius of Nicomedia, wrote the following

“But we say and believe, and have taught, and do teach, that the Son is not unbegotten, nor in any way part of the unbegotten; and that He 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, only begotten and unchangeable, and that before He was begotten, or created, or purposed, or established, He was not. For He was not unbegotten.” (The *Ecclesiastical History of Theodoret*, Book 1, Chapter 3, ‘Letter of Arius to Eusebius of Nicomedia’)

Smisor continued in his article

“Arius’ teaching was severely and vehemently opposed by the Western church, who from a Biblical standpoint, in contradistinction to the pagan origin of Arianism, maintained that the Son is of the same essence as the Father, having been begotten of the Father as an only son.” (Smisor, *Op. Cit*)

There is overwhelming evidence to show that Christ, like His Father, has a divine nature but not as the creed of Nicaea says – which is that they are of (belonging to) the one and the same substance (consubstantial), therefore concluding that the Father and the Son are inseparable. Notice that Smisor admits, in keeping what SDAs had taught throughout the entire time of Ellen White’s ministry, that Christ was begotten of God. He reasoned

“A correct understanding of the nature of Christ is essential to a correct understanding of the problem of evil. Even to-day many Christians hold more or less to the teachings of Arius.” (*Ibid*)

I wonder if in making this comment, Smisor had his fellow SDAs in mind? They believed much the same as Arius – perhaps even the same if the truth was known. Smisor continued

“When Christ came to earth, John says that He possessed "the glory as of the only begotten of the Father." John 1:14. The character of God is made known to man by "the only-begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father." Verse 18. Again John repeats this thought in that very familiar text, "God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son." John 3:16. In the Greek "only begotten" is one word, monogenes, which means "only born," "only child." This expression, applied to Christ, clearly implies that Christ is the only-born Son of God, and by the very fact of being born of God, He of necessity partakes of the nature and essence of God, just as a human son partakes of the nature and essence of his human father. Then Christ is God.” (*Ibid*)

Smisor had this correct. It is exactly what ‘monogenes’ meant to those living at the time John wrote his gospel – which is crucial in understanding what John meant by his use of this word.

For those who would like to read what Ellen White had to say about the possibility of Christ sinning and losing His eternal existence, see here

[https://www.theprophetstillspeaks.co.uk/Articles\\_pdf/MHDOJRF.pdf](https://www.theprophetstillspeaks.co.uk/Articles_pdf/MHDOJRF.pdf)

If you would like to read what the early SDAs believed about the same subject, see here

[https://theprophetstillspeaks.co.uk/Articles\\_pdf/The\\_risk\\_factor.pdf](https://theprophetstillspeaks.co.uk/Articles_pdf/The_risk_factor.pdf)

### **More fiction**

In the *Adventist Review* of 15<sup>th</sup> February 1996, there was an editorial called *Reinventing the Theological Wheel*. It had been written by the long-time editor of the *Review*, namely William Johnsson (1934-2023). He had explained that in the General Conference parking lot (this was after leaving work one day) he had been discussing, with a man and a teenage boy, the Greek word ‘monogenes’. Johnsson claimed that the boy had said

"The word monogenes comes from two words—mono, which means only, and another one that means to give birth. So that proves Jesus was a created being." (*William Johnsson, Adventist Review, February 15<sup>th</sup> 1996, 'Reinventing the Theological Wheel'*)

Whether the boy had actually used the word “created”, we only have Johnsson’s word for it, but in the light of the claim today, of the trinitarians, that the non-trinitarians are saying that Jesus is a created being (because the non-trinitarians believe, as the Bible says, that Christ was begotten of God), I would take Johnsson’s remarks with a very large pinch of salt. It could have been the way that Johnsson interpreted what the boy was saying. Note that the boy had said that the latter part of ‘monogenes’ (genes) means “to give birth” – which strongly implies he believed Christ to be begotten of God - not created.

In his editorial, Johnsson claimed that ‘monogenes’ means “the unique one”. This though, cannot be the correct understanding of what the gospel writer John meant by his usage of the word. This can be seen by the link I provided at the end of this article.

After relating the brief discussion that the three had experienced together, Johnsson also wrote the following

“We are witnessing a rebirth of bad theology among some Seventh-day Adventists. Ideas that seemed to be behind us, dead and buried, have made a reappearance—the view that Jesus is not eternally preexistent God, and the related teaching that denies the Trinity. Some Adventist pioneers believed Christ was a created being, and did not accept the Trinity. But, guided by study of the Bible and reinforced by the writings of Ellen White, the church long ago corrected these ideas.” (*Ibid*)

I have never come across any of our early SDAs who believed that Christ was literally a created being – if that means created like angels were created. The belief held amongst the vast majority of early SDAs was that Christ was begotten of God therefore He was truly the Son of God. Certainly, this same vast majority did not accept the trinity doctrine.

Interestingly, 3 months later when this same editorial was published in the *Australian Record* of May 11<sup>th</sup> 1996, it omitted from the above paragraph the words, “- the view that Jesus is not eternally preexistent God, and the related teaching that denies the Trinity.”. Why these words were omitted I have no idea. There must have been a reason for it. Johnsson went on to say (3 contiguous paragraphs)

“Our fundamental beliefs state our official understanding in clarion tones: "There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three coeternal Persons" (Fundamental Belief No. 2). "God the eternal Son became incarnate in Jesus Christ. . . . Forever truly God, He became also truly man, Jesus the Christ" (Fundamental Belief No. 4).

These doctrines go beyond theological hairsplitting. They reach to the very heart of our faith; they are vital to our salvation. They point to the ultimate question that every person must face now and before the bar of God: Who was Jesus?

The Scriptures tell us that He was the Word, eternally one with God, who became flesh (John 1:1-3, 14). All that God is, He is—eternally is” (*Ibid*)

Here Johnsson is claiming that believing in three co-eternal beings, also the trinity doctrine, is “vital to our salvation”. If this were true, then leading up to the early 1950’s, this would rule out the majority of SDAs from salvation. It also means that anyone who does not believe it today will not be saved. That is quite an assertion – also a massive assumption. In fact it makes a person’s salvation dependent upon holding a certain set of doctrines – which is far from being true. There is nothing in scripture that even implies such a thing. Johnsson concluded his editorial by saying

“If we accept Jesus as truly God, the simple monotheism of Judaism has to give way to a broader understanding of deity. God is one—but in three coeternal Persons. This teaching, which stretches our intellectual powers but which resonates in our life of faith, also is grounded in Scripture and finds strong support in Ellen White's writings. Let's not try to reinvent the theological wheel. Any attempt along those lines leads to a dead end—either in ancient heresy or modern liberalism.” (*Ibid*)

I can only assume that the “ancient heresy”, also “the bad theology”, that Johnsson is referring to in his editorial, is the belief (which is based upon the reasoning that ‘monogenes’ does mean ‘only begotten’) that Christ is truly the Son of God, also that the trinity doctrine is not biblical.

Regardless of the claims of William Johnsson, nowhere is Scripture is God spoken of as a three-in-one being as in the trinity doctrine. It is also true to say that Ellen White’s writings do not, as Johnsson says, strongly support such a teaching. In fact, correctly understood, they actually deny it. No trinitarian would say or believe that the pre-existent Son of God could have lost His eternal existence. In trinitarianism, that particular belief is impossible. This is because according to this teaching, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit together, are the one true God. In other words, in trinitarian theology, none of the three could ever, under any circumstances, be separated from each other. Ellen White did not agree with this conclusion. She said that Christ, by agreeing to become incarnate, could have lost His eternal existence. This is one reason why we know she did not agree with trinitarian theology, therefore we know for sure she was not a trinitarian.

For those who would like to see what I believe was John’s intention of his use of ‘monogenes’, they can do so here

[https://theprophetstillspeaks.co.uk/Articles\\_pdf/Another\\_look\\_at\\_monogenes.pdf](https://theprophetstillspeaks.co.uk/Articles_pdf/Another_look_at_monogenes.pdf)

As you will see if you read the above article, it is not as William Johnsson believed. He believed ‘monogenes’ to mean something entirely different.

**End of article**

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**Website:** <https://www.theprophetstillspeaks.co.uk/>

**Email:** [terry\\_sda@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:terry_sda@blueyonder.co.uk)