

Is the “Heavenly Trio” a Trinity?

By Brendan Valiant

In the past, people have accused Ellen White of plagiarism. Not having a perfect understanding of the prophetic gift, they believe that because one quotes from other sources, they cannot be inspired by God.

While this is not a defence of Ellen White's prophetic gift, it could be mentioned that Paul's own writings include quotes from pagan prophets and sometimes the Septuagint. The Septuagint could easily be shown to have errors in translation at times. It is interesting that the inspiration Paul and some of the other New Testament writers had prevented them from quoting any of the verses which contained error.

This same principle can be found in the writings of Ellen White. When she quotes from another source, she leaves out the error¹ that many of these other authors had due to their traditional beliefs. Because of this, we can not only know what she believed due to what she *does* quote, but also from what she *doesn't* quote, if we know the source material.

Ellen White is often said to have believed in the trinity. One major quote that is used to substantiate this belief is where she speaks of the "three living persons of the heavenly trio". This quote was popularised in *Evangelism* and also appears in *In Heavenly Places* and in the *SDA Bible Commentary, Vol. 7a* in the Appendix on the Godhead. In her lifetime, it appeared in *Bible Training School* of March 1, 1906 (titled "The Father, Son and Holy Ghost") and *Special Testimonies, Series B, No. 07*.

The manuscript that it originally came from is filed as Manuscript 21, 1906, though the content was actually written in November of the previous year. In examining this manuscript, we will look also at a book by W. E. Boardman called *The Higher Christian Life*. This book was instrumental in the Higher Life Movement, a movement among the Methodist's, or Wesleyan's, who were trying to put into practice the principles of holiness that John Wesley taught. The 1859, first edition of this book was inventoried in the library of Ellen White when she died.

In this manuscript, Ellen White is writing about the errors that John H. Kellogg was teaching about the Godhead. Shortly after Kellogg wrote "The Living Temple", he became trinitarian, though it is probable that his sympathies with that teaching extended long before, he having married a Seventh-day Baptist. By this time, due to Kellogg's correspondences with G. I. Butler and A. G. Daniells, and their correspondences with W. C. White, she would have been sure to know this².

In this manuscript, the following paragraph indicates that Ellen White was quoting someone else.

"I am instructed to say, The sentiments of those who are searching for advanced scientific ideas are not to be trusted. Such representations as the following are made: "The Father is as the light invisible; the Son is as the light embodied; the Spirit is the

light shed abroad." "The Father is like the dew, invisible vapor; the Son is like the dew gathered in beauteous form; the Spirit is like the dew fallen to the seat of life." Another representation: "The Father is like the invisible vapor; the Son is like the leaden cloud; the Spirit is rain fallen and working in refreshing power.""

This author at first thought she may have been quoting from *The Living Temple* but that book was published in 1903 and this is written at the end of 1905. Also, at the time, Kellogg didn't fully believe in a trinity. I then thought it was quoted from an article by Kellogg or one of Kellogg's followers. I asked the *Ellen White Estate* if they knew where the quote came from and they told me of the book by Boardman.

It is certain, due to the context of the manuscript in question, that the sentiments in this book were being used by Kellogg and his supporters in presenting the latest version of their beliefs. Research is ongoing to find the evidence to support this, but even the *Ellen White Estate* concluded it probable.

The sentiments quoted above by Ellen White are verbatim from pages 102-104 of Boardman's book. Of these sentiments the book says the following:

"These likenings are all imperfect. They rather hide than illustrate the tri-personality of the one God, for they are not persons but things, poor and earthly at best, to represent the living personalities of the living God. So much they may do, however, as to illustrate the official relations of each to the others and of each and all to us. And more. They may also illustrate the truth that all the fulness of Him who filleth all in all, dwells in each person of the Triune God."

However Ellen White says of them:

"All these spiritualistic representations are simply nothingness. They are imperfect, untrue. They weaken and diminish the Majesty which no earthly likeness can be compared to. God can not be compared with the things His hands have made. These are mere earthly things, suffering under the curse of God because of the sins of man."

The book then gives another representation:

***"THE FATHER IS ALL THE FULNESS OF THE GODHEAD INVISIBLE.
THE SON IS ALL THE FULNESS OF THE GODHEAD MANIFESTED.
THE SPIRIT IS ALL THE FULNESS OF THE GODHEAD MAKING MANIFEST."***

Ellen White, after quoting verbatim the previous representations and calling them "simply nothingness", "imperfect" and "untrue", appears to quote this same representation to show what the truth is as has been shown to her. Note however the differences between what is written above and what is found below:

"The Father is all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, and is invisible to mortal sight."

The Son is all the fulness of the Godhead manifested. The Word of God declares Him to be "the express image of His person." "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Here is shown the personality of the Father.

The Comforter that Christ promised to send after He ascended to heaven, is the Spirit in all the fulness of the Godhead, making manifest the power of divine grace to all who receive and believe in Christ as a personal Saviour."

The first difference is that the Father is invisible to "mortal sight", not invisible full-stop. This distinction is set in contrast with the belief that God is "without form", a belief that the early Adventists shunned. Her next paragraph rather expands upon this by saying that "The Word of God declares Him to be 'the express image of His person'". Ellen White knew from Christ's own lips that the Father was as much a person (with a form) as Christ was, but that should she see the Father, she would cease to exist³.

Another addition to the second paragraph is the quote of John 3:16. "Here is shown the personality of the Father". This verse and application appears to serve no other purpose than to point out the truth of the Father/Son relationship. The final difference between Ellen White's words and Boardman's is found in the explanation of the Holy Spirit. She does not say, as with the Father and Son that the Spirit "is all the fullness of the Godhead making manifest" but that it is "the Spirit ***IN*** all the fullness of the Godhead". She shows by this distinction a difference in the Spirit's relation to the Father and Son. She then writes:

"There are three living persons of the heavenly trio; in the name of these three great powers--the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit-- those who receive Christ by living faith are baptized, and these powers will co-operate with the obedient subjects of heaven in their efforts to live the new life in Christ."

Boardman's book has both the words "living persons" and "living personalities". In the original handwritten manuscript, Ellen White first wrote "living persons" and then crossed out the "s" and wrote above it "alities". It appears as though the first term was inappropriate to what she wanted to convey. However, Ellen White elsewhere used the term "three persons" and she approved the typewritten version of this document which contains the same.

Also, the term "heavenly trio" is not found in the book. But the terms "Trinity", "Triune God" and "three in one" are. It is said by Seventh-day Adventist trinitarians that Ellen White was openly in support of the trinity by the time of the writing of *Desire of Ages*. If this was so, and while Ellen White was clearly quoting Boardman's book, why did she not quote the words that are so easily found in Boardman's book. From present research, it appears that the term "heavenly trio" is unique and original to Ellen White at the time of her using it. It certainly cannot be found in any writings before her lifetime that are available on the internet at this time.

She goes on to say that the "heavenly trio" are "three great powers". She is also consistent in showing the only Bible verse that has these three in any *relational* way is Matthew 28:19. This verse, contrary to the opinions of some, can be shown historically to be genuine. However, it does not speak of a trinity, as only the Father and Son have names⁴.

Her choice against using trinitarian terms show that she was not trinitarian. Her differences in her explanations of what the Godhead *is* show her to hold a belief that is different from that of present-day Adventism. In an unpublished section of the manuscript in question she says the following, showing what she believed on the matter:

"He that believeth in the Son, hath the Father also." He who has continual faith in the Father and the Son has the Spirit also. The Holy Spirit is his Comforter, and he never departs from the truth."

We may have the Spirit, but we are not to have faith in it. Ellen White knew with John that "our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ" (John 1:3). I hope that this may open the eyes of some who have been deceived into thinking that Ellen White was trinitarian due to a handful of quotes such as this, taken out of historical and literary context.

Endnotes

- ¹ The errors that she can be trusted to have left out were those of doctrinal, not historical, importance.
- ² Letter from J. H. Kellogg to W. W. Prescott, October 25, 1903; Letter from J. H. Kellogg to G. I. Butler, October 28, 1903; Letter from A. G. Daniells to W. C. White, October 28, 1903.
- ³ This can be found in the Day-Star article, March 14, 1846, from one of Ellen White's first visions.
- ⁴ see Proverbs 30:4

Bibliography

White, Ellen G. Manuscript 21, 1906
Boardman, W. E. 1859, *The Higher Christian Life*.