

When Trinity Doesn't Mean Trinity

By Brendan Valiant

Words only carry the meaning that is attributed to them, just like currency. The only reason a small silver-coloured dodecagonal coin is worth fifty cents in Australia is because we have placed that value upon it. Everyone in Australia would agree that fifty cents is worth fifty cents. However, fifty cents Australian is not necessarily worth fifty cents US. It is the same with words. While dictionaries are an aid to understanding the meanings of words, this does not guarantee that everyone will attach the same meaning to the same word.

For example, quite often, our understanding is shaped by our experience. A person's concept of a father might be different, depending upon whether they had a loving or abusive experience with theirs. Other factors which determine our understanding of words are culture and education. Culture is especially important when examining the meaning of words written by those generations before us, for words change meaning over time. In this study, we shall look at the early Seventh-day Adventist uses of the term "trinity," seeking for a harmonious understanding of the historical evidence.

From the Sabbath Bible Conferences of the late 1840's to the 1890's, the term "trinity" was only ever used in a negative sense in Adventist literature. This era is so well documented by other authors, that we will only look at one representative quote here. J. N. Loughborough wrote an extended answer to a question in 1861 of which this is the introduction:

"QUESTION 1. What serious objection is there to the doctrine of the Trinity?"

ANSWER. 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." (*Review and Herald*, Vol. 18, No. 23, p. 184)

After 1888, renewed focus was given to the work of the Holy Spirit in both conversion and living the victorious life as a result of the Latter Rain which began to fall with that message. As part of this focus, attention was given to the personality of the Holy Spirit and its relationship to God and Christ. This attention did not constitute a change in direction on the teaching on the Holy Spirit, but it did result in more prominence given to this agency and its role in the plan of redemption.

From its beginning, the Review had included writings from authors outside of Adventism on topics of general agreement. During this decade, a number of writings on the Subordination of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit were included from other publications. Of note in this study are the paper *The Subordination of the Son* by Samuel T. Spear, and certain articles from the *King's Messenger* reprinted in the Review and Herald, such as *Blended Personalities* (Vol. 77, No. 14, p. 210) and *The Holy Ghost* (Vol. 78, No. 8, p. 116).

While these freely use Trinitarian language, it must be noted that it is because they were written by those outside of the denomination, who had their own theological bent. Examination of other issues of this time period reveal a general editorial policy

of including such externally authored articles and news items unedited when it came to minor points of expression.

In this climate of deeper study into the working of the Holy Spirit with the obligatory interest in its personality and relationship with God and Christ, there inevitably came a need for a group term to include Father, Son and Holy Spirit under one banner.

The term “Godhead” was not considered appropriate for this. Their understanding was that this term referred either quantitatively (as a noun) for God the Father alone or qualitatively to the attribute of divinity, which was possessed by Father and Son and is descriptive of the Spirit. Deity and Divinity appear to have been used in a similar way. Other terms such as Elohim (potentially a plural) do not appear to have been considered.

Considering this vacuum and the relaxed position on seeing the term appear in official publications, it is no surprise to see some of the leaders borrowing the term Trinity. What needs to be determined is whether they also received with it the theological baggage of the trinity doctrine itself. Those who have been found to have used this term during this time period include M. C. Wilcox, Uriah Smith, S. N. Haskell and F. M. Wilcox. We will examine the context of these original quotes, as well as the conceptual views of these people in their wider contemporary writings.

M. C. Wilcox was found to use the term around the time that *Signs of the Times* printed Samuel T. Spear’s article, as mentioned above. This article was later printed under a different title, *The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity*, as part of the Bible Student’s Library series. In commenting on this article in *Signs*, Wilcox wrote, “‘The Subordination of Christ,’ by the late Samuel T. Spear, taken from the *Independent*. It was so long that we found it necessary to divide it. We trust that this candid setting forth of the Trinity will be read with care.” (*Signs of the Times*, Vol. 18, No. 5, p. 80.)

Elsewhere, showing that the printing did not constitute complete agreement with the article, Wilcox stated, “While there may be minor thoughts in this worthy number which we might wish to express differently, on the whole we believe that it sets forth the Bible doctrine of the trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with a devout adherence to the words of the Scripture, in the best brief way we ever saw it presented.” (*Signs of the Times*, Vol. 18, No. 22, p. 352)

These facts alone might lead one to speculate what was or wasn’t agreed with in the article, if it weren’t for other articles by Wilcox in the same decade. A few years later, in 1898, Wilcox authored an article titled, “The Spirit—Impersonal and Personal,” which appeared in a series of editorials on the Holy Spirit. In this article, he states, “So the Spirit, the Comforter, brings to us Christ’s presence... the “eternal spirit” comes to us as the life force and veritable presence of Jesus Christ; Redeemer, Companion, King.” (*Signs of the Times*, Vol. 24, No. 33, p. 518)

In the previous issue to this (Vol. 24, No. 32), Wilcox had responded to a question on whether the Holy Ghost was a person, saying, “The Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit, the Holy Ghost, the Comforter, the Spirit of Christ, are all one and the same Spirit... This Spirit is the outflowing of the life of God in Christ, and has the power of bringing to the child of God the personality and presence of Christ. In this way it may

be said to be a person, while as God's life it is said to be shed forth, poured out, etc. We cannot comprehend the infinite."

From the above evidence it is abundantly clear that while M. C. Wilcox used the term "Trinity" as a collective term for the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, he did not have in mind either the orthodox Catholic Trinity or the current Trinity teaching of the modern Seventh-day Adventist church.

The next person to use the term Trinity is Uriah Smith, whom no one would think of as a Trinitarian. He wrote in answer to a question in 1896 on *Worshiping the Holy Spirit and the doxology*, "We know of no place in the Bible where we are commanded to worship the Holy Spirit, as was commanded in the case of Christ (Heb. 1:6), or where we find an example of the worship of the Holy Spirit, as in the case of Christ. Luke 24:52. Yet in the formula for baptism, the name "Holy Ghost," or "Holy Spirit," is associated with that of the Father and the Son. And if the name can be used thus, why could it not properly stand as a part of the same trinity in the hymn of praise, "Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost"?" (*Review and Herald*, Vol. 73, No. 43, p. 685)

One has merely to read *Looking Unto Jesus*, Uriah Smith's book on the life of Christ, printed 1898, to see that he was clearly not a Trinitarian at this time. It is interesting that the term is only used in connection as a collective term for Father, Son and Holy Spirit, particularly in connection with Matthew 28:19.

S. N. Haskell was another one to so use this term. In his 1919 publication, *Bible Handbook*, under the section, "Baptism," he writes, "Matt. 28:19. In the name of the Trinity. T., v. 6, p. 91." He also used the term in the 1905 edition of his book, *The Story of Daniel the Prophet*, where he wrote, "Gabriel was only an angel, upheld by the same Power that sustained John, and he would not for one moment allow John to be deceived by thinking he was a part of the great Trinity of heaven, and worthy of the worship of mankind." (pp. 132)

This thought is missing from the 1901 edition of the book and while it appears in this expanded edition, it does not need to convey the ideas that come with the word. On the contrary, many of Haskell's works, both before and after this, show concepts in harmony with the early Adventist understanding of God. His uses appear consistent with the others who, at this time, were using the word as a collective label.

One of the final uses we will look at comes from the son of M. C. Wilcox. In 1913, F. M. Wilcox was the editor of the *Review and Herald* when he wrote a statement of beliefs which many have said was Trinitarian. The description, however, does not conflict with what the early Pioneers believed:

"1. In the divine Trinity. This Trinity consists of the eternal Father, a personal spiritual being, omnipotent, omniscient, infinite in power, wisdom, and love; of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the eternal Father, through whom the salvation of the redeemed hosts will be accomplished; the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead, the one regenerating agency in the work of redemption." (Vol. 90, No. 41, p. 21)

This article by Wilcox wasn't meant to be a comprehensive set of beliefs of Adventism. It leaves out many beliefs that have appeared on all our statements of

fundamentals from 1872 to today. It remains true to the original statement by James White, differing only in emphasising the three powers of heaven, which had been given more attention in the events surrounding Kellogg's pantheism.

It is interesting to note that at this time when leaders within Adventism were attempting to find a word to collectively connote the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Ellen White coined a term that was, to all knowledge, original to her in this context. "Heavenly trio," while often used as proof of Ellen White being Trinitarian, actually was coined to be used instead of "trinity," to avoid the theological baggage with which the latter came.

And it is this very difficulty – the inability to separate a contextual meaning from a loaded term – which has plagued Adventist historians of the past half century at least. Many have made much of a few words here and there which they consider to uphold their teaching rather than looking at the weight of evidence that the big picture provides. As more historical resources are becoming widely available for researchers, it would do well for all parties to re-evaluate the context of statements they have placed so much weight upon.

Suggested further reading: Is the Heavenly Trio a Trinity?
Ellen White, 1888, and the Christian Connexion
Examining "The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity"