

Unaccounted Factor

How Criticism Motivated The Adoption of
Trinitarian Theology Within Seventh-day Adventism



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The Unaccounted Factor:

How Criticism Motivated The Adoption of Trinitarian
Theology Within Seventh-day Adventism

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“The greatest fault we can find in the Reformation is, the Reformers stopped reforming. Had they gone on, and onward, till they had left the last vestige of Papacy behind, such as natural immortality, sprinkling, the trinity, and Sunday- keeping, the church would now be free from her unscriptural errors.”¹

“The Scriptures abundantly teach the pre-existence of Christ and his divinity; but they are entirely silent in regard to a trinity.”²

“The concept of the Trinity, namely the idea that the three are one, is not explicitly stated but only assumed.”³

“The New Testament does not have any explicit statement on the Trinity—apart from 1 John 5:7, which has been rejected as a medieval addition to the text—but the Trinitarian evidence is overwhelming.”⁴

“Explicit in the New Testament, implied in the Old, the doctrine of the Trinity is fundamental to Adventist faith.”⁵

¹ James White, February 7, 1856, Review & Herald, vol. 7, no. 19, page 148, par. 26

² J.H. Waggoner, 1884, The Atonement In The Light Of Nature And Revelation, p, 173

³ Fernando Canale, Handbook of SDA Theology, SDA Encyclopedia Vol 12, page 138

⁴ Dennis Fortin <http://www.perspectivedigest.org/article/17/archives/15-4/god-the-trinity-and-adventism>)

⁵ R. Allan Anderson, Review and Herald, September 8th 1983, ‘Adventists and the Trinity’

"Internal evidence provided below, however, indicates that the Trinity can rise to the level of being explicit in the Old Testament." ⁶

Which of the quotes above were written by Seventh-day Adventist Christians? The modern reader might be surprised to learn that all of them are! Yet it is apparent that these statements are not all harmonious. The quotes disagree as to whether the doctrine of the Trinity is Biblical, much less explicit therein. The quotes that oppose the Trinity are from two early Seventh-day Adventist pioneers while the quotes that are supportive of it are from Adventist authors in more recent times. This is certainly the quandary isn't it? Which quotes should we believe? Were the Seventh-day Adventist pioneers so biased that they did not see the Trinity even though it is explicit in the Old Testament? Or are modern Seventh-day Adventist scholars reading with Trinitarian goggles and therefore reaching conclusions based on wishful thinking rather than explicit Biblical data? Basically we are asking if the doctrine of the Trinity is Biblical? As much as I would like to delve into that matter it is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I shared the quotes above because they are emblematic of a massive shift in Seventh-day Adventist theology on the nature of God. This change can also be seen in the Seventh-day Adventist statements of Fundamental Beliefs over time.

In 1872 a statement of the Fundamental Principles of Seventh-day Adventists was published anonymously. While most certainly not an authoritative creed it was "a concise statement of the more prominent features" of the faith and declared "what is, and has been, with great unanimity, held by" the Seventh-day Adventist people. It was written "to meet inquiries" as to what was believed by Seventh-day Adventists, "to correct false statements circulated" and to "remove erroneous impressions." It

⁶ Norman Gulley, Systematic Theology: God as Trinity pg 26

expressed a “desire simply that our position shall be understood.” The portion of its first two statements that are relevant for our discussion read this way:

“I – That there is one God, a personal, spiritual being, the creator of all things, omnipotent, omniscient, and eternal, infinite in wisdom, holiness, justice, goodness, truth and mercy; unchangeable, and everywhere present by his representative, the Holy Spirit. Ps. 139:7.

“II – That there is one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Eternal Father, the one by whom God created all things, and by whom they do consist...”⁷

In 1889 a revised statement of these beliefs was published declaring “the principle features” of the Seventh-day Adventist faith “upon which there is, so far as we know, entire unanimity throughout the body.”⁸ The exact same two statements as seen above were quoted verbatim in this updated document.

This statement of belief is non-Trinitarian because the “one God” of Scripture is declared to be “a personal, spiritual being” and He is differentiated from the “one Lord Jesus Christ” who is declared to be “the Son of the Eternal Father.” There is no mention of the Trinity and also no mention of the Holy Spirit as a person. Thus the “one God” of Scripture is God the Father. Contrary to this, Trinitarian theology teaches that the “one God” of Scripture is 3 Persons, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that They are one Being. This is a common doctrine in Seventh-day Adventism today (see Appendix 1).

⁷ A Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught & Practiced by The Seventh-Day Adventists; Steam Press of the Seventh-Day Adventists Publishing Association, Battle Creek, Mich. 1872 partial quotes pgs. 4, 5

⁸ Seventh-Day Adventist Year Book of Statistics for 1889; Review and Herald Publishing Co. Battle Creek, Mich. 1889, partial quotes pg. 147

The 1872 statement was the standard understanding of the Seventh-day Adventism of old.⁹ James White published it in very first edition of the Signs of the Times on June 4, 1874. Uriah Smith also published it in the November 24th, 1874 edition of the Review and Herald. The revised beliefs were published in the 1889 and 1905 Seventh-day Adventist Yearbooks. They were also published annually in the Seventh-day Adventist Yearbooks from 1907 up until the year 1914. These statements were also listed in catalogues and sold in Seventh-day Adventist offices for one cent each.¹⁰ There is also evidence suggesting that they were used as a basis for organizing churches with some even using them as a test of fellowship.¹¹ Then, from 1915 onward, the Fundamental Principles were no longer published. The Yearbook did not print any statement of belief again until the year 1931. In that year we read the following claim:

“2. That the Godhead, or Trinity, consists of the Eternal Father, a personal, spiritual Being, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, infinite in wisdom and love; the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of

⁹ The non-Trinitarian understanding of God is reflected throughout the 1878 publication entitled “The Biblical Institute,” particularly in the chapter entitled “Christ in the Old Testament.” This book was a synopsis of lectures given by James White and Uriah Smith in Oakland, California, April 1st-17th, 1877. On pg. 178 we read that “God is a person and has a form.” On pg. 184 we read the question “3. What is the Holy Spirit?” The answer given is “It is something which is common to the Father and the Son: the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ...it may, perhaps, best be described as a mysterious influence emanating from the Father and the Son, their representative and the medium of their power.” On pgs. 311,312 an argument is put forward that “Christ is the angel that was with Moses in the Mount Sinai...The eternal Father is never called an angel in the Scriptures...” On pg. 317 we read that “Neither Moses nor Christ were lawmakers, Christ disclaims having anything to do with legislation.” On pg. 320 we read “God is the one Father of all the adopted sons and daughters of grace from all the ages, and Christ is their only Savior and Redeemer...and the Holy Spirit is their sanctifier.”

¹⁰ D.M. Canright purchased 5 copies of the Fundamental Principles and sent one to the editor, James Gray, as a proof that Seventh-day Adventists did not believe in the Trinity. D.M. Canright “Seventh-day Adventists and the Doctrine of the Trinity” The Christian Workers Magazine Volume 16, pg 85 October 1915.

¹¹ Evidence for this will be seen later on in this paper

the Eternal Father, through whom all things were created and through whom the salvation of the redeemed hosts will be accomplished; the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead, the great regenerating power in the work of redemption. Matt. 28:19

“3. That Jesus Christ is very God, being of the same nature and essence as the Eternal Father...”¹²

This statement is interesting because while it uses the word “Trinity” and makes Jesus Christ “very God” it still speaks of “the Eternal Father” as “a personal, spiritual Being” and makes the Lord Jesus Christ “the Son of the eternal Father.” Thus it is perfectly compatible with begotten theology.

However, it takes a step forward from the previous belief in that it asserts that the Holy Spirit is “the third Person of the Godhead” but simultaneously takes a step backward in that it does not make the Spirit the means of the Father’s omnipresence like the previous statement did. This statement was supposed to be prepared by a committee of 4 men, C.H. Watson, M.E. Kern, F.M. Wilcox and E.R. Palmer. However, according to LeRoy Froom, it was actually written entirely by Francis Wilcox.¹³

The statement was never approved by any larger group than the four aforementioned individuals.¹⁴

This statement was eventually adopted, arguably by default, at the 1946 General Conference when it was voted that statements of Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Beliefs could not be altered except

¹² Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-Day Adventists; SDA Yearbook 1931

¹³ LeRoy Froom, *Movement of Destiny* pg 411, 413, 414.

¹⁴ “Realizing that the General Conference Committee or any other church body would never accept the document in the form in which it was written, Elder Wilcox, with full knowledge of the group, handed the statement directly to Edson Rogers, the General Conference statistician, who published it in the 1931 edition of the Yearbook, where it has appeared ever since. It was without the official approval of the General Conference Committee, therefore, and without any formal denominational adoption, that Elder Wilcox’s statement became the accepted declaration of our faith” (*The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Mission: 1919-1979*,” unpublished paper quoted at <https://spectrummagazine.org/article/bonnie-dwyer/2009/06/07/new-statement-fundamental-beliefs-1980>

by the vote of General Conference.¹⁵

The final change in Seventh-day Adventist belief occurred in 1980 when the Seventh-day Adventist church voted to adopt the following statement:

“There is one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a unity of three coeternal Persons. God is immortal, all-powerful, all-knowing, above all, and ever present. He is infinite and beyond human comprehension, yet known through His self-revelation. He is forever worthy of worship, adoration, and service by the whole creation¹⁶

This is actually the only statement ever directly voted on by the Seventh-day Adventist church that touches upon the matter. While the word “Trinity” is actually absent, the statement is Trinitarian because it refers to the “one God” as “a unity of three coeternal Persons” and then continues on to use the singular pronouns “He” and “His” when referring to Them.¹⁷ There is no reference to the Father as a “personal, spiritual Being” thus enabling one to view the 3 Persons as a singular Being (see Appendix 1).

As the statements of Seventh-day Adventist belief above demonstrate there has been a clear shift away from the non-Trinitarian position over time. The first statement, written in 1872, was published up until 1915. The second statement, written in 1931, remained until 1980. The third statement, adopted in

¹⁵ "Revision of Church Manual," *Review and Herald*, June 14, 1946, p. 197.

¹⁶ Seventh-day Adventist Believe: A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines pg 16.

¹⁷ When the wording was being discussed J.G. Bennett offered a mild protest against the usage of the singular pronoun when he stated “I would have a little difficulty in applying the pronoun He to the Trinity or the Godhead. For me this has deep theological implications (*Review and Herald* April 23, 1980 pg 11)

1980, has been with us for 37 years and is the current Seventh-day Adventist belief. It is also important to note that the ambiguity of the Trinitarian statements has allowed for leading men to state that Seventh-day Adventist Trinitarian belief is the same as the creedal Trinitarian belief (see Appendix 2).

Now it is self-evident that God's Word has not changed since the days of our pioneers so how then did this shift occur? Logic dictates that the impetus must have been extra-biblical. An outside source, or sources, must have influenced the way that Seventh-day Adventists understand God's Word. So what was that source(s)? Depending upon whom you ask you will receive two very different answers within Seventh-day Adventism today. Here are two quotes illustrative of these different answers:

“Only gradually did this false doctrine give way to the Biblical truth, and largely under the impact of Ellen White's writings in statements such as: “In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived (Desire of Ages, p. 530). Likewise, the Trinitarian understanding of God, now part of our fundamental beliefs, was not generally held by the early Adventists. Even today a few do not subscribe to it.”¹⁸

“It may come as a surprise to many that LeRoy Froom was primarily responsible for introducing the Trinitarian doctrine to the Adventist Church, and purposefully set about to promote its acceptance and institute it into the beliefs of the Church.”¹⁹

As the quotes above illustrate one group, let's call them Seventh-day Adventist pro-Trinitarians, say that the change occurred largely under the impact of Ellen White's writings and usually it is her book Desire of Ages that receives the credit. The original pioneer belief is labeled a “false doctrine” by this

¹⁸ William Johnsson, Adventist Review, January 6th, 1994, ‘Present Truth –Walking in God's Light’

¹⁹ <http://www.trinitytruth.org/isthetrinityinthebible.html>

group. The other group, let's call them Seventh-day Adventist anti-Trinitarians, say that the change occurred after the death of Ellen White through the influence of apostate leadership and usually it is LeRoy Froom who is blamed. Now while there are variations and nuances these are the two basic hypotheses. According to my research there are aspects of truth in both hypotheses but a major factor has been overlooked.

The purpose of this paper will be to set forth evidence that a major factor that caused the introduction of the word "Trinity" into Seventh-day Adventism, in a positive sense, was reaction to criticism. While there are several other factors of causality for the eventual adoption of a Trinitarian doctrine by Seventh-day Adventists²⁰ this particular factor is frequently overlooked.²¹ Yet reactionary theology

²⁰ The other factors behind the adoption of this doctrine are, firstly, the "open door" doctrine of Seventh-day Adventist post 1851 and corresponding successful proselytizing efforts. This appears to have eventually brought in individuals who might be rightly called closet Trinitarians. There are 2 data points supporting this factor – a hearsay claim about Ambrose Spicer, that will be discussed later on in this paper, and the direct testimony of H.C. Lacey in 1946. Lacey became influential in teaching orthodox Trinitarianism in Adventism. Another causality factor here are the numerous statements from the pen of Ellen White that taught the Personhood of the Holy Spirit. These appear to have had an immediate impact on the brethren within the lifetime of Ellen White in how certain Adventists viewed the Spirit. While it has been popularly claimed that her statement in *Desire of Ages* 530 about there being in Christ life, original, unborrowed and underived immediately reversed the denominational thinking regarding the begotten nature of Christ that development appears to have occurred after her death, possibly beginning sometime in the 1930s. The last of the other factors here appears to be the development of new thoughts in Adventist soteriology that were viewed as necessitating Trinitarian theology. A key individual in this development was W.W. Prescott. However, his thought process in this regard was not a negation of a pre-incarnate begotten Son but rather a new idea about the timing of this event. Prescott wrote "the Son is co-eternal with the Father. That does not prevent His being the only-begotten Son of God....There is no contradiction to say that the Son is co-eternal with the Father, and yet the Son is the only-begotten of the Father." (W. W. Prescott, Report of the 1919 Bible Conference for July 2nd, pg 20). Again he asserted that "Evidently in an Eternal Father and an Eternal Son the ideas of older and younger can have no place. As we lift up the conception of Sonship out of time into eternity, these elements of it, ever present in human fathers and sons, at once disappear. When they fall away, does any conception essential to our idea of son ship remain? Yes; there still remains the chief idea, viz., personal existence and powers derived from another person. And this idea is plainly embodied in John 5:26, and in other express assertions from the lips of Christ describing his own relation to God." (W. W. Prescott, *The Doctrine of Christ: A Series of Bible Studies for Use in*

not only played a major role in the original positive usages of the word “Trinity” it remained as a factor in both the establishment and perpetuation of this doctrine within Seventh-day Adventism. There has been a concentrated effort to appear orthodox in the eyes of Christendom by asserting that Seventh-day Adventists and other Christians have the doctrine of the Trinity in common. The result of this effort is a Seventh-day Adventist Trinitarian doctrine with a wax nose that can be turned either way depending on the circumstance.

Although the history of the Seventh-day Adventist pioneers’ anti-Trinitarianism stance has been somewhat obscured at certain points in our history²² it is fairly well established today in scholarly circles that this was the normative pioneer position. C. Mervyn Maxwell notes that the early Adventists were “about as uniform in opposing Trinitarianism as they were in advocating belief in the Second

Colleges and Seminaries, page 20, 1920). Again he wrote “As the absolute Son, He, who 'in the beginning was with God, and was God,' was begotten before times eternal; as the Son, who was the God-man, He was begotten by the resurrection from the dead. So shall we be 'sons of God, being sons, of the resurrection.' Luke 20:26.” (Signs of the Times, Jan 8, 1929)

²¹ According to Gilbert Valentine the following authors have tried to account for how and why this change took place. Gane (1963), Holt (1969), Froom (1971), Burt (1996), Whidden (1998), Moon (2003). They do not address the factor of criticism as an impetus for the introduction of the Trinity. Valentine himself briefly mentions the critical factor when he wrote of the discussions in the mid-1950s between SDA leaders and Martin and Barnhouse that “the issue of apologetics again became the main motivating factor in the attempt to find ways to express Adventist understandings more clearly and adequately both for those inside and those outside the community” (Clearer Views of Jesus and the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church pg 15). Here we note the reference to apologetics “again” becoming “the main motivating factor” which implies that this was once before the main factor but Valentine does not delve into the role this factor had in the initial introduction of the doctrine. His paper focuses primarily on the shift emerging “out of the discussions and debates on soteriology that began in 1886 [and] boiled over at the historic 1888 Minneapolis General Conference Session and then flowed out across conferences and congregations” (Ibid pg 5)

²² LeRoy Froom’s work Movement of Destiny is the quintessential example of this. It presents the anti-Trinitarian view of the pioneers as a minority position.

Coming.”²³ Russell Holt, in speaking of the belief up until the time of James White’s death in 1881, notes:

“A survey of other Adventist writers during these years reveals, that to a man, they rejected the trinity, yet, with equal unanimity they upheld the divinity of Christ.”²⁴

My reading of the pioneer writings suggests that we can extend this rejection for another decade. There does not appear to be a single pro-Trinitarian reference in any Seventh-day Adventist periodical until the year 1890.²⁵ In fact, during these early decades, the evidence suggests that a non-Trinitarian doctrine was actually considered a part of the Seventh-day Adventist foundation of faith and was taught to new converts before their baptism. Uriah Smith noted:

“1. We are baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Matt. 28:19. By this we express our belief in the existence of the one true God, the mediation of his Son, and the influence of the Holy Spirit.”²⁶

²³ Sanctuary and Atonement in SDA Theology: An Historical Survey,’ The Sanctuary and the Atonement: Biblical, Historical and Theological Studies, ed. Arnold V. Wallen Kampf and W.Richard Leshner, (Washington, DC: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 1981) 530; qtd Bull and Lockhard 56)

²⁴ Russell Holt, “The doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination: Its rejection and acceptance”, A term paper for Dr. Mervyn Maxwell, 1969

²⁵ A question and answer article entitled "THE TRINITY" by Chas. L. Boyd says "'6. After whose form, or image, was Christ created?" and gives the answer "Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God." "Who being the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person." Phil. 2:6; Heb. 1:3" Here we see a very unique definition of the Trinity in Adventism (Bible Echo and Signs of the Times, October 15, 1890 pg 315)

²⁶ Uriah Smith, 1858, The Bible Students Assistant, pages 21, 22

This is clearly a non-Trinitarian application of Matthew 28:19.

To this we add the testimony of James White regarding John Cottrell. John Cottrell was a Seventh-day Baptist who joined with the Seventh-day Adventists in 1851. Brother White wrote about him in 1853 stating that he “rejected the doctrine of the trinity”

“Bro. Cottrell is nearly eighty years of age, remembers the dark day of 1780, and has been a Sabbath-keeper more than thirty years. He was formerly united with the Seventh-Day Baptists, but on some points of doctrine has differed from that body. He rejected the doctrine of the trinity, also the doctrine of man’s consciousness between death and the resurrection, and the punishment of the wicked in eternal consciousness. He believed that the wicked would be destroyed...”²⁷

Here we see, according to James White, a point of doctrinal difference between the early Seventh-day Adventists and the Seventh-day Baptists was the doctrine of the Trinity. Yet even while consistently rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity²⁸ throughout his lifetime and teaching a begotten Son who came after the Father,²⁹ James White simultaneously upheld the Divinity of the Son of God.

“The S. D. Adventists hold the divinity of Christ so nearly with the trinitarian, that we apprehend no trial here.”³⁰

²⁷ James White, June 9, 1853, Review & Herald, vol. 4, no. 2, page 12, par. 16

²⁸ The “inexplicable Trinity” was “bad enough” in James White’s estimation but “that ultra Unitarainism that makes Christ inferior to the Father” was even “worse.” (James White, Review and Herald, November 29, 1877)

²⁹ “The Father was greater than the Son in that he was first” (James White, Review and Herald January 4th, 1881)

³⁰ James White, Review and Herald, October 12, 1876 pg 116.

Continuing on with our evidence regarding the early Adventist position we add the testimony of brother Seymour Whitney who became a Seventh-day Adventist in 1861. His former fellowship, the Congregational church at Malone, NY, wrote to him “a few words now in regard to the doctrines which you have recently embraced as substitutes for those you once adopted, but now have put away.” Under this heading we read their protest that “the doctrine of the Trinity you set aside as not a scripture doctrine.”³¹

Here we see a clear example of a Trinitarian becoming a non-Trinitarian upon joining with the Seventh-day Adventists.

There is also evidence that a non-Trinitarian doctrine was taught to members within the fold. In 1919 William Prescott stated that this is what he had been taught.

"I was in the same place that Brother Daniells was, and was taught the same things [that Christ was the beginning of God's creative work, that to speak of the third person of the Godhead or of the trinity was heretical] by authority, and without doing my own thinking of or studying I supposed it was right³²

Here we see that brother Prescott claims to have been “taught” a non-Trinitarian doctrine. Thus the internal teaching in Seventh-day Adventism was non-Trinitarian.

Herbert Lacey also indicates that the teaching within the educational system of Adventist was non-

³¹ Review and Herald, March 3, 1862.

³² W.W. Prescott July 6th, 1919 minutes pg 58, brackets in the original

Trinitarian at this time.

“As I already stated, I was really a Trinitarian at heart. And I went through Healdsburg College, and Battle Creek College, with a dim sort of a feeling that there was something wrong about our teaching on the Ministry and Personality of the Holy Ghost. (Of course, that terms was never used except in reading from the Bible, - it was always ‘Holy Spirit’ and referred to as ‘it.’³³

“...Most assuredly our people were anti-trinitarian, when we (the Lacey family) accepted the ‘Truth’ in 1888. At least, that is how it appeared to us at that time.³⁴

Herbert Lacey came into Adventism in 1888. He then attended Healdsburg College “where he completed the ministerial program in 1892.” After this he attended Battle Creek College and “graduated from the classical course in 1895.”³⁵ His statements that the Seventh-day Adventist people were “most assuredly” anti-Trinitarian and his “dim sort of a feeling” that something was incorrect about the teaching regarding the Spirit indicates that the doctrine he was exposed to was certainly non-Trinitarian.

These evidences suggest to us that entry into Seventh-day Adventism was, at this point in our history, joining a non-Trinitarian faith and this was the predominant teaching that the Seventh-day Adventist people were exposed to, whether new converts or life-long Adventists. A non-Trinitarian stance appears to be a nearly unanimous position among the Seventh-day Adventist people as stated in the

³³ Herbert C. Lacey to LeRoy Froom, August 30, 1945

³⁴ Herbert C. Lacey to A.W. Spalding, June 5, 1947

³⁵ Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia entry on Herbert Camden Lacey

preambles to the 1872 and 1889 editions of the Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Principles. As noted earlier, this doctrine was held “with great unanimity” by Seventh-day Adventists in 1872 and with “so far as we know, entire unanimity throughout the body” in 1889.

Now we need to pause a moment and speak about these Fundamental Principles. The credibility of the preamble’s claim has been questioned by Seventh-day Adventist pro-Trinitarians, notably LeRoy Froom and Jerry Moon. Their arguments are very similar so I will examine Dr. Moon’s theory.

“The first Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by Seventh-day Adventists (1872) was the work of Uriah Smith...It is notable that while there is no reference to the term Trinity, neither is there any overt polemic against a Trinitarian position. Smith was clearly striving to adhere as closely as possible to biblical language. The statement represented a consensus at the time, but in harmony with its preamble's explicit disclaimer of any creedal statement [66] it was never given the status of official approval.

“The second statement of "Fundamental Principles" (1889), also by Uriah Smith,[67] is likewise a consensus statement that avoids pressing any points of disagreement. As with the 1872 statement, the preamble maintains "no creed but the Bible," and further claims that "the following propositions may be taken as a summary of the principal features of their [Seventh-day Adventists'] religious faith, upon which there is, so far as we know, entire unanimity throughout the body" (emphasis supplied).[68] ³⁶

³⁶ www.sdanet.org/atissue/trinity/moon/moon-trinity1.htm

Here we note several fascinating things. The first is that brother Moon is making it “notable” that there is no “overt polemic against a Trinitarian position” in the statement that was “a consensus at the time.” He also states that the second consensus “likewise...avoids pressing any points of disagreement.” I find this to be circular reasoning. According to the author(s) of the document there was no known point of disagreement in the body at this time but “entire unanimity throughout the body.” One cannot avoid pressing any point of disagreement if no points of disagreement are known!

We also note that statements of belief are not typically framed negatively by focusing on what is disbelieved but framed positively by focusing on what is believed. Is it notable that there are no overt polemics against Modalism, Unitarianism or Tritheism in the statement either? Or should we understand that these were not views common among Seventh-day Adventists at that time? I believe the latter is the correct view.

The third point to note here is that the credit for the first statement of Fundamental Beliefs is being assigned solely to Uriah Smith. LeRoy Froom wrote in 1971:

“Though appearing anonymously, it was actually composed by Smith”³⁷

Presumably Dr. Moon is simply re-echoing this idea. However Froom does not cite any source for his assertion that Uriah Smith was the author and there are other claims made about the original authorship. In fact the editors of Ministry Magazine, Roy Anderson, J. Arthur Buckwalter, Louise Kleuser, Earl Cleveland and Walter Schubert, published the following claim 13 years earlier in 1958

³⁷ MOD pg 160

“It is true that in 1872 a "Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by Seventh-day Adventists" was printed, but it was never adopted by the denomination and therefore cannot be considered official. Evidently a small group, perhaps even one or two, endeavored to put into words what they thought were the views of the entire church...”³⁸

Another source, this one 12 years earlier than Froom’s 1971 work credits James White for having “a large part” in composing this statement.

“The formulation of principle doctrines of the Seventh day- Adventist Church here presented was constructed earlier than the indicated publication date in the Signs [1874]. Though there is no assurance that James White was the only author, he no doubt had a large part in its composition.”³⁹

The Living Witness credits James White as one of the authors. Again the problem here is that there is no proof offered that he wrote it either. However we can say with certainty that James White approved of the statements because, as mentioned previously, he published these principles verbatim in the very first edition of the Signs of the Times (June 4, 1874). Uriah Smith also published them in the November 24th, 1874 edition of the Review and Herald. So while we do not know who authored the Principles both men are witnesses to the historicity of its claim.

³⁸ Ministry Magazine “Our Declaration of Fundamental Beliefs: January 1958

³⁹ The Living Witness, 1959, Pacific Press Publishing Association, pages 1, 2.

With these other contemporary claims present why did Froom state that Uriah Smith wrote this statement? Perhaps he was unaware of the other claims but, based on the research I have done into Froom, I am not inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt. It is an easily verifiable fact that LeRoy Froom would sometimes play fast and loose with the data on this subject. These things are very surprising considering his sterling reputation as a consummate historian (i.e. Prophetic Faith of our Fathers; Conditionalist Faith of our Fathers) yet the truth is that he is not reliable regarding the history of the Trinity in Seventh-day Adventism.

In 1925 Froom wrote Lacey “I think that new light will confirm the essentials of the past, though that does not mean that all of the details must be retained as our founders laid them down.”⁴⁰ In 1931 H.W. Cottrell wrote to Froom explaining that "The conclusion drawn at the time (of the pioneers) was that the Holy Spirit was not a person in the sense that God and Christ are persons, if so, the same difficulty would be encountered with the Holy Spirit being everywhere present as is held by the Trinitarians concerning God and Christ as persons being everywhere present, and if it should be so conceded Christ would be the Son of the Holy Spirit, rather than of God as the Bible declares Him to be. (Matt 1:18).” In that same letter he wrote: “From my personal knowledge the doctrine of the ‘Trinity-Godhead’, was not taught by Seventh-day Adventists during the early days of my ministry.”⁴¹ 1947 H.C. Lacey wrote to Froom stating that “...I have always known that Elder Uriah Smith was an Arian in belief (‘Thoughts on Daniel and the Revelation’ reveal that!) and that our people undoubtedly generally followed that view.”⁴² In 1955 Arthur White wrote to LeRoy Froom “Mrs. Soper calls to our attention the fact that you are seeking information as to the positions held by our early workers concerning the

⁴⁰ Leroy Froom to Herbert Camden Lacey, April 13, 1925

⁴¹ H.W. Cottrell to LeRoy Froom, September 16, 1931

⁴² Herbert C. Lacey to LeRoy Froom, August 30, 1945

Trinity, the personality of the Holy Spirit, and the pre-existence of Christ as this may be revealed in their writings. I think we will have to concede that our early workers were not Trinitarians” and he recommended that Froom read the “Doctrine of the Personality of the Holy Spirit up to 1900” by Christy Taylor.⁴³

Thus we know that Froom received numerous statements and had access to the truth about the pioneer position yet in 1957, in the book *Questions on Doctrine*, he and the other authors informed Martin and Barnhouse that the early Seventh-day Adventists did not have a defined view of the Godhead and that “with the passage of years the earlier diversity of view gave way to unity of view”⁴⁴ A careful reader will note that they ignored the unified view in 1872 and 1889 and did not give the actual passage of years it took to accomplish the view they were espousing. This is revisionist history. George Knight correctly notes that in *Questions on Doctrines* “The authors at times push the facts a bit too far on such issues as Adventism’s historic understanding of the Trinity....”⁴⁵

This pushing the facts too far continued in Froom’s 1971 book *Movement of Destiny*.

In 1960 Froom wrote O.H. Christensen: “May I state that my book, *The Coming of the Comforter* was the result of a series of studies that I gave in 1927-28, to ministerial institutes throughout North America. You cannot imagine how I was pummeled by some of the old timers because I pressed on the personality of the Holy Sprit as the Third Person of the Godhead. Some men denied that –still deny

⁴³ Arthur White to LeRoy. Froom, December 7, 1955

⁴⁴ QOD pg 30.

⁴⁵ Knight, George R., *Questions on Doctrine*, Annotated Edition, 2003, p. xxx.

it. But the book has come to be generally accepted as standard.”⁴⁶

So by Froom’s own admission he knew what the original pioneer view was anti-Trinitarian because he had been pummeled by some of the old timers in the late 1920’s yet despite this, and all the previously mentioned evidence, he wrote in his 1971 book *Movement of Destiny* that the pioneers’ anti-Trinitarian stance was a “minority” view.⁴⁷ This is a complete reversal of what the data indicates. Arthur White had previously written “that none of our early workers nor Seventh-day Adventists generally, prior to about the middle 1890s were willing to accept the doctrine of the trinity.”⁴⁸ Unfortunately, LeRoy Froom also distorted individual views. C. Mervyn Maxwell notes that Froom did “special pleading” when arguing for E.J. Waggoner having a Trinitarian position in 1888.”⁴⁹ In plain language it is revisionist history. Froom also placed himself in a difficult position by implying that Ellen White was always a Trinitarian. He then had to create a rationale as to why it took the prophet so long to guide the church correctly on this matter.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Letter of LeRoy Froom to Otto H. Christensen, Oct 27, 1960

⁴⁷ MOD pg 119; see also pg 148, 178, 187, 200, 481, 483).

⁴⁸ Arthur White to Hedy Jemison, July 2, 1969).

⁴⁹ C. Mervyn Maxwell, review of *Movement of Destiny* by Le Roy Edwin Froom, in *AUSS* 10 [January 1972] pg 121.

⁵⁰ In 1957 an apology was given regarding this: “Why did she not make her stronger emphasis from the beginning? Doubtless for the same reason that she advised against pursuing theological controversy with respected but mistaken brethren – for the sake of unity on the main features of the message of the imminent return of Christ, which they all felt called of God to proclaim to the world (QOD pg 48). In 1971 under a heading entitled “Ellen White leader in salvation verities” Froom argued that “every major, distinctive doctrinal truth” in Adventism “came originally from personal or group Bible study” as “the method of discovery and adoption” but “such was not the case, however, with Ellen White’s relation to the Eternal Verities of the Everlasting Gospel, over which there were- regrettably- variety views among certain of the pioneers...Concerning these primary principles, provisions and Divine Personalities of Salvation, Ellen White was usually the pathfinder in emphasis and clarity.... (MOD 117, 118). Here Froom involves himself in quite the difficulty. According to Froom, Ellen White’s relation to the eternal Verities was not obtained through Bible study and she was usually the pathfinder in this area. This leads one to question if she knew the truth about Trinity all along and was a pathfinder in emphasis and clarity then why didn’t she guide the church into the truth on this subject

The examples above suggest a clear agenda on Froom's part and his ascribing this statement to Uriah Smith is useful toward that end. Froom claimed that "it [the 1872 statement] clearly had less "unanimity" than he averred"⁵¹. The data whereby Froom has reached this conclusion is not forthcoming and it contradicts the data we know he had received yet he presented a different version of history anyway. As Merlin Burt notes "One is left with the impression that Froom chose not to present the facts, possibly either out of fear that it might undermine someone's faith or of jeopardizing the Church's evangelical standing."⁵² This theory finds support in the following statement from Froom in a Ministry Magazine article entitled "New Approaches Imperative for a New Day."

"But there were underlying reasons for our past emphasis and procedures, and also for certain silences. This was occasioned, at first, by differing views *on the part of some* over the eternal pre-existence and complete deity of Jesus Christ... the constricted view of a minority that brought odium over this point upon the whole movement... Not until these constricted views were corrected, and that fact made known publicly in scholarly circles, did the old prejudices melt that had been based on those faulty minority views. The old canard about our being an "anti-Christian cult" was abandoned by the informed, and we were conceded to be truly Christian -- despite our Sabbath and sanctuary emphasis,

from the very start? Froom's previous answer was for the sake of unity. Here we see a clear reason why Froom had to falsify the early pioneer anti/non-Trinitarian stance as a minority view. If not, then he would have a prophet who knew the truth about the Trinity all along remaining silent about it for decades thus suffering the church, at large and in unity, to believe and teach falsehood. This would not bode well for her prophetic status. The much simpler solution is that Ellen White was not a Trinitarian and her understanding of God, His Son and the Spirit evolved over time and she led as she received insight.

⁵¹ (MOD pg 160)

⁵² (Merlin Burt "Demise of Semi-Arianism and Anti-Trinitarianism in Adventist Theology, 1888-1957 pg 47)

and our position on conditional immortality.”⁵³

Here I believe we see the agenda, a quest for acceptance by the larger Christian world and the removal of the labeling of Seventh-day Adventists as an anti-Christian cult. Some have even suggested that LeRoy Froom destroyed evidence! Dr. Jan Barna asserts that Movement of Destiny “is Froom’s worst book. Froom had even burned much of the primary evidence. Historians do not burn evidence unless they have a problem with it.”⁵⁴ ⁵⁵ According to George Knight, LeRoy Froom, when near to death, asked his son Fenton Froom “to bring his files/papers for MOD and read the title of each one. He then instructed Fenton to put each paper in one of two piles. Then he asked him to burn one of the piles” and Fenton “did as instructed.”⁵⁶ Unfortunately it is not known what documents were destroyed. George Knight suggests that they “were unpublished documents” and might be “some of the surveys he cites” or “documents we can not find in his collections or other archives.”⁵⁷ Whether he burned source material relating to the Trinity or not, it is certain that he falsified the original pioneer position. While these tactics might have been successful in removing the cult label from Seventh-day Adventism it was ultimately short-sighted. The disrepute that Froom’s name is held in by modern day Seventh-day Adventist anti/non-Trinitarians demonstrates that his revisionist history simultaneously laid a foundation for an end-time resurgence of anti-Trinitarianism! As the lies are peeled back layer after layer it leads many to distrust Adventist scholarship at the core.

⁵³ LeRoy Froom, Ministry, March 1966, “New approaches Imperative for a New Day”

⁵⁴ <http://www.sdadevelopment.szm.com/1956/soteriology/>

⁵⁵ In an email from Dr. Barna explained that this “is a sensitive issue” and that he “learned about” what Froom did “from George Knight” as part of the “course he used to teach on [the] development of Adventist theology.” (Email from Jan Barna to Jason Smith, Monday, November 27th, 2017 at 5:57 am)

⁵⁶ Email from George Knight to Jason Smith, Saturday, December 2nd, 2017 at 1:18 am

⁵⁷ Ibid

For the purpose of this paper the fact remains that the preambles to the 1872 and 1889 versions to the Fundamental Principles soundly contradict Froom's claim about this being a minority view. Thus Froom must dispute this claim and we note it is much easier within Adventism to repudiate or disparage something written by one man than a small group and, if you had to pick the man, it is much easier to go with Uriah Smith than James White. We leave it to the reader to decide who had a better grasp of contemporary Seventh-day Adventism in 1872, the original author(s) of the Fundamental Principles or LeRoy Froom.

Now returning to Dr. Moon he writes of the 1889 revised statement:

“Apparently, Smith did not consider the fine points of the doctrine of the Godhead as ranking among the "principal features" of the SDA faith at that time, because he could hardly have been unaware that there were certain minor disagreements related to the Trinity.[69] ⁵⁸

Again I find this to be circular reasoning and what is apparent to Dr. Moon is not apparent to this author. What evidence is offered that Uriah Smith was aware of “certain minor disagreements related to the Trinity” in 1889? Let's read the footnote:

“[69] The statement of D. T. Bourdeau, attesting that there were among SDAs "many . . . conceptions of the Deity," appeared in the Review and Herald, of which Smith was the editor, only one year later.

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⁵⁸Jerry Moon, “The Adventist Trinity Debate” www.sdanet.org/atissue/trinity/moon/moon-trinity1.htm

⁵⁹ Ibid

This seems illogical on several fronts. Let's assume that Uriah Smith was responsible for the 1889 revision of the fundamental principles for the sake of argument. If this is true and he was aware that there were "certain minor disagreements related to the Trinity" then he lied when he changed the preamble to say that "The following propositions may be taken as a summary of the principle features of their religious faith, upon which there is, so far as we know, entire unanimity throughout the body."⁶⁰ This is an even stronger statement than the 1872 preamble!

Secondly, how can an 1890 statement from D.T. Bourdeau be used as an evidence that Uriah Smith had certain knowledge back in 1889 that contradicts his own claim? That seems a bit unfair. There is very little evidence that there was any disagreement in 1889 about the Trinity at all. We will look at this statement from D.T. Bourdeau later on this this document.

Finally, can we really say that a doctrine of a begotten Son from a point in eternity vs. a doctrine of an eternally generating Son vs. a doctrine of an eternally existent unbegotten Person is a fine point of the doctrine of the Godhead? It is certainly not viewed that way today in Adventism. Is a doctrine of a Holy Spirit that is not a person vs. a doctrine of an Holy Spirit that is a person really an issue of minor disagreement? These actually seem to be issues of quite significant consequence and call into question Dr. Moon's theory.

The point here has been to affirm the historicity of the 1872 and 1889 statements of Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Principles. These statements indicate that the Seventh-day Adventist view during this time was nearly unanimously non-Trinitarian. The evidence from Uriah Smith, John

⁶⁰ Seventh-Day Adventist Year Book of Statistics for 1889; Review and Herald Publishing Co. Battle Creek, Mich. 1889, partial quotes pg. 147