Perspective Digest

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Armageddon: Atonement’s Ultimate Victory
God, the Trinity, and Adventism

An old controversy over the nature of God surfaces again.

Denis Fortin

In the past decade or two, there has been a resurgence of Arianism and anti-Trinitarianism in the Christian and even in the evangelical world.

But Seventh-day Adventist objections to the doctrine of the Trinity are not new. Many of our early pioneers had issues with the doctrine of the Trinity, and it is now commonly known and accepted that many of them were anti-Trinitarian. Representative of such sentiments is Joseph Bates’s statement in his autobiography: “Respecting the Trinity, I concluded that it was impossible for me to believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, was also the Almighty God, the Father, one and the same being.” Although Bates’s view of the Trinity does not correspond with the traditional orthodox understanding of the triune God, it nonetheless highlights that in early Adventism the doctrine was not accurately understood to start with.

In a recent book on the Trinity, Woodrow Whidden comments that, “not only are there increasing reports of pockets of anti-Trinitarian revival in various regions across North America, but via Internet its influence has spread around the world. As this grassroots Arian or anti-Trinitarian movement gains ground, local churches increasingly find themselves drawn into debate over the issues.”

Though Adventists have been careful and deliberate in their study of many biblical doctrines—for example the doctrines of last-day events, justification by faith, the sanctuary, and the atonement—other doctrines have been neglected. One of them is the biblical doctrine of the Godhead. And perhaps we are now seeing the results of this neglect.

In a theological dictionary the author of the article on the Trinity stated that although the expression “the Trinity” is not a biblical term, with which I readily agree, “it has been found a convenient designation for the one God self-revealed in Scripture as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

Likely it is here that the difficulties with the doctrine of the Trinity begin for some people, and some Adventists in particular. First, we have a term that is not found in Scripture, and Adventists are determined to base their doctrines on Scripture only. Second, to our modern, analytical, and mathematical minds, the Trinity is a hard concept to understand. How can three equal one, or one equal three?

Yet we do find in Scripture many references to three persons in God, and this adds to the confusion in many people’s minds. Although the Old Testament emphasizes the exclusive unity of God (Deut. 6:4; 5:7-11), it also alludes to the plurality of God (Gen. 1:2, 26; 11:7; 18:1-33; Ex. 23:23).
Of all allusions to this plurality of God in the Old Testament, Isaiah 42:1 and 48:16 come very close to a Trinitarian formulation.

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. Jesus is clearly described as divine in the Gospel of John (John 1:1-3; 20:28), and He himself proclaims His own divinity (8:58). In the New Testament we find also clear references to the three persons of the Godhead. All three are mentioned at the baptism of Jesus (Matt. 3:16, 17); during the Lord’s Supper, Jesus comforts His disciples with the thought that He and the Father would send the Holy Spirit to guide them after His departure (John 14:16, 17); all three persons are part of the baptismal formula found in Jesus’ great commission to His disciples (Matt. 28:19); Paul readily refers to all three persons in many of his epistles (Rom. 8:9-11; 2 Cor. 13:14; 2 Tim. 1:3-14; Eph. 1:13, 14; 3:14-19); Peter acknowledges the work of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the salvation of people (1 Peter 1:2), and John is a witness of the Spirit’s testimony regarding Jesus, the Son of God (1 John 5:5-9). The Book of Revelation also presents three persons involved in the final events of this world (Rev. 1:4. 5; 22:16-18).

But all these biblical evidences to the triune God become somewhat ambivalent for some people because the Holy Spirit is often referred to with metaphors of objects: a dove (Matt. 3:16), the wind (John 3:8), fire (Isa. 6:6, 7), water (John 7:37-39), and oil (Matt. 25:1-4). Moreover, adding to this ambivalence are some New Testament statements that appear to refer to Jesus as having had a beginning when He is referred to as “begotten” or “firstborn of all creation” (John 3:16; Col. 1:15).

But the history of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity also brings up some issues. Historically, it can be argued that the development of the doctrine of the Trinity is closely connected with the Christological disputes the early church struggled with. When the early church through a series of councils confirmed the eternal divinity of Jesus, it opened the way for a clarification of the relationship between God the Father and Jesus. "The more emphatic the church became that Christ was God, the more it came under pressure to clarify how Christ related to God." And along with this, it needed to clarify the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

For the early Church, the fact that Christian faith involved acceptance of Jesus as Savior and Lord meant that the Trinity quickly found its way into the creeds of the church. The Niceo-Constantinopolitan creed confesses in part that “We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, . . . We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. . . . We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.”

Roger Olson comments that “the implications of this confession, especially in the context of monotheism, naturally became one of the first concerns of patristic theology, the main aim being to secure the doctrine against tritheism on the one side and monarchianism on the other.”

The early church fathers gave us the vocabulary we use and discuss today. Irenaeus spoke of
the “economy of salvation,” in which each member of the Godhead has a distinct yet related role. In his theology of the Trinity, Tertullian argued that “substance” is what unites while “person” is what distinguishes the members of the Godhead. "The three persons of the Trinity are distinct, yet not divided, different yet not separate or independent of each other." The eastern Cappadocian fathers expanded on Tertullian’s thought and tended to emphasize the distinct individuality of the three persons while safeguarding their unity by stressing the fact that both the Son and the Spirit derived from the Father. They spoke of one “substance” in three “persons.”

However, another issue for us today is that much of that vocabulary and thought assumed ancient Greek dualism and metaphysics, which are very distant and confusing to us now. Augustine grounded his theology of the Trinity on the concept of relationship and on the bond of love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He “developed the idea of relation within the Godhead, arguing that the persons of the Trinity are defined by their relationships to one another.” Augustine rejected any form of subordinationism that treated the Son and the Holy Spirit as inferior to the Father within the Godhead. Although the Son and the Spirit may appear to be secondary to the Father, this judgment applies only to their role within the process of salvation; they may appear to be subordinate to the Father in history, but in eternity all are equal.

By the end of the fifth century, the early church had reached a consensus regarding the doctrine of the Trinity that has remained Christianity’s official position for centuries.

But there have always been strong divergent opinions threatening this consensus. Although the early church councils clearly defined Jesus’ divine-human nature and the relationship between the persons of the Godhead, Arianism and modalism have remained influential beliefs within Christianity. Jaroslav Pelikan believes that during the Reformation, the doctrine of the Trinity was relegated to a secondary position in relation to the immediate moral-religious interest of the Reformers. And this is basically the position it kept in Protestant theology for the following five centuries.

Most devastating to the doctrine of the Trinity was the impact of Enlightenment rationalism and Deism, an impact that is still felt today. For a variety of reasons, during the Enlightenment the doctrine of the Trinity became “a pestilence for rationalistic theologians,” as one thinker said, and the assumption that it was a “revealed doctrine” could no longer be taken for granted in the Christian theology of the 19th century. Ever since the Reformation, Socinianism had been criticizing the doctrine of the Trinity on both biblical and rational grounds, but during the 18th and 19th centuries the criticisms appeared with growing frequency and insistence also within churches that were professedly Trinitarian in their confessions of faith. Along with Unitarianism, which was gradually beginning to take its place alongside the Trinitarian churches, some American denominations, such as the Christian Connection and some Freewill Baptist churches, became anti-Trinitarian.

To some extent, the modern anti-Trinitarian sentiments and the reappearance of modalism confirmed “the warnings long voiced by orthodox polemics that loss of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity would eventually lead to loss of the reality of God.” These warnings were fulfilled when Christian theology adopted pantheistic and panentheistic views of God in the 19th and 20th
centuries.

Traditional Christian theology affirmed a doctrine of God according to which the created world was distinct from its Creator. This doctrine distinguished clearly between a God omnipotent in nature and a God identical with nature. Upon that distinctness depended such fundamentals of the Christian worldview as the very doctrine of creation itself.

A hundred years ago, our own Adventist denomination was shaken by a pantheistic controversy. Could it be that such a development was the result of some long-held Arian views—that the Holy Spirit was not to be understood as a person within the Godhead but only as a divine force?

Such views were espoused by J. N. Andrews, Joseph H. Waggoner, Daniel T. Bourdeau, R. F. Cottrell, J. N. Loughborough, Uriah Smith, and many others of our pioneers who came from a Christian Connection and Freewill Baptist heritage. But second-generation Adventists also held these views, among them E. J. Waggoner, a good friend of John Harvey Kellogg.

But slowly our denomination reshaped its understanding of the Godhead and moved toward a traditional Trinitarian view in order to take into account the clear New Testament teaching on a triune God and to uphold the validity and full sufficiency of Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice of atonement on the cross. Furthermore, Ellen White certainly had a strong influence in that direction, particularly after the publication of her book *The Desire of Ages*.

Yet today questions persist, and there is a resurgence of anti-Trinitarian views among Adventists. Some wish to reclaim the teachings of our Adventist pioneers on the Godhead and deny the full and eternally pre-existent deity of Jesus and the personal deity of the Holy Spirit.

Our own Adventist theological experience and history can make valuable contributions to this discussion. In many ways the philosophical assumptions and presuppositions of our worldview are different from traditional Christianity and bring different perspectives on some of these old issues. We do not accept the traditional Platonic dualistic worldview and metaphysics that were foundational to the church fathers’ theology of the Trinity, one of these being the concept of the immortality of the soul.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Arianism holds that the Son was created by nature and did not exist before the Father brought Him into existence. As such, the Son is subordinate to the Father’s authority. Arians have also consistently denied the personhood of the Holy Spirit.


3. Ibid., pp. 8, 9.


6. Later Western versions of the Nicene Creed added the *filioque* clause here: “who proceeds from the Father and the Son.” The addition of this clause was one of the issues that led to the great schism between East and West in 1054 A.D.


8. Ibid., p. 196. Monarchianism is a form of modalism that denied the plurality of God. It holds that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are a succession of modes or operations, that they are not separate persons.


10. Ibid., p. 71.


12. Ibid., p. 193.

13. References in *The Desire of Ages* to the eternal deity of Christ are found on pages 19, 530, 785, and to the divine personhood of the Holy Spirit on page 671.

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The Trinity in the Old Testament

The Old Testament presents implicit and explicit evidence of the existence of the Trinity.

Norman R. Gulley

In his Antithesis, the Gnostic Marcion, claimed in the second century A.D. that “the finite, imperfect, angry Jehovah of the Jews” and the “good or gracious God” revealed by Christ were two different Gods. In fact, according to Marcion, the Old Testament God is evil (or at least the author of evil), while the New Testament God is good. Yet Tertullian (ca. 155-220) wrote five books against Marcion’s heretical ideas and is the most important early thinker to demonstrate the importance of rejecting dualism in the Trinity.

During the whole 3rd century A.D., Modalistic Monarchianism stated that one God took on different modes. He was the Father in the Old Testament, the Son in the Gospels, and the Spirit since Pentecost—the same God appearing in three different modes of revelation. The stress here was on the oneness of God against pagan polytheism, which denied a Trinity in either the Old Testament or the New Testament. Much later, Michael Servetus (1511-1553) believed that the Trinity had little biblical support, and that if theology could rid itself of the Trinitarian idea, this would contribute to the conversion of Jews and Muslims. Socinians (16th-19th century) emphatically denied the divinity of Christ, and so rejected the Trinity. Their Racovian Catechism (1605) was one of the earliest anti-Trinitarian statements since Arianism in the fourth century and became the forerunner of Deism and Unitarianism (both promoting God as one). The 17th century witnessed a vigorous defense of the Trinity against Socinian and Arminian views and modern forms of Sabellianism and Arianism.

It is well known that many biblical scholars, past and present, reject a continuity between law and grace and hence distinguish the God of law (Old Testament) from the God of grace (New Testament). Even more radical, the Dispensationalists assume that God deals differently with those living in one historical period than with others living in another historical period. Lewis Chafer, for example, claims that these different dispensations are “the very foundation of a science such as Systematic Theology.” He then continues: “Though too often confused, the divine government is different in each of these ages, being adapted perfectly to the relation which the people in their respective dispensations sustain to God. Each of these systems of human government is wholly complete in itself. The Mosaic law contained the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances, and was an expression of God’s will to Israel to whom alone it was addressed. In the teaching of grace addressed only to the Church, God has disclosed in full the manner of life which becomes those who are already perfected in Christ.”

Dispensationalists distinguish between Israel and the church, designating the old covenant as
law and the new covenant as grace. Charles Hodge believed Scripture contrasts the old and the new covenants in several ways. One way is that the new reveals the same covenant, but that “it is spoken of as a state of tutelage and bondage, far different from the freedom and filial spirit of the dispensation under which we now live... in the New Testament the gospel greatly predominates over the law. Whereas, under the Old Testament, the law predominated over the gospel.”

Predestinarians promote a difference in humans due to sovereign rather than human choice. What these human ideas have in common is questioning the God of Scripture.

However, there is a problem. If God is a solitary Person in the Old Testament (“‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one’” [Deut. 6:4]), and a Trinity in the New Testament (for example, at Christ’s baptism [Matt. 3:16, 17]; and in Christ’s great commission [28:19]), how can He be a God of love (1 John 4:8) throughout human history? In other words, how can a solitary God in the Old Testament love as the Trinity does in the New Testament? Such assumed differences are not merely between law and grace, bondage and freedom, sovereign and free choice, but have to do with the nature of God Himself. If God relates to humans differently at any time and in any way, what does this do to His words “‘I the Lord do not change’” (Mal. 3:6, NIV)?

**The Old Testament Shema**

“‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!’” (Deut. 6:4), or “‘one Lord’” (NIV, KJV), or “the Lord alone” (Goodspeed), or “the Lord our God is one Lord, the only Lord” (Amplified). Commentators recognize that the Hebrew can be translated in different ways. The next chapter in Deuteronomy, about the Decalogue, begins the same way: “‘Hear, O Israel, . . . the Lord our God’” (5:1, 2), and the word one can be considered as a title or name for God. Two chapters before the *Shema*, the Red Sea miracle (exodus redemption) calls forth the exclamation, “‘The Lord is God. . . . There is no other’” (4:39, NIV), which echoes “‘who among the gods is like you, O Lord’” (Ex. 15:11, NIV), which anticipates the first commandment and its prologue: “‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me’” (20:2, 3). These texts focus on the uniqueness of God.

The *Shema* “expresses not only the *uniqueness* but also the *unity* of God. As one God (or the ‘Unique’), when he spoke there was no other to contradict; when he promised, there was no other to revoke that promise; when he warned, there was no other to provide refuge from the warning. He was not merely first among the gods, as Baal in the Canaanite pantheon, Amon-Re in Egypt, or Marduk in Babylon, he was the one and only God.”

What is this oneness that is attributed to God? Is it more than a “name,” “uniqueness,” and “the one and only”? There are two words for “one” in Hebrew. The first means *unique*, such as an only son (Gen. 22:2) and an only child (Prov. 4:3; Zech. 12:10). The second means *united*, such as “A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24, NIV). The word for *united* is used in the *Shema*.

Millard Erickson observes that the unity of husband and wife is “not uniqueness, but the unity of
diversity. It speaks of union, rather than aloneness."\textsuperscript{10} This is why Duane L. Christensen says that this word for unity, "speaks . . . also of the unity of God. The doctrine of monotheism is implicit in this brief creedal statement."\textsuperscript{11} The Hebrew word for "one" meaning solitary, or without others, is not used in the \textit{Shema}. So it seems that the Shema not only speaks of the uniqueness of God as the only God, but "refers to the oneness that results from a unity of numerous persons."\textsuperscript{12}

\textit{Elohim} is a plural term for God (for \textit{El} is God, and most names for God add to the word \textit{El}). This didn’t bother monotheists, which indicates that the plurality of the name wasn’t confused with polytheism. Rather, as Herman Bavinck concludes, the plural form of this name for God "refers to the deity in the fullness and richness of its life. The God of revelation is not an abstract ‘monad’ but the true and living God, who in the infinite fullness of his life contains the highest diversity."\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Further Old Testament Evidence for Plurality}

The plurality of God is also present in the following: (1) After sin entered the world "The Lord God [singular] said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of us [plural], to know good and evil’" (Gen. 3:22); (2) "I heard the voice of the Lord [singular], saying: ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us [plural]?’" (Isa. 6:8).

In Hebrew, more than one Person in the one God is conveyed by God’s use of the plural “let us”: (1) "God [singular] said, ‘Let us [plural] make man in Our image’" (Gen. 1:26); (2) in response to the Babel tower builders, God [singular] said, “Let us [plural] go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech” (11:7). When God said “let us,” “one of us,” or “for us,” He indicated that more than one Person is in the Godhead, even though He told Israel that their God was one. While focusing on one God to keep them from many gods, He allowed them to glimpse that one God as more than one Person.

It should be kept in mind that the above plurals are not those of majesty, as when a royal person (singular) says “we grant you this privilege,” for there are no other royal persons in Scripture who speak in this way. We must not read into Scripture ideas understood in our culture. George A. F. Knight is right to say that believing that Scripture contains plurals of majesty "is to read into Hebrew speech a modern way of thinking. The kings of Israel and Judah are all addressed in the singular in our biblical records."\textsuperscript{14}

There are other examples of plurality in God: (1) “‘The Lord God and His Spirit have sent Me’” (Isa. 48:16); (2) “I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,’ says the Lord of hosts” (Mal. 3:1).

\textbf{Angel of the Lord}

An internal indicator for plurality in God is the phrase “the angel of the Lord.” The following examples document that the “angel of the Lord” is sometimes God, for the “angel of the Lord” (\textit{Yahweh}) in the Old Testament is the pre-incarnate Christ. This angel’s relationship with persons in
the Old Testament compares well with the Christ we know in the New Testament, thus showing the Christ of the Old Testament is the same as the Christ of the New Testament, and the distinction between the Old Testament God and the New Testament God is not warranted.

- When Hagar fled from Sarah, the angel of the Lord found her near a spring in the desert. The angel of the Lord named her baby and told Hagar to return to Sarah and submit to her, adding, "'I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count. . . . For the Lord has heard of your misery'" (Gen. 16:10, 11, NIV).

  Only God can do that, and Hagar responded, "'You are the God who sees me'" (vs. 13, NIV). This God said the Lord had heard of her misery, so God referred to the Lord, and in so doing gave insight into the plurality of the Godhead.

- When Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac, "The Angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time out of heaven, and said: 'By Myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son—blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore'" (22:15-17). The angel of the Lord is called "the Lord," and He speaks twice in the passage (vss. 11, 12; 15-18), and "God" is mentioned four times (vss. 1, 3, 8, 9). It is Yahweh who saves Abraham from sacrificing His son, blesses Him, and Abraham calls the place "Yahweh will provide" (vs. 14), an insight into the future day when on the same mount, Christ would provide the sacrifice for all humans.

- When Israel blessed Joseph, he said, "'God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has fed me all my life long to this day, the Angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads'" (Gen. 48:15, 16).

- Once "the angel of God" (Gen. 31:11) spoke to Jacob in a dream explaining how to increase his flocks, out of pity for what his father-in-law Laban was doing to him. He said to Jacob, "'I am the God of Bethel!'" (vs. 13). At Bethel, the pre-incarnate Christ gave Jacob a dream of a ladder between earth and heaven, with angels ascending and descending, to let him know he was not alone. He promised, "'I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you'" (28:15). He told Jacob to leave the land, and thus to leave Laban, and return home. Laban pursued Jacob, but the pre-incarnate Christ appeared to Laban in a dream at night, saying "God had come to Laban the Syrian in a dream by night, and said to him, 'Be careful that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad'" (31:24).

  The report that Esau, with four hundred men, was coming to meet him caused Jacob "great fear and distress" (Gen. 32:7, NIV). He prayed to God to save him, claiming the covenant promises given to him. Then came the night of wrestling. With whom did Jacob wrestle? Genesis says it was with a man (32:22-30), but Hosea is more specific: Jacob wrestled “with the angel” (Hosea 12:4) who was “God” (vs. 3). The pre-incarnate God stayed with Jacob that night and blessed Him, changing His name to Israel before departing (Gen. 32:26-29). In Hebrew culture names stood for character. The name Jacob means deceiver, and the name Israel means “you have struggled with God and with
men, and have prevailed’” (vs. 28). His new name is a guarantee of a successful meeting with his brother Esau. The name Jacob reminded him of deceiving Esau in the past, whereas the name Israel would remind him of victory over Esau in the future. This was an encouragement to him. And Israel became the name of God’s chosen people, and so to be named the same was an honor. That night the pre-incarnate Christ gave him forgiveness for the past and a promise for the future. No wonder Israel exclaimed, “I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved’” (vs. 30).

- When Moses stood before the burning bush, “the Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. . . . When the Lord saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, ‘Moses, Moses!’ . . . He said, ‘I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God” (Ex. 3:2, 4, 6). But the pre-incarnate Christ promised to give Moses success in his mission in leading God’s people (3:16-4:17).

- Israel was terrified as the army of Pharaoh closed in behind them as they faced the Red Sea. Then “the Angel of God, who went before the camp of Israel, moved and went behind them” (Ex. 14:19), and during the Red Sea crossing, “the Lord looked down upon the army of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and cloud, and He troubled the army of the Egyptians. And He took off their chariot wheels, so that they drove them with difficulty” (vss. 24, 25).

In praising the angel of the Lord (Ex.14:19), Israel sang the song of Moses after the Red Sea deliverance: “‘Who is like You, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like You, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?’” (15:11). New Testament corroboration says the angel of the Lord through Moses “brought them out, after he had shown wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red Sea, and in the wilderness forty years” (Acts 7:36). For 40 years in the desert they were fed by manna (Ex. 16:15, 31, 33; Ps. 78:24), divinely provided water (Neh. 9:20), and their clothes didn’t wear out (Deut. 8:4).

- Later, during the time of the Judges, “The Angel of the Lord . . . said: ‘I led you up from Egypt and brought you to the land of which I swore to your fathers; and I said, ‘I will never break My covenant with you.’ But you have not obeyed My voice’” (Judges 2:1, 2). When the angel of the Lord spoke to Gideon, he was addressed by Gideon as “Lord,” and to Gideon’s concerns Scripture says, “The Lord answered” (6:16, NIV). The angel of the Lord appeared to Manoah’s wife (Sampson’s mother), promising she would give birth to a son who would deliver Israel from the Philistines (13:27). Manoah prayed to God that the angel of the Lord would come back, and He did and talked to Manoah, after which the angel ascended in the flames from the altar of burnt offering, and Manoah exclaimed, “‘We have seen God!’” (13:19-22).

- Clearly, the angel of the Lord is the covenant-making God, the same God who spoke to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3). This is the Lord who gave the Ten Commandments to His people (Exodus 20; Acts 7:38), the law identified with the covenant (Deut. 4:13). This is why Christ said, “‘If you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me’” (John 5:46). God said to Israel, “I send an Angel before you to keep you in the way and to bring you into the place which I have
prepared. Beware of Him and obey His voice; do not provoke Him, for He will not pardon your transgressions; for My name is in Him’” (Ex. 23:20, 21). Here God spoke about the pre-incarnate Christ and said He had His name. That is to say, He also is called God. Here is a clear statement that there is more than one Person in the Godhead, that they share the same name God, and that in this respect there is only one God, the God who is represented by these two in the passage.

- Paul identifies the angel of the Lord. “Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:1-4).

The Old Testament God is unique compared to idols: He is Creator of everything, foretells the future, acts as none other can, and is the Savior of the world. The texts on the “angel of the Lord” indicate that this unique God is a relational God. He is the same God we know from the New Testament. For the Old Testament says, “I am the Lord, I do not change” (Mal. 3:6), and the New Testament says “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8).

**Sola Scriptura Evidence for an Old Testament Trinity**

The *sola scriptura* hermeneutic is Scripture interpreting Scripture, and in this case, allowing the New Testament to interpret the Old Testament texts on God. This hermeneutic is vital to biblical understanding and is crucial in evaluating Dispensational claims regarding the continuing relevance of Old Testament prophecies for contemporary Israel.

*Creation*. In the creation of male and female in the image of God (Gen. 1:26, 27), the Persons of the Godhead are imaged in the oneness of man and woman in marriage. The *sola scriptura* hermeneutic specifies the reality of that image as the Spirit (Gen. 1:2; Ps. 104:30) and the Father creating everything through the Son (Col. 1:15, 16; Heb. 1:2), and hence the reality of the image is a oneness in three, or the Trinity.

*Christ’s Mission and Inauguration*. In Luke 4:18, 19, Christ read from Isaiah 61:1, 2, recognizing the verses as a statement of His mission, and in so doing indicated that it speaks of the Trinity as follows: “The Spirit [Holy Spirit] of the Lord God [the Father] is upon Me [Christ]” (61:1). This is Christ’s commentary on this Old Testament passage.

The inauguration of Christ in heaven is another example of more than one Person in the one God: “Your throne, O God [Heb. Elohim], is forever and ever. . . . You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, Your God [literally: “God, God of you’”), has anointed You with the oil of gladness” (Ps. 45:6, 7). Here God is addressing God; two Persons share the name of God (Heb. Elohim). Who are they? This passage is quoted in Hebrews 1:8, 9: “To the Son He says: ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. . . . You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness more than Your companions.’” Here God speaks to Christ after His victorious life on earth when He “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (1:3).

The Trinity in Isaiah

It is well known that the Trinity is explicit in the New Testament and only implicit in the Old Testament. Internal evidence, however, indicates that the Trinity can rise to the level of being explicit in the Old Testament. There are several examples in the Book of Isaiah.

- The Trinity is explicit in Isaiah 42:1: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations” (NIV). God the Father is speaking about His Son, to whom He will give the Holy Spirit. The New Testament comments that this passage from Isaiah was fulfilled in the healing ministry of Jesus (Matt. 12:15-21), who was sent by the Father (John 3:16, 17) and empowered by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:16, 17; Luke 4:18). The heart relationship of the Father for the Son is seen in this passage, for the Father says Christ is “the one I love, in whom I delight” (Matt. 12:18, NIV). Here is specific insight into the loving relationship among the three in the Godhead. They love each other, and as such are by nature “love” (1 John 4:8). Here is a glimpse into the relational Trinity.

- The Trinity is explicit in Isaiah 48:16: “Come near me and listen to this [cf. “Listen to me, O Jacob . . . I am the first and I am the last” (vs. 12)] . . . . And now the Sovereign Lord [Father] has sent me [Christ], with his Spirit [Holy Spirit].”

- The Trinity is explicit in Isaiah 63:7-10: “I will tell of the kindnesses of the Lord, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the Lord has done for us—yes, the many good things he has done for the house of Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses. He said, ‘Surely they are my people, sons who will not be false to me’; and so he became their Savior. In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit” (NIV).

Isaiah, the gospel prophet, reveals more about the Suffering Servant (Jesus Christ) than any other Old Testament prophet. Likewise, arguably, He presents the Trinity more explicitly than any other Old Testament writer.

The Spirit in the Old Testament

The Holy Spirit is mentioned 88 times in the Old Testament, in about half of its 39 books, and 325 times in 24 New Testament books. Yet He says very little about Himself. He communicates much about the Father and the Son. This is an insight into the selfless love in the Trinity, for the Son
glorifies the Father (John 17:4), and the Spirit glorifies the Son (16:14). In perfect eternal and reciprocal love, each loves the others more than loving Himself—the very opposite of Satan and those who follow Him. This communion means they do not do things on their own (5:22, 27, 30; 10:30, 37, 38; 14:31; 15:10), so the Son speaks what the Father told Him (7:16; 12:49; 15:15), and the Spirit “will speak only what he hears” from Christ (16:13, NIV).

The Old Testament and New Testament Trinity Are the Same

If God is love by nature (1 John 4:8), which is documented in the sampling of Old Testament texts examined above, then the God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New Testament. What God is in His revelation in history is what God is like in His own inner-Trinitarian being. God’s acts of love issue from His nature as love. God could not be solitary and be love, for an eternal existence of God by Himself before the first creation would not be the same as a Trinity. The fact that the Trinity lived for eternity with one another before creating indicates that their mutual love for one another needed none other. It means that there is a reciprocal love relationship within the Trinity so that each loves the other two with an eternal and divine love.

The New Testament speaks of the relational Trinity as follows:

- Mutual indwelling. Christ says the Spirit will come to the disciples and adds, “I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:18). So Christ says He will come to them through the Holy Spirit. At the same time Christ prayed for Christian unity “that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You” (17:21).

- The Trinity is a relationship of equals who have different functions in the plan of salvation. The Father prepared a body for Christ, and Christ came to do the will of His Father (Heb. 10:4-7), to reveal Him (John 14:9), and to speak His words (John 17:8). But in carrying out this mission Christ said, “It is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work” (14:10, NIV), and speaks of His Father as “You, Father, are in Me, and I in You” (17:21).

- With respect to sending the Spirit, Christ said, “When the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father” (John 15:26, italics supplied).

In the New Testament, the Spirit is given titles never ascribed to Him in the Old Testament. He is “Spirit of His Son” (Gal. 4:6, NIV), “Spirit of Christ” (Rom. 8:9; 1 Peter 1:11, NIV), and “the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:19). W. H. Griffith Thomas could therefore say, “It is not in His Absolute Being, but as the Spirit of Christ that He is revealed in the New Testament.” H. B. Swete concludes that the Spirit is Christ's “second Self.”

Why is the Spirit's new name associated with Christ? He is the “Spirit of Jesus” because He brings Jesus to Christians. Jesus promised, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). Furthermore, the Spirit is called the “Spirit of Jesus” because His mission is Christ-centered. Jesus said, “The Father will send [the Holy Spirit] in My name” (John 14:26). The “Spirit of truth” (John 16:13) comes to reveal the one who is “the truth” (John 14:6). Jesus said the Holy Spirit would “testify of me” (15:26) and “will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare
it to you” (John 16:14). He “will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you” (John 14:26).

Human beings were created to be temples for the indwelling of God (1 Cor. 3:16). Christ’s work, both in heaven’s sanctuary and in human temples, applies the results of Christ’s atonement sacrifice for and in humans. So the application of Calvary is made in the heavenly sanctuary by Christ and in human temples by the “Spirit of Christ.”

According to the Old Testament, it is clear that divine love is shared by the Father, Son, and Spirit in a reciprocal relationship beyond human comprehension. Suffice it to say, the Old Testament God of love—who is the same as the New Testament God of love (Mal. 4:6; Heb. 13:8)—acted in the history of Israel/Judah with profound grace and suffered grief. God’s hesed covenant faithfulness continued even though it was rejected by Israel/Judah. Creation of humans in the image of God (Gen. 1:26, 27) meant that Adam and Eve’s relationship with each other was to reflect the relationship among the Trinity. After the fall of humans, God’s covenant with humans was to restore the relationship with Him and with one another so human love to some degree could reflect the reciprocal love among the Trinity. The suffering Servant passage of Isaiah 53, forecasting the pain of Christ becoming a substitute for human sins, crushing out His life, opens up the depths of God’s love for humans as much as any New Testament passage:

“He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; . . . but He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment, and who will declare His generation? For He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgressions of My people He was stricken. . . . He poured out His soul unto death, and He was numbered with the transgressors, and He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Isa. 53:2-12).

Even the Shema (God is one, Deut. 6:4), stressing the uniqueness of God (compared to polytheism), didn’t use the word one as unique but one as united, thereby indicating unity of persons. Several Old Testament texts indicate a plurality in God, as one God addresses another God. The pre-incarnate Christ often acts in Old Testament history as the “angel of the Lord” and reveals His same hesed love (Old Testament) as His agape love (New Testament). The continuity of a relational God in both Testaments counters the idea that the Old Testament God is different from the New Testament God (which if true would aid the cosmic controversy against God). The data supports the biblical claims: “I the Lord do not change” (Mal. 3:6) and “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8). Although the Trinity is more implicit in the Old Testament and
explicit in the New Testament, (1) the sola scriptura hermeneutic indicates that Christ understood the
Trinity to be present in the Old Testament; and (2) Isaiah, the gospel prophet who reveals the
suffering Servant Christ as no other Old Testament prophet, also presents the Trinity with greater
specificity than any other Old Testament writer.

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Ecumenism: At What Cost?

Efforts in recent years to unify the entire Christian faith have grave consequences for belief.

Gerhard Pfandl

In May 1997, Cardinal Basil Hume, spiritual leader of Roman Catholics in Great Britain, spoke at Canterbury Cathedral. In the presence of the Archbishop of Canterbury, he stated publicly that the primacy of the Pope was a necessary ingredient of any move toward Christian unity involving Rome.

Christian unity has become the focus of most Christian churches today. And why not? After all, did not Jesus say, “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one” (John 17:20-22, NKJV).1

Just over 200 years ago, in 1792, an English Baptist village pastor and village cobbler by the name of William Carey was instrumental in founding the Baptist Missionary Society. A year later, in 1793, Carey and his family became the society’s first missionaries. They went to India. In the years following, missionary and Bible societies sprang up all over Europe and America. Men like Robert Morrison, Adoniram Judson, John Williams, Robert Moffatt, and Hudson Taylor were sent out to the four corners of the globe to preach the gospel.

And what a job they did! Christianity increased from 23 percent of the world population in the year 1800 to 34 percent in the year 1900.2 The century of mission, as the 19th century in church history is now called, increased the percentage of Christians in the world by more than one-third. Today, Christians are still only about one-third of the world population. In other words, Christianity made no progress in the evangelization of the world in the 20th century.

Although the Christian Church as a whole had tremendous success in evangelizing the world during the 19th century, tensions developed among churches and missionaries over the new converts. Sheep stealing became a common accusation that they hurled at one another. The heathen, therefore, began to ask: “How do you serve the same God, yet remain so divided?” The missionaries did not have good answers.

The Ecumenical Movement

This question was taken up in 1910 at the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland. One of the topics discussed was “How to Evangelize Without Fighting.” At the end of the discussion a resolution was passed, the goal of which was “to plant in each non-Christian nation one undivided
Church of Christ.\textsuperscript{3} But to do that, they needed some kind of unity.

At Edinburgh the idea of the ecumenical movement was conceived, but because of World Wars I and II, it took almost another 40 years to bring the ecumenical baby into the world. In 1948, 351 delegates from 147 Protestant churches gathered in Amsterdam, Holland, to organize the World Council of Churches. Since then, the ecumenical movement has made progress. Today, 349 churches with more than 560 million members belong to the World Council of Churches, whose administrative center is in Geneva, Switzerland.

Unity! Yes, but at what cost? There is no more sheep stealing, but there is also hardly any evangelization.

**The Roman Catholic Church**

During the first 12 years after 1948, only Protestant churches belonged to the World Council of Churches. Then in 1961 all the Orthodox churches joined.

The largest Christian church, however, the Roman Catholic Church, with about 1 billion members, is still not a member of the World Council of Churches. Until the 1960s, one could not really be a good Catholic and be ecumenical. In 1964, however, the Roman Catholic Church officially stepped into the ecumenical age. In that year, the second Vatican Council adopted the decree on ecumenism, which says that “all who have been justified by faith in baptism are incorporated into Christ; they, therefore, have a right to be called Christians and with good reason are accepted as brothers by the children of the Catholic Church.”\textsuperscript{4} The decree refers to non-Catholic Christians as “separated brethren.”\textsuperscript{5}

The Catholic ecumenical position is very simple: The separated brethren ought to accept the supremacy of the Pope, and either become members of the Roman Catholic Church or join hands and continue their existence as separate entities within the framework of a fraternal religious system. Some Protestant leaders are in fact seriously considering doing just this. In 1989, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, leader of about 70 million Anglicans, after his audience with the Pope, said: “For the universal church I renew the plea. Could not all Christians come to reconsider the kind of primacy the bishop of Rome exercised within the early church, a ‘presiding of love’ for the sake of the unity of the churches in the diversity of their mission.”\textsuperscript{6}

Popes Paul VI in 1969 and John Paul II in 1984 visited the headquarters of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, but the Roman Catholic Church still is not, and probably never will be, a member of the World Council of Churches. Nevertheless, there exists close cooperation between the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church in many ways. In a number of countries around the world, for example, the Roman Catholic Church is a member of the National Council of Churches.

Every Sunday, ecumenical worship services are held around the globe, and in 1991, for the first time in history, the Pope held an ecumenical service with two Lutheran bishops at St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. After the service, the Swedish Lutheran bishop, Bertil Werkström, said: “The moment has
come where we must say that the denunciations at the time of the reformation are no longer valid.”

In 1994, Paul Crouch, the founder of Trinity Broadcasting Network, told two Roman Catholic priests and a leading Catholic laywoman who were his guests: “In the essentials our theology is basically the same: some of these even so-called doctrinal differences . . . are really matters of semantics. . . . So I say to the critics and theological nitpickers, ‘Be gone, in Jesus name! Let’s come together in the spirit of love and unity.’”

Unity? Yes, but at what cost? Truth is sacrificed on the altar of unity.

A Prophecy

In 1885, Ellen G. White wrote: “When Protestantism shall stretch her hand across the gulf to grasp the hand of the Roman power, when she shall reach over the abyss to clasp hands with spiritualism, when, under the influence of this threefold union, our country shall repudiate every principle of its Constitution as a Protestant and republican government, and shall make provision for the propagation of papal falsehoods and delusions, then we may know that the time has come for the marvelous working of Satan and that the end is near.”

In 1885, when she wrote this, the ecumenical movement, as we know it today, was not even thought of. At that time, not only were Protestants quarreling amongst themselves, but most were passionately opposed to the Roman Catholic Church, as some still are today in Northern Ireland. Over the past 40 years, the first part of this prophecy is being fulfilled. The second part will surely be fulfilled in the future.

Revelation 13

Revelation 13 presents two symbolic beasts supporting each other. Seventh-day Adventists have always taught that the first beast is a symbol of papal Rome, and the second a symbol of Protestant America. It must be made clear that when we speak of papal Rome, we are not referring to individual believers in the Roman Catholic Church but to a religio-political empire, an institution teaching doctrines based on the traditions of men rather than on the Word of God and with the political power to impose those doctrines. God has His people in all Christian churches, including the Roman Catholic Church.

Revelation 13:12 says, “He [the second beast] exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence, and causes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast, whose deadly wound was healed.” According to this text it may be expected that sometime in the future, the United States will tell the world to worship, i.e., to obey, the papacy.

In 1888, Ellen G. White wrote: “Through the two great errors, the immortality of the soul, and Sunday sacredness, Satan will bring the people under his deceptions. While the former lays the foundation of Spiritualism, the latter creates a bond of sympathy with Rome. The Protestants of the United States will be foremost in stretching their hands across the gulf to grasp the hand of...
Spiritualism; they will reach over the abyss to clasp hands with the Roman power; and under the influence of this threefold union, this country will follow in the steps of Rome in trampling on the rights of conscience.”

“Protestants of the United States,” she says, “will be foremost in reaching over the abyss to clasp hands with the Roman power.” Are there any indications that this could ever happen?

On March 29, 1994, 39 leading evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics—men like Pat Robertson and John Cardinal O’Connor—signed a document entitled “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium.” Headlines emblazoned upon newspapers across America proclaimed: “Christians Herald New Era” and “Catholics Embrace Evangelicals —Conservatives of Both Faiths Agree to Accept Each Other as Christians.” On Reformation Day, October 31, 1999, Lutherans and Roman Catholics signed a common declaration on justification by faith, the very issue that started the Reformation in the 16th century. According to this document, Lutherans and Roman Catholics “are now able to articulate a common understanding of justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ.” The remaining differences, it is asserted, no longer justify doctrinal condemnations.

Unity? Yes, but at what cost? The process of the ecumenical rapprochement is virtually wiping out the Protestant Reformation.

In 1995, the authors of Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission, reported that “European Catholics and Protestants have concluded that the condemnations of the Reformation were based on misconceptions, were aimed at extreme positions on the other side and no longer apply to today’s situations.” What would Martin Luther and the thousands who gave their lives for the principles of the Reformation say to that?

For years, the Christian Coalition has been operating in the United States. Ralph Reed, former General Secretary of this organization, claims: “The future of American politics lies in the growing strength of Evangelicals and their Roman Catholic allies. If these two core constituencies—Evangelicals comprising the swing vote to the south, Catholics holding sway in the north—can cooperate on issues and support like-minded candidates, they can determine the outcome of almost any election in the nation.”

What does prophecy say?

“He deceives those who dwell on the earth by those signs which he was granted to do in the sight of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who was wounded by the sword and lived. He was granted power to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed” (Rev. 13:14, 15).

The Christian Coalition, or an organization similar to it, could well become the instrument for the development of the image to the beast, which is the union of church and state to enforce religious laws.

The cost of this unity is threefold: (1) There is hardly any mission to the non-Christian world...
because it is no longer politically correct to convert unbelievers, since all religions lead to God anyway. Christ as the exclusive way of salvation has been abandoned. (2) Truth has been sacrificed on the altar of unity. (3) The Reformation is virtually being wiped out. Nevertheless, through all these events prophecy is being fulfilled.

**That They May Be One**

But did not Christ say Christians should all be one? Jesus’ prayer in John 17:21, “‘that they all may be one’” is often cited as the biblical basis for the ecumenical movement. But what did Jesus really pray for in John 17?

In verses 11 and 12 He says: “‘Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.’”

The prayer of Jesus in John 17 was not an appeal to the disciples to produce unity. The unity He referred to was already there. Jesus was not dealing with something at which the church should aim. He was not even speaking to His disciples or to us. He was praying to His Father that God might keep His followers in that unity which He, through His Word, had already brought into existence.

The essence of this unity was that between Father and Son (vs. 21). This unity is a spiritual unity, not some organizational unity. And this spiritual unity has always existed among true believers. It is not a superficial unity that negates God’s Word for the sake of political or social goals, as worthy as some of them may be.

Those who are living at this time in human history are privileged to see the fulfillment of prophecy taking place. They are privileged to have a part in that spiritual unity, which all true believers, whatever their church affiliation, share. It is a unity based on the Word of God, not on political or social manifestos. It is a unity that safeguards God’s teachings, rather than changes and accommodates them.

True Christian unity comes from above. It is a God-created spiritual unity, not an outward organizational unity created by sinful human beings. As individuals, we may become part of this spiritual unity through conversion, revival, and reformation in our lives. This should be our goal.

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Armageddon: Atonement’s Ultimate Victory

Though seldom connected in today’s culture, Armageddon and atonement are two sides of the same coin.

Ikechukwu Michael Oluikpe

Armageddon! This term has been and still is an epithet for worldwide warfare. It has been used throughout the centuries to depict the horrors of war. The term brings to mind memories of World War I, World War II, the Cold War, the Gulf War, and the present War on Terror.

All eyes are anxiously watching the nations for what will be the next move. All these wars are significant for Christians, especially in the light of Bible prophecy. Many believers await the fulfilment of the great battle of Armageddon involving the nations and the Antichrist as part of the end-time prophecies of the Apocalypse with special focus on the Middle East scenario.

This is the view of dispensationalist eschatology, which has become popular and has influenced and led to the great spread of dispensationalist eschatology within the Christian faith through the Scofield Reference Bible, the Dallas Theological Seminary, and the Left Behind novel series and movies. Major proponents of dispensationalist eschatology include J. Dwight Pentecost, Hal Lindsey, Tim LaHaye, John Walvoord, and C. C. Ryrie, among others.

The word Armageddon appears only once in the Bible—Revelation 16—and it is described as the place where the kings of the earth will gather for the battle of the great day of God Almighty (vss. 14, 16). A variety of exegetical and theological interpretations of the significance of Armageddon exist, but these are divided generally into two: (1) a literal place for an international military battle in the Middle East or (2) a theologically symbolic place for the spiritual battle between Christ and the antichrist. Either way, the Bible in the Apocalypse reveals the reality and inevitability of this universal end-time battle.

In the light of salvation history, however, one wonders where this great battle fits into the big picture of the plan of redemption and its spiritual significance. Is Armageddon just another prophecy of global nuclear mushroom clouds and nuclear ash, or is there something profoundly more to it? How does Armageddon fit in the concept of atonement?

The atonement is one of the most central themes in the Bible. It revolves around the significance and extent of the varied roles of Jesus Christ and His work for humanity’s salvation. It is one of the all-encompassing words that denote the past, present, and future of the plan of redemption.

A variety of theories have been proposed for the atonement, each with its biblical emphasis. Some major theories of atonement include the exemplary model, the moral-influence model, the
governmental model, and the satisfaction model, among others. These theories can be divided into two major views: the objective and subjective views.

The objective theories of atonement hold that the primary reason for the death of Jesus Christ was the need to satisfy the demands of divine justice and mercy inherent in God’s nature. On the other hand, the subjective theories hold that the main reason for the death of Christ was to influence humanity’s sinful attitude toward God, so that humanity is eventually drawn and reconciled to God as a result of the demonstration of God’s love through the Cross. These theories are not in opposition to each other but are complementary aspects of the great work of atonement through Jesus Christ. It is important, however, to note that atonement is primarily objective.

The objective aspect of atonement can be described as a divine conflict and victory in which Christ fights and triumphs over the evil powers of the world that hold humankind in bondage and suffering. It emphasizes that the life and work of Christ, especially on earth, brought victory over the demonic powers and liberation to sinners from the bondage of sin and Satan.

Among the objective theories, the *Christus Victor* model of atonement is noteworthy. Also earlier known as the ransom theory, it dominated the early church’s thinking on the atonement until it was superseded by other theories. After years of neglect, it was brought to light by the Swedish historical theologian Gustaf Aulen in his classic work *Christus Victor* in 1931. It is this objective theory that describes Christ’s work as a victory over evil. Christ’s victory over these powers brings a new relation of reconciliation between God and humanity.

God is the subject reconciling the world to Himself through Christ. He is also the object being reconciled in the sense that Christ’s death and merits (the display of God’s love) meet the demands of divine wrath and justice. Hence the tension within the will and being of God is resolved by God’s own action through Christ. Salvation is a divine activity from first to last. This reconciliation brings victory and liberation to sinful humanity through Christ. Atonement is victory over sin, evil, death, and the devil.

**Christ’s Victory: Objective Atonement**

How did Christ win the victory over these forces of evil? In His life and ministry during the incarnation, it was evident that Jesus was in conflict with the devil. Through Herod’s attempt to destroy Him after His birth (Matt. 2:1-18), the wilderness temptations (Matt. 4:1; Luke 4:1), the struggle at Gethsemane and Judas’ betrayal (John 13:27), Satan waged war against Jesus Christ every step of the way.

Christ’s life and ministry, however, demonstrated triumph over the enemy as He healed sicknesses, cast out demons, and delivered captives from the bondage of sin (Matt. 4:23; Mark 1:24; Luke 10:17-20). His victory over the devil is summarily illustrated in a parable in which the strong man is the devil but the stronger man is Jesus Christ Himself (Mark 3:23-27; Luke 11:17-22). The stronger man overcomes the strong man, takes away his armour, divides his spoil, and liberates his slaves.
Apart from His victory in ministry, Christ’s life evidenced victory over sin in the flesh. The obedience of Christ (in His humanity) to the Father was the means of His triumph. When Christ died on the cross, as a perfect sacrifice without sin, He broke the power of Satan and death. By totally resisting the devil’s temptations and being obedient to God the Father even to death, He won victory. Christ’s resurrection was thus a public demonstration and proclamation of Christ’s victory on the cross.

Death could not hold Him because it had already been defeated, and all evil principalities and powers were made subject to Him (Acts 2:24; Eph. 1:20-23; 1 Peter 3:22). This victory was now to be extended by the life and mission of the church through the power of the Holy Spirit. “Every Christian conversion involves a power encounter in which the devil is obliged to relax his hold on somebody’s life and the superior power of Christ is demonstrated.” Therefore Christ’s victory can be personally experienced in the life of every Christian through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

**The Christian’s Victory: Subjective Atonement**

The victory of Christ is to be experienced personally in the individual lives of Christians. The victory He won in the flesh can be claimed, recapitulated, and experienced through the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Christian life should be not only a conflict but a victory, just as Christ was victorious.

Christ has overcome the devil and his works (1 John 3:8), which include the curse and condemnation pronounced by the law (Gal. 3:13; Rom. 8:1-4), the sinful flesh (John 8:34, 36; Rom. 6:6; 8:3), the world (John 16:33; Gal. 6:14) and death (Heb. 2:14, 15). It is important to note, however, that though Christ has defeated these powers, they still exist actively. They have not been completely destroyed. They still remain a continuous threat to the Christian.

This is what makes the Christian life a struggle, a “fight of faith” (1 Tim. 6:12, NKJV) which involves striving (Luke 13:24), wrestling (Eph. 6:10), pulling down (2 Cor. 10:3, 4), enduring (Matt. 10:22; 24:13), pressing on (Phil. 3:14), resisting (James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:9) and standing firm in the strength of the Lord (Eph. 6:10, 11, 13, 14; 1 Peter 5:9). Thus, every Christian continues in this warfare of faith against sin, the flesh, and the world by depending on divine power. This daily battle will exist until the promised day of the blessed hope of Christ’s second advent brings the beginning of the complete annihilation of sin and all its effects.

**Armageddon’s Victory: Ultimate Atonement**

On the cross, Jesus Christ defeated the evil powers, but they have not yet been destroyed. His complete victory over these powers will begin at the Second Coming. After Christ’s victory on the cross and ascension, He began to reign as High Priest-King over all principalities and powers, waiting for them to become His footstool (Ps. 110:1). This will happen when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that He is Lord to the glory of the Father (Rom. 14:10, 11; Phil. 2:9-11). After the
devil is thrown into the lake of fire with death and Hades (Rev. 20:10, 14), and all sinners, evil
dominions, authorities, and powers are destroyed, Jesus Christ will hand over the kingdom to the
Father (1 Cor. 15:24-28).

Of all the New Testament books, none celebrates the consummation of this victory better than
the Book of Revelation. It speaks of Christ as the Overcomer who shares His victory and promises
rewards of victory to all who overcome in the end (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 21:7). He appears as
the risen, ascended, glorified, and reigning Lord, the One who has defeated death and the grave
(1:17, 18). He is the Lamb who has triumphed (5:5) and through whose blood His people defeat the
devil (12:11). He will ultimately overcome the devil and his agents—the beasts, Babylon, the kings of
the earth, death, and Hades (13:17, 18; 15:2, 3; 17:14; 18; 19:11-21; 20), and eternally establish
His perfect rule over all.

Armageddon fits into this picture as the beginning of the complete destruction of all the evil
powers that have been a continual threat to the saints. It is the actual physical, ultimate victory of
the saints over these enemies of God. The Old Testament battles and victories like the Exodus (the
Red Sea victory), Deborah and Barak over the Canaanites, and Cyrus’s victory over Babylon and
deliverance of the Jews, foreshadowed and symbolized the ultimate victory when God will completely
deliver His people from the presence and power of their ultimate enemy: sin with all its effects. These
victories are types of the antitype battle of Armageddon.

It will be logical to say, especially in the setting of the Apocalypse, that Armageddon is God’s
divine intervention to deliver His saints who have personally experienced Christ’s victory over sin in
their lives and demonstrated it in their faithful obedience to Him in the face of persecution from the
evil powers—the beasts, Babylon, and the kings and people of the earth whose names are not in the
book of life (Rev. 13:8; 17:2, 8). In this moral and spiritual war, the saints win victory over these evil
powers by resisting their temptations and refusing to compromise their faith, even in the face of
persecution and death, just as Christ did while on earth (13:17, 18; 15:2, 3; 20:4).

It is biblically consistent to say that God’s saints will be within the Tribulation (and not taken out
of it) and will be delivered from it by Christ’s second coming. The dispensationalist theory of the
Tribulation and Rapture is usually explained based on the last seven years (or one prophetic week) of
the 70-week prophecy of Daniel 9:24-27. In this theory, the saints are taken out of the antichrist’s
seven-year tribulation in the Rapture. They return with Jesus Christ to defeat and destroy the
antichrist and the nations with him in the battle of Armageddon fought in the Middle East.

Throughout salvation history (as it is recorded in the Bible), however, God’s people are never
taken out of trouble; they are preserved through it. Examples include: Noah and his family through
the Flood (Genesis 6–9); the Israelites in the 10 plagues of Egypt before the Exodus (Exodus 7–12);
Elijah and other faithful through the famine and drought of Israel (1 Kings 17, 18); the three Hebrew
youth in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3); and Daniel in the lions’ den (Daniel 6). Other Bible texts make it
clear that God’s people will go through trouble but will be delivered out of it (Dan. 12:1, 2; Matt.
24:13; John 16:33; Acts 14, 22; 2 Tim. 3:12).
The context of the Apocalypse also agrees with the rest of Scripture on this point. It clearly shows the saints who have passed through the tribulation (Rev. 7:14), who have overcome the beast by refusing to worship him or receive his mark (13:15-17; 15:2-4), and who are protected from the troubles of the winds of strife by the seal of God like the Israelites (7:3; Ex.11:7). The second coming of Jesus delivers the saints completely in the end.

Armageddon will be the climactic outworking of Christ’s victory that began on the Cross. Indeed, on the Cross, sin was publicly judged by God before the universe. It was at the Cross that “the final eradication of evil was made certain” and complete victory over sin was made sure. As stated earlier, the Book of Revelation agrees that Christ’s death on the Cross is the basis for the final victory of God and the church over all their enemies. “It is in His death that Christ overcomes His enemies, the world—not a bloody eschatological battlefield. . . . For him [John] there is only one victory of Christ; it was won in the past and resulted in the debilitation of all enemy powers, once and for all.”

Truly the Apocalypse resounds with “the objective decisive victory of the Lamb over all the powers of darkness which He won when He shed His blood on the cross.” Indeed, “the message of the Book of Revelation is that Jesus Christ has defeated Satan and will one day destroy him altogether.” This is the good news of Armageddon.

**Armageddon in Atonement**

Among other models, atonement can be described as Christ’s victory over all evil powers on the Cross. Though these powers are broken and defeated, they are not yet destroyed. Armageddon brings Christ’s victory at the Cross to its climax when all these enemies of God are completely and ultimately destroyed. Though this judgment is a D-Day (doomsday) for evil, it is a V-Day (victory day) for the saints, bringing complete liberation, peace, and harmony to the whole universe and perfect reconciliation of God and alienated humanity. This is the end of the atonement, God dwelling with the redeemed with no more sin and its effects (Rev. 21:3). Armageddon will bring atonement to its final objective of reconciling God and humankind.

Though the imagery of nuclear mushroom clouds and smart bombs in the Middle East may seem like the biblical picture of the end-time prophecy of Armageddon, it is truly about one thing: God’s final victory over His evil enemies and the deliverance of His saints from them. Armageddon is atonement’s ultimate victory!

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