

Clearer Views of Jesus *and the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church* | BY GIL VALENTINE

In his recent insightful *Spectrum* article on the way Seventh-day Adventists express their view of God, Rick Rice referenced the oft-noted observation by Adventist scholars that the Adventist view of God as Trinity, as held today, has emerged through a process of “evolution.” He also ventures that he is not sure we can tell just when and how the transformation took place.¹ Recent historical research, however, does in fact enable us to know more clearly how the transformation happened, and it is a fascinating story. This article will explore how the change came about.

Anti-Trinitarian antecedents

George Knight makes the claim at the outset of his book *Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* that most of Adventism’s founders and pioneers would not have been able to join the church today if they had been required to agree to the 27 Fundamental Beliefs. Most of them, he says, would not have been able to get past Belief #2 on the doctrine of the Trinity.² Beliefs #4 and #5 on the Son and the Holy Spirit would have been equally problematic. Knight is right.

Prominent Sabbatarian Adventist leaders came from the Christian Connection movement and they brought their anti-Trinitarianism with them.³ These early Adventist leaders were not just passive objectors to the doctrine as *non-Trinitarians*; they were actively hostile to the doctrine. They were *anti-Trinitarian*, and they were hostile to any “creed” that enshrined it.

What is remarkable is the about-turn that occurred in Adventist thinking on the issue. By 1980 an explicit doctrine of a triune godhead was enshrined prominently as #2 on the list of the church’s carefully crafted statement of 27 Fundamental Beliefs and formally voted by the church.

A number of Adventist scholars including Erwin Gane (1963), Russell Holt (1969), LeRoy Froom (1971), Merlin Burt (1996), Woodrow Whidden (1998) and Jerry Moon (2003) have documented these beginnings and the change. And all have suggested that Ellen White was in some way the source of the change.⁴ But what is the backstory? Why did she change?

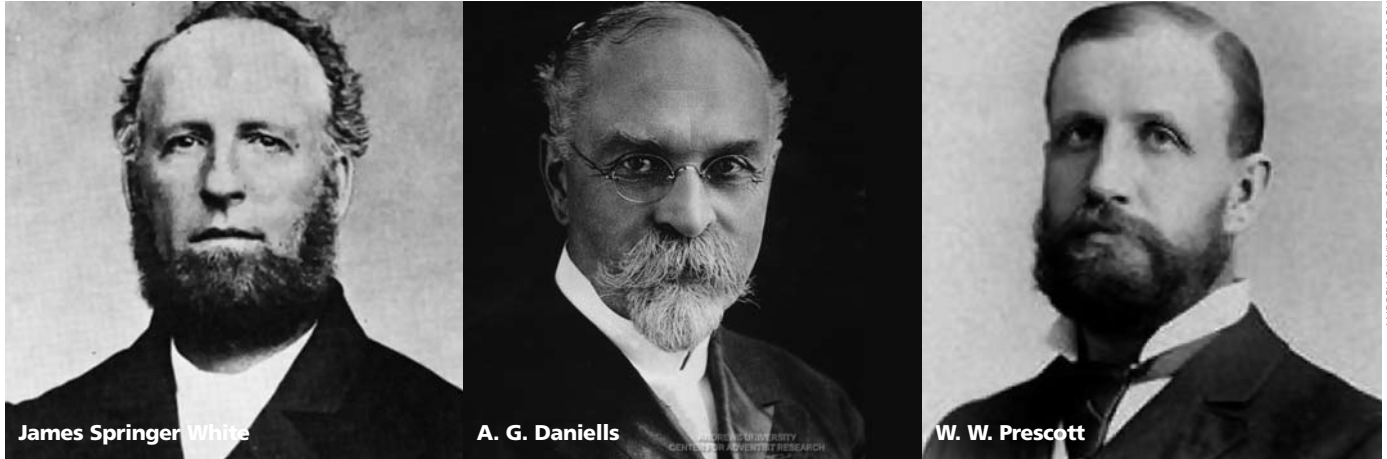
We know that the young Ellen White was an informed and confessionally-baptized Episcopalian Methodist Christian. And we know that Episcopalian Methodists held the doctrine of the Trinity as their first article of faith.⁵ However, as an early Sabbatarian Adventist living in the midst of anti-Trinitarians and married to a very vocal one by the name of James, she too adopted an anti-Trinitarian stance.⁶ Later, as both George Knight and Jerry Moon observe, her language at best was vague and ambiguous, able to be accepted by both anti-Trinitarian and Trinitarian viewpoints. Then with the publication of *Desire of Ages* in 1898, things changed.⁷ What brought the change of understanding?

A new slice of history

None of the accounts by Adventist historians seem to have been aware of the existence of a cluster of letters written in the 1940s in which LeRoy Froom, then editor of *Ministry* magazine, and Arthur Spalding, author of the *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists*, dialogue with Herbert Camden Lacey about the change and its contextual background. A retired bible teacher and brother-in-law to the late W. C. White, Lacey recounts a series of important theological developments in Australia in the mid-1890s.⁸ Evidence from the contemporary 1890s correspondence between W. W. Prescott, A. G. Daniells, E. G. White and W. C. White confirms and

complements the general account by Lacey. The events related by Lacey, Prescott and Daniells unfold a fascinating backstory that helps us understand why and how new perspectives on the nature of the Godhead made

ogy on the part of the wider church. The underlying conviction—that the source of salvation for the believer can only be God—strengthened. In its simplest form, the argument ran, “Created beings cannot be saved by one



their way into the *Desire of Ages*.

The story begins with the 1888 conference and its initiation of a radical realignment in Adventist soteriology. Subsequently the person and salvific work of Jesus came to be the focus of Adventist preaching and teaching rather than the Law. Clearer views of Jesus and the wonder of God’s grace opened windows on new landscapes for Adventists. The clearer understanding of soteriology—particularly the primacy of Justification by Faith—struggled for recognition in Adventism during the immediate subsequent decade following 1888. This was associated with a growing awareness by several church thinkers that this new and clearer emphasis on the atoning work of Christ and on righteousness by faith was and needed to be integrally linked with a more adequate understanding of the full deity of Christ, and led to the undermining of Arianism in Adventism.

The controversy over new soteriological insights may be seen as paralleling similar developments in the early Christian Church. As Maurice Wiles points out, the decisive factor in the triumph of Athanasius over Arius during the Christological controversies of the third and fourth centuries in the early church can be attributed to a clearer understanding of soteriol-

ogy who himself is a created being.”⁹ Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh also point out that early Arianism “is most intelligible when viewed as a scheme of salvation.” At the center of the scheme was “a redeemer whose life of virtue modeled perfect creature-hood and hence the path of salvation for all Christians.” Salvation was ultimately by good living. Early Adventism, with its strongly legalistic understanding of salvation, was perhaps linked to and dependent on its Arianism in more subtle ways than we have previously realized.¹⁰

The story

A close study of the context of the Lacey letters suggests that the events in Australia involving the ministry of General Conference Education Secretary W. W. Prescott helped bring about this doctrinal development. In the years following the landmark 1888 session, Prescott began to rethink Adventist evangelism and apologetics in order to cast them in the new soteriological and more Christocentric framework. In late 1893 in a public evangelistic program at the Independent Congregational Church in Battle Creek, Prescott pioneered a public presentation of Adventist teachings, the Sabbath, the Covenants and the prophecies in a fresh gospel setting. One promi-

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ment citizen, James Upton, attended the meetings and remarked to W. A. Spicer that “they had heard more gospel here than they have heard for many years.”¹¹ It was a Christocentric presentation of Adventist theology and mission—and represented a radical departure from the traditional approach to presenting Adventist teachings. During 1894 and early 1895 Prescott continued to read and reflect on what a Christocentric focus for Adventist teachings meant.

In mid-1895 Prescott travelled to Australia to spend almost a year “down under” helping get Avondale College started and working with A. G. Daniells (Australian Conference President), Ellen White and W. C. White in strengthening the Adventist presence in Australia and New Zealand. Just prior to leaving for the South Pacific, Prescott had accepted an assignment to write the study material for the Sabbath School lesson quarterly scheduled for use in the church in late 1896. The assigned topic was the Gospel of John, but the series was to be different in an important way. Instead of taking one quarter to study the Gospel fairly superficially, it had been decided that the whole year—fifty-two weeks of lessons over four quarters—would focus on the Fourth Gospel, and Prescott would write all four. On his month-long voyage out to Australia the professor spent much of his time studying the Gospel, and the notion apparently began to develop within him that the church needed to be clearer in its convictions about the eternal preexistence of Christ and its corollary, the eternal full deity of Christ.

Not long after he landed in Sydney, Prescott made his way to a secondhand bookstore and bought himself an English translation of the German theologian Augustus Neander’s influential *Lectures on the History of Christian Dogma*. He focused his study on chapter six, which deals with the Christological and Trinitarian controversies of the early Christian centuries. (Prescott’s underlined copy of the book was still on a shelf in the Andrews University Library when I studied there in the early 1980s. It was heavily under-

lined in Prescott’s distinctive style in the chapters dealing with those controversies.)

This doctrinal history informed Prescott’s thinking about the implications of the teaching of the Fourth Gospel. By December of 1895 at the Tasmanian camp meeting, he had completed the first quarter of readings and had shown the manuscript to W. C. White to get feedback. White was impressed because it opened up a new “wide field of thought.”¹²

In the meantime, Prescott had been serving as the lead preacher at an evangelistic camp meeting in Melbourne and had presented his new Christocentric gospel-centered approach to doctrine to appreciative audiences there. Ellen White and her son W. C. White were both in attendance and were very impressed with the new approach. “His theme from first to last and always is Christ,” reported an awed W. C. White. His mother was certain that “the inspiration of the spirit had been on him.” According to Daniells, “preaching Christ and him crucified” rather than traditional Adventist doctrinal sermons made for sermons “full of power.”¹³

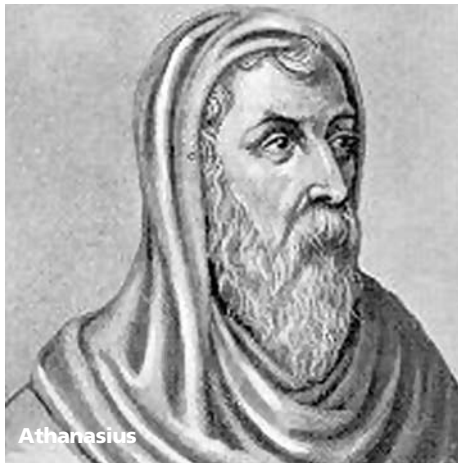
Prescott’s new approach was particularly helpful because Uriah Smith’s *Daniel and Revelation* had been widely sold by colporteurs in the strongly Anglican city, and this had produced a negative reaction among the public that Adventists were a semi-Arian sect who did not believe in the preexistence of Christ nor his full divinity. However, Prescott’s preaching of “sound Christian doctrine” and his “uplifting of Jesus,” with its strong emphasis on the full deity of Christ, “completely disarmed the people of prejudice,” reported Daniells. “The minds of the people have been completely revolutionized with regards to us as a people,” he added in his report to the General Conference President.¹⁴ Prescott’s approach also drew a better class of people to the meetings, noted Ellen White. Clearly, the Christocentric approach, apologetics and deeper bible study were working together in a symbiotic way to bring about the reshaping of Adventist thinking about the nature of the Godhead.

Further reflection on the full deity of Christ

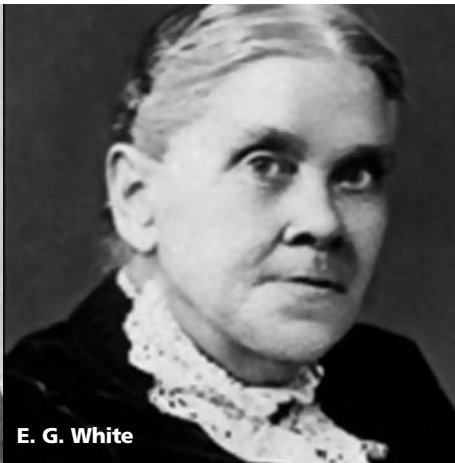
Prescott continued his intensive study of the Gospel of John as part of his preparation of the second quarter sequence of Sabbath School bible

ment and therefore fully God and co-eternal with the Father. He then went on to see the same theological implications in all the other “I Am” statements of Jesus in the Gospel.

Herbert Lacey, the twenty-five year-old



Athanasius



E. G. White



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study guides, and this study led him to a reconsideration of the theological implications of the series of Jesus’ “I Am” statements in the Fourth Gospel. These insights led to a deepening conviction about the eternal deity of the Son.

Early January 1896 found Prescott in Coorabong, New South Wales, about eighty miles north of Sydney, where he shared in the pioneering establishment of a new school at Avondale. Although the teachers were already on hand, legal complications over the transfer of land had delayed the erection of buildings and the planned beginning of classes in March. With the frustrating delay it had been decided that beginning in late March, instead of having classes for students, the church leaders would convene an “institute”—a month-long general Bible and education conference. A large tent was pitched and Prescott was the featured instructor. Participants considered matters of curriculum and pedagogy, but the meetings were most memorable for Prescott’s preaching on the Gospel of John and the divinity of Christ.

The integrating theme for Prescott’s studies on the Gospel of John was the “I Am” statement of Jesus in John 8:58, which Prescott linked with the “I Am” declaration of Yahweh in Exodus 3:14. Christ was the Yahweh of the Old Testa-

ment and therefore fully God and co-eternal with the Father. He then went on to see the same theological implications in all the other “I Am” statements of Jesus in the Gospel. Herbert Lacey, the twenty-five year-old brother-in-law to Willie White, also attended the institute meetings. He had recently obtained his BA degree in classics from Battle Creek College and had returned to teach at the new school. Thus he was also invited to speak at the Institute. He and his new wife boarded with his younger sister and W. C. White and became part of the extended Ellen White household near her new house called “Sunnyside.” In his later recalling of the events of 1896, Lacey reported on other highly significant factors that contributed to making this a particularly important year in the development of Adventist theology.

During early 1896 and even as the Institute was being held, Ellen White was working through an extensive revision process on the manuscript for her new book on the life of Christ, eventually published two years later as *Desire of Ages*. Ellen White had asked Prescott to read the entire manuscript critically. Marian Davis, Ellen White’s “book maker,” was struggling with the collation and arrangement of materials for the first chapter and also the sequencing of some events in the narrative for other early chapters. Both Marian Davis and Ellen White attended Prescott’s Bible studies on John and were deeply engaged and impressed. Marian took extensive notes of the sermons and

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there were many moments of new insight.

Marian sought further help with the editorial and book-making process and according to Lacey, both he and Prescott helped extensively with the difficult first chapter and also in clarifying significant parts of the harmony of the Gospel events that provided the undergirding storyline for the book. According to Lacey, Prescott’s preaching on John significantly shaped sections of *Desire of Ages* concerning the eternity of the Son. “Professor Prescott was tremendously interested in presenting Christ as the great ‘I Am,’” he explained, noting that Marian Davis was very impressed by this, “and lo and behold, when the *Desire of Ages* came out, there appeared that identical teaching on pages 24 and 25, which I think can be looked for in vain in any of Sr. White’s published works prior to that time.”¹⁵ Lacey went on to explain, “Professor Prescott’s interest in the ‘Eternity of the Son’ and the great ‘I Am’s’ coupled with the constant help he gave Sr. Davis in her preparation of the *Desire of Ages*, may serve to explain the inclusion of the above-named teaching in that wonderful book.”¹⁶

Another noticeable inclusion in the *Desire of Ages* that reinforced the changing paradigm was Ellen White’s statement about Christ’s life being “original, unborrowed, underived.” This statement was also placed in the context of a Johannine “I Am” statement. “Jesus declared, ‘I am the resurrection, and the life.’ In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived. ‘He that hath the Son hath life’ (1 John 5:12). The divinity of Christ is the believer’s assurance of eternal life.”¹⁷ It is interesting to notice that most of the scriptural passages that Ellen White drew upon to underline the new emphasis on the divinity of Jesus in *Desire of Ages* came from the Gospel of John.¹⁸

The Holy Spirit as a person

The account provided by Lacey also informs us that a second strand of theological insight contributed to the development of the Adventist doctrine of the Godhead at this same time and in this same place. This second strand involved the

beginning of a shift to understanding the Holy Spirit to be a person instead of an “it.” Again, documentation from the 1890s corroborates Lacey’s recollections written in the 1940s.

Following Prescott’s successful evangelistic meetings in Melbourne, A. G. Daniells and his evangelistic team stayed on cultivating interests and establishing churches with the newly baptized members. Lacey joined them. In their regular workers’ meetings together each morning, the ministers decided to use as a devotional guide a little book Daniells had picked up in a secondhand bookstore entitled *The Spirit of Christ*, published in 1888 by the well-known Dutch Reformed South African author Andrew Murray.¹⁹ This book written on the person and work of the Holy Spirit proved to be spiritually and theologically helpful to Daniells and his minister colleagues. In the opening chapter in the book, Murray asserted,

*It is generally admitted in the Church that the Holy Spirit has not the recognition which becomes Him as being the equal of the Father and the Son, the Divine Person through whom alone the Father and the Son can be truly possessed and known, in whom alone the Church has her beauty and her blessedness.*²⁰

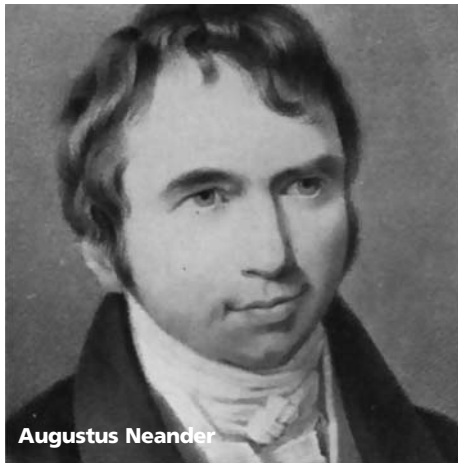
Daniells remarked to Prescott (who by now had become a spiritual mentor to the Australian Conference President) that he found chapter sixteen on the Holy Spirit and Mission to be particularly helpful. The mission of the church would be empowered if the work of the Spirit was more widely appreciated.²¹

The lack of recognition of the Holy Spirit as the equal of the Father in Adventism was soon to be addressed. At that same Cooranbong Bible Institute in March and April, A. G. Daniells presented a series of Bible studies on the Holy Spirit based on his reading of Andrew Murray’s book, and he was supported in the preaching endeavor by Lacey who had developed a keen interest in the topic.

Before Lacey’s return to Australia, he had attended an International Student Volunteers meeting in Detroit. There he had heard famous

preachers like Hudson Taylor, A. J. Gordon, J. R. Mott and A. T. Pierson speaking on Mission and the work of the Spirit. Moved by what he heard, Lacey had studied the topic on his month-long voyage back home to Australia in late 1895.

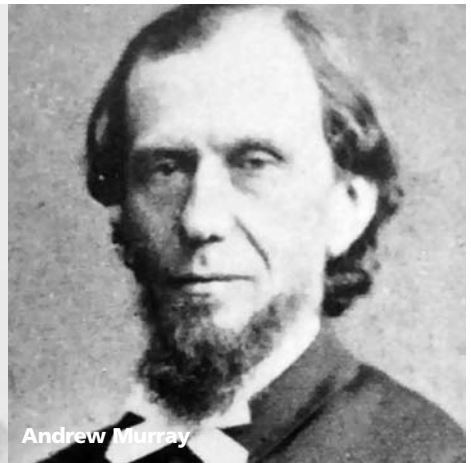
dents on the Avondale Campus in these terms: “We need to realize that the Holy Spirit who is as much a person as God is a person, is walking through these grounds.”²⁵ She could not have shared such an insight three years earlier.



Augustus Neander



Marian Davis



Andrew Murray

LEFT: VOM-GLAUBENDE; CENTER: WWW.THESEVENTHUNDERS.COM

The encounter with Daniells’ secondhand copy of Andrew Murray strengthened the new convictions. They were soon advocating that Adventists begin to think of the Holy Spirit as the third person of the Godhead. According to Lacey, there was considerable discussion amongst the ministers on the matter of the personhood of the Spirit and a realization that they would need to adjust their language to accommodate this understanding. The meeting at Coorabong was the venue where these twin streams converged.

The very next month, on May 10, 1896, Ellen White used the personal pronouns “He” and “Him” repeatedly to describe the Spirit for the first time in a manuscript she wrote on the “Holy Spirit in our Schools.” It took some time for Daniells, Lacey and Ellen White to reprogram their long-established speech and writing patterns, as they continued to occasionally refer to the Spirit as “it.” But change had begun. The insight that the Spirit was the “third person of the Godhead” was first publicly expressed in writing by Ellen White in 1897, in letters written to ministers.²² It was also reflected in the *Desire of Ages* published in 1898.²³ Daniells pointed out this particular statement to Lacey on the campus at Coorabong.²⁴ The following year, Ellen White would address the stu-

Change comes slowly

There was not much turmoil apparent over the quiet developments about the Godhead in far-off Australia. Prescott continued his Christocentric emphasis. *Desire of Ages* was read more widely and the church’s patterns of thought slowly began to change until it was more common to talk of Adventists believing in the doctrine of the Trinity. Seventeen years later, the new understanding was tentatively included in an informal summary of the “cardinal features” of Adventist faith in the *Review* in 1913. The statement, framed by editor F. M. Wilcox, referred to Adventist belief in the “Divine Trinity.” But the statement was still ambiguous enough on the divinity of Christ as to be acceptable to those who were of the old view. The statement referred to Jesus as “the Son of the Eternal Father.”²⁶ Within the General Conference in Washington, D.C., there were also forward-thinking leaders increasingly aware of the need not only to clarify and restate Adventist theology but also of the need to make sure that other Christians and the general public had a correct understanding of what Adventists now believed about soteriology and Christology. Apologetics—the need to avoid being misunderstood—continued to be a driving motivation in the widening consensus on the doctrine of the

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Trinity in Adventism. W. A. Spicer, the well-informed General Conference secretary, reported to L. R. Conradi in the early months of World War I that the Review and Herald Publishing House had appointed a committee tasked with the work of revising the widely-circulated book *Bible Readings for the Home Circle* to ensure the removal of the now inappropriate semi-Arian expressions on the nature of Christ. Urgent work had also been undertaken to revise the Arianism out of "Thoughts on Daniel" while "Thoughts on Revelation" still needed to be attended to.²⁷

During the 1920s, as is evidenced by the 1919 Bible Conference transcripts, the topic of the Trinity was still a very sensitive issue, with pastors being labeled either as progressives or conservatives depending on their stance on the issue. Discussions on the topic became so heated at the conference that the stenographer was asked to stop taking notes on the discussion. But that was about as disruptive as the topic became. Again in 1930 F. M. Wilcox and a committee of four church leaders were requested to draft a more formal summary statement of Adventist beliefs in response to a perceived need to have such a document in the denomination's annual Yearbook. According to Froom, Wilcox drew up the twenty-two-point statement for consideration by his colleagues. It was also reviewed by F. D. Nichol before being published without any further formal consideration or approval in the 1931 *SDA Year Book*.²⁸ Froom reports Nichol as telling him that Wilcox still had to word the statement conservatively "in the hope that it might be acceptable to those who had held divergent views, especially over the Godhead."²⁹

Ellen White's own growing understanding and the wide influence of *Desire of Ages* and other works slowly led to a broad consensus of understanding on the nature of the Trinity. Clearer views of Jesus and of the Spirit who testifies of him changed the way Adventists think about the Godhead. The change, profound though it was, never seemed to seriously threaten the unity of the church. Rather, the temperature of the discussions over the issue seemed to have stayed at

a low level with an occasional localized boiling-over. For example, Prescott was vigorously attacked by a fundamentalist pastor in the late 1940s over his views on the Trinity. In the mid-1950s, debate over the nature of the deity of Christ and Trinitarian doctrine again moved to center stage following discussions with evangelical leaders Walter Martin and Donald Barnhouse. On this occasion 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.

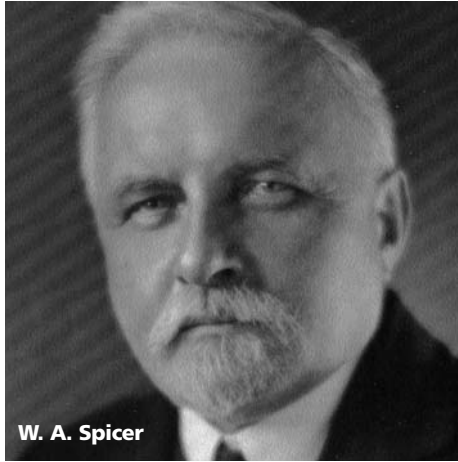
This change in theology eventually reflected itself in the worship experience of the church. In his 1947 letter looking back on the state of affairs in the church fifty years earlier, Lacey lamented that Adventists did not ever sing Trinitarian hymns. This was a notable omission for people who became Adventists from an Anglican background as his family had done. Not until the 1941 edition of the hymnbook could Adventist compilers bring themselves to include such grand favorites as "Holy, Holy, Holy" in an Adventist hymn book. The editorial committee was even prepared to include the stanza concluding with the words "blessed Trinity." R. B. Hannum, the chair of the editorial committee who was of Arian leanings, took it upon himself without authorization to rewrite the language of the poet, as "God over all who rules eternity."³⁰ The word "Trinity" still squeaked in however, in the last stanza of Hymn 45, "The Sun is on the Land and Sea."

In 1985, in the new edition of the hymnal, Adventists eventually included in their version of the grand and familiar hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy" the stanza that had the expression "God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity." It is the only hymn in the 1985 hymn book that uses the word "Trinity," although there are six others that refer to the Godhead or the expressions "three in one" or "one in three."

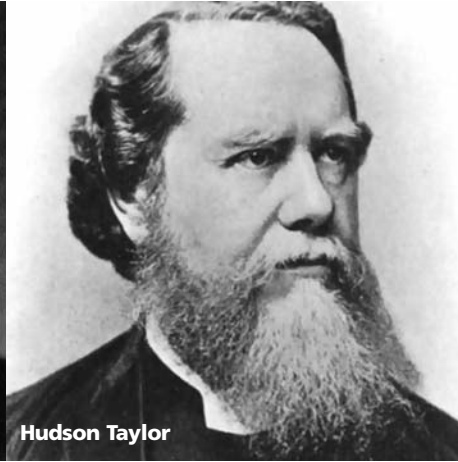
Adventist theology has changed in this area for a number of reasons. It changed because we came to have clearer views of Jesus, because we

came to understand the doctrine of salvation more clearly and because we needed to help others understand us better—which helped us to understand ourselves better. It changed because we studied scripture more closely and because

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W. A. Spicer



Hudson Taylor



F. M. Wilcox

RIGHT: ELLEN G. WHITE ESTATE GALLERY

the promised Holy Spirit continues to lead into truth, toward clearer understandings of God and the wonder of God’s grace. ■

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6. The language of her Methodist creed that asserted God was “without body and parts” made God seem unreal to her and her fellow Adventists.

7. Moon, “The Adventist Trinity Debate” Part 2, 278. Knight, *Search for Identity*, 115.

8. The letters were initiated as an inquiry from Froom to Lacey in an effort to understand the background to the discussions on the eternal existence of Christ. M. L. Andreason had been proclaiming that Ellen White was the source of the

...the wide influence of *Desire of Ages* and other works slowly led to a broad consensus of understanding on the nature of the Trinity.

change and that there had been no discussion or study by the community itself. L. E. Froom to H. C. Lacey, August 8, September 26, 1945. H. C. Lacey to A. W. Spalding April 2, June 5, 1947. A. W. Spalding to H. C. Lacey, June 2, 1947. Copies of the correspondence may be found in the Center for Adventist Research at Andrews University.

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11. W. A. Spicer to W. C. White, January 4, 1893. The meetings later shifted to the Opera House. See Valentine, *W.W. Prescott*, 86.

12. W. C. White to A. G. Daniells, December 13, 1895.

13. W. C. White to Brethren, November 21, 1895; E. G. White to J. E. White, November 18, 1895; A. G. Daniells to O. A. Olsen February 14, 1896.

14. A. G. Daniells to O. A. Olsen February 14, 1896.

15. H. Camden Lacey to L. E. Froom, August 30, 1845. Lacey himself thought the interpretation to be stretched too far and that in the latter cases of the use of the “I Am” in the Gospel and that in these cases it was a simple use of the copula in the Greek.

16. *Ibid.* See also the corroborating letter H. C. Lacey to A. W. Spalding June 5, 1947.

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18. John 1:1; 8:57–58; 10:30; 11:25; 14:16–18, 26; 16:8, 12–14.

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23. White, *Desire of Ages*, 538.

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25. White, Ellen G., “Ms 66, 1899” in *Manuscript Releases* vol. 8 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association).

26. “The Message for Today,” *Review* (October 9, 1913), 21.

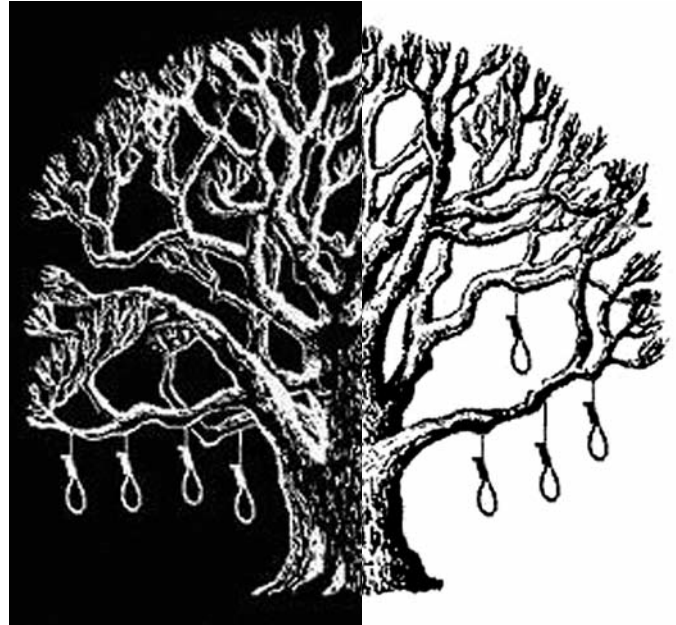
27. W. A. Spicer to L. R. Conradi, October 30, 1914. “We lately have been attacked in publications as believing this teaching, the attack being based on *Thoughts on Revelation* which in this matter certainly does teach Arianism straight.”

28. *SDA Yearbook* (1931), 377–380. See Froom, LeRoy Edwin, *Movement of Destiny* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1971), 413–414.

29. *Ibid.*

30. John Brunt, a former student of Hannum, relates the anecdote.

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whose Sunday School class was firebombed in September of 1963, just a few weeks after the March on Washington, which led to the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; heroes like the many whites who were either killed or harassed for their support of civil rights for African Americans in the twentieth century. In short, how dare a segment of our church want to reap where it hasn't sown! This is hypocrisy of the highest order, and it is contemptible, to say the least. We can and must do better!

London's work is important for my purposes here because it displays what Gadamer argued in *Truth and Method*: that our social, cultural, and political ideologies color our interpretations of sacred texts. This is how, on the one hand, there are white Adventists who would oppose the twentieth-century African American civil rights struggle, and how, on the other hand, there are African American Adventists like E.E. Cleveland and Charles E. Dudley who embrace London's notion of “community awareness” to justify involvement with the same struggle. As London describes it, the tension within the church over involvement in the African-American struggle for civil rights in the twentieth century was palpable. Interestingly, both groups are part of a Protestant denomination that embraces the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, which, according to Gadamer, is itself situated in a certain historical situation that demands the liberation of poor, illiterate persons from the coercive

jurisdiction of the papacy; a liberated biblical hermeneutic that predates Luther in the voice of Marsilius of Padua in the *Defensor Pacis*, and continues to this day in the voice of James Cone in *God of the Oppressed* and most recently in his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.

Reading London with Gadamer enables me to continue the work of epistemic and hermeneutical humility that Martin Heidegger began: the work of destabilizing the notion of a fixed self that can immediately access the original meaning of a text. What then, is the solution? Is there no absolute, fixed, universal truth? I wholeheartedly believe that there is, but this is not the right question. The question is: can anyone know absolute truth absolutely? And the answer to that question is, in my view, an emphatic “no.” This does not mean that we lapse into an ethical relativism or hermeneutical chaos. To the contrary, reading London with Gadamer provides us with a deeper, richer conception of the truth understood as everyone bringing their own unique interpretive baggage to the text; a truth that is profoundly ethical, as it brings us full circle to the biblical admonition for self-humiliation; a truth that resists hegemonic interpretations of texts that become oppressive; a truth that leads us to the path of understanding one another, rather than being a continuous source of conflict and meaningless debate about matters far beyond our finite minds as though we can transform infinity into finitude; a truth that prevents the construction of our own social, political, cultural and theological idols that lead to injustice. ■

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2. London, Jr., Samuel G., *Seventh-day Adventists and the Civil Rights Movement* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2009).
3. Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004).
4. Smith, James K.A., “Between Predication and Silence: Augustine on How (Not) to Speak of God,” *Heythrop Journal*, 41, no. 1 (2000), 66–86.
5. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 273.
6. Ibid.
7. London, Jr., *Seventh-Day Adventists Civil Rights*, 3.
8. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 299.
9. Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Anti-Christ: A Criticism of Christianity*, trans. Anthony Ludovici (New York, NY: Barnes and Noble, 2006), 25.
10. Ibid.
11. In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James Cone critiques Reinhold Niebuhr, perhaps the greatest scholar in moral theology of the twentieth century, for his failure to condemn the lynching of African Americans. Cone’s critique of Niebuhr is that he had nothing at all to say condemning lynching despite the fact that the hanging of innocent black bodies hanging from trees in the deep American south—what Billie Holiday referred to as “Strange Fruit” in her song that bears that name—bears an uncanny resemblance to the hanging of an innocent poverty-stricken Jew at the hands of an overzealous and misguided band of religious authorities who employed the arm of secular power to accomplish their corrupt ends. The African-American “historically affected consciousness,” to employ Gadamer’s term, should be apparent here. For my review of *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, see *The American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience*, 12, no. 2 (Spring 2013), 29–31.

**The question
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belief as a snare and a delusion, and that later, when summaries of Adventist conviction began to appear, they were informational, not instruments of intellectual control. Every student of the pioneers knows, too, that Ellen White condemned doctrinal self-satisfaction and attempts to close off of disagreement about how and what the Bible teaches.

But after World War I (and Ellen White's death), Adventism took a turn toward fundamentalism. If we had always argued for our point of view, we now veered, or many of us did, toward a more unforgiving vituperation, aping certain other Christian communities in their fearfulness, their infallibilism regarding inspired writings, their lust for doctrinal certainty and sameness, their slide into proud and disputatious factions. American fundamentalism was in fact heroic for its early grasp of modernity's murderous potential, now symbolized, chillingly, by the death camp and the mushroom cloud. But the downsides of the movement were toxic, and the toxicity affected Adventism, as the strife-ridden follow-up to the church's 1919 Bible Conference makes clear. Ongoing, and often willful, forgetfulness of the pioneer spirit (not that it was perfect) shows that the unhappy effect continues.

But fundamentalism did address vulnerabilities we are all familiar with, and it did resist, even if imperfectly, society's secularizing drift. So it is unlikely, inside of Adventism or out, to go away. And if many of us cannot in good conscience bear the fundamentalist banner, we should no doubt think about, and even learn from, what it stands for. Anything less would be intellectual self-indulgence. A certain epistemological modesty is not only becoming, it is required. God's thoughts and ways are higher than ours, and mature Christian faith salutes this fact as certainly as it salutes the lordship of Christ.

In February my wife and I attended the One Project gathering in Seattle. More than seven-hundred participants were taking seats at round tables as the first day began. It turned out that

four people at our table had also attended conferences put on by the (fundamentalist-leaning) GYC, or Generation of Youth for Christ. A very professional couple had shown up at the One Project gathering with misgivings, having been "warned" about dangers associated with the meeting. Not fully pleased with the goings-on through the day, they stuck around anyway. Before going to bed that first evening they watched a YouTube video of an Adventist lambasting the next morning's lead-off speaker.

But they came back for day two, and after the first talk expressed puzzlement about the YouTube video. Then, at mid-day, we had lunch together. Despite some difference in perspective (paired up, of course, with plenty of agreement) there was a... connection, and a level of mutual regard that felt like *koinonia*.

That sort of experience gives me hope. In Seattle, Bill Knott, editor of the *Adventist Review*, said that our movement "is either about a conversation and a journey, or it has lost its way." Later, thanks to an article in his magazine, I reflected again on Ellen White's belief that Christian unity does not consist in unanimity concerning "every text of Scripture." Church resolutions to put down disagreement "cannot force the mind and will," cannot "conceal" or "quench" all difference of opinion. "Nothing can perfect unity in the church," she continued, "but the spirit of Christ-like forbearance" (*Manuscript Releases*, v. 11, 266; italics mine).

The Nicene Council tried in the fourth century to impose uniform belief on the faithful. Fifty years of acrimony, and even violence, followed. It was true then and is true now that Christ-like forbearance is the key to *koinonia*. Doctrinal uniformity is a chimera, and we will fail to actually be God's Remnant—a people who embody the mind of Christ—until we realize that this is so and, with due discernment, love, accept and employ one another anyway. ■

Charles Scriven chairs Adventist Forum.

...genuine
intellectual
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human limits
—allows that
we know,
in part, that
we hold our
treasure
in earthen
vessels.