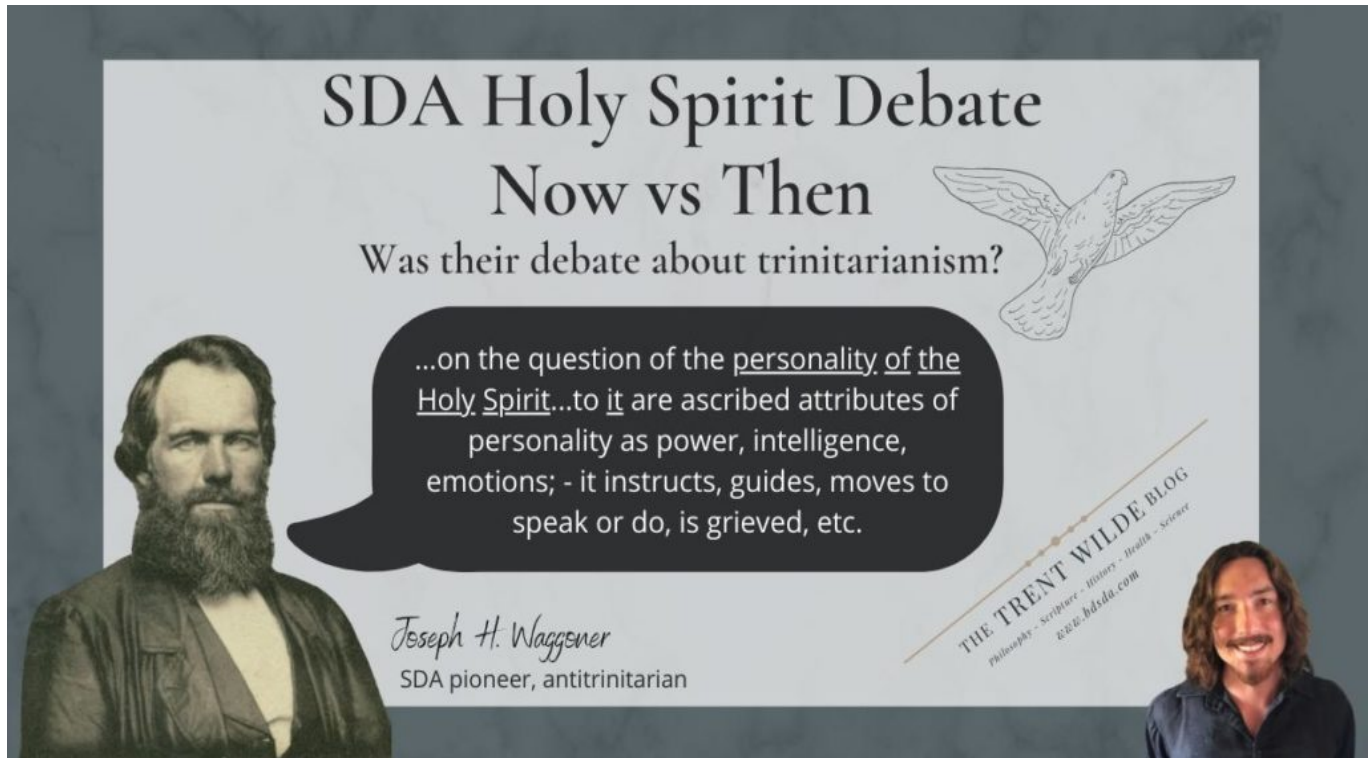


SDA Holy Spirit Debate Now vs Then 1

Description



In the last two posts, I explained 1st) [the early SDA doctrine of the personality of God](#) and 2nd) [Ellen White's teaching regarding whether or not the Holy Spirit is a person](#).

In this post (and probably for a few more), we'll be continuing with the same basic topic. More specifically, I want to explain some of the differences between the current discussion within the SDA church over whether the Holy Spirit is a person and the discussion regarding the same question among 19th-century Seventh-day Adventists.

The reason why I want to point out the differences between these two discussions is that one of the easiest mistakes to make when considering the past is to assume that *their* concerns *were* what *our* concerns *are*. In other words, we tend to interpret the past in light of our present context rather than taking the pains to understand the context of the period we're talking about.

It's certainly true that what people in the past said can be relevant, and even paramount, for current issues, but we need to be careful to not use someone's statements as if they were taking a certain position in our current discussion when their purpose in making the statement was to engage in a very different discussion. If we are to use what people said in the past responsibly, we

need to make sure we're understanding them in their own context. And to do that, we need to differentiate between the discussions we are having *now* and the discussions *they* were having *then*.

So, over the next several posts, we'll consider three major ways the 19th-century SDA discussion over the personhood of the Holy Spirit differs from the current SDA discussion about the same issue.

The first distinction, the one that's the focus of this episode, is that in the modern discussion, the question of whether or not the Holy Spirit is a person is conflated with the question of whether or not trinitarianism is true. This conflation exists to the extent that if someone affirms that the Holy Spirit is a person, it's considered a given that they're trinitarian. Likewise, if someone isn't trinitarian, it's considered a given that they deny the personhood of the Holy Spirit. In 19th-century Seventh-day Adventism, these things weren't "givens" and the personhood of the Holy Spirit was considered as a distinct question from trinitarianism. To early SDAs, anti-trinitarianism didn't necessarily entail denying that the Holy Spirit is a person. Likewise, affirming the personhood of the Holy Spirit didn't necessarily imply trinitarianism.

All modern SDAs, whether trinitarian or anti-trinitarian, acknowledge that early SDAs were not trinitarian. This is so obvious in early SDA literature that no one, to my knowledge, denies it. Yet, it's frequent to pay too little attention to exactly what their objections to trinitarianism were. In light of current debates, we might assume their major contention had to do with the Holy Spirit. Yet, it is remarkable how little they had to say one way or the other regarding whether the Holy Spirit is a person, especially in light of how much they wrote against trinitarianism!

They had several objections to trinitarian doctrine, but their greatest objection was to its portrayal of the nature of the Father and the Son and the relationship between them. We'll talk about this more in future episodes, but as an example of this objection, consider this statement by J. N. Andrews in his book [The Three Angels of Revelation 14:6-12, p. 54](#). For a little context, he's listing the false doctrines of Babylon and the second item on his list is the Trinity. He says,

"2. The doctrine of the Trinity which was established in the church by the council of Nice, A. D. 325. This doctrine destroys the personality of God, and his Son Jesus Christ our Lord."

Notice that in objecting to the Trinity, he doesn't say anything about the Holy Spirit. Instead, he says that trinitarianism destroys the personality of God and his Son Jesus Christ. Again, we'll talk about this more in future posts, but I also recommend going back a couple of posts to [What is the SDA Doctrine of the Personality of God?](#)

J.N. Andrew's statement is just one among many that express the heart of the early SDA objection to the doctrine of the Trinity. It had to do not so much with whether the Holy Spirit is a person, but with the Trinitarian idea of what a person is.

Now, let's get the nitty-gritty of how we can know early SDAs considered the question of whether the Holy Spirit is a person to be separate from the question of whether Trinitarianism is true.

One important factor is this: While all early SDAs were anti-trinitarian, some of them were quite open to the idea that the Holy Spirit is a person. This is a point worth repeating: We know for sure that some early SDAs were fine in principle with the idea that the Holy Spirit is a person even while being anti-trinitarian. Consider J.H. Waggoner: he was clearly anti-trinitarian, as is apparent throughout his writings. Just as one example, in his book [*The Atonement, the sixth chapter*](#) is all about how the doctrine of the Trinity is subversive of the atonement.

Yet, in his book *The Spirit of God*, near the beginning, he says this:

“There is one question, which has been much controverted in the theological world upon which we have never presumed to enter. It is that of the personality of the Spirit of God. Prevailing ideas of person are very diverse, often crude, and the word is differently understood; so that unity of opinion on this point cannot be expected until all shall be able to define precisely what they mean by the word, or until all shall agree upon one particular sense in which the word shall be used.” – [*The Spirit of God, page 8*](#)

This is quite a striking statement. We know from his other writings that Waggoner considered the question of trinitarianism to be settled; to him, it was clearly a false doctrine. Yet, the question of whether the Holy Spirit is a person wasn't settled in his mind and he said that SDAs hadn't presumed to enter upon that question. They certainly entered upon the question of trinitarianism and unitedly sided against it. But not so when it came to the personality of the Holy Spirit. This shows that they didn't conflate these questions, but regarded them as distinct. In their view, if the personality of the Holy Spirit was ever to be understood, it was essential to first establish what it even means to be a person. This approach wasn't theoretical either – it is exactly what the early SDAs did. Overall, they had very little to say about whether the Holy Spirit is a person, but a whole lot to say about what it means to be a person. As a body, they had no real burden to address the personality of the Holy Spirit, but they felt a heavy and sustained burden to make clear exactly what it means to be a person. And, to do that, they had to address the common theological notions of what personhood is; especially the trinitarian notions of personhood. So, they addressed trinitarianism with a special focus on how trinitarian doctrine portrayed what it means to be a person, but they didn't so much address the personality of the Holy Spirit. So, when it came to the doctrine of the trinity, they had a definite view and they entered upon the subject. When it came to whether the Holy Spirit is a person, they didn't have a definite view and they didn't enter upon that subject.

Yet, by the late 1870s, a little discussion had begun on whether the Holy Spirit is a person. In 1879, Waggoner wrote a letter to James White expressing that he leaned toward thinking that the Holy Spirit is a person – again, this is while being an anti-trinitarian. Here's what Waggoner said in his letter,

“But there is one query which will arise in my mind. It is on the question of the personality of the Holy Spirit. The more I think of it the more I am inclined to believe that the generally received view is correct. I will not stop to criticise the language of the Testament. We know that the word SPIRIT in Greek is in the neuter gender, and in

Hebrew, feminine. The Hebrew has no neuter gender. But it is generally conceded that the Authorized Version is correct in using masculine pronouns when referring to the Holy Spirit. Instance. John 14:16, 17, 26. We ordinarily use it instead of he – perhaps it is allowable. But, to it are ascribed attributes of personality, as power, intelligence, emotions;-it instructs, guides, moves to speak or do, is grieved, etc. But most of all, we are baptized into the name of the Holy Spirit.” – [J.H. Waggoner to James White July 28, 1879.](#) (underlining in original)

After this, he goes on to express his dissatisfaction with a couple of articles written by D. M. Canright a year before in which Canright argued that the Holy Spirit isn't a person. By the way, that is one of the few examples of an early SDA writing articles taking a definite position against the personhood of the Holy Spirit. Yet, Waggoner wasn't convinced and thought it more probable that the Holy Spirit actually is a person.

We'll have to wrap it up here for this post, but I'll summarize some of the main points. No early Seventh-day Adventist accepted the classical doctrine of the Trinity. Their primary objection to trinitarianism didn't relate to the personality of the Holy Spirit; instead, they objected to the trinitarian notion of what it means to be a person. While they freely and regularly spoke and wrote against trinitarianism, they barely even discussed the question of whether the Holy Spirit is a person. By the late 1870s, a few SDAs voiced opinions about whether the Holy Spirit is a person and some thought the answer was “no,” while others thought it was probably “yes.” There is no hint, however, that any of them thought answering “yes” was equivalent to accepting trinitarianism. Since the early SDA notion of personhood was worlds apart from the trinitarian notion of personhood, they didn't consider affirming the personality of the Holy Spirit to at all imply an affirmation of trinitarianism.

There's still more showing that they regarded the question of the personhood of the Holy Spirit to be distinct from the question of trinitarianism, but that'll have to wait till next time.