

What is Trinitarianism Anyway? – SDA Holy Spirit Debate Now vs Then 2

Description

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This is the second post of our series explaining the differences between the early-SDA and modern-SDA discussions over whether the Holy Spirit is a person ([read the first post here](#)). As a reminder, the first difference is that, in the modern-SDA discussion, both trinitarians and non-trinitarians commonly conflate the question of whether the Holy Spirit is a person with the question of whether trinitarianism is true; conversely, in the early-SDA discussion, people understood these questions to be distinct. More specifically, from the early-SDA perspective, rejecting trinitarianism didn't amount to rejecting the personhood of the Holy Spirit. Likewise, they didn't think that accepting the personhood of the Holy Spirit would amount to accepting trinitarianism.¹ If you'd like to see lots of evidence for this, I recommend reading [the introduction I've written to R. A. Underwood's series *The Holy Spirit A Person*](#).

From the modern-SDA perspective, this might seem just weird! But is it? In this post, we'll look at one reason why it actually isn't weird at all that the SDA pioneers distinguished between the question of trinitarianism and the question of whether the Holy Spirit is a person. In fact, they were right on target.

So, the first thing we need to address is what trinitarianism even is. People often assume that it's just belief in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As we'll see in [the next post](#), there have actually been many non-trinitarian theologies that maintain belief in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So that isn't anything distinctive of trinitarianism. What really constitutes the doctrine of the trinity is a collection of specific views regarding the **nature** of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and of the **relationship** between Them. These distinctive features of trinitarianism are perhaps most famously expressed in [the Athanasian Creed](#). Here's the most relevant portion:

...we worship one God in trinity and the trinity in unity,

neither blending their persons

nor dividing their essence.

For the person of the Father is a distinct person,

the person of the Son is another,

and that of the Holy Spirit still another.

*But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one,
Their glory equal, their majesty coeternal.*

*What quality the Father has, the Son has, and the Holy Spirit has.
The Father is uncreated,
the Son is uncreated,
the Holy Spirit is uncreated.*

*The Father is immeasurable,
the Son is immeasurable,
the Holy Spirit is immeasurable.*

*The Father is eternal,
the Son is eternal,
the Holy Spirit is eternal.*

*And yet they are not three eternal beings;
there is but one eternal being.*

*So too they are not three uncreated or immeasurable beings;
there is but one uncreated and immeasurable being.*

*Similarly, the Father is almighty,
the Son is almighty,
the Holy Spirit is almighty.*

*Yet there are not three almighty beings;
there is but one almighty being.*

Thus the Father is God,

the Son is God,

the Holy Spirit is God.

Yet there are not three gods;

there is but one God.

Thus the Father is Lord,

the Son is Lord,

the Holy Spirit is Lord.

Yet there are not three lords;

there is but one Lord.

....

Nothing in this trinity is before or after,

nothing is greater or smaller;

in their entirety the three persons

are coeternal and coequal with each other.

As you can see, this isn't just stating that there is a Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It goes far beyond this to state specific things about the **nature** of the Divine Persons, like that they are immeasurable, eternal, almighty, and uncreated. Furthermore, it states that each member of the Trinity is a *person*, but *not a being*, for there are not three beings – the Father one being, the Son another being, and Holy Spirit yet another being – no, it states repeatedly that They are *not three beings*; They are *only one being*.

As for the **relationship** between the Divine Persons, it states They are coequal and coeternal. No one of Them is greater or lesser than the others and no one of Them is before or after the others. And once again, while They are said to be Distinct Persons, they are also said to be one and the same being.

If you're having a hard time forming a coherent picture that comprehends all of these affirmations, welcome to the world of trinitarian theology! It's not supposed to be understandable; it's considered a divine mystery, lying ever beyond the realm of human comprehension. Yet, each aspect of trinitarian doctrine means something specific and plays a role in the system. And those who affirm it are supposed to do so with genuine belief in what it affirms. So, it simultaneously

demands the employment of reason and the suspension of reason. I'm explaining this right now in part to help you make sense of any feelings of bewilderment you may be having, but also to point out that without this bewildering combination of affirmations, you don't have trinitarianism. Again, trinitarianism isn't simply belief in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; it is this specific collection of views regarding Their **nature** and the **relationship** between Them.

To bring us a little closer in time to the early SDAs, let's quote another trinitarian creed. This is from [the Methodist Articles of Religion](#):

There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and good; the maker and preserver of all things, both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity – the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost.

Once again, the thrust of the doctrine isn't simply that there is a Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; rather, it's that these Three share a particular **nature** and **relationship**. Notice, it says that this Triune God is *without body and parts*; this seems to be a more explicit declaration of that part of the Athanasian Creed that says God is immeasurable. Most of the other elements can also be understood as a far more condensed way of expressing the same ideas found in the Athanasian Creed.

The SDA pioneers were familiar with all these aspects of trinitarianism and, when they addressed the doctrine and explained why they rejected it, they focused on these truly distinctive aspects. In other words, they rejected the trinitarian portrayal of the **nature** of Divine Persons and of the **relationship** between the Divine Persons. *This* is what they considered so objectionable about trinitarianism; not the idea that the Holy Spirit is a person.

In our next post, we'll consider several non-trinitarian theologies that affirm the personhood of the Holy Spirit. And, just to keep the point in focus, all of this is showing that the question of whether the Holy Spirit is a person has always been distinct from the question of whether trinitarianism is true. The real emphasis of trinitarian doctrine isn't even on whether the Holy Spirit is a person, and there have always been non-trinitarians who affirm the personhood of the Holy Spirit. So the pioneers weren't at all odd in distinguishing between these questions. Historically speaking, they simply *are* distinct. The real oddity is to conflate them.

As an off-topic note, I want to make you aware of a few recent publications:

One is to a new study by Sabbath School with Branch Davidians called *Is Jesus as Old as His Father?* ([Video](#) – [Podcast](#)). Which has obvious relevance to the topic of this post. And actually, their study just before that also relates to our subject. It's called *Was God Both On His Throne and Visiting Babel Simultaneously?* ([Video](#) – [Podcast](#)).

There's also an article [Teresa](#) wrote called [Should We Believe All That the Prophets Have Spoken?](#) It's a really important article, written primarily for Davidians, but of course, let all who have ears to hear, hear!

Lastly, there's [The Parable of The Two Schools](#). It's a parable similar to Jesus' parables from

2000 years ago, but this is from the most recent new moon. I hope you read it.

Make sure to check back soon for the next post! And as always, feel free to comment. ?

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