

Non-Trinitarians Who Say the Holy Spirit Is A Person

Description

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We're continuing our series that explores the differences between the early-SDA and modern-SDA discussions regarding whether or not the Holy Spirit is a person (see [part 1](#) and [part 2](#)). As a reminder, the first difference is that modern SDAs tend to think the personhood of the Holy Spirit is intrinsically tied to trinitarianism while early SDAs viewed these questions as distinct. In [the last post](#), we looked more closely at what trinitarianism actually is and found that it isn't simply "belief in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Instead, trinitarianism is a collection of specific views regarding the **nature of**, and **relationship between**, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. What we learn from this is that one could reject trinitarianism due to disagreeing with its distinctive features while also believing that the Holy Spirit is a person. It's certainly true that trinitarianism affirms that the Holy Spirit is a person, but this affirmation *isn't the emphasis of trinitarian doctrine, nor is it unique to trinitarian doctrine*. And this last point is what we'll be focusing on in this post. We'll take a brief look at non-trinitarian theologies that affirm that the Holy Spirit is a person.

I won't be explaining any of these non-trinitarian theologies in detail. That simply isn't the purpose of this post. My main goal is just to make you aware of the historical reality that the question of the personhood of the Holy Spirit has always been distinct from trinitarianism. The fact that there have been a number of non-trinitarian theologies that affirm that the Holy Spirit is a person makes this an unavoidable conclusion. And it shows that the early SDAs weren't at all strange for distinguishing between these questions and it thus also helps us to understand how some of them accepted the personhood of the Holy Spirit while remaining anti-trinitarian. All that said, if you want to learn more about any of the theological views I'm about to describe, just follow the hyperlinks.

Alright, first we have [Modalism](#), the most popular forms of which are [Sabellianism](#) and [Patripassianism](#). If you ask a modalist if they believe the Holy Spirit is a person, they'll say, "Yes, of course!" Yet, modalists aren't trinitarians. Trinitarians say the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are *one being*, yet *three persons*. Modalists say that They are *one being* and *one person*, yet operating in three different modes. Have you ever heard someone explain how God can be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and yet be but one God by saying something like, "I'm a son to my father, a father to my son, and a friend to my friend"? Yeah, that's a modalist explanation of the Godhead, not a trinitarian explanation. But again, the main point is that modalists affirm the personhood of the Holy Spirit while denying trinitarianism, which shows the two issues are distinct.

Next, we have [Christian Tritheism](#). This is the view that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three beings rather than one being – three Gods rather than one God. Notice that this is unlike trinitarianism in that trinitarianism regards the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three persons yet emphasizes that They are but one being and therefore one God. Again, tritheism affirms the personhood of the Holy Spirit, even regarding the Holy Spirit as a *distinct person*, and yet it isn't

trinitarian.

The next view is [Arianism](#), which is most well-known for its claims that Jesus is not coeternal with God the Father. In this view, the Father is the eternal God, Jesus is likewise divine but he came into existence at some point in the distant past and is subservient to the Father, but what is less known about Arianism is that it embraces the personhood of the Holy Spirit. It just regards the Spirit as a created being who is subservient to both the Father and the Son.¹ You can confirm this by searching “Holy Spirit” on the [Arianism wiki page](#).”

Lastly, there have been [Christians who regard the Holy Spirit as an angel](#). This view actually became popular in Islam where it is commonly thought that the Holy Spirit is Gabriel ([link](#)).

All of these views hold the Holy Spirit to be a person, which shows quite conclusively that the personhood of the Holy Spirit isn't at all distinctive to trinitarianism. In the writings of early SDAs, you can find references to all of these views I've mentioned,² You can verify this by searching the key terms in the writings of early SDAs at sites like [egwwritings.org](#) and [adventistarchives.org](#). which obviously means at least some early SDAs were familiar with them. And actually, it's probably the case that a lot of early SDAs had at least heard of these views since they were mentioned in the *Review and Herald* and other publications popular among early SDAs.

In light of this, it isn't at all surprising that early SDAs regarded the question of whether the Holy Spirit is a person as distinct from the question of whether trinitarianism is true. In order for trinitarianism to be true, its *distinctive claims* would have to be true, and the personhood of the Holy Spirit simply isn't among its *distinctive claims*. For someone to accept the personhood of the Holy Spirit wouldn't make them a trinitarian any more than it would make them a modalist, or a tritheist, or an arian, or any other brand of Christian who affirms the personhood of the Holy Spirit.

The fact of the matter is that early SDAs didn't adopt any of these views. [Their view of God was dominated by materialism. Their chief contention was that God and His Son are both material beings with real bodies that occupy time and space.](#) In their view, [this is what it meant to be a person](#). Whether or not the Holy Spirit is a person is something they had very little to say about. Eventually, when they did comment on it, some said the Holy Spirit isn't a person and some said the Holy Spirit is a person. None of them, however, thought accepting the personhood of the Holy Spirit would in any way imply that trinitarianism was true. They all agreed that trinitarianism is false because they rejected the truly distinctive features of trinitarianism such as its claim that the persons of the Godhead are one and the same being.

There's a lot more that can be said about this, but for now, I hope it's clear that, historically, the question of whether the Holy Spirit is a person has always been distinct from the question of whether trinitarianism is true. The early SDAs understood this distinction and we need to understand it as well if we're going to accurately comprehend the early SDA discussion regarding the personhood of the Holy Spirit.

For more on all of this, I recommend reading [the introduction I've written to The Holy Spirit a Person by R. A. Underwood](#).

As always, feel free to contact me by commenting here on the blog, on YouTube, or if you like, you can email me at pres@bdsda.com.

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