

Why Early SDAs Rejected Trinitarianism

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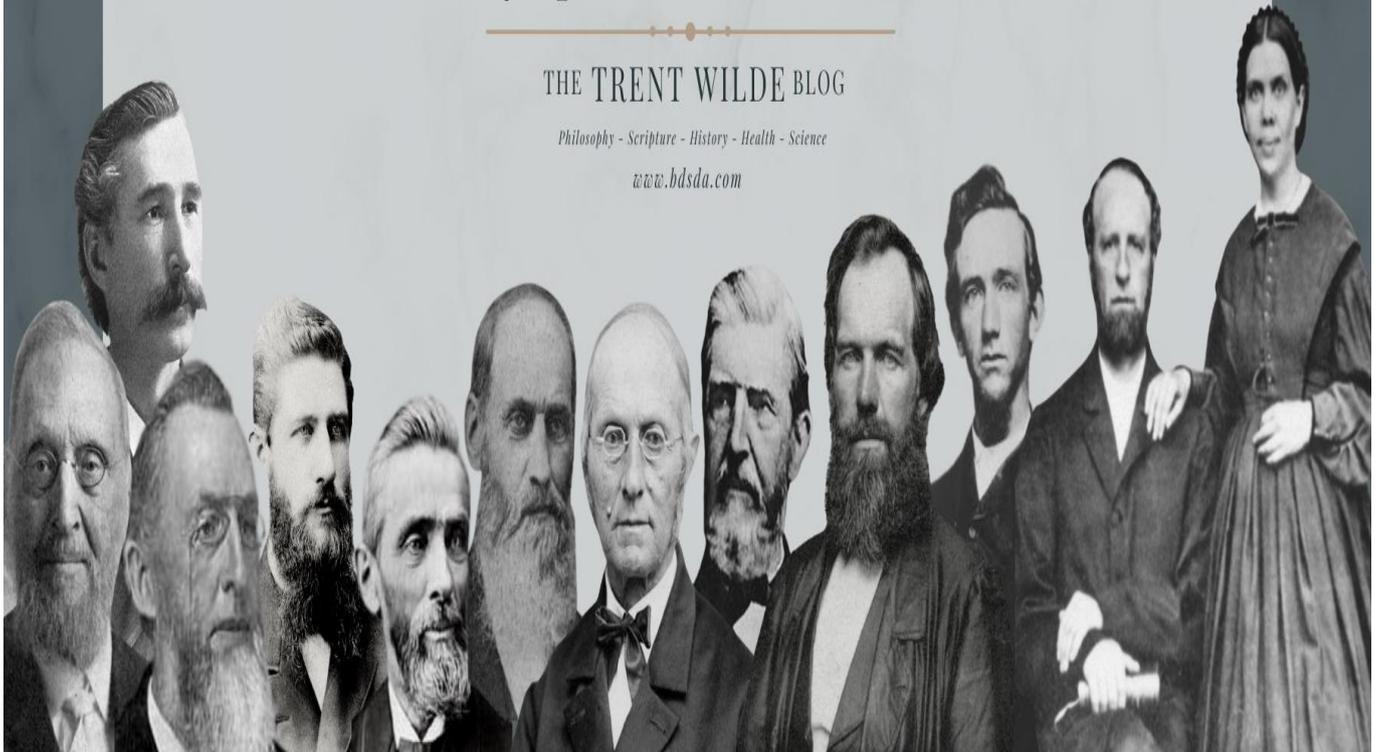
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SDA Holy Spirit Debate Now vs Then 4

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In the last two posts ([What is Trinitarianism Anyway?](#) and [Non-Trinitarians Who Say The Holy Spirit Is A Person](#)), we covered some important historical facts about what trinitarianism actually is and about how the personhood of the Holy Spirit isn't inherently connected to trinitarianism. Modalism, Christian Tritheism, Arianism, and Holy-Spirit-Is-An-Angelism are all examples of non-trinitarian theologies that affirm that the Holy Spirit is a person.

Early SDAs were aware of the fact that the personhood of the Holy Spirit has always been a distinct question from trinitarianism and so they dealt with each issue separately. They all rejected trinitarianism, but, for the most part, they *didn't reject* the personhood of the Holy Spirit. This doesn't mean most of them *accepted* the personhood of the Holy Spirit as we saw in [the first post of this series](#), they simply didn't address the question at least not for the first 30 years of Seventh-day Adventism. In the late 1870s, there is evidence of three early SDAs having opinions on whether the Holy Spirit is a person. Two said, "No;" one said, "Probably yes." See [my introduction to R. A. Underwood's series The Holy Spirit A Person](#). And, so far as we know, there's no evidence of more discussion on the question until the 1890s.

Let me summarize this point again since it's really important. When you read early-SDA writings, say from 1845 to 1885, there's an abundance of evidence that they rejected trinitarianism. Many SDAs wrote on the question and they expressed their view plainly. In contrast, during this same period, they wrote almost nothing on the personhood of the Holy Spirit. The most well-known statement on the subject was J. H. Waggoner's statement we read back in [the first post on this subject](#) where his point was actually that SDAs as a people hadn't engaged the question of whether the Holy Spirit is a person. This statement was originally published in [the Signs of the Times in 1875](#), and then published again in the same year [in the Review and Herald](#), and then it was published in 1877 in Waggoner's book [The Spirit of God](#). And there's evidence that, even years later, early SDAs could point to this statement as encapsulating the early SDA view. See [The Bible Echo And Signs of the Times, April 1, 1892, p. 112](#) In other words, the most widely published and endorsed statement by early SDAs regarding the personhood of the Holy Spirit was a statement straightforwardly saying that SDAs, by and large, didn't have a view on whether the Holy Spirit is a person! This shows conclusively that, in early Seventh-day Adventism, the question of trinitarianism was in one state; that is, it was settled early SDAs *unitedly rejected it*, while the question of whether the Holy Spirit is a person was in a wholly different state; it was not settled early SDAs had *no definite view on the subject*.

This should make it crystal clear that the reason why early SDAs rejected trinitarianism is **not** that they rejected the personhood of the Holy Spirit. That bears repeating: this makes it clear that the reason early SDAs rejected trinitarianism is **not** that they rejected the personhood of the Holy Spirit. That simply couldn't be the reason since, as a people, they didn't have a view as to whether the Holy Spirit is a person!

So, we now need to ask, why did they rejected trinitarianism? As we're about to see, they rejected it because they regarded as false the truly **distinctive** features of trinitarianism. In other words, they rejected the trinitarian claims regarding the **nature of**, and **relationship between**, the Divine Persons.

Consider this statement by Joseph Bates:

â??Respecting the trinity, I concluded that it was an impossibility 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. I said to my Father, â??If you can convince me that we are one in this sense, that you are my father, and I your son; and also that I am your father, and you my son, then I can believe the trinity.â?• [The Autobiography of Joseph Bates, p. 204](#)

As we saw [a couple posts back](#) when reading the Athanasian creed, Trinitarianism really does emphasize that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one and the same being. Joseph Bates, along with all other early SDAs we know about, rejected this idea. Early SDAs regarded *the Father* as the eternal God and Jesus as a *distinct being* from the Father who was begotten by the Father at some point ineffably far back in time. Some people mistook the early SDAs as teaching that Jesus was just a created being like the angels, but this wasnâ??t their view. Hereâ??s a Q&A on this very point from [the Review and Herald, April 17, 1883](#). The answer is written by W. H. Littlejohn and itâ??s illuminating regarding the reasons why early SDAs rejected trinitarianism:

â??Will you please favor me with those scriptures which plainly say that Christ is a created being? J. C.

ANS. You are mistaken in supposing that S. D. Adventists teach that Christ was ever created. They believe, on the contrary, that he was â??begottenâ?? of the Father, and that he can properly be called God and worshipped as such. They believe, also, that the worlds, and everything which is, was created by Christ in conjunction with the Father. They believe, however, that somewhere in the eternal ages of the past there was a point at which Christ came into existence. They think it is necessary that God should have antedated Christ in his being, in order that Christ could have been begotten of him, and sustain to him the relation of son. They hold to the distinct personality of the Father and Son, rejecting as absurd that feature of Trinitarianism that insists that God, and Christ, and the Holy Spirit are three persons, and yet but one person. S. D. Adventists hold that God and Christ are one in the sense that Christ prayed that his disciples might be one; i. e., one in spirit, purpose, and labor.â?•

First, did you notice that those last couple of sentences simply omit any explanation of what SDAs thought about the Holy Spirit? It relates what trinitarianism claims about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but then, when relating the SDA view, it just comments on the Father and Son without so much as even mentioning the Holy Spirit (not even to reject the personhood of the Holy Spirit)! While this may be surprising under the assumptions of the modern SDA debate regarding the trinity, it makes perfect sense in light of the fact that early SDAs just didnâ??t have a view one way or the other as to whether the Holy Spirit is a person. Clearly, the Holy Spirit just wasnâ??t their issue with trinitarianism. The statement specifies exactly what the issue was â?? the truly distinctive trinitarian claims about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit being three persons and yet but one person. Now, I should mention that trinitarians express things slightly differently â?? the trinitarian terminology is that God is **three persons** yet **one being**. But early SDAs universally rejected this distinction between **person** and **being**. To them, a **person** is (by definition) a **being** â?? a **material, corporeal being**. From this perspective, the trinitarian dogma is really speaking out of both sides of its mouth â?? on one hand, it says the divine persons are *distinct persons*, and

yet it undermines this very distinction by continually emphasizing they are *one and the same being*. Early SDAs criticized this by showing that, scripturally speaking, God and Christ are distinct persons, and they wrote a whole lot evidencing *what it means for them to be distinct persons* — again, it means they are *distinct material beings* — each a *purely material body with no non-physical element*. [Ellen White called this view of God and Christ a **pillar** doctrine of Seventh-day Adventism](#). If you aren't already familiar with this, I recommend checking out [our studies on the Personality of God](#).

From the early SDA perspective, trinitarianism was wrong because its **distinctive features** run contrary to the truth of the *personality of God and Christ*. There's plenty of evidence showing this, and I go through the evidence in a lot of detail in [my introduction to R. A. Underwood's series The Holy Spirit A Person](#), but for now, I'll leave you with this statement from J. N. Andrews from his study [The Three Angels of Revelation 14:6-12, p. 54](#). Here's what he says,

—The doctrine of the Trinity which was established in the church by the council of Nicea, A. D. 325. This doctrine destroys the personality of God, and his son Jesus Christ our Lord.—•

- 1
See [my introduction to R. A. Underwood's series The Holy Spirit A Person](#).
- 2
See [The Bible Echo And Signs of the Times, April 1, 1892, p. 112](#)