

Lesson 1

"The Godhead"

We commence a new cycle of thirteen lessons on the study of God. The "Godhead" is a Good News Bible teaching (Rom. 1:20, Col. 2:9). The 1888 message focuses our attention upon the one nature of the three persons of the Godhead as *agape* (1 John 4:8). The knowledge that we have of God is by His initiative of revelation. *Agape* is the source of faith which is given to every man (Gal. 5:6). So we have the capacity to know with the mind and believe with the heart there is one God composed of three beings (John 10:38).

If we trace God's *agape*-love back before time and creation, before God's desire to make humans in His image, there existed love within the family of the Godhead. The Father has always had a Son to love from eternity, and the Son has always expressed His love of the Father by choosing to subordinate Himself to the Father. The Holy Spirit loves the Father and the Son and likewise does the Father and the Son love the Holy Spirit.

We are to understand the divine family not from our understanding of family relationships where a son is generated by a father and mother and thus subordinate to the parents. Rather we are to understand the relationship of the three divine persons as revealed in Scripture. Three beings are equal in that they are co-eternal and each of them individually is the fullness of the Godhead (John 1:1-3). [1] But they are one God by virtue of their *agape*, which is expressed in a mutual subordination to one another. There is no independence or domination of one member over another, for such assertion of individuality over the others is not in Their nature.

Jesus taught His disciples the correct way to pray, "Our Father which art in heaven" (Matt. 6:9). He was a Comforter to His followers during His earthly ministry, and nearing His departure He promised to send them "another Comforter" to be with them (John 14:16). "Another" links the Holy Spirit with Himself. He has just told the disciples that He, Jesus, must "go" and leave them. So this new Comforter will be to them all that Jesus has been to them. Therefore they must not feel like "orphans." "I will come to you," He says (vs. 18). The Holy Spirit is not identical with Jesus for He is "Another"; they are two Persons of the Godhead--the Son and the Holy Spirit, but still they are One, for it is "I [who] will come to you" (John 14:16-18).

Millions of Muslims are prejudiced against Christianity because they think Christians believe in three gods because of the commonly understood doctrine of the "Trinity." Our

Lesson observes "the word *Trinity* doesn't appear in the Bible"; however, it goes on to insist that "the doctrine of the Trinity" is Scriptural. [2] The statement is made, "Today the church has taken a firm stand on the doctrine." [3] "The Trinity" has become official doctrine in the "Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists." [4] As "the trinity" is defined in "the fundamental beliefs" it reads: "There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three coeternal Persons." [5] The Lesson defines the Trinity as "God is One and composed of three "Persons. ..." [6]

The non-biblical term "trinity" introduces an element of confusion into the teaching of the Godhead. Ellen White never used the word and neither did the 1888 messengers Jones and Waggoner.

It is obvious that the church and its scholars desire to declare their agreement with "Christianity" on the doctrine of the trinity. It is apologetically stated by the Lesson that "some early Adventists struggled with the doctrine of the Trinity." [7]

We who believe "the most precious message" have no misgivings regarding the biblical teaching of the doctrine of the Godhead. It is the unbiblical dogma of the trinity that produces confusion. So what does the word trinity mean? Does it mean three persons in unity or three gods in unity? It turns out that it means both. The Catholic trinity teaches three gods yet one god.

We should be aware that the Roman Catholic Church claims ownership of the trinity. The trinity is the hub from which all the spokes of doctrine radiate outward. [8] The official Catholic catechism states, "the revealed truth of the Holy Trinity has been at the very root of the Church's living faith. ..." [9] This means that the Sunday-sabbath, the immortality of the soul, the atonement, the church, predestination and all the other doctrines are "spokes" of the trinity.

Seventh-day Adventists have believed ever since the 1840s, what Ellen White says. The sanctuary truth is "the central pillar that sustains the structure of our position" [10] She says further, "The correct understanding of the ministration in the heavenly sanctuary is the foundation of our faith" [11] ("our faith" being the unique teachings of Seventh-day Adventists that make us different from the Roman Catholic or Evangelical Protestant churches).

Just what do Roman Catholics teach about the Trinity? "The divine persons do not share the one divinity among themselves but each of them is God whole and entire. ..." [12] The dogma of the trinity is tritheism. [13] It is certainly not monotheism. The trinity is one of those doctrines that has come in from paganism and made orthodox "Christianity."

This "ineffable mystery" is "infinitely beyond all that we can humanly understand." [14] It is a monstrosity. The trinity is three gods and yet they are one God.

This being the case, then the Son of God could never die on the cross. If Christ died, God of necessity would cease to exist as "Christianity" knows it. The trinity is a triumvirate committee. If one of the committee members died He would cease to be God and the trinity would be "kaput." God would then become a duality--the Father and the Holy Spirit. God would not be in jeopardy because only the Son of God was at risk.

Hence, for Catholicism there is the necessity for the doctrine of the immortality of the soul which flows out of the doctrine of the trinity: Christ never died on the cross. The doctrine of the immortality of the soul undermines the atonement and the whole plan of salvation.

A believer may think of God the Father, Jesus the Word, and the Holy Spirit as compared to a tree: it is one tree, with the root hidden from sight, and the trunk revealing the presence of the root, and the branch bearing the fruit.

The one who believes the Holy Bible thinks of God as one, prays to God as one, and worships God as one. And he praises God for His love in revealing Himself to us and adopting us in Christ as His children, so that we are no longer "orphans," "aliens ... and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world" (John 14:18; Eph. 2:12).

--*Paul E. Penno*

Endnotes:

[1] Ellen White's statement is clear as sunlight: "The Father is all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, ... invisible to mortal sight. The Son is all the fullness of the Godhead manifested. ... 'the express image of His person.' ... The Comforter ... is the Spirit in all the fullness of the Godhead, making manifest the power of divine grace to all who receive and believe in Christ as a personal Saviour. There are three living persons of the heavenly trio; in the name of these three great powers--the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit--those who receive Christ by living faith are baptized, and these powers will co-operate with the obedient subjects of heaven in their efforts to live the new life in Christ" (*Special Testimonies*, Series B, No. 7, pp. 62, 63 (1905); *Evangelism*, pp. 614, 615).

[2] Joanne Davidson, *et. al.*, *Glimpses of Our God* (2012), p. 6.

[3] *Ibid*, p. 12.

[4] *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (2010), p. 156. The fundamental beliefs as voted in General Conference Session follow the practice of using biblical terms. However, the use of the word "trinity" is a departure from this rule.

[5] *Ibid*.

[6] *Glimpses*, p. 6.

[7] *Glimpses*, p. 12.

[8] "The dogma of the Trinity is the central dogma of Catholic faith." *The Teaching of Christ: A Catholic Catechism for Adults* (2005), p. 150. "The Trinity: An incomprehensible reality. The central doctrine of the Catholic faith is the mystery of the Holy Trinity" *The Catholic Way* (2001), p. 43.

[9] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (imprimatur Ratzinger, 1995), p. 74.

[10] Ellen G. White to Brother and Sister John J. Wessels, May 18, 1897 W-126, p. 4. 4MR 244.

[11] Ellen G. White to George C. Tenney, June 29, 1906 T-208, p. 2. 8MR 245, *Evangelism*, p. 221.

[12] "The divine unity is Triune." *Catechism*, pp. 75, 76.

[13] The dogma of the trinity opens the door for pantheism.

[14] *Ibid*, p. 74.