

SDA Introduction of the Trinity Doctrine

by Terry Hill

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The Introduction of the Trinity Doctrine into the Seventh-day Adventist Church

Section Three

James White and The Trinity

We have now come to the point in this presentation where we need to look at the beliefs and teachings of our pioneers regarding the trinity. We shall do this by looking at quotes from articles written by them and printed in our publications. These quotes are not for the purpose of defining a theological perspective but to determine the historical view of early Seventh-day Adventism regarding the trinity.

What better place to start than with that stalwart of Adventism, James Springer White (1821-1881).

James White was the fifth of nine children. He was born in Palmyra, Maine on August 4th 1821. For reason of poor health, he was prevented from attending school until he was 19 years of age. He then attended the academy at St. Albans and worked 18 hours a day for three months to gain a certificate to teach in the common branches of education. Following a short spell in teaching, he then attended another school for about four months which brought his formal 'schooling' to a close.

At 15 years of age, James White was baptised and became a member of a church called the Christian Connection. His late teens found him engrossed in education but through his mother, he came to a knowledge of the Advent message as preached by the Millerites.

Being impressed with their message, James White acquired the Millerite charts detailing the prophecies of the return of Jesus. This was then thought by the Millerites (Adventists) to be around 1843-1844. After borrowing a horse along with a patched up saddle and bridle, he began to preach the Advent message. It is said that through his preaching between 1842-1844, over 1000 people came to know about Christ. In 1843 he was ordained to the ministry of a movement called

'The Christian Connection'.

When Jesus did not return as expected, James White was amongst those who suffered the bitter disappointment, but he still believed in the Advent movement.

Prior to the 'great disappointment', James White met a girl called Ellen Harmon. During 1845 as their work for God brought them together, they became more acquainted. This began a relationship which led to them being married on 30th August 1846. Around the time of their marriage, they both became Sabbath keepers.

James White was a very hard worker but suffered with ill health. This did not stop him from becoming a pillar of the early church of Seventh-day Adventists. In a vision of November 1848, God told Ellen White that her husband should print a paper through which the beliefs of this small Sabbath keeping group could be published. This began a lifetime work of editorial work for James White.

Much more could be said about this great man and the tremendous work that he did in pioneering the Seventh-day Adventist Church to become a world wide movement. Nevertheless, we must move on to our objective.

Let's see now how James White viewed the trinity doctrine because he was after all, one of the founder members of the denomination as well as being the husband of God's messenger Ellen G. White.

As I have just said, James White had belonged to a church called 'The Christian Connection', so let me first tell you something about this church.

Many of its members had belonged to the other Christian denominations of that time. It was because of this that they held different beliefs. Nevertheless, one belief that the majority did hold in common was that the doctrine of the trinity should not be taught within their movement. This was because they believed that no support could be found for it within the scriptures, Thus, completely out of harmony with the orthodox churches of their time, they abandoned the 'trinity' teaching.

Many modern Seventh-day Adventist pro trinitarians have made the observation that the early Seventh-day Adventist Church was anti-trinitarian simply because a number of our prominent pioneers came from the Christian Connection.

Whilst this may be considered a valid observation, let me suggest that there is an alternative point of view, which I believe is just as valid and convincing.

That viewpoint is that God deliberately chose as the leaders of his remnant church, those who were non trinitarian. He did this obviously with the knowledge

that throughout their lives they would be printing anti trinitarian articles on behalf of His remnant church. That is quite a thought isn't it?

Now here is another interesting thought. Could it be also, that God led these same people into the Christian Connection to prepare them for leadership in His remnant church? That is something to think about isn't it? Whatever your view, the fact is that God chose non trinitarians to become co-leaders in His remnant church.

There is also the thought that even though God knew that James White was going to print anti trinitarian articles in our publications, He told Ellen White in vision that her husband should start to print a paper.

James White was firmly resolved in his non trinitarian belief when in the early part of 1845 he became acquainted with Ellen Harmon. A short while before this in Dec 1844, Ellen Harmon had been given her first vision which had marked her call to the prophetic office.

Now that lends itself to asking another intriguing question. If God wanted his people to believe and teach that He was a trinity of beings, then why did He lead His messenger, (assuming that He did), to marry such a devout non trinitarian? To have His prophet marry a devout anti trinitarian would be rather strange if all this time God wanted His people to believe that He was a trinity.

It is an undisputed fact that right through to his death in 1881, James White made numerous ant-trinitarian statements. Lets now take a look at some of those statements. Most of them I found in the Review and Herald but the first one we look at was in a letter that he had printed in 'The Day-Star' of January 24, 1846. He says:

"The way spiritualizers this way have disposed of or denied the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ is first using the old unscriptural trinitarian creed, viz (namely)., that Jesus Christ is the eternal God, though they have not one passage to support it, while we have plain scripture testimony in abundance that He is the Son of the eternal God."

Six years later in the Review & Herald of August 5, 1852, James White wrote an article in which he spoke out against the belief that Jesus and the apostles had changed God's law. In this article he said:

"To assert that the sayings of the Son and his apostles are the commandments of the Father, is as wide from the truth as the old trinitarian absurdity that Jesus Christ is the very and Eternal God."

Two years later in 1854 in the Review and Herald of September 12, James White said concerning Sunday:

"As fundamental errors, we might class with this counterfeit sabbath other errors which Protestants have brought away from the Catholic church, such as sprinkling for baptism, the trinity, the consciousness of the dead and eternal life in misery."

One year later in the Review and Herald of December 11, 1855 he says:

"Here we might mention the Trinity, which does away the personality of God ... "

The next year again in the Review and Herald of February 7th 1856, James White in speaking of the reformers said:

"The greatest fault we can find in the Reformation is, the Reformers stopped reforming. Had they gone on, and onward, till they had left the last vestige of Papacy behind, such as natural immortality, sprinkling, the trinity, and Sunday-keeping, the church would now be free from her unscriptural errors". (James White, February 7, 1856, Review & Herald, vol. 7, no. 19, page 148, par. 26).

The passing of time did not change the views of James White. Twelve years later in 1868, he wrote in 'Life incidents:'

"Jesus prayed that his disciples might be one as he was one with his Father. This prayer did not contemplate one disciple with twelve heads, but twelve disciples, made one in object and effort in the cause of their master. Neither are the Father and the Son parts of the "three-one God." They are two distinct beings, yet one in the design and accomplishment of redemption."

We can see here that James white does not value very much the three in one and the one in three teaching of the trinity. His views are self explanatory. Nine years later in the Review and Herald of November 29th 1877, James White in an article called 'Christ equal with God' said:

"The inexplicable Trinity that makes the Godhead three in one and one in three, is bad enough; but that ultra Unitarianism that makes Christ inferior to the Father is worse. Did God say to an inferior, 'Let us make man in our image...?'

"... The question of the trinity and the unity is not practical, and yet we call attention to it to guard the people against that terrible heresy that takes from our all conquering redeemer his divine power."

From this statement of 1877, we can see that whilst James White is still anti-trinitarian, he in no way sees the Son as being inferior to the Father. I will come back to that a little later.

Even in the year of his death, James White never changed his anti trinitarian stance. In the Review and Herald of January 4th 1881, he said:

" The Father is the greatest in that he is first. The Son is next in authority because He has been given all things."

So we can see that up to the year of his death, James White, the husband of Ellen White, was still a passionate anti trinitarian.

I want to return to James White but first let me tell you about a man by the name of Russell Holt. Like other people, as we shall see later, he did a survey on the introduction of the trinity teaching into the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This he did nearly 33 years ago in June 1969, as part of the requirements of his studies in Seventh-day Adventist history for Dr Mervin Maxwell. Russell Holt produced a term paper that had the title 'THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY IN THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST DENOMINATION: ITS REJECTION AND ACCEPTANCE.'

Now whilst the very title of this paper speaks volumes in itself, it is useful to remember that Russell Holt was all in favour of this change over to the trinity doctrine.

Summing up the views of James White on the trinity Russell Holt says:

"The evidence from his pen (meaning James White pen), seems to indicate, that from his first spiritual affiliations with The Christian Connexion, until his death at the age of 60, James White opposed the trinity, both on the basis of logic and scripture, while holding a definite concept of the exalted position and divinity of Jesus Christ."

Well, I do not know how it seemed to you, but those statements from James White that we have just read, seem to say a little bit more than 'indicate' that he opposed the trinity. The fact is that he totally and unequivocally rejected the doctrine of the trinity.

Right up to the time of his death he was a passionate anti-trinitarian, That really is something for us to consider, but for a moment, and I do believe that this is extremely important, lets take note of that last comment that Holt made about James White.

He said that James White, whilst he rejected the trinity, at the same time held a "definite concept of the exalted position and divinity of Jesus Christ."

Now that is very interesting because what usually happens is that immediately anyone says anything untoward about the trinity, the first reaction is to believe that there is an attempt to rob Jesus of His divinity. Remember that is how I said that I felt when I first picked up that leaflet at my local church that led me into these studies.

Look at this statement, made by James White in an article in which he compared Seventh-day Adventists with Seventh-day Baptists. This is in the Review and Herald of Oct 12 1876. the article is called "The two bodies - The Relation Which the S.D. Baptists and S.D. Adventists Sustain to Each Other," He says:

"The principle difference between the two bodies (meaning Seventh-day Adventists and Seventh-day Baptists), is the immortality question. The S.D. Adventists hold the divinity of Christ so nearly with the trinitarians that we apprehend no trial here."

Now I find that interesting. Here is a man who is very vocal in his rejection of the trinity teaching and yet at the same time says that he holds the divinity of Christ so near to how the trinitarians hold it, that on this score, he says, there is no problem.

So you see, the reason why Seventh-day Adventists were anti-trinitarian, was NOT in opposition of the high regard of Christ held by those who taught the trinity. That was not the problem. So do not let people mislead you on that one. We will see that again later when we talk about Ellet Waggoner.

In the first section of this presentation, I mentioned that there are a number of misleading statements that have been made by some who have also done a study on this particular subject. Now I am not saying that they have been made deliberately misleading, nevertheless, misleading is what I view them to be.

I found a number of these statements made by Erwin Gane. These were made in his masters thesis which today is published on a web site:

<http://www.sdanet.org/atissue/trinity/gane-thesis/index.htm>

It says on the site that this previously unpublished Masters Thesis was written in 1963 for the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary Andrews University.

Before retirement, Erwin Gane's last 9 years of service in the Seventh-day Adventist Church was at the General Conference as editor of the Adult Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly. Previous to this he taught religion classes at Avondale College in Australia, Union College, and Pacific Union Colleges in America.

The web site confirms that the doctrine of Trinity has only been a fundamental belief of the Seventh-day Adventist church since 1931 and that in its earliest years most church leaders were anti-trinitarian. It makes the claim as do most of the pro trinitarians, that it was Ellen White that led the church through a gradual process to the fully Trinitarian position which is held today.

In chapter two of his thesis found at:

<http://www.sdanet.org/atissue/trinity/gane-thesis/e-gane02.htm>

there is a subheading which says 'James White an enigma', meaning of course, a puzzle. He says:

"Since White came out of the Christian Connection, one would expect to discover that he was, at least, early in his career, opposed to Trinitarianism. But the evidence is not readily forthcoming, and what is available is inconclusive."

Now I do not wish to be disrespectful, but I find it difficult to understand just how Erwin Gane in writing a masters thesis, ever comes to this conclusion about James White. We have just read statement after statement of documented evidence where James White repeatedly declares himself to be anti-trinitarian. So why does Erwin Gane say that the evidence available is inconclusive, not enough even to prove that he was anti-trinitarian in his early days when he came out of the Christian Connection?

Was Erwin Gane unaware of these statements? Certainly, if one is aware of these quotations, then it would not be possible to draw the conclusions that Erwin Gane leads his readers to believe.

Well, only Erwin Gane can answer these questions. We can only conjecture. Suffice to say that James White did make all these anti-trinitarian statements. The proof of that is of course is that anyone can read them for themselves as you and I have done.

The only thing that I can do here is to say that perhaps Erwin Gane was not aware of these anti-trinitarian remarks made by James White.

Erwin Gane then refers to an article by A. J. Dennis, strongly opposing the trinity teaching. This article was printed in the Signs of the Times on May 22nd 1879 while James White was editor. Erwin Gane says:

"It would be easy to conclude that White concurred with the position quoted in the article, since he was the editor and there is no indication that he as editor might have held another view. But, James White was a Christian gentleman, and possibly he published a view with which he could not agree simply as a gesture of Christian courtesy."

Now in the light of all that we have read as to how James White regarded the trinity, it would go beyond the bounds of credibility to believe that he published this anti trinitarian article only on the grounds that he was a Christian gentleman.

James White, as we have seen, was an avid and vehement anti-trinitarian and remained that way up until the day that he died. Repeatedly he spoke out against the trinity doctrine. In fact as Russell Holt quite rightly says in his term paper, James White was an anti-trinitarian to the day that he died. To suggest that James White was in disagreement with this anti-trinitarian article, and only printed it out of Christian courtesy, is not supported by the facts.

In fairness to Erwin Gane, he does say in the next paragraph that there were as he puts it 'indications' that James White was not trinitarian but the reasoning he gives is very obscure. You would never come to the conclusion that James White was an anti trinitarian on the basis of the evidence that Erwin Gane produced.

Some may ask if that is what he is trying to achieve? Well, all that I can say is that Erwin Gane does not quote any of those anti-trinitarian statements that I have just shared with you. Why, I do not know.

Let me just quote the last paragraph of Chapter two of Erwin Gane's thesis. He says:

"There is in the James White Memorial Library at Andrews university, a thesis which states that A. T. Robinson, declared in an interview that James White was not a trinitarian". Gane then says that Robinson had been 'acquainted' with the Whites but then adds "This type of evidence based on the testimony of an old man is hardly to be regarded as satisfactory."

So Erwin Gane is still trying to downplay the fact that James White was an anti-trinitarian and to do this he says that we are not trust this type of witness as A. T. Robinson. What does Gane mean by "this type of witness?"

Erwin Gane says that Asa Robinson was 'acquainted' with the Whites. Lets look at the facts for a moment and see if we can find a reason why the personal witness of the 'old man' Asa Robinson should not be trusted.

Contained within the Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopaedia, there is devoted half a page to A. T. Robinson, describing his life and pioneering work in our denomination. Now obviously I cannot tell you everything that is said in the article, suffice to say that at the age of 20 in 1870 he became a Sabbath keeper and later married Loretta Farnsworth, a daughter of William Farnsworth who was a Sabbath pioneer. After being a colporteur, Robinson was invited by S. N. Haskell to enter city mission work. In 1886 Robinson was ordained and the next year chosen as president of the New England conference. In 1891 he went to South Africa and organised the first conference. Under his guidance and care, the work grew rapidly. Rapid advances were made in Africa and a sanitarium and a college was founded under his supervision.

From 1898 Robinson and his wife spent 6 years in various conferences in Australia before returning to America. After this he spent the next 18 years as conference president in Nebraska, Colorado and Southern New England. At the age of 71 he was appointed chaplain of the New England Sanitarium, whilst his wife served as Bible instructor to the patients. Robinson retired at 80 years of age and lived near Pacific Union College until the death of his wife in 1933. After that he lived with his daughter until the day that he died at the age of 99. At the age of 95, he preached his last sermon called 'The Blessed Hope' in the college church.

Quite a man, Asa Robinson.

What is interesting is what I have not yet told you, but you have probably already guessed anyway. Asa Robinson and his wife, because of their level of involvement in the church, were both very good friends with James and Ellen White. Robinson met the Whites in 1850 meaning that he knew James White for 31 years before James White died. They were all very close friends. The Robinson's had a son called Dores who married Ellen Whites granddaughter, Ella, whom he had met in Australia. Dores Robinson was a secretary, compiler and editor who worked for Ellen White until she died in 1915. Asa Robinson also worked very closely with Ellen White until the day that she died. She mentioned him frequently in her writings. In the Review and Herald of 28th October 1884, she said:

"Here was Eld. Cottrell, whom we have known for thirty years; Eld. Taylor, for more than twenty-five years; Bro. Robinson, for thirty-five years. My heart was touched as I looked upon these brethren who had long stood in defense of the faith."

As you can see there was a great deal of involvement of the Robinson family with the Whites.

Now, what was it that Erwin Gane said about Robinson? That he was 'acquainted with the Whites'. Some acquaintance, well over 30 years.

Well. I do not know how you see it, but I do not see it the way of Erwin Gane. In the light of the evidence available, to say that Robinson was just 'acquainted' with James White must be considered misleading. If anyone knew what James White believed it was Asa Robinson.

The other side of the coin is that to say that you cannot trust the witness of an 'old man' as Erwin Gane puts it, is not really the best way to speak of someone, whatever is meant by the statement. Anyway, what greater witness is there than a personal witness, particularly of one who did such a great pioneering work for the church and knew James and Ellen White so well.

In his masters thesis, Erwin Gane would have us believe that there is no real proof that James White was an anti-trinitarian but all the evidence says exactly the opposite. Whilst Erwin Gane produced his masters thesis some 39 years ago and maybe could claim ignorance of James Whites anti-trinitarian stance, I do not think that could be claimed today. I believe that it is very unfortunate that this once unpublished thesis, with its very misleading statements, is now published on a web site so that everyone in the world can see it.

I can well understand that to present James White as the solid anti-trinitarian that he was and then claim as he does in the same thesis that it was His 'prophet' wife Ellen that led the church to being trinitarian is obviously in itself a problem. The two do not go together. After all, why should Ellen White, being a prophet of God, live all this time with an anti-trinitarian husband who prints anti-trinitarian articles to the day that he dies and yet never tell him that he is wrong on doing it.

Now lets think about this situation with James White for a moment. Russell Holt says in his paper "surely Ellen White was aware of her husbands anti-trinitarian views". Well, all that I can say is I would hope so because by the time of James White death in 1881, she had been married to him for 35 years.

Now you would think wouldn't you that in all this time, if Ellen White, who was an 'inspired messenger' of God, thought that her husband had been taking a wrong stand as being anti-trinitarian, then in 35 years she would have said something to him, but the record is silent. As far as I know, there is not one single place that can be found where it says that Ellen White told her husband. or anyone else for that matter, that they were wrong in this matter of being anti-trinitarian.

It must also be remembered here, as Russell Holt says, that James White was far from being on his own in taking this anti trinitarian stand, neither was he on his own in writing and publishing anti trinitarian statements in the literature that came off the presses of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

May I ask you to consider this for a moment because I can only present the facts as I see them. Ellen White was a 'prophet of God', or to use her terminology, a 'messenger' of God. She was the lady to whom James White was married for 35 years. He ate with her, slept with her, preached with her, prayed with her, had children by her, travelled thousands and thousand of miles with her, preaching here and preaching there, building up churches together, and yet, never once did she say to him "James, you are wrong in what you are saying about the trinity doctrine". Not once in 35 years is there any record that she anything about his anti-trinitarian views and neither is there any record of her saying anything to anyone else.

Now, if you know anything at all about Ellen White, you know that she could not keep silent when error was being taught. Listen to what she said In a General Conference bulletin of December 31st 1903, Ellen White said:

"In New Hampshire there were those who were active in disseminating false ideas in regard to God. Light was given me that these men were making the truth of no effect by their ideas, some of which led to free-lovism. I was shown that these men were seducing souls by presenting speculative theories regarding God. I went to the place where they were working, and opened before them what they were doing."

She did exactly the same with John Harvey Kellogg. When he started to teach a wrong view of the nature of God she totally condemned what he was teaching as being heresy, in fact she called it the alpha of heresies.

Now what does it tell us that in 70 years of her husband and all the other leaders and pioneers of the church, all publishing anti-trinitarian materials and she never once said that they were wrong? It must tell us something.

In his term paper, Russell Holt makes this observation about the views of other Adventist writers at the time of James White.

"A survey of other Adventist writers during these years reveals, that to a man, **they rejected the trinity, yet, with equal unanimity they upheld the divinity of Christ. To reject the trinity is not necessarily to strip the Saviour of His divinity.** Indeed, certain Adventist writers felt that it was the trinitarians who filled the role of degrading Christ's divine nature."

Russell Holt's observations are completely in line with all the facts as I have found in my three years of studies. First of all, I have not found any Seventh-day Adventist, up to the time of the death of Ellen White in 1915 or in the years immediately following her death, that claimed to be a trinitarian. Now please don't get me wrong. I am not saying that during this time there were no trinitarians in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. What I am saying is that I have not come across any.

For this reason, it is obvious that I cannot quote anyone up to this time at least, as having made any pro-trinitarian statements. That is the simple fact of the matter and I cannot go any further. If I could find some trinitarians, who made pro-trinitarian statements, then I would quote them and I am sure also that other people would have done so also if they had found them.

Secondly, it is also true, that **the pioneer writers did hold to the full divinity of Jesus and yet, none of them were trinitarians.** It is as Russell Holt says, certain Adventist writers felt that it was the trinitarians that were stripping Jesus of His divinity. So we must not think that these anti-trinitarians were robbing Jesus of something that truly was His, because the reality is, they were exalting Him.

I said that I would come back to that statement of James White in the Review and Herald in 1877 when he said:

"The inexplicable Trinity that makes the Godhead three in one and one in three, is bad enough; but that ultra Unitarianism that makes Christ inferior to the Father is worse. Did God say to an inferior, "Let us make man in our image?"

So you see that James White says even as an anti-trinitarian, that Christ was not inferior to the Father, therefore James White must have considered Christ equal with the Father. Notice though, that James White in the year of his death maintained that there is a difference between the Father and the Son. He said:

"The Father is the greatest in that he is first. The Son is next in authority because He has been given all things."

Like the other pioneers, James White believed that the Son was begotten of the Father and that the difference between the two is time and not quality of being. James White was an anti-trinitarian but he did not see the Son as being a lesser being than God. All the pioneers believed that Christ was the Son of the Eternal God.

Was James White an enigma as Erwin Gane suggests? The facts say that James White was an anti trinitarian to the day that he died and yet upheld the divinity of Christ with the same regard as trinitarians. There is no puzzle here.

Now I want to remind you of the article written by George Knight in the Ministry magazine of October 1993. The very first words of the article say and I quote:

'MOST of the founders of Seventh-day Adventism would not be able to join the church today if they had to subscribe to the denomination's Fundamental Beliefs. More specifically, most would not be able to agree to belief Number 2, which deals with the doctrine of the Trinity. End of quote.

Now did you notice that George Knight in his article, says that **MOST** of the founders of Seventh-day Adventism, would not be able to join the church today because of our trinitarian belief? **He does not say ALL of the founders.** Now I do not know from where George Knight acquires his information because as I said, I cannot find anyone who was a trinitarian in the early church, especially amongst the pioneers.

That is exactly what Russell Holt says in his term paper. He says that '**to a man they rejected the trinity**'. So, as George Knight does not specify from where he is getting his information and because he does not quote anyone who during this time was a trinitarian, then I must at the moment, regard his statement as being suspect, at least, until I can prove otherwise. That is the best that I can say on that one.

As we come to the end of this third section which concerns the views of James White on the trinity, I believe that what has been presented has been enough to show that James White was an anti trinitarian until the day that he died and yet never regarded Christ as an inferior person to God.

The next section of this presentation will cover the views of a number of the other pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

As a matter of interest, I found the history of the 'Christian Connection' movement somewhat 'sketchy' and difficult to find. If you would like to read a little bit more about this movement and its relationship to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, then I suggest that you look at two documents written by Bert Haloviak of SDA archives and statistics that I found at:

http://www.adventistarchives.org/doc_info.asp?DocID=46

http://www.adventistarchives.org/doc_info.asp?DocID=43

Be very patient as you download any documents from this site, especially files of a large size.

If you would like to comment on what you have just read, then here are a number of email addresses to which you can reply.

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Terry Hill

Bristol England