

## **A Comparative Study of the Roman Catholic and Seventh-day Adventist Churches Doctrine of the Trinity: Implications for the Anti-Trinitarian Views with Adventism**

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### **Abstract**

In recent years the question of the Trinity has been of important interest within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Many have disputed the current Trinitarian position of the Church. Therefore, many Adventists are calling for a rejection of the Trinity because of an alleged idea that the current Adventist position on the subject of the Trinity is coming from the Roman Catholic Church. However, a comparative and contrasting study between the Roman Catholic Church and the Seventh-day Adventist Church's statement of belief in the Trinity shows that the Adventist statement is different from the Catholic view. Therefore, the two theologies of the Trinity differ from one another. Even though the two denominations agree on the importance of the concept of the Trinity in their theology, they differ in their understanding of the major aspects of the three persons of the Trinity.

**Keywords:** Trinity, God, Doctrine, Anti-Trinitarians.

### **Introduction**

There has been an increasing interest in the doctrine of God, with a significant emphasis on the doctrine of the Trinity in recent years. Consequently, the doctrine of the Trinity has been disputed even among theologians. As Volf put in the title of his paper, "*The Trinity is Our Social Program: The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement*,"<sup>1</sup> many scholars seemed to have found in the doctrine of the Trinity not only a doctrine of faith that can shape society—one's life may be fashioned on how one understands who God is; but also, the foundation of Christian

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<sup>1</sup> Miroslav Volf, "The Trinity is Our Social Program: The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement," *Modern Theology* 14 (1998): 403-23.

theology. Erickson says, “the doctrine of the Trinity is crucial for Christianity.” He adds, “it is concerned with who God is, what he is like, how he works, and how he is to be approached.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, the doctrine of the Trinity is perceived by many as either wrong and questionable or as an assertive orthodoxy for the Church.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, there are those in favor of the Trinity—Trinitarians, and on the other hand, there are those who are against this doctrine—Anti-Trinitarians.

From another angle, it is commonly accepted among Church historians that the Trinity concept was among the first major theological issues addressed by the Church in its early history.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the Church—Roman Catholics Church, settled and established the doctrine of the Trinity in the fourth century, during the First Council of Nicaea (325) and later in the Council of Constantinople (381). This doctrine is accepted among Protestants and Evangelicals who have upheld the doctrine of the Trinity. Nevertheless, this doctrine does not have unanimous recognition within various denominations, even among Protestants and Evangelicals. It is widely disputed and has provoked discussions. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is not spared from this debate. Many Adventists today see the current Trinitarian position of the Adventist Church as a doctrinal problem. They see the Seventh-day Adventist Church embracing the Trinity, which is, in their views, grounded not only in Eastern Orthodoxy but also in Roman Catholicism.<sup>5</sup>

The doctrine of the Trinity has raised polemics within Protestant and Evangelical Churches. Even among Adventists, the doctrine of the Trinity has generated many debates. While some state that the evidence of Adventist history suggests that the pioneers were

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<sup>2</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 292.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *God in the Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Woodrow Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John W. Reeve, *The Trinity: Understanding God's Love, His Plan of Salvation, and Christian Relationships* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Ass., 2002) 10.

anti-trinitarian, others indicate that the current trinitarian position of the Church was a betrayal of the pioneer's faith.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, there is a claim that this doctrine is the heritage of the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore, it must be false and abandoned by the Adventist Church. Consequently, many people argued against what they see as the *Catholic dogma of the Trinity* and called for a new consideration of the Semi-Arian position of the Adventist pioneers.

This notwithstanding, Burt states that "many have not realized that the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity has differences from the Seventh-day Adventist biblical doctrine of the Trinity."<sup>7</sup> If this assertion is correct, then the Adventist biblical doctrine of the Trinity cannot be taken as the heritage of the Roman Catholic Church. But, for the sake of arguments, the precedent affirmation made by Burt raises some vital questions that need honest answers: what is the Catholic Church's statement on the Trinity? What is the Seventh-day Adventist statement on the Trinity? Are there similarities and differences between the two views? Is the anti-trinitarian affirmation that the current Adventist belief in the Trinity is the heritage of the Catholic Church, right?

Upon the statement of the problem, the purpose of this study is to critically analyze the doctrinal statement of the Trinity as expressed by the Roman Catholic Church and the Seventh-day Adventist Church today. The meticulous analysis of the two views will provide the similarities and differences between the two statements and their theology. Ultimately, this work gives the implication from the comparative study of the two views for the contemporary challenges raised by the anti-trinitarian arising within Adventism.

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<sup>6</sup> See Fred Allaback, *No New Leaders . . . No New Gods!* (Creal Springs: Fred Allaback, 1995); Lynnford Beachy, *Did They Believe in the Trinity* (1996); Rachel Cory-Kuehl, *The Persons of God* (Albuquerque: Aggelia, 1996); Allen Stump, *The Foundation of Our Faith* (Welch: Smyrna Gospel Ministries, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Merlin D. Burt, "The Trinity in the Seventh-day Adventist History," *Ministry Magazine* (February 2009), 5. See also Merlin D. Burt, "History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on the Trinity," in *Journal of Adventist Theological Society*, 17, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 125-139.

This study will use a descriptive and analytical comparative method. It will investigate meticulously and examine the Catholic view of the Trinity and the Adventist view. To achieve the purpose of this work, the paper is to introduce a concise historical development of the concept of the Trinity in the Roman Catholic Church and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Secondly, the article will systematically analyze the current statement of the Trinity of the two denominations. Thirdly, the study will compare and contrast the two opinions, emphasizing their theology reflected in their recent statements on the Trinity. Finally, the work will give the various implications of the Trinity based on the comparative study of the two denominational trinitarian views for the contemporary challenges raised by the anti-trinitarian occurring within Adventism.

### **A Brief Historical Development of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Roman Catholic Church**

During the period of the apostolic Church, believers were monotheists. The Apostolic Fathers such as Barnabas, Hermas, Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, and Papias wrote to express their view on the doctrine of God.<sup>8</sup> The Church during its early post-apostolic period was immensely reflecting on Christ. There is enough evidence that Christians in the post-apostolic period believed in the pre-existence of Christ and His implication in the creation and the plan of salvation.<sup>9</sup> At the end of the second century, through the writings of Irenaeus and Tertullian, the idea of the pre-existence of Christ as a distinct person to the Father was established.<sup>10</sup> In the third century, significant discussion arose on the nature of Son—*Adoptionism* and *Monarchianism*. Tertullian, in this context, seems to have been the first to apply the term *Trinity* (from the Latin *Trinitas*) to God in his writing against *Praxeus* in

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<sup>8</sup> Samuel Macauley Jackson ed., “Apostolic Fathers,” in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Barker, 1960), 1:248.

<sup>9</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *God in The Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of The Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 42.

<sup>10</sup> Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma* (New York: Dover, 1961), 1:191.

response to the Monarchian heresy.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, in an attempt to preserve monotheism and the full deity of Christ, Modalism emerged and concluded that there was no distinct personal being or substance within God. Consequently, modalists such as Sabellius and Noetus saw the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as a designation of God revealing Himself in different modes, offices, or operations—one person with other names.<sup>12</sup>

The Arian dispute marks the fourth century. For Arius, God was “the unoriginated source of all reality,” and His essence “cannot be shared or communicated.” Arius argued that the Son was a created being and could not be God. He insisted that there was a time when Christ came into existence.<sup>13</sup> But Athanasius denounced Arianism vividly as a heresy.<sup>14</sup> This controversial position of Arius led to the Nicene reaction to Arianism in 325.

Consequently, the Nicene Council focused on the Arian claim that Jesus was not fully God. During the panel, after a long debate, a statement was formulated and approved on June 19, 325. It was signed by all present bishops except two who refused to sign.<sup>15</sup> The Creed, once developed, stated:

We believe in One God, Father, Almighty, the Maker  
of all things visible and invisible. And in One Lord  
Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father,  
Only-begotten, that is from the substance of the Father;  
God from God, Light from Light, true God from true  
God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father  
whom all things were made, both things in heaven and  
things on earth; who for us men and for our salvation  
came down and was incarnate, was made man,

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<sup>11</sup> See René Braun, *Deus Christianorum : Recherches sur le vocablaire doctrinal de Tertulian*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1977).

<sup>12</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 358.

<sup>13</sup> Linwood Urban, *A Short History of Christian Thought*, rev. and exp. edition (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 63.

<sup>14</sup> Michael C. Thomsett, *Heresy in the Roman Catholic Church: A History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011), 35.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

suffered, and rose again the third day, ascended into heaven, and is coming to judge the living and dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.

And those who say ‘There once was when He was not’ and ‘Before being begotten He was not,’ and ‘He came into being out of nothing,’ or those who pretend that the Son of God is ‘from another hypostasis or substance’, or ‘created,’ or ‘alterable’, or ‘mutable’, the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes.<sup>16</sup>

This statement recognized that the Son was of the same “substance as the Father,” therefore, He is God—“True God from God.” The Council of the Church Fathers not only confirmed Alexander’s position that the Son is distinct from the Father’s being but also condemned the principal argument of Arius in the Appendix of the Creed. A brief mention of the Holy Spirit was made in the Nicene Creed. This brief statement fed the theological debate for the following years on the nature of the Holy Spirit.

In the previous centuries, the discussions were focused on the Father and the Son, but the interrogations on the Holy Spirit had never been brought into the disputes. Nonetheless, in the fourth century, the discussion focused on the nature of the Holy Spirit. In the third century already, Tertullian had defined the Holy Spirit as the *Spiritus Sanctus* and *persona* and gave him the title of *deus* and *dominus*.<sup>17</sup> For Tertullian, there is a distinction between the member of the Trinity and not division. Therefore, the Father, Son, and Spirit are one identical substance.<sup>18</sup>

The Council of Constantinople in 381 among other issues related to leadership in the Church addressed the problem raised on the nature of the Holy Spirit. After theological debates, a Creed was formulated and adopted. It read:

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<sup>16</sup> Franz Dunzl, *A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church* (Maiden Lane, NY: T&T Clark, 2007), 56.

<sup>17</sup> Franz Dunzl, *A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church* (Maiden Lane, NY: T&T Clark, 2007), 118.

<sup>18</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 358.

We believe in one God, Father, Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, only-begotten from the Father before all ages; Light from Light, true God from true God; begotten, not made, consubstantial with the the Father by whom all things were made. Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and was made man; was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; and suffered, and was buried; and the third day rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father and will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead; whose kingdom will have no end. And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father who together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified; who spoke through the prophets. In one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church confess one baptism for the remission of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the coming age. Amen. <sup>19</sup>

The Constantinople creed emphasized the deity of the Father and the Son and the deity of the Holy Spirit. The Son is begotten from the Father and “true God from true God.” Moreover, the divine nature of the Holy Spirit is defined as “Lord.” The Creed states that the Holy Spirit is in the exact nature of the Father and Son, as He is worshiped and glorified as the Father and the Son.

Altogether, the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity within the Roman Catholic Church emerged essentially based on controversial issues that arose from the Church. All of the theological disputes were primarily the result of movements such as Monarchianism, Modalism, and Arianism that led to the formation of the Trinity Creed in the Council of Nicene and later in the Council of

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<sup>19</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 124-125.

Constantinople, where a definite statement was approved in 381. Today the official statement of the Trinity from the Roman Catholic Church reads as follows in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

*The Trinity is One.* We do not confess three Gods, but one God in three persons, the ‘consubstantial Trinity.’

The divine persons do not share the one divinity among themselves, but each of them is God whole and entire: ‘The Father is that which the Son is, the Son that which the Father is, the Father and the Son that which the Holy Spirit is, i.e., by nature one God.’ In the words of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215): ‘Each of the persons is that supreme reality, viz., the divine substance, essence or nature.’

*The divine persons are really distinct from one another.*

‘God is one but not solitary.’ ‘Father,’ ‘Son,’ ‘Holy Spirit’ are not simply names designating modalities of the divine being, for they are really distinct from one another: ‘He is not the Father who is the Son, nor is the Son He who is the Father, nor is the Holy Spirit He who is the Father or the Son.’ They are distinct from one another in their relation to origin: ‘It is the Father who generates, the Son who is begotten, and the Holy Spirit who proceeds.’ The divine unity is Triune.

*The divine persons are related to one another.* Because the divine unity does not divide, the real distinction among persons resides solely in the relationships which relate them to one another: ‘In the relational names of the persons, the Father is related to the Son, the Son to the Father and the Holy Spirit to both. While they are called three persons given their relationship, we believe in one nature or substance. Indeed ‘everything (in them) is one where there is no opposition of relationship.’ ‘Because of that unity the Father is wholly in the Son and wholly in the Holy Spirit; the Son is wholly in the Father and wholly in the Holy



Spirit; the Holy Spirit is wholly in the Father and  
wholly in the Son.’<sup>20</sup>

### **A Brief Historical Development of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church**

In the 1800s, Christianity in America was caught by the apostolic doctrine of Christ’s second coming. Amid Protestantism in America, William Miller launched a movement that brought together many Christians from many denominations. Though there had been many different doctrines, Christians from the Millerite movement were focused on the second advent of Christ. Through a meticulous study of the prophecy of Daniel 8:14, the Millerite movement fixed Jesus’ second coming to be October 22, 1844.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, Jesus did come as they had planned and preached.<sup>22</sup> Millerism, an ecumenical movement before 1844 comprised of many evangelical denominations, underwent fragmentation due to disappointment.<sup>23</sup> A group that later became the Seventh-day Adventist Church arose from this fragmentation and disappointment in the early 1860s.<sup>24</sup>

During the early stage of the Adventist Church’s history, many pioneers rejected the doctrine of the Trinity. This is understandable because many came from denominations that stood against this doctrine. For instance, James White and Joseph Bates were originally members of the Christian Connection Church— an anti-trinitarian church. Moreover, some pioneers, such as Uriah Smith, believed Jesus was a created being.<sup>25</sup> Regarding the nature

<sup>20</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Libreria Editrice Vaticana), no. 253-255.

<sup>21</sup> It is a view that saw the Old Testament ceremonial Sabbaths as types and the ministry of Jesus as the antitype. Mainly advocated by S.S. Snow, he proclaimed that Christ would come on the “tenth day of the seventh month” according to the Jewish calendar. After some calculations, this period corresponds to October 22, 1844.

<sup>22</sup> Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Ontario, Canada: Pacific Press, 1979), 48.

<sup>23</sup> George Knight, *William Miller and the Rise of Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2010), 196.

<sup>24</sup> Douglas Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic: The Public Involvement of a Major Apocalyptic Movement* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 12.

<sup>25</sup> Uriah Smith, *Thoughts, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Revelation* (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing, 1881), 59.

of the Holy Spirit, many pioneers of the Adventist Church saw “the Holy Spirit to be the omnipresent influence from the Father or the Son rather than a person.”<sup>26</sup> A selected number who spoke against or rejected the Trinity and the divine nature of Christ within the early years of the Adventist Church are J.B Frisbie<sup>27</sup>, J.N Loughborough,<sup>28</sup> R. F. Cottrell,<sup>29</sup> J. N. Andrews,<sup>30</sup> D. M. Canright,<sup>31</sup> and J. H. Waggoner.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, by 1890 Adventists had already expressed a harmonious position that Jesus originated from God and that the Holy Spirit was an influence but not a person.<sup>33</sup> Their position had been, up to this period, a Semi-Arian view regarding the personhood of Christ.

After 1890, a progressive transition was noticed from anti-trinitarianism to trinitarianism. An example of the first reference to the Trinity in Adventist literature was the Bible Student Library series in 1892.<sup>34</sup> Even though Samuel Spear, the author of this essay, argued that Son was “subordinate to God” and that the Father was “superior” to Christ,<sup>35</sup> this appears as the first favorable statement on the Trinity. Eventually, an emphasis on the deity of Christ was progressing within the Church. Later A.T Jones wrote in 1895

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<sup>26</sup> Merlin D. Burt, “History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on the Trinity,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 126.

<sup>27</sup> J. B. Frisbie, “The Seventh Day Sabbath Not Abolished,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 7, 1854, 50.

<sup>28</sup> J. N. Loughborough, “Questions for Brother Loughborough,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, November 5, 1861, 184.

<sup>29</sup> R. F. Cottrell, “The Trinity,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 6, 1869, 10–11.

<sup>30</sup> [J. N. Andrews], “Melchisedec,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (September 7, 1869): 84. This is an unsigned article, J. N. Andrews was the editor of the paper.

<sup>31</sup> D. M. Canright, “The Personality of God,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, August 29, 1878, 73–74; September 5, 1878, 81–82; September 12, 1878, 89–90; September 19, 1878, 97.

<sup>32</sup> J. H. Waggoner, *The Atonement: An Examination of the Remedial System in the Light of Nature and Revelation* (Oakland: Pacific Press, 1884), 164–179.

<sup>33</sup> Merlin D. Burt, “History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on the Trinity,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17 no. 1 (Spring 2006): 128.

<sup>34</sup> The number 90 essays were entitled “*The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity*.” “The pamphlet was a reprint of an article from the New York *Independent* of November 14, 1889. See M. L. Andreasen, *The Book of Hebrews* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1948), 115–124.

<sup>35</sup> Samuel Spear, *The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity*, in the Bible Study Library, no. 90 (Oakland Calif: Pacific Press Publishing Company, 1892), 3, 4.

that “God is one. Jesus Christ is one. The Holy Spirit is one. And these three are one: there is no dissent nor division among them.”<sup>36</sup> By 1919, with the Adventist Bible Conference, most Adventists accepted the divinity of Christ. In 1931, in the Adventist Church statement of Fundamental Beliefs, a comment on the Trinity appeared for the first time. It read,

That the Godhead, or Trinity, consists of the Eternal Father, a personal, spiritual Being, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, infinite in wisdom and love; the Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Eternal Father, through whom all things were created and through whom the salvation of the redeemed hosts will be accomplished; the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead, the great regenerating power in the work of redemption. Matt. 28:19.<sup>37</sup>

This statement favorably mentioned the word, *Trinity*. However, though the Father is defined as “Eternal,” Jesus is introduced as “the Son of the Eternal Father” and the Holy Spirit as “the third *person* of the Godhead” —the emphasis is mine, and not as an influence. In 1957, in the book *Question on Doctrine*, there was a progressive theology on Christ’s nature as “one in nature, equal in power and authority, God in the highest sense, eternal and self-existent, with life original, unborrowed, underived; and that Christ existed from all eternity, distinct from, but united with, the Father, possessing the same glory, and all the divine attributes.” As a result, the Adventist Church gradually and officially shifted to the trinitarian view of the Bible and the divinity of Christ.<sup>38</sup>

To sum up, Burt points out that “it took over 50 years for the doctrine of the Trinity to become normative”<sup>39</sup> in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. From an anti-trinitarian position held by

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<sup>36</sup> A. T. Jones, editorial, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 10, 1899, 24.

<sup>37</sup> *1931 Year Book of the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination*, Prepared by H. E. Rogers (Washington: Review and Herald, 1931), 377.

<sup>38</sup> *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1957), 36.

<sup>39</sup> Merlin D. Burt, “History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on the Trinity,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 139.

the pioneers, the Adventist Church is today a biblical trinitarian Church. This development is made possible because Adventists believe in the dynamic view or progressive revelation.<sup>40</sup> Today the Adventist belief in the Trinity is expressed as part of their twenty-eight Fundamental Beliefs, and it reads:

There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three coeternal Persons. God is immortal, all-powerful, all-knowing, above all, and ever present. He is infinite and beyond human comprehension, yet known through His self-revelation. God, who is love, is forever worthy of worship, adoration, and service by the whole creation. (Gen. 1:26; Deut. 6:4; Isa. 6:8; Matt. 28:19; John 3:16; 2 Cor. 1:21, 22; 13:14; Eph. 4:4-6; 1 Peter 1:2.)<sup>41</sup>

### **An Analysis of the Roman Catholic Church Statement on the Trinity**

The Roman Catholic Church has its current official statement on the Trinity expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.<sup>42</sup> This statement represents not only what the Catholic Church believes but also how the Church understands this concept of the Trinity. In this part of the work, the paper analyzes the current statement of the Trinity of the Roman Catholic Church.

#### **Description of the Statement**

The statement starts with affirming the oneness of the Trinity. Consequently, the Church does not confess three Gods (Tritheism), but only one God. Not only is the Father divine and eternal, but also the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Son and the Holy Spirit are

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<sup>40</sup> See P. Gerard Damsteegt, "Seventh-day Adventist Doctrines and Progressive Revelation," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 2, no. 1 (1991): 77–92.

<sup>41</sup> General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Office of Archives and Statistics, *Seventh-day Adventists Year Book 2015* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2021), 7.

<sup>42</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 253-255.

identified as of the same *essence* or *substance* (*homoousios*) or nature as the Father. This statement echoes the ecumenical council at Nicene in 325, where the Son was seen as “consubstantial” with the Father.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are identified as divine *persons* (*hypostasis*), emphasizing their distinction from one another. This distinction is established based on their relationship of origin. The statement rejects the modalist view of God—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not a designation of God revealing Himself in different modes, offices, or operations. There is not one person with different names, but one God in three persons. A statement from the Lateran Council IV (1215) is added, stating, “It is the Father who generates, the Son who is begotten, and the Holy Spirit who proceeds.” This statement implies that the Son is seen as generated from the Father, and the Holy Spirit is seen as coming forth from the Father and proceeding from one Son—*filioque*. Hence, the statement affirms the eternal generation of the Son, the double procession of the Spirit from both the Father and the Son. The three persons of the Trinity are related to one another. The council of Toledo XI (675) mentioned that though they are three persons based on their relationship with no opposition, they are of “one nature or substance.”

### **Theological Implications of the Statement**

For the Roman Catholic Church, God is one, and there are no three Gods. This assertion stands in opposition to polytheism and any dualism. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit operate inseparably. There is no separation between them, either spatially or temporally. The Son is God as the Father, and the Holy Spirit is God as the Father and Son. The Father is not only presented as the One who begets the Son but also as the One from whom proceeds the Spirit. Therefore, the Father is not “begotten” and without “principle.” He is the principle without principle. The Son and the Spirit are sent, but not the Father. He has no origin. St. Thomas Aquinas referred to Him as “the fontal principle of the whole divinity” and “the source

and principle of the whole deity.”<sup>43</sup> However, according to Catholic doctrine, “the characteristic of the Father as ‘principle without principle’ (...) does not exclude that of the Son and by virtue of his generation by Father, the procession of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>44</sup> Consequently, it implies that the Trinity derives its unity from the Father. The Father becomes the prime cause. Moreover, since the Father generated the Son, the Father is the first person of the Trinity. This understanding comes from John 1:18, which speaks of the “only-begotten Son.” However, this act is unique: “it is not a category of a generation that we know.”<sup>45</sup> It is not understood as the human manner of being born. There is only a continuity of nature between the one who generates and the one who is generated. Though this unique generation results in a distinction, there is no division of the divine. The Son is Son not by adoption or grace as a creature, but by Him being begotten “from the same substance of the Father” (*ek tes ousias tou Patros*), excluding the idea that the Son could be a created being. The Son is not an exterior reality of the Father, but “he receives the very being of the Father.” By affirming that the Son is “true God from true God,” the implication is that the Son is not in a manner inferior to the Father but is of the same divinity as the Father.

The Creed attributes to the Spirit two titles: *Holy* like the Father, and *Lord* as the Son, affirming the divine nature of the Spirit.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, the Spirit is not seen as a force but as a person of the Godhead. The Spirit is seen as proceeding from the Father and the Son, not as double processing but as a single procession, by a

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<sup>43</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences*, Bk. I, dist. 34, q. 2, a. 1: “Fontale principium totius divinitatis”; *Commentary on Dionysius’ Divine Names*, ch. 2, Lesson 4 (no. 181): “Fons et principium totius deitatis.”

<sup>44</sup> See Boris Bobrinskoy, *The Mystery of the Trinity: Trinitarian Experience and Vision in the Biblical and Patristic Tradition* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1999), 265–66.

<sup>45</sup> Lewis Ayres, “Augustine on the Trinity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, edited by Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 124. See also, Lewis Ayres, *Augustine on the Trinity* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>46</sup> St. Basil of Caesarea, *Letter 159*, in St. Basil, *Letters*, vol. 1 (1–185), trans. Sister Agnes Clare Way (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981), 313.

unique act of the Father and the Son.<sup>47</sup> The processing is an outward movement, as Aquinas explained it.<sup>48</sup> He comes forth from the Father, expressing the eternal origin of the Spirit. As St. Athanasius explained, the Spirit and Word are one.<sup>49</sup>

It is noted that the Catholic Church expressed its theology by appealing to Greek philosophy as a starting ground to formulate its theology on the Trinity. And the interpretation of the Scripture is made with philosophical and not biblical assumptions.

### **An Analysis of the Seventh-day Adventist Church Statement on the Trinity**

The latest Seventh-day Adventist Church statement on the Trinity is expressed in the Yearbook.<sup>50</sup> This statement represents the current official doctrinal position of the Church. In this part of the work, the paper analyzes the Adventist view of the Trinity and its theological implications.

#### **Description of the Statement**

The doctrine does not mention the word *Trinity*; however, the concept of Trinity is clearly expressed. The doctrine starts by introducing that there are not three gods but only one God. In other words, Seventh-day Adventists believe only in one God. The doctrine explicitly describes the Trinity—Godhead, as made up of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The three persons of the Trinity are presented as distinct from each other.

The Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit are identified as coeternal—with no beginning. Each one of the Trinity is classified with divine

<sup>47</sup> St. Augustine, *On the Trinity* 5.14.15: “Pater et Filius...relatiue ad Spiritum Sanctum unum principium”; Sanctus Aurelius Augustinus, *De Trinitate libri XV*, ed. W. J. Mountain, vol. 1, *Libri I–XII* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1968), 223.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: The Trinity*, trans. Ceslaus Velecky, vol. 6 (London, UK: Blackfriars, 1965), 3.

<sup>49</sup> St. Athanasius, *Letter to Serapion* 3.5, in *The Letters of Saint Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit*, trans. C. R. B. Shapland (London: Epworth Press, 1951), 175.

<sup>50</sup> General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Office of Archives and Statistics, *Seventh-day Adventists Year Book 2015* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2021), 7.

attributes. For a more precise understanding of how Seventh-day Adventists see each one of the members of the Trinity, there is a need to analyze their doctrines #3 (The Father), #4 (The Son), and #5 (The Holy Spirit). In these different articles of faith, the Father is presented as “the Creator, Source, Sustainer, and Sovereign of all creation.”<sup>51</sup> The Son is presented as God, the person through whom things were created. He is the revelation of God’s love and character.<sup>52</sup> The Holy Spirit is acknowledged as God as much as the Father and the Son. He is a person, as are the Father and the Son. He is also presented as an active agent during creation.<sup>53</sup> He is sent by the Father and the Son after Jesus’ ascension to heaven. “The qualities and powers exhibited in the Son and Holy Spirit are also those of the Father.”<sup>54</sup> Also, the provision of biblical passages demonstrates that the Adventist’s doctrine of the Trinity and the understanding of the nature of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is established only in the canonical data.

### **Theological Implications**

God is one, and there are not three Gods. He is the one and only God. This theology does not stand in opposition to monotheism but agrees with it. The oneness of God is understood as a divine plurality. It is a theology against tritheism—there are three separate deities. Each person of the three is fully divine and thus coequal

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<sup>51</sup> See article # 3 of the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventists in General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Office of Archives and Statistics, *Seventh-day Adventists Year Book 2015* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2021), 7.

<sup>52</sup> See article # 4 of the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventists in General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Office of Archives and Statistics, *Seventh-day Adventists Year Book 2015* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2021), 7.

<sup>53</sup> See article # 5 of the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventists in General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Office of Archives and Statistics, *Seventh-day Adventists Year Book 2015* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2021), 7.

<sup>54</sup> See article # 3 of the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventists in General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Office of Archives and Statistics, *Seventh-day Adventists Year Book 2015* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2021), 7.



and coeternal. Consequently, there is no place for Adoptionism—the *Father* adopted the man Jesus as his son during his baptism; Arianism—the Son was created; Semi-Arianism—the Son came forth from the Father, and he is “of similar substance, but not equal.”

Moreover, this theology rejects *Subordinationism*—the Son is subordinated to the Father by nature. It denies *Modalism*—One God manifesting Himself in three modes, and *Patripassianism*—Jesus is God, and the Father is incarnated and suffered as the Son—the Trinity. God is seen not as a timeless God who belongs to non-temporal eternity but as the one who can enter into time and relate to His creation in history (i.e., the execution of the plan of salvation for humanity). The Holy Spirit is sent by the Father and Son to be with His children. This implies that the mission of the Holy Spirit comes from both the Father and Son. In other words, there is no double procession of the Spirit within the Trinity—*Filioque*, but the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son, in the sense that both send him to be with His children.

### **Comparison of the Roman Catholic Church Doctrine of the Trinity to the Seventh-day Adventist Church Doctrine.**

After exposing the Roman Catholic Church’s doctrine of the Trinity and the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s doctrine of the Trinity expressed in their various statement of beliefs, one can note some apparent similarities and fundamental dissimilarities.

#### **Apparent Doctrinal Similarities**

In comparing the two doctrinal statements, the significant apparent similarity is found in the conception of God being one—God is one. The Catholic Church and the Adventist Church recognize the concept of the Trinity, one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Catholicism affirms not to “confess three Gods, but one God in three persons, the ‘consubstantial Trinity,’”<sup>55</sup> Adventism

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<sup>55</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Libreria Editrice Vaticana), no. 253-255.

states, “there is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”<sup>56</sup> In the Roman Catholic Church, the Trinity comprises three persons distinct from one another, each being God, sharing the same divine substance, essence, and nature. This view appears to be the same as the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the Trinity. In the Adventist Church, there is as well one God, a unity of three persons, with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exhibiting the same qualities and powers, and “the Godhead exists in a plurality, that Jesus is God, co-existent from eternity with the Father, and that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Godhead.”<sup>57</sup> The two statements affirm not only the divinity and humanity of Christ but also the divinity of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not only God, but He is distinct—a person, different from the Father and Son.

### **Fundamental Doctrinal Dissimilarities**

Though one can see apparent similarities between the Catholic and Adventist understanding of the Trinity, some crucial variations need not be neglected. These differences are conveyed within the following conceptions that express the doctrine of the Trinity: 1) the source of the Trinitarian theology; 2) the hierarchy within the Trinity; 3) the subordination of the Son; and 3) the procession of the Holy Spirit.

The Trinitarian theology of the Catholic Church is based on the tradition of Greek philosophy. Moreover, the very concept of the Trinity, as expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, is grounded firstly in the various Church Councils and Church Fathers. Both [Church Councils and Church Fathers] are the first sources of authority for developing the doctrine of the Trinity among Catholics. At the same time, the Adventist doctrinal position on the Trinity is only based on the Scriptures. It does not call for Church Fathers, Church Council, or Greek philosophy as

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<sup>56</sup> General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Office of Archives and Statistics, *Seventh-day Adventists Year Book 2015* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2021), 7.

<sup>57</sup> Gerhard Pfandl, “The Trinity in Scripture,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 14, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 94.

supporting arguments for the Trinity, but only the canonical data which is used for establishing this doctrine.

The variation of the doctrine is noticeable in the role of the Father. For the Catholic Church, it is the Father who generated the Son. The Son is seen as having begotten by the Father while the Holy Spirit proceeds from both. This implies theologically that the Father is the only one without origin. Therefore, the Father stands as the first person with divine origin. He is “the fontal principle of the whole divinity” and “the source and principle of the whole deity.”<sup>58</sup> He is “the principle without principle”<sup>59</sup> and the “first origin of the Spirit.”<sup>60</sup> This understanding implicitly established a hierarchy within the Trinity, with the Father having predominance indirectly on the Son and the Holy Spirit since He is the cause without any causes. For the Adventist Church, there is no difference between the three persons of the Trinity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are coeternal. No one comes before any other. The three are the source and principle of the absolute deity. None is at the origin of the others.

The Roman Catholic Church precedent states that the Son is generated from the Father. Therefore, without the Father, there cannot be a generation of the Son. This implies that the generation of the Son depends on the Father—even though Catholicism talks about eternal generation. Hence, this view places a sense of subordination of the Son to the Father. However, the Adventist doctrine appears “to remove any hint of subordination,”<sup>61</sup> affirming that “the qualities and powers exhibited in the Son and the Holy Spirit are also of the Father.”<sup>62</sup> The subordination of the Son should

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<sup>58</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences*, Bk. I, dist. 34, q. 2, a. 1: “Fontale principium totius divinitatis”; *Commentary on Dionysius’ Divine Names*, ch. 2, Lesson 4 (no. 181): “Fons et principium totius deitatis.”

<sup>59</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Libreria Editrice Vaticana), no. 245.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Kwabena Donkor, “God in 3 Persons – In Theology,” *Biblical Research Institute Release* 9/2015, 19.

<sup>62</sup> See article # 3 of the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventists in General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Office of Archives and Statistics, *Seventh-day Adventists Year Book 2015* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2021), 7.

not be understood in the ontological sense but in the sphere of the execution of the plan of salvation—temporal subordination.<sup>63</sup> Ángel Rodríguez states, “This subordination of the Son refers to a functional submission and not a description of inner-Trinitarian relationships.”<sup>64</sup>

While the Catholic theology on the Trinity affirms the double procession of the Holy Spirit, the Adventist theology understands that the procession of the Holy Spirit must be understood “not in an ontological sense, but rather in a historical sense as the inner divine activity involved in sending the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as the representative of Christ’s presence.”<sup>65</sup> Hence, the Catholic understanding of *the procession* of the Holy Spirit differs from the understanding of the sending of the Spirit from the Adventist view.

### **Implications for the Contemporary Challenges Raised by the Anti-Trinitarian among Adventism**

In recent years, many people within Adventism have been speaking against the Trinitarian position of the Church. Several publications express this reality by criticizing the current Trinitarian position of the Adventist Church.<sup>66</sup> They qualified the Adventist doctrine of the Trinity as heresy or the “strange God”<sup>67</sup> of “Roman Catholic Church doctrine.” They called for a return to the Adventist pioneers’ position—The Semi-Arian position. However, the direct analysis of the two views of the Trinity [Catholics and Adventists] has shown some theological implications that differ from one to the other.

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<sup>63</sup> Fernando L. Canale, “Doctrine of God,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day. Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 126.

<sup>64</sup> Ángel Rodríguez, “1 Corinthians 15:28,” Biblical Research Institute, <https://adventist-biblicalresearch.org/materials/bible-not-texts/1-corinthians-1528> (accessed September 26, 2022).

<sup>65</sup> Fernando L. Canale, “Doctrine of God,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day. Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 132.

<sup>66</sup> Gerald Pfandl, “The Doctrine of the Trinity among Adventists,” Biblical Research Institute (June 1999), 1.

<sup>67</sup> Lynnford Beachy, *Understanding the Personality of God* (Kansas, Oklahoma: Present Truth Ministries, 2012), 15.

After analyzing the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Trinity with the Adventist position, it has been noted that the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity differs from the Adventist doctrine of the Trinity. The Adventist doctrine is based on canonical data, while the Catholic doctrine calls mainly on the Church Councils and Church Fathers. Consequently, while the Anti-Trinitarian Adventists are calling to the history of the Adventist Church—the Church pioneers,<sup>68</sup> as an argument to forsake the current doctrine of the Trinity, it appears that the anti-Trinitarians appear to be in agreement with the Catholic Church in their calling to Church history to justify their position on doctrinal issues such as the Trinity, whereas the Adventist Church is not.

While the Catholic Church affirms the eternal subordination of the Son, the Adventist Church stands not only for the eternal divinity of the Son but also for a temporal subordination of the Son within the paradigm of the plan of salvation. The Anti-Trinitarians affirm that “the continual attempt of the Trinitarians to make the Son absolutely equal to the Father is virtually proof that He is not.”<sup>69</sup> Consequently, this seems to agree not with the Adventist position but with the Catholic view. Adventists’ Anti-Trinitarian belief denies the complete and eternal pre-existence of the deity of Jesus, thus, advocating the eternal subordination of the Son. Therefore, ontologically “the Father holds the highest position.”<sup>70</sup> Such a stand agrees with the Catholic approach to the nature of the Son. In contrast, the Adventist Church does not agree with the two previous views on the nature of the Son. Adventists understand that the Son is ontologically co-eternal and coequal with the Father as to their divine nature. No one is above the other.

On the nature of the Holy Spirit, non-Trinitarian Adventists attest that the Spirit is not a person “as if it was a third individual,

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<sup>68</sup> See Merlin Burt, “History of the Seventh-day Adventist Views on the Trinity,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17.1 (2006): 125–139; Moon, 140–159; Woodrow Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John Reeve, *The Trinity: Understanding God’s love, His plan of Salvation and Christian Relationships* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002), 190–238.

<sup>69</sup> Lynnford Beachy, *Understanding the Personality of God* (Kansas, Oklahoma: Present Truth Ministries, 2012), 19.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

separate and distinct from God the Father, and his Son.”<sup>71</sup> They understand the Spirit as being the power or non-personal divine energy of the Father and Son. Hence, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son—eternal procession. Meanwhile, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that the Father eternally begot the Son and that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son. Though Catholics see the Spirit as the third person of the Trinity, the non-Trinitarian Adventists see the Spirit as the non-personal divine energy of the Father and Son. Thus, Adventist non-Trinitarian conquered Catholicism regarding the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son.

On the contrary, the Seventh-day Adventist Church understands the procession of the Spirit to be temporary and limited within the execution of the plan of salvation. For the Adventist Church, the procession of Spirit is only understood in the context of the Father and Son sending the Holy Spirit to His Church as His representative. In other words, the Spirit is sent to fulfill “the historical flow of created space and time to achieve the goals of Trinity’s plan of salvation.”<sup>72</sup> Therefore, the non-Trinitarian Adventists’ position of the procession of the Spirit—eternal procession appears identical to the Catholic Church, though, they differ in the nature of the Spirit.<sup>73</sup>

Hence, the claim made by non-Trinitarian Adventists that the Seventh-day Adventist Church took the heretical heritage of the Trinity from the Catholic Church is not correct since the two concepts are different. The Catholic doctrine of the Trinity is based more on Church traditions than Scriptures. In contrast, the Adventist doctrine of the Trinity is wholly based on canonical data and nothing more. Significantly, it is evident that the doctrinal view of the concept of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit of Adventist anti-Trinitarians has more substantial similarities to the Roman Catholic Church’s concept of the Trinity. Therefore, it will not be out of

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<sup>71</sup> Lynnford Beachy, *Understanding the Personality of God* (Kansas, Oklahoma: Present Truth Ministries, 2012), 34.

<sup>72</sup> Fernando Canale, *Basic Element of Christian Theology* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University, 2005), 100.

<sup>73</sup> The Catholic Church views the Holy Spirit as the third person of the Trinity while Adventist anti-Trinitarians view the Holy Spirit as the power of God.

place to state that the Adventist Anti-Trinitarian's understanding of the Godhead is closer to the Catholic understanding of the same concept. Thus, the Adventist Anti-Trinitarian seems to have inherited from the Roman Catholic Church's understanding of God.

### Conclusion

The current work has provided a brief analysis of the Trinitarian doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church and the Seventh-day Adventist Church's position on this doctrine. While comparing the two positions, the present study has shown an apparent similarity in affirming a monotheist belief; however, some critical variations were noted. These variations included the source of the Trinitarian theology, the hierarchy within the Trinity, the subordination of the Son, and the double procession of the Holy Spirit.

The study has shown that the Anti-trinitarians' Adventist view of the Godhead appears closer to the Roman Catholic Church doctrine of the Trinity, yet the two theories are in total contradiction of their [Anti-trinitarians Adventist] claim that the current Seventh-day Adventist theology on the Trinity is a vestige of the Roman Catholic Church. In other words, the Anti-trinitarians' Adventist theology of the concept of the Father and Son agrees with the Catholic Church's understanding of the Father and Son. This similarity is also seen in the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit.

The Adventist theology of the Godhead is grounded only in the biblical canon. White rightly puts it when he says, "I do not believe in the Trinity because it is 'traditional' to do so. I believe in it for the same reason Athanasius did so long ago: the Scriptures compel me to this conclusion."<sup>74</sup> In light of this assessment, it would seem inappropriate and theologically incorrect to continue to charge the Seventh-day Adventist Church with apostasy because it believes in "the Trinity," with the wrong assumption that the Adventist Trinity is the same as the Catholic Trinity.

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<sup>74</sup> James R. White, *The Forgotten Trinity: Recovering the Heart of Christian Belief* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: BethanyHouse, 2019), 24.

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