

Proposal

By Ken LeBrun, May 16, 2016

In a telephone conversation on February 1, 2016, I was offered an opportunity to submit a document to the Upper Columbia Conference for consideration. I was specifically directed to address the following two points:

1. Make a presentation from Scripture on how the church could improve its presentation on the Trinity. The points are to be made from the Bible only, and not from history or from the writings of Ellen G. White.
2. Explain why the pre-1980 statement of beliefs was better than the current one.

In this paper I hope to adequately fulfill that assignment.

How the Church Can Improve Its Presentation on the Trinity

I simply suggest that the church refrain from requiring, as a criterion for membership, affirmation of a summary statement about God that derives from theological reasoning and which is not explicitly stated in the inspired Word.

The church was never given the authority to formulate doctrine or to require conclusions beyond what the inspired prophets have specifically stated. In fact, Jesus uttered a strong admonition against the adoption of man-made doctrines:

“But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.” Matthew 15:9

The Bible repeatedly warns against adding to or subtracting from what God has said:

“Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you.” Deuteronomy 4:2

“What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.” Deuteronomy 12:32

“Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar.” Proverbs 30:6

“For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.” Revelation 22:18, 19

I see two problems with our current Trinity doctrine: (1) Our official statement goes beyond what the Bible says. (2) This beyond-the-Bible statement is given authority.

So, exactly what is it about our statement that goes beyond the Bible? Specifically I’m talking about the definition of the “one God” as “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

Certainly there is a Father. Certainly there is a Son. Certainly there is a Holy Spirit. But no Scripture passage ever tells us that together those Three constitute the one God. Neither Matthew 28:19 nor 2 Corinthians 13:14 nor 1 John 5:7 supplies the missing link of equating the “one God” with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as a group. To affirm that the divine Persons “are one” in the sense of unity, is not the same as claiming that the “one God” is to be understood as the collective sum of those Persons. The popular equation, harmless as it may appear, introduces a subtle but substantive shift, which effectively eclipses what the Bible actually says. Many authors have, over the years, written in defense of the equation. But the fact remains that the Bible does not supply the much-revered formula.

Please do not miss the point. Jesus is uncontrovertibly divine. The title “God” is properly applied to Him in scripture (John 20:28; Hebrews 1:8), for He is equal with God (John 5:18). He is the image of God (2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15), the express image of His person (Hebrews 1:3). The purpose of this paper is not to question His eternity or to speculate about the nature of the Holy Spirit. My concern is that the church is requiring the acceptance of a particular explanation of the “one God” that has not been given to us to impose.

In the Great Commission, Jesus made perfectly clear what we are to be teaching:

“Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.”
Matthew 28:20

Jesus never commanded us, either personally or through His prophets, to define the one God as a unity of three Persons.

What are we supposed to preach?

“Preach the word.” 2 Timothy 4:2

And what does the Word say about the “one God”?

“For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him.” 1 Corinthians 8:5, 6

“For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” 1 Timothy 2:3-5

“There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” Ephesians 4:4-6

“And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.” John 17:3

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” John 3:16

Whenever the Bible mentions “one God” and then goes on to spell out *who* that is, it is always the Father. The idea that the one true God is fundamentally, *by definition*, a plurality of three Persons is a message we have nowhere been commissioned to proclaim. Throughout the New Testament, the consistent, and apparently essential, Christian confession of faith is that Jesus is the Son of God. Notice the following declarations:

“Then they that were in the ship came and worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God.” Matthew 14:33

“And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Matthew 16:16

“Now when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, Truly this was the Son of God.” Matthew 27:54

“And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God.” John 1:34

“Nathanael answered and saith unto him, Rabbi, thou art the Son of God.” John 1:49

“And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God.” John 6:69

“She saith unto him, Yea, Lord: I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God.” John 11:27

“But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.” John 20:31

“And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” Acts 8:37

“And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.” Acts 9:20

“Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God.” 1 John 4:15

“Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?” 1 John 5:5

In spite of it being the undisputable New Testament confession of faith, the expression “Son of God” is strangely absent from our current Fundamental Beliefs. Instead, we find a phrase, “God the eternal Son,” which the Bible never employs. Regardless of its defensibility, this substitution effects a subtle shift in meaning, making it appear that the church feels it necessary to modify what the Bible says.

We live in challenging times. “Profane and vain babblings” (2 Timothy 2:16), “doubtful disputations” (Romans 14:1), “fables” (1 Timothy 1:4), “contentions, and strivings” (Titus 3:9) are all around us. We don’t need to be part of the problem by imposing controversial doctrine on those who simply want to hold to what the Bible itself asserts.

“But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strifes.” 2 Timothy 2:23

No religious teaching has historically caused as much controversy as has the doctrine of the Trinity. God is not the author of confusion, for in the Bible every essential truth is clearly stated. The truth about God is no exception. God has stated it as clearly as we must require it. Any demand beyond a plain “Thus saith the Lord” engenders strife, as the seventeen-hundred-year history of imposing ecclesiastical creeds has proven.

The doctrine of the Trinity is the church’s attempt to summarize what we understand the Bible’s statements on the subject to mean. Although endeavoring to understand the meaning of scripture is certainly proper, if our final conclusions are supported more by theological considerations than by the actual language of the Bible, those conclusions should never be made the standard of discipline against

those who prefer to hold to the way the Bible actually says it and who therefore choose not to accept the church's theological summary.

If we insist on enforcing a conclusion that we ourselves have formulated, a conclusion never expressed by any inspired writer, such enforcement sets our formulation above the Bible's own expressions.

Why the Pre-1980 Statement of Beliefs was Better

Just for clarification, I am not recommending the 1931 statement,* if that's what you mean. But I especially appreciate the document published by the denomination from 1872 to 1914 entitled "A DECLARATION OF THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS." Here are three factors that make it preferred:

1. The Declaration of Fundamental Principles was non-binding.

The preamble to the 1872 *Fundamental Principles* stated:

"In presenting to the public this synopsis of our faith, we wish to have it distinctly understood that we have no articles of faith, creed, or discipline, aside from the Bible. *We do not put forth this as having any authority with our people, nor is it designed to secure uniformity among them,* as a system of faith, but is a brief statement of what is, and has been, with great unanimity, held by them. We often find it necessary to meet inquiries on this subject, and sometimes to correct false statements circulated against us, and to remove erroneous impressions which have obtained with those who have not had an opportunity to become acquainted with our faith and practice. Our only object is to meet this necessity." (Emphasis supplied)

Our early leaders recognized that a creed is a statement of beliefs that holds authority and is used as a test of faith. They had no objections to producing a summary of beliefs for informational purposes. But to assign authority to that summary, and to use it as an instrument for evaluating one's orthodoxy, would render it a creed. Early Seventh-day Adventists more than nominally rejected any creed other than the Bible itself.

The simple removal of authority from our current statement of beliefs would eliminate its greatest objection.

* Although it did use the word "Trinity" as a synonym for "Godhead," the 1931 statement was definitely preferable to the 1980 statement in that it carefully avoided any fabricated definition of the one God, and was therefore a biblically acceptable description of the heavenly trio. But my concentration on the 1872 statement, in addition to the reasons stated in this paper, is due to the fact that it explicitly identified the one God as a Person.

2. The Declaration of Fundamental Principles enjoyed unanimous acceptance by our people.

As noted above, the 1872 *Fundamental Principles* referred to itself as “a brief statement of what is, and has been, *with great unanimity*, held by them.”

The preamble to the *Fundamental Principles* in the 1912 Yearbook stated:

“Seventh-day Adventists have no creed but the Bible; but they hold to certain well-defined points of faith, for which they feel prepared to give a reason ‘to every man that asketh’ them. The following propositions may be taken as a summary of the principal features of their religious faith, upon which there is, so far as is known, *entire unanimity throughout the body*.”

This unanimity is reflected in Ellen White’s 1904 reference to “the fundamental principles that have sustained the work for the last fifty years,” “the fundamental principles that are based upon unquestionable authority,” to which God “calls upon us to hold firmly, with the grip of faith.” 1SM 204, 208

3. The Declaration of Fundamental Principles presented the doctrine of God just the way the Bible does.

This was the secret of its unanimous acceptance, and the reason why it needed no external enforcement. It so closely expressed what the Bible simply says, that everybody could agree with it. There was no attempt to define the doctrine any more specifically than the Bible does.

I. That there is one God, a personal, spiritual being, the creator of all things, omnipotent, omniscient, and eternal, infinite in wisdom, holiness, justice, goodness, truth, and mercy; unchangeable, and everywhere present by his representative, the Holy Spirit. Ps. 139:7.

II. That there is one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Eternal Father, the one by whom God created all things, and by whom they do consist; . . .

Statements of belief can change. We don’t have to insist on any particular wording. We don’t have to go back to 1872 and use their exact phrases. But we can learn from those early standard bearers two vitally important principles. First, that the Word of God itself is our only rule of faith and discipline, the only instrument to be used as a standard or a test. And Second, the closer our informational summary of beliefs mirrors the actual language of Scripture, the greater unanimity of endorsement the document will enjoy.