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Ellen G. White and the Personality of the Holy Spirit

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Ellen White and the personhood of the Holy Spirit

No Christian teaching is more fundamental than the doctrine of God. The Seventh-day Adventist biblical understanding of the Trinity helps us to understand the revealed nature, attributes, and character of God. In the last 15 years, much has been written on the history of the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the Godhead or Trinity and, particularly, the position of Jesus in the Godhead.¹ Less has been written on the history of Ellen G. White and the Adventist understanding of the Holy Spirit in the Godhead.²

Against the background of early Seventh-day Adventist theology and experience, this article will explore Ellen G. White's understanding of the Holy Spirit. I will first provide a brief overview of the Adventist view on the personality of the Holy Spirit through the early twentieth century. Careful Bible study, together with Ellen G. White's clear statements, majorly influenced a change in Adventist understanding. Because of current questions, some attention will be given to establishing the veracity of Ellen G. White's clearest statements on the nature of the Holy Spirit in the Godhead.

Adventist views of the Holy Spirit up to the early twentieth century

The Sabbatarian and Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the Holy

Spirit, until the 1890s, was largely focused on the tangible, or "living reality," of the Holy Spirit as a divine manifestation rather than His nature or personality.³ During the period up to the 1890s, most Adventists did not accept that the Holy Spirit had a distinct personality. For them, the Godhead included the Father (who was omnipotent and omniscient), the pre-Incarnate begotten Divine Son, and the Holy Spirit as a manifestation of the presence or power of the Father or the Son. Adventists emphasized the separate and distinct personalities of the Father and the Son. For many early Adventists, a personality required a material form, which prevented omnipresence. By defining the Holy Spirit as an influence or power from the Father or the Son, it allowed for God to be omnipresent.⁴

In 1877, J. H. Waggoner wrote of the Holy Spirit as an *It* rather than a *He*. After writing of the "one question which has been much controverted," that is, "the personality of the Spirit," he described the "Spirit of God" as "that awful and mysterious power which proceeds from the throne of the universe."⁵ In 1878, Uriah Smith answered the question "What is the Holy Spirit?" by writing, "In a word it may, perhaps, best be described as a mysterious influence emanating from the Father and the Son, their representative and the medium of their power."⁶ Both men remained

respectful of the mysterious nature of the Holy Spirit. In 1878, D. M. Canright, in a more argumentative and apologetic two-part article, explicitly rejected the personhood of the Holy Spirit, "The Holy Spirit is not a person, not an individual, but is an influence or power proceeding from the Godhead."⁷

In 1889, M. C. Wilcox, one of the editors of the *Signs of the Times*, wrote, "God's power, separate from his personal presence, is manifested through his Spirit."⁸ In representing the idea of how God can be omnipresent, Wilcox wrote in 1898: "God is a person; how can His life be everywhere present?" and then compared the Spirit to an "aura" that extends beyond a person.⁹

A few other Seventh-day Adventists took a very different view and speculated that perhaps the Holy Spirit was an angel or in the same class as the angels.¹⁰

The 1890s saw the beginning of a shift toward accepting the personhood of the Holy Spirit. One example of this change can be seen in R. A. Underwood's understanding. "The Holy Spirit is Christ's personal representative in the field; and he is charged with the work of meeting Satan, and defeating this personal enemy of God and his government. It seems strange to me, now, that I ever believed that the Holy Spirit was *only* an influence, in view of the work he does."¹¹

The shift in thinking on the personhood of the Holy Spirit was well underway when, in 1907, A. T. Jones wrote, “The Holy Spirit is not an influence; nor an impression, nor peace, nor joy, nor any *thing*. . . . The Holy Spirit is a *Person*, eternally a divine *Person*.”¹²

Ellen G. White and the Holy Spirit up to the 1890s

Ellen G. White’s writings are particularly rich in regard to the Holy Spirit, often referring to Him in both

the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. I gazed on Jesus’ countenance and admired his lovely person. . . . I asked Jesus if his Father had a form like himself; He said he had, but I could not behold it.”¹³

Other cofounders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, such as James White and Joseph Bates, also directly countered the spiritualizing view in print and supported the personhood of the Father and Jesus.¹⁴

Second, like Adventists generally, Ellen G. White understood the Holy Spirit in a practical and

deceptions of Satan.”¹⁵ She rejected this idea.

Third, her views on the Holy Spirit were drawn from and centered on the Bible. She, like other early Adventists, was, first of all, a student of Scripture. She was particularly careful not to stray beyond the Bible in her descriptions of the Holy Spirit.

In 1891, Ellen G. White wrote in response to a man who believed that the Holy Spirit was really the angel Gabriel and that the 144,000 will be Jews that acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah. After giving important

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her published and unpublished writings. In fact, she refers to the Holy Spirit almost as often as to Jesus.

Ellen G. White adopted three important orientations regarding the Holy Spirit and the Godhead during her earlier years that continued throughout her life. First was her emphasis on the personhood of God the Father and Jesus. During 1845 and 1846, there was a branch of Millerite Adventists who argued that Jesus had come spiritually on October 22, 1844. They also spiritualized the resurrection, heaven, the New Jerusalem, the new earth, and also the Father and Jesus. In 1846, Ellen G. White wrote in affirmation of the personhood of the Father and Jesus: “I saw a throne, and on it sat

demonstrable sense. The work of the Holy Spirit was very present and active in her Christian experience and ministry. She received hundreds of prophetic visions and dreams and often experienced dramatic blessings through the operation of the Holy Spirit. During the first few years of her prophetic ministry, Ellen G. White was confronted by some who believed that her visions were a result of mesmerism—now known as hypnotism—and said that there was no Holy Spirit. This gave her “keen anguish, well-nigh to despair.”

“Many would have me believe,” she wrote, “that there was no Holy Ghost and that all the exercises that holy men of God have experienced were only mesmerism or the

principles of biblical interpretation, she directly addressed his positions. “Your ideas of the two subjects you mention do not harmonize with the light which God has given me. The nature of the Holy Spirit is a mystery not clearly revealed, and you will never be able to explain it to others because the Lord has not revealed it to you.” She then quoted John 14:16 and continued, “This refers to the omnipresence of the Spirit of Christ, called the Comforter.” Ellen G. White then confessed the limits of her own understanding: “There are many mysteries which I do not seek to understand or to explain; they are too high for me, and too high for you. On some of these points, silence is golden.”¹⁶ In the absence

of special insight on the nature and personality of the Holy Spirit, Ellen G. White stayed close to Scripture and, unlike the other Adventist writers previously cited, left the personality of the Holy Spirit undefined.¹⁷ This was soon to change.

Ellen G. White on the Holy Spirit from the early 1890s

Two years later, in 1893, she wrote, “There is altogether too little made of the work of the Holy Spirit’s influence upon the church. . . . The Holy Spirit is the Comforter, in Christ’s name. He personifies Christ, yet is a distinct personality.”¹⁸

In 1896, she quoted the words of Jesus in John 16:7, 8, and then wrote her earliest clear statement on the Holy Spirit as a Person in the Godhead. “Evil had been accumulating for centuries, and could only be restrained and resisted by the mighty power of the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Godhead, who would come with no modified energy, but in the fullness of divine power.” In 1898, Ellen G. White published these words, with slight modification, in *The Desire of Ages*.¹⁹ There is no indication of a particular vision that Ellen G. White received that caused her to write more explicitly on the personality of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, as a messenger of the Lord, she became very specific on the issue during the 1890s. Through the remainder of her life, she continued to support the personhood and full deity of the Holy Spirit.²⁰

For example, Ellen G. White often referred to John 14–16 and the Comforter bringing the presence of Jesus to the believer. She continued this theme as she presented the Holy Spirit as the Third Person of the Godhead. She wrote, “Although our Lord ascended from earth to heaven, the Holy Spirit was appointed as His representative among men.” She then quoted John 14:15–18 and continued, “Cumbered with humanity, Christ could not be in every place personally; therefore it was altogether for their advantage that He should leave them, go to His Father,

and send the Holy Spirit to be His successor on earth.”²¹ Ellen G. White was comfortable with the existing tension of the Holy Spirit being a Person and also representing Jesus. One characteristic of the biblical Trinity is to represent or point to Each Other. The Holy Spirit represented Jesus. Jesus, throughout His life on earth, represented the Father (John 14:9), and the Father pointed to and exalted the Son (Matt. 3:17; 17:5; Mark 1:11; 9:7; Luke 3:22; 9:35).

Ellen G. White’s use of *He* and *It* while referring to the Holy Spirit

In 1936, H. C. Lacey claimed that his 1895 series of early morning Bible studies at the Armidale camp meeting and his 1896 presentations at an institute in Cooranbong, Australia, influenced Ellen G. White to accept the personhood of the Holy Spirit. Lacey speculated that Ellen G. White had not used the term *Person* or referred to the Holy Spirit with the personal pronoun *He* or *Him* before his presentation.²²

An examination of Ellen G. White’s statements show that she did use the word *Person* to refer to the Holy Spirit as early as 1893, as quoted above. But she used the pronouns *It* and *He* variously both before and after her explicit statements on the personality of the Holy Spirit. In 1884, she wrote, “The Holy Spirit exalts and glorifies the Saviour. It is his office to present Christ.”²³ In 1891, she wrote of the “Holy Spirit working upon our hearts.” She continued, “[H]e takes of the things of God, and presents them anew to our minds.”²⁴ In *The Desire of Ages*, written in 1898, she clearly articulates the personhood of the Holy Spirit, “When the Spirit of God takes possession of the heart, it transforms the life.”²⁵ In 1900, she wrote, “The Holy Spirit has gone out into all the world; everywhere it is moving upon the hearts of men.”²⁶

The Desire of Ages not only helped to explain the personhood of the Holy Spirit, but it also clearly taught the eternity of Jesus and

His full equality with the Father. Her statement, “In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived,” along with other statements on the divinity of Jesus helped many Adventists to take a new look at Scripture to understand Jesus’ place in the Godhead.²⁷


Veracity of Ellen G. White’s statements

There are some who believe in the prophetic authority of Ellen G. White’s writings but deny the personhood of the Holy Spirit and His place in the Godhead. Ellen G. White’s clear statements place them in a difficult position. In response, they have argued that her secretaries or editors inserted these statements without her knowledge. Tim Poirier, vice director of the Ellen G. White Estate, published a helpful paper in 2006 tracing back key statements by Ellen G. White to their original source.

Original drafts, written by the hand of Ellen G. White, are available for at least four of her clearest statements.²⁸ Other documents are accessible in the original typed form and contain handwritten notations by Ellen G. White on the pages.²⁹ At the top of one typed manuscript, Ellen G. White had written the words, “I have read this carefully and accept it.”³⁰ Several of these statements were published in various forms. Ellen G. White, herself, paid for the publishing plates of *The Desire of Ages* and most of her other books. In *The Desire of Ages*, she even sent corrections for the book after the first edition was already published. These changes were incorporated in the second printing. The degree of veracity for Ellen G. White’s statements is significant, and editors find it hard to argue that she did not write the statements regarding the Holy Spirit that appear in print.

Seventh-day Adventists believe that Ellen G. White was given the prophetic gift. Her emphatic statements had a significant influence on the development of the Adventist understanding of the Trinity,

particularly through support of the eternal and original nature of Jesus and the full divinity and personhood of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, Seventh-day Adventist doctrine is established through the authority of Scripture rather than through the writings of Ellen G. White. Mrs. White understood her prophetic role was to bring people to the Bible as the final authority and the basis for all faith and practice. She wrote in her first published tract: "I recommend to you, dear reader, the word of God as the rule of your faith and practice."³¹ On many occasions she defined the relationship of her writings to the Bible. In one of her more compelling statements, she defined her prophetic role: "I have a work of great responsibility to do—to impart by pen and voice the instruction given me, not alone to Seventh-day Adventists, but to the world. I have published many books, large and small, and some of these have been translated into several languages. This is my work—to open the Scriptures to others as God has opened them to me."³²

Seventh-day Adventists have a more biblical orientation on the Holy Spirit because of the writings of Ellen G. White. We can be grateful that God has led throughout the history of the church to build an understanding of the Bible through the influence of the Holy Spirit in the gift of prophecy. 

1 Studies include Merlin D. Burt, "Demise of Semi-Arianism and Anti-Trinitarianism in Adventist Theology, 1888-1957" (research paper, Andrews University, 1996); Gerhard Pfandl, *The Doctrine of the Trinity Among Adventists* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1999); Woodrow W. Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John Reeve, *The Trinity: Understanding God's Love, His Plan of Salvation, and Christian Relationships* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2002); Jerry Moon, "The Adventist Trinity Debate, Part 1: Historical Overview," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 41, no. 1 (2003): 113–129; Jerry Moon, "The Adventist Trinity Debate, Part 2: The Role of Ellen G. White," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 41, no. 2 (2003): 275–292; Michael Dörnbrack, "Die Rolle Ellen Whites bei der Entwicklung der Trinitätslehre in der Adventgemeinde: Aussagen, Auswirkungen und Reaktionen" (research paper, Theologische Hochschule Friedensau, 2004); Merlin D. Burt, "History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on the Trinity," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17, no. 1 (2006): 125–139; Jerry Moon, "The Quest for a Biblical Trinity: Ellen White's 'Heavenly Trio' Compared to the Traditional Doctrine,"

Journal of the Adventist Theological Society 17, no. 1 (2006): 140–159; Denis Fortin, "God, the Trinity, and Adventism: An Introduction to the Issues," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17, no. 1 (2006): 4–10; Denis Kaiser, "A Comparative Study on the Trinity as Seen in the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Christian Connexion, and Among Seventh-day Adventists Until 1870" (research paper, Andrews University, 2008); Merlin D. Burt, "The Trinity in Seventh-day Adventist History," *Ministry*, February 2009, 5–8. Only a few papers were written before the 1990s. Two of the more significant are Erwin Roy Gane, "The Arian or Anti-Trinitarian Views Presented in Seventh-day Adventist Literature and the Ellen G. White Answer" (master's thesis, Andrews University, 1963); Russell Holt, "The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination: Its Rejection and Acceptance" (term paper, Andrews University, 1969).

2 Recent studies include Denis Kaiser, "The Holy Spirit and the Hermeneutical Approach in Modern Adventist Anti-Trinitarian Literature" (research paper, Andrews University, 2008); Denis Kaiser, "The Reception of Ellen White's Trinitarian Statements, 1897-1915," in *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, eds. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., forthcoming); Tim Poirier, "Ellen White's Trinitarian Statements: What Did She Actually Write?" *Ellen White and Current Issues Symposium* 2 (2006): 18–40; Evelyn Tollerton, "The Historical Development of the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in Seventh-day Adventist Theology: A Paradigm Shift From Anti-Trinitarianism to Trinitarianism, 1846-1946" (research paper, Andrews University, 2006). The earliest history of the personality of the Holy Spirit is from Christy Mathewson Taylor, "The Doctrine of the Personality of the Holy Spirit as Taught by the Seventh-day Adventist Church up to 1900" (bachelor's thesis, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 1953). Some of the content in the first section of this paper is drawn from Taylor's research.

3 E. Goodrich, "No Spirit," *Review and Herald*, January 28, 1862, 68; R. F. Cottrell, "The Beginning of the End," *Review and Herald*, December 16, 1873, 5; Joseph Clarke, "Be Filled With the Spirit," *Review and Herald*, March 10, 1874, 103.

4 D. M. Canright, "The Personality of God," *Review and Herald*, August 29–September 19, 1878, 73, 81, 82, 89–90, 97; D. M. Canright, *Matter and Spirit; or, The Problem of Human Thought: A Philosophical Argument* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1882), 47, 48; D. M. Canright, "The Holy Spirit," *Signs of the Times*, August 8, 1878, 236; Uriah Smith, "In the Question Chair: Is the Holy Ghost a Person?" *Review and Herald*, October 28, 1890, 664. For a good explanation of early Adventist understanding of personhood, see Evelyn Tollerton, "The Spirit of God: The Omnipresent Influence of God" (paper presented at SDATS Scholarship Symposium, January 9, 2007).

5 J. H. Waggoner, *The Spirit of God: Its Offices and Manifestations to the End of the Christian Age* (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Pub. Assn., 1877), 8, 9.

6 James White and Uriah Smith, *The Biblical Institute: A Synopsis of Lectures on the Principal Doctrines of Seventh-day Adventists* (Oakland, CA: Steam Press of the Pacific S.D.A. Pub. House, 1878), 184.

7 D. M. Canright, "The Holy Spirit," *Signs of the Times*, July 25, 1878, 218; D. M. Canright, "The Holy Spirit," *Signs of the Times*, August 8, 1878, 236.

8 M. C. Wilcox, "Manifestation of the Holy Spirit," *Signs of the Times*, July 15, 1889, 422.

9 M. C. Wilcox, "The Spirit of Life," *Signs of the Times*, June 2, 1898, 342.

10 C. P. Bollman, "The Spirit of God," *Signs of the Times*, November 4, 1889, 663.

11 R. A. Underwood, "The Holy Spirit a Person," *Review and Herald*, May 17, 1898, 310; emphasis in original.

12 A. T. Jones, "Christian Loyalty," *Medical Missionary*, March 27, 1907, 98. With the exception of Ellen G. White, Jones is also the earliest clear presenter of the eternal undervived deity of Jesus. See Burt, "Demise of Semi-Arianism," 7, 8.

13 Ellen Harmon, "Letter From Sister Harmon," *Day-Star*, March 14, 1846, 7.

14 James White, "Preach the Word," *Review and Herald*, December 11, 1855, 85; see also James White, "Letter From Bro. White," *Day-Star*, January 24, 1846, 25; Joseph Bates, *The Opening Heavens; or, A Connected View of the Testimony of the Prophets and Apostles, Concerning the Opening Heavens, Compared With Astronomical Observations, and of the Present and Future Location of the New Jerusalem, the Paradise of God* (New Bedford, MA: Benjamin Lindsey, 1846), 1.

15 Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1945), 22.

16 Ellen G. White to Brother Chapman, June 11, 1891, Letter 7, 1891, in *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 14 (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990), 175, 179.

17 The same is true regarding the nature of the Jesus' divinity. In this case, she is the earliest Adventist writer to refer to Christ as eternal. See Ellen G. White, "An Appeal to the Ministers," *Review and Herald*, August 8, 1878, 49.

18 Ellen G. White, "Privileges and Responsibilities of Christians; Depend on Holy Spirit, Not Self," MS 93, 1893, in *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 20 (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1993), 323, 324.

19 Ellen G. White, "My Brethren in America," February 6, 1896, Letter 8, 1896, in *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 2 (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1987), 34; Ellen G. White, *Special Testimonies for Ministers and Workers*, no. 10 (1897), 25–33; Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898), 671.

20 Ellen G. White to Sister Wessels, March 7, 1897, Letter 124, 1897, in *Daughters of God* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1998), 183–185; Ellen G. White, *Special Testimonies for Ministers and Workers*, no. 10 (1897), 37; Ellen G. White, "Extracts From Discourse Given by Mrs. E. G. White in the Avondale Church, March 25, 1899," MS 66, 1899; Ellen G. White, "Preparation for Baptism," MS 57, 1900; Ellen G. White, "God's Purpose for His People," MS 27a, 1900; Ellen G. White, MS 130, 1901; Ellen G. White, "An Important Letter," *Union Conference Record*, April 1, 1901, 2; Ellen G. White, "Preach the Word," MS 20, 1906; Ellen G. White, *Special Testimonies Series B*, no. 7 (1905), 62, 63 from MS 21, 1906, written in regard to J. H. Kellogg and his view that God was an essence that pervades all of nature rather than a personal being. She wrote earlier in this manuscript, "I am instructed to say, The sentiments of those who are searching for advanced scientific ideas are not to be trusted. Such representations as the following are made: 'The Father is as the light invisible; the Son is as the light embodied; the Spirit is the light shed abroad.' 'The Father is like the dew, invisible vapor; the Son is like the dew gathered in beauteous form; the Spirit is like the dew fallen to the seat of life.' Another representation: 'The Father is like the invisible vapor; the Son is like the leaden cloud; the Spirit is rain fallen and working in refreshing power.' All these spiritualistic representations are simply nothingness. They are imperfect, untrue."

21 Ellen G. White to Edson and Emma White, February 18, 1895, Letter 119, 1895 (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate).

22 H. C. Lacey to W. C. White, July 27, 1936 (Berrien Springs, MI: Center for Adventist Research, Andrews University).

23 Ellen G. White, "Man's Obligation to God," *Signs of the Times*, April 3, 1884, 209.

24 Ellen G. White, "Meeting Trials," *Review and Herald*, August 25, 1891, 529.

25 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, 173.

26 Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1900), 70.

27 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, 530.

28 Poirier, "Ellen White's Trinitarian Statements." Handwritten original drafts by Ellen White are extant for MS 93, 1893; MS 57, 1900; MS 20, 1906; and MS 21, 1906.

29 Interlineated original typed manuscripts are extant for Letter 8, 1896; MS 27a, 1900; MS 57, 1900; MS 20, 1906; and MS 21, 1906.

30 MS 20, 1906.

31 Ellen G. White, *A Sketch of the Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G. White* (Saratoga Springs, NY: James White, 1851), 64.

32 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8 (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1904), 236.

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