

A brief sketch of my journey from trinitarianism to non-trinitarianism

By Terry Hill

Introduction

I was not brought up a Seventh-day Adventist. In fact it was not until I was 30 years of age (in 1973) that I first heard of the church. This was when I met the young lady who later became my wife. Today, 42 years later, we are still together. When we first met, my wife had been a member for 5 years.

I would describe my upbringing as nominally Christian (never have I doubted the existence of God) but my lifestyle, particularly during my teenage years, through to the time when I met my wife, was far from being what I would now term Christian.

I was baptised in 1975 but even before this I was involved in the life of the church. During this time I was teaching adult and junior Sabbath School classes. As the years rolled by, the church became more and more a part of my life. I will not go into the details here, suffice to say that apart from my family, it was my life.

I like to think that during the years between 1973 and 2003, most who knew me would have described me as a loyal and trusted Seventh-day Adventist. During this time, I was always welcome in all the local churches in my area. Very often I preached and taught in these churches. I had been preaching since shortly after my baptism.

In 2003 all of this changed but in order to explain why this happened, I will need to go back to 1999. It was then that events took place that would completely change the course of my life – particularly my church life.

Misunderstandings and rude awakenings

It should go without saying that between 1973 (when I first encountered Seventh-day Adventism) and 2003, my lifestyle changed completely. There is no need to detail these changes because I am sure they can easily be imagined.

My beliefs too underwent a dramatic change. They became decidedly 'Seventh-day Adventist'. One of these beliefs though did not come through Bible study. In fact I cannot remember anyone talking to me about it, neither before my baptism or afterwards. It seemed to develop within me almost imperceptibly. This was the doctrine of the trinity.

Over the years I came to believe that this doctrine was the most important teaching of the Christian faith. I believed that any denomination that did not teach it could not be termed a Christian denomination.

For various reasons I also came to believe that the Seventh-day Adventist Church had always been a trinitarian denomination. This had come about mainly through reading a book called 'Movement of Destiny'. It had been written by Le Roy Edwin Froom, a very high profile Seventh-day Adventist minister. It had taken him forty years to produce it. I read it through from cover to cover at least twice. Froom was

also author of 'The Coming of the Comforter' (1928), the 4-volume 'The Prophetic Faith of our Fathers' (1950) and the 2-volume 'The Conditionalist Faith of our Fathers' (1966). He was also a major contributor to the highly controversial 'Questions on Doctrine'.

In 'Movement of Destiny' (1971), Froom claimed that the majority of early Seventh-day Adventists had been trinitarian. He said it was only 'the few' who would not accept the trinity doctrine. The church today though will freely admit that in his book he presented a falsified view of the history of Seventh-day Adventism but there was no such admittance when I first read it. I just accepted it then as the truth.

Froom maintained a prominent position in the church. He came to be considered as its leading historian and apologist. The church promoted his 'Movement of Destiny' as an accurate account of the denominational history of Seventh-day Adventism. On the front cover of the book he was described as 'Emeritus Professor of Historical Theology Andrews University'.

In the light of the above, it is not surprising therefore that never once did I think to question what Froom had written. I just accepted it as a true account of our denominational history. This experience taught me the folly of not checking out the validity of something before I believed it. This is regardless of who said or wrote it.

Merlin Burt (Professor of Church History at Andrews University) in his history of our denominational changeover to trinitarianism made these observations concerning Froom's book

"Records show that Froom for many years was active in seeking an understanding of the early period. He wrote letters during the 1930's and 1940's to various ones asking for their recollections. Arthur White, secretary of the Ellen G White estate, even tried in 1955 to correct Froom's position writing "I think that we will have to concede that our early workers were not trinitarians". (Merlin Burt's research paper, 'Demise of Semi-Arianism and anti-trinitarianism in Adventist Theology, 1888-1957', page 46, December 1996)

"One is left with the impression that Froom chose not to present the facts, possibly out of fear that it might undermine someone's faith or of jeopardizing the Church's evangelical standing". (Ibid, page 47)

I believe the latter is why Froom chose to 'revise' our denominational history.

According to Froom (see MOD page 8), the day his book was published, 1500 copies were gifted to 550 Bible teachers, 40 overseas editors and 50 broadcasters around the world. This included 500 copies sent to the libraries of 114 mission-land training schools. Thus it was that concerning our denominational history, error was disseminated at all levels amongst thousand and thousands of Seventh-day Adventists. It is not surprising therefore that there is still so much confusion over it today.

So what happened in 1999 that four years later in 2003 would turn my life upside down? I will explain.

Getting to know the truth

One morning in the winter of that year (1999), this was as the new millennium was fast approaching, I arrived at my local church to find a letter awaiting me. It was addressed to the Young People's Leader which that particular year happened to be me. I opened it thinking it was simply more of the usual communication from the South England Conference but I was wrong. It had nothing to do with the conference. It contained a letter and a leaflet. Both were saying exactly the same thing. This was that the trinity doctrine is the omega of heresies that in the early 1900's, Ellen White had warned would be received by Seventh-day Adventists. Needless to say, I was more shocked than surprised.

Although it is true to say that Ellen White did predict that an 'omega' of heresies would be accepted by many Seventh-day Adventists, she did not specify what it would be. In 1999 I had no knowledge of this prediction. It was all very new to me.

When verifying this, I discovered that Ellen White had written the following two statements. Both were penned in the early 1900's – and both were in connection with John Harvey Kellogg's book 'The Living Temple'.

“Be not deceived; many will depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils. We have now before us the alpha of this danger. The omega will be of a most startling nature.” (*Ellen G. White, Special Testimonies, Series B, No. 2, page 16*)

“In the book "Living Temple" there is presented the alpha of deadly heresies. The omega will follow, and will be received by those who are not willing to heed the warning God has given. (*Ibid page 50*)

This “alpha of deadly heresies” did involve the trinity doctrine but the details of this (why it concerned Kellogg's book 'The Living Temple' etc.) would be far too much to explain here – suffice to say as I did eventually come to realise, the Seventh-day Adventist Church was then, as it always had been, very much a non-trinitarian denomination.

As you consider my reaction to this claim that the trinity doctrine is this omega of heresies spoken of by Ellen White, please bear in mind that when I received this letter and the leaflet (1999), I still believed that the trinity doctrine was the most important teaching of Christianity – also that the Seventh-day Adventist Church had always been a trinitarian denomination.

So what was my reaction? Well, for reasons that can easily be imagined, I tore up the letter and put it in the nearest waste bin. I reasoned it was from a group of extremists who had nothing better to do with their time. For some reason though, unknown to me at that time, I put the leaflet in my pocket. I still have it today.

Some weeks later (I cannot remember how many exactly) when retiring for the night, I was looking for something to read so I began thumbing my way through a pile of old magazines that were by my bedside. They had been given to me by various church members when I had visited them over the years. These were magazines they no longer required. Some of the magazines were very old and very interesting.

The picture on the front cover of one of these magazines caught my eye. It was a picture of a man dressed in the type of clothing that James White would have worn. He was looking into a full-length mirror. The reflection in the mirror showed the same man dressed in modern-day clothing. The caption underneath read 'Adventists and Change'. It was advertising an article written by George Knight. If you are a Seventh-day Adventist, you will realise he is regarded by our church as the leading historian of Adventism (as Froom was in his time). I thought to myself, this looks interesting. I will read this before I go to sleep. The article began

"Most of the founders of Seventh-day Adventism would not be able to join the church today if they had to subscribe to the denomination's Fundamental Beliefs." (George Knight, *'Ministry' magazine*, October 1993, page 10, *'Adventists and Change'*)

George Knight continued

"More specifically, most would not be able to agree to belief Number 2, which deals with the doctrine of the Trinity." (*Ibid*)

To say I was surprised would be a gross understatement. I had to read it again and again. Contrary to what I believed at that time (1999), it was saying that the pioneers of Seventh-day Adventism had rejected the trinity doctrine. Obviously they had not regarded it as scriptural.

I found this almost unbelievable. Apart from anything else, it was saying that what I had been led to believe by Froom was not true. Why then, if George Knight was correct, had Froom led his readers to believe differently – and more importantly, why had the church promoted his book as being an accurate account of our denominational history? Understandably, all of this puzzled me.

There was something that puzzled me even more. Why had our early church rejected the trinity doctrine? It was this that disturbed me the most. After all, wasn't the trinity doctrine the most important teaching in Christianity? I found myself being quite disappointed in our pioneers – and somewhat bewildered by what I was reading.

Nevertheless, I realised that George Knight was a renowned church historian. I could see too that the article contained facts (in the way of quotations of our pioneers) that I could not deny. Eventually I found myself having to accept that the beliefs of early Seventh-day Adventists had not been as I had thought them to be. In this respect therefore, my understanding of our denominational history had been seriously flawed – albeit this had not been completely my fault.

As I considered what the article was saying, I experienced all sorts of emotions. I felt abused because the church had betrayed my trust. Why had it led me to believe that our denomination had always been mainly trinitarian? That really did rankle in my mind. I felt that the church had let me down. I was so disappointed with the church. I was disappointed too that our pioneers (who I had so highly respected) had rejected the most important teaching of the Christian faith. Why had they done this I reasoned? Were we not God's remnant people? How could we get it so wrong – especially regarding such an important doctrine?

I read the article through a number of times. Each time I did so I became more and more convinced that something was wrong. In the finality, although reluctantly having to accept what George Knight was saying (that our church had once been a non-trinitarian denomination), I did feel that the reasons he gave for this changeover to trinitarianism were not very convincing. He seemed to present a weak argument. I believe it was this, more than anything else, that made me feel something was not quite right. I became very suspicious of what I was being asked to believe.

Needless to say, all of this reminded me of my experience of some weeks previously with the letter and the leaflet (saying that the trinity doctrine was the omega of heresies). Surely there could not be any truth in this – could there?

The next day I sent for the cassette tapes that the leaflet had been advertising. This was my first step towards being involved in our present Godhead controversy. Whilst I did not accept all that was said on these tapes, it was through listening to them that set me on the road to studying this issue for myself. This was at the beginning of the year 2000.

Letting go of the trinity doctrine

After studying these things for myself, I eventually came to realise that I had not really understood what the trinity doctrine was all about. When I did understand, I realised that even though I had been making such a profession of this teaching, I had not really believed it. This is because I held to one particular belief that in trinitarianism is impossible to hold. I was therefore, in spite of my profession, not really a trinitarian.

So what was this belief?

I believed that in the making of the decision for Christ to become incarnate, a risk had been taken concerning His existence. In other words, the divine person of Christ, in becoming incarnate, could have sinned – and if He had sinned, He would have forfeited His eternal life. No trinitarian could believe such a thing. In fact this belief is prohibited by trinitarianism. On the basis of this I knew I had to 'let go' of the trinity doctrine. I could not deny what Christ had endured for my sake by becoming incarnate. I knew my stand would not be acceptable to some but what else could I do? There were no other options. I had to do what I knew was right to do.

This risk belief is still very important to me. I have held it since first becoming a Christian. It tells me how much God was willing to give up to redeem me from sin. It showed me how much He loved me. It was this belief that initially had drawn me to Christ. How can a person fail to love, respect and admire someone who was willing to make such an infinite sacrifice? For me, to deny this risk existed, would be to deny Christ. I could never say to His face that to save me He did not risk anything. Could you?

If this risk factor had not been there (if it had not existed), then it would have been as Roy Adams so aptly put it when he was addressing this same issue (if Christ could not have sinned). He wrote in the Review in 2008 (as Associate Editor of the Review)

“If that were the case, then we’d be into divine playacting of the most cynical kind. And Jesus’ 40-day fast in the desert, His all-night prayer vigils, and His agony in Gethsemane would all amount to a cruel farce.” (*Roy Adams, Advent Review, April 17th 2008, ‘An impenetrable mystery’*)

Who can argue with this reasoning?

The reason why the trinity doctrine forbids this risk belief is that it teaches that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit exist in one indivisible being (that all three comprise one and the same indivisible substance) therefore it is totally impossible for any of the three, regardless of the circumstances, to become separated from the other two. This is the reason why I initially rejected the trinity doctrine. Apart from not being able to prove this 'one divine being' belief from Scripture (therefore it is only speculation), it takes away from Christ all He risked in becoming incarnate.

I could say a great deal more about this teaching and how it affects the incarnation, especially how it affects the atonement, but this is not my purpose in writing out this brief sketch explaining how and why I initially became a non-trinitarian.

The reason why I have related my experience is to show that (a) when I professed to be a trinitarian I had not really understood what the trinity doctrine really taught and (b) in spite of my profession, I wasn’t really a trinitarian anyway. I believe that many present-day Seventh-day Adventists are in exactly the same position.

People have asked me, “why then, if you had not really understood what the trinity doctrine was all about, had you held it in such high regard”?

I have no doubt that the main reason I upheld this teaching was because I believed that if it was not accepted, then those rejecting it were also rejecting that Christ is divine (that He is fully God).

For centuries Christians have been led to think this way. The truth of the matter is though, as most theologians will agree, Scripture alone will not support this three-in-one teaching. It has to be supported by assumptions – meaning using speculative reasoning (reasoning that that cannot be proven from Scripture). This assumption is that all three persons of the Godhead exist in one indivisible divine being (one indivisible substance/essence) as the one God. Where in Scripture can this be found?

The fact of the matter is that to prove the divinity of Christ, there is no need to make assumptions. The only thing needed is the Bible. In other words, in order to establish that Christ is fully divine (fully God), the trinity doctrine is completely unnecessary.

Coming to grips with the truth

Looking back on my experience, I can see God’s leading. When I trashed that letter I had made a very big mistake. God though did not leave it there. He did not give up on me. He gave me another chance.

I do not believe it was coincidental that at that precise time (late 1999) I was in possession of the October 1993 issue of the Ministry magazine. I believe that this was in God’s providence. I realised too I had blown the first chance (by trashing the

letter) so I had no intention of blowing the second chance (the reading of George Knight's article). God was drawing my attention to something very important. It was something He wanted me to know and to which He wanted me to respond. This is His way of working. He provides the initiative but it is up to us to follow it through. He doesn't 'make' us do anything. Our response to His leading shows how much we are interested in knowing the truth. God, through the Holy Spirit, responds accordingly. Those who are seeking the truth He leads into the truth. This is His promise.

It was at the beginning of the year 2000 that I began to study for myself the various issues that were involved in what I had now come to realise was a major controversy within the church. The leaflet, the tapes and the magazine article had all done their respective work. In their various ways they had sown the seeds of truth. They had also initiated within me a spirit of investigation.

From that time on I studied night and day. I can recall that some nights I did not even go to bed. I searched and searched the archives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (also anywhere else on the Internet) for every piece of information I could find. I came to know of happenings in my church that previously I had never heard mentioned – not even after 25 years of being a church member. The more I studied the more I came to know.

I read a great deal of that which had been written by those who for years previously had been involved in this controversy. I was immensely helped by their research. Their work proved invaluable. If it had not been for their contribution, then perhaps I would not have been able to accomplish what I have accomplished. I shall always be ever grateful for the work they had done.

I made numerous trips to the Ellen White Centre here in the UK. The information I acquired there, along with information gathered from numerous other sources, led me to realise a great deal of our denominational history that previously had been unknown to me. It was like coming out of the darkness into the light.

I read all the books and articles on the subject that I could find. With every piece of new information a picture of our denominational history was forming in my mind. It was like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Each piece made the picture that much clearer.

After 16 years of study, I am much enlightened. This is with regards to both the theology and the history of the trinity doctrine. This is especially where Seventh-day Adventism is concerned. I am also aware of the problems involved in this controversy. Some are not easily answered.

I am also quite conversant as to what God has graciously revealed to us through the spirit of prophecy. This is something else of which I shall be eternally grateful. Through my studies I also came to realise how, in the fourth century, albeit it was done rather forcibly, the trinity doctrine was initially inculcated into the beliefs of Christianity but that is a story in itself.

A sad happening

Unfortunately, shortly after I had made my objections known about a book the Seventh-day Adventist Church had published here in the UK promoting the trinity

doctrine (I had made my objections known to the South England Conference president and the editor of the press that had published the book) I was stopped from preaching and teaching. This was in 2003. This for me was a very sad day. In fact it was the saddest day of my Christian experience. Yet I knew I had stood for the truth. This was the all-important factor. If this was to be my 'lot' for standing by what God had shown me then so be it. The alternative was not an acceptable option.

It would be impossible to explain in words how I felt when this happened to me. The only thing I can say is that it left me with a feeling of emptiness that has not gone away. It was just as though I was being told, after 30 years of faithful service to the church, I was no longer wanted. Suddenly I felt like an outsider. I felt as though I did not belong.

If someone had taken the time to say to me "lets sit down and talk about this together", it is quite possible that things may have been different but as it was, this never happened. Perhaps this is the saddest thing of all.

Some closing thoughts

One very important thing I have not mentioned – and it would be very amiss of me not to mention it – is that many of the books and articles that I have read over the years that supposedly reveal the truth about this changeover to trinitarianism are not really the truth. I have found the 'history' in them to be very much distorted. This was just like Froom's book had distorted it.

Many of these publications have put across the idea that our church began to adopt trinitarianism whilst Ellen White was alive – and that because her writings support the trinity doctrine, she would have approved of this changeover. This is far from being true.

First of all, no record can be found of any such changeover – at least not whilst Ellen White was alive. In fact in 1936, in a series of Sabbath School studies specifically designed by the General Conference to show to the world the official faith of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, it can clearly be seen that our Godhead beliefs were still the same then as they had been the year that Ellen White died (1915). In other words, they were still non-trinitarian.

As a matter of passing interest, the Godhead beliefs set out in those studies are the beliefs that I hold today. Whilst I would add a little bit of my own personal explanation to them, they are basically what I believe. I would also say that these beliefs are those generally held by the vast majority of the present-day non-trinitarian Seventh-day Adventists. We are saying therefore that the Godhead belief, declared by the General Conference in 1936 to be the official faith of Seventh-day Adventists, is the truth.

The changeover therefore to trinitarianism did not come until much later. It happened gradually over decades. In fact it was not until 1980 that for the very first time in the history of Seventh-day Adventism, the trinity doctrine was voted into its fundamental beliefs. This happened at the General Conference session held at Dallas, Texas. The reports of this conference show that when the delegates came to discuss this doctrine to word it to be included in our fundamental beliefs, they did have trouble in wording it. This reveals that up to then it had not existed in our fundamental beliefs.

As far as the 'oft repeated claim' is concerned that Ellen White's writings support the trinity doctrine, nothing could be further from the truth. Apart from anything else, she was as adamant as I am that in the making of the decision for the divine Son of God to become incarnate, a risk was taken concerning His eternal existence. As I have said previously, this belief is totally prohibited in trinitarianism. Ellen White therefore, just on this one point alone, could never have been a trinitarian. It would have been an impossibility. Very rarely though, if ever, do the trinitarians bring this to the fore.

On my website I have attempted to set out all of this information in an orderly and easily accessible manner. My prayer is that it will be a continual blessing to all those throughout the world who are searching for the truth. At the end of this document you will find some relevant links that may be of interest to you.

The glory must go to God. If it were not for His leading, none of this would have been possible. Through the ministration of His Holy Spirit He continues to lead people into the truth. May each of us be a partaker of those blessings. May we search for the truth like searching for hidden treasure. May we be prepared to sell all we have to purchase that pearl of great price.

"We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and his teaching in our past history" (Ellen G. White, General Conference Bulletin, 29th January 1893)

Peace and blessings

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Relevant links that may be of interest to you:

A Bible study called 'The Death of Christ and the possibility of Him sinning'

<http://theprophetstillspeaks.co.uk/Hatton/WDAC.pdf>

Ellen White's comments on the incarnation of Christ and the risk taken concerning His existence

<http://theprophetstillspeaks.co.uk/Hatton/MHDOJRF.pdf>

Ellen White's comments concerning the incarnation and the death at Calvary of the divine Son of God

<http://theprophetstillspeaks.co.uk/Hatton/MHDOJEGW.pdf>

A simple guide to understanding the trinity doctrine – its theology, its history and its implications

<http://theprophetstillspeaks.co.uk/Understanding/Asimpleguide.pdf>

A study of the Godhead - as it pertains to Seventh-day Adventism

<http://theprophetstillspeaks.co.uk/Godhead/aGHD1.pdf>