

## **The Adventist Jesus, Faulty Physicalism Metaphysic, Modalism, and semi-Arian Atonement Model in Seventh-Day Adventism**

One of the doctrines that the SDA Church holds is the notion of “Souls Sleep”. It is the idea that once someone dies, they *cease to exist* via their soul sleeping (the soul ceasing because the composite of the body and breath has been disconnected). **“Death is an unconscious state for all people.”**<sup>1</sup> This sleeping soul will be resurrected and the Second Coming of Jesus. However, considering Christology, and the Death of Jesus. Soul sleep eliminates a coherent theology of the **Hypostatic Union of the Lord Jesus (the God-Man)**. If death means ceasing of consciousness/existence, there are only two explanations as to what happened to Jesus on the Cross, either #1) the Divinity of Jesus ceased to exist #2) or the Human Nature of Jesus ceased to exist. Which would separate the Human and Divine natures, which is Semi-Arian/Nestorian. Since it does not make sense to claim that God ceased to exist (metaphysically impossible since God by definition is one not bound to time, place or space. If God were to cease to exist ontologically, that would mean that God is subject to time, place and space), the only option for the SDA is to claim that Jesus was not really the God-Man, rather a human subject. This is made evident in the **Arian** SDA fundamental belief #9.

“Philippians 2:6-8 says that even though Jesus is God, **He set His divine nature aside and took on human nature**. He came to serve us—to show us God’s love for us and live as our example. He came to minister to people through his perfectly obedient life. He obeyed the Father in every way, even when it led to a humiliating death on a cross.

If Jesus had any **advantage through His divinity, His life, death, and resurrection would not have served its purpose!** Christ came to prove the love and fairness of God the Father.”<sup>2</sup>

Since Adventist do not hold to the idea that **death within scripture** refers to a **separation of body and soul**. Adventists cannot hold to Soul Sleep and the Hypostatic Union at the same time. An Arian view of Jesus (the idea that Jesus was not Divine) is consistent, and is the logical conclusion to Soul Sleep. Two Adventist pioneers by the names of J.H Waggoner and J.N Loughborough took Soul Sleep to its logical conclusion and **rejected the Deity of Christ** because of this contention.

**“J.H Waggoner** believed that the Father was the self-existent God, *Christ was not. Therefore, Christ could die for sinners. Both His human and divine attributes died on the Cross.* This position led Waggoner to conclude that *Christ was subordinate possessing a derived existence.*”

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<sup>1</sup> ([SDA](#) Fundamental Belief #26)

<sup>2</sup>([SDA](#) 28 Fundamental Belief #9)

It is clear, therefore, that Waggoner's repudiation of Trinitarianism was in view of *its apparent contradiction of his understanding of the atonement*.<sup>3</sup>

He [Loughborough] opposes the use of the terms "the Triune God," and "the three-in-one God." *if Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are each God, it would be three Gods.*" Under the second point he urges that in Scripture Father and Son are spoken of as two distinct persons. As indicated by John chapter 17, *the oneness between them is the same as that between Christian believers.* To believe the doctrine of the Trinity, to Loughborough, would involve acceptance of the idea that "God sent himself onto the world, *died to reconcile the world to himself, raised himself from the dead, ascended to himself in heaven....*"<sup>4</sup>

Even as recently as 2006, there has been a wave of Anti-Trinitarians within Adventism who "have advocated for the semi-Arian position of some early Adventist leaders."<sup>5</sup> The history of Adventism attests to the notion of rejection of the Deity of Christ, and has only been until recently that Adventism affirms the Trinity. Which could be argued as just an equivocation of the word Trinity, in order to masquerade as an Adventist concept.

Jerry Moon states that "Ellen White's view did change [on the Trinity]—she was raised trinitarian, came to doubt some aspects of the trinitarianism she was raised on, and eventually came to a different trinitarian view from the traditional one."<sup>6</sup> Also, Moon argues that the Trinitarian doctrine that the Pioneers rejected is *not* the same doctrine that Ellen White teaches pertaining to the Trinity. Moon states that "It appears, therefore, that the trinitarian teaching of Ellen White's later writings is not the same doctrine that the early Adventists rejected." The Pioneers rejected "creedal Trinitarianism", which mirrors the Cappadocian Formation of the Trinity. Because Ellen White's 'trinity' concept *is not* what the Pioneers rejected (i.e. Cappadocian Trinity). This would only logically follow that Ellen White *does not* teach the Cappadocian understanding of the Trinity, since she can not affirm what the Pioneers rejected according to Moon. Other issues such as the Pioneers metaphysical presuppositions such as God needing to have a physical tangible body in order to be a personal God further proves that Adventism has drifted away from the Orthodox understanding of the Trinity—simply equivocating on the term "Trinity".

Jerry Moon allows us to see the perspective of post-1844 Adventism, showing that James White. Because of the rise of Spiritualism, presupposed that God's ontological existence consists of a physical, tangible body.

In one passage James charged that the "spiritualizers" "spiritualize away the existence of the Father and the Son, as two distinct, *literal* [sic], *tangible persons*, also a literal Holy city and throne of David."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup><http://www.sdanet.org/atissue/trinity/gane-thesis/e-gane16.htm>

<sup>4</sup>Ibid

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.atsjats.org/11moon-trinitywhite06-01.pdf> (p. 141)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid (p. 142)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid (p. 146)

Even the Advent fathers collapsed the distinction between God's essence and God's energies or actions. Since they interpreted the impassibility of God's essence found in the Methodist Episcopal Church as God's energies (i.e. God being described as having a back and face in Exodus 33:23 being identical to God's essence).

For example, one trinitarian creed that early Adventists quoted fairly often was that of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Ellen White's church of origin. That creed says in part, "There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts." This the early Adventists vigorously refuted, citing several biblical passages that portrayed God as having both "body" and "parts."<sup>8</sup>

Moon even takes the position that Ellen White's visions pertaining to the form of the Father and Jesus supports James White's physicalist presuppositions about the ontology of God;

Twice in early visions of Jesus, she [Ellen] asked Him [Jesus in vision] questions related to the "form" and "person" of God. In one early vision, she reported seeing "a throne, and on it sat the Father and the Son. I gazed on Jesus' countenance," she said, "and admired His lovely person. The Father's person I could not behold, for a cloud of glorious light covered Him. I asked Jesus if His Father had a form like Himself. He said He had, but I could not behold it, for said He, 'If you should once behold the glory of His person, you would cease to exist.'"<sup>9</sup>

In 1850 she reported, "I have often seen the lovely Jesus, that He is a person. I asked Him if His Father was a person and had a form like Himself. Said Jesus, 'I am in the express image of My Father's person.'" Thus her visions confirmed what her husband had written in 1846, that the Father and the Son are "two distinct, literal, tangible persons."

The Holy Spirit was not recognized as a divine tangible person until the 1890's in White's Theology as well. Further attesting that the Adventist 'trinity' has departed from the faith of the Cappadocians.

In the 1890s, when she became convinced of the individuality and personhood of the Holy Spirit, she referred to the Holy Spirit in literal and tangible terms much like those she had used in 1850 to describe the Father and the Son. For instance, addressing the church at Avondale College in 1899, she declared, "the Holy Spirit, who is as much a person as God is a person, is walking through these grounds, unseen by human eyes . . . . He hears every word we utter and knows every thought of the mind."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid (p. 147)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid (p. 155)

Moon also comments on Ellen White's 'trinity' concept as not being ontologically united, but rather united in mission. This is the logic of the second Fundamental Belief of Adventism which is Modalistic in nature. The reason why this analogy for the Trinity fails is because within human anatomy. Individuals consist of one person and one existence, that means that in a "winning team" there would be three existences. Which is heretical, and would advocate some form of tritheism. In the metaphysic of the Trinity, having a multiplicity of personhood (*hypostasis*) does not follow having a multiplicity of existence (*ousia*). This is *nothing* like a winning team, and is the reason most Trinity analogies are heretical falling subject to Tritheism, Modalism, or Partialism.

The triune God may be compared to a winning team. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit work together in ways that a human team would never be able to for a common goal. While each person of the Godhead has a distinct role in the plan of salvation, they unite in their mission.<sup>11</sup>

Regardless of the faulty epistemological starting point for Adventist pertaining to the doctrine of the Trinity. Ellen White, the Seventh-Day Adventists' inspired prophet says that Jesus was exalted prior to the Creation of the earth, and other statements that would later be problematic with the church's understanding of Christology.

***The exaltation of the Son of God as equal with the Father was represented as an injustice to Lucifer***, who, it was claimed, was also entitled to reverence and honor. If this prince of angels could but attain to his true, exalted position, great good would accrue to the entire host of heaven; for it was his object to secure freedom for all. But now even the liberty which they had hitherto enjoyed was at an end; for an absolute ruler had been appointed them, and to his authority all must pay homage. Such were the subtle deceptions that through the wiles of Lucifer were fast obtaining in the heavenly courts. There had been no change in the position or authority of Christ. Lucifer's envy and misrepresentation, and his claims to equality with Christ, had made necessary a statement of the true position of the Son of God; but this had been the same from the beginning.<sup>12</sup>

According to Ellen White, Jesus is given the Ontological Status of God in her narrative of Heaven before the Creation.

A special light beamed in his [Satan's] countenance, and shone around him brighter and more beautiful than around the other angels; yet Jesus, God's dear Son, had the pre-eminence over all the angelic host. He was one with the Father before the angels were created. Satan was envious of Christ, and gradually assumed command which devolved on Christ alone. The great Creator assembled the heavenly host, ***that he might in the presence of all the angels confer special honor upon his Son....The***

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.adventist.org/trinity/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/84.68>

***Father then made known that it was ordained by himself that Christ, his Son, should be equal with himself; so that wherever was the presence of his Son, it was his own presence....*** His Son would carry out His will and His purposes, but would do nothing of himself alone.<sup>13</sup>

During the 1919 Bible Conference, Elder W. W. Prescott made a presentation on “The Person of Christ.” This stirred up disputation among the Adventists at the Conference. L. L. Caviness is reported saying this concerning the Deity of Christ and the Trinity.

*I cannot believe that the two persons of the Godhead are equal, the Father and the Son, — that one is the Father and the other the Son, and that they might be just as well the other way round.... In praying he [Christ] said it was his wish that the disciples might see the glory which he had with the Father, and which the Father had given him. **It was not something he had all through eternity, but the Father had some time given to him the glory of God.** He is divine, but he is the divine Son. I cannot explain further than that, but I cannot believe the so called Trinitarian doctrine of the three persons always existing.*<sup>14</sup>

An Adventist Pioneer that had a significant impact on the formation of Adventist Theology Joseph Bates argued against and rejected the Deity of Christ. He obviously conflated the distinction between Essence (ousia) and Person (hypostasis) in the Trinity. Presupposing that God only consists of one person like how Human existence works (a human being consisting of one person and one essence). However the Trinity explains that the Metaphysic of God is nothing like a Human in the sense that God can have one existence (ousia), while having three persons (hypostasis). Nevertheless ignorance does not justify the rejection of the Holy Trinity;

“Respecting the trinity, I concluded that it was impossible for me to believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, was also the Almighty God, the Father, one and the same being. I said to my father, ***“If you can convince me that we are one in this sense, that you are my father, and I your son, and also that I am my father, and you my son, then I can believe in the trinity.”***... In a few days I was immersed and joined the Christian Church. (Autobiography of Elder Joseph Bates (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist, 1868)

J.M Stephenson, another Adventist pioneer affirmed an Semi-Arian position pertaining to the Deity of Christ. He even twists Colossians 1:15 in order to try to prove Jesus is created. Stephenson says;

The idea of the Father and Son supposes priority of the existence of the one, and the subsequent existence of the other. To say that the Son is as old as the Father, is a

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<sup>13</sup> <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/141.56>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.sdanet.org/atissue/trinity/gane-thesis/e-gane16.htm>

palpable contradiction of terms. *It is a natural impossibility for the Father to be as young as the Son, or the Son to be as old as the Father.*<sup>15</sup>

Stephenson went so far as to declare that Christ was a created being;

Col. 1:15. "the first born of every creature." Creature signifies creation; hence to be the first born of every creature, (creation) *he must be a created being*; and as such, his life and immortality must depend upon the Father's will just as much as angels, or redeemed man....<sup>16</sup>

Metaphysical presuppositions about God's ontology simply cloud the Early Adventist in achieving a coherent Christology. This faulty understanding of the Godhead ultimately pours out into their Christology and Incarnational Theology. Battling between if the Human or Divine nature ceased existence partaking in Soul Sleep.

For Adventist to try to get around Jesus the God-Man **ceasing to exist**, some will use this analogy "Jesus was sleeping in the grave in the same way that when we sleep we do not cease to exist". There are many problems with this, the first being that this is a **category error**. Since when someone is sleeping on Earth, according to Adventist teaching the **body and breath are still in union with each other** (one is still alive). But if Jesus **died** (i.e. Soul Sleep ), this would mean that **body and breath would break their union**. Causing Jesus in His human nature to cease existence and consciousness.

For the Adventist to disagree with this, they would **deny the position of Soul Sleep**. Since this doctrine teaches that when one dies, ceases to act, will or self-reflect until the Return of Jesus. There is **no possible way** in the doctrine of Soul Sleep **to have some type of consciousness after the body and breath break their union**. This would be self-refuting and would support the idea of **an immortal soul, since outside the composition of body and breath a soul can exist**.

Daniel Kitavi on YouTube helped me point this out to an Adventist online;

"The doctrine [of Soul Sleep] is described slightly differently depending on the Adventist you talk to. There are some who take the **concept of sleep to refer to an ontological state of the soul after death. The soul survives death but in an unconscious state until resurrection when it is awakened**. Others take sleep to be a metaphor describing not the ontology of the soul but the nature of death itself as something temporary and reversible by God. Death often looks like the person is sleeping and like the temporary nature of sleep, the dead can be reawakened. That's one example. There are other non-ontological ways that the metaphor is explained. The two views are clearly not the same. The first is a soft version of the immortality of the soul. Death does not actually destroy the soul. It renders it unconscious. A soul can still continue to exist without a body and without the breath of life albeit

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

unconsciously. The second is soul extinction or annihilation. Soul is simply taken as another word referring to the entire person. The soul (person) does not survive death. **The separation of body and breath renders the soul (person) non-existent since the soul (person) didn't exist before the two came together.**

Another way to understand the second view above is using the analogy of a chair. A chair only exists when certain constituent parts are arranged and combined in a certain way. If i take a log and together with some nails i create a table, i have not made a chair even though the same materials are involved. But if I arrange those same materials in a certain way then a chair now exists. The soul is understood the same way. **The parts alone (body and breath) do not constitute a soul. A soul is the combination of such parts.** But just like the dissolution of the parts composing a chair would result in the non-existence of the chair, **the dissolution of the body and breath would result in the non-existence of the soul.** Even though Adventists insist in being monistic in their understanding of the nature of man (recently talked to one who claimed the position of non reductive physicalism), many are actually dualists when they claim that the soul continues to exist after death (unconsciously). **This is like suggesting that the chair continues to exist after the dissolution of its material parts. The only way this can be is if the essence of what it means to be a chair could exist without its material composition and arrangement as a separate entity. This would be metaphysical Platonism. And in the nature of man, this is dualism.**<sup>17</sup>

Since the definition of death in Adventism is ceasing the ability to act to will, act, self reflect and exist after death. This would break the Hypostatic Union, having one of the natures of Christ cease for the three days in the tomb. Splitting the divine and human natures in Christ (Nestorian/Arian). **St John of Damascus** explains the distinction and unity in the Incarnation. Refuting the idea that one of the natures of Christ can cease. There is a distinction that doesn't follow composition between the human and divine nature of the Incarnate Logos *theanthropos*.

[T]he Incarnation of the One God the Word of the Holy Trinity, and our Lord Jesus Christ, we confess that there are two natures, one divine and one human, joined together with one another and united in subsistence , so that one compound subsistence is formed out of the two natures: but we hold that the two natures are still preserved, even after the union, in the one compound subsistence, that is, in the one Christ, and that these exist in reality and have their natural properties; for they are united without confusion, and are distinguished and enumerated without being separable. And just as the three subsistences of the Holy Trinity are united without confusion, and are distinguished and enumerated without being separable , the enumeration not entailing division or separation or alienation or cleavage among them

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<sup>17</sup> (Daniel.Kitavi's Youtube Comment on "Did Jesus Preach To Spirits in Hell When He Died?")

(for we recognise one God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit), so in the same way the natures of Christ also, although they are united, yet are united without confusion; and although they interpenetrate one another, yet they do not permit of change or transmutation of one into the other. For each keeps its own natural individuality strictly unchanged. And thus it is that they can be enumerated [distinguished] without the enumeration introducing division. For Christ, indeed, is one, perfect both in divinity and in humanity. For it is not the nature of number to cause separation or unity, but its nature is to indicate the quantity of what is enumerated, whether these are united or separated: for we have unity, for instance, when fifty stones compose a wall, but we have separation when the fifty stones lie on the ground; and again, we have unity when we speak of coal having two natures, namely, fire and wood, but we have separation in that the nature of fire is one thing, and the nature of wood another thing; for these things are united and separated not by number, but in another way. So, then, just as even though the three subsistences of the Godhead are united with each other, we cannot speak of them as one subsistence because we should confuse and do away with the difference between the subsistences, so also we cannot speak of the two natures of Christ as one nature, united though they are in subsistence, because we should then confuse and do away with and reduce to nothing the difference between the two natures.<sup>18</sup>

This is what happens when your *ordo theologica* ends with Christology. Christ is the most important in Christian Theology, this is why the First Ecumenical Council starts with refuting Arianism and defining Christology. Protestants are too worried about Eschatology and Soteriology that their Christology ends up being heretical and damnable. May God silence these various Christian heresies and bring them to the fullness of the Orthodox Church.

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<sup>18</sup> An Exposition of the Orthodox Faith (Book III), St John of Damascus



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