

Old Landmarks

Anti-Trinitarians such as Allen Stump and Nader Mansour have claimed that non-Trinity is a foundational pillar or "old landmark" of the Seventh-day Adventist faith.

These claims are based largely on Ellen White's quotes such as the following:

"Those who seek to remove the old landmarks are not holding fast; they are not remembering how they have received and heard. Those who try to bring in theories that would remove the pillars of our faith concerning the sanctuary or concerning the personality of God or of Christ, are working as blind men. They are seeking to bring in uncertainties and to set the people of God adrift without an anchor." (Ellen G. White to the delegates at the 1905 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Takoma Park, Washington D. C., May 24th 1905, "A Warning against False Theories," MR 760)

"I entreat every one to be clear and firm regarding the certain truths that we have heard and received and advocated. The statements of God's Word are plain. Plant your feet firmly on the platform of eternal truth. Reject every phase of error, even though it be covered with a semblance of reality, which denies the personality of God and of Christ." - RH August 31, 1905, par. 11

"No line of truth that has made the Seventh-day Adventist people what they are is to be weakened. We have the old landmarks of truth, experience, and duty, and we are to stand firmly in defense of our principles, in full view of the world." - 6T 17.2

"We are God's commandment-keeping people. For the past fifty years every phase of heresy has been brought to bear upon us, to becloud our minds regarding the teaching of the word,—especially concerning the ministration of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary, and the message of heaven for these last days, as given by the angels of the fourteenth chapter of Revelation. Messages of every order and kind have been urged upon Seventh-day Adventists, to take the place of the truth which, point by point, has been sought out by prayerful study, and testified to by the miracle-working power of the Lord. But the way-marks which have made us what we are, are to be preserved, and they will be preserved, as God has signified through His word and the testimony of His Spirit. He calls upon us to hold firmly, with the grip of faith, to the fundamental principles that are based upon unquestionable authority." SpTB02 59.1

These statements make reference to "old landmarks", "platform of eternal truth", "waymarks", and "fundamental principles" that refer to the pillars of the faith that Ellen White says must not be changed.

The first two of the above statements also make reference to erroneous theories that destroy the "personality of God and of Christ" and thereby remove the pillars of faith.

The aforementioned anti-Trinitarians have claimed that opposition to the Trinity is a foundational pillar of the Seventh-day Adventist faith, and that the Trinity doctrine as understood by Seventh-day Adventists today denies the personality of God and of Christ.

Are these claims valid?

In addressing this claim we must seek to understand what Ellen White herself viewed as the "old landmarks." In 1889 Ellen White made just such a list of doctrines that she considered to be foundational pillars (emphasis supplied in these and all quotes following):

"In Minneapolis God gave precious gems of truth to His people in new settings. This light from heaven by some was rejected with all the stubbornness the Jews manifested in rejecting Christ, and there was much talk about standing by the old landmarks. But there was evidence they knew not what the old landmarks were. There was evidence and there was reasoning from the Word that commended itself to the conscience; but the minds of men were fixed, sealed against the entrance of light, because they had decided it was a dangerous error, removing the "old landmarks," when it was not moving a peg of the old landmarks, but they had perverted ideas of what constituted the old landmarks. The passing of the time in 1844 was a period of great events, opening to our astonished eyes the **cleansing of the sanctuary** transpiring in heaven, and having decided relation to God's people upon the earth, [also] the **first and second angels' messages and the third**, unfurling the banner on which was inscribed, "**The commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.**" [Revelation 14:12.] One of the landmarks under this message was the **temple of God**, seen by His truth-loving people in heaven, and the **ark containing the law of God**. The light of **the Sabbath of the fourth commandment** flashed its strong rays in the pathway of the transgressors of God's law. The **non-immortality of the wicked** is an old landmark. I can call to mind nothing more that can come under the head of the old landmarks. All this cry about changing the old landmarks is all imaginary." - 6LtMs, Ms 13, 1889, par. 9

There is no reference to Trinity or non-Trinity in this list of foundation pillars.

The statement was made in reference to the attempt in 1888 to stall the "light from heaven" which was presented to the church by Jones and Waggoner on the subject of Righteousness by Faith.

She clearly enumerates a list of items that were central to the identity of the Seventh-day Adventist movement. These items were agreed to by all in that movement and distinguished them from most other Christians. Moreover Ellen White states that she could think of no other items that should be on the list.

It is clear that Ellen White did not consider any non-Trinitarian doctrine to be a pillar of the Seventh-day Adventist faith. She did not include it in any known list of beliefs that could be considered as pillars.

Personality of God and of Christ

What about the theories that deny "the personality of God or of Christ" in the first two quotes above?

These statements were made in 1905 when Ballenger was attacking the sanctuary and Kellogg was pressing his pantheistic theories, and context shows that this was what she was referring to:

"Brother Ballenger does not discern what he is doing any more than Dr. Kellogg discerned that the book *Living Temple* contained some of the most dangerous errors that could be presented to the people of God. The most specious errors lie concealed in these theories and suppositions, which, if received, would leave the people of God in a labyrinth of error." - 20LtMs, Ms 62, 1905, par. 4

Although Ellen White made statements about the personality of God, there is no evidence that she ever stated that the Trinity would destroy or adversely impact the individual personalities of the Father and of the Son.

The aforementioned anti-Trinitarians also quote from James White and J.N. Andrews, written 50 years earlier, to explain what Ellen White was referring to when she wrote of denying "the personality of God and of Christ":

"Here we might mention the Trinity, which does away the personality of God, and of his son Jesus Christ..." - James White, *Review & Herald*, Dec. 11, 1855

"The doctrine of the Trinity which was established in the church by the council of Nice, A.D. 325. This doctrine destroys the personality of God, and his Son Jesus Christ our Lord." - J.N. Andrews, *Review & Herald*, March 6, 1855

We've already noted that Ellen White was combating the specific issue of Kellogg's pantheism, and not addressing some Trinity issue.

But what were these early pioneers objecting to?

They were objecting to the fanciful, mystical, or distorted views of the Trinity, as the following examples show:

"Respecting the trinity, I concluded that it was an impossibility 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.**" - Joseph Bates, *Autobiography*, 1868, pg 205

"That God is an infinite and eternal Spirit, **without person, body, shape or parts** ... That Jesus Christ is God himself; the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, are **one identical being.**" - A.C. Bourdeau, *Review & Herald*, June 8, 1869 (describing the teaching of Prof. Roux at a French Baptist Education Institute)

"...every argument of the Trinitarian to prove **three Gods in one person** ... contradicts reason, and contradicts the Bible." - D.M. Canright, *Review & Herald*, Aug. 29, 1878

"That one person is three persons, and that **three persons are only one person**, is the doctrine which we claim is contrary to reason and common sense." - R.F. Cottrell, *Review & Herald*, July 6, 1869

"...we don't believe, as the M.E. church Discipline teaches, that Christ is the very and eternal God; and, at the same time, very man; **that the human part was the Son, and the divine part was the Father.** We might here add that the orthodox view of God as expressed by them in several 'Articles of Faith,' is, that 'God is **without body, parts, passions, centre, circumference, or locality.**'" - D.W. Hull, *Review & Herald*, Nov. 10, 1859

"If Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are each God, it would be three Gods, for three times one is not one, but three. There is a sense in which they are one, but not **one person**, as claimed by Trinitarians." - J.N. Loughborough, *Review & Herald*, Nov. 5, 1861

"The doctrine called the Trinity, claiming that **God is without form or parts; that the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, the three are one person.**" - Uriah Smith, *Review & Herald*, July 10, 1856

"Is Christ the Father in the Trinity? If so, how is He the Son? or if **He is both Father and Son**, how can there be a Trinity" - J.H. Waggoner, *The Atonement in the Light of Nature and Revelation*, pg 169

With these ideas current at the time, it is not surprising that James White and J.N. Andrews objected to the confusing views of the Trinity that were prevalent in their day. The pioneers of the Adventist church correctly insisted on the personality of God in whose image we were created.

Unscriptural Papal Trinity

Our early pioneers were coming out of a long period of darkness of Papal confusion and were reacting against the impersonal God without form or parts as posed by the mystical and unscriptural Catholic concept of the Trinity as reflected in the statements from various Catholic sources below:

"From all eternity **the Father begets the Son, and the Son proceeds from the Father.** The Father and Son breathe forth the Holy Ghost, and He proceeds from Them, as from one Source" - Louis Laravoire Morrow, Bishop of Krishnagar, *One God in Three Persons*, My Catholic Faith: a Manual of Religion, pg. 30

"The Son is necessary to the completeness of the Godhead. The Son, we are told, is not external to the Father, does not accrue to the Father from without, but is **of the substance of the Father.**" *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1963 edition, Vol. 22, pg. 479

"He [the Holy Spirit] proceeds, not by way of generation, but by way of **spiration from the Father and the Son together**, as from a single principle. Such is the belief that the Catholic faith demands." - *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1914 Edition, art, "Holy Spirit"

"**The Son proceeds from the Father** by an act of the intellect and this is termed 'Eternal Generation,' by which we mean not only that there never was a time when the Father existed without generating the Son, but also that the act of Generation is a continuous act." The manual teaches that **there could be no separation between the Father and the Son on earth**, since this would interrupt the act of generation. Thus the Son would not exist, which would mean that the Father would not exist. Since they are of one essence, neither the Father nor the Son could exist separately from the other." - Alfred Mortimer, *Catholic Faith and Practice*

"**The Son proceeds from the Father by generation** (and generation means the process of begetting offspring, reproduction, or giving birth to)..." - Peter Geiermann, C.S.S.R., *The Convert's Catechism of Catholic Doctrine*, pg. 31, September 16, 1957

"The Holy Ghost is the Spirit of Christ. He is also the Spirit of the Father. Thus St. Augustine argues (in Joan, tr. Xcix, 6, 7 in P.L., XXXV, 188) . . . Just as there is only one Father, just as there is only one Son, so there is only one Spirit, who is, consequently, the Spirit of both' . . . such is the explicit teaching of ecclesiastical tradition, which is concisely put by St. Augustine . . . This doctrine was put in the following words by the Second Ecumenical Council of Lyons (Denziger, 'Enchiridion,' 1908, n. 460): 'We confess that **the Holy Ghost proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son**, not as from two principles, but as from one principle, not by two spirations, but by one single spiration.' The teaching was again laid down by the council of Florence." - *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1914 Edition

"**The Son 'proceeds' from the Father, and the Holy Spirit 'proceeds from the Father and the Son.'** These are the two processions in God. And these are foundational to the four relations that constitute the three persons in God. These are those four eternal relations in God:

1. The Father actively and eternally generates the Son, constituting the person of God, the Father.
2. The Son is passively generated of the Father, which constitutes the person of the Son.
3. The Father and the Son actively spirate the Holy Spirit in the one relation within the inner life of God that does not constitute a person. It does not do so because the Father and Son are already constituted as persons in relation to each other in the first two relations. This is why

CCC 240 teaches, '[The Second Person of the Blessed Trinity] is Son only in relation to his Father.'

4. The Holy Spirit is passively spirated of the Father and the Son, constituting the person of the Holy Spirit."

- Tim Staples, *Explaining the Trinity*, catholic.com

Essentially the Catholic Trinity teaches:

1. The Son came out of the Father, beginning long ago - so He is not eternal.
2. The Holy Spirit has no separate existence, but only as He keeps coming out of the others.
3. God is one in person

The SDA church today has nothing in common whatsoever with these teachings.

Ironically, these same ideas are now being promoted by many Protestants who seek to distance their view of the godhead from the errors of Catholicism, but in reality are repeating them. Anti-Trinitarians believe that God created Christ from His own substance, and that the Holy Spirit is a force or energy of holy influence from the Father and the Son, which is nearly identical to Roman Catholic teachings.

It's no wonder that the SDA pioneers rejected this doctrine of the Trinity. Our pioneers did not write one word in opposition to the triune Godhead, but it was the mystical unscriptural pagan ideas of the godhead that they rejected.

Restoration of Truth

Our pioneers had to deal with layers of confusion regarding not only the Papal legacy of mysticism relating to the Trinity, but also had to come to a proper understanding of Christ's divinity, the divinity and personality of the Holy Spirit, and the atonement - all of which had been obscured by Catholic-Protestant confusion. It was necessary that they reject this confusion before they could properly understand each of these related Bible truths. Thus, the restoration of truth was a step-by-step process that developed over time.

Ellen White also grew in her understanding of these Bible truths. Unlike some of the early pioneers, she never repudiated the "Trinity", although she never used the term. Over time she gradually intensified her expressions for the triune God, using such expressions as "three living persons of the heavenly trio" (IHP 336), "three great powers - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (IHP 336), "the Godhead ... the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (CH 222), "the three dignitaries and powers of heaven" (6BC 1075), "the power of the three holiest Beings in heaven" (21LtMs, Ms 95, 1906, par. 29), "the three highest powers in heaven, - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost" (SpTB07 51.1), "The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the three holy dignitaries of heaven" (5BC 1110), "the three persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (15LtMs, Ms57, 1900, par. 11), "the threefold name...the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost" (6BC 1075), "the three highest powers in the universe-the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (RH 08/12/1909), "the Father, the Son, and Holy Ghost,—the three highest powers in the heavenly courts" (22LtMs, Ms 61, 1907, par. 14), and "the three great Worthies in heaven" (21LtMs, Ms 95, 1906, par. 13).

It is simply not the case, as the aforementioned anti-Trinitarian authors assert, that non-Trinity was ever an "old landmark", a "waymark", or a "fundamental principle" of the Seventh-day Adventist faith. Not once did Ellen White ever include anything having to do with the nature of the Godhead as a pillar of our faith. Our pioneers

were not against the triune God, only the false concepts of the Trinity that were prevalent in their day. Ellen White came to strongly endorse the doctrine of the triune God, the divinity and eternal pre-existence of Christ, and the personality and individuality of the Holy Spirit. Thus there is no merit to the claims made regarding non-Trinitarianism and the fundamental principles of our faith, nor that the Trinity doctrine destroys the personality of God or of Christ.