



The following article, the first in a series of three dealing with the eternal Godhead, was published in ALMA Torch in May 2008. Each article in the series will be posted here as it is published.

THE ETERNAL GODHEAD – I

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Introduction

This series of articles upholds the doctrine of the eternal Godhead, composed of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and seeks to explain the significance of contemporary challenges to this doctrine within Seventh-day Adventism. In this article it will be seen that rejection of the eternal Godhead, intellectually at least, stems from a failure to apply a sound Scriptural methodology.

My consistent experience has been that whenever dissension arises over the nature of the Godhead there are two different methodologies at work, resulting in different reactions to the same evidence, leading to different conclusions. The methodology of choice is clearly influenced by personal factors. Luke 5:22 states: “But when Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answering said unto them, What reason ye in your hearts?” Jesus knew that our minds work in accordance with our desires. Spiritual orientation affects our perceptions and the way in which we process evidence.

This principle applies in other ways. Social psychologist Robert Abelson concludes that most people in many important areas of their lives treat their beliefs like possessions.¹ The surprising point for Abelson is the strength of non-rational factors in persuasion. It seems that the place of reason and evidence in persuasion is much less important in practice than commonly thought.

Fortunately, Scripture contains its own self-interpreting principles and Seventh-day Adventists do not need to come to doctrinal discussions of the Godhead with different methodologies.

Thus, it is important that we come to a consideration of the Scriptural evidence concerning the Godhead with an earnest desire to know the truth and with a defensible methodology. A proper regard for our own souls and the souls of others will lead us to apply the self-interpreting principles of the Scriptures consistently and to demand the same of those who would persuade us to abandon the doctrine of the eternal Godhead. We cannot afford to be deceived on this issue. Before proceeding to the evidence, it will be helpful to revisit some basic principles of Scriptural interpretation.

Understanding Scripture and Evaluating Claims

The interpretative principles contained in Scripture include: the authority and harmony of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:15-17; 2:15; Isaiah 1:18; 28:9-13; Acts 17:11; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 5:19-21); the self-interpreting nature of Scripture (2 Peter 1:20; 1 Corinthians 2:12-14; Isaiah 28:9-13); the clearer passages as the key to the less clear (2 Peter 3:16); and in relation to the Spirit of Prophecy: “The testimonies themselves will be the key that will explain the messages given, as scripture is explained by scripture” (Selected Messages, Vol. 1, p. 42). Ellen White clarifies her role in relation to Scripture: “God has, in that Word, promised to give visions in the "last days"; not for a new rule of faith, but for the comfort of His people, and to correct those who err from Bible truth” (Early Writings, p. 78).

It is clear from such passages as Acts 17:11 that doctrinal claims can be tested against Scripture. There seem to be clear passages against which to test claims on important topics. For example, if the claim is made that it is impossible to keep the law of God, the claim can be tested against direct, relevant passages such as Revelation 14:12 and Revelation 22:14, which disconfirm the claim. If this process disconfirms a claim, it indicates that Scriptural testimony has been misperceived. If conclusions are not confirmed, the topic must be revisited and the evidence brought into harmony.

To express this succinctly, Scripture is self-interpreting when we deal faithfully with what the text is saying in its context, compare relevant passages and bring them into harmony, test claims against the clearest and most relevant passages of Scripture and check to see if our conclusions are confirmed in the Spirit of Prophecy. That is the basic methodology for understanding Scriptural doctrines and testing claims. It is the failure to apply these simple and timeless principles to the Scriptural testimony upholding the eternal Godhead that leads people to adopt indefensible positions.

The Eternal Godhead

Godhead is a Scriptural term and will thus be explained in Scripture. Acts 17:29: “Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device.” God and Godhead are here equated. To be part of the Godhead is to be God. Romans 1:20 adds more information: “For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.” One of the

characteristics of Godhead is eternal power. Eternal power means power that has always existed and will always exist. The testimony of these passages is that those who are part of the Godhead are God and possess eternal power. Colossians 2:9, 10 add further to this picture: “For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power.” The Godhead is plural and Christ is a member of it, being the head of all principality and power.

These three Scriptural references to the Godhead inform us that members of the Godhead are eternal beings. Other parts of Scripture reveal that there are three members of the eternal Godhead: “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one” 1 John 5:7; “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” Matthew 28:19; “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen” 2 Corinthians 13:14; and “How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him” Acts 10:38.

Still other Scriptural references confirm that each of these three members of the Godhead is eternal. The Father is eternal, as we read in Deuteronomy 33:27: “The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms: and he shall thrust out the enemy from before thee; and shall say, Destroy them.” The Son, as a member of the Godhead, is eternal, as confirmed in Isaiah 9:6: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.” The Holy Spirit, as a member of the Godhead, is also eternal, as is confirmed in Hebrews 9:14: “How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?”

Ellen White confirms that the Godhead is eternal and composed of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, three distinct persons but of one purpose. Here is *Upward Look*, page 148: “The eternal Godhead—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost—is involved in the action required to make assurance to the human agent, . . . confederating the heavenly powers with the human that man may become, through heavenly efficiency, partakers of the divine nature and workers together with Christ.” The eternal Godhead is made up of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. It could not be expressed more clearly. The distinction between the three members of the Godhead is confirmed in *Counsels on Health*, page 222: “The Godhead was stirred with pity for the race, and the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit gave Themselves to the working out of the plan of redemption.”

Evangelism, page 615, settles the issue in relation to the Holy Spirit being a person: “There are three living persons of the heavenly trio; in the name of these three great powers—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—those who receive Christ by living faith are baptized, and these powers will co-operate with the obedient subjects of heaven in their efforts to live the new life in Christ.” There are three living persons in the Godhead.

Both the Son and Holy Spirit are eternal beings. Here is *Faith I Live By*, page 46, in relation to the Son: “Christ was God essentially, and in the highest sense. He was with God from all

eternity, God over all, blessed forevermore. The Lord Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God, existed from eternity, a distinct person, yet one with the Father. He was the surpassing glory of heaven. He was the commander of the heavenly intelligences, and the adoring homage of the angels was received by Him as His right. He was equal with God, infinite and omnipotent.” Christ’s existence is eternal and thus uncaused. Christ is God in the highest sense.

Of the eternity of the Holy Spirit we read in Testimonies to Ministers, page 404: “All should bear in mind that Satan’s special efforts are directed against the ministry. He knows that it is but a human instrumentality, possessing no grace or holiness of its own. He knows that it is an agent that God has ordained to be a powerful means for the salvation of souls and is efficacious only as God, the eternal Spirit, makes it so.”

Christ is a member of the absolute Godhead, as we note in Signs of the Times, June 27, 1895, paragraph 3: “The greatness of God cannot be measured or comprehended. And that doctrine that denies the absolute Godhead of Jesus Christ, denies also the Godhead of the Father; for no man knoweth the Son but the Father.” What is already apparent about Christ’s membership of the absolute Godhead cannot be denied without risking the very structure of Scriptural knowledge of God and His truth. Christ is the absolute Godhead and is thus the absolute God. An absolute Godhead means no degrees of membership exist.

Ellen White confirms that the Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Godhead and exercises the fullness of divinity in Desire of Ages, page 671: “Sin could be resisted and overcome only through the mighty agency of the Third Person of the Godhead, who would come with no modified energy, but in the fullness of divine power.” It is thus established beyond question that the Godhead is eternal and is composed of three eternal Persons. To assert otherwise is to destroy reason and language.

The Eternal Son of God

I want to focus now on the eternity of the Son of God, as this presents an excellent case study of what goes wrong when sound methodology is not applied to Scripture. In John 8:58, we read: “Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.” Regarding this statement, we read in Desire of Ages, pages, 469, and 470: “Silence fell upon the vast assembly. The name of God, given to Moses to express the idea of the eternal presence, had been claimed as His own by this Galilean Rabbi. He had announced Himself to be the self-existent One, He who had been promised to Israel, “whose goings forth have been from of old, from the days of eternity.” Micah 5:2, margin.”

The evidence for Christ’s self-existence is unequivocal: “Christ is the pre-existent, self-existent Son of God.... In speaking of his pre-existence, Christ carries the mind back through dateless ages. He assures us that there never was a time when He was not in close fellowship with the eternal God. He to whose voice the Jews were then listening had been with God as one brought up with Him.—Signs of the Times, Aug. 29, 1900. (Evangelism, page 615);” “He was equal with God, infinite and omnipotent. . . . He is the eternal, self-existent Son.—Manuscript 101, 1897. (Evangelism, page 615).” Patriarchs and Prophets, page 305, equates self-existence with being uncreated or underived: “Jehovah, the eternal, self-existent, uncreated One, Himself the

Source and Sustainer of all, is alone entitled to supreme reverence and worship.” Jesus does not derive His existence from the Father but is self-existent or uncreated.

Note what happens when sound methodology is not applied in relation to this issue. From Psalm 90:2, we learn that God’s existence is from everlasting to everlasting: “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.” Micah 5:2 confirms that Jesus’ existence is from everlasting: “But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.” That Jesus is everlasting is confirmed in Isaiah 9:6: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.”

Jesus is called LORD [YHWH or Jehovah] and “our God” in the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 40:3 (cf Matthew 3:3). Jesus is known as the “mighty God” and “everlasting Father” in Isaiah 9:6, “I am” in John 8:58, “the great god” in Titus 2:13, “the Almighty” in Revelation 1:8, and “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS” in Revelation 19:16. Jesus is equal with the Father in the Godhead, possessing eternal power. He is eternal or self-existent and does not owe His existence or power to the Father or owe His membership of the Godhead to Him.

We now turn to key texts that are commonly cited to deny the force of this evidence. John 5:26 is one such text. It reads: “For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself.” Is Jesus speaking here of His incarnation or of His pre-existence? The next verse provides the essential information. Here are verses 26 and 27: ²⁶“For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself; ²⁷And hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man.” The conjunction “And” and the use of the adverb “also,” meaning “in addition to,” in verse 27, indicate that the two verses are connected and that having life in himself and authority to execute judgment are related to His status as the “Son of man” in verse 27. To apply verse 26 to the pre-existence of Christ is a failure to note the qualifying context in which Jesus makes the statement and is thus a failure of sound methodology. In John 5:26, Jesus is speaking of conditions that apply in His incarnation.

There are three passages that are most commonly cited to support the idea that only the Father is truly God. They are: “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD” (Deuteronomy 6:4); “But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him” (1 Corinthians 8:6); and “One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (Ephesians 4:6). At first glance they seem to indicate that only the Father is God. If it is true that only the Father is God, that would bring them into conflict with the texts and passages that we have noted previously to show that Jesus is an eternal member of the Godhead and is indeed God. For these reasons we particularly need to be sensitive to the context and to engage in comparison and to bring these passages into harmony with previously cited evidence.

In Psalm 83:18, we read: “That men may know that thou, whose name alone is JEHOVAH, art the most high over all the earth.” Notice that the name YHWH or Jehovah is applied only to the “most high.” It is a name exclusively devoted to God. Yet we discovered previously that Jesus is

called LORD [YHWH or Jehovah] and “our God” in the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 40:3. For Jesus also to take the name Jehovah indicates His equality with the Father and their unity in the Godhead. Hence Jesus may be justly called “everlasting Father” as in Isaiah 9:6.

There is nothing in Deuteronomy 6:4 or its context to deny the concept of equality within the Godhead or the divine unity it represents. The Three Members of the Godhead (Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14; 1 John 5:7) are three individual divine beings in such unity of love and purpose that they are effectively “one LORD.” When the Bible is allowed to explain itself there is complete harmony. It is the same with 1 Corinthians 8:6 and Ephesians 4:6. The wider context of 1 Corinthians 8:6 is food offered to idols and the contrast is between the non-existence of the multiplicity of heathen idols and one true God, the Father. Note verse 4: “As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one.” Paul is reinforcing the fact that there is one God or Lord as Moses does in Deuteronomy 6:4.

Ephesians 4:6 is found in a passage dealing with unity, the ultimate source of which is the Father. Here are verses 3-6, “³Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴*There is* one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; ⁵One Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶One God and Father of all, who *is* above all, and through all, and in you all.” The emphasis here is on the unity of the believers preserved in and by the Three Members of the Godhead and guaranteed by the Father by virtue of His role as the first among equals in the Godhead. Paul is not seeking here to deny the eternity of the Son of God for he would then be contradicting himself in relation to the eternal power and authority of Christ and His membership of the Godhead in Romans 1:20 and Colossians 2:9, 10. By attention to context and comparison of passages the evidence can be brought into harmony. Failure to use a defensible methodology results in irresolvable contradiction.

Those who believe that Christ owes His existence to the Father often cite Proverbs 8:22-31. Here is the passage: “²²The LORD possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. ²³I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. ²⁴When *there were* no depths, I was brought forth; when *there were* no fountains abounding with water. ²⁵Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth: ²⁶While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world. ²⁷When he prepared the heavens, I *was* there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth: ²⁸When he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the fountains of the deep: ²⁹When he gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment: when he appointed the foundations of the earth: ³⁰Then I was by him, *as* one brought up *with him*: and I was daily *his* delight, rejoicing always before him; ³¹Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights *were* with the sons of men.”

As the SDA Bible Commentary points out, citing Patriarchs and Prophets, page 34, there is a parallel in this passage with the work of the Second Person of the Godhead. However, it cautions that the passage is allegorical and that the allegory should not be pressed beyond what the writer had in mind. Interpretations must be consistent with the testimony of Scripture elsewhere. This is

a less clear passage and care must be taken not to impose it over clearer passages (see 2 Peter 3:16). Let us note the wisdom of this approach.

Here is the relevant paragraph in *Patriarchs and Prophets*, page 34: "The Sovereign of the universe was not alone in His work of beneficence. He had an associate—a co-worker who could appreciate His purposes, and could share His joy in giving happiness to created beings. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God." John 1:1, 2. Christ, the Word, the only begotten of God, was one with the eternal Father—one in nature, in character, in purpose—the only being that could enter into all the counsels and purposes of God. "His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." Isaiah 9:6. His "goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting." Micah 5:2. And the Son of God declares concerning Himself: "The Lord possessed Me in the beginning of His way, before His works of old. I was set up from everlasting. . . . When He appointed the foundations of the earth: then I was by Him, as one brought up with Him: and I was daily His delight, rejoicing always before Him."

The immediate context in which Ellen White cites parts of Proverbs 8:22-30 is her citation of Isaiah 9:6 and Micah 5:2. Thus, caution is warranted. If Christ indeed had a beginning attributable to the Father, based on the elements of Proverbs 8:22-30 cited by Ellen White, then we would also be forced to acknowledge that the Father had a beginning for it speaks of the "beginning of His way." Similarly, "as one brought up with Him," the idea is reinforced that the Father had a beginning. Christ is not brought up "by" Him but "with" Him. The one common element in Isaiah 9:6, Micah 5:2 and the parts of Proverbs 8:22-30 cited by Ellen White is "everlasting." It would be safe to assume that Ellen White is not setting up a tension between her understanding of "everlasting" in Isaiah 9:6 and Micah 5:2 and that of Proverbs 8:23. She speaks of the "eternal, everlasting Father."ⁱⁱ The idea of the incomprehensible ages of eternity is brought out rather than a particular point in time or beginning. That is consistent with the allegorical nature of the passage and it brings the passage into harmony with other literal passages that touch on the eternity of the Son of God. Jesus personifies wisdom in Proverbs 8 and this should also make us cautious about pressing allegorical passages too far, for we read in Proverbs 7:4, "Say unto wisdom, Thou are my sister."

ⁱ Abelson, R. P. (1986). Beliefs are like possessions. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 16 (3), 223-250.

ⁱⁱ 5SDABC, page 1084; That I May Know Him, page 12; Sons and Daughters of God, page 301.