



This article, the final article in a series of three dealing with the eternal Godhead, was published in ALMA Torch in November 2008.

THE ETERNAL GODHEAD – III

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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. The first article revealed that rejection of the eternal Godhead, intellectually at least, stems from failure to apply sound Scriptural methodology. That article closed with a case study in relation to methodology and the eternity of the Son of God. The second article in the series focused on a similar case study in relation to the Third Member of the eternal Godhead, the Holy Spirit. In this third and final article in the series, our focus will be the eternity of the Son of God in the Spirit of Prophecy and the significance of contemporary challenges to the doctrine of the eternal Godhead.

Life, Original, Unborrowed, Underived

In a well known statement, Ellen White writes: “But the life of Christ was unborrowed. No one can take this life from Him. “I lay it down of myself” (John 10: 18), He said. In Him was life, original, unborrowed, underived. This life is not inherent in man. He can possess it only through Christ” (Selected Messages, Vol. 1, pp. 296, 297). Ellen White states clearly that the life of Christ was “unborrowed.” To say that the life of Christ was “unborrowed” is to say that He is the true and original owner of this life, conditioning also her use of “original” and “underived” in relation to Christ’s life.

Thus, when we read that Christ had “original,” “unborrowed” and “underived” life, we are meant to understand that His life is not conferred but is original with Him. Hence we read: “In Him is life, that is original, unborrowed, underived life” (Medical Ministry, p. 7); “From Jesus is our life derived. In him is life that is original,—unborrowed, underived life. In him is the fountain of life” (Review and Herald, August 6, 1914 par. 1); and “Jesus declared, “I am the resurrection, and the life.” In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived. “He that hath the Son hath life.” The divinity of Christ is the believer's assurance of eternal life” (Desire of Ages, p. 530).

It is inherent life that Christ possesses. Simple comparison of Ellen White’s uses of “original,” “unborrowed” and “underived” prevents the erroneous conclusion that the life “in Christ” was really the Father’s life conferred upon Him. Ellen White said that her writings were to be understood through comparison, as Scripture is understood (Selected Messages, Vol. 1, p. 42). It is failure to deal fairly with Ellen White’s writings that leads to counter claims in relation to her use of “original,” “unborrowed” and “underived” in describing Christ’s life.

Christ’s Characteristics

We have now reviewed in this series a number of terms used by Ellen White to describe Christ’s characteristics. Here are these terms with their meanings: pre-existent = life before His incarnation; self-existent = occurring without external agency or assistance; equal with God = the same in rank; infinite = boundless and endless; omnipotent = having infinite power, boundless and endless; eternal = that always (has existed and) will exist; original = existing from the first; unborrowed = the true and original owner; and underived = not taken from another source.

This profile is not that of a Being with conferred life or powers. Christ’s eternity and infinite power are confirmed clearly in a number of overlapping concepts which, when taken together, put the issue beyond doubt. God has left us without excuse if we misperceive the eternity of the Son of God. Ellen White’s role is to preserve the Church from embracing error. If we draw conclusions from our studies that are denied in the clear, summative statements of the Spirit of Prophecy, then we should abandon the conclusions and go back to a Scriptural study of the topic from first principles.

Self-existence

Despite the fact that self-existence cannot be conferred because conferred self-existence is self-referentially absurd, there are those who wish to make the self-existence of Christ a conferred self-existence, so we need to examine Ellen White’s use of self-existent when referring to Christ. Let us first note how Webster’s Dictionary of 1913¹ defines self-existence: “Self-existence **Self-exist**”**ence** noun Inherent existence; existence possessed by virtue of a being's own nature, and independent of any other being or cause; —an attribute peculiar to God. Blackmore.”

The Spirit of Prophecy confirms that Jesus is claiming self-existence in John 8:58 and 59: "With solemn dignity Jesus answered, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I AM." 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. (Desire of Ages, pp. 469, 470).

Self-existence is equated with being uncreated or underived in the Spirit of Prophecy: "Jehovah, the eternal, self-existent, uncreated One, Himself the Source and Sustainer of all, is alone entitled to supreme reverence and worship. Man is forbidden to give to any other object the first place in his affections or his service. Whatever we cherish that tends to lessen our love for God or to interfere with the service due Him, of that do we make a god" (Patriarchs and Prophets, p. 305).

A comparison of these two passages reveals that Ellen White understood that Jesus, the "self-existent One," was "the eternal, self-existent, uncreated One." Yet, a third passage puts the issue beyond question: "[Rev. 1:18-20 quoted.] These are wonderfully solemn and significant statements. It was the Source of all mercy and pardon, peace and grace, the self-existent, eternal, unchangeable One, who visited His exiled servant on the isle that is called Patmos" (SDA Bible Commentary, Vol. 7, p. 955). Ellen White describes Jesus Christ as the "self-existent, eternal, unchangeable One," thus giving Him the same characteristics as His Father.

If Jesus is self-existent, He cannot be a literal Son. If He is self-existent and eternal, the Son of God had no beginning and is before all things just as Scripture indicates.ⁱⁱ The self-existence of the Son of God defines the nature of His Sonship. Christ could surrender His life because he was equal with God, infinite and omnipotent, with the capacity to lay down his life and to take it again. A comparison of all references to the self-existence of the Father and the Son in the Spirit of Prophecy gives not the least hint that Christ's self-existence was conferred upon Him by the Father. Jesus is "the Eternal Word."ⁱⁱⁱ

Only Begotten and Firstborn

To understand Ellen White's use of "only begotten" in reference to Christ, we need to see how Scripture uses it and related words. The term "only begotten"^{iv} (John 1:14; 1:18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9) comes from the Greek word *monogenes*. The Biblical use of *monogenes* reveals that its range of meaning extends to "only" and "unique," depicting a special relationship, not an event in time. Isaac, for example is called Abraham's "only begotten son," although he was not Abraham's only son or even his firstborn son (Hebrews 11:17 cf Genesis 16:16; 21:1-21; 25:1-6).

Likewise, when Christ is called the "firstbegotten" or "firstborn," *prototokos*, (Hebrews 1:6; Romans 8:29; Colossians 1:15, 18; Revelation 1:5) the term does not refer to a point of time. Rather it emphasizes importance or priority (cf. Hebrews 12:23). Depending on its context, the

Messianic prediction, “You are My Son, today I have begotten you” (Psalm 2:7), refers to Jesus’: incarnation (Hebrews 1:6), resurrection (Acts 13:33; cf. v. 30), or enthronement (Hebrews 1:3, 5).

That *monogenes*^v does not require a point in time is demonstrated by verses in which *monogenes* is simply translated *only*. Examples are Luke 7:12; 8:42; and 9:38. Here is Luke 9:38: “And, behold, a man of the company cried out, saying, Master, I beseech thee, look upon my son: for he is mine *only* child” (emphasis supplied). Thus there is nothing in the use of *monogenes* to contradict the testimony of Scripture that Jesus is everlasting or eternal.

The other word translated begotten is *gennaō*, meaning to bear, beget, bring forth, conceive or be delivered of.^{vi} It is used somewhat differently from *monogenes*. It can be found in 1 Corinthians 4:15, Philemon 10, 1 John 5:1 and 1 John 5:18. It does not refer to a literal begetting but to spiritual birth. Here is 1 John 5:18: “We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not.” When it is used of Christ (Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:5 and Hebrews 5:5), there is no evidence that Christ came into existence at some time in the past, for these passages are simply a divine interpretation of Psalm 2:7.

With this brief Scriptural review we now turn to the Spirit of Prophecy and a passage that is employed to infer Christ is a literal Son. Here is the passage: “A complete offering has been made; for “God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son,”— not a son by creation, as were the angels, nor a son by adoption, as is the forgiven sinner, but a Son begotten in the express image of the Father's person, and in all the brightness of his majesty and glory, one equal with God in authority, dignity, and divine perfection. In him dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Signs of the Times, May 30, 1895 par. 3).

The first thing to note is that the article from which this extract is drawn is dealing with Christ in His incarnation. It is entitled “Christ Our Complete Salvation.” The second thing to note is that “a Son begotten” is bounded by John 3:16 and Colossians 2:9, two passages dealing with the incarnate Christ. So we need to see how Ellen White uses “a Son begotten” elsewhere, if any. We discover that our reference is the only place that it occurs, so we need to examine her use of “express image of the Father’s person” and “the brightness of his majesty and glory” to see if she is referring to Christ as a literal Son begotten by God.

There are twelve other uses of “express image of the Father’s person.” All but two use this phrase to refer to Christ’s character as a living representation of the character of the Father or His law. Four uses are made of this phrase in conjunction with Colossians 2:9.^{vii} All four uses are related to the character of Christ. Here is one of these references, Selected Messages, Vol. 1, p. 295: “It is impossible to gain a perfect knowledge of God from nature alone; for nature itself is imperfect. In its imperfection it cannot represent God, it cannot reveal the character of God in its moral perfection. But Christ came as a personal Saviour to the world. He represented a personal God. As a personal Saviour, He ascended on high; and He will come again as He ascended to

heaven—a personal Saviour. He is the express image of the Father's person. "In him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9)."

In two references, it is clear that there are those who, having seen Jesus, are unable to discern Him who is the "express image of the Father's person."^{viii} Here is one of these references, Testimonies to Ministers, p. 137: "Do we choose to be numbered with those who cannot discern the truth, who are so blinded by the deceptive power of the enemy that they see not Him who is the express image of the Father's person?" If Jesus is the express image of the Father's person but this fact is not discerned by some, it is not dealing with physical likeness alone. Thus there is nothing in the use of this phrase to suggest that it is descriptive of a literal begetting.

"The brightness of his majesty and glory," which only appears once in the reference under consideration, is inconclusive, so we need to check similar phrases. "Brightness of his glory" appears sixty eight times. It is used in several ways, including references where it clearly applies to Jesus in His incarnation.^{ix} Here is the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, Vol. 5, p. 1130: "Looking upon Christ in humanity, we look upon God, and see in Him the brightness of His glory, the express image of His person." Given that it is used in this way, we need to go back to the context of our initial reference to make a final determination concerning the meaning of "a Son begotten." From the context, it is clearly not dealing with the literal begetting of Christ in His pre-existent life before His incarnation, so we can conclude that there is nothing in this passage to compel belief in Christ as a literal Son.

Another passage that includes "express image of his Father" and which is clearly referring to Christ's pre-existence is found in The Youth's Instructor, December 20, 1900, paragraph 4. It reads: "Before Christ came in the likeness of men, he existed in the express image of his Father. He thought it not robbery to be equal with God. Nevertheless he voluntarily emptied himself, and took the form of a servant. He was the incarnate God, the light of heaven and earth." However, it does not compel belief in Christ as a literal Son because it makes reference to Christ as the incarnate God.

Also, here are the two sentences at the end of the previous paragraph that precede this statement: "He is the eternal Word. Yet, he was made flesh, and dwelt among us." Jesus could not be eternal and also a literal Son with a beginning in time. Once again, attention to context resolves the issue in favour of the eternity of the Son of God.

We have now covered the major objections to the eternity of the Son of God and have not been able to sustain one objection from a consistent application of the self-interpreting principles of the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy. That is also true of every objection treated in this series. When the strongest objections collapse consistently under investigation, we are entitled to conclude that objections to the eternal Godhead have no merit and can be safely rejected.

Overwhelmingly, as we have seen, the objections rely on the following failures: selective attention to less clear or uncertain passages; inattention to what the text or passage is saying;

neglect of context; neglect of comparison with other relevant passages; and failure to harmonize. These are serious failures and deserve explanation as to why they are occurring among those who claim to be waiting for the return of Christ. It is to this explanation that we now turn to conclude the series.

Who Stands to Gain?

In *Great Controversy*, page 524, we read: “Another dangerous error is the doctrine that denies the deity of Christ, claiming that He had no existence before His advent to this world. This theory is received with favor by a large class who profess to believe the Bible; yet it directly contradicts the plainest statements of our Saviour concerning His relationship with the Father, His divine character, and His pre-existence. It cannot be entertained without the most unwarranted wresting of the Scriptures. It not only lowers man's conceptions of the work of redemption, but undermines faith in the Bible as a revelation from God. While this renders it the more dangerous, it makes it also harder to meet. If men reject the testimony of the inspired Scriptures concerning the deity of Christ, it is in vain to argue the point with them; for no argument, however conclusive, could convince them. "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." 1 Corinthians 2:14. None who hold this error can have a true conception of the character or the mission of Christ, or of the great plan of God for man's redemption.”

While this passage is dealing specifically with the issue of Christ's pre-existence, it is applicable to Christ's deity in general for the belief that Christ is not eternal cannot be sustained from Scripture and is an error of degree not kind. It is just as serious to deny Christ's eternity as to deny His pre-existence for both errors deny His divinity. The warning is that those who reject Christ's divinity will reach a point where they will no longer be able to process evidence coherently. That is a terrible situation to be in for it means that there is no self-correction available from the evidence in the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy.

The implications are enormous: “Just as soon as the people of God are sealed in their foreheads—it is not any seal or mark that can be seen, but a settling into the truth, both intellectually and spiritually, so they cannot be moved—just as soon as God's people are sealed and prepared for the shaking, it will come. Indeed, it has begun already; the judgments of God are now upon the land, to give us warning, that we may know what is coming” (*Maranatha*, p. 200). If we are now settling into the truth intellectually and spiritually, it is a disruption of the sealing process to be intellectually incoherent at this time. Satan dearly wants to disrupt the sealing process for those who are waiting for Jesus to come. If he can do it by getting people to adopt errors that diminish not only Jesus but also the Holy Spirit, he has a double victory. It is only Satan who gains from denial of the eternity of the Second and Third members of the Godhead.

As we have seen previously, denying the eternity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit does not enhance the Father: “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.”^x It is one thing for some prominent Seventh-day Adventist pioneers to have held errors in relation to the eternal Godhead. It is quite another thing to return to these errors when the Holy Spirit has corrected them through a deeper understanding of Scripture and confirmation through the Spirit of Prophecy. Error that causes a complete breakdown in the capacity of a person to process evidence on such an important topic is to be avoided at all costs in these final days of earth’s history. We are to be intellectually prepared for Christ’s return and if we are not then we cannot be fully spiritually prepared.

Herein, I believe, lies the explanation for the revival of this error in our midst. Satan wants to disrupt the sealing process and in the name of faithfulness to the pioneers has caused many to deny the eternal Godhead and to begin the process of undermining other salient aspects of our faith. You cannot quarantine error. It must be firmly rejected or it will corrupt the whole spiritual experience. For example, denial of the eternal Godhead by Seventh-day Adventists is building a bridge of sympathy to Rome.

The section on the Trinity in my copy of the Catechism of the Catholic Church^{xi} reveals that, while Roman Catholics believe that “The divine persons are really distinct from one another,” (the heading of Paragraph 254), the distinction is based upon relationship of origins. Here is how it is expressed in part in paragraph 254 of the Catechism: “ They are distinct from one another in their relations of origin: “It is the Father who generates, the Son who is begotten, and the Holy Spirit who proceeds.” That statement is virtually indistinguishable from ideas being promoted in our midst today by those who reject the eternity of the Son and the Holy Spirit. The part in parenthesis is citing the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 A.D.

The Council of Florence (1438 A.D.) explains: “The Holy Spirit is eternally from the Father and Son; He has his nature and subsistence at once (*simul*) from the Father and the Son. He proceeds eternally from both as from one principle and through one spiration....And, since the Father has through generation given to the only-begotten Son everything that belongs to the Father, except being Father, the Son has also eternally from the Father, from whom he is eternally born, that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son” (From Paragraph 246). It has been mooted that the Seventh-day Adventist position on the Godhead is Roman Catholic. These passages not only disconfirm the suggestion but reveal how ironic it really is.

When we see the revival of old errors in our midst that are calculated to disrupt the sealing process and to create bridges over which people can begin the walk away from Seventh-day Adventism, we can know that we are late in earth’s history. The evidence for the eternal Godhead is compelling, as we have seen throughout this series. Truth is advancing and we do no honour to the pioneers by returning to their errors concerning the Godhead. There are terrible and

seemingly irreversible consequences of losing our intellectual discernment on this issue. Our only safety is to embrace the compelling evidence of a “Thus saith the Lord.”

ⁱ This is the closest American dictionary reference that I could find to the time of Ellen White’s use of self-existent.

ⁱⁱ E.g. John 1:1-4; and Colossians 1:16, 17.

ⁱⁱⁱ E.g. Special Testimonies On Education, p. 173.

^{iv} The first two paragraphs in this section are mostly drawn from Seventh-day Adventists Believe, p. 56.

^v This paragraph is drawn from Winds of Doctrine by Colin and Russell Standish, p. 49.

^{vi} This paragraph is drawn from Winds of Doctrine by Colin and Russell Standish, pp. 49, 50.

^{vii} Selected Messages, Vol. 1, p. 295; SDA Bible Commentary, Vol. 6, p. 1068; Review and Herald, November 8, 1898, para. 15; and Review and Herald, March 17, 1904, para. 15.

^{viii} Testimonies to Ministers, p. 137 and Pamphlet 086, p. 35.

^{ix} E.g. Reflecting Christ, p. 354; SDA Bible Commentary, Vol. 5, p. 1126; and SDA Bible Commentary, Vol. 5, p. 1130.

^x Signs of the Times, June 27, 1895, par. 3.

^{xi} ST PAULS, Strathfield, New South Wales, 1998, Pocket Edition, Complete and Unabridged.