

THE TRINITY

WINDOWS: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

In this study series, we will be exploring eight key Bible doctrines of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Many of our people—perhaps you included—go into intellectual neutral, breathe a sigh of boredom, and expect a repetition of dry theological facts we’ve heard over and over again:

- The seventh day is the Sabbath, not the first day; and here are a gazillion Bible verses to prove it.
- The Ten Commandments were not abolished at the cross, so you still need to keep them; and here are the verses to prove it.
- The investigative judgment began in 1844, and your name could come up any minute; and here are the verses and a time prophecy chart to prove it.
- When we die, we’re really

dead, completely dead, dead as a door nail, so if a dead family member or friend ever appears to you, it’s not really him or her, it’s a demon; and here are the verses to prove it.

- Jesus is coming soon, and when He does, it will not be a secret rapture with some second chance at salvation after a seven-year tribulation, so you better be ready now; and here are the verses to prove it.
- And besides all of that, you should become a vegetarian, pay tithe, stop watching TV, and get baptized by immersion.

Can I get an amen?

No?

Why not?

Well, because we all sense that something is missing when the truth is reduced to a series of intellectual facts

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and behavioral requirements.

So here's a fact for us to face: none of these doctrines individually, nor all of them collectively, constitute *the* truth. Are you listening? None of them constitute the truth until they are centered in, informed by, and pervaded with the love of Christ. This is why the apostle Paul speaks of the truth "as the truth is in Jesus" (Ephesians 4:21).

Hmm.

The truth as it is *in Jesus*.

What exactly does that mean?

You may recall that Jesus once said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free" (John 8:32), and then a little later He said, "*I am . . . the truth*" (John 14:6; emphasis added).

You get the point, right?

Truth isn't just a bunch of abstract factual information to memorize, quote, and argue about. Truth is a person, and His name is Jesus. In a relationship with Jesus, there is liberation from all that binds us—namely, from all our relational brokenness and the shame that attends it.

So what is the "truth" like when it is preached *outside* of Jesus?

Well, for one thing, truth apart from Jesus is merely raw data, void of personality and character. It doesn't have a face, a heart, or a personal desire for you. Second, truth apart from Jesus is emotionally brutal because all it can do is impose guilt and arouse fear. It cannot save, heal, or transform the human heart.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that it is spiritually abusive to preach a list of doctrinal truths and behavioral standards while failing to preach Jesus as *the* Truth, with a capital *T*. Paul says, "The letter kills" (2 Corinthians 3:6), by which he means that the bare facts of the truth, preached without Jesus as the living,

loving, compassionate center, only have the effect of slaughtering people on a spiritual, emotional, and relational level. "Truth" that does not magnify Jesus can only drive people away from God in despair or produce in them a spirit of condemnatory pharisaism. By contrast, we see in Jesus a beautiful equilibrium between two crucial complementary factors: John says Jesus came to our world "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

See that?

Grace and truth!

Why is that combo so vital?

Truth that is void of grace can only heap shame upon sinners, whereas grace combined with truth brings healing.

It is clear, then, that we don't just need truth—the bare bones of doctrinal facts. Rather, we need the truth *as it is in Jesus*—the living embodiment of God's love.

So, then, let's employ a simple, but powerful metaphor to guide us in our series of messages in this book. The doctrinal truths of Scripture can be thought of as a series of perceptual windows through which God's character may be viewed from various different angles. For our purposes, let's imagine the structure of truth as an octagon-shaped building. On each of the eight sides of the structure, there is a window. Each window represents one of our doctrinal beliefs:

1. The Trinity
2. The Great Controversy
3. The Law of God
4. The Sabbath
5. The Sanctuary
6. Death and Hell
7. The End Time
8. The Second Coming

As we look into the building through each window, we see Jesus, and Jesus, and Jesus, and Jesus, as the true and accurate revelation of God's character.

Eight windows into one reality!

Windows are designed for looking through, not at. A window serves its purpose when it operates as a visual passageway. No biblical doctrine is an end in itself: not the Sabbath, not the state of the dead, not the judgment, and not end-time prophecy. None of these truths exist to point to themselves. Rather, the Sabbath serves as a visual passageway into the heart of God. The sanctuary doctrine serves as a visual passageway into another dimension of God's beauty and so on with every biblical doctrine.

Think about it like this: as Seventh-day Adventists, we actually only have one belief, one doctrine—"God is love" (1 John 4:16).

That's it.

We don't believe many things, we believe one thing with many dimensions. We can always expound on the one thing, but it is always the same one thing we're looking at, just from various angles. Like one tree with many branches, one engine with many moving parts, or one river with many contributing streams.

The various doctrines we hold serve their purpose only to the degree that we communicate them in such a manner as to magnify the beauty of God's love. In fact, Ellen White explicitly states that this is the case:

It is the darkness of misapprehension of God that is enshrouding the world. Men are losing their knowledge of His character. It has been misunderstood and misinterpreted. At this time a message from God is to be proclaimed, a message illuminating in its influence and saving in its power. His character is to be made known. Into the darkness

of the world is to be shed the light of His glory, the light of His goodness, mercy, and truth. . . .

. . . The last rays of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is a revelation of His character of love.¹

Astounding, huh?

God has been horribly misrepresented in our world, especially by religion, which professes to represent Him. And what is the form in which this misrepresentation of God's character exists? Doctrines! Belief systems! Many people in our world are afraid of God, not because they know Him as He really is, but because of the false reports they have heard about Him in the form of religious teachings.

God specifically called the Seventh-day Adventist Church into existence as a prophetic movement, to proclaim a message to the world that vindicates God as the good God He really is. If correctly understood, our theological system has the potential to offer our world a beautiful and inviting picture of God unlike anything it has ever known before. Adventist theology, when viewed in Christ, is like a series of windows through which the character of God is clarified and exonerated.

So let's get started by looking through the first of our eight windows—the Trinity.

Ancient love

Let's do a simple thought experiment. Go lock

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yourself in your bathroom for the rest of your life (it's a thought experiment, so stay in your seat and use your imagination), and then ask yourself a simple question,

will I ever experience love?

The obvious answer is No—even if you have a full-length mirror!

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And why is the answer No?

For the simple reason that love cannot be experienced in isolation. Love, by definition, is other-centered rather than self-centered; for it to really be love, it requires more than one person. With this, we have realized something deep and vitally important for our understanding of God. Let's unpack it.

The first truth we encounter when we open the Bible is that God is a social unit rather than a solitary self. Notice the opening line of Scripture: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1).

The most obvious thing we see here is that there are two basic categories that compose reality:

1. God
2. Everything else

God is the Creator, and everything else that exists He created. This means that God predates and transcends all things that fall into the "made" category and that God alone occupies the "unmade" category. The apostle John, in introducing Jesus, articulated this sublime insight with these words: "All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made" (John 1:3). Pretty deep, I know, but hang on because it's all about to become beautifully clear.

In the same passage, John said this: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God" (verses 1, 2).

In the beginning, who was with whom?

In the beginning, God was "with God."

OK, that's cool; but in what sense were these equally Divine Persons "with" one another? John tells us in verse 18: "No one has seen God at any time. The only

begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him."

Wow, I love that! So interpersonal!

John wants us to understand that Jesus, whom he earlier identified as none other than God, came to our world from a very specific and special relational place: from "the bosom of the Father." *Bosom* is a poetic word that conjures up the idea of closeness; the Phillips translation says Jesus "lives in the closest intimacy with the Father." Now, with all this in mind, go back to Genesis 1: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

The Hebrew word in this sentence that's translated into English as "God" is a proper name in the original language. It is a very significant name, jam-packed full of meaning. In fact, it is the most beautiful name that will ever leave your lips: *Elohim*.

The thing that makes this name so meaningful is that it is a plural noun. In other words, the God that we encounter in the opening verse of the Bible is in some sense *one* and yet *more than one*. Later on in the chapter, this idea becomes even more explicit. Notice verses 26 and 27: "Then God [Elohim] said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness. . . .' So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."

Here we see that Elohim is composed of an "Us" and an "Our." We are not to think of God as merely a "Me" and an "I" but rather as social unit that involves more persons than a single, solitary being. Remember our opening point: love cannot be experienced in isolation. Now, in the context of this simple realization, we can read with understanding the most profound and powerful declaration in the Bible: "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

We deduce from this basic reality that God has never

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existed in isolation. God is, and always has been, an “Us” and an “Our”—in other words, a social unit—because “God is love.” Without doing any injustice to the text, we could paraphrase the opening sentence of the Bible like this: “In the beginning *Love* created the heavens and the earth.”

Cross-reference this once again with John 1, and the picture becomes even more beautiful: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the

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Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made” (verses 1–3).

From this passage, we see that both God the Father and God the Son were active agents together in the work of creating our world. Now go back to Genesis 1 for an additional brushstroke of the picture: “The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (verse 2).

We see here that the Holy Spirit was also actively involved in the Creation event, along with the Father and the Son. Amazing!

So, then, the God we encounter in Genesis 1, bearing the plural name *Elohim*, is composed of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Within the parameters of God’s own divine reality, apart from any created beings, God is an other-centered fellowship, a

self-giving friendship. As we move forward from Genesis in the biblical narrative, we encounter what the Jewish people call “the Shema,” which they regard to this day as the most important of all theological declarations: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the Lord is one!” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

There is a hidden beauty here in plain sight, which is brought to light by asking the question, in what sense is the Lord our God *one*? We find the answer in Jesus, because He intentionally employed the language of the Shema to describe the relationship that exists between Himself and the Father: “I and My Father are one” (John 10:30).

Brilliant!

Again, we see that God is not *one* in the sense of being a *solitary* being, but rather God is *one* in the sense of relational *oneness*. Later, in John 17, Jesus again used the language of *oneness*; and on this occasion, He defined it as the relational dynamic of love. He prayed to the Father for His disciples:

“That they may be one just *as We are one*: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.

“Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:22–24).

Then Jesus closed His prayer by asking “that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them” (verse 26).

Here's the picture before us:

- The Father is God, but not all there is of God.
- Jesus Christ is God, but not all there is of God.
- The Holy Spirit is God, but not all there is of God.

All Three, together, as an intimate social fellowship, compose one divine reality. This is why we use the word *Trinity*, or Tri-unity, to describe God.

It is not a dry doctrinal fact.

It is not a cold theoretical equation.

It is not a complex philosophical concept.

No. The doctrine of the Trinity is a crystal-clear window into God's outgoing, other-centered, supersocial character.

What's not to like about a God like this?

1. Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 1941), 415.