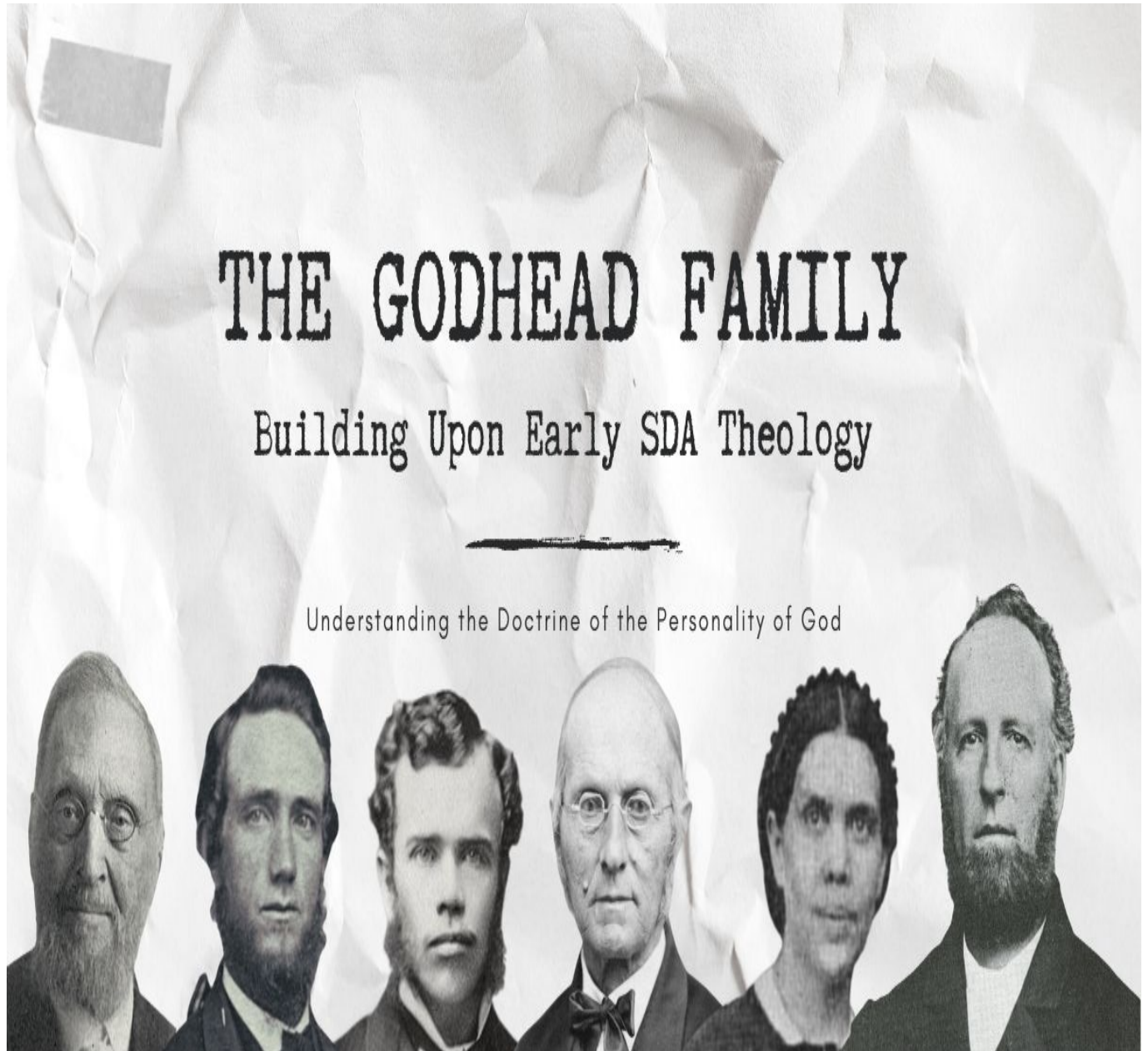


The Godhead Family: Building Upon Early SDA Theology

Description



A study related to the SDA
Sabbath School Lesson for 2021, 3rd Quarter
Rest In Christ
Week 6
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Edited by Trent Wilde

This week's lesson is entitled, "Finding Rest in Family Ties," so this week, we thought we would talk about the godhead as a family.

The SDA pioneers took the Father and Son relationship between Jesus and His Father literally – not just as roles that members of the Godhead took.

A.C. Bourdeau, in the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, wrote,

“... Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He is not his own son, nor his own father; did not proceed from himself, pray to himself on the mountain, in the garden, and on the cross when he exclaimed, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ ‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do;’ and did not sit down on the right hand of himself when he was received up into Heaven. But Jesus Christ is a material intelligence, possessing body and parts, with immortal flesh and immortal bones (See Luke 24:24-42); and is a distinct being from God the Father. He is like his Father, ‘being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person.’ Heb. 1:3. He came from, and prayed to, his Father; when he was baptized of John in Jordan, he heard a voice which came from his Father in Heaven, saying, ‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased;’ and ‘when he had by himself purged our sins,’ he ‘sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.’ ‘He was received up into Heaven, and sat on the right hand of God.’ Mark 16:19. He and his Father are one in the same sense that his followers should be one. Said Christ, while praying for his apostles, ‘Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one.’ John 17:20-22.” A.C. Bourdeau, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 8, 1869

Here we can see that Bourdeau was giving scriptural evidence to substantiate his position that Jesus and the Father were two distinct beings that had an actual father-son relationship.

Before we read more quotes from the pioneers, we should note that the pioneers did not have light on the nature of the Holy Spirit before the late 1800s, so their arguments concerning the members of the godhead were mostly confined to the Father and the Son. In fact, they didn't have much to say about whether the Holy Spirit was a person one way or another. You may have heard before that the SDA pioneers were anti-trinitarian, but keeping their lack of focus on the Holy Spirit in mind will help us understand that when the pioneers were arguing against trinitarianism, they were mainly focused on the relationship of the Father and the Son and how they were separate and distinct beings. Trinitarians argue that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three persons in one being. Early SDAs rejected the Trinitarian distinction between “person” and “being,” arguing that to be an individual person is the same thing as being an individual being. Many SDAs today miss this fact and assume the pioneers were arguing against the idea that there were three members of the godhead, but if you read their writings in context and with the understanding that there was no light yet on the Holy Spirit, their real message will become quite clear.

For example, Joseph Bates wrote,

“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. 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 your father, and you my son, then I can believe in the trinity.’” J. Bates, *The Autobiography of Elder Joseph Bates*, pp. 204, 205. (1868).

So we can see that Bates was not even addressing the nature of the Holy Spirit here, but rather was coming against the idea that the Father and Son were “one and the same being.” He rightly associates this idea – the idea that the Father and Son were two persons in one being – with trinitarianism. Ellen White also agreed that Jesus and God were not the same being and she even used very similar wording to Joseph Bates in his rejection of the Trinitarian idea that the members of the Godhead are “one being” when she said, “The man Christ Jesus was not the Lord God Almighty...” Ellen White, Ms 140-1903.28.

E. J. Waggoner, in *Signs of the Times*, wrote concerning the nature of Jesus’ sonship. He wrote,

“The angels are sons of God, as was Adam...by creation; Christians are the sons of God by adoption (Rom. 8:14, 15), but Christ is the Son of God by birth. ... and so Christ is the ‘express image’ of the Father’s person.” E. J. Waggoner, *Signs of the Times*, April 8, 1889, p. 12.

Note that in the following quote, in a later issue of *Signs of the Times*, Ellen White’s language is almost identical to Waggoner’s. She wrote,

“‘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...” E. G. White, *Signs of the Times*, May 30, 1895.

If you will notice, it is the “begotten” aspect of Jesus’ sonship that separates Him from the rest of us. The words “Father” and “Son” and “begotten” clearly show that the godhead contains literal family members.

So, from the quotes given thus far, we see that the Father and Son are two separate persons – separate beings. The pioneers also argued in favor of the idea that they are both physical.

As an example of this sentiment, we will read part of a letter written by James White printed in “*The Day-Star*,” January 24, 1846, to a man named Enoch Jacobs, who was a leader of a band of believers in Cincinnati. You can read the whole letter by [clicking this link](#).

James wrote,

“In the 4th verse he [Jude] gives us the reason why we should contend for THE faith, a particular faith; ‘for there are certain men,’ or a certain class who deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ. This class can be no other than those who spiritualize away the existence of the Father and Son, as two distinct literal tangible persons, also a literal Holy city and throne of David. ...

The way spiritualizers this way have disposed of or denied the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ is first using the unscriptural trinitarian creed, viz, that Jesus Christ is the eternal God, though they have no one passage to support it, while we have plain scripture testimony in abundance that he is the Son of the eternal God. Then they dispose of Jesus; secondly, by quoting John 4:24. God is a spirit, and as they assert, nothing but a spirit, the Holy Ghost, which dwells in a christian,— Thus they dispose of the Almighty God; while I can and will show from two texts of the bible, that they both exist with body and parts, Dan. 7:9. I beheld till the thrones were cast down (set up) and the ancient of days did sit whose garment was white as snow and the hair of his head like the pure wool. The ancient of days, or God, has a head, and hair on his head, and a body, as David [sic.] saw him clad with a snow white garment; Paul, speaking of Christ, in Heb. 1, says, ‘who being the brightness of his (God’s) glory, and the express IMAGE of his (God’s) PERSON.’ God is a person, for he made man in his own image; so is his only begotten son, Jesus; and this same Jesus is to set on David’s throne in the literal city on the new earth, under the whole heavens.— This is THE faith once delivered to the saints and will live in spite of modern spiritualism, and for this we are to earnestly contend.” James White, *The Day-Star*, January 24, 1846

James here says that the Lord God and the Lord Jesus Christ are denied by spiritualizing them away. On one hand, people deny that they are two separate beings, one the Father and the other His Son. Secondly, they spiritualize away God and Jesus by denying that they are physical beings each with their own bodies and body parts. And you can tell by the way he used the word “person” here, that to James, to be a “person” necessarily included being made of a physical body. As we will see, Ellen White and the other pioneers shared this view. In fact, it is one of the foundational doctrines of the SDA movement. They sometimes referred to it by the phrase, “the personality of God.” James White, and others, even wrote articles by that name. Check it out.

Ellen White wrote,

“I have frequently been falsely charged with teaching views peculiar to Spiritualism. But before the editor of the *Day-Star* ran into that delusion, the Lord gave me a view of the sad and desolating effects that would be produced upon the flock by him and others in teaching the spiritual views. 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*.’

I have often seen that the spiritual view took away all the glory of heaven, and that in many minds the throne of David and the lovely person of Jesus have been burned up in the fire of Spiritualism. I have seen that some who have been deceived and led into this error will be brought out into the light of truth, but it will be almost impossible for them to get entirely rid of the deceptive power of Spiritualism. Such should make thorough work in confessing their errors and leaving them forever.

I recommend to you, dear reader, the Word of God as the rule of your faith and practice.” Ellen White, *Early Writings*, p. 77

This is just one statement among many where Ellen White states that God and Jesus both have physical forms. And it is clear from statements like this that, to her (just like with the other pioneers) this is part of what it means to be ‘persons’ – it requires having a body and parts.

On this subject, D. M. Canright wrote a pamphlet entitled “The Personality of God.” It is important to note that BOTH Ellen and James helped write this article by Canright. (See the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, August 22, 1878, page 68, “The Colorado Tent,” by James White). Canright’s article was then published in four successive *Review and Sabbath Herald* issues later that year.

Canright wrote,

“All through the Scriptures God is described as a being in the form of man. Thus he is said to have a head, and hairs of his head, Dan. 7:9; and hands, Ex. 33:22; feet, Ex. 24:10; loins; Eze. 1:27; face, Matt. 18:10; heart, Gen. 6:6; parts, Ex. 33:23; a form, Phil. 2:6; shape, John 5:37; person, Heb. 1:3; soul, Jer. 5:9; and spirit, Matt. 12:28. Thus it is declared that God has all the members and parts of a perfect man. This is not said once, not twice, but many times, not in parables and symbols, and figures, but directly and plainly.” D. M. Canright, *Review and Herald*, Sept. 5, 1878

Remember, Canright wrote this with the help of James and Ellen. And it clearly reflects the unified position of the early SDA people. Notice that Canright here says, “God has all the members and parts of a perfect man.” and he lists body parts mentioned in scriptural descriptions of God. The fact that he included “loins” in the list shows that to the SDA pioneers, part of God’s physicality was his gender. Both God and Christ are physical males, with loins, beards, etc. Canright’s list of body parts reveals that this is the scriptural view, and also that it was the view of the early SDAs.

After the foundation of the masculine personhood of the Father and Son was well-established, God began to reveal light through Ellen White regarding the personhood of the Holy Spirit.

In a discourse given by Ellen White in the Avondale Church, March 25, 1899, she said,

“We have been brought together as a school, and we need to realize that the Holy Spirit, who is as much a person as God is a person, is walking through these grounds, unseen by human eyes...” Ellen White, 2SAT 136.6

For Ellen White to say that the Holy Spirit is as much a person as God is a person doesn't just mean that the Holy Spirit has thoughts and character traits. As we have just seen, the SDA pioneers (including Ellen White) considered “personality” to necessarily include having a physical body. They reject the idea of disembodied spirits, regarding it as a form of spiritualism. The early SDA doctrine of the physical nature of “persons” (which of course was a doctrine Ellen herself believed) makes it truly unavoidable that when Ellen White said the Holy Spirit is a person, she was saying that the Holy Spirit is a distinct being with a body and parts. The Son is a distinct being composed of a physical body, the Father is a distinct being composed of a physical body, and the Holy Spirit is likewise a distinct being composed of a physical body. Elsewhere, Ellen referred to them as “the three holiest beings in heaven” (Ms95-1906.29).

But this raises another issue. A minute ago, we saw that for early SDAs, the personality of God and Christ includes their gender. Persons have gender. And since the Holy Spirit is a person with body and parts just like the Father and the Son, this naturally implies that the Holy Spirit has gender too. But what is the gender of the Holy Spirit and how does the Holy Spirit fit into the Family that is the Godhead? This is something Ellen White and the pioneers never addressed, but as you can see it is a natural question that arises from an understanding of their view of the Godhead. Thankfully, the scriptures have light on these questions.

In John chapter 3, Jesus and Nicodemus have a conversation about what it means to be “born again.” Jesus says,

“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?”

Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” John 3:3-5

Jesus then goes on to talk more about being “born of the Spirit.” Obviously, since males cannot give birth, Jesus is here speaking of the Holy Spirit as a female. Even though Nicodemus didn't understand what being born again was really about, he at least caught on to Jesus's image of a mother giving birth, as you can see from his question, “Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?”

Similarly, Paul also speaks of the Holy Spirit as a mother. In Galatians 4, Paul contrasts two sons of Abraham – Issac and Ishmael – who were born from two different women: Sarah, the free woman, and Hagar, the bondswoman, respectively. Those who are born of the flesh, paralleled with Hagar, are contrasted to those who are born of the Spirit, paralleled with Sarah. So again, ...we see in scripture the Holy Spirit being presented as a mother. And while this might seem new and even shocking to us, it wouldn't have been to Jesus and his earliest followers since they spoke Semitic languages like Aramaic and Hebrew and in those languages, “Spirit” is feminine – yes, even in the Hebrew Bible. In fact, for centuries, the Aramaic and Hebrew-speaking churches maintained the view that the Holy Spirit is feminine. Interestingly, J.N. Andrews spoke of the very earliest of these churches – the Nazarenes – in his book *History of the Sabbath and the First Day of the Week*. This is what he said on p. 338:

“And Dr. Frances White, lord bishop of Ely, mentions the Nazarenes as one of the ancient bodies of Sabbath-keepers who were condemned by the church leaders for that heresy; and he classes them with heretics as Morer has done. Yet the Nazarenes have a peculiar claim to our regard, as being in reality the apostolic church of Jerusalem, and its direct successors.” J.N. Andrews, *History of the Sabbath and the First Day of the Week*, p. 338

So Andrews here speaks of the Nazarenes as the apostolic church and its direct successors. This makes sense since even the book of Acts mentions that this was the name of Jesus followers (Acts 24:5). The reason why this matters for our subject is that the Nazarenes used a gospel, written in Hebrew, that speaks of the Holy Spirit as Jesus mother. In fact, it quotes Jesus himself saying,

“Just now my Mother, the Holy Spirit, took me by one of my hairs and carried me up to the great mountain Tabor.” (quoted by Origen in his *Commentary on John 2:12*)

It also describes the Holy Spirit saying to Jesus,

“My Son, in all the prophets I have been expecting you to come, that I might rest on you. For you are my rest; you are my firstborn child, who rules forever.” (quoted by Jerome in his *Commentary on Isaiah 11:1-3*)

As surprising as this may be, doesn't it make sense that the Holy Spirit is the Mother in the Godhead? After all, the book of nature teaches us that it is impossible to have a son without a mother; likewise, a male can only become a father by a mother giving birth. The early SDA pioneers, including Ellen White, held that Jesus was the literal Son of God, not created, but begotten in the express image of his Father's person. And since the Holy Spirit is a real person just as they are, and since the Holy Spirit is part of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit must be a member of the Divine Family. The testimony of nature is that where there is a father and a son, there must be a mother. And Scripture itself testifies that the Holy Spirit is that Mother.

Even if you find this startling at first, consider the alternatives... Is God a single father, and Jesus his motherless son? In such a scenario, who is the Holy Spirit? The uncle? There certainly isn't any scripture testifying to that. Could the Holy Spirit be another son? Well, scripture testifies that *Jesus* is the only begotten son of God! How about another alternative. If one wanted to accept that the Holy Spirit is a parent, since Jesus said that sending the Holy Spirit would ensure that we won't be orphans (John 14:18), but deny the femininity of the Holy Spirit, that would perhaps give us two Fathers in the Godhead. So we would have Jesus the Son and his two Fathers. But again, this is not substantiated in nature or in scripture.

The truth that the Scriptures reveal is that the Godhead is a family, with male and female members.

In closing, let's look at Genesis 1:26 and 27.

Genesis 1:26-27 reads,

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness...”

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

First, we have the plural pronouns “us” and “our.” That lets us know there is more than one member of the Godhead, but it doesn’t help very much in determining the gender of ‘God,’ or more accurately, “Gods,” as we will see. We have to look at the context of the paragraph and the Hebrew meaning of the word translated “God” to come to the correct conclusions here.

The word translated “God” in the bible is usually the plural Hebrew word “Elohim.” The base of the word “Elohim” is “Eloah.” This is a feminine noun meaning “goddess” and is correctly translated “goddess” when the word is used concerning Ashtoreth, “the goddess of the Zidonians” in 1 Kings 11:5. But when the exact same word is used in connection with “the goddess of Israel” a few verses later in 1 Kings 11:9, the word is translated “God” instead. This can only be because of preconceived ideas.

The “im” ending in Hebrew denotes a plurality. “Im” is the masculine plural suffix given to singular nouns to make them, well, plural. So, the Hebrew word “Elohim” is a plural word, with a feminine base and a masculine plural ending.

But does the masculine plural ending indicate that the “Elohim” are all male? Well, the masculine singular form from which “Elohim” is ultimately derived is “El” – this refers to a single male deity. But adding the masculine plural ending to “El” gives “Elim,” not “Elohim.” “Elim” shows up in Hebrew too; it is a legit form that refers to multiple deities. But if “Elohim” and “Elim” mean the same thing, why have both forms? Well, it turns out they don’t mean exactly the same thing. “Elohim” doesn’t derive directly from “El,” but instead, as we said, it derives from “Eloah” – goddess.

“Eloah” is feminine and “im” is the masculine plural ending. This means that “Elohim” refers to multiple beings – at least two, with at least one male and one female. So the word “Elohim” itself actually testifies to this truth of the Godhead as a family with members of both genders. And this is also the truth being spoken of in Genesis 1:26-27. It doesn’t say that only males are made in the image of God. It says that humans, both male and female, are made in the image of Elohim. Clearly then, Elohim, the Godhead, has both male and female members.