

The Godhead, *The Clear Word*, and Seventh-day Adventism

A Brief Response to Stephen Pitcher's article, "[Is this word Clear?](#)" (*Proclamation!* January/February 2009, 6-13, 20.

Jud Lake, Th.D., D.Min.

Before reading this article, please read my "[The Seventh-day Adventist Church and *The Clear Word*,](#)" posted elsewhere on this website. This article deflates Mr. Pitcher's assumption that *The Clear Word* is the Adventist "version of the Bible" (9) and that Adventists have "altered the words of the Bible" (13). There I provide eight lines of evidence that *The Clear Word* has no official (or unofficial) endorsement from the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a "version of the Bible." Furthermore, I show that *The Clear Word* intends to be an expanded, interpretive paraphrase of the Scriptures by one man, not a literal translation, thus indicating that the added words and deletions are those of the author and not meant to be understood as coming from God. Thus, there is no attempt in *The Clear Word* to alter the words of God.

What strikes me most about Mr. Pitcher's article is the biased and unfair way he uses his sources. Throughout the article he cites various Adventist articles and books, including *The Clear Word*, and ignores the context of the passages he cites. Notice several examples.

Inspiration

Mr. Pitcher endeavors to show that Adventists emphasize the human origin of the Scriptures in order to leave room for modifying the meaning of the text to fit their beliefs. He claims that "when all is said and done," the Bible is "a document of human origin in the Adventist mind, even if unconsciously" (8). In making this argument, he cites two articles by Adventist scholars [Frank Holbrook](#) and [Angel Rodriguez](#). (8, notes #5, #6). If you read both of these articles in their entirety at the Biblical Research Institute website, you will find that they actually refute the idea Mr. Pitcher is conveying about Adventists and inspiration! He completely ignores the immediate context and overall message of both articles. Does it not occur to him that some readers of his article might go and read the sources he cites in their original context? For example, in the *context* of the citation from the second article (8, note #6), composed mostly of Ellen White's classical statement on inspiration, Dr. Rodriguez gives the following explanation of Ellen White's statement that Mr. Pitcher failed to consider: "The divine mind, she says, is diffused. And by that she means the divine mind and will are combined with the human mind and will in such a way that what is expressed by the human instrument—"the utterances of the man"—are the 'word of God'" ([Rodriguez](#)). In other words, the end product of what we find in the Bible—all of it—is the Word of God. Furthermore, [Mr. Pitcher's explanation](#) of Ellen White's term "diffused" (8) does not fit the context of her statement on inspiration or the meaning of the term in her day. To access what Ellen White and Adventists *really* believe and teach on the subject of inspiration, [go here](#).

Mr. Pitcher states that while SDAs agree with other Christians that the Bible is of divine origin, "yet once one presses a specific point of view that is not in harmony with SDA doctrine it is

often discounted as not a correct understanding of the intent of the author.” This is because the Bible is considered “a human document in the Adventist mind,” Pitcher claims, and since “the words were crafted by fallible human authors, others with good intentions should feel free to modify the exact wording to ‘strengthen or clarify the expression of the divine purposes’” (8). Notice the last phrase in quotes is from the Holbrook paragraph cited earlier in Mr. Pitcher’s article (8, note #5). Go to the [Holbrook article](#) and go down to the major section entitled, “Process of Inspiration,” then move down to the subsection, “Transmission of a Divine Message.” There, in the last two paragraphs of this subsection, you will find in context the sentences Mr. Pitcher extracted for his article. Read the two paragraphs carefully and compare with what Mr. Pitcher says about the way Adventist approach the Bible. You will see that Mr. Pitcher takes what Dr. Holbrook is saying out of context by omitting sentences from the quote. Holbrook uses Jeremiah, an *inspired* writer, as the example of how the biblical writers “strengthen or clarify the expression of the divine purposes.” But Mr. Pitcher gives the impression that Adventists believe they can change the text to fit their ideas. This is a gross misrepresentation of mainstream Seventh-day Adventism. Here is the fact: Seventh-day Adventists believe that the only way to understand the meaning of Scripture is to approach it prayerfully as the revealed and inspired Word of God and apply correct principles of interpretation. See two articles at the Biblical Research Institute website on interpreting the Word of God that Mr. Pitcher evidently missed (or ignored?): [“Interpreting Scripture According to the Scriptures: Toward an Understanding of Adventist Hermeneutics”](#) by Adventist theologian Richard Davidson; and [“Methods of Bible Study,”](#) a document voted in 1986 at the Adventist Annual Council in Rio de Janeiro.

This section on inspiration in Mr. Pitcher’s article (7-8) is meant to lead into the idea that Blanco has changed the words of the Bible to fit his Adventist doctrine. As stated above, because of the acknowledged interpretive nature of *The Clear Word*, this is not the case. While Adventists espouse a holistic view of inspiration (plenary-thought inspiration), they *do* believe that the words of the Bible are important (see the article by [Rodriguez](#) cited in Mr. Pitcher’s article, which represents mainstream Adventist understanding).

Cult Bibles

To connect *The Clear Word* with *The Book of Mormon* and *The New World Translation* is profoundly misleading. Both of these “Bibles” are used as a basis for doctrine by their respective organizations. As I have spelled out in my article, [“The Seventh-day Adventist Church and The Clear Word,”](#) this is not the case with Jack Blanco’s expanded paraphrase. Blanco himself said it well in 1994:

The Jehovah’s Witnesses have their own Bible, but they use their Bible to prove their doctrines. We’re not using this paraphrase to prove our doctrines. We go to the Scriptures to prove our doctrines (Bruce Manners, “Do We Now Have an Adventist Bible?” *Record*, October 15, 1994, 9).

Notice how he distinguishes his “paraphrase” from “the Scriptures.” While *Proclamation!*’s strategy of putting Adventism into the same basket as the major cults is a popular one, it is easily

refuted by the facts.

One interesting statement by Mr. Pitcher occurs at the bottom of page 8. He admits that this is speculation: “This writer is of the opinion that the Adventist church kept Blanco’s paraphrase from publication until after the death of Walter Martin in 1989.” I can end his speculation now by stating that before 1989, what would eventually become *The Clear Word* was only the personal journal of Jack Blanco’s devotional experience. Neither he nor the publisher had ever entertained the thought of publishing a paraphrase of the Bible before the early 1990s. Then Pitcher says, “If this work had been published in his lifetime, Martin would have wasted no time in reapplying the label ‘cult’ to this chameleon.” If Martin were still around, I do agree that he might have some issues with the content of *The Clear Word*. But I believe he would be fair in his assessment and recognize that this paraphrase is [not an SDA Bible](#). Moreover, Martin’s apprentice, Kenneth Samples, now a noted Christian apologist, continues the tradition of studying Seventh-day Adventists in a fair way. During the fall of 2007 I attended the [Questions on Doctrine 50th Anniversary Conference](#). The audience was composed only of Adventist scholars and two non-Adventist scholars, Donald Dayton and Kenneth Samples, who made notable contributions during the presentations. Samples sat through every presentation and panel discussion, listening intently to everything that was said. He engaged in many one-on-one discussions with the Adventists as well. He and I discussed the criticisms of Seventh-day Adventism, for example, and I found him to be fair and impartial to the present situation. He is planning to write a book on Seventh-day Adventism, updating the work of his deceased mentor, Walter Martin, and I know he will certainly not agree with several Seventh-day Adventist teachings. But I believe that his assessment will be based on an honest research ethic and that he will be fair in his treatment of Seventh-day Adventism (to read Samples presentation at the QOD Conference, [go here](#)).

The Godhead and *The Clear Word*

Mr. Pitcher pits *The Clear Word* against the *English Standard Version*, a formal equivalent version, regarding the following subjects: food laws, the Sabbath, hell, and the deity of Christ. While I believe the Adventist understanding of these subjects is contextual, I have no desire to defend *The Clear Word*’s paraphrase of the texts Mr. Pitcher uses on food laws, the Sabbath, and hell. It is an interpretive paraphrase and Mr. Pitcher has the right to disagree with Jack Blanco’s interpretation. If I were to explain the Adventist understanding of these three subjects, I would use the *English Standard Version*, along with the original biblical languages, and focus on the literary context. A discussion of that nature, of course, is out of the purview of this article.

What I do want to address is Mr. Pitcher’s discussion of the Godhead in *The Clear Word*. It is on this subject that he does more than disagree with Blanco’s interpretation—he distorts what Blanco says.

Mr. Pitcher asserts that Blanco “incorporates” the “anti-Trinitarian influence” into *The Clear Word* (11). I know Dr. Blanco personally and have had numerous theological discussions with him, and he is not anti-Trinitarian in any way! In fact, he never tires of exalting the full deity and eternal existence of Jesus Christ. Mr. Pitcher presents ten passages from *The Clear Word* and reads some aspect of anti-Trinitarianism in each one of them. A casual reading of Blanco’s

paraphrase of the Gospel of John in its entirety, however, from which Pitcher draws six of his verses for critique, clearly reveals the deity of Christ. Notice, for example, several passages from Blanco's paraphrase of the Gospel of John.

John 1:1: "From the beginning, the Word of God was there. The Word stood by the side of God, and the Word was fully God" (emphasis mine). Mr. Pitcher writes that "'From' connotes something continuing since the beginning," whereas "'In' connotes a presence not only at the beginning but also before and after." He also writes: "Standing 'by the side of' and being 'with' carry different theological meanings. One has to do with physical space, the other with identity or 'being'" (11). Here he attempts to read ideas into Blanco's paraphrase that are not there. This conjecture of what Blanco means is corrected by the added word "fully," which sets forth Blanco's understanding that the "Word," which "became a man and lived among us" (vs. 14), was, in essence, God Almighty. Furthermore, Blanco spells out his understanding of the text by the way he paraphrases verse 2: "There never was a time when the Word of God was not with God." Thus, Dr. Blanco understands the "Word" to be eternally self-existent and God Almighty in the fullest sense. Not only is this clear from the context, but Dr. Blanco confirmed this meaning with me personally.

John 5:18: "He made Himself equal with God by claiming that God was his Father."

John 5:21-23: "Whatever the Father can do, the Son can do, even raising the dead. In fact, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judging to the Son. The Father wants everyone to honor His Son, just as they honor Him. Those who do not honor and respect the Son are not honoring the Father who sent Him."

John 8:58: "Because I existed before Abraham was born." Mr. Pitcher cites this text from *The Clear Word* and correctly says that Jesus was "claiming the title of Almighty God," because the Greek literally reads, "I Am." But he believes that Blanco meant that Jesus was claiming only to "pre-exist Abraham" (11-12). Blanco's paraphrase of this verse must first be taken in its larger context (see above on verses 1-2). Second, his wording does not deny that Jesus was claiming to be Almighty God. The *New Living Translation*, a dynamic or functional equivalent version translated by a major team of evangelical scholars, words this verse essentially the same as does Blanco: "The truth is, I existed before Abraham was even born!" Did these evangelical scholars mean that Jesus claimed only to "pre-exist" Abraham? Of course not! In fact, to avoid any misunderstanding, they put a footnote by this verse which reads: "Or, 'Truly, truly, before Abraham was, I am.'" Perhaps Blanco should have done the same thing to avoid misunderstanding. The point is that his wording of this text does not undermine the full deity and eternal self-existence of Jesus Christ when it is read in context.

John 10:30: "You see, my Father and I are so close, we're one." Mr. Pitcher comments: "Jesus' statement has nothing to do with closeness, but with exactness. It has to do with identity of being. TCW implies they are separate entities. The biblical text says they are one" (12). Blanco's wording does not deny "exactness" or "identity of being."

Mr. Pitcher ignores the key words “we’re one.”

John 10:31: “But if I am doing the Father’s works, even though you don’t want to believe in me, at least admit that the works I do are from God. If you admitted that much, you would soon see that He’s working in me and that I am in Him. We work together as one.”

John 14:9: “Jesus, being somewhat disappointed with Philip’s lack of faith, said, ‘When you’re looking at me, you’re looking at the Father. How can you ask me to give you a glimpse of the Father?’” Compare this with Mr. Pitcher’s comments on John 14:8, 10, 11a. Modalism (the idea that there is only one God who successively manifested Himself as Father, then Son, and finally as Holy Spirit) finds no place in Blanco’s paraphrase of this entire passage when read in context. This just goes to show that a person can read anything they wish into a sentence isolated from its context. This is often done with formal equivalent versions of the Bible as well.

John 20:28: “Thomas stood there speechless. Then he fell to his knees and said, ‘Lord, you’re alive! They were right! I believe! You are my Lord and my God.’” Mr. Pitcher cites Blanco’s earlier version of *The Clear Word Bible*, “You are the Son of God,” and implies that Blanco’s understanding of this passage is not equivalent to the Christian understanding of Lord and God. But he ignores the fact that Blanco changed it to reflect more closely the original text: “You are my Lord and my God!” Furthermore, Pitcher reads into Blanco’s wording, “Thomas stood there speechless,” the idea that Thomas was “expressing emotion rather than making a declaration of truth revealed by God” (12). Blanco’s final wording of the text leaves no room for this unfair charge. Thomas “fell to his knees” in a position of worship, obviously overcome with emotion but clearly aware of what he was saying, and exclaimed, according to Blanco: “Lord, you’re alive! They were right! I believe!” Then the unmistakable words: “You are my Lord and my God.” This expanded paraphrase of this passage in no way diminishes Thomas’s profound declaration regarding the deity of Christ.

Thus, when read according to its context, *The Clear Word* does not support an Arian, semi-Arian, modalist, or anti-Trinitarian view. Mr. Pitcher has read these views into Blanco’s paraphrase by isolating verses from their contexts.

The Godhead and the Seventh-day Adventist Church

Mr. Pitcher cites a book which he recognizes as an “important book”: *The Trinity: Understanding God’s Love, His Plan of Salvation, and Christian Relationships*, published by the Review and Herald, 2002, and authored by three Adventist scholars: Woodrow Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John W. Reeve. Twice he cites this book in the same selective way he cited the two articles by Holbrook and Rodriguez. Either Mr. Pitcher did not carefully read this book or he refuses to acknowledge its contents, because it refutes his assertions about what he calls the Adventist “amalgamated God” (Pitcher, 11-12, 13). For instance, the authors expound the biblical view of the Godhead from Scripture and refute anti-Trinitarianism (Chapters 1-7),

provide a history of the Trinity doctrine in Christianity (Chapters 8-12), document how Ellen White led the Adventist pioneers to the full and eternal deity of Jesus Christ (Chapters 13-14), and confirm Trinitarian dominance in the church since the 1950s (200-202). Mr. Pitcher also failed to consider the book's careful discussion of how the Adventist pioneers rejected the influence of Greek philosophy in the ancient creeds and chose to hammer out their understanding from Scripture alone, which was a long process (166-174, 190-203, 219).

For a concise discussion of the context of this book and Ellen White's view on the deity of Jesus Christ, see my article ["Ellen White and Arianism."](#) There you will find a concise history of the Trinity in Adventism and links to articles by Adventist scholars on this subject. Several of these articles became chapters in the book by Whidden, Moon, and Reeve. Thus, fair-minded readers can see for themselves how Mr. Pitcher has manipulated and distorted Adventist teaching on the Godhead in his article.

The assertion that "numerous concepts of God are equally acceptable" (Pitcher, 13) in Adventism today is a gross misunderstanding of the situation. First, the official position of the church affirms the biblical doctrine of the Trinity as evidenced in the following documents published by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists: ["Fundamental Beliefs 2-5."](#) (officially voted doctrinal statement by the world SDA Church); "The Godhead," *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: An Exposition of the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, 23-33; and Fernando L. Canale, "Doctrine of God," *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, 105-159. Second, the purpose in the printing of the book *The Trinity* is evidence that the church is asserting the biblical view of God over against any non-biblical views of God in Adventism (see the "Introduction," 7-14).

Mr. Pitcher also asserts that the Adventist church has "never repented of its Arian/anti-Trinitarian position, nor has it dealt with the resulting issues that allow current members to maintain membership while being openly anti-Trinitarian" (11). Calling the Adventist church to repent (expressing godly sorrow over sin and turning away from it) brings with it the assumption that the church has committed sin in its anti-Trinitarian past. But in spite of some incorrect views of church pioneers regarding the Godhead, Adventists have seen God's leading in the entire experience. The authors of *The Trinity* explain it best at the conclusion of Chapter 13, which "sketched the long process from Adventists' initial rejection of creedal Trinitarianism to their eventual acceptance of a biblical doctrine of the Trinity":

From a perspective of belief that God was leading the Adventist movement, it appears that a major reason for the long process was that He was not calling the pioneers to a simple choice between Trinitarianism and anti-Trinitarianism. Rather, He was summoning them to develop a new understanding not dependent on Greek philosophy. The only way for the pioneers in their context to effectively separate Scripture from tradition was to abandon every doctrine not clearly supported from the Bible alone. Thus they initially rejected the traditional doctrine of the Trinity, which clearly contained elements not evident in Scripture. As they continued to work on the basis of Scripture, periodically challenged and stretched by the Holy Spirit through the visions of Ellen White, they gradually became

convinced that the basic concept of *one God in three persons* did indeed appear in Scripture (202; author's emphasis).

Accordingly, when one carefully studies Adventist history on the Trinity, it becomes clear that the pioneers were both Scriptural and unscriptural in their understanding of this doctrine. But they were living up to the light they had at the time. When biblical Trinitarianism became clear in their minds, and the problems of creedal Trinitarianism were rooted out, then they fully embraced the biblical position (there were, of course, some stubborn individuals). Thus, the Adventist pioneers in general were *sincere* in their relationship to the Godhead at every stage of their development during the dynamic growth from the initial rejection of creedal Trinitarianism to eventual acceptance of biblical Trinitarianism. One can be sincerely wrong and still be in a right relationship with God as long as one is open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. If the Adventist church had collectively rejected the Holy Spirit's guidance concerning the biblical teaching of the Trinity, then repentance would be necessary. But, fortunately, the Adventist pioneers embraced the Holy Spirit's guidance and today the SDA Church espouses a fully biblical Trinitarian position (see "[Fundamental Beliefs 2-5.](#)"). Mr. Pitcher's comment that there is no willingness in Adventism to state "'we introduced you to a 'Jesus' who was not the eternal, Almighty God'" (13) shows an unwillingness on his part to carefully study Adventist history on the Trinity and accurately represent the facts.

As to the issue of the church allowing current members "to maintain membership while being openly anti-Trinitarian," the official *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* lists as its *first* reason for disciplining church members "Denial of faith in the fundamentals of the gospel and in the cardinal doctrines of the church or teaching doctrines contrary to the same" (see "Reasons For Why Members Shall Be Disciplined," [Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual](#), 195). A careful reading of Chapter 14, "Church Discipline" (185-200), in the *Church Manual*, however, encourages great care and caution on the part of the local church in disciplining church members. Regarding this first reason for disciplining, just because a church member questions one of the doctrines of the church, it does not mean they should automatically be taken off the membership list of the church. Wisdom and discernment on the part of the local church leadership should be exercised according to each individual case. The question should be addressed: To what degree is this person involved in anti-Trinitarian thinking and what effect is it having on the church? Those struggling with the Trinity or any other doctrine of the church should be gently and lovingly brought back to Bible truth through earnest effort. If a person refuses to accept the church's official teaching on the Trinity or any other doctrine, then that particular case should be prayerfully considered by the local church leadership. If, however, a particular person or group of persons becomes more pronounced and aggressive in promoting anti-Trinitarianism, fostering a "factional and divisive spirit, in the fragmenting of the effort and witness of the church, and thus in hindering it in the discharge of its obligations to its Head and to the world" (190), then immediate disciplining action should take place according to the *Church Manual*. Thus, Mr. Pitcher's assertion that the church is not dealing with this issue is false (Pitcher, 11).

One other issue needing attention is Mr. Pitcher's selective use of Eric Claude Webster's magisterial study *Crosscurrents in Adventist Christology*. He uses this dissertation negatively to show the diversity within Adventism regarding the nature of Christ (11). And, once again, either

he did not carefully read the book, or he refuses to acknowledge its contents. The entire study documented and confirmed that, in spite of theological differences on the nature of Christ, “Adventist Christology is in agreement on the eternal pre-existence of Christ, on His essential equality with the Father, on His oneness with, yet distinction from the Father and the Holy Spirit” (447). Furthermore, the study concluded from analysis of the four views that “it is possible to have a multi-faceted Christology, drawing on all the New Testament models concerning the person and work of Christ, while also upholding the full divinity and full humanity of Christ without falling into contradiction” (452). This model is followed today by mainline Adventist theologians (see, for example, Raoul Dederen, “Christ: His Person and Work,” *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, 160-204). Most importantly, Mr. Pitcher did not take into account Webster’s amazing chapter on “The Christology of Ellen Gould White” (56-156), which portrays the depth and richness of Ellen White’s writings on the subject and confirms her belief in the eternal pre-existence of Jesus Christ and his equality with the Father in nature and essence. This significant chapter, along with the entire study, can be read [online](#) and compared with Mr. Pitcher’s article.

Conclusion

It is clear from the evidence above that Mr. Pitcher either failed to carefully study his sources or he read them through the lens of his own bias against Seventh-day Adventists. Either way, his research ethic, as demonstrated in this article, is one that cannot be trusted for reliable information about the Adventist understanding of the Godhead.

In the important book, *The Trinity*, the following summary of the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the Trinity doctrine is found:

The Trinity doctrine teaches that the Godhead consists of three divine Persons—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are not three Gods, but three divine Persons who are one in nature (same essence or substance), character, and purpose. Each has eternally pre-existed—that is, there has never been a time in eternity past when They did not coexist, and there will never be a time when They will cease to exist (243).

Seventh-day Adventist embrace this understanding because it is found in the Bible. As to the Adventist understanding of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Ellen White said it best:

Christ was God essentially, and in the highest sense. He was with God from all eternity, God over all, blessed forevermore (*Review and Herald*, April 5, 1906).

For more of what Ellen White said about Christ’s place in the Godhead, go [here](#). See also my article, [“Ellen White and Arianism.”](#)

