

BIBLICAL SYMPOSIUM

Understanding Ellen White

January 11, 2015

CHURCH OFFICERS WORKSHOP

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Introduction

Ellen G. White 1827 – 1915 is considered to be a prophet by members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church and was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White. As the Lord's messenger, her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction. They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested. (Joel 2:28, 29; Acts 2:14-21; Heb. 1:1-3; Rev. 12:17; 19:10.)

Ellen White's Understanding of How God Speaks

Exhibit One. From *The Great Controversy*, pages v-vii.

The Bible points to God as its author; yet it was written by human hands; and in the varied style of its different books it presents the characteristics of the several writers. The truths revealed are all “given by inspiration of God” (2 Timothy 3:16); yet they are expressed in the words of men. The Infinite One by His Holy Spirit has shed light into the minds and hearts of His servants. He has given dreams and visions, symbols and figures; and those to whom the truth was thus revealed have themselves embodied the thought in human language. {GC v.3}

The Spirit was not given—nor can it ever be bestowed—to supersede the Bible; for the Scriptures explicitly state that the word of God is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested. {GC vii.3}

The Dynamics of Inspiration

A Close Look at the Messages of Ellen White

By Juan Carlos Viera

1. The "Visionary" Model of Inspiration

Many Christians think of the "visionary" model--God speaking through prophetic visions and dreams--as the unique and only way God reveals His will to the prophets. This model suggests visions of a supernatural character in which the prophet exhibits signs of being controlled by a supernatural power. Such signs as being breathless or with unusual strength--or lack of strength--can be found in the testimony of Biblical prophets as well as in Ellen White. [1] For a Biblical illustration of supernatural strength, see Judges 13-16. For lack of strength while in vision, see Daniel 10:7-11. Many reliable witnesses state that Ellen G. White was breathless while in vision.

2. The "Witness" Model of Inspiration

In the "witness" model God seems to inspire the prophet to give his or her own account of things seen and heard. John could write: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, . . . that which we have seen and heard we declare to you" (1 John 1:1-3). **Being a witness means to relate the story as seen--or perceived--by the individual.** Technically, a witness is not allowed to refer to views or opinions given by others. God inspires a person to give his or her own account without additional dreams or visions, but still the message is the result of divine inspiration, because the Holy Spirit impresses the mind of the prophet and inspires him or her to write as a witness.

3. The "Historian" Model of Inspiration

Whereas the Gospels of Matthew and John result from a "witness" model, **Mark's and Luke's come from what we might describe as a "historian" model of inspiration.** Luke tells us candidly that his story of Jesus did not come through visions and dreams, but through research. "Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us . . . it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus" (Luke 1:1-3).

4. The "Counselor" Model of Inspiration

In the "counselor" model the prophet acts as an adviser to God's people. For example, Paul dealt with family matters in his first letter to the Corinthians. In some instances, he had a "command" from the Lord (1 Cor. 7:10). In other instances he did not have a special revelation (verse 25), but that did not prevent him from giving inspired counsel--counsel coming from a mind filled with the Spirit of God (verse 40).

5. The "Epistolary" Model of Inspiration

Letters from James, John, Paul, and Peter brought inspiration, devotion, instruction, and correction [p. 25] to the believers of the first century as well as to Christians of all ages. However, in the framework of the dynamics of inspiration, epistles confront us with new dilemmas: first, how to **handle personal letters now made public through their insertion in the Biblical canon;** second, **how to understand inspiration when the prophet writes greetings, names, circumstances, or even common things that do not require a special revelation.**

6. The "Literary" Model of Inspiration

In the "literary" model the Holy Spirit inspires the prophet to express his or her intimate feelings and emotions through the means of poetry and prose, as in the psalms.

Ellen White was not a poet; nevertheless, she expressed her intimate sentiments and emotions in thousands of handwritten diary pages. In those pages the believer finds [p. 26] inspiration, instruction, correction, and comfort, as in any other portion of the inspired writings.

INTERPRETING PROPHETS ANCIENT AND MODERN

Begin With a Healthy Outlook

A. Prayer B. Open mind: C. Faith not doubt.

Focus on the Central Issues

A person can read inspired materials in at least two ways. One is to look for the central themes of an author; the other is to search for those things that are new and different. The first way leads to what can be thought of as a theology of the center, while the second produces a theology of the edges. Doing a theology of the edges may help a person arrive at "new light," but such light in the end may look more like darkness when examined in the context of the central and consistent teachings of the Bible.

Account for Problems in Communication

The process of communication is not as simple as we might at first suspect. The topic was certainly at the forefront of James White's thinking as he watched his wife struggle to lead the early Adventists down the path of reform. **In 1868 he wrote that *"What she may say to urge the tardy, is taken by the prompt to urge them over the mark. And what she may say to caution the prompt, zealous, incautious ones, is taken by the tardy as an excuse to remain too far behind"*** (*Review and Herald*, Mar. 17, 1868; italics supplied).

Study All Available Information on a Topic

When we read the full range of counsel that Ellen White has on a topic, the picture is often quite different than when we are dealing with only a part of her material or with isolated quotations. Many times in her long ministry Ellen White had to deal with those who took only part of her counsel. "When it suits your purpose," she told the delegates of the 1891 General Conference session, "you treat the Testimonies as if you believed them, quoting from them to strengthen any statement you wish to have prevail. But how is it when light is given to correct your errors? Do you then accept the light? When the Testimonies speak contrary to your ideas, you treat them very lightly" (*ibid.*, p. 43). It is important to listen to all the counsel.

Avoid Extreme Interpretations

The history of the Christian church is laced with those who would place the most extreme interpretations on God's counsels and then define their fanaticism as "faithfulness." A leaning toward extremism seems to be a constituent part of fallen human nature. God has sought to correct that tendency through His prophets.

Even though balance typified Ellen White's writings, it does not always characterize those who read them. Ellen White had to deal with extremists throughout her ministry. In 1894 she pointed out that "there is a class of people who are always ready to go off on some tangent, who want to catch up something strange and wonderful and new; but God would have all move calmly, considerately, choosing our words in harmony with the solid truth for this time, which requires to be presented to the mind as free from that which is emotional as possible, while still bearing the intensity and solemnity that it is proper it should bear. **We must guard against creating extremes, guard against encouraging those who would either be in the fire or in the water"** (*Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 227, 228).

Take Time and Place Into Consideration

We need to take the time and place of Ellen White's various counsels into consideration. She did not write them in a vacuum. Most of them met problems faced by specific individuals or groups in quite specific historic contexts.

For example, in the 1860s Ellen White suggested that women should shorten their skirts. Why? Because in her day skirts dragged on the ground. In the process they picked up the filth of a horse-and-buggy culture among other things. Such skirts also had other problems that Ellen White and contemporary reformers of her day repeatedly pointed out. Thus she could write that "one of fashion's wasteful and mischievous devices is the skirt that sweeps the ground. Uncleanly, uncomfortable, inconvenient, unhealthful--all this and more is true of the trailing skirt" (*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 291).

But what was true of her day is generally not true of ours. Of course, one can think of some traditional cultures that still mirror the conditions of the nineteenth century. In those cultures the counsel fits without adaptation. But we must adapt it for most cultures today.

Study Each Statement in Its Literary Context

In the preceding section we noted that it is important to understand Ellen White's counsel in its original historical context. In this section we will examine the importance of reading her statements in their literary framework.

People have too often based their understandings of Mrs. White's teachings upon a fragment of a paragraph or upon an isolated statement entirely removed from its setting. Thus she writes that "many study the Scriptures for the purpose of proving their own ideas to be correct. They change the meaning of God's Word to suit their own opinions. And thus they do also with the testimonies that He sends. They quote half a sentence, leaving out the other half, which, if quoted, would show their reasoning to be false. **God has a controversy with those who wrest the Scriptures, making them conform to their preconceived ideas**" (*Selected Messages*, book 3, p. 82). **Again she comments about those who by "separating . . . statements from their connection, and placing them beside human reasonings, make it appear that my writings uphold that which they condemn"** (Letter 208, 1906).

Recognize Ellen White's Understanding of the Ideal and the Real

Ellen White often found herself plagued by "those who," she claimed, "select from the testimonies the strongest expressions and, without bringing in or making any account of the circumstances under which the cautions and warnings are given, make them of force in every case. . . . **Picking out some things in the testimonies they drive them upon every one, and disgust rather than win souls**" (*Selected Messages*, book 3, pp. 285, 286).

Her observation not only highlights the fact that we need to take the historical context of Ellen White's statements into consideration when reading her counsel, but also indicates that she put some statements in stronger or more forceful language than others. That idea leads us to the concept of the ideal and the real in Mrs. White's writings.

When Ellen White is stating the ideal, she often uses her strongest language. It is as if she needs to speak loudly in order to be heard. One such statement appears in *Fundamentals of Christian Education*. "Never," she exhorted, "can the proper education be given to the youth in this country, or any other country, unless they are separated a wide distance from the cities" (p. 312; italics supplied).

Those who for years have been working to help the colored people are well fitted to give counsel in regard to the opening of such schools. So far as possible these schools should be established outside the cities. But in the cities there are many children who could not attend schools away from the cities; and for the benefit of these, schools should be opened in the cities as well as in the country *Testimonies for the Church vol. 9, p.201*

Use Common Sense

Seventh-day Adventists have been known to differ and even argue over some of Ellen White's counsel. That situation is especially true of those statements that seem so straightforward and clear. One such statement appears in volume 3 of the *Testimonies*: "Parents should be the *only* teachers of their children until they have reached eight or ten years of age" (p. 137; italics supplied).

That passage is an excellent candidate for inflexible interpretation. After all, it is quite categorical. It offers no conditions and hints at no exceptions. Containing no "ifs," "ands," "ors," or "buts" to modify its impact, it just plainly states as fact that "parents should be the *only* teachers of their children until they have reached eight or ten years of age." Mrs. White first published the statement in 1872. The fact that it reappeared in her writings in 1882 and 1913 undoubtedly had the effect of strengthening what appears to be its unconditional nature.

Interestingly enough, however, a struggle over that statement has provided us with perhaps the very best record we possess of how Mrs. White interpreted her own writings.

But, as we discovered in the previous section, the ideal is not always the real. Or, to say it in other words, reality is often less than ideal. Thus Ellen White continued in the interview: "Mothers *should* be able to instruct their little ones wisely during the earlier years of childhood. **If every mother were capable of doing this, and would take time to teach her children the lessons they should learn in early life, then all children could be kept in the home school until they are eight, or nine, or ten years old**" (*ibid.*, pp. 214, 215; italics supplied).

Here we begin to find Mrs. White dealing with a reality that modifies the categorical and unconditional nature of her statement on parents being the only teachers of their children until 8 or 10 years of age. The ideal is that mothers "should" be able to function as the best teachers. But realism intrudes when Ellen White uses such words as "if" and "then." She definitely implies that not all mothers are capable and that not all are willing. But "if" they are both capable and willing, "then all children could be kept in the home school." See. *3SM. P.217*

Discover the Underlying Principles

In July 1894 Ellen White sent a letter to the denomination's headquarters church in Battle Creek, Michigan, in which she condemned the purchase and riding of bicycles (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, pp. 50-53). At first glance it appears strange that such an issue should be considered important enough for a prophet to deal with. It seems especially odd when we note that the bicycle issue had been specifically revealed in vision.

How should we apply such counsel today? Does it mean that Seventh-day Adventists should not own bicycles?

In answering that question we first need to examine the historical context. In 1894 the modern bicycle was just beginning to be manufactured, and a fad quickly developed to acquire bicycles, not for the purpose of economical transportation, but simply to be in style, to enter bicycle races, and to parade around town on them. In the evening such parading included the hanging of Japanese lanterns on the bicycles. Bicycling was the "in" thing--the thing to do if you were anything or anybody on the social scale.

Realize That Prophets Are Not Verbally Inspired, Nor Are They Infallible or Inerrant

"I was led to conclude and most firmly believe that *every* word that you ever spoke in public or private, that *every* letter you wrote under *any* and *all* circumstances, was as inspired as the ten commandments. I held that view with *absolute* tenacity against innumerable objections raised to it by many who were occupying prominent positions in the [Adventist] cause," wrote Dr. David Paulson to Ellen White on April 19, 1906. Deeply concerned over the nature of Ellen White's inspiration, Paulson wondered whether he should continue to hold such a rigid view. In the process he raised the question of verbal inspiration and the related issues of infallibility and inerrancy. Since a correct understanding of such issues is of crucial importance in reading Ellen White and/or the Bible, we will examine each of them in this section.

Mrs. White replied to Paulson on June 14, 1906. "My brother," she penned, "you have studied my writings diligently, and you have never found that I have made any such claims [to verbal inspiration], neither will you find that the pioneers in our cause ever made such claims" for her writings. She went on to illustrate inspiration in her writings by referring to the inspiration of the Bible writers. Even though God had inspired the Biblical truths, they were "expressed in the words of men." She saw the Bible as representing "a

union of the divine and the human." Thus "the testimony is conveyed through the imperfect expression of human language, yet it is the testimony of God" (*Selected Messages*, book 1, pp. 24-26).

Avoid Making the Counsels "Prove" Things They Were Never Intended to Prove

In the previous section we noted that Ellen White did not claim verbal inspiration for her writings or the Bible, nor did she classify them as either inerrant or infallible in the sense of being free from factual mistakes. In spite of the efforts of Mrs. White and her son to move people away from too rigid a view of inspiration, many have continued on in that line. Down through the history of the denomination some have sought to use Ellen White's writings and the Bible for purposes for which God never intended them. Likewise, claims have been made for prophetic writings that transcend their purpose.

As a result, we find individuals who go to her writings to substantiate such things as historical facts and dates. Thus S. N. Haskell could write to Ellen White that he and his friends would "give more for one expression in your testimony than for all the histories you could stack between here and Calcutta" (S. N. Haskell to E. G. White, May 30, 1910).

Make Sure Ellen White Said It

A fair number of statements are in circulation that apparently have been falsely attributed to Ellen White. How can we identify such statements? The first clue that they are apocryphal for those who are familiar with Ellen White's writings is that such statements are often out of harmony with the general tenor of her thought. That is, they seem strange when compared to the bulk of her ideas, appear to be out of place in her mouth. Strangeness, of course, is not proof that we are dealing with an apocryphal statement. It is merely an indication.

The safest way to test the authenticity of an Ellen White statement is to ask for the reference to its source. Once we know where it is found, we can check to see if Ellen White said it and also examine the wording and context to determine if it has been interpreted correctly.

Ellen G. White's Practice Regarding Vegetarianism

Did Ellen White eat any meat after her health-reform vision in 1863? What about that 1858 "pork" testimony?

Ellen White did not claim that after her 1863 health vision she never again ate meat. Prior to the vision, she believed that she "was dependent upon a meat diet for strength." Because of her weak physical condition, especially for her tendency to faint when weak and dizzy, she thought that meat was "indispensable." In fact, at that time she was "a great meat eater"; flesh meat was her "principal article of diet."

But she complied with advancing light. She cut meat out of her "bill of fare" immediately, and it was no longer a regular part of her diet. She practiced the general principles she taught others, such as that one must use the best food available under the circumstances. When away from home, either while traveling or camping in austere conditions, decades before convenience foods were invented, finding an adequate diet was often difficult. Not always able to obtain the best, for whatever reason, she at times settled for the good--the best under the circumstances.

Ellen White was not dogmatic regarding meat eating. In 1895 she noted, "I have never felt that it was my duty to say that no one should taste of meat under any circumstances. To say this . . . would be carrying matters to extremes. I have never felt that it was my duty to make sweeping assertions. What I have said I have said under a sense of duty, but I have been guarded in my

statements, because I did not want to give occasion for anyone to be conscience for another" (*Counsels on Diet and Foods*, pp.462, 463).

In modern attempts to understand history, too frequently the past is judged by the present, most often unknowingly. Individuals of the past must be judged in the context of their circumstances, not ours. In a day without refrigeration, when obtaining fresh fruit and vegetables depended on where one lived and the time of the year, when meat substitutes were rarely obtainable before the introduction of peanut butter and dry-cereals (mid-1890s), on some occasions one either ate meat or nothing at all. In our day, in most circumstances meat eating is rarely a necessity.

While in Australia, she came to the place where she "absolutely banished meat from my table." For a time, she had allowed some meat to be served to workers and family members. From that time on (January 1894) it was understood "that whether I am at home or abroad, nothing of this kind is to be used in my family, or come upon my table" (ibid., p. 488). Many of Ellen White's strongest statements against meat were written after she had renewed her commitment to total abstinence in 1894.

Ellen White's major health visions of 1863 and 1865 encompassed all features of the health reform message that she emphasized until her death. Changes in certain emphases through the years only refined those principles, they did not add or subtract from them. As time passes, even prophets must take time to assimilate revealed principles--time for theory to become practice in their own lives. She constantly advocated the principle, in practice as well as in teaching, that everyone who is committed to truth will move from the bad to the good, from the good to the better, from the better to the best. Such was her experience.

What about her apparent reversal on the question of eating pork? In 1858 she wrote to the Haskells (Brother and Sister A) on a number of items, rebuking them for insisting that pork-eating should be made a "test question": "I saw that your views concerning swine's flesh would prove no injury if you have them to yourselves; but in your judgment and opinion you have made this question a test. . . . If God requires His people to abstain from swine's flesh, He will convict them on the matter. . . . If it is the duty of the church to abstain from swine's flesh, God will discover it to more than two or three. He will teach His *church* their duty" (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, pp. 206, 207).

In the health reform vision of June 6, 1863, a broad array of health principles was revealed. The next year she published a fifty-page chapter entitled "Health" in *Spiritual Gifts*, volume 4. In reference to swine's flesh she said: "God never designed the swine to be eaten under any circumstances" (p. 124), and in her later books she continued to emphasize the injurious consequences of eating swine's flesh.

How does one account for this change in Ellen White's views between 1858 and 1863?

First, she had received no light from God on swine's flesh before 1863. Her vision in 1858 did not inform her as to the rightness or wrongness of eating pork. Rather, it reproved this brother for creating division among Adventists by making the issue a test question at that time. Second, she left open the possibility that if pork-eating ought to be discarded by God's people, He would, in His own time, "teach his *church* their duty." When the vision did come, nearly five years later, the whole church saw the issue clearly and never again was there division regarding this issue.

[Adapted from Herbert E. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord: the Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1998), pp. 157, 158, 312-319.]

For additional information about Ellen White's dietary practices see, [Ellen White and Vegetarianism](#).

NOTES
