

Ellen White: A Subject for Adventist Scholarship

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Most Seventh-day Adventists know that for some time we have been able to make Ellen G. White say almost anything we want. Her authority is universally recognized in the church, but what we make her say with authority often depends on who of us is quoting her. In the life of the church, therefore, she speaks with many accents. Sometimes on a single topic we make her voice blare out arguments on both sides of a debate.

Take the subject of health reform. One Ellen White talks reasonably about the advantages of temperate living. Another Ellen White fanatically demands that we eat only foods grown according to certain rigidly defined methods. Which is the *real* Ellen White?

Sometimes we make her march determinedly in opposite directions — as in our discussions of justification by faith versus perfection, or God's sovereignty versus man's free will. As important a topic as the universality of salvation throws us into a dilemma when quotations extracted from her writings are simply strung together end-to-end. She appears on both the banner of those who say that the heathen who never hear the name of Christ will be as if they never were, and the banner of those who insist that every man is given right sufficient for a choice determining his eternal destiny.

The result of having so many Ellen Whites is that the Adventist church may soon have no Ellen White at all. Conceivably all that may be left will be a few members shouting at each other in her name; the great majority, having already despaired of understanding her, will only wonder what all the commotion is about.

It should be clear by now that among the top priorities of the church

ought to be the establishment of more objective ways of understanding what Ellen White said. The church needs to see a coherent whole in her wide-ranging writings. To find a consistent method of interpretation for these writings should not be thought of as merely an intriguing academic possibility; it is an essential and immediate task for the church.

Up to now, two main ways — both of them wanting — have been used to understand Mrs. White's thinking. One way has been to compile quotations taken at random from all her works, and then to group these quotations simply by topic. The other way has been to consider as more authoritative those statements that start with the words "I was shown," or some similar expression.

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Both of these ways have sometimes proved useful, but they remain inadequate. A collection of quotations by topic often exaggerates the seeming contradictions among them. As a result, the consistent viewpoints Ellen White actually had are obscured, and her persuasiveness is diminished. On the other hand, to take as authoritative only the statements that cite a specific vision depreciates the value of the many things God "showed" her through the guidance of the Holy Spirit pervading her life. She was led by God even when she could not refer to a particular vision for a specific admonition.

The church has not sufficiently perceived the full significance of Ellen White's message by using these means. New methods are needed. What follows is a set of proposals to make possible a more consistent interpretation of these inspired writings.

The *first step* should be to discover the nature of Mrs. White's relationship to other authors. We know that she borrowed terms, phrases, and historical accounts from others. To find the real Ellen White we must undertake the vast, but absolutely necessary, task of learning exactly what kind of use she made of the work of these other writers. Sample cores have been taken,¹ but the vital information — the nature, selection, and use of the abundant material available to her and integrated by her in her writing — is still a mystery. Until we know more precisely which authors she respected sufficiently to rely on, we will not really know Ellen White or her ideas.

The *second step* should be to recover the social and intellectual milieu in which she lived and wrote. How can her testimony be understood until the economic, political, religious, and educational issues that were the context of her words are recognized? Unless we know what meaning specific words had in the culture of her day, how can we know her meaning in using them?² Either Ellen White lives for us first in her own cultural situation or

she does not live for us at all. Of course, if we hear her speak within a definite cultural milieu, we do not thereby confine the significance of her words to that context. Understanding her in terms of the nineteenth century does not mean that what she said is irrelevant to the twentieth century. Actually, finding how her words pertained to the past century is a necessary step in establishing their relevance to our own. Like most things in nature, words do not live in a vacuum.

The *third step* should be to give close attention to the development of Ellen White's writings within her own lifetime, and also to the development of the church. What was first written as a small series of books grew through the years into the rather voluminous Conflict of the Ages series. Personal letters became articles in church papers, only thereafter to be transformed into parts of books. Events in Mrs. White's life and currents in the church are relevant to understanding why her writings took the shape they did. Compilations of her writings published since her death should be examined in terms of the issues that confronted the church when the editors did their compiling.³

By taking the three foregoing steps we can know with more assurance what the real Ellen White said. By making certain that our investigations follow clearly defined guidelines, we can more completely free our interpretations of conflicting personal biases. When we compare what she took from her sources with what she ignored in them, we can see more clearly a trend in her thinking. By knowing the streams of thinking in which these sources fall, and by being aware of what other alternatives existed for her, we can see for the first time the significance of her choice of sources. By putting ourselves in the crosscurrents of her day, we can see why she used one argument on a topic at one time and another argument on the same topic at another time. Anything we learn about her and the church at every stage in the preparation of her writings can only help draw us further into her mind.

Our final step should then be to apply in our day the words she spoke in her day. We may never be able fully to recapture Ellen White's original intentions or the absolute truth of what she meant. But if the methods proposed here, or similar ones, were implemented, the church would be much closer to her ideas than it is now. Setting up objective criteria for interpretation would restrain individual prejudice and decrease confusion. With relatively greater consensus on what she said, we would increasingly agree on what she would say today. Her influence, instead of waning, would then become more pervasive.

Using such methods would put the church in touch with a more vital and interesting Ellen White, with nuances and enthusiasms we do not recognize now. This more vibrant Ellen White would not always agree with her modern readers (any more than she did with her original readers), but she would be a more believable person. She would be seen as God's human spokesman — perhaps less magical and less awesome, but also less obscure and less ignored, and therefore actually more influential than she is now. And if she were more vital and effective, she would thereby be actually more authoritative also. Rather than being an impersonal voice subject to our manipulation, she would become again the living, breathing person who drew men to God.

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Following methods like those outlined here would open up far-reaching scholarly enterprises. No one Adventist during his entire life could accomplish the tasks that would emerge. Indeed, no single discipline has adequate tools to do the job alone. It is imperative, therefore, that Adventist scholars from various disciplines bring their different perspectives and insights and equipment to the challenge of understanding Ellen G. White.

This kind of interdisciplinary effort by the Adventist academic community could help more clearly to distinguish the essence of Adventism.

NOTES

1 An example is William S. Peterson's article in this issue: A Textual and Historical Study of Ellen White's Account of the French Revolution.

2 In an unpublished study, *Ellen G. White and Fiction*, John O. Waller examines the meaning of the word *fiction* in Mrs. White's time and relates his findings to her use of the term.

Richard Rice's article, *Adventists and Welfare Work: A Comparative Study* (*Spectrum* 2, 52-63, winter 1970), recounts some of the attitudes and endeavors of social welfare activists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and thus gives an idea of the issues that concerned Mrs. White when she commented on social welfare.

The task of recreating the milieu in which Mrs. White and other early Adventists discussed interracial relations is attempted by Branson in *Ellen G. White: Racist or Champion of Equality?* *Review and Herald*, April 9, 16, and 23, 1970.

3 In his recent book, *Ellen G. White and Church Race Relations* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1970), Ronald D. Graybill has established the setting, in Mrs. White's life and in the work of the church, of her comments on race in *Testimonies for the Church*, volume nine (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1970), pp. 199-226.

Jonathan Butler, in *Ellen G. White and the Chicago Mission* (*Spectrum* 2, 41-51, winter 1970), shows that a knowledge of the church's controversy with John Harvey Kellogg is essential to an understanding of Mrs. White's seemingly contradictory statements on inner-city mission work.