

Ellen G. White and Her Writings

W. PAUL BRADLEY

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The purpose of this paper is to review four articles in the Autumn 1970 issue of *SPECTRUM*. In these articles about the writings and work of Ellen G. White, a number of questions were raised, proposals set forth, and interpretations suggested. Some points are well taken; some call for a more careful analysis. I will refer to the articles in the order in which they appeared and will make an effort to touch on principal issues raised in each.

ELLEN WHITE: A SUBJECT FOR ADVENTIST SCHOLARSHIP

1. *Can we understand Ellen White?*

This article¹ raises the question above and contends that, as she is used, there are many Ellen Whites, in effect, saying many different things, and that we make her say "almost anything we want."² It is asserted that she is "an impersonal voice subject to our manipulation"³ and that, therefore, we need a method of interpreting what she says.

Then certain procedures are suggested to solve the alleged problem. But the conclusion is disturbing: "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 proposed that "Adventist scholars from various disciplines bring their different perspectives and insights and equipment to the challenge of understanding Ellen G. White."⁴

This position is unreasonable. From both the practical and the theoretical viewpoints it is unthinkable that Ellen White will not be understood until scores of years have been devoted to a critical study of her writings by high-

ly trained specialists in various disciplines. Commenting on the study of the Bible, Ellen White pointed out that “scriptural difficulties can never be mastered by the same methods that are employed in grappling with philosophical problems.”⁵

Let us look at the ingredients constituting the argument in the article.

First, as to Ellen G. White statements that should be read in the light of special context, it has always been understood that certain specific counsels should be read in the light of the circumstances of the times of writing. As time advances and there is less personal knowledge of the circumstances and the way of life of sixty to a hundred years ago, there will doubtless be areas where knowing the circumstances of the times will facilitate a discovery of the principles involved and make a present-day application more meaningful. But that this matter is “among the top priorities of the church” and “an essential and immediate task for the church”⁶ considerably overstates the problem.

Seventh-day Adventists should be cautious in accepting the suggestion that the need of special understanding of context is true of the writings as a whole — all 24,000 pages of the current fifty-six Ellen G. White books. One may ask in what way such an examination would be necessary for *Steps to Christ*, *Christ's Object Lessons*, *The Desire of Ages*, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*, and the devotional books.

Let us raise the question whether, among the thousands of Adventist ministers and members, the problem of understanding Ellen White is as acute as it is made to appear. It is true that she did her writing during the time of a previous generation. But are we so far from her time as to make historical criticism necessary? She wrote in simple English that we use. Why should there be difficulty in understanding it? I was in my late teens and had entered college the year she died, and I object to the suggestion that she is so far removed as to make it impossible to get her meaning. We have the original manuscripts of much of what she wrote, and these haven't had to be translated from other languages for English readers, as was the Bible from Hebrew and Greek. She has been understood equally well by the Australians, the Americans, and the British.

Certain steps have been taken by the trustees of the Ellen G. White Estate to provide information on the historical context. *Early Writings* (made up of Ellen White writings of the 1850s and presuming a personal knowledge of the 1844 disappointment and its aftermath) in printings since 1963 has carried a “historical prologue” of twenty-six pages and eight pages of appendix notes. *Testimonies to Ministers* (made up of “special testimo-

nies" written largely during the perplexing 1890s) was furnished in 1962 with twenty-two pages of historical foreword and fifteen pages of appendix notes. The volumes of the *Testimonies for the Church* since the 1948 reprinting have included statements reviewing the "time" of each volume.

Two appendixes were furnished in 1963 for the *Comprehensive Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White*, filling pages 3180-3188. One is of proper names, and the other is of obsolete words, little used words, and terms with altered meanings. These steps meet needs seen to exist. In actuality only a relatively small proportion of the White materials require such historical orientation.

One problem that certainly has existed with respect to Ellen White's writings — one of which there are numerous examples — appears when persons have quoted her out of context, or used isolated fragments of her writings, or combined quotations artificially to suit the particular purpose of the user. The fair-minded student will use White materials so that the conclusion will be in keeping with the overall tenor of her writings as a whole. She witnessed a misuse of her writings in her own time and warned vigorously against this lack of ordinary integrity on the part of extremists, teachers of error, advocates of spurious visions, and others of the same class. Commenting on how some people misused her own writings, as well as the Bible, she said:

This is the way my writings are treated by those who wish to misunderstand and pervert them. They turn the truth of God into a lie. In the very same way that they treat the writings of my published articles and in my books, so do skeptics and infidels treat the Bible. They read it according to their desire to pervert, to misapply, to willfully wrest the utterances from their true meaning. They declare that the Bible can prove anything and everything, that every sect proves their doctrines right, and that the most diverse doctrines are proved from the Bible. . . . It is not that the difficulty is in the Bible.⁷

Writing to a misguided compiler of some of her writings, she pointed out: "You have also taken from their connection portions of the testimonies which the Lord has given for the benefit of His people, and have misapplied them to the support of your erroneous theories — borrowing or stealing the light of Heaven to teach that which the testimonies have no harmony with, and have ever condemned. Thus you place both scripture and testimony in the framework of error."⁸

And on another occasion she wrote: "It will be found that those who bear false messages will not have a high sense of honor and integrity. They will deceive the people, and mix up with their error the *Testimonies* of Sister White, and use her name to give influence to their work. They make

such selections from the *Testimonies* as they think they can twist to support their positions, and place them in a setting of falsehood, so that their error may have weight and be accepted by the people.”⁹

Ellen White had a suggestion for those who are truly seeking an understanding of her meaning: “The testimonies themselves will be the key that will explain the messages given, as scripture is explained by scripture.”¹⁰

She also suggested a commonsense approach to the problem of communication faced by the Bible writers: “Human minds vary. The minds of different education and thought receive different impressions of the same words, and it is difficult for one mind to give to one of a different temperament, education, and habits of thought by language exactly the same idea as that which is clear and distinct in his own mind. Yet to honest men, right-minded men, he can be so simple and plain as to convey his meaning for all practical purposes.”¹¹ The lesson of this passage is that if one will approach the messages of Ellen White reasonably, he can get her meaning “for all practical purposes.”

Several years ago, when the three-volume *Index* of Ellen White’s published writings was in preparation, it was asked whether the church was not inviting trouble by gathering together in one place, under one subject heading, references to all her statements on a given point, thus making it easy to detect any contradictions and inconsistencies. Actually, it hasn’t worked out that way. The making of the *Index* has not in itself introduced any new problems; rather, one statement complements and illustrates another. Nor has the publication of the full scope of the 2,000 articles Ellen White wrote for the *Review* during the years of her active labor introduced any difficulty in reconciling her messages.

The assertion made that “we may never be able fully to recapture Ellen White’s original intentions or the absolute truth of what she meant”¹² is subject to serious challenge. The bulk of her writings convey to the fair-minded reader her teachings in their full intent. The rather rare item dependent on historical context can be easily fathomed in the light of information readily available.

2. *Some have considered “as more authoritative those statements that start with the words ‘I was shown.’”*¹³

The article under discussion makes the foregoing statement and goes on to point out that “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.” This point is

well taken and will bear further elaboration. The idea that a direct reference to a vision gives a statement added authority is not a new thought among observers of her work. It had some currency in Ellen White's own time, and she corrected this error.

When a question arose concerning her letters and periodical articles, she said: "In these letters which I write, in the testimonies I bear, I am presenting to you that which the Lord has presented to me. I do not write one article in the paper expressing merely my own ideas. They are what God has opened before me in vision — the precious rays of light shining from the throne."¹⁴ Again, in another situation, she said: "In the testimonies sent — I have given you the light God has given to me. In no case have I given my own judgment or opinion. I have enough to write of what God has shown me, without falling back on my own opinions."¹⁵ Concerning the Testimonies she said: "Do not by your criticisms take out all the force, all the point and power, from the Testimonies. Do not feel that you can dissect them to suit your own ideas, claiming that God has given you ability to discern what is light from heaven, and what is the expression of mere human wisdom."¹⁶

In the five volumes of the Conflict of the Ages series,¹⁷ Ellen White does not once use the expression "I saw" or "I was shown." She purposely omitted such references in books intended for non-Adventist readers. But in her 1888 introduction to *The Great Controversy*, the first of her works planned for general distribution, she freely, yet discreetly, wrote of the source of the information she presented: "Through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the scenes of the long-continued conflict between good and evil have been opened to the writer of these pages. From time to time I have been permitted to behold the working, in different ages, of the great controversy."¹⁸

The manner in which God has operated in the past — through his spokesmen, by the Spirit of prophecy — may always remain to human minds somewhat of a mystery. We have an unusually interesting statement by Ellen White that sheds some light on this point. And if we accept her explanation as to the manner in which God works through the human instrument, we would have to be careful in judging whether any one or more of the messenger's writings was not inspired of God.

The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen. Look at the different writers.

It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man's words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God.¹⁹

There were numerous situations in history, in the church, and in the lives of members and leaders of the church concerning which Ellen White received instruction and enlightenment. Whenever she wished to communicate information to others, she drew on these subjects and scenes that had been revealed to her. As she wrote the messages — whether testimonies to individuals, Bible commentary, or historical scenes — she acknowledged the presence of God's Spirit to guide her and strengthen her powers of recall.

After I come out of vision I do not at once remember all that I have seen, and the matter is not so clear before me until I write; then the scene rises before me as was presented in vision, and I can write with freedom. Sometimes the things which I have seen are hid from me after I come out of vision, and I cannot call them to mind until I am brought before a company where that vision applies, then the things which I have seen come to my mind with force. I am just as dependent upon the Spirit of the Lord in relating or writing a vision, as in having the vision.²⁰

While writing the manuscript of *The Great Controversy*, I was often conscious of the presence of the angels of God. And many times the scenes about which I was writing were presented to me anew in visions of the night, so that they were fresh and vivid in my mind.²¹

To those who were inclined to differentiate between which of her statements or counsels were inspired and which were not, she replied: "Some have taken the position that the warnings, cautions, and reproofs given by the Lord through his servant, unless they come through special vision for each individual case, should have no more weight than counsels and warnings from other sources. In some cases it has been represented that in giving a testimony for churches or individuals, I have been influenced to write as I did by letters received from members of the church. There have been those who claimed that testimonies purporting to be given by the Spirit of God were merely the expression of my own judgment, based upon information gathered from human sources. This statement is utterly false."²²

3. *What was Ellen White's relation to the historical authors she quoted?*²³

This question with its implications is left for consideration later in connection with another article.

4. *We need an understanding of "the social and intellectual milieu in which [Ellen White] lived and wrote."*²⁴

We must all acknowledge the validity of this statement. No one could object to any line of investigation that would give us better understandings of the social, religious, economic, and political factors that were at work in North America during the latter two-thirds of the past century.

Ellen White recognized that conditions change and circumstances may differ widely. She wrote: "Regarding the testimonies, nothing is ignored; nothing is cast aside; but time and place must be considered."²⁵ Again, she pointed out: "In the advancement of the work of God, that which may be said in truth of individuals at one time may not correctly be said of them at another time. The reason of this is that one month they may have stood in innocency, living up to the best light they had, while the month following was none too short for them to be overcome by Satan's devices, and, through self-confidence, to fall into grievous sins and become unfitted for the work of God."²⁶

However, principles are not changed by the passing of time, and no alteration of conditions can invalidate them. And the testimonies of Ellen White were intended to help the church to the end of time, to guide the church in its travels to the kingdom. With regard to these abiding principles, they speak clearly, and no re-interpretation is required to make us know God's messages for us. In 1907 she wrote in the *Review*: "The instruction that was given in the early days of the message is to be held as safe instruction to follow in these its closing days."²⁷ Again, she said:

In a view given me about twenty years ago, 'I was directed to bring out general principles, in speaking and in writing, and at the same time to specify the dangers, errors, and sins of some individuals, that all might be warned, reprov'd, and counseled. I saw that all should search their own hearts and lives closely, to see if they had not made the same mistakes for which others were corrected, and if the warnings given for others did not apply to their own cases. If so, they should feel that the counsel and reproofs were given especially for them, and should make as practical an application of them as though they were especially addressed to themselves.'²⁸

It will be of interest to know that the trustees of the Ellen G. White Estate, with the approval of the General Conference administration, have commissioned Arthur L. White to write a definitive biography of Ellen G. White. When completed, this will help organize and make available much material that will clarify questions of circumstance and background of certain of the *Testimonies*.

5. *What about the compilations of Ellen White's writings made since her death in 1915, particularly with respect to content and editorial slant?*

Ellen White fully expected that her extensive collection of unpublished materials found in letters, manuscripts, sermons, and materials in out-of-print sources would be searched for relevant and applicable instruction that would be published and circulated throughout the church after her death. In a 1903 letter she said: "The articles that from week to week are printed in our papers are soon forgotten. . . . These articles are to be gathered together, reprinted in book form, and placed before believers and unbelievers."²⁹ "I am endeavoring, . . ." she wrote in 1905, "to write letters that will be a help, not merely to those to whom they are addressed, but to many others who need them."³⁰

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In her will, dated February 9, 1912, Ellen White appointed five trustees who, with their successors, were empowered to exercise custody over her literary materials and given the responsibility of "administering, preserving, and protecting the said . . . property, and publishing and selling said books and manuscripts and conducting the business thereof."³¹

The manner in which compilations of Ellen G. White writings are prepared is of great significance of course. It would be possible to edit a compilation so as to slant her teachings, one simple way being to omit quotations on some aspect of the subject. The possibility that this might ever be done has been a matter of concern to the trustees. Arthur L. White, executive secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate, speaks of this:

Great care must be exercised in making selections from the writings for general circulation, that subjects be not presented in an unbalanced manner. The trustees sense keenly the care that must be taken in placing in general circulation hitherto unpublished testimonies. They do not trust merely to their own judgment in this, but secure the help of other workers of long experience who give careful study to the manuscripts to ensure that fair and wise selection has been made. All new matter which is placed in general circulation by the trustees is considered not only by them, but by experienced members of the General Conference Committee.³²

When a compilation of Ellen G. White materials for a new book is desired by any office or department of the church, or by others, the proposal is first considered by the trustees, and also by a General Conference committee that gives guidance in matters relating to collections of such materials from the viewpoint of their role in serving the interests of the church. An experienced staff member of the estate office is assigned to make a wide gathering of materials bearing on the subject. The compilation is not made to fit a preconceived outline; but rather the material itself determines the

content and indicates the emphasis of the outline. Then finally the materials are grouped into chapters and subsections.

Before being sent to the publisher, compilations are subject to careful reading by the trustees. If the subject matter deals with a particular area, persons of special competence in that field are asked to read the material critically to judge the adequacy and fairness of selection. The custodians of Ellen White's materials have never denied the right of responsible investigators to verify and check in her unpublished writings as to any statement which may be called into question.

DIVINE REVELATION:

A REVIEW OF SOME OF ELLEN G. WHITE'S CONCEPTS

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This paper³³ makes some helpful contributions to an understanding of the nature of revelation, a subject that has been occupying the thinking of many Adventist Bible students lately. In pursuing the author's line of thought we would need, it appears, to keep the distinction between special revelation and general revelation quite clearly in mind. There is no doubt, as the author has shown, that Ellen White teaches that God speaks to the hearts of all his children through the agency of the Holy Spirit. But this line of thought should not be carried to the point that every sincere believer living in the right relationship to God becomes a prophet.

Ellen White's comments on this point are quite enlightening. Several extracts are given here to show the direction of her counsel and to make it clear that she made a definite distinction between general revelation, or leadings of the Spirit, and special inspiration. "In the highest sense the prophet was one who spoke by direct inspiration, communicating to the people the messages he had received from God."³⁴ When she was asked, "Do you not think that these men [Adventist pioneer writers] who have brought out the truth in the past were inspired of God?" She replied: "I dare not say they were not led of God, for Christ leads into all truth; but when it comes to inspiration in the fullest sense of the word, I answer, No."³⁵ Concerning Martin Luther she declared: "Angels of heaven were by his side, and rays of light from the throne of God revealed the treasures of truth to his understanding."³⁶ And of William Miller she said: "God sent His angel to move upon the heart of a farmer who had not believed the Bible, to lead him to search the prophecies. Angels of God repeatedly visited that chosen one, to guide his mind and open to his understanding prophecies which had ever been dark to God's people."³⁷ But at no time did Ellen White consider either Luther or Miller to be a prophet.

When she was left alone after the death of her husband, James White, Ellen White felt the need of someone on whom she could lean for help and support in her many heavy responsibilities. She was assured concerning her son, W. C. White: "I have given you My servant, W. C. White, and I will give him judgment to be your helper. I will give him skill and understanding to manage wisely."³⁸ But no one has claimed or would claim that upon W. C. White the gift of prophecy had been bestowed.

In 1904 a report reached Ellen White, in Australia, that A. T. Jones was quoting her as saying that the time had come when, if believers held the right relation to God, all could have the gift of prophecy to the same extent as she. When Ellen White heard this, she asked: "Where is the authority for this statement?" In writing of this incident she commented: "These ideas in relation to prophesying, I do not hesitate to say, might better never have been expressed. Such statements prepare the way for a state of things that Satan will surely take advantage of to bring in spurious exercises."³⁹ And in writing to A. T. Jones about the supposed visions of a certain Anna Phillips, Ellen White said:

You cannot be too careful how you talk of the gift of prophesying, and state that I have said this and that in reference to the matter. Such statements, I well know, encourage men and women and children to imagine that they have special light in revelations from God, when they have not received such light. This, I have been shown, would be one of Satan's masterpieces of deception. You are giving to the work a mold which it will take precious time and wearing soul labor to correct, to save the cause of God from another spasm of fanaticism.⁴⁰

The thoughtful reader will consider well the impact of these statements as he ponders and endeavors to hold in balance the implications of the article on divine revelation.

A TEXTUAL AND HISTORICAL STUDY OF ELLEN G. WHITE'S ACCOUNT OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

This article⁴¹ opens with the declaration that Seventh-day Adventists "know remarkably little about [Ellen G. White] or her literary work," and asserts that, "if we are ever to understand Adventism . . . we must undertake this study." The article then provides an example of the method that the author suggests "Adventist scholarship might profitably adopt in this examination of Ellen White's writings." The one chapter of *The Great Controversy* selected for consideration is from that portion of the book which traces the history of Protestantism. There are several pitfalls to be avoided.

The reader should note, first of all, that the chapter title, "The Bible and the French Revolution," reveals Ellen White's intent in the chapter: the treatment is primarily a study of the results of a nation's following a certain course of action. In view of its context in the book, it is clear that this is Ellen White's point. Her sketchy historical treatment only confirms this conclusion.

By direct statement and by repeated implications, the SPECTRUM article holds that until all of Mrs. White's writings are analyzed by scholars somewhat in the manner suggested, her true meaning cannot be known (as in the article "Ellen White: A Subject for Adventist Scholarship").⁴² But the reader should observe that the scope of the published Ellen White works covers many areas of teaching and concern. There are the devotional writings as well as the instruction on education, church administration, missionary outreach, health and family life, and child care and training. Twenty percent of her writings in current books are in the *Testimonies for the Church*. A little better than ten percent are Bible commentary appearing in the first four of the five Conflict of the Ages books. The last parts of both *Early Writings* and *The Great Controversy* are prophetic of last-day events.

The candid student will be slow to accept the implication that because some have seen problems in certain of the historical chapters in *The Great Controversy* the writings as a whole are called in question. Involved are the largely historical first eighteen chapters of *The Great Controversy*, aggregating 319 pages of text, about one-half of the book. This is three-fourths of one percent of the current published White books. The chapter on "The Bible and the French Revolution" is one-tenth of one percent. The field of these historical chapters is quite different from the text of her other published writings. Whether or not one sees some problems in these eighteen chapters will depend on his concept of the purpose of the author and the nature of inspiration, and also on his understanding of how Ellen White did her work.

When one looks at the array of materials in the White books, he may rightly ask just how would Adventist scholars apply the suggested methods to the examination of such chapters as "God's Love for Man" (in *Steps to Christ*), "The Lord Is Risen" (in *The Desire of Ages*), or "The Last Crisis" (in *Testimonies for the Church*, volume nine). One may well inquire whether Adventists must wait until such an examination is made and reports submitted before these and like counsels and admonitions are permitted to speak to their hearts.

It is evident that the chapter selected from *The Great Controversy* does

not represent the bulk of the Ellen G. White writings given through the Spirit of prophecy for edification, instruction, protection, and encouragement. It has already been granted that there are writings that deal with certain specific lines of counsel concerning which an investigation into the circumstances of the times of writing makes the counsels more meaningful. But to assert that the Ellen G. White writings as a whole must be evaluated by scholars in their special fields of competence before they can be truly meaningful or carry to us God's thoughts is a proposal which would largely neutralize or negate the counsels.

Another serious pitfall easily seen in this article, and reflected also in the first article I reviewed, is the assumption that the Ellen G. White writings are based on the writings of others. Both articles speak of "her sources" in a way that tends to leave little place for inspiration but suggests that she wrote as any historian would write. While it is true that Ellen White did use certain historical quotations, it does not follow that she searched histories to develop a theme or plot. She viewed the events of history in the light of the contest between the forces of righteousness and the forces of evil. This is clearly disclosed in the full book title, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan in the Christian Dispensation*.

A few statements will remind us of what Ellen White understood to be her "sources":

I was moved by the Spirit of the Lord to write that book.⁴³

God gave me the light contained in *Great Controversy*. . . . Thus He is speaking to the people in stirring words.⁴⁴

As the Spirit of God has opened to my mind the great truths of His word, and the scenes of the past and the future, I have been bidden to make known to others that which has thus been revealed — to trace the history of the controversy in past ages, and especially so to present it as to shed a light on the fast-approaching struggle of the future.⁴⁵

Sister White is not the originator of these books [being sold to the public]. They contain the instruction that during her lifework God has been giving to her.⁴⁶

According to this testimony it is evident that Ellen White's basic source was the visions God gave to her. She consulted certain historical writers for supplemental data as shown below.

The reader should notice how Ellen White employed history as background on which she depicted the story of "the great controversy." Perhaps a statement written by W. C. White in explaining the 1911 revision of *The Great Controversy*, and endorsed in the margin by Ellen White in her own handwriting, will be helpful here:

Mother has never claimed to be authority on history. The things which she has written out, are descriptions of flash-light pictures and other representations given her regarding the actions of men, and the influence of these actions upon the work of God for the salvation of men with views of past, present, and future history in its relation to this work.

In connection with the writing out of these views, she has made use of good and clear historical statements to help make plain to the reader the things which she is endeavoring to present. When I was a mere boy, I heard her read D'Aubigne's 'History of the Reformation' to my father. She read to him a large part, if not the whole, of the five volumes. She had read other histories of the Reformation.

This has helped her to locate and describe many of the events and movements presented to her in vision. This is somewhat similar to the way in which the study of the Bible helps her to locate and describe the many figurative representations given to her regarding the development of the great controversy in our day between truth and error.

Mother never laid claim to verbal inspiration, and I do not find my father, Elders Bates, Andrews, Smith, or Waggoner put forth this claim.⁴⁷

Ellen White herself clearly stated in her introduction to the book that the quotations she employed were used not to cite "that writer as an authority but because his statement affords a ready and forcible presentation of the subject."⁴⁸

Out of a number of specific problems that have been introduced in considering Ellen White's writings that touch on history, the six below are representative.

1. *Ellen White quoted from historical works, even lifting out whole passages and embodying them in her account in the 1888 edition of The Great Controversy without giving credit.*

This must be acknowledged; but while credit was not given, such quotations usually appeared in quotation marks. One can explain this omission in the 1888 stage in the development of *The Great Controversy* on two counts. It was quite common for writers of her time not to be too careful about credit when copying from one another. Ellen White herself explains what she did in the 1888 edition: "In some cases where a historian has so grouped together events as to afford, in brief, a comprehensive view of the subject, or has summarized details in a convenient manner, his words have been quoted; but in some instances no specific credit has been given, since the quotations are not given for the purpose of citing that writer as authority, but because his statement affords a ready and forcible presentation of the subject."⁴⁹

In the 1911 edition the author and those who assisted her in the revision sought to the best of their ability to give the proper source for all quoted matter.

2. *Ellen White quoted authorities whose work was characterized by undue haste in its preparation, or by a strong philosophical or historical bias, thus making their works not too dependable.*

This objection against Ellen White's use of these historical writings loses its meaning when one takes into account her purpose in employing these quotations, and if one accepts her as God's true messenger who has special revelations from God that have a bearing on the meaning of history. She was privileged to choose freely the writers who best expressed the thoughts she wished to convey. There is no doubt that authors she quoted had strong antipathies against the Catholic system and in some cases even against democracy as it was exemplified in some situations. Is it now claimed that the Roman Catholic power is innocent of the abuses attributed to it by Ellen White, or that the excesses of the French Revolution enhanced the ideals of democracy? What else could Ellen White say in view of the burning rhetoric of the prophecies of the Bible and the visions God gave to her regarding the war of the Catholic power against God, his law, and his people?

3. *If Ellen White were writing today, her account of events during the French Revolution would be different because she would use later, more balanced sources.*

This is only conjecture. She would use these later sources only if they paralleled what she had seen in vision and represented more accurately what she was trying to express of the outworking of the long controversy between God and the adversary Satan. It is true that today the historical concept of the Protestant Reformation is being modified and that facts are even being suppressed. Ellen White is quoted by W. C. White to have declared: "Much historical evidence regarding these matters [the arrogance and assumptions of the papacy] has been designedly destroyed."⁵⁰

Actually, when the work of revising *The Great Controversy* was in progress in 1911 at Ellen White's Elmshaven office, the researchers who were helping to identify and verify the historical sources were given a word of caution by her secretary, C. C. Crisler. He wrote to Guy Dail in Hamburg, under date of January 3, 1911, in much the same vein as he wrote to H. Camden Lacey in London and Jean Vuilleumier in Basel, enlisting their help in identifying the historical sources:

In all this historical work we are eager to have the Mss. that may be submitted, given the most searching tests. We need never be afraid of historical truth. However, we would do well to avoid accepting the conclusion of some of the more modern his-

torians who are attempting to rewrite history so as to shape it up in harmony with their philosophical viewpoint. We find it necessary to exercise constant vigilance in this respect; and this leads us to set considerable store by the original sources, or fountainheads, of history.⁵¹

A note in the appendix to *The Great Controversy* cited two editions of a Catholic document dated 1584 and 1612 in which the Pope is given the title "Dominum Deum nostrum Papa" (our Lord God the Pope). The note concludes with the sentence: "In several editions published since 1612, the word 'Deum' (God) has been omitted."⁵²

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In the White Estate vault, there is a heavy folder of materials representing the historical sources consulted in connection with the 1911 revision of the chapter "The Bible and the French Revolution." These sources go far beyond those cited in the chapter and give valid evidence, except in some minor details, for the historical accuracy of the presentation of the chapter in question. This documentation, which was not consulted in the preparation of the article I am reviewing here, shows that the matters under consideration here were also of concern to those involved in the 1911 revision.

There is no assurance that modernity alone will give balance and completeness in historical writing. Consider, for example, the very useful and readable (and, in fact, scholarly) book by Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, one volume in the Pelican series on the history of the church, published in England as late as 1964. One searches the index in vain for a reference to the work of Seventh-day Adventists. Yet Adventist missions, according to an American Bible Society report, are found in more countries of the world than those of other American Protestant churches or family of churches. One finds Adventists referred to in the book only once and only briefly.

It is altogether logical that Ellen White, with her inspired insight into the elements back of the French Revolution, would quote from sources which took note of the factors that stand out as a part of *The Great Controversy* story, unfavorable though they may appear to some participants in the events. As for bias and balance in history, it is doubtful if a completely unbiased history exists.

④ *Ellen White incorporated into her account, in quoting from historical sources, inaccuracies that were embedded in the historian's text.*

It might be helpful to focus on the process by which Ellen White received the visions that resulted in volumes such as the Conflict of the Ages series. From her first vision she viewed the struggles of the Advent people as they

traveled to the New Jerusalem. But it was in the vision of March 14, 1858, in Lovett's Grove (now Bowling Green), Ohio, that "the great controversy between Christ and Satan" was unfolded to her more fully, and this understanding was enlarged in subsequent visions. Concerning the way in which the visions came to her, W. C. White explained before the General Conference Council on October 30, 1911, that "the things which she has written out are descriptions of flash-light pictures and other representations given her regarding the actions of men."⁵³

In another W. C. White statement we get a more detailed view of the relation of her writing to the visions. Answering certain questions put to him in 1934, he commented in a letter to LeRoy E. Froom:

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The framework of the great temple of truth sustained by her writings was presented to her clearly in vision. In some features of this work information was given in detail. Regarding some features of the revelation, such as the features of prophetic chronology, as regards the ministration in the sanctuary and the changes that took place in 1844, the matter was presented to her many times and in detail many times, and this enabled her to speak very clearly and very positively regarding the foundation pillars of our faith.

In some of the historical matters such as are brought out in *Patriarchs and Prophets*, and in *Acts of the Apostles*, and in *Great Controversy*, the main outlines were made very clear and plain to her, and when she came to write up these topics, she was left to study the Bible and history to get dates and geographical relations and to perfect her description of details.⁵⁴



Evidently in some of the scenes which passed before her, Ellen White was not given a disclosure of the exact place, or time, or even an identification of all the characters involved. She fitted what she had seen into the framework of secular history, making use of such accounts as would describe fairly what she was trying to convey. Always, she focused attention on the controversy issues, not on the minutiae of the historical account. We can hardly imagine an angel dictating to her the names of all places, the exact identity of people, the hour of the day, and other minor details over which historians differ. Rather, her preoccupation was with the meaning of the events, drawing back the curtain so the reader might see apostasy and evil at work, and God's countermeasures in the lives and work of his servants. She expressed it in the introduction to *The Great Controversy*: "It is not so much the object of this book to present new truths concerning the struggles of former times, as to bring out facts and principles which have a bearing on coming events."⁵⁵

If one accepts this view of Ellen White's role, an inaccuracy brought over from a historian into her writings would not cause too great concern. But we would have no basis on account of that to question her analysis of

how the general events of the historical period fit into the prophetic picture of the Scriptures.

5. *Ellen White depended on histories to fill in the broad outline of what she was trying to describe.*

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The inference here is that she had nothing to say but what was in the histories. This is a judgment that rests entirely on supposition and is belied by a careful review of her first treatment of the subject in 1884, in *The Spirit of Prophecy*, volume four, in a chapter entitled "The Two Witnesses." Allusions to the history run through the chapter. In the enlargement in 1888, considerable historical matter was summoned to fill out the account. If we follow the development of the Conflict series in its several states of expansion, we see what seems to be a logical progression of the material from simple and condensed to a full and more elaborate account as there was a market and as she had the time to make the account more complete. Unfortunately we are unable to penetrate back to see what fund of information was in Ellen White's mind, put there in views presented to her by the Spirit of prophecy, and to compare that with what she wrote when she made use of the historical sources.

⑥ *We must make Ellen White more fallible and human than we have in the past.*

Ellen White said, "In regard to infallibility, I never claimed it; God alone is infallible, His word is true, and in Him is no variableness, or shadow of turning."⁵⁶ Let us agree, as we have above, that Ellen White was not infallible. She was just a human being, and she taught that "God alone is infallible." But she received revelations from the Holy Spirit who *is* infallible, and her messages written in human language reflect as accurately as human language can the mind and will of an infallible God.

One's views on historical detail arise from his understanding of the inspiration of the prophetic writers. The minutiae of history may seem to loom large in certain circumstances, but they become secondary and of much less prominence when it is understood that in the works of inspired writers the principal concern is with the prime issues and causes of church history.

Henry Alford illustrates the point: "Two men may be equally led by the Holy Spirit to record the events of our Lord's life for our edification, though one may believe and record that the visit to the Gadarenes took place before the calling of Matthew, while the other places it after the event; though one

in narrating it speaks of two demoniacs, — and the other, only of one.” And concerning the humanness and fallibility of the apostles: “We do not find the apostles transformed, from being men of individual character and thought and feeling into mere channels for the transmission of infallible truth. We find them, humanly speaking, to have been still distinguished by the same characteristics as before the descent of the Holy Ghost.”⁵⁷

THE ‘SPIRIT OF PROPHECY’

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The article about the Spirit of prophecy⁵⁸ points to the anomaly involved in using the term *Spirit of prophecy* when referring to the writings of Ellen G. White, or even to the author herself. The writer of the article is right in saying that the common Adventist practice is in error when the expression is used loosely. The term “Spirit of prophecy” describes the activity of the heavenly agency when it is at work in an individual making him a prophet. The term is not the prophet nor his messages. Ellen White was not the “Spirit of prophecy,” but in her work we find the manifestation of the Spirit of prophecy.

The Comprehensive Index to the Writings of Ellen White lists the expression seven times. There are references both with and without quotation marks which refer to the four-volume series presenting the “great controversy” story published during the years 1870 to 1884.⁵⁹ The expression is also used in its basic sense, to refer to the agency through which Ellen White received her messages: “When this position is taken by our people, then the special warnings and counsels of God through the Spirit of prophecy can have no influence with them to work a reformation in life and character.”⁶⁰

The writer of the article raises a question about the correctness of linking Revelation 12:17 with Revelation 19:10 so as to reach the conclusion that the remnant church (inferentially, the Seventh-day Adventist church) is to have the gift of the Spirit of prophecy. Here I wonder whether he is not surrendering too easily a position which we have held and taught for many decades. I suggest the following reasons why we should hold to our historical position.

1. It is true that we have a variety of renderings of the latter part of Revelation 19:10 — so many, in fact, as to be somewhat bewildering. This is what happens when an effort is made to infer meanings that are not in the text, and so-called translations become personal interpretations rather than translations. We have strong confirmation of the King James reading in the American Standard Version and in the Revised Standard Version,

both of which render that part of the verse "the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."

2. Bible scholars seem to agree that Revelation 12:17 can be translated with either of two meanings, both implied in the original: "In the Greek this phrase may be understood either as the 'testimony' (or 'witness') Christians bear concerning Jesus, or as the 'testimony' (or 'witness') that originates with Jesus and is revealed to his church through the prophets (see on ch. 1:2). A comparison with ch. 19:10 clearly favors the latter interpretation. . . . The close relationship between the 'testimony of Jesus' and prophecy is further demonstrated by a comparison between chs. 19:10 and 22:9."⁶¹

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3. In Revelation 1:1, 2 appears the title of John's book, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ," which is given by God to Jesus, who "sent and signified it by his angel unto his servants," and which is designated in verse 2 simply as the "testimony of Jesus Christ." This would seem to identify the "testimony of Jesus" with prophecy.

4. The pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist church first employed, as their biblical support for the exposition of the prophetic gift, Joel 2:28-31 and Acts 2:16-20. When in the mid-1850s they studied the application of the Revelation texts, they pondered the question of the testimony of Jesus very carefully and came to the firm conclusion that the use of Revelation 12:17 and 19:10 was not out of harmony with good exegesis. In 1883 a scholarly article by W. H. Littlejohn⁶² reflected the further development of this viewpoint.

5. Ellen G. White used these familiar biblical expressions in the way Adventists are accustomed to: "We have the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ, which is the spirit of prophecy."⁶³

CONCLUSION

In forming one's personal judgment about the validity of the gift that resulted in the work of Ellen G. White in the Seventh-day Adventist church, one must doubt whether historical criticism of her writings will have a preponderance of weight. There will always have to be present a strong element of faith. On this point she said: "If you refuse to believe until every shadow of uncertainty and possibility of doubt is removed, you will never believe. The doubt that demands perfect knowledge will never yield to faith. Faith rests upon evidence, not demonstration."⁶⁴

But such needed faith might have more chance of survival if judgments are approached with humility, a grace that is always present in true scholar-

ly pursuits. Ellen White counseled: "Let intellectual pride be banished. I lift my voice in warning against every species of spiritual pride. There is an abundance of it in the church today."⁶⁵

That evidence on which we may base our faith I discern as I peruse the Bible prophecies concerning the time of the end, and the vast scope of God's work to be done then as outlined in the prophecies of Revelation 14 and 18. I see it in the identification of the advent movement in Revelation 10, and in the straightforward scriptural declarations of the characteristics of the remnant people (Revelation 12:17, 19:10). I read it in Joel's prophecy of events to transpire in the last days, and to be confirmed in the coming of the prophetic gift at a most strategic moment in the advent movement. I follow the subsequent outworking of God's providence in the fortunes of the church and the remarkable spreading of the movement as the messages of counsel have been received and followed.

And I listen to the testimony of those closely joined with Ellen White in labor during her entire life, adding evidence that comes to me with convincing force. For Ellen White's work was not done in a corner. It was open to scrutiny by opposers as well as friends. Yet her work has endured and does endure. There is no doubt of that.

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HEROLD D. WEISS'S REPLY:

That a call for Adventists with different scholarly expertises to engage their talents in the study of Mrs. White should be considered "disturbing" and "unreasonable" is, to say the least, baffling. Neither from a practical nor from a theoretical point of view is it "unthinkable" that highly trained specialists must establish the basic criteria for the interpretation of a document. This is especially so when the document in question is to serve as a basis for policy or conduct. Of course, no one denies that for devotional purposes the Holy Spirit reaches the reader through the writings in an immediate way. The issue which our article addresses cannot by an act of fiat be classified as an "alleged" problem. It is a real problem, and Bradley grants that much in his reply. If it were not, the church would have no difficulty, just to give one example, in dialoguing with Robert Brimsmead and his followers.

I would like to thank Bradley for agreeing that Mrs. White is being used out of context rather frequently, as well as for his support and further evidence concerning the nature of her inspiration, and for his recognition, supported by Mrs. White herself, that "time and place must be considered." Indeed, the only way to know which is the "principle" involved in a particular counsel is by knowing the historical circumstances to which the "principle" was first applied. How could one know what principle the apostle Paul taught in First Corinthians, chapters eight to ten, if one does not know what it meant "to eat meat offered to idols" in the Hellenistic world, and if one does not know what it meant to make a distinction between those who have "knowledge" and those who have "love" in that same Hellenistic age?

I think Bradley misunderstands what we said concerning the compilations of Mrs. White's counsels published after her death. In no way were we concerned about the integrity of those entrusted with the responsibility to bring out these compilations. We were only saying that for the adequate understanding of a compilation as a document by itself, the circumstances, the specific needs which, in the minds of the editors, the compilation was meant to supply, should be taken into account if the compilation is not to serve only as a source of quotations subject to easy misreading.

Mrs. White is absolutely correct when she contends that the Scriptures are not to be considered a philosophical challenge to be resolved by philosophical methodology. But I think no one would deny that the Scriptures contain linguistic, historical, and theological challenges which need be resolved by the appropriate methods. In the case of Mrs. White, the same is true not only in terms of what prompted her to write certain things, or which were the sources at her disposal and the way in which she used them, but also what prompted the trustees of her estate to publish particular statements at particular times.

Bradley's solution to the problem (which he, in fact, admits and faces) differs from ours in a quite simple way. We would like to have the historical context established upon an objective basis according to scientific methodology. Bradley would leave it to the "fair-minded" and trust that they will not distort the counsels. This means that the only way to challenge the use of a quotation out of context is to call into question the character of the one using the quotation. I would rather carry on a discussion at the level of the evidence, as this can best be established by open research, and leave personalities out as much as possible.