

# An Imaginary Conversation on Ellen G. White

A ONE-ACT PLAY FOR SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS

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WILLIAM S. PETERSON

When the editor of *SPECTRUM* asked me to reply to the article by Elder W. Paul Bradley which appeared last quarter, I decided that although we are dealing with weighty questions, both of us were beginning to take ourselves much too seriously, and so I have cast my response in the form of an "imaginary conversation." Obviously the greatest risk is that I may have attributed to Elder Bradley opinions which he does not actually hold. I have tried to avoid this by drawing most of his dialogue from his article. It will be observed that I have gently satirized both of us — Elder Bradley for a humorless, authoritarian manner, myself for a fanciful extravagance of statement. Yet, as I hoped to suggest in my final speech, despite the amusing clash of wits in this conversation, there is an undertone of seriousness in what each of us is saying. Elder Bradley is very earnestly defending a position in which he has deeply believed all his life; and I, for all my love of paradox and *reductio ad absurdum*, am equally in earnest about finding a means of reconciling the contradictory evidence of my head and heart.

*As the curtain rises, William S. Peterson is seated in a chair in the faculty lounge of Andrews University. Peterson is an English teacher in his early thirties, bearded, and wearing a sport coat, striped tie, and colored shirt. On his lap he is holding a sheaf of rather tattered notes, a copy of SPECTRUM with a rose-hued cover, and The Great Controversy. Opposite him, in an identical chair, sits Elder W. Paul Bradley, a man of medium build who appears to be in his sixties and is wearing a dark suit and tie. He is president of the Ellen G. White Estate. He too holds a folder of notes, books, and the same rose-colored SPECTRUM.*

*The faculty lounge, unlike faculty offices at Andrews, is spacious and expensively furnished and is evidently used only on special occasions. Through the windows one can see the lawns of the campus, finally turning green again despite a very late spring.*

*The two men have just entered and greeted each other, and now, shuffling their notes about somewhat uneasily, they begin to talk.*

BRADLEY: Well, I have read your SPECTRUM article with great care, Doctor Peterson, and, as you might imagine, I find myself disagreeing with much of what you say. I think that you and Branson and Weiss are really on the wrong track in regard to Ellen White's writings.

PETERSON: I'm eager to hear what you will have to say about it. But before we discuss the article, Elder Bradley, I must protest against your assumption that Roy Branson, Herold Weiss, and I all share identical views of Mrs. White. As a matter of fact, we don't. And, for that matter, I didn't even know of the existence of their article until it appeared in SPECTRUM.

BRADLEY: But your approach to these questions is basically the same, isn't it?

PETERSON: Oh, yes, of course we start from the same premises — that Mrs. White's books need closer study by Adventist scholars, and that when she is removed from her historical context her writings are likely to be misused. But if you go beyond that point, our conclusions are less similar than you might think. I mention this only because I am willing to defend my *own* article and don't want the additional burden of defending what other contributors to SPECTRUM have said. Likewise, it's hardly fair to hold Branson and Weiss responsible for what *I* said. So let's begin our discussion with that distinction, shall we?

BRADLEY: Yes, that's fair, I think. I wonder if we can turn now to the article itself. You make much of the need for historical scholarship in connection with Ellen White's books, and you illustrate this need by studying one chapter in *The Great Controversy*. Yet only the first eighteen chapters of that book are "historical," and they amount to only three-fourths of one percent of all her published writings. Don't you feel you're exaggerating the importance of those few chapters — which are so different from her other books?

PETERSON: Not at all. I have always understood that *The Great Controversy* was absolutely central in Adventist thinking; so I don't feel you can adequately express its importance in percentages. The entire Conflict of the Ages series offers a history of the world from Creation to the Second Coming; these are, by general agreement, Mrs. White's most important books, and in them *she is writing history*, though of a special kind. Besides, I never said in my article that the methodology I proposed would work for *every* book she wrote; I just adopted an approach that seemed appropriate for the chapter in *The Great Controversy* that I was dealing with.

BRADLEY: Then you would agree that some of her writings — such as *Steps to Christ* — are purely devotional and must be regarded as such?

PETERSON: Yes, I agree entirely. But the point is that we Adventists haven't *used* her writings devotionally in many instances; we have used them to settle historical, scientific, and theological questions. If you want to say that the vast majority of her writings are devotional in nature, fine — I can accept that. But you can't then turn around and use those same writings as the final arbiter in deciding, say, how old the earth is. I want to come back to this matter later in our discussion, incidentally.

BRADLEY: The basic error of your article, however, is the assumption that Ellen White occasionally used faulty "sources" and that therefore her writings are not always reliable when she makes historical statements. You overlook the fact that she was shown these things in vision and afterward only selected passages from historians to illustrate what she had seen.

PETERSON: That, I know, is the "orthodox" explanation of how her books came to be written, yet it presents all sorts of difficulties. The other day, for example, I read through chapter seven in *The Great Controversy* with a copy of d'Aubigné's *History of the Reformation* beside it. Mrs. White does not draw merely facts or illustrative anecdotes from d'Aubigné; the very *structure* of that chapter comes from d'Aubigné. Every paragraph (except for a few clearly transitional ones) appears to be either a direct quote or close paraphrase or a summary of d'Aubigné. Now, since d'Aubigné's book forms the basis of so many of the early chapters of *The Great Controversy*, are we to conclude that he was inspired by God? Why don't we read him in the pulpit then? Why don't we sell his works in our Book and Bible Houses?

BRADLEY: I presume you are being ironic. What sets apart Ellen White's treatment of the Reformation from d'Aubigné's is her *point of view*, not her factual material.

PETERSON: Yet her interpretation of the significance of the Reformation seems to me identical to d'Aubigné's. Perhaps there are differences between them, but I didn't notice any. For that matter, Mrs. White's treatment of the Reformation in *The Great Controversy* was nearly identical to that of many Protestant historians during the nineteenth century. What makes her different from them?

BRADLEY: She was inspired, and they were not.

PETERSON: I still think there's a logical dilemma here. Does that mean that d'Aubigné is inspired in those passages which Mrs. White quotes?

BRADLEY: I wish you would stop perversely insisting upon d'Aubigné's "inspiration." The point is not the authority of d'Aubigné but the authority of Ellen White. We have always believed that God directed her to those

historians who described most accurately what she saw in vision. Let me quote from a letter written by Ellen White's secretary, Clarence Crisler, when he was assisting with the revision of *The Great Controversy* in 1911:

The more closely we examine the use of historical extracts themselves, the more profoundly are we impressed with the fact that Sister White had special guidance in tracing the story from the time of the Destruction of Jerusalem, down through the centuries until the End. No mortal man could have done the work that she has done in shaping up some of those chapters, including, we believe, the chapter on the French Revolution, which is a very remarkable chapter, in more ways than one.

There — that is impressive testimony, coming as it does from a man who had investigated this question very carefully.

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PETERSON: Yes, it is. But let me read the next paragraph in Crisler's letter:

And the more we go into these matters, the more profound is our conviction that the Lord has helped not only Sister White in the presentation of truth, but that He has overruled in the work of other writers, to the praise of His name and the advancement of present truth. Our brethren in years past have used many quotations, and, as a general rule, the Lord surely must have helped them to avoid making use of many extracts that would have led them astray.

Crisler evidently felt that the divine guidance given Mrs. White in choosing quotations was different in *degree*, but not in *kind*, from the guidance given other Adventist writers. I wonder if that means it would be heretical for me to claim in the pages of SPECTRUM that James White and Uriah Smith also used bad historical sources sometimes?

BRADLEY: No, of course not. You are being absurd again.

PETERSON: I am simply trying to see where certain lines of reasoning will lead us.

BRADLEY: You haven't really responded yet to Crisler's assertion that historical research bears out the accuracy of *The Great Controversy*.

PETERSON: A few days ago I looked through the folder of materials owned by the White Estate dealing with the 1911 revision of *The Great Controversy*, and I certainly admit that Mrs. White's assistants were very zealous in compiling evidence which supported her statements on the French Revolution. For the most part, though, they seemed to be preoccupied with questions of *fact*, and they appeared totally unaware that many of the sources they consulted offered an *interpretation* of the Revolution which was diametrically opposed to Mrs. White's. For instance, one of the mimeographed documents which they prepared was entitled "The Reformation and the Spirit of Liberty," and it was made up of a series of extracts

from various historians, all of whom asserted very emphatically that the rise of Protestantism brought about a demand in Europe for greater political liberty as well as religious liberty. In other words, once an infallible church was abandoned, the divine right of kings came under attack also. Hence the French Revolution, at least in its early phase, was the working out in the political sphere of the principles of the Reformation. Yet Mrs. White, of course, says precisely the opposite: that the Revolution was a result of France's *rejection* of the Reformation. Now, I suspect that both statements cannot be correct — so I am puzzled by Crisler's ringing affirmation that the historical accuracy of *The Great Controversy* is confirmed by their research, when in fact the very material they compiled tells a different story.

BRADLEY: And yet the historians whom you apparently regard most highly are recent ones, and we all know that there have been concerted efforts by the papacy to destroy the damaging evidence about its own history. So it is not surprising that modern histories of Europe should de-emphasize the sins of Catholicism.

PETERSON: It is a fact that the Roman Catholic church has been very secretive about some matters in the past and not very kindly disposed to free intellectual inquiry. But the Vatican archives are now at last open to Protestant scholars, and I daresay that if I were to visit the Vatican this summer I would have freer access to materials there than if I were to visit the General Conference archives in Takoma Park. Mind you, I do not approve of unreasonable restrictions upon archives anywhere; but until our own church opens up its records, even if only to Adventist scholars, we are in no position to judge the practices of the Catholic church. But to return to the central question of the historians that Mrs. White *did* consult for the chapter on the French Revolution: they were, by and large, British historians of the early and middle years of the nineteenth century who wrote at a time when the Revolution was still being viewed through a haze of anxiety and fear created by the Napoleonic Wars. And, as I tried to suggest in my article, Mrs. White did not even turn to the best historians available *in her day* — men like de Tocqueville, Taine, and Blanc — who were examining the documentary evidence and offering a more balanced appraisal of the Revolution. Instead she relied too heavily on older sources with a strong Tory bias.

BRADLEY: Your article deals with some alleged errors by Mrs. White in matters of time or place or identification of the characters involved. Can't you agree that these are very trivial matters? Obviously she was not shown all of these things in her visions, and so it's hardly surprising that a few unimportant mistakes in chronology or fact might have crept in.

PETERSON: Well, I'm not sure that historians would agree that questions of time and place are trivial; I've always thought those were the very substance of history. I've noticed that in treating both the Reformation and the French Revolution Mrs. White is sometimes very muddled about the sequence of events, and I confess that this rather troubles me. Still, on the whole, I am ready to agree with you that chronology, for example, is not an essential or inspired aspect of her writings. But don't you see what that implies? Let's go back to the question of the age of the earth. I'm not a scientist, and I can't discuss this from a scientific standpoint, but it's clear to me that if you are willing to give up the inspiration of her chronology, then that has large implications for our view of Creation. You must acknowledge that nowhere does the Bible say the earth was created in 4004 B.C.; that figure was arrived at by Archbishop Ussher through a rather dubious manipulation of Old Testament genealogies, his findings were widely accepted in the nineteenth century, and they were endorsed by Mrs. White. So — the position that the world is only 6,000 years old is based — for Adventists, at least — on *the authority of Mrs. White alone*, not on scriptural authority. Right?

BRADLEY: I would like to know where this digression of yours is leading us.

PETERSON: Precisely to this conclusion: that if her statements of chronology are not always reliable, then Adventists can readily admit that the world is a good deal older than 6,000 years; and that her statements about the age of the earth are to be subjected to the same kind of critical scrutiny as, say, her statement that the Bible was officially suppressed in France in 1793. This is not a fanciful illustration, by the way: in looking through that file of materials in the White Estate vault, I noticed that Crisler and others were very concerned about establishing whether 1793 was in fact the correct date for that event. They checked her statement (in the 1888 edition of *The Great Controversy*) against all available historical sources. Then why not check her statements about the age of the earth against all available scientific and historical sources?

BRADLEY: I had no idea you were so interested in this question. You didn't mention it in your article.

PETERSON: I'm not, really, though many Adventist scientists *are* concerned about it, as you know. I just wanted to see where these ideas would take us. I wanted to see what were the logical consequences of a certain position. All I am really asking for is logical consistency: if you say that the 6,000-year figure is sacred, then every other date in Mrs. White's books

must also be accepted as divinely revealed — and I doubt that *that* is a tenable position.

BRADLEY: I'm afraid that what you're saying now merely confirms my worst fears about the meaning of your article. So what you really had in mind all along was the age of the earth?

PETERSON: No, no — of course not. That is merely an example that came to my mind just now because many Adventists are very worried about it. What I was really asking in my article, I think, was whether we should re-examine the nature of Mrs. White's inspiration. Specifically, I wanted to know the relationship between her visions and published "sources" (though I know you don't like that word) in the writing of her books.

BRADLEY: That's very simple. She received revelations from the Holy Spirit, who is infallible, and her messages, though written in human language, reflect as accurately as human language can the mind and will of an infallible God.

*The lights slowly darken, except for a single spotlight on Peterson, who walks forward to the front of the stage, still holding his notes and books, and directly addresses the audience.*

PETERSON: Ladies and gentlemen, since I am the author of this play as well as an actor in it, I think it is appropriate that I be allowed a final word. You have heard Elder Bradley explain his viewpoint; you have heard me explain mine. Now you must judge between us. Or it may be that neither of us is right. Elder Bradley thinks that the solution to the problems we have discussed is simple. I disagree. The question of how God chooses to speak to human beings seems to me instead enormously complex.

Even though Christ was the supreme revelation of God's character, the very disciples who had been with him for three years did not understand the meaning of his crucifixion. All of us, the entire human race, are represented in those distraught disciples who walked that evening on the road to Emmaus, with a mysterious, hooded figure by their side; they, like us, were so absorbed in their human griefs, their human world, that they were unaware of the divine presence. Even the prophets, those whom God had chosen to speak through, can communicate the mind of God to us only imperfectly and partially, for we all in this life see through a glass darkly. Mrs. White has some very wise words to say on this subject at the beginning of chapter nineteen in *The Great Controversy*. I have not the slightest doubt that she meant these words to apply to herself as well as others:

Men are instruments in the hand of God, employed by Him to accomplish His purposes of grace and mercy. Each has his part to act; to each is granted a measure of light, adapted to the necessities of his time, and sufficient to enable him to perform the work which God has given him to do. But no man, however honored of Heaven, has ever attained to a full understanding of the great plan of redemption, or even to a perfect appreciation of the divine purpose in the work for his own time. Men do not fully understand what God would accomplish by the work which He gives them to do; they do not comprehend, in all its bearings, the message which they utter in His name. . . .

Even the prophets who were favored with the special illumination of the Spirit did not fully comprehend the import of the revelations committed to them. The meaning was to be unfolded from age to age, as the people of God should need the instruction therein contained.

*He closes the book. The spotlight dims, and the curtain falls.*