

Ellen White's Authority and the Church

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The term *cult* has been applied to the Seventh-day Adventist church. One of the reasons given has been that Adventists have an extrascriptural source of authority in the writings of Ellen G. White.¹ The official church position, however, has been that Mrs. White's books serve only to shed light on the Bible and that the Bible is the sole source of authority in doctrine.² The average Adventist finds his understanding of Mrs. White somewhere between these two positions.

The following quotation from a *Review and Herald* editorial favors the first rather than the second assertion:

While Seventh-day Adventists do not consider the writings of Ellen G. White to be a modern addition to the canon of Scripture, we do recognize in them the same quality and degree of inspiration as that of the Bible writers, and consider their teaching authority to be equal to that of the Bible — *for Seventh-day Adventists*. The difference between them and the canonical Scriptures lies in the fact that we do not consider them to be of "universal application" — that is, to other Christians.³

This statement accurately portrays the current conscious attitude of a few and the unconscious assumption of many. Thus, Mrs. White's writings, as they are quoted in church publications and from the pulpit, appear to be right on a par with the Bible. What makes the Adventist church even more susceptible to the criticism of extrascriptural authority is the common use of these writings in doctrinal study. Her counsel is considered to have the same impact of authority — not only in principle, but frequently in literal interpretation — as the Bible. Her counsel is taken as the ultimate word in Bible study.

This perspective boxes in Adventist theologians. Consider the minister

who wishes to study in depth any of the church beliefs. He may indeed look to the Bible as the basis, but the final decision on its interpretation rests with Mrs. White. As vigorously as this position is denied officially, it is assiduously followed in practice. Adventist physicians feel guilty because some of Mrs. White's counsel on the practice of medicine is not clinically feasible. Educators are ill at ease about following the explicit "pattern" outlined for the schools of her day. (This is not to say that her instructions were bad, but more to say that they are unnecessarily felt to be immutable and to be appropriate to all times and places.)

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Unfortunately, Mrs. White herself doesn't help today's church out of the dilemma. Her personal letters and direct testimonies to individuals and groups were frequently considered suitable for broader application, both by usage and by her own instruction. For instance, even though she disclaimed infallibility,⁴ she said that her testimonies were not her ideas but the Lord's; that slighting and rejecting them was slighting the Lord; that God's blessings would be withdrawn from those who didn't heed the testimonies; and that turning aside from God's counsel (her testimonies) was like rebelling against him just as Korah, Dathan, and Abiram did (and everyone knows what happened to them!).⁵ She further wrote that one of the last deceptions would be Satan's attempt to unsettle the confidence of God's remnant people in the true testimony.⁶ Her books have many such statements — and they are used liberally to maintain her position of authority.⁷ Such statements would cause a loyal Adventist to hesitate to make any expression that might seem contrary to her word. Her works are a kind of "party line," and the faithful are quick to attack "revisionists."

It is hard for present-day Adventists to understand that the needs of the early Adventist church had an influence on how Mrs. White expressed herself about authority and revelation. The "little flock" that emerged out of the 1844 disappointment needed a firm guiding hand. They weren't in need of mere suggestions and advice as a focus for debate; they were looking for answers from a voice of authority. Mrs. White filled this position. By her direct approach to problems, the church benefited and prospered. Later, however, her position of paramount authority became institutionalized and schematized — and it becomes more so with each passing day. This is a mistake.

Mrs. White often spoke of there being no "in-between" point; she was either of God or of the devil.⁸ The all-or-none approach, applicable as it

was in expressing pointed instructions to a doubting individual or group in her day is not necessary for our understanding of Mrs. White's inspiration and authority today. During the same time in history, the Mormons accepted a similar aura about Joseph Smith,⁹ and the Christian Scientists did the same for Mary Baker Eddy.¹⁰ At first glance it appears that these personalities also claimed infallibility (since they spoke as the voice of God). But what is misunderstood is what their followers at that time required. They demanded leaders who frequently asserted their role as messengers of God.

Apparently many of Mrs. White's letters and testimonies went unheeded. To reinforce what she had in mind, she reminded church members repeatedly that her counsel was not hers but God's and that the members had better listen. Does this make Mrs. White deceitful and unprincipled for having spoken and functioned in a manner responsive to her times? To the contrary, it was perfectly acceptable then. Yet, Adventists today seem to feel obliged to read literally her efforts to structure and guide the early church, and hence they find themselves in the either-or position she spoke about: Don't tamper with the testimonies or you'll find yourself under Satan's banner.¹¹ To relate to her in this fashion now is worse than being foolish — it is destructive and devious. Making her into an inflexible authority without the possibility of error creates a serious credibility gap for the thinking Adventist.

It should be no surprise that one can be inspired by the writings of Mrs. White in spite of unresolved questions and even disagreement with some of the things she wrote. Belief that her leadership was a manifestation of the gift of prophecy is not dependent on her being infallibly right on *every* point. Nor, emphatically, is it based on the ability to demonstrate that all of her statements are self-consistent and true.

But some Adventists seem to have a veritable compulsion to prove this point. As a result, they eagerly seek confirmation that cancer is caused by germs, that tuberculosis and cancer are largely caused by meat-eating, and that the Earth is no more than 6,000 years old.¹² Maybe these assertions are true. But implicit in this approach is the postulate that since she had this important information before scientists discovered it, she can therefore be trusted as God's messenger. What happens, then, when tuberculosis and cancer occur among vegetarians? Does this destroy her authority?

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Mrs. White's place of authority in the church should be carefully thought through. The very idea of such study causes consternation, however, be-

cause it seems to imply doubt concerning her work and also because it could mean that some long-held positions might have to be revised. The foundations of the Christian faith as Adventists understand them are not going to collapse from examining the views set forth by Mrs. White. LeRoy E. Froom has effectively dispelled this concern by pointing out that Adventist beliefs emerged from many conservative sources antedating Mrs. White.¹³

Adventists must seek a different means of using the Ellen White writings in church publications and from the platform. To use one of her quotations to clinch an argument closes off debate and reflection. The point then becomes unassailable, often reflecting more the proponent's position than what Mrs. White had in mind. To keep repeating that she was guided by God (because all her writings are in harmony with the Bible) is an effort to make her infallible.

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The "radical" might propose to do away with the past; he might say that the Adventist church no longer needs her messages. Few Adventists would consider this a wise course. Equally imprudent, though, would be the position of rejecting all change and labeling as apostasy any effort to clarify her position. Either approach places the value of her counsel out of reach.

Mrs. White has given the church the highest quality of perception of God and his goodness. Her writings are ultimate for Adventists in the sense that through reading her books one can catch a clearer, transforming vision of God and of the unique task he has assigned to the Adventist Movement. The Ellen White books don't require an uncritical literalism in order to serve this purpose. The crossfire of challenge and criticism will only clarify and strengthen her place in the church.

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