

# Ellen G. White in Adventist Theology

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## I

Increasingly the need has been expressed for a more coherent and consistent approach to the use of Ellen G. White's writings. It is a common observation that her writings are now used to support a wide variety of points of view — many of which are mutually exclusive. As Branson and Weiss have pointed out, simply to compile the Ellen White statements on a topic is inadequate, at best, for understanding her views on that topic. Yet that method is still the dominant one, both in published interpretation and in more informal types of discussion. Methods of interpretation more acceptable to scholarship need to be applied to her writings.<sup>1</sup>

It was partly to call attention to this need and to take some steps toward meeting it that Branson and Weiss wrote their article. They proposed the application of three basic tools of interpretation to the problem of understanding as well as possible what Mrs. White really said. The steps they outlined were:

Discover the nature of Mrs. White's relationship to other authors.

Recover the social and intellectual milieu in which she lived and wrote.

Give close attention to the development of Ellen White's writings within her own lifetime, and also to the development of the church.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, the adoption of these simple but fundamental rules would mark an important positive step in Adventist scholarship. Not only would this approach help Adventist theology to the achievement of positive results in what have heretofore been unproductive disputes over her meaning in specific passages, but it would go a long way toward restoring to the church the voice of an authentic prophet.

What would be the effect on Adventist theology if these methods were actually implemented in the study of Mrs. White? What if we were to recover her authen-

tic voice, and once again she could speak to the church unequivocally? Since her authority is so closely identified with the activity of Adventist theology, the effect on the course of theological development could be expected to be significant, complex, and problematical. For example, the degree to which Adventist theology would be able to tolerate the wide variety of points of view that now exist in it would almost certainly be greatly reduced.

Probably no one person is in a position to be fully aware of the magnitude of the diversity within Adventist theology. A serious lack of publication and other forms of communication on the part of the members of the various Adventist college religion faculties still prevents general access to the information that might allow such a picture to be pieced together. However, from my acquaintance with the orientations of the faculty members on the three California campuses, and from my conversations with several, I perceive that over the past twenty years the general level of sophistication among those doing Adventist theology has increased impressively. At least on those campuses within my experience, and presumably on most of the others, the religion departments have acquired persons well educated in the various theological orientations available to the contemporary theologian. These teachers have been applying such orientations to the achieving of insight into the message of the Seventh-day Adventist church, and to the solving of the many problems found in Adventist theology as it attempts to meet the spiritual perplexities of the age. Several are well on their way to sophisticated formulations of what seems to them to be important contributions of Adventism to Christian theology. A major consequence of this development has been the emergence of a great amount of diversity in Adventist theology.

I am well aware that a significant portion — perhaps even a majority — of Adventists still view such innovation with a high degree of suspicion. And it is no doubt true that most of the points of view now being formulated by Adventist theologians will not survive — perhaps in some cases for reasons having to do with inadequate identity with the roots of Adventism. But the problems in Adventist theology are real, not simply intellectual exercises for which we already have the answers. Any serious attempt to deal with them, therefore, whether or not the effort might strike one as headed for success or failure, should be welcomed and encouraged.

Despite the increasing sophistication of Adventist theologians, no one has yet been able, so far as I know, to go beyond the need to borrow Mrs. White's authority in order to claim legitimacy for his approach to theology. Although some will admit that Mrs. White's statements are not necessarily authoritative for their theologies, all the Adventist theologians I have heard — or heard of — feel compelled to avoid going against what they see to be a basic aspect of the "theology

of Ellen G. White." This, of course, is not necessarily a bad limitation for Adventist theology; in fact it seems to be an obvious and natural one. But it does put Adventist theology, as it now stands, in a rather absurd position. After all, if Mrs. White's writings can be said to say anything at all with coherence, then her work cannot be said to lend support to all of the points of view now held in Adventist theology — except perhaps in a highly subjective and indirect fashion. Some of the views *must* be disagreeing with her in some fundamental respect.

It seems clear that if Adventist theology were to adopt the suggestion to apply consistent rules of interpretation to Mrs. White's writings, thereby reducing the ambiguity characterizing interpretation of her up to now, the absurdity of the position I have described would become all too apparent. If Adventist theology finds itself unable to forego identification with the authority of Mrs. White, the consequence will necessarily be the stifling of the variety and creativity that seems so promising and that is only now beginning to find acceptance in the church's theological establishment.

There are many in the church, some of them theologians, who would not find this latter so exorbitant a price to pay. Some would find that benefits to the church would outweigh the harm to its theology. Others would even disagree that it would be in any way harmful. But as one who looks forward to doing theology in the Adventist tradition, I believe that price to be great enough to warrant an examination of its necessity. For reasons that seem very much in harmony with the basic thrust of Adventism, I regard the creative growth that I see occurring in Adventist theology essential to the prospects of the church for making the impact on the world that it feels itself destined to make.

There seem to be two obvious ways to avoid the narrowing of Adventist theology simply to the explication of Mrs. White's statements concerning the major points of doctrine.

The *first way*, the exploitation of the obvious ambiguities in the White writings, is responsible for the wide variety of points of view in Adventist theology today. But the innocent use of this device is no longer possible on a large scale. Consciously to continue its use would be a piece of gross intellectual dishonesty, the price for which is unthinkable. Besides, the church has much to gain in terms of conviction and vitality from the restoration to it of the voice of an authentic prophet. The application of the tools of scholarship to the recovery of that voice seems to be a fitting and natural service Adventist theology can perform for the church as a whole.

The *other way* available to Adventist theology to avoid the narrowing of its scope is a reassessment of the meaning for theology of the fact of Mrs. White's prophetic authority. This, in fact, is what this essay is intended to propose.

Recognition of a prophet's authority is commonly assumed to require the specific content of one's theology to conform significantly to that prophet's theological statements. But on what basis is this kind of attention demanded? Simple assertion of prophetic authority does not make the answer to that question as obvious as one might at first suppose. What, theologically speaking, *is* prophetic authority? What kind of authority does prophecy in fact carry for scholarship? What position do Mrs. White's writings really demand for themselves in the theology of the Seventh-day Adventist church? It is in the attempt to resolve these logically prior questions of evaluation that I perceive the crucial point in Adventist theology and scholarship.

Clearly, what is now necessary is a concerted effort to reexamine the role, and consequently the nature of the authority, of a prophet. The several points of view now operating in Adventist theology should each be brought to comment on a theological concept of the prophetic office. The Adventist theologian, I believe, will soon be in a position in which this task (for which he is peculiarly suited because he is acquainted with the life and work of Mrs. White) will be not only appropriate but unavoidable. He has the opportunity to achieve the firm and consistent footing necessary for this essential contribution in the next decades.

Special care, however, must be taken to maintain the positive nature of this endeavor. Defining a concept that might significantly limit the scope of prophetic authority could put the scholar in a morally suspect position. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to search for a consistent attitude toward these writings so as to allow for changes in theology to meet a changing situation. Rigorous adherence to the normal standards of intellectual honesty — along with proper regard for constructive criticism from the theological community — seems sufficient to structure the task.

## II

The foregoing proposal — that Adventist theology should work for the achievement of a significant amount of freedom from the theological content of Mrs. White's writings while remaining committed to the authenticity of her prophetic role — will no doubt strike most readers of this essay as so strange as to make it difficult to imagine how it might be attempted. On the surface the proposal seems to require an essentially meaningless definition of prophetic authority. Therefore, to demonstrate that what I am proposing as a major project of Adventist theology is not necessarily doomed to self-contradiction, I now outline one possible approach to such a redefinition of prophetic authority.

The discussion that follows is not presented in a manner to warrant its acceptance as a real solution to the problem with which this essay is concerned. Since

the discussion is intended simply to illustrate that the problem can be approached in a manner that does not give up, at the outset, some basic Adventist commitments, I shall not burden it down with the research and reasoning necessary to an adequate argument of the position. But neither is the position purely hypothetical. It represents my thinking as far as I have taken it to this time. Any criticism such an approach might provoke from readers will be received with interest. But the primary assertion here is that attempt at redefinition needs to be made — not that my approach is necessarily the correct one.

One way to assess the scope of prophetic authority is to evaluate the way prophets have actually functioned. Crucial to this evaluation is the distinction that I feel must be made between the apostle and the prophet.

The *apostle's role* was that of the “founder”<sup>3</sup> of a new religion, the mediator to his people of their basic relationship to their God. This “covenant” became the primary authority defining all religious expression within its context.

The *prophet*, on the other hand, was entirely subordinate to the authority of that original apostolic revelation of the covenant in whose context he spoke. This subordinate nature of a prophet's relationship to his covenant is a significant fact that seems a necessary component of any definition of the prophetic office. The prophet's function was to revive and intensify commitment to that covenant — never to add to it or otherwise change it. Though his authority was no less real and of no less a source than the apostle's, its purpose and hence its scope were more specific.

This schematic can be applied to both the Old and the New Testaments; and while in fact the actual history of prophetic activity does not fit it precisely, the complications are merely complications, I believe, and not contradictions. Thus one can say that Moses' role was apostolic, founding as he did the Hebrew religion and formulating the “old” covenant.<sup>4</sup> Prophets during his lifetime had distinctly minor roles consisting chiefly of charismatic expressions of commitment and fervor on important occasions. We do not know of any theologically important message delivered by a prophet during Moses' lifetime.<sup>5</sup> Certainly the authority of prophets was not on a level with that of Moses. Prophets did not participate in the covenant's formulation, nor could they conceivably have challenged Moses' sole authority to do so.

But as the passing of time made Moses seem more and more remote to the Jews, the prophet's importance to Israel increased. His role came to be that of combating his people's growing existential distance from the Exodus, to create in them a vivid awareness of its significance for their contemporary situation by the use of his charismatic gifts. Since the situations to which the prophets were called were sometimes of a national character, and occasionally even of historical im-

portance, what they said was sometimes written down. But at no time could the theological content of those writings be said to approach the universality that characterized the message of Moses.

The subordinate role that this schematic requires for prophecy clearly limits its significance for theology. But one might object that, as a matter of fact, some Old Testament prophets said some things of great theological significance. Although this fact is undeniable, it can be accounted for, I believe, by the peculiar tension that characterized the Old Testament prophet's relationship to his covenant. While a complete deference on his part to the authority of the Mosaic Covenant was indicated, his charismatic — hence highly existential — nature soon drove him onto the inadequacy of what was, after all, a preliminary revelation. Consequently much of what the later prophets said served to point forward to a New Covenant that would contain the final revelation more than to point backward to the Old Covenant. The theological significance of this expectation extended beyond the situations to which the prophecies in which it was contained were primarily directed, causing them to take on a universality exceeding what one might expect from the limited nature of the prophetic office.

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But in the New Testament, that heretofore increasing importance of prophecy for theology was dramatically reversed. Everything the Old Testament prophet had been signifying in his stretching of the natural limitations of his role was entirely fulfilled by the Advent of Jesus and the proclamation of the New Covenant. Prophets again became relatively minor figures of merely local importance. What they said was directed almost without exception to their own local congregations.

It seems unfortunate that prophecy died out in the active life of the Christian community. Perhaps as a result of the excesses of the charismatic movements — which, in the name of a “third age” of the Spirit, claimed an authority superseding that of even the apostles — prophecy became more and more domesticated until eventually it came to be considered merely a component of the authority inherent in the increasingly powerful hierarchy. Christian prophecy never did follow its Old Testament pattern. The increasingly important role one might have expected it to assume with the passage of time never developed, in fact.

But could prophecy conceivably ever become as theologically significant in the Christian context as it became in the Mosaic context? Although this question may seem merely academic to most Christian theologians, it has vital relevance to Adventist theology's attempt to assess the significance for Adventism of an authentic Christian prophet in the recent past of the church.

Recognition of prophecy's subordinate role clearly requires a negative answer to the question. It is true that a more significant role in the church's history would be a legitimate expectation of prophecy in view of the scheme here presented. But

the truly final nature of the revelation of Christ as formulated in the New Testament makes it inconceivable that Christian prophecy's deference to apostolic revelation in matters of theology could be anything less than absolute. Since the tension that impelled the Old Testament prophet to strain the limits of his role no longer exists for the prophet in a Christian context, it is no longer possible that a prophet of the theological significance of, say, Isaiah might appear.<sup>6</sup>

The theologian — whose sole commitment is to the application of the apostolic revelation to the intellectual mood and difficulties of his age — need therefore have no prior commitment to take into account any specific prophet's message. The theologian's concern is with the universal Christian message. The message of the prophet — whose function is local and whose scope is limited to the situation to which he is called — need not concern the theologian significantly. Indeed, assessment of a prophet's significance for the larger Christian community can be said to be part of the theologian's proper function.

### III

Must we then conclude that the prophet has no authority over the theologian? Does the scheme I have presented allow anyone who calls himself a theologian to put himself outside the scope of a prophet's authority?

Not so. Although not everyone stands in the specific situation to which any one prophet directs his message, he who does (theologian or whatever) — and who finds himself therefore under the "spell" of the prophet's charisma — is clearly obligated to yield to the authority of that prophet's message. The theologian would necessarily incorporate into his theology this presumably profound personal religious experience. But the theologian who finds himself at some distance from the situation to which the same prophet directs his message, and who consequently is not affected by the compelling power of that prophet's authority, is free to assess that prophet's ultimate contribution to Christian thought along more objective lines.

These observations have some useful implications for assessing the significance of Mrs. White's writings for Adventist theology. Theologically oriented persons who were involved in the beginnings of the Adventist church, for example, cannot be faulted from this point of view for allowing Mrs. White to dominate their theological writings. Neither, for similar reasons, can an Adventist theologian today be faulted for so using her writings if he finds himself within the situation to which she was speaking. But neither can a theologian be faulted if, according to intellectually honest criteria, he perceives himself to be working in a situation to which she was not speaking.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, in the scheme here developed we have a position in which a theologian

can consistently acknowledge the validity of Mrs. White's prophetic role, recognize his debt to her contribution to the beliefs and practices of his church (and thus to his own), and yet seek to find ways to move beyond her theological statements to develop a theology designed to meet the problems inherent in his own situation. While perhaps in the context of this essay the scheme raises more questions than it answers, it does demonstrate, I believe, the possibility of approaching the problem of finding limitations to the scope of Mrs. White's authority without necessarily contradicting the commitments required for an Adventist identity.

But whatever the approach adopted, the Adventist theologian in the next few years will be forced more and more to work out his position in this regard. A serious attempt must be made to achieve some sort of consensus. But in the absence of consensus the Adventist theologian will need to make his own position regarding the scope of Mrs. White's authority explicit as a foundation for whatever else he may try to say to the more general problems in Adventist — and Christian — belief. The development of the skills necessary for the introspection of our attitudes and commitments in this regard will become important, I believe, for the introspection I perceive for the church generally as it seeks to define the role it must play in the coming years.

At any rate, it is only by developing the ability to meet new problems as they appear within contemporary Christianity — with the same venturesome spirit that characterized the small band that founded the Seventh-day Adventist church — that we can hope to remain at all faithful to the "spirit of prophecy" once manifested in the activity of Ellen G. White.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1/ Roy E. Branson and Herold D. Weiss, *Ellen G. White: A subject for Adventist scholarship*, SPECTRUM 2 (4):30-33 (Autumn 1970).

2/ *Ibid.*

3/ The term is Walther Eichrodt's and reflects the fact that much of my analysis is based on his *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press 1961), vol. 1, pp. 299 ff.

4/ Although Moses was certainly a prophet, that term is inadequate to describe his role. He was much more than a prophet.

5/ Ignore for now the problematic exception of Baalim.

6/ A possibility that I shall only note, but not dis-

cuss in this essay, is that Mrs. White may be said to merit more theological attention than I suggest here, on the ground that her function was not only to point back to the New Testament revelation but ahead to the Second Advent — indeed, to signal that event. Whether or not this is so is a proper subject for another paper.

7/ One might assert, of course, that Mrs. White was not a prophet at all — at least in the sense this essay uses the term — but an apostle. But then one should be aware of the consequences. If Mrs. White was an apostle, then she was the founder of a new religion. Her followers could not be called Christian, therefore, but, say, "Adventist," and would be on the same level as Mormons and Christian Scientists.