

The Conditionality of Ellen White's Writings

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Seventh-day Adventists have always believed that prophecy is conditional. Only a cursory glance at the "if" passages of Deuteronomy 27-30 and Jeremiah 18 should be enough to validate the historical position of the church. Despite the fact that the church has been quick to point to the conditional nature of *biblical* prophecy, however, few Adventist teachers have stressed the conditionality of the prophetic pronouncements of Ellen G. White. This is particularly interesting in the light of Mrs. White's own statements.

After the re-publication in 1882 of the three earliest White books (*Experience and Views*, *A Supplement to Experience and Views*, and *Spiritual Gifts*), some early church leaders raised questions as to the "completeness" and "significance" of the views expressed in these books — in the light of subsequent writings. So in 1883 Mrs. White answered their questions personally. One question concerned a vision in which Mrs. White saw that "the time for Jesus to be in the most holy place was nearly finished" and that only a "little longer" was required before Jesus would come. To this question Mrs. White replied:

It is true that time has continued longer than we expected in the early days of this message. Our Saviour did not appear as soon as we hoped. But has the word of the Lord failed? Never! It should be remembered that *the promises and threatenings of God are alike conditional*. . . . Had Adventists, after the disappointment in 1844, held fast to their faith, and followed on unitedly in the opening providence of God, receiving the message of the third angel and in the power of the Holy Spirit proclaiming it to the world, they would have seen the salvation of their God, the Lord would have wrought mightily with their efforts, the work would have been completed, and *Christ would have come ere this* to receive His people to their reward. . . . It was not the will of God that the coming of Christ should be thus delayed. [Italics supplied.]¹

Clearly, Mrs. White explained the delay of Christ's coming in terms of conditional prophecy in this instance. But let us go further.

It is certain that Mrs. White saw the Second Coming of Jesus in vision more than once. In each of the specific accounts, she added or subtracted various details that she saw. James White published in 1858 the first volume of *Spiritual Gifts*, in which Mrs. White had written her first total view of “the great controversy between Christ and Satan.” This volume contained the vision of the “loud cry” that was to take place just before the Second Coming — the vision in which God’s people were to be delivered (that is, the Second Coming itself). The details make it certain that this was a *conditional* prophecy. It is understandable that in 1858 Mrs. White would refer to the “poor slaves” of the South, for at that time tension between the northern states and the southern states was increasing, and the country was rapidly moving toward civil war. Mrs. White said:

The last call is carried even to the poor slaves, and the pious among them, with humble expressions pour forth their songs of extravagant joy at the prospect of their happy deliverance, and their masters cannot check them; for a fear and astonishment keep them silent. Mighty miracles are wrought, the sick are healed, and signs and wonders follow the believers.²

Certainly what was described then will not take place in the forthcoming “loud cry,” although it *could have taken place* had Jesus come earlier. Delay has altered the details of prophecy.

In her vision of “the time of Jacob’s trouble,” Mrs. White saw “the saints leaving the cities and villages . . . and living in the most solitary places. Angels provided them food and water; but the wicked were suffering with hunger and thirst.”³ She also saw the wicked rushing upon the righteous, with evil angels close behind. Then in the vision of the great deliverance she saw “the pious slave rise in triumph and victory, and shake off the chains that bound him, while his wicked master was in confusion, and knew not what to do; for the wicked could not understand the words of the voice of God. Soon appeared the great white cloud. On it sat the SON of Man.”⁴ Surely this is conditional prophecy. No one at all today expects to see chained slaves on the earth at the Second Coming of Jesus. But it could have been so. Again, delay has altered the details of prophecy.

The Pacific Press published in 1884 volume four of the *Spirit of Prophecy* series — Mrs. White’s second total view of the cosmic battle between evil and good. (Had Jesus come in the manner prescribed in *Spiritual Gifts*, it should be noted, this second series would not have been necessary.) In this volume four Mrs. White again narrated a vision of the Second Coming of Jesus and the deliverance of his people, and there are certain similarities between the 1884 description and the 1858 description in *Spiritual Gifts*. The Lord still comes at midnight; the righteous are still mobbed by the wicked; but no mention is made of slaves or wicked masters. Had Christ come before 1884, the shackled slaves would have been alive to meet their deliverer, but conditions had changed.

What if Sunday laws never happen? Would that mean Mrs. White was a false prophet? Sound hermeneutics say no! Because certain details of prophecy are conditional, we cannot expect them to come to pass. Sunday laws may indeed be enacted — but not necessarily. The book of Revelation says that a *time of trouble* will surely come upon the inhabitants of the earth. The crux of the great controversy, however, is the authority of God versus the authority of man. As for the details, Mrs. White says, "The promises and threatenings of God are alike conditional."⁵

REFERENCES

- 1/ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 2 bks. (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1958), bk. 1, pp. 67, 68.
- 2/ White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 4 vols. (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, facsimile reproduction 1945), vol. 1, pp. 195, 196.
- 3/ White, *Spiritual Gifts*, p. 201.
- 4/ White, *Spiritual Gifts*, p. 206.
- 5/ White, *Selected Messages*, p. 67.