

READERS' SYMPOSIUM

Butler on Ellen White's Eschatology

The thesis of Butler's article in *SPECTRUM* (Vol. 10, No. 2) appears to be this: The apocalyptic eschatology as outlined in detail in *The Great Controversy* is historically conditioned to the late nineteenth century and must be reinterpreted today in the light of developments in the religious and political world since then. This reinterpretation is called for since Ellen White herself recognized the conditional nature of prophecy. If the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to remain truly "Adventist," it must preach the end of the world of our day in the light of present conditions and not those of either a past era or a remotely future one.

That certain predictive prophecies of Scripture are conditional in nature is borne out in many places. For example, Jonah's

Jonathan Butler's article, "The World of E. G. White and the End of the World" has been widely discussed when presented on several occasions before publication and since its appearance in SPECTRUM (Vol. 10, No. 2). The editors are pleased that Harold E. Fagal, who participated in a colloquium on the article, has permitted us to publish his comments. They are followed by other responses from readers and then Butler's own comments.

prophecy was, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). Yet when the Ninevites repented, judgment was postponed. Sometimes the conditions are clearly stated: "If ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me" (Ex. 19:5). At other times, the condition may not be stated but implied: "At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; if it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them" (Jer. 18:9, 10).

An important statement by Ellen White on this subject was given when she was challenged as to why time had continued longer than her earlier testimonies seemed to indicate. Her reply was: "How is it with the testimonies of Christ and His disciples? Were they deceived? . . . The angels of God in their messages to men represent time as very short. . . . It should be remembered that the promises and threatenings of God are alike conditional" (*Evangelism*, p. 695).

Our problem today is not with accepting the principle of conditional nature of prophecy as much as with deciding which prophecies are to be understood as conditional. Butler has touched a sensitive issue when he, in effect, declares that even those

events that Ellen White described as those that would precipitate the end of the world were conditioned by the turn of events in her time and are not to be viewed as unconditional prophecy today. That we have been willing to do this with regard to some of Ellen White's statements may be illustrated by our explanation of the statement found in *Spiritual Gifts* (vol. 2, p. 208): "At the conference [held in Battle Creek in 1856] a very solemn vision was given me. I saw that some of those present would be food for worms, some subject for the seven last plagues, and some would be translated to heaven at the second coming of Christ, without seeing death." With the passing of time and the demise of all of those who were present, including possible infants in the arms of attendees, we have said that "if the conditions had been met, Jesus would have come long ere this, and some of those present would have been 'food for worms,' that is, they would have died prior to the coming; others would have been 'subjects for the seven last

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plagues'; still others would have been 'translated to heaven at the second coming of Christ, without seeing death' " (D. F. Neufeld, *The Adventist Review*, Oct. 25, 1979, p. 17).

Butler now asks us to reexamine our position toward the eschatological outline found in *The Great Controversy* in the light of the fact that the end of the world has not happened, and the forces of Catholicism, apostate Protestantism and spiritualism have not united in a way so as to precipitate the final crisis. Thus, he says that we are to understand this, too, as conditional prophecy.

That the eschatology of the New Testament is presented with a sense of immediacy is seen in the following passages which are but a few of those that could be cited to illustrate this:

I John 2:18: "Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists: whereby we know that it is the last time."

Revelation 1:1: "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon take place. . . ." And verse 3: "the time is near." (In one way or another, the thought that the various events foretold in the book of Revelation were to take place in the not distant future is specifically stated seven times by such expressions as "what must soon take place," "I am coming soon," "the time is near." The concept of the imminence of the return of Jesus is both explicit and implicit throughout the book of Revelation.)

Matthew 24:34: "this generation will not pass away till all these things take place."

Romans 13:12: "the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light."

Through the years, the church has had to explain this sense of immediacy concerning the second coming in the light of the fact that the *eschaton* has not taken place. In *Christ's Object Lessons* (p. 69), Ellen White wrote:

It is the privilege of every Christian not only to look for but to hasten the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (II Peter 3:12, margin.) Were all who profess His name bearing fruit to His glory, how quickly the whole world would be sown with the seed of the gospel. Quickly the last great harvest would be ripened, and Christ would come to gather the precious grain.

In 1954, the *Review and Herald* published the book *Problems in Bible Translation* for the Committee (of the General Conference) on Problems in Bible Translation. D. E. Rebock, secretary of the General Conference, wrote the foreword in which he said: "This report of the findings of that committee is sent forth, not with any idea of finality, but rather in the hope that it may help the reader better to appreciate the principles involved in the work of translation, and that it may enable him more judiciously and effectively to apply these principles in his own study of the Holy Scriptures." The book was one of the first, if

not the first, place in which we published anything about revelation as historically conditioned and the conditional nature of prophecy. Notice a few statements taken from this book:

Generally speaking, such parts of Scripture as constitute a direct revelation from God were addressed to His people then living and adapted to their understanding and needs. . . . We need to ascertain what they, and the Holy Spirit through them, intended to be understood in the light of the influences under which they lived, worked, and wrote. . . .

Predictions of weal and woe to occur prior to the close of probation are usually conditional in nature, due to the operation of man's power of choice; those following that event are contingent upon the will of God alone and are therefore unconditional in nature. Most prophetic messages were originally designed to meet the specific needs of God's people at the time they were given, but in the providence of God they have been recorded and preserved, and may be of equal or even greater value to the church today . . . (pages 103-4).

At this same time, the volumes of the *SDA Bible Commentary* were being published. In this work, many New Testament passages regarding the expected immediacy of Christ's return had to be explained in the light of the fact that it has not even yet taken place. The explanations given took into account the conditional nature of prophecy. An illustration is found in the comments on Revelation 1:1:

Thus it seems clear that although the fact of Christ's second coming is not based on any conditions, the repeated statements of Scripture that the coming was imminent were conditional on the response of the church to the challenge of finishing the work of the gospel in their generation. The Word of God, which centuries ago declared that the day of Christ was "at hand" (Rom. 13:12), has not failed. Jesus would have come very quickly if the church had done its appointed work. The church had no right to expect her Lord when she had not complied with the conditions. (See *Evangelism*, pp. 694-697.)

Thus the statements of the angel of Revelation to John concerning the imminence of Christ's return to end the reign of sin are to be understood as an expression of divine will and purpose. God has never purposed to delay the consummation of the plan of salvation, but has ever expressed His will that the return of our Lord be not long delayed.

These statements are not to be understood in terms of the foreknowledge of God that there would be so long a delay, nor yet in the light of the historical perspective of what has actually taken place in the history of the world since that time. To

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be sure, God foreknew that the coming of Christ would be delayed some two thousand years, but when He sent messages to the church by the apostles He couched those messages in terms of His will and purpose with regard to that event, in order to make His people conscious of the fact that, in the divine providence, no delay was necessary. Consequently, the seven statements of the Revelation concerning the nearness of Christ's coming are to be understood in terms of God's will and purpose, as promises conditionally set forth, and not as utterances based on divine foreknowledge. In this fact, doubtless, is to be found the harmony between those passages that exhort to readiness for the soon coming of Christ and those time prophecies that reveal how far ahead lay the actual day of the Lord.

Whether one agrees with every point of the argument set forth here is not important. What is important is that the church found it necessary to come to some understanding of why the *parousia* had been so long delayed, and it did so by using the concept of the conditional nature of prophecy.

The compilers of the book *Evangelism* collected several Ellen White statements to which they gave the heading "The Reason for the Delay." Notice some of the reasons given:

The long night of gloom is trying, but the morning is deferred in mercy, because if the Master should come, so many would be found unready. God's unwillingness to have His people perish, has been the reason of so long delay (1868).

It was not the will of God that the coming of Christ should be thus delayed. God did not design that His people, Israel, should wander forty years in the wilderness. . . . For forty years did unbelief, murmuring, and rebellion shut out ancient Israel from the land of Canaan. The same sins have delayed the entrance of modern Israel into the heavenly Canaan. In neither case were the promises of God at fault. It is the unbelief, the worldliness, unconsecration, and strife among the Lord's professed people that have kept us in this world of sin and sorrow so many years (1883).

It appears that what Butler has done in this article with regard to the eschatology of Ellen White in *The Great Controversy* is similar to what the church has done in explaining the sense of immediacy concerning the *parousia* as found in the New Testament. If we accept the position that all prophecies of the Bible dependent upon men for their fulfillment (which means those whose fulfillment is to take place before the close of probation) are conditional in nature, even when the conditions so governing them are not explicitly expressed, and only those prophecies whose fulfillment is dependent upon God's acting without the involvement of man's free choice (which means those whose fulfillment is to take place after the close of probation) are unconditional in nature, consistency would demand that the prophecies of Ellen White in *The Great Controversy* be treated in the same manner as those in the Bible. The alternative to this would be to place her writings on a different plane from those of the Bible itself.

There are forces at work within the church and without that are leading us to reexamine certain of our positions to be sure that we are

expressing truth in the clearest, most precise way. And this brings me to a suggestion I would like to make with regard to the way Butler has expressed himself. I could wish that he would rethink, and perhaps reexpress, a point or two. For example, he says: "When *this* Protestant world began slipping away, Mrs. White was aghast. She saw the Victorian Protestant America declining in the face of religious and ethnic, intellectual and social changes. Mrs. White's eschatology envisioned the end of her world" (p. 10). This thought is repeated again in the final paragraph of the article: "The title of our discussion lends itself to a double entendre: when Mrs. White heralded the end of the world she spoke of the end of *her* world. Since Ellen White provided an eschatological perspective for her own time, in her spirit it is now up to us to provide one for our time" (p. 12). If I understand these words correctly, I could wish that the author would modify them, for I believe that Ellen White was speaking in *The Great Controversy*, not only of the end of *her* world (if by that Butler means the Victorian Protestant America), but of the end of *the* world. The world did not come to an end as quickly as she envisioned it would. However, she was speaking of *the* world that one day *is* going to come to an end. That it did not end when and how she envisioned does need explanation, and that could well be done in terms of the conditional nature of prophecy. *The Great Controversy* outlines how the final consummation of all things would have taken place had the end come as expected then.

Ellen White herself wrote: "Had Adventists, after the great disappointment in 1844, held fast their faith, and followed on unitedly in the opening providence of God . . . the work would have been completed, and Christ would have come ere this to receive His people to their reward" (*Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 68). This statement was made in 1883. Hence, if the conditions had been met, Christ would have come at some time prior to 1883. How many of the predictions in *The Great Controversy* will be fulfilled in just the way they are given there only time will tell. Butler may be right when he suggests that "communism, nuclear arms,

energy shortages or ecological disorders may be among the 'beasts' and 'signs' unanticipated by Mrs. White and other early Adventists" (p. 12). And it may be increasingly difficult to see how a prophetic message for our times could avoid the mentioning of these things and how much a part the triumvirate of Catholicism, apostate Protestantism and spiritualism will actually play in closing events. Only time will tell what forces will be at work just before the *eschaton* that will play decisive roles in the last-day events.

My last point has to do with terminology. I am not sure I fully understand the reference to "the Adventist culture [providing] an example of a kind of 'realized eschatology' from which the world may benefit in our time" (p. 10). If Butler, by his use of the expression "realized eschatology," is referring to the *eschaton* in which Victorian Protestant America came to an end, I am not sure I see how this can provide "an example . . . from which the world may benefit in our time." To say, with Butler, that "the prophetess predicted that Protestant America would end with the passage of Sunday legislation, the repudiation of constitutional government, the persecution of the Saturday-keeping minority, resulting finally in the Second Coming" (p. 10) is correct. That the *eschaton* has not come is also correct. But to reinterpret what Ellen White wrote in such a way as to understand her to be predicting the end of Victorian Protestant America would be attributing to her something totally foreign to her thinking.

And let me say that the term "prophetic disconfirmation" (p. 10) caused me some concern. I cannot quite see how we could ever convince our people regarding the validity of a principle of prophetic interpretation called "prophetic disconfirmation." I would suggest that we stay with the term "the conditional nature of prophecy" that has served us well for the past quarter of a century.

In conclusion, let me commend Butler for an article that I found both stimulating and provocative. He is a lucid writer and has my admiration for what I consider to be a good piece of writing. I appreciate his submitting it

for publication knowing full well that it could possibly be misunderstood. And, let me add, I am also grateful for a journal in which articles like this can be published. SPECTRUM provides Butler and others with a forum for presenting new ideas and a readership willing to react and respond so as to help advance the cause of truth for all of us.

Harold E. Fagal

To the Editors:
Jonathan Butler's provocative SPECTRUM article (Vol. 10, No. 2) made the point that the reevaluation of Adventist eschatology, specifically in the area of Sabbatarianism, may be necessary due to the changed "realities" of our present world as compared with the Victorian age of the pioneers.

While serious analysis and research should continually be made to unlock, if possible, the reason for the delayed *eschaton*, caution should be exercised so as not to disregard the lessons of the past that may very well prove to be the blueprint for the future.

It is agreed that the Sabbath has never been the burning issue that it once was in the nineteenth century. Adventists living during that era were convinced that prophecy was being literally fulfilled. And Ellen White was at certain times speaking and writing about current events that were transpiring around her. But such, however, was not always the case with either Adventist theologians or Ellen White.

It must be remembered that by the 1850s, Adventist eschatology had been concretely formulated. And these early pioneers virtually ignored the formation of the National Reform movement that took place more than a decade later. (See *Review and Herald*, 1863 and 1864.) They did not even identify it as the possible procuring cause for the predicted Sunday persecution until the 1870s, when J. H. Waggoner declared that "we have underestimated rather than overestimated this organization." (*Review and Herald*, February 17, 1874; see also Uriah Smith, *Review and Herald*, January 16, 1872.)

The early Adventist exegists, in the face of all contrary evidence, predicted that because of Revelation 13, Sabbatarianism would be-

come a leading political consideration within the United States and eventually the world. They predicted that somehow this democratic republic would enforce as a capital offense a national law, upholding the false Sabbath-Sunday.

As the National Reformers were rapidly gaining strength in 1876, Uriah Smith recounted how it “was no small act of faith” to believe in the eschatological scenario painted by Revelation 13 in those early days of the movement (1850s). “No sign appeared,” he said, “above or beneath, at home or abroad, no token was seen, no indication existed that such an issue would ever be made” (Uriah Smith, *United States in Light of Prophecy*, 1876, p. 156.)

It should be noted that Ellen White in her first *The Great Controversy* dated 1858 had already written out her eschatological framework long before Sabbatarianism was in vogue. Therefore, any attempt to portray the Adventists of the 1880s, including Ellen White, as simply reacting to their times with their own unique eschatological bias is historically incorrect, for Adventism had long predicted such unbelievable events.

As the Blair bill was pending before Congress (1888) and the nation was caught up with Sabbath reform, Ellen White declared that God was bringing the issue “to the front” to “become a subject of examination and discussion” so that agitation on the Sabbath could be publicly precipitated. (Ellen White, “The Approaching Crisis,” *Review and Herald*, December 11, 1888.)

She further noted that this religious amendment was indeed the very thing that Seventh-day Adventists had been expecting. “We have been looking many years for a Sunday law to be enacted in our land; and now that the movement is right upon us, we ask what our people are going to do in the matter.”

J. N. Loughborough also interpreted the Blair bill as concrete evidence that the past predictions were trustworthy. “But here we have in this year of grace, 1888, sprung upon us at once the very work, which I, with hundreds of other Seventh-day Adventists, have

for thirty-five years been looking to see come in and fulfill this prophecy . . . the great crisis of the message and the closing up of the work are right upon us.” (J. N. Loughborough, *Signs of Times*, October 5, 1888, p. 603.)

Curiously, while many Adventist leaders in the 1880s, especially Ellen White, were convinced that the vociferous Sunday movement was the specific fulfillment of the Third Angel’s message, many other Adventists were not. Ellen White wrote:

Not all of our ministers who are giving the Third Angel’s message really understand what constitutes that message. The National Reform movement has been regarded by some as of so little importance that they have not thought it necessary to give much attention to it and have even felt that in so doing, they would be giving time to questions distinct from the Third Angel’s message. May the Lord forgive our brethren for thus interpreting the very message for this time. (E. G. White, “The Approaching Crisis,” *Review and Herald*, December 11, 1888, p. 4.)

Therefore, it would seem that the unique Adventist eschatology was predicted upon prophetic exegesis in the 1850s and not social or cultural influence during the 1880s. And second, that even in spite of the startling rise in political Sabbatarianism in the 1880s, many Adventists of that period had serious doubts as to the significance of those current events and questioned the validity of the early Adventist eschatology.

But there is yet another point which may hold a key to explain why the Adventist eschatology which seemed to come so close to its long-predicted realization failed. And that is soteriology.

The 1880s are far better known among Adventists for soteriological rather than eschatological advances. And yet it is most remarkable that as the prophecies began to reach surprising fulfillment, a fresh look at the Gospel within Adventism was initiated. And it was the literal prophetic application of the current Sunday movement to the early Adventist eschatology, championed primarily by A. T. Jones along with the clarification

of the law and the gospel by E. J. Waggoner, that brought Ellen White to her feet and to their side, in spite of formidable opposition from within Adventism.

The denomination seemed on the brink of what could have been a truly realized eschatology. But the unprecedented opportunity to more fully proclaim the true Sabbath in the context of both eschatology and soteriology dissipated as the church balked at her own predictions and failed to grasp a more defined gospel. By 1895, political Sabbatarianism was rapidly declining and that relegated Adventism back into obscurity to wait for another rendezvous with her unique destiny.

We would do well to consider Ellen White's 1896 warning to those trying to find new insights into "those prophecies which He, by His Holy Spirit, moved upon His chosen servants to explain." ("The Third Angel and the Other Angel," 1886, *Selected Messages*, p. 112.)

After she depicted Satan as working to confuse Adventists on the point of eschatology, she declared that "if we search the Scriptures to confirm the truth God has given His servants for the world, we shall be found proclaiming the First, Second and Third Angel's messages." Although Ellen White was aware that there were future events "yet to be fulfilled," she wrote that "very erroneous work has been done again and again and will continue to be done by those who seek to find new light in the prophecies, and who begin by turning away from the light God has already given." Ellen White was forever convinced that "the messages of Revelation 14 are those by which the world is to be tested." (*Selected Messages*, p. 112.)

Therefore, the reevaluation of Adventist eschatology must lie not in the allegorization of the Third Angel's message or in the disregard for the past prophetic expositions. It must rather be in the reassessment of the historical progress towards prophetic fulfillment that substantiates the validity of Adventist eschatology. It could be that the past, specifically the period of the 1880s, when correctly understood, holds the explanation for the present and the future.

Thomas A. Norris

To the Editors: In his essay, "The World of E. G. White and the End of the World" (Vol. 10, No. 2), Jonathan Butler concludes that we should provide, as twentieth century Adventists, an updated eschatological perspective to White's writings. His purpose is noble: retain the true meaning of her writings by treating them in the same way we have the writings of the biblical prophets. I have, however, a problem with his methodology.

My questions do not center around the careful comparisons he has made between the nineteenth century and the present, but rather in the use he makes of his data. I agree that it is important for us to make pertinent applications to the messages of the prophets, but Butler has made applications that are in my judgment insupportable, and if extended in the same way to the Scriptures, as he believes we have already done, would lead to a typically liberal Protestant position of interpretation.

The key argument for Butler is that there is no longer a nineteenth century Protestant America; therefore, E. G. White's eschatological views, based as they were in the setting of her own time, cannot have meaning for today except in one critical sense: that of immediacy. (It is interesting, incidentally, that many of the points that Butler makes to support the differences between our world and hers are situations that she herself said would exist!)

Butler writes this profound and accurate statement: "If a message meant to inspire urgency now actually encourages lethargy, the essential ingredient of apocalypticism has been lost." But if we are to move from E. G. White's world as *radically* as Butler suggests, retaining the "essence," which he states is urgency, then methodologically we cannot stop there. Why speak of prophetic disconfirmation vis-à-vis White by making such a careful comparison of her time to ours, and then not make precisely the same prophetic disconfirmation with the biblical prophets? It is incongruous to speak of retaining the element of urgency found in White's writings on the basis of the ingredient of apocalypticism—a phenomenon of the first century and earlier, and surely a strange crea-

ture to the twentieth century. (The element of urgency is found also in nonapocalyptic literature.)

What I am saying is that Butler himself has not made the *same* application to the Scriptures as he has to Ellen White, for apocalypticism, which is very important to him, and rightly so, is not a twentieth-century world vehicle of truth, and came into existence in a world far removed from ours. The frustrations and issues that led Jewish religionists and later Jewish Christians to speak of God's

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cataclysmic inbreaking into history to end the domination of evil world powers (apocalyptic literature) are also long gone.

Following Butler, all we could really say about those early Christian views is that the ingredient to be retained is urgency—but urgency for what? The second coming? In the clouds of heaven? Gone are the ancient world-views of *how* it was going to happen; we do not live in a three-tiered universe in the twentieth century where God comes from up to us who are down.

Butler uses the Sabbath as one of his major examples. He argues that it is outdated for us in 1979 to speak of the Sabbath as a central issue in the great controversy, especially in connection with persecution. Since the nineteenth century Sabbath issue is gone, we must see in the Sabbath its true meaning: a symbol of human freedom and dignity. But has he overlooked the fact that the Sabbath has throughout biblical history been more than a symbol of man's value? It is true that Jesus' emphasis was on this aspect of the Sabbath, but that was because it was the aspect of the Sabbath that had been so grossly abused. The Sabbath has always been an “issue” of loyalty to God as Creator and Redeemer, and in many instances, in the time of crisis, accompanied with persecution.

If the Sabbath is to be removed from the position given to it by Ellen White in her eschatology, then why not argue that the one difference she did have with her contemporaries (which day is the Sabbath) is also no longer a critical point? Why hold onto a day that was supported in a context that no longer exists for either (1) Ellen White, or (2) a Jewish world that passed from the scene 2,000 years ago. Why not represent man's human dignity by keeping the day others are keeping in the twentieth century? Our message to the non-Adventist world would be the value of keeping Sunday in a way that teaches the value of mankind.

This line of argument is, of course, totally unacceptable to Adventists, and I'm sure is unacceptable also to Butler. I would say in conclusion that while I share the author's concern for making meaningful use of Ellen G. White's writings, I would strongly urge that this process be done with considerably more attention to the implications to any twentieth century application.

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Butler Replies

Both oral and written reactions to my article have generally conceded the historical point that Ellen White's description of last-day events was conditioned by nineteenth-century American culture; consequently, aspects of her eschatology now appear, in certain ways, anachronistic. What has caused continuing debate are differences concerning the nature of prophecy.

One perspective critical of my essay seems to understand prophecy as *gnosis* (or “secret knowledge”). Thomas Norris, for example, argues that Adventist exegesis on Revelation 13 emerged in the 1850s “in the face of all contrary evidence” and was not simply a reaction to the social and cultural setting of the 1880s. Here Norris suggests that Adventist prophetic exposition involved special knowledge well in advance of its times rather than contemporary comment accessible to a general public. While it is a crude misreading of my argument to say that I found Mrs.

White “simply reacting” to her times, Norris’ notion of prophecy as prediction, in this case, shipwrecks on the historical evidence. Antebellum American Protestants had long agitated for state and national Sunday legislation, particularly in an effort to end postal service on Sundays but also to close bakeries, stores, taverns, theaters and offices. In the 1850s, following recent Irish-Catholic immigration, the religious press continued to harangue state and federal legislators on behalf of blue laws, rendering Adventist exegesis not at all implausible in that social

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and cultural milieu. To be sure, antislavery activism superseded Sunday reform as a concern of evangelicals in this period, but Adventists reflected this emphasis as well. In her 1858 version of *The Great Controversy*, Mrs. White focused on the plight of a slave minority rather than an Adventist minority in prophesying a soon end to the American Republic. (*Early Writings*, Review and Herald, 1882, pp. 275-76.)

Contrary to the perspective of prophecy as *gnosis*, I find Ellen White’s *The Great Controversy* written for a wide audience of her contemporaries. In this book, prophecy was not, for the most part, the esoteric knowledge of a small cult but the common property of evangelicals in general, and the prophetess not an obscure cultic figure but a messenger to the Christian world. Like *Patriarchs and Prophets* or *The Desire of Ages*, *The Great Controversy* spoke authoritatively to people precisely because so much of it was the evangelical common sense of the times. With the passage of time, however, basis for belief in the book has undergone a change. In new and different circumstances, what once was more common knowledge now appears as esoteric mystery, and acceptance of Mrs. White requires an initiation process — more cultic

than Christian — that was unnecessary and untrue of Adventism a century ago. Thus, when the historian points out the literary dependence, lack of originality or common sense of the prophetess, he threatens the prophetess as gnostic, but not the prophetess herself.

The concept of prophecy as simply prediction, underlying some comments on my essay, overlooks the facts. In the 1880s, Ellen White predicted that “the National Reform movement, exercising the power of religious legislation, will, when fully developed, manifest the same intolerance and oppression that have prevailed in past ages.” (*Testimonies*, Pacific Press, 1948, vol. 5, p. 712.) This prophecy on the National Reform movement turned out to be false, but at least partially because the prophetess inspired an Adventist lobby against both the Blair and Breckenridge bills. That is, Mrs. White’s prophetic impact on her community led to the failed prediction of an imminent national Sunday law, just as Jonah’s prophetic message succeeded so well that his specific “prophecy” failed. Such a turn of events need not undermine our belief in Mrs. White’s prophetic authority. But it does shift our emphasis on the prophet’s function away from that of predicting future events to that of shaping a people, which seems closer to the biblical profile of the prophet, anyway.

A familiar response to my argument has been a recitation of contemporary events like the resurgence of evangelicalism in the 1970s, a right-wing evangelical lobby in Washington politics, the election of a Southern Baptist as president, energy shortages, or the Pope’s visit to America as events coinciding with Mrs. White’s predictions. I, too, am disturbed by an evangelical movement in which the nineteenth-century vision to “Christianize America” has been reborn. However, these contemporary evangelicals must confront a more fundamentally pluralistic and secular culture than their kindred spirits faced a century ago. The rallying points for evangelicals have been conservative political positions on homosexuality, E.R.A., gun control and prayer in schools, rather than the Sunday issue which occupied evangelicals in the 1880s.

Alternatively, it has been suggested that a secular, economic problem like an oil crisis and a shutdown at the gas pumps could fulfill Mrs. White's prophecies. But how could such a crisis lead to the persecution — to the point of death penalties, no less — of a *religious* minority? The popular Pope John Paul II is also cited as conforming to Mrs. White's prophecies. It is true that he increasingly appears to be a dinosaur theologically, but he represents quite a different Catholicism and lives in a completely different era than that of Leo XIII, whose life and times we find characterized in *The Great Controversy*.

In these remarks, I am arguing that Adventists may acquire from Ellen White a basic apocalyptic perspective on their times but not gnostic information on just what in particular is happening or will happen. Indeed, a nineteenth-century *gnosis* may offer misinformation on the twentieth century and lead Adventists to lose the full meaning of apocalypticism in their new situation.

Both Norris and Harold Fagal seek a resolution to the problem of failed predictions and a delayed Advent in terms of “conditional prophecy.” Though I only allude to conditional prophecy briefly in the study, I am entirely sympathetic with it and appreciated Fagal's careful discussion of the concept within recent Adventism. The biblical example of Isaiah should inform any understanding of conditional prophecy. The New Testament spiritualized the millennial hopes for historic Judaism in applying Isaiah's prophecies to the Christian community. Fundamentalists, on the other hand, continue to apply these prophecies to the historic Israel, positing a long hiatus without specific historical application. My argument would suggest reinterpreting Ellen White's prophecies more like the New Testament has done with Isaiah's, while many Adventists have adopted toward Mrs. White a kind of fundamentalist dispensationalism, placing us for now in a hiatus in which her prophecies do not have the specific historical application they once had or will have.

On the matter of terminology, if the more clinically neutral term “prophetic disconfir-

mation” allows the onus of failed prediction to fall at times on the prophet, the more theologically interpretive “conditional prophecy” casts the blame elsewhere — usually on the prophetic community. Instead of the prophet's being wrong, the people have fallen short and caused the delay. Though in certain circumstances it may be healthiest and nearest the truth to accept that prophets make mistakes, Fagal's discussion does highlight once again, in quite a biblical way, that prophets relate primarily to a contemporary people and not to future events.

Larry Richards implies that pointing out instances of prophetic disconfirmation and cultural conditioning undermines the prophetic enterprise and that rewriting any of the apocalyptic scenario denies the notion of an apocalyptic drama itself. In relation to both the Scriptures and Ellen White's writings, I reject that this sort of reductionism is an inevitable result of the theological task. Richards' methodological criticism makes about as much sense to me as saying that because the author in Exodus 20 found in Sabbath observance a symbol of Israelite redemption from Egypt while in Deuteronomy 5 the Sabbath was seen as a symbol of God's creation, Sabbath theology has been so “radically” restated as to empty sabbatarianism of any significance. I suspect that quite the contrary actually results from such theological restatements.

Though I admit that biblical apocalypticism was a child of its times, each generation of Christians has faced similar enough circumstances as to find the apocalyptic message compellingly immediate and relevant. In each generation, it has made sense to speak of a soon end to the world, to confront the struggle between good and evil, not only on an individual level but also in the institutional sphere of “principalities and powers,” and to encourage a people of God in the face of terror and oppression with the promise of God's triumph.

This table of contents in the apocalyptic story remains the same, though the chapters need rewriting for each new time and place — as Joachim or Müntzer or Ellen White understood and as we must understand in order to continue in their apocalyptic tradi-

tion. Though apocalyptists have miscalculated prophetic timetables, the apocalyptic perspective on human nature, social, political and ecclesiastical institutions, evil, goodness, history and the place of Christ in history has proved powerfully accurate. Richards could not be more wrong when he suggests that apocalypticism “is not a twentieth-century world vehicle of truth.”

Marxism, the illegitimate child of the Judeo-Christian tradition, illustrates the vitality of a fundamentally apocalyptic ideology throughout most of the globe. Within Christianity itself — including Seventh-day Adventist Christianity — the only growing edge has been among Third World apocalyptists. Even in North America, best-selling paperbacks from 1984 to *The Late Great*

Planet Earth reflect the appeal of an apocalyptic worldview.

Actually, I think it is not the historical argument on nineteenth-century American Adventism or the call for a renewal of the apocalyptic spirit in twentieth-century Adventism that has drawn criticism of the article. It is the question of what this does to our understanding of Ellen White as a prophet that provokes concern. It is perhaps all too revealing of a major shift in Seventh-day Adventism from the nineteenth to the twentieth century that Adventists would rather give up a sense of apocalyptic urgency — by hanging on literalistically to the signs of earlier times — in order to preserve a particular understanding of Ellen White’s authority.

Jonathan Butler

Scrivens on Music

To the Editors: The recent article, “Another Look at Ellen White on Music” (Vol. 10, No. 2) proves again that Mrs. White can be made to support almost anything. After reading and rereading all that I can find on what she has to say on music, I have to conclude that her writings do not support the overall conclusions of the unnamed historian.

I would like to address myself briefly to just two of the problems I feel exist in the article. I believe the most basic problem is that the author draws conclusions based on silence. Because Ellen White never applauds the music of Franck, *et al.*, she is made to condemn them. Would we want to follow this principle elsewhere? How much of Ellen White’s counsel on sexual relations in marriage are strongly positive? Can we imagine a letter like this: “Dear Brother and Sister A., The Lord has shown me that you have a marvelous sex life. My counsel is to keep it up and enjoy yourselves.” We rightly say that the negative tone of her counsels on sex—she uses words like “baser passions,” “shameful animalism,” “debasing lust”—come through because she was writing to

people who had problems. Her near silence on the positive, therefore, should not be construed to condemn the proper enjoyment of a God-given gift. Couldn’t the same be true of music? Surely, if the music of Franck is to be condemned, it needs to be on better grounds than the silence of Ellen White.

A second problem I find stems from the fact that the author seems to forget that all inspired counsel needs to be viewed in its cultural context. We’ve managed pretty well concerning the bicycle issue, but we very well may miss concerning music (as I feel this article does). When Paul and Silas sang in jail, it resulted in an earthquake and several conversions. Does this mean that we should consider first-century Jewish music the proper music for our needs? Or would it be better if we used the hymns the angels sang to some South Sea Islanders a few years ago? Surely the angels wouldn’t sing anything but the best. Those hymns were, of course, simply what the people had been taught by the missionaries, and so the angels used the music of the newly Christian culture of the islands. The music of Franck would have been meaningless to Paul and Silas as well as to the