
Graybill's Exit: Turning Point At The White Estate?

by Bonnie L. Casey

After 13 years of service as a church historian at the Ellen G. White Estate, Ron Graybill, under pressure from the Estate board, agreed to request reassignment. Following a controversy over his doctoral dissertation, Graybill has been reassigned from his position as associate secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate to one of course author and subject specialist at Home Study International. He will also be available to the General Conference officers for special projects. His assignment at Home Study, which involves preparing a course on denominational history, will run to the end of 1984, when his position will be reassessed. As with other controversies in the recent past, the one over Graybill and his dissertation raised questions about church discipline, the role and leadership of Ellen White, and the policies of the White Estate.

In April 1983, Graybill successfully defended his doctoral dissertation, earning a doctorate in American religious history from the Johns Hopkins University. While it compares the lives and leadership of several women religious leaders of the 19th century, (Mary Baker Eddy, founder of the Church

of Christ, Scientist; Catherine Booth, co-founder with her husband of the Salvation Army; and Alma White, founder of the Pillar of Fire Church), the dissertation focuses mainly on Ellen White—how her role as a church leader was legitimated and exercised, and how that role affected her roles as woman, wife, and mother. Graybill argues that because she was a “charismatic” leader—one without official constitutional authority—her authority was exercised through influence. Because of this, her influence had to be jealously guarded against “negative associations.” “I happen to think,” says Graybill, “that her leadership was for good and not selfish ends. My dissertation deviates from some accepted understandings of Ellen White and how she did her work, but it is not negative or defamatory.”

Those in the White Estate whose major criticisms centered on the dissertation itself saw some general themes emerging from the work which, for them, provided a key to Graybill's beliefs and assumptions. According to these critics, two major themes were 1) skepticism about Ellen White's prophetic gifts, and 2) doubts about her character and integrity. They believe Graybill's dissertation leaves the impression that Ellen White's visions were not unique, but arose out of a

general context of ecstatic religious experiences common in 19th century America; that her ministry was, therefore, not essentially different from that of the other women religious founders discussed in the dissertation.

These critics also charge Graybill with suggesting that Ellen White produced visions as they were needed to assert her authority or manipulate church leaders, and they were particularly disturbed by Graybill's account of the Whites' home life. They believe Graybill slanted the evidence to portray James and Ellen as locked in a personal power struggle for much of their married life, and to show them as poor parents who favored one of their sons over the other.

Of this last criticism, Graybill says, "To really judge the dissertation fairly, you need to read all of James White's letters and all of Ellen's letters to James or that mention James. After doing this, I believe you would see that I tried to present a balanced, fair view of their married life—a subject crucial to my main effort to understand how Ellen's leadership was supported and/or threatened."

As to the charge that he is skeptical of the supernatural origin of Ellen White's prophetic gifts, Graybill explains that he was faced with two basic challenges in writing the dissertation. "I was writing about four women founders or prophets, all of whom claimed divine endorsement and guidance. Because of this, I chose merely to look at the mundane historical factors which bore upon their leadership. My own theological presuppositions lead me to accept Ellen White's claims to prophetic guidance and reject the others. But the dissertation is a work of history, not theology."

Graybill further explains that it is his belief in God, which cannot be documented in a strictly historical work, which leads him to the conclusion that Ellen White's visions were genuine and unique. But so far as

history is concerned, he says, "there are many common factors in the ministry of Ellen White and other religious founders. It does not detract from the importance of her ministry to discover she was not unique in every aspect of her career."

Overall, Graybill does not accept his critics' characterization of his dissertation. He says he is sorry that some have gotten a negative impression from the work, but that there are many responsible people who feel it is much more favorable than unfavorable to Ellen White. "Perhaps," he says, "the dissertation is like a Rorschach test—what we see in it depends to a great extent on what we bring to it."

Graybill's problems with the White Estate arose as much from how he went about researching and writing the dissertation as from the actual conclusions he drew, which he maintains are fully supported by evidence from documents in the White Estate vault. In the first place, Graybill did not seek the advice and counsel of the White Estate staff before submitting his dissertation to his graduate committee. Instead, he relied on the advice of an informal reading committee—five lay members who offered historical criticism and editorial suggestions.

Furthermore, at least half of the quoted material in Graybill's dissertation is from documents the White Estate has not released for publication. He admits that using these documents without asking for their release was "bending the rules," but cites the pressures of time and potential conflicts as his reason for doing so. "I felt the evidence indicated clearly that I had to take some positions that would be objected to very strenuously by some members of the White Estate. It was already late spring, and I knew that if I tried to get release of these documents I could be delayed by as much as a year."

Graybill went ahead and used the unreleased material, then requested that University Microfilms, where doctoral dissertations are automatically filed, place

his dissertation on a five-year restriction. By the terms of this agreement, Graybill understood that his dissertation was still legally unpublished and would be inaccessible to the public or for copying for five years.

The situation changed dramatically, though, when Douglas Hackleman, a writer and editor in Loma Linda, Calif., obtained two copies of Graybill's dissertation through

a series of misunderstandings, and published a review of Graybill's work in the October 1983 issue of his magazine, *Adventist Currents*.

At first, Hackleman wanted only to report briefly in *Adventist Currents* that Graybill had finished his dissertation and received his doctorate. On Aug. 19 he called Graybill to ask for the title and a brief description of his dissertation. Graybill told Hackleman he did not wish to be mentioned in *Adventist Currents* and would give him no information about his

Responses to Graybill's Departure

Even before Graybill's *E. G. White and Race Relations* came out in 1970, I had learned to appreciate Ron's special skills in helping us better understand the true import of God's special messenger to the Seventh-day Adventists. Ron constantly reminded us that the messenger and the message could not be separated from her time and circumstances and still be correctly understood. His careful research into the "life and times" of a particular statement brought confidence to the Adventist historical fraternity and to scores of thoughtful laypeople. The E. G. White trustees would be well-advised to fill the gap his leaving creates with someone equally well-trained and trusted.

—Richard Schwarz, vice president for academic affairs of Andrews University and author of *Light Bearers to the Remnant*

Ron Graybill gave the Ellen G. White Estate a credibility that it never had before because he was able to approach her writings in a very open way. He made it possible for us to gain a greater appreciation of Ellen White as a person, a mother, a writer, as well as a messenger. With Ron Graybill gone, the White Estate has lost most of its credibility. Another thing that Ron did for us, because of his training, his expertise, and his growing academic contacts is give credibility to Ellen White in non-Adventist academic circles and American Christianity generally.

What has happened to Ron Graybill is going to dampen the interest of serious students in Ellen

White studies because they will think that they will not get the materials they need and they will be fearful that they will be hurt by the church. Some of us feel strongly about the inequity of the discipline meted out to Ron by printing the questions against him in the *Adventist Review* as compared to what was done with administrators involved in conflict-of-interest in the Davenport affair. There is a double standard—one for an elite corps of administrators and another for scholars in the church. Evidently it is easier to discipline those with novel ideas than those with poor ethics in administration. I find this inequity, coming on the heels of the Davenport affair, pretty sordid.

Silencing Ron will not silence the research he carried on. Ron's work will have a beneficial effect in the long run by helping the church achieve a better understanding of Ellen White.

—Paul Landa, Chairman of the department of church history, division of religion, Loma Linda University and editor of *Adventist Heritage*.

I am very sorry to see Ron Graybill go. He has been consistently trusted by the academic community to give the straight story. We are in an era of openness and the church needs competent scholars in E. G. White studies who have a positive attitude toward Ellen White and the church. Ron has been appreciated for faithfully attempting to serve the church in that way.

The White Estate will have enormous difficulty overcoming the stigma of Graybill's

thesis, but referred him to the graduate records office at Johns Hopkins University. On Aug. 25, Hackleman called Johns Hopkins and was given not only the title of the dissertation but also the order number at University Microfilms. Hackleman then called University Microfilms in Michigan, and because he had the order number, the person there did not realize that the dissertation was restricted. Over the phone he was able to order two copies of the

dissertation, which arrived at his home on Sept. 7. (University Microfilms has since apologized for its mistake.)

On Sept. 10, Hackleman spoke to the San Diego Chapter of the Association of Adventist Forums and presented a synopsis of Graybill's dissertation. He also gave the audience the order number of the dissertation and the telephone number of University Microfilms. Within a few days he learned from people who had tried to order the

from the White Estate

departure. While I believe the White Estate has been making progress in providing more access to documents it could provide greater access.

—Alden Thompson, Professor of Theology, School of Theology, Walla Walla College and author of "From Sinai to Golgotha" *Adventist Review*, (December 3, 10, 17, 24, 31, 1981)

Pastors are asked many questions by members who have some evidence about Ellen White writings and have heard many rumors. Ron Graybill was one person we could turn to who was faithful to the evidence and at the same time redemptive. At workers' meetings in my conference, he was candid, non-defensive, open with the facts, and at the same time enhanced Ellen White's role. As a pastor I feel Ron's departure as a personal loss.

What has happened has implications far beyond Ron Graybill. Thinking laypeople and pastors are going to wonder if the questions they have been hearing about Ellen White really can be answered and if anyone who tries to be candid and open with the evidence will get into trouble. The Adventist pastor's role is now going to be more difficult than it was before.

—Rudy Torres, senior pastor
Glendale City Church

This most recent development in the saga of Ellen White and 20th century Adventism comes as a great surprise and disappointment to

me. I have read Ron Graybill's dissertation, but have not been a party to the White Estate discussions regarding it. What I can speak to, however, is the quality of his scholarship, the careful and studied balance in his public presentations between the demands of scholarship and the requirements of pastoral concern, and his personal commitment both to truth and to the traditional faith of Adventists in the prophetic ministry of Ellen G. White.

In my conversations over the last three years with pastors, teachers, and church members at large, Ron Graybill's name has often surfaced as one of the most credible spokespersons on the Ellen G. White study circuit. He is both trusted and appreciated. I have not found one individual acquainted with both Graybill and the issues who has the slightest doubt as to his integrity, his commitment to the best interest of the Adventist church, and his personal faith in the special ministry of Ellen G. White.

His loss to the White Estate at this time of great concern over the legitimate role of the writings of Ellen G. White will, in my judgment, be quite serious but recoverable in time, if the White Estate appoints a replacement who knows the difference between apologetics and research. What is lost forever to Ellen G. White research is the momentum of creative effort Ron Graybill personally exemplified as well as inspired in others.

—Fred Veltman, professor of theology, Pacific Union College, director of the General Conference "Ellen G. White Life of Christ Research Project"

dissertation that they had been turned down because it was restricted. He says this is the first he knew of any restriction on the dissertation.

Hackleman claims he has not copied or distributed the dissertation and is not responsible for its wide circulation. He says only that he lent one copy of the dissertation to some friends, which they returned after a few days. When Graybill learned that Hackleman had obtained copies of his thesis and was planning to review it in his journal, he called Hackleman and asked him to delay publishing a review of it until he had time to "process" it through the White Estate. But Hackleman decided to go ahead with the review since many copies of the dissertation were already circulating and requests for more copies were coming to him from as far away as Australia.

Hackleman says he feels "bad but not responsible" for Graybill's situation. "I am sorry I was a cog in the wheel of his fate," he says. He also claims that had he known from the beginning that the thesis was restricted, he would not have pursued the matter. "Had Ron been more open and forthright with me," he says, "I believe he would still have his job."

When Graybill first learned that the dissertation was being distributed, he told Robert W. Olson, secretary of the White Estate, about it and, before giving him a copy of the dissertation to read, immediately began to "edit" it by expanding the text and deleting certain things from the preface. Graybill says that by expanding the text, he was "trying to show that with a few explanatory sentences, the dissertation would be more palatable to Seventh-day Adventists who are not familiar with scholarly discourse." He adds, "I felt all along that the dissertation was not a complete statement of my beliefs, because I had to leave out any supernatural perspective and anything that might sound like I was favoring Ellen White." Olson remembers that "Ron said he had made some changes in the dissertation he gave me and other

members of the board, but didn't say what kinds of changes."

In the end, deletions from the preface caused even more controversy than expansions in the text. Graybill first of all deleted a reference to himself as "the first doctoral student to have immediate and unlimited access" to the material in the vault. "It is a true statement," he explains, "but somewhat awkward in light of my not asking for release of those documents." The other, and more troublesome, deletion was the removal of two names from the list of people who had read the dissertation before its submission to Johns Hopkins. Graybill says his motive was to forestall any criticism that he had been unduly influenced by these members of the reading committee. Nevertheless, according to both Graybill and Olson, some members of the board saw this as an effort to deceive them, and the deletions became a significant issue with the board and staff of the White Estate.

On Nov. 3, the board of trustees voted to place Graybill on administrative leave because of questions regarding his ability to serve as a spokesperson for the White Estate. During the month of November there were numerous informal meetings and conversations among the staff about Graybill and his future with the White Estate. Graybill talked to several members of the board, trying to determine what might be done in the way of discipline that would be considered sufficient, yet redemptive. Graybill's understanding was that his colleagues were looking for ways not to have to fire him. "Most of the conversation was in terms of my doing something else for a period of time—six months or a year—after which I would come back to the Estate." But toward late November, Graybill perceived "a continual hardening" of the positions of some members of the board.

Meanwhile, mail and telephone calls were coming in from all parts of the country, and, according to Olson, they were

five-to-one in Graybill's favor. (Since the December board meeting, Olson reports, communications to his office are no longer in Graybill's favor.)

The board of trustees met on Dec. 5. Graybill met with them from 2:30 to 5:30 p.m., during which time he apologized for his procedural violations and for his insensitivity to the staff in his dealings with them. He then read a statement entitled, "What Ellen White Means to Me in the Light of My Doctoral Dissertation," and submitted to questioning.

Neal Wilson, president of the General Conference, led the discussion and asked most of the questions, which focused more on Graybill's personal beliefs and attitudes regarding the church and the Spirit of Prophecy than on the specifics of the dissertation. As Graybill reported later, "The bulk of the discussion at the board meeting was clearly about me, not about my dissertation." There was also some discussion of his attitude toward Arthur White's biography of Ellen White. Some members expressed concern that Graybill, personally

and now by his dissertation, had not been sufficiently supportive of it.

Graybill left the meeting feeling "pretty good. There had been some emotional moments, but I felt the vote might indeed go in favor of my continuing at the White Estate after a certain period of discipline." After Graybill left, the board took a short break, then came back and deliberated until 8:25 p.m. At 8:30 p.m. Olson called Graybill at home and told him that in a straw vote, the board had voted 7-4 that he should "seek rehabilitation outside the White Estate." Graybill was told that he could meet the following morning at 8 a.m. with Neal Wilson and Charles Bradford, General Conference vice president for North America, to request reassignment to an unspecified position within the church, or be fired.

Graybill told Olson that he did not have enough time or information to make such an important decision. Olson replied that Graybill should trust the brethren and put himself in their hands. Graybill refused to accept the limited, and unknown, options being offered him on such short notice. So

Board Members of The White Estate

Ultimate authority for the affairs of the Ellen G. White Estate lies with its self-perpetuating

board of trustees. The board selects life-time members (comprising half of the board), five-year members, and the chairman.

Life Members:

- W. Paul Bradley, retired chairman of E. G. White Estate Board
- D. Arthur Delafield, retired associate secretary of E. G. White Estate Board
- W. Duncan Eva, retired vice president of the General Conference
- Robert W. Olson (Secretary), secretary of E. G. White Estate
- Arthur L. White, retired secretary of E. G. White Estate
- Neal C. Wilson, president of the General Conference
- Kenneth H. Wood (Chairman), retired editor of the *Adventist Review*

Five-year Members:

- Charles E. Bradford, vice president of the General Conference, for North America
- William G. Johnsson, editor of the *Adventist Review*
- Louis A. Ramirez, director of the publishing department of the General Conference
- J. Robert Spangler, director of the Ministerial & Stewardship Association
- Francis W. Wernick, vice president of the General Conference
- Jean Zurcher, secretary of the Euro-African Division
- Alternate: Paul A. Gordon, under secretary of E. G. White Estate

the meeting with Wilson and Bradford was canceled, and the board meeting scheduled for the next morning—ostensibly to vote on Graybill's reassignment or to fire him—was canceled as well.

Later in December, after consulting with several members of the board, Graybill wrote a letter to Kenneth H. Wood, chairperson of the board of trustees, in which he "reluctantly agreed" to accept reassignment. He was told that this letter was unacceptable. Following another board meeting on Jan. 5, during which Graybill's case was discussed at length, Graybill, after further conversations with the chairperson and secretary of the White Estate Board, submitted another letter to Wood actually requesting reassignment outside the White Estate. On Jan. 9 the board voted to accept this formal request.

There are many complex reasons for Graybill's troubles with the White Estate. The easiest to explain are the procedural and tactical errors involved in the writing and presentation of his dissertation. But other factors have to do with the White Estate itself, specifically their policy concerning the release of unpublished documents, and their tendency to distrust those who they feel do not share their views on the mission of the White Estate.

On this issue, Olson maintains that the present release policy is "very generous," and necessary to guard Ellen White's right to privacy, but that the board would not have let Graybill go simply for using unreleased material without permission. "The primary issue," according to Olson, "is that Ron could write a dissertation in which he raises doubts and questions about Ellen White's inspiration. Ron argues that he has been misunderstood, but I don't think he has. In his dissertation he clearly gives the impression that Ellen White had visions when it was convenient for her to do so. He

almost describes her as power-hungry, and implies that there was a naturalistic explanation for her visions and dreams. If this is what he believes, then he can no longer be a spokesman for the White Estate. By his own actions, you could say that Ron had taken himself out of the White Estate."

Of what he estimates to be 40,000 double-spaced, typewritten pages still unreleased, Graybill "would favor release of all but a few very sensitive documents, but only in critical, annotated editions." On the matter of why he had to leave the White Estate, Graybill says: "On a most fundamental level, I lost my job because those who felt most deeply that I should be removed from the White Estate don't trust me as one of them, as one who shares their theological views. They don't accept me as one who supports or opposes the same things they do. There are things in the dissertation that they could never say and that they don't believe anyone who believes in the church and Ellen White could ever say."

Graybill says he is not bitter about his experience. He believes the church is in a transition period. "We have so many large groups of people now with very different styles of religious experience and religious backgrounds, that there are bound to be growing pains and dislocations." Referring to the church as the body of Christ, he points out that the joints, where muscle and bone come together, are critical points where stress manifests itself. "People like me, who try to interact between different groups in the church, are like the joints of the body and are very vulnerable to injury and stress. If the stresses get too great between two groups, then persons in those in-between roles sometimes get crushed or strained. That's what is happening to me."

In spite of this, Graybill says he has not lost hope in the church and its future. "We still have the church," he says, "and we still have me, and we still have Ellen White. And who knows, we may eventually get those 40,000 unreleased pages in the White Estate."