

The Scope of Ellen White's Authority

by Donald R. McAdams

The Adventist dilemma in 1985 over the authority of Ellen White is not new. It also confronted those in her day who accepted her spiritual gift. The 1919 Bible Conference transcripts make that clear. The college Bible teachers, editors and General Conference administrators present at the 1919 meetings had personal knowledge of Ellen White's unique spiritual gift. They also knew that Ellen White copied from other sources and made statements that were not correct—in short, that her works were not entirely original and that they were not infallible. An inspired, yet fallible, prophet was—and still is—the dilemma for Adventists.¹

But the debate about Ellen White's authority in the 1980s is not a private discussion confined to church leaders; it is open to the entire church. The publicity given to the allegations of Walter Rea, the basic nondenial of his charges by the church's official publications and spokesmen,² and the publication of his book, *The White Lie*, in April 1982 have created an awareness and an interest among church members regarding Ellen White's use of sources. The research about Ellen White circulating among Adventist intellectuals for a decade³ is now being dis-

cussed widely among educated Adventists throughout the North American Division.

As in 1919, the central question today for Adventists who believe Ellen White was inspired is this: If we accept that she took much material from others and often made mistakes, what authority should we grant to her words?

Note that it is Ellen White's authority, not her inspiration, that is being questioned. Most of the researchers of the 1970s were thoroughly committed Adventists who showed that using the words of others did not detract from Ellen White's claim to inspiration. Like the men of 1919, most informed Adventists today see no need to debate whether or not she was inspired. Her inspiration cannot be proved or disproved. The decision to believe is one of faith, informed by facts.

But for many who accept the inspiration of Ellen White, there is still a question about her authority. The discussion about Ellen White's authority is widespread in the church. It is not being carried on in the pages of the *Adventist Review*; it is going on in private conversations among friends, within families and in the hearts of thousands of Adventists. Knowing that at least some, and perhaps much, of what Ellen White wrote was not seen in vision but came from the writings of others, Adventists are, for the first time in the history of the church, making the fine distinction between inspiration and authority.

While acknowledging the inspiration of

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their prophet, they are asking themselves whether everything Ellen White said is necessarily true, accurate and therefore authoritative. If church leaders are willing to acknowledge that Ellen White paraphrased and selectively abridged much material from others and that her historical statements are not always accurate, is it not possible that some of her other statements—important statements about science, prophecy, theology and behavior, statements upon which Adventists have built their lives and for which they have sacrificed much—are not accurate? And if Ellen White is not totally original and not always accurate, then in what way is she an authority for individual Adventists and for the church?

The dictionary defines authority as “legal or rightful power,” as in parental or governmental authority; “one that is claimed or appealed to in support of opinions, actions, measures, etc.,” and “power derived from opinion, respect or esteem.” Note that none of these definitions of authority requires or even suggests inerrancy or infallibility. Let me give an example. I am an authority in my home. I expect my children to accept my authority and obey me. And yet I recognize that I am not always right. We sometimes refer to eminent scholars as authorities in their field, but this does not mean we accept everything they say as true. Yet this is the way Adventists have traditionally defined the authority of Ellen White. We have viewed her every statement as true, something that must be accepted, believed and acted upon.

The church certainly has the right to claim this authority for Ellen White, to assert that she does not make statements that are historically, scientifically or theologically inaccurate. But on what basis is this claim made? Is there any way to test this claim, or is it by its very nature untestable? That is, can we say because Ellen White is inspired by God, she is the final authority and cannot be evaluated by any facts or judgments

that are necessarily human?

Such a view of Ellen White’s authority, a common view among conservative Adventists, is not logical. If a prophet is not testable, then there is no way to determine who is and who is not a prophet. Anyone can claim divine authority for his “testimonies” or publications and say, “because my information comes directly from God, it cannot be wrong; I, the messenger of divinity, am the test of all other statements of truth; no human data, objective or subjective, can test divinity.” Faced with such a claim from two or more mutually incompatible “prophets,” a prospective believer would be unable to choose which one to believe.

Authority, by its very nature, is something that cannot just be claimed; it must be earned. It is only after scholars have thoroughly studied a subject and written with consistent accuracy that they are accepted as authorities. Only a prophet who speaks the truth and describes reality as it

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is can be accepted as an authority by a body of believers.

One must acknowledge that Ellen White’s statements are testable. She does not and cannot stand above empirical data or objective reality—that is, what sane, reasonable and honest people can establish as fact by the use of their senses and reason. Fallible and subjective though our senses and reason be, they are all that we have with which to

perceive reality and to receive the communication of God—whether directly to the mind, by way of the Holy Spirit, or through the words of another, a prophet.

But how, one asks, can observation and reason test a prophet's statements on spiritual and theological matters? Perhaps a prophet can be tested against the facts of science or history, but how can his or her statements on the character of God or the events in heaven before the creation of the world be tested?

Before considering this question, we need to ask another, Does God impart to

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prophets information that is readily obtainable by observation and reason? Does it make sense to reveal to a prophet the population of New York City, the circumference of the earth or the length of the year? Would God need to show a prophet the content of Luther's 95 theses, the names of those who signed the Declaration of Independence, or the date for the fall of the Bastille?

There may be rare circumstances when God needs to reveal scientific or historical information to a prophet, but special revelation is required precisely because God needs to give us information we could not otherwise obtain. The questions at the very core of human experience, questions about origin, meaning, destiny, the nature and character of God and how he wishes to be worshiped, could not be answered without God's revelation through inspired messengers. Ellen White made a statement about

divine and human power that makes essentially the same point about divine and human knowledge: "What human power can do, divine power is not summoned to do."⁴

If we acknowledge that all prophets can and must be tested and accept the premise that God does not ordinarily reveal to a prophet scientific or historical information, we have in place the twin pillars on which we can construct a model or conception of inspiration and authority. This model of inspiration will enable us to be honest with the data on Ellen White, logical and systematic in our thinking, and committed to a belief that Ellen White was an inspired messenger of God who spoke with prophetic authority.

What authority, then, does Ellen White have? Let us for purposes of analysis divide Ellen White's writings into two parts. The first part gives information about spiritual matters. In this sphere Ellen White is tested by the Bible, that is, by the true prophets who have gone before her. She is true unless proved false, and she can be proved false only by a clear statement of Scripture that contradicts her own statement. Does this happen? Yes. But only on rare occasions and, in my opinion, with matters of small significance.

A word of explanation is needed on this point. While Ellen White does speak "according to the law and the testimony," she is not a biblical exegete and occasionally assigns a meaning to a text that the text does not have. Preachers sometimes do this when they use a text homiletically. Much of what Ellen White said was in the form of a sermon or originated in that form. We might say that much of what she wrote was an extended sermon to the Adventist people.

Before proceeding to the second part of Ellen White's writings, an additional question needs to be raised. If the part of Ellen White's writings that deals with spiritual matters is tested only by the Bible, how is

the spiritual message of the Bible tested? In short, why would one choose, in the first place, to accept the Bible as a spiritual authority? The answer is a subjective one.

Though there is much historical and scientific data that lends credence to the Bible, one must acknowledge that the Bible is accepted as inspired not because Bible writers claimed inspiration but because a community of people, the Old Testament Jews and the New Testament Christians, as a result of their own experience, came to believe that the various Bible writers were bringing them God's message.

As we study this collection of books we come to understand their experience and find that the messages that appealed to their minds and hearts appeal to ours also. The really important questions that we have about life and meaning we find answered in this book. And we discover by our own experience that when we commit ourselves to live by this book, our lives are enriched and we become filled with joy and the assurance that God is indeed speaking to us.

I find that Ellen White has the same impact upon me. I acknowledge that in spiritual matters I cannot prove her to be true or false, but I believe.

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The second part of Ellen White's writings gives information on history, science and other nonspiritual matters. It is not that she wrote specifically for the purpose of giving this information; she always wrote for a spiritual purpose. But to convey truth about spiritual matters, she often used facts and

explanations taken from the general knowledge of her age. As she put it when referring to her use of historians, she presents facts that are "universally acknowledged by the Protestant world." It is in this sphere that Ellen White can be tested by objective facts gathered by human observation and experiment; in short, by the historical and scientific method. In these areas she can and has been shown to be incorrect.

Two very important qualifications need to be made. Ellen White is not wrong when she describes historical events that defy our understanding of the laws of science—that is, miracles. Accounts of miracles are not scientific statements, they are historical statements. They do not give us facts about nature or describe the working of the laws of nature. They describe an event when the laws of nature did not work as they usually do. As such, they are historical statements subject to historical analysis. If reliable eyewitnesses refute a miracle story we can prove it false, but if a witness we accept as inspired describes a miraculous event, we should accept it.

In addition, Ellen White is not proven wrong by the theories of historians, scientists or scholars in any field. For example, she is not proven wrong on her view of the Protestant Reformation by pro-Catholic historians, nor on Creation by the theory of evolution. And she is not proven wrong by indirect evidence—that is, the inferences of scholars based on direct evidence.

One should note that many of the conclusions of scientists and scholars are based on indirect evidence. The religious practices or material level of living of early civilizations, for example, are inferred from human artifacts. The age of the earth is inferred by the direct evidence of the percentage of radioactive elements in a sample of rock. The size and age of the universe is inferred by the red shift in stars. Of course, scientific or historical conclusions based on indirect evidence are not accepted until the

chain of inference is tight, the logic cannot be refuted and there are converging lines of evidence. This is the arena where scientists and scholars disagree. The public sees only the conclusions and is not aware of the qualifications and uncertainties of the scholars doing the work.

Ellen White is not proven false by these conclusions based on indirect evidence, but on occasion, where the chain of evidence is very closely linked and tightly reasoned and where there are several converging lines of evidence, a believer in her inspiration and authority can choose to accept these conclusions even if they disagree with Ellen White's statements.

As believers in Ellen White's inspiration, we give her an authority granted only to Bible writers. All other writers, in everything they say, are considered false unless proven true. Though we do not often ask for proof, we all understand that any speaker or writer carries the burden of proof for all of his or her statements. If challenged, the speaker or writer must produce the evidence. We do not ask this of Ellen White. She is an authority. If we challenge her statements we accept the burden of proof. This is not an insignificant point. It is at the very essence of the meaning of the word *authority*.

Many will find this conclusion unaccep-

table. Those who will not or cannot acknowledge that Ellen White took much material from others and made mistakes will remain convinced that there is no question that needs to be answered. Ellen White is right because she is right. Everything she says is true because it was given to her by the Holy Spirit, even if she happened to see the same words, phrases or ideas in the writings of others. For these people, there is no question about her authority and no need for this discussion.

Others do not see any evidence that Ellen White was inspired. Her writings do not speak to their hearts, and they see no reason to grant her authority, no matter how one defines the word. If she can be shown to be false in areas where she can be tested, they say, then there is no reason to believe that in areas where she cannot be tested she is accurate.

But there are many in the church who, with me, acknowledge the recent evidence and yet believe in Ellen White's inspiration. They believe in a fallible and not totally original prophet. I hope that this paper will make a positive contribution to these believers by showing that one can believe in Ellen White's inspiration and accept her as an authority while acknowledging error in her writings.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The only statement by Ellen White that acknowledges her use of other writers in her own works appeared in the introduction to the 1888 *Great Controversy* and again in the introduction to the 1911 *Great Controversy* (pages xiii-xiv). The statement is ambiguous.

The great events which have marked the progress of reform in past ages are matters of history, well known and universally acknowledged by the Protestant world; they are facts which none can gainsay. This history I have presented briefly, in accordance with the scope observed, the facts having been condensed into as little space as seemed consistent with a proper understanding of their application. In some cases where a historian has so grouped together events as to afford, in brief, a comprehensive view of the subject, or has summarized details in a convenient manner, his words have been quoted; but in some instances no special credit has been given, since the quotations are not given for the purpose of citing that writer as authority, but because his statement affords a ready and forcible presen-

tation of the subject.

This statement was almost never referred to by the White Estate or church writers before 1974. In that year, in an unpublished study of Ellen White's use of Protestant historians, I pointed out that this statement allowed Adventists to openly acknowledge Ellen White's widespread, selective abridgement from Protestant historians. I can distinctly remember some of the brethren arguing that what Ellen White meant when she said, "in some instances no special credit has been given, since the quotations are not given for the purpose of citing that writer as authority, but because his statement affords a ready and forcible presentation of the subject," was that the historians were not the authority, the angel was. With that view of the statement, and with so many other statements in the introduction to *The Great Controversy* describing the visions, it is not surpris-

ing that the statement was so seldom cited. (In fact, I have not found one use of the statement before 1974 to show that Ellen White acknowledged her use of other writers.) Since 1974 the *Adventist Review* and other church publications have quoted the statement often to show that Ellen White acknowledged her use of other writers.

Not only did the Adventist people in general not know that Ellen White paraphrased from others, they believed that information contained in the passages quoted from Protestant historians first came to her in visions. White Estate spokesmen assured the church that the prophet did not depend upon human sources for information. She merely used the words of others to express in clear language that which had already been revealed to her by the Lord. This point was made by W.C. White, Francis Nichol and A.L. White:

The framework of the great temple of truth sustained by her writings was presented to her clearly in vision. In some features of prophetic chronology, as regards the ministration in the sanctuary and the changes that took place in 1844, the matter was presented to her many times and in detail many times, and this enabled her to speak very clearly and very positively regarding the foundation pillars of our faith.

In some of the historical matters such as are brought out in *Patriarchs and Prophets*, and in *Acts of the Apostles* and in *Great Controversy*, the main outlines were made very clear and plain to her, and when she came to write up these topics, she was left to study the Bible and history to get dates and geographical relations and to perfect her description of details.

W.C. White, in a letter to L.E. Froom, December 13, 1934 (unpublished), quoted by W.P. Bradley, "Ellen G. White and Her Writings," *Spectrum*, Vol. 3, No. 2, (Spring 1971), p. 58.

There is illumination by the Holy Spirit. Scenes are presented. Spiritual thoughts and ideas are brought to the mind. Then the prophet takes up his pen and proceeds to present, in the language of men, what has been seen and heard and impressed on his mind in vision. And it is in this context that Mrs. White frankly states that she has drawn, at times, on the language of men as found in histories and other sources.

Francis D. Nichol, in *Ellen G. White and Her Critics*, (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1945), p. 461.

In connection with the writing out of these views of the events of ancient and modern history, and especially the history of the great Reformation of the sixteenth century her reading of D'Aubigne, Wylie, and others proved to be helpful. She sometimes drew from them clear historical statements to help make plain to the readers the things which she was endeavoring to present. Also, by thus corroborating with indisputable historical evidence that which had been revealed to her, she would win the confidence of the general reader in the truths she was presenting.

Just as her study of the Bible helped her to locate and describe the many figurative representations given to her regarding the development of the controversy, so the reading of histories of the reformation helped her to locate and describe many of the events and the movements presented to her in the visions.

A.L. White, "Ellen G. White as an Historian," incomplete publication data, p. 7.

2. In the numerous public responses to Rea's allegations, church spokesmen did not once deny that Ellen White borrowed from others. Elder Neal C.

Wilson, president of the General Conference, explicitly acknowledged that "in her writing Ellen White used sources more extensively than we have heretofore been aware of or recognized."—N.C. Wilson, "This I Believe About Ellen G. White," *Adventist Review*, March 20, 1980, p.8.

Arthur White had acknowledged, even before Rea's charges were made public, partly in anticipation of what was coming and partly in response to my work, that Ellen White had made historical errors. In the third article in a seven-part series in the *Adventist Review*, entitled "The E.G. White Historical Writings," he said, "Would it have been possible for some inaccuracy to have crept into Ellen White's descriptions of historical events or that the historians from whom she quoted may have been mistaken in some points of detail and thus, Ellen White, not being especially informed, allowed these mistakes to slip through into her narrative?" He answered his question with a straightforward affirmative.—A.L. White, *Adventist Review*, July 26, 1979, p. 9.

The most straightforward acknowledgement of Ellen White's use of other writers and her inaccuracies was made by R.W. Olson, secretary of the White Estate, on the back page of the April 15, 1982, *Adventist Review*:

"Ellen White used the works of other authors more extensively than we once thought. She borrowed historical, chronological, descriptive, and theological material. Some of her most beautiful gems were first penned in similar, though not usually identical, words by others. Also, we have found some inaccuracies in her writings, but these do not relate to Christian belief or conduct."

3. Much has changed in the past 14 years. The authority of Ellen White is now widely discussed in the Adventist Church. The research of William Peterson, Donald McAdams, Ronald Numbers, Ronald Graybill, Raymond Cottrell, Walter Specht, Donald Casebolt and Walter Rea has conclusively established the following points:

- Ellen White not only quoted from Protestant historians, she also paraphrased extensively and sometimes closely from them, carrying over into her work not only the words and their ideas but sometimes their historical errors.

- Ellen White not only selectively abridged historians in *The Great Controversy*, she also paraphrased extensively from Bible commentators, devotional writers, writers on the life of Christ and others in all of the Conflict of the Ages series, the Testimonies, and almost everything else she wrote.

- Ellen White's literary assistants made major contributions to her books as finders, paraphrasers, organizers and editors.

- Ellen White was influenced by time, place and person.

For an essay summarizing the research of those scholars and giving the bibliographic data, see Donald R. McAdams' "Shifting Views of Inspiration: Ellen G. White Studies in the 1970s," *Spectrum*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (March 1980), pp. 27-41.

4. *The Desire of Ages*, p. 535.