
Formative Authority, Yes; Canonization, No

by Herold Weiss

Ellen White's role as an authority in the Seventh-day Adventist Church changed while she was alive and has continued to change since her death. Through these changes the meaning of her authority has itself changed—both in the claims made for her by church leaders and in the understanding of ordinary church members. In what follows I will trace these changes and suggest that today we must conceive her authority as rooted, not in the kind of person she was, but in the truthfulness of what she said.

A distinction will clarify this. We may speak on the one hand of formal authority, the authority that exists when someone's words are taken to be true just because he or she has said them, quite apart from the question of the words' intrinsic truthfulness. The authority of the words comes from the office the person occupied. But there is another kind of authority we may call internal. It exists, not because of who is speaking, but because the words themselves persuade us. What I am suggesting is this: No longer can Ellen White have formal authority in our community; from now on her authority must be internal, residing in the truth of what she says.

Ellen White's fellow believers first took her to have authority because of her visionary experiences. To the disappointed and confused flock, her visions meant that in spite of the believers' confusion, God was with them. Thus her role in the early years was that of providing confidence to the believers.

When the community passed from its effort to cope with disappointment to that of clarifying its doctrines, Mrs. White's visionary experiences continued to inform it. That is how in the early 1850s our pioneers arrived at "present truth," including the doctrine of the shut door.

But then Mrs. White's role changed. Instead of being the one who symbolized God's blessing on the movement, she became the one who was to rebuke anyone showing weakness of character. Letters of counsel, later collected and reprinted as *Testimonies for the Church*, began to appear. Walter Rea asserts that at this time Mrs. White was a marionette in the hands of her husband James, who as a kind of puppeteer was using her to exercise control over the flock. To me, the evidence shows that Mrs. White was, in fact, a very strong person who would not allow anyone to handle her in this way. What is clear in any case is that as the writer of testimonies, her role was different, though she herself saw this as an extension of her former role of providing comfort to the little flock. It is clear that in this new role she sometimes embellished her counsels, warnings and rebukes with extended copying from literature available to her which

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was, at times, also available to her readers.

In 1858, with the appearance of *The Great Controversy*, Mrs. White changed roles again: she became a literary enterprise. Her contemporaries, some of whom accepted the *Testimonies* as a sign of God's special presence in the community, considered the new materials written for sale by colporteurs to be essentially similar to other books the colporteurs were selling. From the 1880s on, Mrs. White produced a tremendous amount of literature—testimonies, articles and books. Of course, these were all related. The latter fed on the former. Fanny Bolton, one of her literary assistants, had a hard time, indeed, trying to reconcile her preconceived notions of inspiration with the way the articles and books were being put together by Marian Davies and herself. The pressure on Mrs. White to write for the *Review*, the *Signs*, the *Youth's Instructor* and the colporteurs was tremendous. But her authority as an inspired or inspiring author was by now established; she enjoyed her work, and it never became a painful struggle for her. In the early hours of the morning she would write a draft which her assistants revised; later she approved the final draft.

After Ellen White died, her son, W. C. White, took over the production of her books, continuing to do what she had done before her death. Her own books had been compilations of paragraphs from testimonies, letters and articles; the only thing now missing was the approval of the final draft by Mrs. White herself. But another very significant change took place as well. The demand for her authoritative word began to come from a new quarter. She had produced her books to meet the demands of the general reading public. Now they were being produced to meet the demands of a General Conference committee that had decided the church needed something about a particular subject, such as stewardship or parenting. Now others were handling the formal authority Mrs. White had formerly employed for herself. Those who needed an objective authority had found one in her.

During the 1920s and 1930s many of those who had worked with Mrs. White in the production of her books were still alive. But with the death of that generation the claims made on her behalf gained new heights. At the same time, efforts were made to block scholars from access to her materials in the White Estate vault. In the 1950s, when I was a seminary student in Washington, D.C.,

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my professors, Dr. Walther, Dr. Loasby and Dr. Heppenstall, had very limited access to these materials. Dr. Walther finally declared that he would no longer teach a course in denominational history because he had no access to the documents. At the same time it was expected that every doctrine we were taught would be buttressed by statements from Mrs. White.

When authority is formal, every position taken by the person who has that authority must be obediently adopted. But in the 1920s and 1930s it was already becoming clear that Mrs. White's every word could not be taken as a divine command. Our college campuses already enjoyed the luxury of paved tennis courts, and around the world some ministers were wearing wedding rings. In the realm of the practical aspects of life, in the world of policies and projects in the church, the authority of Mrs. White had begun to slip. Indeed, the decline had begun rather soon

after her death. Around the world Adventists belonged to labor unions, lent and borrowed money and received aid from the government in order to keep institutions running; sadly enough, many times ecclesiastical managers found themselves with little guidance and made important decisions only on the basis of expediency.

No one has authority unless it is granted. Mrs. White's authority on matters of daily

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living has always met with an uneven response. On numerous occasions the church has denied her the authority to dictate on practical matters. This is quite significant, since it was precisely over practical matters of daily life that Mrs. White's *Testimonies* exercised authority in the first place.

Today the authority of Mrs. White on practical matters is invoked only when the objective sought happens to coincide with something that she said at one time or another. And to some degree, this has become the case also in the area of doctrines. She supplies authority for whatever anyone wishes to teach, particularly in the area of esoteric knowledge. How old is the Earth? How tall was Adam? Is there a sanctuary in heaven? Will there be a third world war? Will it be fought in the South Atlantic or in the Caucasus Mountains? Some persons claim to have authoritative answers to all these questions on the basis of a state

ment penned by Mrs. White.

Mrs. White's formal authority on matters of science and history has also undergone erosion. The revelations for which Ronald Numbers and Walter Rea are well known have had telling effect despite efforts to mount an apologetic counterattack by accommodating her use of sources to her visions.

But it seems to me that, with these new materials before us, Mrs. White's formal authority—the readiness of her readers, that is, to accept what she said as true just because a prophet said it—has in fact been shattered. From now on no one should be able to end a theological dialogue by giving a quotation from Mrs. White.

If we ask why Mrs. White's formal authority has been shattered, it is not first of all because Desmond Ford demonstrated that she was wrong on the sanctuary and Walter Rea showed the extent of her literary dependence. The fundamental reason is that the integrity of her office as a visionary has been legitimately put into question. I think that everyone will have to agree that either consciously or unconsciously she misled us. I also think that it is fair to say that there has been a cover-up by people who knew better—or should have. Some may want to say that she was less than candid about her literary work, while some may find even this description too incriminating and unjust. Others have gone all the way and have charged her with deliberate deception. I think this charge is difficult to prove.

In the aftermath of all the recent research on Mrs. White, even publications representing the church's leadership are presenting altered views. In a recent *Ministry* magazine, for example, we are told that "Mrs. White's prophetic role in shaping doctrine is . . . not normative," and that "Only if we refrain from using Ellen White as a normative authority for doctrine can we hope to meet other Christians on a common ground and expect them to see the validity of our doctrines." And then to cap it off, "If her writings are used to end all doctrinal disputes,

it is almost impossible to maintain the Bible as the normative authority for doctrine."¹ The author goes on to argue that instead of normative authority, Mrs. White had "formative" and "confirmatory" authority. The editors of *Evangelica*² said that with this latter remark the author was taking back what he had given away at first, thus turning the argument into an exercise in sophistry. I would rather like to hear more about what "confirmatory authority" means.

Later I read in the *Adventist Review* a statement put out by the General Conference Committee to encourage discussion of this issue within the church. Among other things it said, "We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White may be used as the basis for doctrine." "We do not believe that Scripture may be understood only through the writings of Ellen White." "We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White exhaust the meaning of Scripture."³ I wondered, reading that, what had happened to the doctrine that the red books are the inspired commentary on the black book. Still later in the *Review* I read that the expression "I saw" on the part of Mrs. White was many times used merely as "a rhetorical device to add emphasis and increase the readability of her report."⁴ This is something I myself had long surmised simply on the basis of what I know about apocalyptic literature.

Other things written recently about Ellen White are even more puzzling. The White Estate put out an essay in which the author suggests that the "I saw" statements are to be understood within the framework of the prophet's "delusional perceptual system," a deficiency in which all humans have a share.⁵ And in *Spectrum* I read that an undeniable cover-up of Ellen White's borrowing was amply justified because "the biblical precedent for a 'cover-up' was established by Christ himself."⁶ I must admit that I never thought I would read arguments in defense of Mrs. White or the policies of the White Estate that were so poorly framed. I fail to see the logic of an argument that says simply because Mrs.

White was a prophet, her personal integrity is sacrosanct.

Mrs. White should never have been defended on grounds that she was endowed with an unimpeachable office that made her every word the truth from heaven. With our small children we don't have to demonstrate strength of character in order to exercise formal authority. But a six-year-old's relation to his mother is not the same as a church's relation to its prophet. The six-year-old may perceive his mother quite differently from what she really is, but Seventh-day Adventists are not six-year-olds. Not anymore.

Genuine Adventism is committed to the gospel and to the truth. It does not claim that we already have the truth on the basis of a confirmatory authority that is peculiarly our own. The Spirit of Prophecy does not give us a handle on truth; it enables us today to search for "present truth." We are no different, in fact, from other Christians who read their Bibles and newspapers and try to use their reason and imagination. But if we face our task responsibly, the Spirit of Prophecy will not fail us. God will bless us and inspire us to a vision of heavenly things that will be true to our times.

A legitimate authority advocates a position and lives from the power of that position, not from consent demanded purely on the formal ground of his or her office.

Many Adventists, perhaps most, want to believe that we have special doctrines, authorized by Mrs. White, that give this church a special identity. But we need not fear the loss of Mrs. White as a formal authority used to end all theological debate. We will no more lose our identity because we cease to preach about the investigative

judgment than we lost our identity when we ceased to preach that in order to be translated you had to be a vegetarian. And in any case, our crisis in the church is not fundamentally a crisis of authority. It is a moral crisis, and we all share in it. What is at stake is not just Mrs. White's moral integrity. At stake is the moral integrity of the Adventist ministry to the world. At stake is the moral integrity of our community. Let us not become fools who defend doctrines at the expense of their integrity.

The important question before this church is not "What is the authority of Mrs. White today?" The real question is "What is the authority of the Adventist message today?" Does it have the inner power to convict the conscience of our own young people and of the world?

Ellen White is our mother and she will continue to be our mother, no matter what. Let us not defend her on the basis that she is a prophet. Whether or not she is a prophet is really not the issue. The real issue is whether or not she is to be canonized. And the present crisis has helped the church to answer that question with a resounding "No!" A whole generation of Adventist theologians has been agonizing over the insidious canonization of Mrs. White. However, it has become clear that she does not have canonical authority, and once the church begins to live according to this understanding a new generation of Adventist theologians may come up to serve the church better than ours has been able.

We will always be grateful to Mrs. White for what she did for us. She does indeed

have formative authority for us in the sense that she had a very definite hand in making us what we are. But from now on, we will have to use our minds under the guidance of the Spirit in order to know how to think and act today.

A legitimate authority advocates a position and lives from the power of that position, not from consent demanded purely on the formal grounds of his or her office. If Jesus had authority with the common people of his day, or if he has authority with us today, it is not because he went about with the title "Son of God" stamped on his forehead. His authority was the authority of the gospel he preached and lived. His authority did not merely command the will; it also transformed the heart. The people reacted positively to Jesus' preaching because he taught with authority and not like the scribes. The difference was that while the scribes used the Old Testament as a formal authority so they themselves could be brokers of authority, Jesus spoke with an inner logic that reached the conscience of his listeners. His words had authority because of what he said. Real authority remains an authority in dialogue, an authority that permits choice.

What church leaders feared most in the 1950s, when I was a seminary student, was that Ellen White's voice would be blended with the realities of the nineteenth century. They wanted her to speak from outside of time, as a voice from eternity. They were afraid of what historical relativism might do to her authority. But their fears, in part at least, were ill founded, for although it is true that the historian relativizes all human voices, it is also true that the historian is the only one who can provide the foundation for any voice of the past to be relevant to our present.

The choice today is not between authority and relativism. The choice is between a formal authority that must be obeyed on account of the fact that it has spoken, and an internal authority that claims our allegiance on account of what it says. Mrs. White's authority cannot be imposed

because she is a prophet. Her formal authority has been shattered. From now on, Mrs. White's authority will depend on what she says, and the church as a body will determine the wisdom of her words by whether or not it decides to accept them. The dialogue with Mrs. White has just begun.

The important question before this church is not "What is the authority of Mrs. White today?" The real question is "What is the authority of the Adventist message today?"

Does it have the inner power to convict the conscience of our own young people and of the world? Mrs. White can no longer function as a formal authority. The temptation for us to be brokers of authority has mercifully been removed. What we need is moral integrity that will give power to our witness. We need always be reminded that when the Lord chooses his agents on earth, he does not make them authorities. He makes them servants.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. *Evangelica*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (Nov. 1981), p. 24.

3. *Review and Herald*, July 15, 1982, p. 3.

4. Ron Graybill, "The 'I Saw' Parallels in Ellen

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5. Jack Provonsha, "Was Ellen White a Fraud?" *White Estate*, 1981.

6. Alden Thompson, review of Walter Rea's *The White Lie*, in *Spectrum*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Summer 1982), p. 51.