



# Ellen White In A New Key

James Walters offers a new model for understanding the role and authority of Ellen White for the contemporary church.

*by James W. Walters*

**T**WO WIDELY DISTRIBUTED PAINTINGS OF ELLEN White capture two very different models of inspiration. The older, better-known painting depicts Ellen White, pen in hand, meditatively looking to heaven, awaiting divine illumination. A more recent, more helpful picture appeared on the cover of the *Adventist Review*: a desk top covered with reference books in the background, an open book in the immediate foreground, with a partially filled sheet of writing paper resting on the book and a pen temporarily lying on the desk.

The first painting reflects an authoritarian model of inspiration, in which Ellen White's message comes word-for-word from heaven. It was a model that emerged after her death. With its living prophetess dead, the Adventist Church succumbed to the temptation to elevate the prophetess' words to unhealthy emi-

nence. By the mid-20th century, this authoritarian model had gained pre-eminence in Adventism. Popular Adventist orthodoxy held Ellen White's writings to be an indisputable last word on church mores, policy, and doctrine. The live voice that played such a critical role in Adventist history had become a millstone around the church's neck.

However, in the past 20 years, two types of evidence have severely challenged the widespread authoritarian assumptions with which many church members have approached Ellen White's writings. First, historical studies have demonstrated that Ellen White's writings—their inspired character notwithstanding—are culturally conditioned. Second, inquiries into Ellen White's production of texts have shown considerable literary indebtedness.<sup>1</sup> This historical and textual research has not destroyed the credibility of Ellen White's prophetic ministry. It does mean that Adventism has to adopt another model for understanding Ellen White's prophetic ministry; rather than authoritarian, Ellen White is authoritative. This model is captured by the *Adventist Review* cover depicting

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Ellen White's inspiration as including other works.

A new model of an authoritative Ellen White should include at minimum the following assumptions:

- The biblical gift of prophecy is one of various and important gifts with which God has blessed his church (see e.g. 1 Corinthians 12). The spectrum of spiritual gifts is supplementary and mutually beneficial in the healthy church, with no one gift throttling the other avenues of the Spirit's continuing work.

- The prophetic gift, as manifested in Ellen White, is vividly seen in her speaking forth God's word throughout the first 70 years of Adventist history. God used her as a dynamic founder-leader-counselor in the denomination's formative history.

- Ellen White's writings are an important aspect of her prophetic gift, but they are surely not the only or necessarily most important manifestation. These writings, regardless of the findings of current research, are a constitutive element in the study of how God led the fledgling Adventist movement in the past.

- If the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to remain Christian, the Bible must remain the church's primary authority for faith and practice. However, if the denomination is to remain Seventh-day Adventist, the legacy of how God prophetically used Ellen White must continue to be a secondary authority.

The distinction between the authoritative and the authoritarian nature of the prophetic gift, so central to the proposed model, calls for elaboration. No single statement—human or

divine—which passes human lips can be authoritarian; that is, every human statement is culturally encased and thus subject to interpretation.

The necessity of interpretation is illustrated by the fact that the early church, a few years after Jesus' ascension, was forced to call a Jerusalem council to interpret the gospel in light of changing circumstances. No one person determined church policy. Through mutual exchange of points of view, an authoritative church position was reached.

Various points of view are valuable even in understanding something as central and personal as a relationship to Christ. H. Richard Niebuhr's observation about our understanding of the person of Christ has implications for our understanding of the authority of inspired writings.

Without companions, collaborators, teachers, corroborating witnesses, I am at

the mercy of my imaginations. . . . If after the long dialogue with Mark, Matthew, John, and Paul, and Harnack, Schweitzer, Bultmann, and Dodd, I come to the conclusion that whatever Christ means to others and requires of others this is what he means to me and requires of me, I am in a wholly different position from the one in which I should be—if that were a possible position—were I confronted by him alone. The Christ who speaks to me without authorities and witnesses is not an actual Christ; he is no Jesus Christ of history. He may be nothing more than the projection of my wish or my compulsion.<sup>2</sup>

The issue of authority has been pressed to the forefront in the Adventist Church. The question revolves more around the authority

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of the Ellen White writings than the Bible because the Adventist Church has tended to limit its understanding of the Bible to Ellen White's perception of the Bible. Although the church does not officially teach verbal inspiration, many church members come close to following this view in their use of Ellen White's writings.

Because recent historical research into the cultural background of Ellen White and into the production of her books has made the idea of verbal inspiration increasingly untenable, the church is facing a considerable dilemma of authority. The words of G. B. Thompson spoken in 1919 seem prophetic:

It seems to me that if we are going to preach the Testimonies and establish confidence in them, it does not depend on whether they are verbally inspired or not. I think we are in this fix because of a wrong education that our people have had. If we had always taught the truth on this question, we would not have any trouble or shock in the denomination now. But the shock is because we have not taught the truth, and have put the Testimonies on a plane where she (Ellen White) says they do not stand. We have claimed more for them than she did.<sup>3</sup>

The responsible way forward is for the church to abandon any idea of gaining religious security through giving authoritarian answers meant to silence probing questions. The issue of authority in the church is complex, and there is no single authority that can unilaterally provide neat, tidy answers. We possess no inerrant golden tablets.

The Christian church has always used multiple sources of authority in its pursuit of truth. There are four sources of authority that have long served the Christian church and that are relevant to our denomination in this dilemma: *inspired writings, reason, personal Christian experience, and tradition.*<sup>4</sup>

Inspired writings are a vital source of authority, but their importance does not supersede reason, experience, and tradition. The latter are vital as an analytical person initially

decides to accept certain writings as divinely inspired and as those writings are interpreted. As the Adventist Church has become more analytical about its beliefs, we increasingly recognize the insightfulness of Ellen White's observation that Bible writers "were God's penmen, not His pen."<sup>5</sup> A prophet relates his or her divine message in temporal language, a language that inevitably reflects a contemporary historical setting. Inspired writings are not a divine encyclopedia dispensing absolute knowledge on every topic mentioned. They are an eternal fountain of living water satisfying the deepest existential cry of humanity: Who are we?

Ellen White appears to subscribe to this basic perspective on inspired writings when in a related context she writes that "God alone is infallible."<sup>6</sup> God is not contained in the mediate linguistic symbols and concepts to which the prophets were limited. If God alone is infallible, everything less than God is fallible and therefore subject to interpretation. Hence the need for multiple sources of authority, other than inspired writings, in the Christian life.

Inspired writings, reason, personal experience, and tradition are not new sources of authority in our denomination's theological deliberations. In fact, all four played a crucial role in the arguments given in the 1919 Bible Conference regarding the authority of Ellen White's writings.

## Inspired Writings

**T**he Bible is the inspired record of God's interaction with believers for more than a millennium. The climax of this record is the revelation of God through Jesus Christ. As the eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry died, and as the anticipated eschaton did not materialize, the early church began the task of determining its authentic written testimonies of faith. The maturing Christian community—active in worship, mission, and fellowship—found a diver-

sity of materials eminently helpful. These writings came to comprise the New Testament canon. It is not that these materials exhaust the meaning of faith, but they do genuinely and authoritatively reveal the nature of faith.

Only God is unconditionally free from error and partiality. Only God is infallible. But his Word is the all-sufficient path to salvation. As Karl Barth observed,

There is indeed only one single absolute fundamental and indestructible priority, and that is the priority of God as Creator over the totality of his creatures and each of them without exception. Yet how strange it is that we learn of this very priority . . . only through the Bible.<sup>7</sup>

The writings of Ellen G. White are an additional, yet secondary, norm of authority in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. These writings tell the story of God's interaction with a modern-day Christian movement answering a unique, divine calling. A. G. Daniells, General Conference president in 1919, appealed to teachers of Bible and history to get their theological bearings first from the direct study of "the Book," and then from Ellen White.

The earnest study of the Bible is the security, the safety of man. He must come to the book itself and get it by careful study, and then whatever he finds in the spirit of prophecy or any other writings that will help him and throw light and clarify his vision on it,—that is alright [sic].<sup>8</sup>

The Seventh-day Adventist Church can only gain an understanding of itself and of God's particular guidance in its own history from these writings. By appealing to the writings of Ellen White, Seventh-day Adventists maintain a rooted consciousness of their distinctiveness. The writings of Ellen White are an integral element in God's action of bringing the Seventh-day Adventist movement into existence.

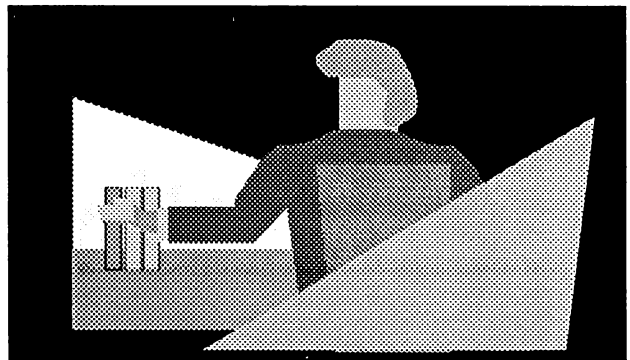
Reason is a god of human culture whose cult is of immense proportions in the modern world. The strides of reason in the scientific world are truly awe inspiring. The reasonableness of historical criticism has brought numer-

ous sacred cows tumbling down. However, who is to say that the canons of reason that are accepted today will remain unchallenged by future cultures? Isn't what is considered "reasonable" itself culturally conditioned by current philosophical and psychological notions? The above consideration is not advanced to deny the importance of reason, but to suggest that it can never be a final authority.

Nevertheless, while notions of what constitutes reasonableness may vary culturally, the use of one's creative, God-given mind is mandatory in all of life's endeavors. Reason is a necessary part of the Christian's pursuit of theological truth.

At the 1919 Bible Conference, the story was told of a Scandinavian missionary in Hammerfest who followed a stringent vegetarian diet. The missionary lived "a good deal on the north wind." The man, following strict Ellen White health counsel, appeared as though he "had hardly blood in his body." Later, when Mrs. White was told of how the Scandinavian missionary had implemented her health counsel, she remarked: "Why don't the people use *common sense*? Why don't they know that we are to be governed by the places we are located?"<sup>9</sup> The value of common sense—the most basic variety of reason—in applying inspired counsel was evidently an obvious necessity to Ellen White.

Long-term General Conference President A. G. Daniells felt that rational human reflection was compatible with respect for Ellen White's inspiration. Daniells maintained that



Sister White never claimed to be an authority on history, and never claimed to be a dogmatic teacher on theology. . . . She gave out fragmentary statements, but left the pastors and evangelists and preachers to work out all these problems of Scripture and theology, and of history.<sup>10</sup>

## Personal Christian Experience

The church has always believed that God makes himself immediately known to individual persons through his Holy Spirit. Of course, the Spirit illumines one's mind. But more importantly, the Spirit addresses the whole person, including one's affections. Persons are not merely rational beings. And the direction of one's active reasoning is determined by factors of the whole person quite beyond the narrowly rational. The early American theologian Jonathan Edwards once stated "that there never was any considerable change wrought in the mind of any person, by anything of a religious nature that he read, heard, or saw, who had not his affections moved."<sup>11</sup> Edwards' emphasis on the "sense of the heart" is an authentic touchstone of Christian authority.

The later believers in the early centuries of the Christian church had criteria for determining which writings to include in the canon. Personal claim to prophetic status obviously was not determinative. Even common acknowledgment of prophetic calling was not solely determinative. And lack of ecstatic experience was not prohibitive. *It was the quality, integrity, uniqueness, and usefulness of the writings* in nurturing the personal experiences of the believing community that determined the contents of the canon.

In the Bible itself, not all the books and chapters are equally valuable to the church's life today. The long lists of the Chroniclers have limited value to the modern church. Evidently

that was true even in the early church. The apostle Paul counsels: "I urged you . . . that you may charge certain persons not . . . to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations rather than the divine training that is in faith." (1 Timothy 1:3, 4, RSV). Paul wrote much more than is contained in Scripture. The epistles preserved in the canon were those that had proved useful to the experience of the early church.

These considerations have a bearing on the inspired writings of Ellen White and her authority in the Adventist Church today. Not everything Ellen White wrote in the *Testimonies* and in the *Conflict of the Ages* series is equally useful in the life of today's church. Which writings are authoritative in the church is significantly dependent on whether they contribute to the church's actual experience; whether they help the worshipping, working church to experience a life in the Spirit.

H. C. Lacy, in the same session at which Daniells gave his testimony, put the matter succinctly:

In our estimate of the spirit of prophecy, isn't its value to us more in the spiritual light it throws into our hearts and lives than in the intellectual accuracy in historical and theological matters? Ought we not to take these writings as the voice of the Spirit to our hearts, instead of the voice of the teacher to our heads? And isn't the first proof of the Spirit of Prophecy its spiritual rather than its historical accuracy?<sup>12</sup>

## Tradition

The individual Christian does not encounter God in a vacuum. Assurance that a believer's experience of God and understanding of the Christian faith are authentic is gained when one can point to exemplary Christians of like experience and understanding in the tradition. The task of contemporary theology as a discipline in the church is to relate the traditional faith to the present generation. Theol-

ogy must not merely follow the dictates of the past. However, theology does need the normative role of tradition because it contains a wealth of concepts that perpetually recur in various eras of the church's existence.

Adventism's own tradition is useful in understanding the authority of Ellen White. In the 1919 conference F. M. Wilcox invoked the Adventist tradition to lend increased credibility to a particular theological position. Introducing a James White statement from the first volume of the *Review and Herald*, he said:

I have a paragraph here I would like to read. This is so completely in harmony with what Brother Daniells has expressed that I thought I would like to read it. James White, in the *Review* of 1851, wrote this, and it was republished again four years later, as expressing what he considered the denominational view with respect to the *Testimonies* back there.<sup>13</sup>

James White, reacting to those who singularly prized the gift of prophecy, wrote in the first volume of the *Advent Review and Sabbath*

*Herald*: "The gifts of the Spirit should all have their proper places."<sup>14</sup> Surely James White, writing 140 years ago, had no idea that future writings of his prophetically gifted wife would eventually dominate the other gifts of the Spirit and even rival the Bible in practical authority in the church.

In the late 20th-century Adventist Church, complex issues have at times received easy answers because of our readiness to use abundant Ellen White quotations; our willingness to make Ellen White authoritarian. As we have recognized the inadequacy of this approach we have been tempted to abandon Ellen White as being *authoritative* at all.

The appeal here is to recognize Ellen White as a person inspired by God to elaborate the Bible in a way that established the distinctive identity of Seventh-day Adventism. The continuing importance of Ellen White's writings rests on persistent reliance on Scripture, reason, personal Christian experience, and tradition. Only in this way can an already discredited authoritarian Ellen White be replaced by a revered, authoritative Ellen White.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. E.g., William S. Peterson, "A Textual and Historical Study of Ellen G. White's Account of the French Revolution," *Spectrum*, Vol. 10 (Autumn 1979), pp. 57-69. Donald R. McAdams, "Ellen G. White and the Protestant Historians," revised edition (Unpublished paper, October 1977). McAdams' research is concisely and insightfully summarized in Eric Anderson, "Ellen White and Reformation Historians," *Spectrum*, Vol. 9 (July 1978), pp. 23-26. Jonathan Butler, "The World of E. G. White and the End of the World," *Spectrum*, Vol. 10 (Autumn 1979), pp. 2-13. Ron Graybill, "An Update on Ellen G. White's Literary Work," available from the Ellen G. White Estate. Walter Rea, *The White Lie* (Turlock, CA: M and R Publications, 1982). Fred Veltman, "The Full Report of the Life of Christ Research Project," November 1988. Four volumes, 2,561 pages. Released by and available through the president's office, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, MD.

2. *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), pp. 245, 246.

3. Transcription of two sessions of the 1919 Bible Conference, published in *Spectrum*, Vol. 10 (May 1979), p. 49. This highly significant conference was called by

the General Conference of SDA's to deal with the question of how Ellen White should be interpreted to the church membership.

4. Dennis M. Campbell has written a most constructive work, *Authority and the Renewal of American Theology* (Philadelphia: United States Press, 1976). Campbell advances the four norms of church authority which I now introduce, and he includes a fifth: creeds. Campbell's discussion has been very helpful in the development of my suggested norms.

5. *Selected Messages*, Vol. 1, p. 21.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

7. *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, pp. 497, 498.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 40. (Emphasis supplied.)

10. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

11. Sereno E. Dwight, ed., *The Works of President Edwards: With a Memoir of His Life*, 10 vols. (New York: S. Converse, 1829-1830), v. 15.

12. *Spectrum*, Vol. 10 (Autumn 1979), p. 38.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

14. April 21, 1851. (Emphasis supplied.)