

# A Conversation with Herbert Douglass about Ellen White

In November, 1998, Herbert Douglass was in Battle Creek, Michigan working on the Adventist Historic Village when he suffered a heart attack. Two weeks and four hospitals later he was back home on Hope Hill in Northern California ready and eager to talk to *Spectrum* about his latest book *Messenger of the Lord*. Seated by the fire in his office he talked about the past fifty years as being necessary preparation for writing the book. Douglass' career includes time in both academia and publishing. He taught religion first at Pacific Union College and then at Atlantic Union College where he became the academic dean and then president. Several years each at the *Review and Herald* and Pacific Press preceded his appointment to the presidency of Weimar College. He is the author of numerous articles and books. Now retired, he lives, writes and gardens in Weimar, California, when he is not on the road on behalf of the "village."

**Douglass:** It seems like this book was such a natural thing to do after fifty years of professional life. I know I couldn't have written this twenty years ago. I probably could do a better job five years from now. I would be more specific in some areas, but they limited me. They said, 'it's getting too big.' I had to cut out areas that would be interesting in a scholarly journal where you go after things differently.

**Spectrum:** Is that why people like Walter Rea and Ron Numbers don't appear in your book?

**Douglass:** I do reference Ron occasionally. Further, I understand well where Ron and Walter are coming from. But I had to make the decision as to whether I was going to deal directly with personalities (such as Walter or Ron) who have been interpreted as being critical of Ellen White or speak directly to the issues that they and others have struggled with. Early on I made the deal with the White Estate (and nobody could have been more supportive than Ken Wood) that we would face every issue, leaving no stone unturned and track the truth wherever it led us. I think that every

essential issue that Ron or Walter emphasized is dealt with in *Messenger*. In my introductory overview, alert readers will quickly recognize this procedure.

From the 1950s, I had known about Ellen's use of other literary materials. I could handle that within my understanding of how revelation/inspiration works. However, I was not aware of the extent of her "borrowing" until the 70s when I read the diligent works of both Ron and Walter. When I say "borrowed," I mean that remarkable selectivity that only the Holy Spirit could have given her. She could take a book here or a chapter there and find clarity of insight, selecting out the helpful phrase or thought and leave behind all the junk. That is why Dr. Kellogg wrote and spoke so highly of her, the more he practiced medicine.

**Spectrum:** We have a series of questions to ask concerning the relationship between inspiration on the one hand, infallibility and authority on the other. Would you be willing to say that in some sense Paul was inspired when he wrote Romans, Handel was inspired when he wrote the Messiah, and Ellen White was inspired when she wrote

*Desire of Ages?* Would you be willing to say that in some sense that would be true of all three of them?

**Douglass:** We have to have a common understanding of revelation. God chooses people at certain times to set things straight, to clarify His program. He speaks to them and they understand that something is being revealed to them. Handel was inspired in the way that I look at those roses, and they give me wonderful thoughts. But we are dealing with the definition of "inspiration." Ellen G. White received the very same kind of attention that Moses and Daniel were receiving, but the way she passed on this revelation took different forms, such as diaries and personal letters, in addition to printed books and the spoken word.

**Spectrum:** So of the three, Paul, Handel and Ellen White, it would be better in your view, to put Handel in a different category. That leaves Paul and Ellen White. How would you describe the similarities and differences between Paul and Ellen White with respect to how God worked through them?

**Douglass:** Well, forthrightly, I have to say, number one, there is no half-way inspiration. When God chooses messengers, the quality of the inspiration is exactly the same. The revelation is given some conceptual framework that they now put into their own words. The messenger's understanding is a lot different in the 19<sup>th</sup> century than it was in the first century. Number two, prophets can only receive what their experience has committed them to understand. God doesn't give a divinely complete encyclopedia every time he sends down a message. The messenger works with his/her intelligence and emotions.

**Spectrum:** If God worked through Paul and through Ellen White in fundamentally the same way—

**Douglass:** Absolutely, the Spirit of prophecy works as only the Spirit works.

**Spectrum:** Okay, if God works through both fundamentally the same way, does that suggest that we should canonize the writings of Ellen White like we have the Scriptures? And if not, why not? How would you approach this issue?

**Douglass:** If you were asking that question in 62 AD, somebody might say to you, "Pastor, you've been reading Paul's letter to the Ephesians almost as if you were reading Moses. Paul is a great man, but we wouldn't want to canonize Paul! We have the Bible, the Bible is what Jesus used. Don't you think we're safer if we just stay with the Bible that Jesus used?" Of course, everybody in the church will say, "That's right, that's the safest thing to do, stay with the Bible."

**Spectrum:** That response suggests that maybe we should canonize the writings of Ellen White.

**Douglass:** No, no, because she would turn over in her grave. The misunderstanding would be counterproductive to the time in which we live and to her own expressed purpose of getting us back to the Bible.. It would get us off on the wrong track.

**Spectrum:** Okay, now moving from the question of inspiration to the question of infallibility. Would it be fair to summarize your position by saying that Doctor Douglass believes that neither Paul nor Ellen White were infallible messengers of the Lord? Is that right? What would you add to that?

**Douglass:** Both were faithful commentators on the Bible as it had come to them. Both were faithful messengers of unfolding truths as God used them to serve his purposes. In 1982, the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University surveyed a large sampling of Seventh-day Adventists, noting the differences between those who regularly read Ellen White and those who did not. The differences were remarkable, such as 82 percent of the readers usually or always had personal Bible study, while only 47 of the nonreaders did, that the readers were more likely to be stronger Christians in their personal spiritual life and in their witnessing to their communities than the nonreaders, etc. What I'm saying is that there is fruitage in listening to Paul and there is fruitage in listening to Ellen White, and the weight of that evidence keeps me an Adventist.

**Spectrum:** Suppose an Adventist became convinced that Paul had erred in some respect, and that's possible because we don't believe that Paul was infallible, or contrarily that Ellen White had

erred in some respects, again in principle that's possible because we don't think that she is infallible, then how should that Adventist proceed?

**Douglass:** You have a way of asking the central questions. If I didn't go at that central question from the beginning, I wouldn't have written *Messenger*. That is the question behind every Adventist problem today. Every question, every problem in every area, goes back to "What are you going to do with Ellen White?" Knowing that she is fallible, people then begin to focus on the candlestick and not on the light. If we start looking at the container and not the content, we are in real trouble. None us know of Isaiah's or Paul's idiosyncrasies. What we do know is their message. The prevailing principle that kept me going every day on this book was that the message is more important than the messenger.

**Spectrum:** What about that old communication theory of Marshall McLuhan's that the medium is the message?

**Douglass:** I wrote an article about that for *Insight* using that line to explain why Jesus came to this world. But Ellen White is not the message; she is the messenger. She is not the content; she is the container. The message is the Great Controversy theme. This integrating, coherent principle provided the distinctiveness of our health message and our educational principles. But more importantly to all else, this principle helps Adventists to transcend the age-old paradoxes and tensions that have polarized and paralyzed Christianity for 2000 years. It is the reason why I remain an Adventist theologian.

**Spectrum:** How did your view of Ellen White change while writing the book?

**Douglass:** My appreciation for her as a person constantly deepened. To write the section on the "real Ellen," I went over diary entries and much original material. It was like I was living with her. She was a remarkable wife and mother under an incredible schedule that never let up! Traveling, writing, speaking so much of the time and yet she would be out at 5 a.m. planting her seeds or cuttings before she would leave for the next trip. It's amazing when we realize that the Transcontinental

Railroad was completed in 1869, and by 1885, she had crossed this country at least 25 times. When others had given James up to die, think of what she did for her stalwart husband, especially after his strokes and deepening depression, caring to speak to no one. Yet, Ellen found ways to get James to meet people in their home after she made it clear that he had better answers than she did, and that he was needed. Or when she told neighbors not to volunteer their help in getting their hay. And when James slumped into discouragement because neighbors were too busy, Ellen made it clear that they and Willie would do it themselves. Getting him even to leave the house was a great victory, and to watch 5 ft. 2 in. Ellen in the wagon stacking the hay was enough for his manliness to pick up the scythe and start working again, and his health speedily improved. Many are these examples of her common sense.

How about sending kids to school before the age of eight to ten? Let's go to St. Helena in 1904. The board meeting was held in her living room. (The minutes from that meeting weren't recovered until the 1970s.) What she said at that meeting, in essence, was, "Some of our lynx-eyed children are wandering all over the sanitarium grounds, getting into mischief. The best that we can do is to have a school where they can be under the restraining hand of a good teacher." When astonished parents quoted her earlier writings about early school attendance, she answered, "Let's use common sense. When I wrote those words from the light given to me at that time, we didn't have a Sabbath-keeping church school anywhere, but circumstances have changed."

I didn't understand the extent of her common sense before writing *Messenger*. Think of her common sense regarding the use of salt and eggs, for example, or in accepting government aid. But after saying all this, she is still the candlestick, not the light; the messenger, not the message. If we overlook her message, we will all end up as any other church today, lost in the fog of pluralism. If we don't understand the Great Controversy theme, we will never understand the relationship between the cross and our Lord's high priestly ministry, nor even the essence of the Gospel being restoration, not merely forgiveness. This emphasis on the Great Controversy theme is the greatest hidden silence in our church, it seems to me. That's what kept me writing.