



Reexamining the Way God Speaks to His Messengers:

Rereading *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White*.

By Ronald L. Numbers. New York: Harper and Row, 1976.

By Herbert E. Douglass

A quarter of a century ago (could it be!) Ronald Numbers's *Prophetess of Health, A Study of Ellen G. White* was published. What has been its significance, its impact, during these twenty-five years?

I, for one, have been grateful (as Ron knows) for the point of view he set forth on Ellen White's contribution to health education. As many will recall, there were various reactions to the book. However, it is not my purpose to note the psychodrama beneath each of the diverse responses. And to deny such psychodramas, whether they be pleasure or unhappiness, would be unwise.

Those of us who had been involved in producing the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* in the 1950s were much aware of the several points that many became aware of for the first time in 1976. In my own experience, such topics as Ellen White's ability occasionally to see enrichment in the writings of others, her maturing through the years in understanding biblical insights, her "step-by-step" practice in applying health principles to her own busy personal life, and other areas that Numbers highlights were already part of my understanding of how God used Ellen White as his messenger. However, in 1976, *Prophetess* did increase my understanding of the contemporary materials available to Ellen White.

Knowing Ron, he would have refined certain areas in *Prophetess* after further review of the data available. Some of those areas would include the real reasons for James White turning over the editorship of the *Review and Herald* in 1855 and his defense (and that of others) against the charges he was improperly profiteering during the Civil War, Ellen White's daily diet in her later years and her relationship to the "Shut Door" question, the issues involved in the supposed offer of the cornflake industry to Adventists, and so forth. Perhaps, if he were given more pages, he would have surveyed the salient contribution Ellen White made to the establishment of health care institutions on several continents that followed her distinctively integrated health principles. But all that is relatively insignificant.

The long-range contribution of *Prophetess*, it seems to me, is that Numbers prompted a reexamination of certain basic concepts regarding the way God speaks to his messengers, in biblical times and in our own. For that reason alone, among others, we owe him gratitude. These basic concepts can be summed up in five areas. In all these areas we see Ellen White's remarkable common sense.



Ellen G. White, 1878.

God uses his messengers as his spokespersons who convey his messages within the limitations of their human skills but not as mechanical fax machines or as conduits for ideas as water flows through pipes. This principle recognizes the literary, social, mental skills, and so forth, of each messenger, allowing each messenger to convey the divinely revealed messages with the best mental and emotional equipment each has at the moment.

One of the chief problems for most people in understanding biblical writers or Ellen White is an inadequate grasp of how God reveals information to his messengers. When people believe that God's messengers wrote their messages inerrantly, that each word is exactly how God would have it said, they are setting themselves up for emotional trauma when they find discrepancies in prophetic writings. Ellen White never expected her readers to treat her as an authority on dates or even historical details. The chief purpose of her writings, which used the best sources available in her day, was to illuminate the purpose of the gospel—the restoration of God's image in the lives of the redeemed. To focus on a discrepancy in the Bible or in the writings of Ellen White is to miss the whole point of why and how God speaks through human instruments—which is always to clarify the purpose of the gospel.

She said it clearly:

Written in different ages, by men who differed widely in rank and occupation, and in mental and spiritual endowments, the books of the Bible present a wide contrast in style, as well as a diversity in the nature of the subjects unfolded. Different forms of expression are employed by different writers; often the same truth is more strikingly presented by one than by another. And as several writers present a subject under varied aspects and relations, there may appear, to the superficial, careless, or prejudiced reader, to be discrepancy or contradiction, where the thoughtful, reverent student, with clearer insight, discerns the underlying harmony.¹



Ellen G. White, 1899.

God uses the "step-by-step" principle in instructing his messengers and he expects his messengers to use common sense as they pass on these ongoing insights, step-by-step, when they speak or write. This principle recognizes that people need time to digest "new light"; further, the lag-time between accepting principles and then practicing them completely is something that all honest people understand very well. Jesus used this principle in teaching his disciples: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now" (John 16:12 NKJV).

In 1870, James White looked back on health reform as a "step-by-step" process: "The Lord also knew how to introduce to his waiting people the great subject of health reform, step by step, so they could bear it, and make a good use of it, without souring the public mind."²

We can see this principle working in Ellen White's five health visions (1848, 1854, 1863, 1865, 1871), and especially in the *Ministry of Healing* (1905).³ And we see this principle applied when helping diverse audiences to accept "new light" on health practices. In 1872, Ellen White spoke clearly:

Some of us have been years in arriving at our present position in health reform. It is slow work to obtain a reform in diet. . . . If we should allow our people as much time as we have required to come up to the present advanced state in reform, we would be very patient with them and allow them to advance step by step, as we have done, until their feet are firmly established upon the health reform platform. But we should be very cautious not to advance too fast, lest we be obliged to retrace our steps."⁴

Simple common sense!⁵

God permits his messengers, whether biblical writers or others, to use common sense in finding the best way to get his messages across to others in their day. God's messengers are usually very bright and often well read. They know how to put their wide reading through "the gospel sieve," selecting materials that augment their message, leaving behind that which is not helpful or contrary to their divinely inspired messages.

For example, Paul borrowed from the apocrypha in developing a substantial part of Romans 1 and parts of the Jewish Targums in developing 1 Corinthians 10:1-4 and 2 Timothy 3:8. No doubt many in Christ's day recognized his references to extrabiblical sources that he used to develop his messages—messages that were truly original. But his use (as well as Paul's) of common sources had nothing to do with the authority or originality of his messages.

In other words, God does not expect his messengers to "reinvent the wheel" when they are framing their messages in the most forceful, pleasing manner possible. Prophets take the inspired message and do their best to convey that message in language and thought forms that will do justice to the message.

Ellen White explained how she gleaned fresh ways to convey her messages:

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 specific 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. In narrating the experience and views of those carrying forward the work of reform in our own time, similar use has been made of their published works.⁶

One of the interesting observations regarding Ellen White's use of contemporary materials is that she was able to select out those comments that fleshed out her message and leave untouched that which may have been most popular at that moment but contrary

Photo: S. F. Miller



Ellen G. White and her twin sister, Elizabeth, 1878.

to the light she had.

In 1890, in his preface to the book *Christian Temperance and Bible Hygiene*, John Harvey Kellogg probably said it best:

Nearly thirty years ago there appeared in print the first of a series of remarkable and important articles on the subject of health, by Mrs. E. G. White. . . . Thousands were led to change life-long habits, and to renounce practices thoroughly fixed by heredity as well as by long indulgence. So great a revolution could not be wrought in a body of people, without the aid of some powerful incentive, which in this case was undoubtedly the belief that the writings referred to not only bore the stamp of truth, but were endorsed as such by a higher than human authority. . . .

At the time when the writings referred to first appeared, the subject of health was almost wholly ignored, not only by the people to whom they were addressed, but by the world at large. The few advocating the necessity of a reform in physical habits, propagated in connection with the advocacy of genuine reformatory principles the most patent and in some instances disgusting errors.

Nowhere, and by no one, was there presented a systematic and harmonious body of hygienic truths, free from patent errors, and consistent with the Bible and the principles of the Christian religion. . . .

Many of the principles taught have come to be so generally adopted and practiced that they are no longer recognized as reforms, and may, in



Historic Adventist Village: visitors gather outside 1857 meeting house, left.



fact, be regarded as prevalent customs among the more intelligent classes. The principles which a quarter of a century ago were either entirely ignored or made the butt of ridicule, have quietly won their way into public confidence and esteem, until the world has quite forgotten that they have not always been thus accepted. . . .

It certainly must be regarded as a thing remarkable, and evincing unmistakable evidence of divine insight and direction, that in the midst of confused and conflicting teachings claiming the authority of science and experience, but warped by ultra notions and rendered impotent for good by the great admixture of error—it must be admitted to be something extraordinary, that a person making no claims to scientific knowledge or erudition should have been able to organize, from the confused and error-tainted mass of ideas advanced by a few writers and thinkers on health subjects, a body of hygienic principles so harmonious, so consistent, and so genuine that the discussions, the researches, the discoveries, and the experience of a quarter of a century have not resulted in the overthrow of a single principle, but have only served to establish the doctrines taught.

The guidance of infinite wisdom is as much needed in the discerning between truth and error as in the evolution of new truths. Novelty is by no means a distinguishing characteristic of true principles, and the principle holds good as regards the truths of hygienic reform, as well as those of other reformatory movements.⁷

In other words, Ellen White had more to offer than a scrapbook of contemporary health concepts.

God expects his messengers to utilize common sense in communicating God-given principles to their hearers. The difference between principles and their applications should be obvious when the messenger is read or heard in different countries of the world. Or when we

Tourists listen to stories told by volunteer guides at the Historic Adventist Village in Battle Creek, Michigan.

try, in the twenty-first century, to superimpose the same applications of principle that were perfectly understandable in the nineteenth century.

Principles are universal, in the sense that they apply to men and women everywhere, always relevant, always applicable. But policies are the timely applications of universal principles. Ellen White was well aware of this difference: “That which can be said of men under certain circumstances, cannot be said of them under other circumstances.”⁸

For instance, regarding health reform, we all note that she was a dying consumptive at seventeen, yet went on to outlive most of her contemporaries after a remarkably rigorous life. One of her open secrets was to distinguish between principle and policy.⁹ Her chief principles included (1) to do the best one can under circumstances that may be beyond one’s control; (2) to avoid everything hurtful such as alcohol, tobacco, and drugs; (3) to use judiciously that which is healthful; and (4) to follow health principles so that the mind is ready to grasp quickly the will of God and thus to make right moral decisions. In other words, health reform was not another means to earn God’s favor.

That is why Ellen White could counsel church members “to avoid meat eating, not because it is regarded as a sin to eat meat, [that is, from a policy viewpoint] but because it is not healthful [from a principle viewpoint].”¹⁰ And that is why Willie White (1933) could say that the White family had been vegetarians but not always “teetotalers.” Traveling under conditions few today have experienced, the Whites found themselves in circumstances where the best food available for physical strength was some flesh food—and Ellen White, occasionally, made a policy decision governed by a basic principle.

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God works through his messengers when he has urgent messages that are either being forgotten, or overlooked, or has "present truth" that would then be timely. Ellen White's main contribution, permeating all her writings, is her grasp of the Great Controversy theme. This theme brings coherence and integration to all doctrinal development in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Without this core understanding of the biblical story, the distinctives of Adventist theology would dissolve as quickly as Jello in the July sun.

The Great Controversy theme is the conceptual key that illuminates the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. It provides the basis for the Adventist distinctives in education, health, and eschatology. Focusing on "restoration" as the goal of the gospel, it helps us to transcend limited gospels that emphasize God's pardon but not his power to "deliver us from evil."

To understand Ellen White's ministry, to capture her contribution as a "prophetess of health," one must see the big picture of the purpose of health reform and why it was given to prepare a people to meet the Lord. The interaction of the mind, body, and spirit has everything to do with moral and spiritual decision making. Not to see the big picture and to focus on unrelated incidents is to miss the full dimensions of Ellen White, whether as a health educator, or as an educational theorist, or as a full-bore theological teacher. Our focus should be on the message, not the messenger; on the content and not the container.

One last word. Ronald Numbers does not sail under false colors. As every good historian (or theologian) should, he makes clear what his presuppositions are; that is, his organizing principle determines how he collects evidence and interprets data: "I have tried to be as objective as possible. Thus I have refrained from using divine inspiration as an historical explanation."¹¹

This approach can be valuable to those who work with different presuppositions—because different presuppositions do provide different perspectives. Different perspectives may point out data that may have been overlooked by others. But can anyone be truly objective? Could a naturalistic presupposition truly collect all the data, explain all the dynamics at work, and account for

what appear to be remarkable consequences of decisions made against all conventional wisdom?

At the moment I am reading James M. McPherson's *To the Best of My Ability: The American Presidents*. Recipient of several literary prizes, including the Pulitzer (1989), and professor of American history at Princeton University, McPherson in his introduction surveys the seesaw swings in historiography, noting the various presuppositions of the "presidential synthesis" movement, the "new history" writers such as Robinson and Beard, the "progressive history" emphasis, the "class struggle" writers of the 1930s and 1940s, the Jeffersonians and the Hamiltonians, and lately the social historians. Now McPherson sees a return to presidential synthesis.

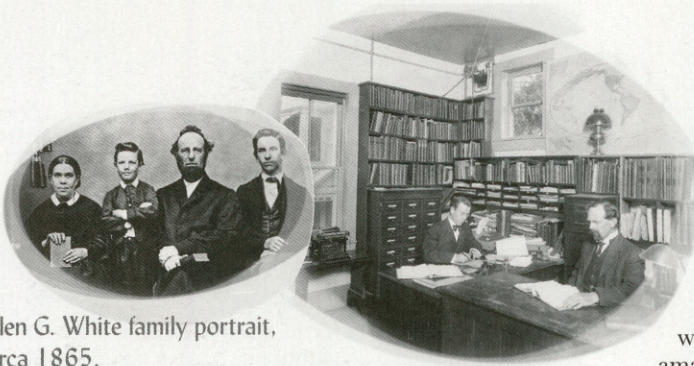
For example, depending on one's presuppositions, historians trying to be objective can come up with studies of Abraham Lincoln that would make the reader wonder if those historians are writing about the same man! McPherson is not saying that the historians he cites are dishonest with the facts. But depending on one's frame of reference, his or her presuppositions, certain facts are highlighted and certain facts are omitted. Knowing that almost any historical event or person is not fully reflected in the best of source materials, the historian's (or theologian's) presupposition will determine how historical data is evaluated.

So, again, I am grateful for Ronald Numbers's perspective, as well as his valuable contribution as a member of our committee at the Historic Adventist Village (Battle Creek, Michigan) that is focused on replicating the Western Health Reform Institute, the precursor of the famous Battle Creek Sanitarium.

Notes and References

1. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1888), vi.
2. *Review and Herald*, Nov. 8, 1870.
3. Herbert E. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1998), 282, 304.





Ellen G. White family portrait, circa 1865.

C. C. Crisler and D. E. Robinson compiling *Life Sketches* in the library and vault in Ellen G. White's office near her home in Elmshaven, California, 1915.

4. *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948), 3:20, 21.

5. "God wants us all to have common sense, and He wants us to reason from common sense. Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relation of things." Ellen, G. White, *Selected Messages from the Writings of Ellen G. White* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1958-1980), 3:217.

6. *Great Controversy*, xi, xii.

7. *Christian Temperance and Bible Hygiene* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Good Health, 1890.) The preface does not name its author as J. H. Kellogg. However, in his presentation to the General Conference session on March 3, 1897, Kellogg said: "Now in the preface to *Christian Temperance* you will find a statement which I presume not very many of you have read. There is no name signed to the preface, but I wrote it. But if you will read it, you will find a statement to the effect that every single statement with reference to healthful living, and the general principles that underlie the subject, have been verified by scientific discovery. I sometimes see some of our brethren appear to be a little shaky on the testimonies; they do not know whether these things come from the Lord or not; but to those I invariably say that if you will study the subject of health reform from the testimonies, and

then from the light of scientific discovery—compare it with what science teaches at the present time—you will be amazed; you will see what a flood of light was given us thirty years ago. There is, however, a more amazing thing than that, and it is that this light which was given to us at that time, confirmed as it is by scientific discovery—I say the most amazing thing of all is that we as a people have turned our backs upon this, and have not accepted it, and believed in it as we should. I want to repeat it that there is not a single principle in relation to the healthful development of our bodies and minds that is advocated in these writings from Sister White, which I am not prepared to demonstrate conclusively from scientific evidence."

8. *Testimonies*, 3:470.

9. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord*, 399ff.

10. Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases from the Files of the Letters and Manuscripts* (Washington, D.C.: E. G. White Estate, 1981), 5:400, 401.

11. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health, A Study of Ellen G. White*, rev. ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), xv.

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