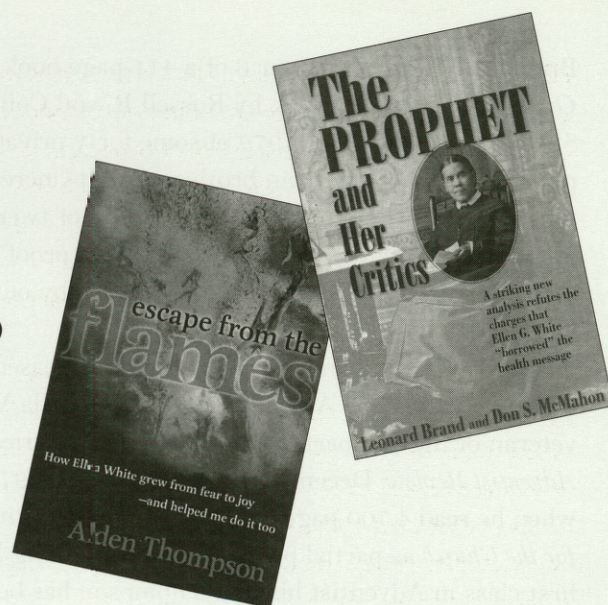


# Prophets Are Human! Are Humans Prophets?

By Arthur Patrick



The evidence suggests that both these statements indicate a three-letter response: Yes. If so, the Adventist dialogue and dialectic about Ellen White is set for a new level of intensity and usefulness. Indeed, five recent books by six Adventist authors, read together, indicate that a crucial tipping point in Adventist Studies is already here.

Graeme Bradford's *Prophets are Human* is from the publishing house serving the South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists (SPD). Released at the Ellen White Summit sponsored by the SPD in February 2004, Bradford's book—a mere ninety-one pages—delivers a heavy message in light language: Ellen White is an inspired prophet and an authentic human being. Unpacked, these concepts mean she was the messenger of a loving God to a struggling Advent movement and its people, even though she made mistakes in peripheral matters.

Bradford is at heart an evangelist; by employment he is a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Theology at Avondale College. According to the back cover of his book, he "is an honest seeker who writes honest answers to questions about Ellen White" (William Johnsson, editor, *Adventist Review*);

he merits "highest admiration...for his personal integrity and commitment to truth" (Barry Oliver, SPD secretary). SPD president Laurie Evans states in his foreword: "This book is long overdue."

Others offer contrasting assessments. One thought leader in Ellen White matters wrote a personal letter to Bradford from Adventist world headquarters in the United States. His twenty-nine pages of concerns are similar to those made public by Angel Rodriguez (*Reflections*, newsletter of the Biblical Research Institute, April 2005, pages 8–10) and Gerhard Pfandl, a BRI staffer in an eight-page review. All three focus on the core issue: inspiration. For Pfandl, "*Prophets are Human* is seriously deficient"; for Rodriguez it is "not representative" of Adventist thought.

But the most strident dismissal of

Graeme Bradford, *Prophets are Human* (Warburton, Victoria, Australia: Signs, 2005)

Leonard Brand and Don S. McMahon, *The Prophet and Her Critics* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2005)

Don S. McMahon, *Acquired or Inspired? Exploring the Origins of the Adventist Lifestyle* (Warburton, Victoria, Australia: Signs, 2005)

Russell R. Standish and Colin D. Standish, *The Greatest of All the Prophets* (Rapidan, Va.: Hartland, 2004)

Alden Thompson, *Escape from the Flames: How Ellen White Grew from Fear to Joy—and Helped Me to Do it Too* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2005).



Bradford comes in Chapter 6 of a 411-page book, *The Greatest of All the Prophets*, by Russell R. and Colin D. Standish, authors since 1979 of some forty privately published books. The twin brothers find it “incredible” that Bradford’s book “passed the scrutiny of twenty individuals” (30); they lament it is another proof that “alas, the omega of apostasy, as prophesied by our prophet for these days, is a reality” (43).

But help is at hand. Pacific Press has released a winsome volume by Alden Thompson of Walla Walla, veteran of the five-part “Sinai to Golgotha” series in *Adventist Review*, December 1981. Ever since 1979, when he read 4,700 pages of Ellen White’s *Testimonies for the Church* as partial preparation for teaching his first class in Adventist history, Thompson has been brewing his understanding of inspiration with reference to both Scripture and Ellen White’s writings.

The result is a “growth model” that offers solutions for the most intense issues that have been under debate for thirty-five years, since *Spectrum* began to bring them into the open for Adventists. Like Bradford’s book, Thompson’s volume is written in language accessible to a wide readership under an engaging title: *Escape from the Flames: How Ellen White Grew from Fear to Joy—and Helped Me to Do it Too*.

But there is more help, much more. Two new volumes present the research of an Australian medical specialist: *Acquired or Inspired? Exploring the Origins of the Adventist Lifestyle*, and *The Prophet and Her Critics*.

*The Prophet and Her Critics* is co-authored by Leonard Brand of Loma Linda University and Don S. McMahon of Melbourne, Australia. Brand is uniquely qualified to intensify the appeal of McMahon’s research for North American readers. Brand provides a context for re-evaluating the earlier research of Ronald Numbers on health (1976), Jon Butler on prophetic fulfillment (1979), and Walter Rea on literary relationships (1982) in particular.

Brand proposes that the “quality of their research” should be examined to see “(1) whether their logic meets an acceptable scholarly standard, avoiding serious logical errors; (2) whether their data support the conclusions they reach; and (3) whether their research design adequately supports their conclusions” (14). Then Chapter 5, titled “The Test,” summarizes McMahon’s research and notes that the CD included with McMahon’s volume makes available the data from which his conclusions were formed.

Back in 1987, McMahon was rereading the *Minis-*

*try of Healing*, testing his hunch “that most—if not all—modern, health/lifestyle risk factors were covered by Ellen White” (*Inspired or Acquired?* 139). A long engagement with historical and scientific issues followed, as he identified “health and medical statements” that implied *what* should be done by the individual and *why* it should be done.

Finally, with the help of a CD-ROM that enabled him to search Ellen White’s writings on computer and date any given statement, he compared her writings with those of five other nineteenth-century health advocates. Three medical colleagues checked McMahon’s analyses; a statistician contributed a probability study that gave him his greatest surprise: “The chances were astronomically against random chance” (141).

There may well be extended discussion amongst medicos and others about the specifics within McMahon’s analyses of the *whats* and the *whys* enunciated by Ellen White, and the ways in which these transcend or compare with the recommendations of Sylvester Graham, Bronson Alcott, Larkin B. Coles, James C. Jackson, and John Harvey Kellogg. The *what* statements in *Spiritual Gifts* (1864) may have a 96 percent congruence with twenty-first-century medical opinion; some 38 percent of its *why* statements are considered verified by the same standard. (McMahon offers analyses of White’s health writings up to the *Ministry of Healing* and wisely assesses the fluidity of medical opinion.)

Mathematics experts and statisticians will, no doubt, pore over the probability and variance proposals. But the big issue is clear: whereas most nineteenth-century medical writers wilt under scrutiny, Ellen White is exceptional. McMahon concludes: “When the knowledge of the mid-19th century is taken into consideration, it is impossible to exclude inspiration from Ellen White’s writings”; indeed, these writings “should not be rejected; it is essential they be carefully studied and appreciatively implemented” (142).

With Thompson and McMahon’s research plus Brand’s interpretive framework, Adventists lose some and win much. The Standish brothers lose most. Prophets are human. But humans are prophets. Anyone ignoring this groundbreaking research and its relevance for the ongoing conversation about the life and writings of Ellen White will quickly be out of date.

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