

# ELLEN WHITE

## Saving Ellen White

An Interview with Graeme Bradford | BY BONNIE DWYER

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Australian author Graeme Bradford has written three books about Ellen White to help people understand the controversy that has surrounded her during the past twenty years. His latest book, *More Than a Prophet*, is now available online at <[www.sdanet.org](http://www.sdanet.org)>. *Prophets Are Human* appeared in 2004; *People Are Human (Look What They Did to Ellen White)* came out in 2006.

**BD** When I visited Elmsbaven several years ago and learned about the many staff members that Ellen White had to assist her in the writing process, it dawned on me that so much of what we label with the name Ellen White really refers to what was done in her name. In other words, the White family and then the White Estate turned her into a brand. Along the way, Ellen White the person was totally lost.

Is that what you mean by the subtitle of your book—*Look What They Did to Ellen White*? Or are you referring to the way in which some church members have used her to judge other people and exert power over them?

**GB** I think it is well-acknowledged that she did have a team of assistants helping her with research for her books. How she interacted with them has been covered well by others. I do refer to the fact that W. W. Prescott was upset that the help coming from her assistants was not given enough prominence.

I also quote a letter from O. R. L. Crosier, her secretary, asking Prescott and Arthur G. Daniells for assistance over difficult areas. In addition, I refer to W. A. Spicer complaining that the bookmakers did not make enough changes

when *The Great Controversy* was revised. It would seem that the team working with her was far more involved than most thought.

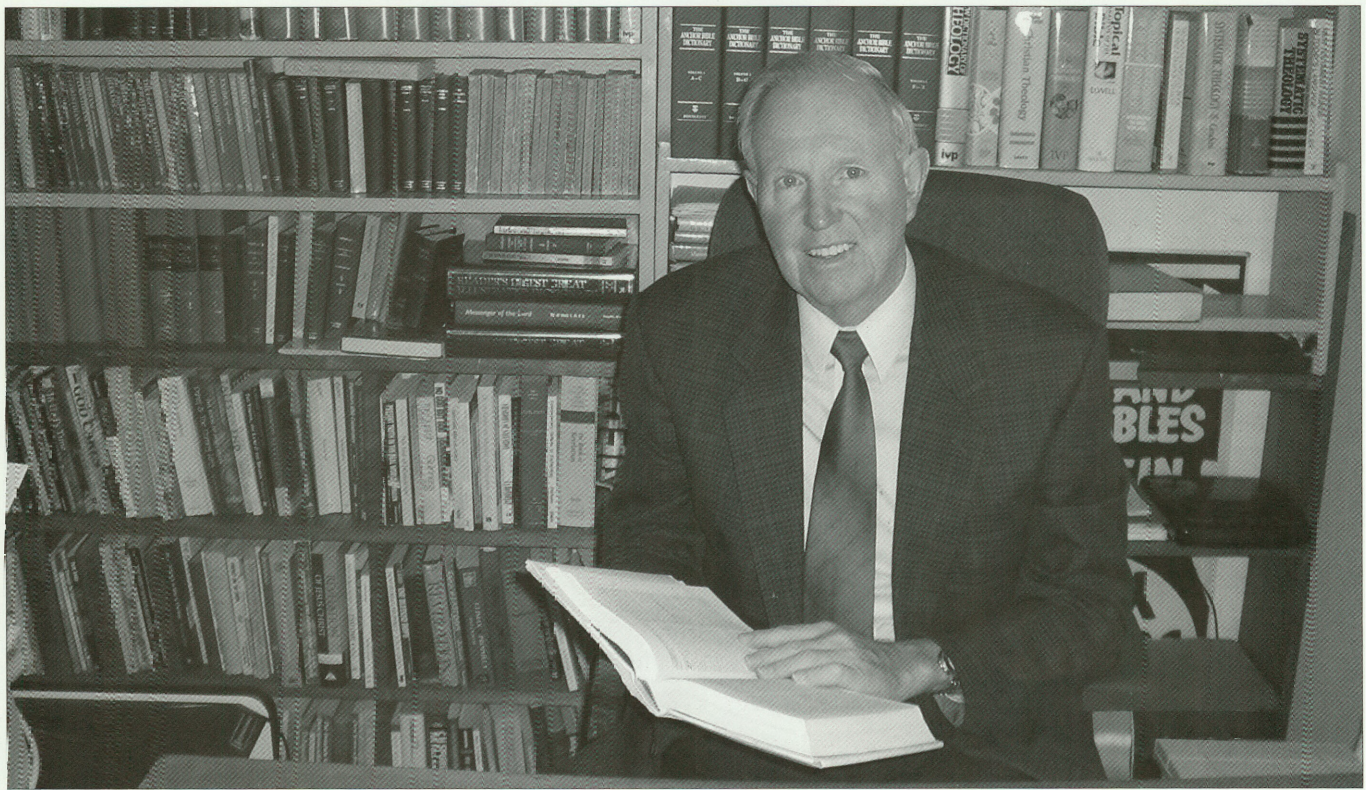
However, the subtitle of the book *More Than a Prophet* primarily refers to how her authority grew after her death: I have a whole chapter titled "Building an Inerrant Ellen White."

In my book, I show how contemporaries who worked with her understood how she did her work and respected her as a prophet or messenger from God. Yet they also saw that most in the Church were giving her authority in areas she would never have claimed. They express these concerns in the meeting after the Bible Conference of 1919.

Later on, conservative forces in Adventism took away the influence of those who understood the situation correctly and began to build and claim too much for her writings. She was used as the last word on almost every subject. Today we know this concept is wrong and we are recovering the real Ellen White.

**BD** If all the compilations of her writings and material produced since her death were set aside, do you think the young people of today—like the character Michael in your book—would be able to relate to her in a more positive way?

**GB** It would no doubt help. However, it would still be difficult because the language she uses belongs to a different era. The young people I have associated with from my teaching experiences seem to find that even the books she wrote during her lifetime are hard to handle. However,



the books she wrote and oversaw to their final stage do have more of a balanced approach to Christian living than many of the compilations put together since her death.

It often happens that the compilations reflect the burden of the compiler, who piles on statement after statement on one point. As such, the ideas can come across in a harsh manner. I am sure this approach will never attract young people.

I think most of the young people today are going to find their spiritual help from more contemporary authors. We are not going to change that since contemporary authors deal more with the real world the young people live in.

However, confidence in the ministry of Ellen White is important for the credentials of Adventism as a movement raised up by God, so we must keep trying to build the confidence of the young people.

**BD** You write in story form with what I assume to be fictitious characters mixed in with historical documents and actual events. Is this strictly a device to bring together different periods, or does it serve a larger purpose? Would turning the whole thing into a novel help people understand Ellen White?

**GB** I wrote the books in story form because people could more easily identify with their message. We wanted the books to be widely read, and this format is

more readable. Although the books are historical fiction, the characters are close to where many Adventists are in their experiences.

Everyone likes a story. The Bible for the most part is comprised of stories about people living out their lives. God chose to communicate with us through the lives of people. Jesus continually told stories about people. Maybe there is room for a novel on the life of Ellen White to be written as historical fiction, as you have suggested.

I am a member of the Southern Pacific Division Spirit of Prophecy Resources Committee, and I have said to its members that we have continually pictured her as an elderly woman, forgetting that she was young at one time. I have suggested that we make a movie of her as a young woman called by God to a challenging task.

It's a moving experience to read of her early calling and how she had many self-doubts. She certainly had a lot of opposition, along with ill health. Yet she was true to her calling and helped forge the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

I am still hoping this movie will come into being sometime. I even suggested we put it into a modern setting of a young seventeen-year-old girl being called of God to a prophetic office at Avondale College in the twenty-first century.

I think we need to come up with some different

approaches if we are going to catch the attention of the next generation. We need to picture her more as a young person, not unlike them in many respects. We need not be afraid to talk about her failures and limitations.

I think members of the next generation will find the real Ellen White, who was so human and faced some issues not unlike those they face, more attractive than the picture we show of her as an older woman without a smile giving directions on how to live the Christian life.

Let's face it, she did live in a different world and knew nothing about some of the things that tempt our young people today. That's why the youth will always turn to more contemporary authors.

**BD** *Early in your story, the Pastor Downton character prays, "that God will give them the truth regarding the church they all love dearly... (and) that they may be helped to want to know the truth no matter what the cost to them personally..." What has learning the truth cost you personally?*

**GB** Learning the truth about the ministry of Ellen White has not harmed my appreciation for her ministry. After reading my books, many people have written and said they have found a renewed confidence in the ministry of Ellen White and Adventism.

Pastors have said that they would never have lost members of their congregations if this material had always been available. Some former pastors have said that if they had read this material they would never have left the ministry.

One actually said that my book, *More Than a Prophet*, was part of a battle for the very soul of Adventism. He went on to say that what I am trying to do is tried by someone every thirty years or so and no one has yet succeeded. He wished me well. So those reactions have been encouraging. However, it has also caused some to look at me with suspicion.

You will notice in my books I talk about how most Adventists want to know the truth. However, I know also that many do not want to change any of their ideas, and they will resist any different thinking. I could almost write a book on how my books have been received by some.

There certainly have been efforts to place the ideas of my books in a false light and turn people away from reading them. I would hope that I will always be open

for correction and be willing to learn and adjust my thinking. As such, I need to have people look at the material critically. That has happened and I have benefited much from the input.

However, it is hard for me to see the ideas twisted and misrepresented. This is especially true when those who do this have the means of communication at their disposal and I have no way of making a correction. It is also hard for me to take when some tell me privately how much they appreciate the books, but then attend public meetings against them or write articles against them.

There is a lot of hard work to be done in reeducating our people, and those who ought to be doing so are not. It seems to me that many are content to sit back and not do the hard work. All the while this is happening, we are losing many of our people, who walk away from Adventism as they become discouraged.

There are many Web sites dedicated to destroying the ministry of Ellen White, and we have not effectively helped our people answer the questions. One of our prominent and respected scholars told me that when he meets an issue with Ellen White he just puts the problem on the shelf with the thought the problem really could be his misunderstanding. I am not sure that approach is going to help our people.

Our people want us to be open and honest. I remember a medical doctor who was shaken by the new material on Ellen White who told me that he could forgive his church for making mistakes but that it was hard for him to accept that his church had not always been honest with him regarding these issues. I believe his thinking reflects what a lot of others think, as well.

I have been running Ellen G. White Update meetings now for some decades, and every time I feel as though I am putting my head on the chopping block. It's nice to be able to say to people, "what you have always believed is right." However, it's hard to tell them that they have been given some wrong ideas regarding Ellen White. Now that the material is out there on DVD and in books, I am hoping not to need to do it so much.

**BD** *You mention that you have included new material in your latest book? What is the newest information about Ellen White that you have brought to the table?*

**GB** For the most part, I have not developed any new ideas, historically or biblically. For the most part, I have read widely and brought together the material researched by others. That is why there are so many footnotes in my books. I have often said that what I have done is just put two and two together.

A lot of the historical material has come from Adventist historians. I was sponsored to travel throughout North America in the early 1990s by the Trans-Tasman Union, when I was ministerial director. During that time, I spoke with many former leaders and people who had lived through the early and middle part of the last century. Some of these people are now dead and I have recorded their thoughts on video and in my books. Their insights have also helped me put things together.

Even the material that many will find new is material I have gleaned from non-Adventist biblical scholars regarding how the gift of prophecy manifests itself in the Bible. I have yet to read any Adventist scholar who deals with this sort of biblical data, which is so important to a correct understanding of the ministry of Ellen White.

This material figures in the early section of the book *More Than a Prophet*. In the 1982 meetings held by the White Estate, attendees searched for answers to questions in a paper presented by Robert Olson on inerrancy in inspired writings. Now I think the answer has come from highly regarded, conservative non-Adventist biblical scholars.

I have applied this material to the writings of Ellen White, and I think it unlocks answers to many of the puzzling questions they were struggling with.

One new thought unique to me is the material contained in the chapter titled "The Multigifted Prophet." I think we have made a mistake in seeing only the prophetic gift operating in the ministry of Ellen White.

Spiritual gifts come in clusters. She did say that her work included more than a prophetic ministry. I think this needs opening up and exploring. I think in doing this we answer many questions as to how she did her work. This is why the book is called *More Than a Prophet*.

**BD** *In the last year, you have chosen some unusual ways of publishing your material—even putting your book online. How would you compare the response to these publishing ventures independent of the church press to your experience with the Signs Publishing House in Australia? Do you reach a different audience?*

**GB** In answer to this question, let me give a little background about what caused me to write these books. A few years ago, a video was produced by some former Adventists titled *The Spirit Behind the Church*. It was designed to destroy the confidence of our people in the ministry of Ellen White, along with their confidence in Adventism. It was working very effectively, since many of our people—as well as people interested in joining our church—were affected by the powerful testimonies given by former Adventists, some of whom had been in the ministry. We have examples of non-SDAs who were threatening to take their children out of our schools.

The video was shown to our South Pacific Division Biblical Research Committee (of which I was a member). As a result, I said to our president that I felt I needed to make a response, since no one else seemed to be interested. He encouraged me to do so and said that the South Pacific Division administration would back me. I was also encouraged to make a video in response.

I immediately went to work on both with a sense of urgency because something needed to be done as soon as possible. Eventually, the video was produced as a DVD, which came out under the sponsorship of the Biblical Research Committee with the title *Prophetic Inspiration*. In this DVD, I present material along with many other scholars, such as Alan Lindsay (the presenter for Keepers of the Flame) and Robert Olson (former director of the White Estate).

The manuscript for the book sat before the Biblical Research Committee for almost two years. Eventually, the chairperson told me that the members were not prepared to say whether I was right or wrong. However, the nature of the material was such that they felt they did not want to get involved. I was given encouragement to try the material out before other Adventist scholars and get some feedback.

I then decided to take some of the material from this manuscript and produce two smaller books, which would be presented in story form. Signs Publishing Company in Australia published these two books as *Prophets Are Human*, and *People Are Human—Look at What They Did to Ellen White*. These books have sold well in Australia and New Zealand. Although they are available in North America through Adventist Book Centers, they have had little impact.

Biblical Perspectives, part of the ministry of Samuel Bacchiocchi, has published the larger manuscript. It is titled *More Than a Prophet*. It is interesting to notice that this book has

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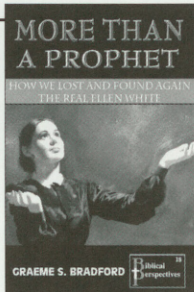
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had a larger impact in North America than in Australia, possibly because Bacchiocchi markets beyond North America.

He also got me to put the material in a condensed form on a two-hour DVD. Pastors show the DVD to congregations, and then take orders for the book. *More Than a Prophet* contains more material and goes into greater depth than the two smaller books.

I have given permission to put the book *More Than a Prophet* online to reach a wider audience. In fact, *More Than a Prophet* has now been put online and can be read by opening up <[www.sdanet.org/atissue](http://www.sdanet.org/atissue)>.

When you open up the site, you will be able to click on *More Than a Prophet* and read the entire book. Those who have prepared the site have also added an appendix, as well as significant documents from which I have quoted.

This site gives people the opportunity to respond to the material presented. I am also able to respond and answer questions.

**BD** *What is the most meaningful thing (book, concept, quotation, anecdote) for you about Ellen White?*

**GB** While in the process of becoming an Adventist, I read the chapter on Gethsemane in the *Desire of Ages*. To read that chapter was a very moving experience for me. It gave me such an appreciation of what Christ endured for me that it revolutionized my whole Christian experience.

As have many others, I have found that the greatest evidence for Ellen White's inspiration is the way she upholds Jesus and builds Christian commitment. She was a woman whom God used mightily to build our Christian lives and increase our devotion to Jesus. ■

Bonnie Dwyer is editor of *Spectrum* magazine.

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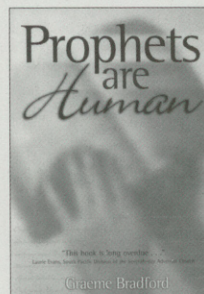
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