

LEGACY OF

ELLEN WHITE



Straitjacket or Flight Suit? *Ellen White's Role* in the Adventist Theology of the Twenty-first Century | BY DAVID H. THIELE

When my article, "Who is the Seventh-day Adventist in 2006," was in the draft stages, a friend and colleague read through it.¹ His response? "I don't think you're right. Denying 1844 does cause Adventist theology to unravel at one point at least: Ellen White." His point is not difficult to see. Ellen White taught that the Judgment began in 1844. To deny the date means she was in error and therefore not a true prophet. Denying the prophetic gift of Ellen G. White has the potential to unravel the entire theology of the Church.

My colleague did say that this was not his own position, but he was sensitive to the fact that many people would view it exactly this way. My attendance at Sabbath School on a recent visit to my home church in rural northern Australia reminded me of how authoritative Ellen White's voice remains to many people, even when she makes incidental comments in passing. This, of course, leads to the heart of the most confronting question for contemporary Adventist theology: What role does Ellen White legitimately play in Adventist theology today?

Theology is sometimes described as "faith seeking understanding." As society changes, the nature of the questions it faces changes along with it. The adequacy of answers to questions given in early settings is reevaluated and new answers to new questions formulated. This means that every generation of the Christians *must* reformulate and recontextualize the church's theology in order to remain true to the faith of its spiritual ancestors.

The easiest way to see this in practice is to consider church standards. Ellen G. White spoke against building sanitariums out of brick rather than wood. However, today the Sydney Adventist Hospital (formally, the Sydney Sanitarium) is a stunning complex made of

brick—the original timber structure having been demolished in 1973. Similarly, Ellen White spoke out against riding bicycles. Yet today at Pacific Adventist University, the dean of the School of Theology, no less, often rides a bicycle to work.

The truth is that as the contextual factors of extravagant cost and connotative meaning of brick buildings and bicycles changed the rationale for Ellen White's caution about them evaporated. The Church as a whole moved on. Being faithful to Ellen White's counsels at this point today may mean forgoing the Ferrari and the multimillion-dollar mansion.

The same process clearly happens with other aspects of theology. It cannot be denied, for example, that the sheer passing of time after 1844 meant that the pioneers had to abandon the view enunciated by James White that marriage was "a wile of the Devil."

Similarly, the appearance of new converts and adherents to the advent message in the late 1840s and early 1850s caused the Church to re-evaluate the "shut door" doctrine, and the American Civil War brought issues to the fore that had hitherto not troubled the early Adventist Church. To what extent should Adventists support the North against the South? To what extent did conscription override an individual's responsibility before God for actions taken in war, and transfer it to the government instead?

Nor did this process end with the death of the pioneers. The youth revolution of the 1960s with its vocal opposition to the Vietnam War meant that the Church had to consider again all sorts of issues of war and peace, dissent, and authority. Today, the Church's attitude to women mirrors the fact that society as a whole has moved to address this topic. Our answers may in many cases be different from those of society as a

whole, but in order to be relevant to society and even *in* society we must address the same issues. The alternative is to become a museum of nineteenth century thought—like the Amish of popular imagination—vigorously answering questions no one is asking any longer.

To be sure, some would suggest that all of this is misguided. Ellen White has spoken and no interpretation of Scripture different from hers can be valid; no question not addressed by her can be important. Ellen White is to be believed and obeyed, not interpreted, much less reinterpreted.

It is also a difficult position to maintain consistently. I well remember a layman who told me on one occasion that Ellen White's statements about still having much to learn about Daniel and Revelation must refer to Daniel 11 because she wrote so little on this chapter. On another occasion, the same man told me that Daniel 11 was obviously not important for us because Ellen White wrote so little on it!

Such a position uses Ellen White as a strait-jacket to prevent movement in Adventist theology for the fear of the damage such movement would do. But standing still is movement, too! As the world moves, those who stand still are left further and further behind. In order to remain in the same relative position we must also be moving, developing, growing.

A fitting analogy is that of the human organism itself. A baby is born and under ideal conditions is "perfect." I am here not making a theological statement about original sin. The baby has the right number of limbs and appropriate mental and physical potentials. People "ooh" and "ahh" and say "Isn't she beautiful." And so she is. But if that very same "perfect" baby does not develop and grow, the beauty fades and the sense of tragedy grows. The child who has only the same abilities as

the baby is regarded as retarded. Instead of "Isn't she beautiful?" people say "Isn't it sad?"

To insist on a rigid following of Ellen White without interpretation or reinterpretation is to demand a church with a retarded theology—a theology once "perfect" and appropriate but now underdeveloped. It is not difficult to see the development in the Church's theology in the pioneer period: the adoption of health reform, the development of a greater emphasis on the gospel in the wake of 1888, the emergence of a full Trinitarianism. But it should not be assumed that the Church's theology reached its full maturity by the time of Ellen White's death. Indeed, the publication of *Questions on Doctrine* indicates that development was still under way.

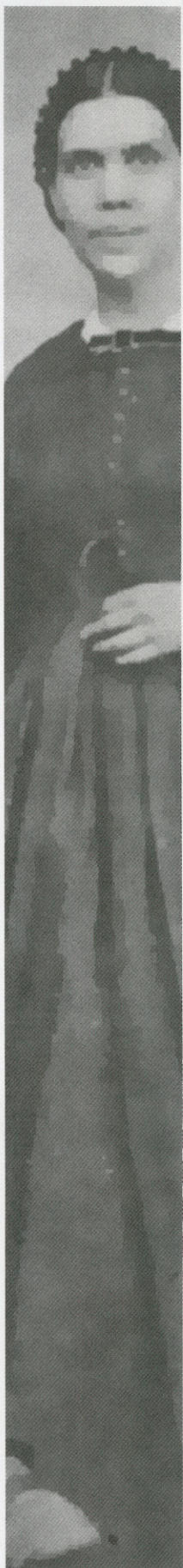
Of course, some may wish to conclude that if Ellen White is not to be obeyed unreflectively, she must consequently have no role to play at all. Is Ellen White only a historical relic of a bygone age? Can we simply discard her and go on our way without her? I believe such an approach is tragically misguided. God has given guidance through Ellen White and to neglect such guidance is foolishness of the worst kind.

There is no doubt that Ellen White's counsel guided the Church through a maze of complex issues and contributed a great deal to its development. One can point to the Church's educational and medical institutions, the organizational structure of the Church and its global evangelistic emphasis as areas where the prophetic ministry bore fruit. The Church would have been immeasurably poorer without the work of Ellen White. The same is certainly true in the sphere of the Church's theology. Ellen White was at the forefront of promoting the proclamation of righteousness by faith and the full development of the Trinity.

To reject Ellen White today as being outdated and irrelevant would be to turn our backs on this amazing source of counsel, guidance, and wisdom. The church of the second century effectively severed its roots with

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the original Jewish church of the previous century. The church was increasingly cultured and cultivated and correspondingly embarrassed by its origins in Judaism. The result was ultimately the development of medieval theology, the establishment of Platonic dualism as the dominant model of Christian anthropology, and the hideous development of systematic Christian anti-Semitism. Nothing compares with the severing of ties with the foundational church in terms of the catastrophic consequences that followed.

Would Adventism fare any better if it disconnected itself from the pioneers and especially from Ellen White? Absolutely nothing suggests that it would. Given that the expectation of the Advent is already suffering from the time lag since 1844, could the Church even survive as "Adventist" if Ellen White were rejected? It may sound far-fetched to suggest that the Church could ever move away from a premillennial eschatology, but it should not be forgotten that historically many revivals of premillennialism have petered out into amillennialism or postmillennialism.

So how is Ellen White to be utilized in Adventist theology if she is not abandoned or followed slavishly? Can she serve as a flight suit, helping Adventist theology to soar in the twenty-first century? I believe she can.

In order to discern Ellen White's role it is necessary to distinguish between the *shape* and *content* of Adventist theology. The shape is the broad outline, determined by the specifics emphasized; the content is the actual assertions made in those areas. It is useful to look at the idea of the imminence of Second Coming. This is surely part of the shape of Adventist theology. The content of our teaching at this point has changed over the years, as time has gone on.

A number of years ago, while I was teaching at Sonoma Adventist College (a junior training school run by the Papua New Guinea

Union Mission), a first-year student from an extremely isolated area in the Papua New Guinea highlands wrote an essay for me on the signs of the Second Coming. Unfortunately, he chose as his main source an evangelistic paperback written by Arthur S. Maxwell in the 1920s and donated to the Sonoma Library by some kindly individual in Australia who had no further use for it.

Not one of the "amazing developments" in science, technology, and society extracted by my student from Maxwell's book as evidence of the soon coming of Christ had any contemporary force. Every one of them had been antiquated by the march of time and further developments. Maxwell's *content* has had to be abandoned (at least at this point), but the shape of his theology (imminence) remains valid.

Might this distinction also prove fruitful with Ellen White? God has given her to the Church as a gift. One of her roles has been to guide the Church in shaping its theology. Today, she remains as a guardian of that "shape." Ellen White indicates the areas that Adventist theology is to emphasize. Her siding with Waggoner and Jones at the 1888 General Conference session has meant that the Adventist Church has been obsessed with the gospel in a way few other denominations in the twentieth century were.

Unfortunately, much of that obsession has been directed to recovering the content of the 1888 Message itself, which like nineteenth-century Adventist theology generally was underdeveloped—a work in process, not a completed product. But Ellen White made it abundantly clear that the gospel was part of the sharp of Adventist theology.

Similarly, eschatology forms a crucial part of the shape of Adventist theology: premillennialism, imminence, the lack of prophetic significance of establishment of the modern state of Israel, and so forth. But here it is especially clear that we cannot simply retain the content of Ellen White's eschatology if we wish to retain its shape.

A powerful example is seen in the pioneer understanding of the signs in the sun, moon, and stars. With- in living memory, the stars had fallen, the sun darkened, and the moon turned blood red. It all indicated to the pioneers that Jesus' return was imminent. When we move forward a century and a half, whatever else these events might indicate, they provide no support for the suggestion of the imminence of the Second Coming. At best, they might indicate its *delay*, but certainly not its *nearness*. If we wish to retain the shape (imminence) we must alter the content.

In exactly the same way, the pioneers saw the fact that the Judgment had begun in 1844 as a theological sign, as it were, of the end times. God had begun his last great work of judgment, surely it was earth's last hour, the last generation was living with the full expectation of never dying. Such a position is almost impossible to hold today. If the Judgment has been going on for 162 years, the world is populated by the seventh generation since 1844. If the process has taken that long, perhaps it will take another century.

This problem lies at the heart of our engagement

with the entire content of the pioneer eschatology. The pioneers saw their entire end-time scenario unfolding before them. American Adventists—the only kind there were at the time—served time in prison for breaking Sunday laws. A national Sunday law was put to Congress. The image to the Beast was forming before their eyes. How could they not see the last great wave of persecution targeting Sabbath keepers just around the corner? Things were urgent, and everywhere current events confirmed their faith.

Today, it's different. A world church puzzles over how Sunday laws could ever be brought in to force in Hindu, Buddhist, or Islamic countries, not to mention Israel. Tradition-minded Adventists console themselves with the fact that "things can change very quickly," but in truth, the evidence before our eyes does not suggest it is going to happen anytime soon. A focus on Sunday laws today means an inevitable concentration on what must still take place before the end is truly near, how distant the end is, instead of how close-as it seemed to the pioneers. These examples could be multiplied ad nauseam, but that is not necessary.

In order to be an Adventist in 2008, do you have to put your brain on a shelf?

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How can Ellen White function productively in the Adventist theologizing of the twenty-first century? If her writings are not to be a straitjacket cramping and restricting creative theological thought, can they serve another function? The analogy of a different piece of apparel may help: the flight suit. A flight suit does not fly a plane. It is even possible to fly a plane without wearing a flight suit. But a flight suit aids a pilot and makes the processes of flight easier.

Ellen White's writings can function in a similar way. Are they necessary for drawing the truth from Scripture accurately? She herself denies this. However, her writings—which are primarily homelitic rather than exegetical—can provide a useful tool for Bible students to use. Firstly, her writings need to be studied today with a view to the basic thrust of her message—its shape rather than its specific content. This means far greater emphasis needs to be given to the theological principles she enun-

ated and less to the specific examples she used to illustrate them. The recent work of Don McMahon, which shows that Ellen White's health counsels are confirmed to a far greater extent by modern science than are the reasons she gives to justify her counsels, may provide a working model here.

McMahon's research suggests that God gave Ellen White genuine insight into healthful living but allowed her to promote these insights using arguments that were immediately persuasive to the audience/readers or her own day—even if they were not actually scientifically correct. Theologians use the term *accommodation* for this divine condescension in communication with humanity. This model, applied to theology, suggests that the specific arguments used by Ellen White may not be useful today but that the essential thrust of her message retains validity.

Adventist theologians ought, then, to be encouraged to reflect creatively on how to recreate the effect of her message in today's world. If part of the shape of Ellen White's theology was imminence, how can we almost a hundred years after her death recreate in a credible way that sense of imminence?

To attempt simply to repeat the content of Ellen White's theology is to turn her writings into a theological straitjacket. To jettison her theological insights altogether would be tragic and certainly signal the end of Adventism—at least in any form recognizable as being continuous with the Church of yesterday and today. But to reflect creatively on the shape of her theology would provide the Church with a flight suit equipping its theology to soar to previously unthought-of heights. ■

Notes and References

1. *Spectrum* 34.2 (spring 2006): 72–77.

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