

The Politics of the Prophetic Gift

by Gilbert M. Valentine | A REVIEW BY DOUGLAS MORGAN

Valentine, Gilbert M., *The Prophet and the Presidents*, (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2011).

As the General Conference moves forward with plans to circulate 50 million copies of *The Great Controversy* in the coming year, Gilbert Valentine, in *The Prophet and the Presidents*, takes us back to a time when denominational leaders resisted Ellen White's pleas for aggressive marketing of the book. It was a different era in the politics of the prophetic gift.

Politics? In the broad and neutral sense, any endeavor to influence the behavior of others, be it through a sermon, article, committee discussion, blog, or tweet, is "political." The same goes for a "testimony," as Valentine shows in this groundbreaking study of the power relationship between prophetic and administrative authority during an era filled with upheavals of extraordinary importance for the future direction of the denomination. He immerses us in Ellen White's own politics—her strategic choices, successes and frustrations in influencing church leadership during the General Conference presidencies of O. A. Olsen, G. A. Irwin, and A. G. Daniells in the years from 1888 until her death in 1915. At the same time, Valentine shows us the agency of these presidents and other influential figures, both in seeking to influence Ellen White and to marshal her "testimonies" to their political advantage.

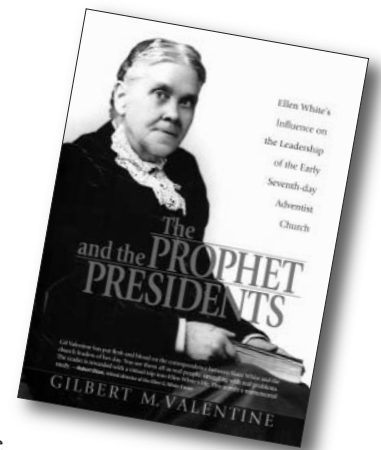
My sense is that, if given due attention, *The Prophet and the Presidents* will be seen as more than just a thoroughly researched, well-written book, but as a landmark in Ellen White historiography. It is not bombshell revelations that make it stand out in this way, though I suspect that even the most well-informed reader will find valuable and perhaps surprising new information in it. It is rather the rigor, depth, and candor with which Valentine consolidates and advances trends that have been building for some time toward studying Ellen White's prophetic career in the light of the very human vicissitudes of her life experience and its cultural context, rather than working with her writings as a

kind of compendium of disembodied oracles.

The questions Valentine raises and the way he goes about answering them will be unsettling to some. He recognizes inconsistencies in Ellen White's writings and does not try to smooth them all out. Nor does he assume that she always had the higher moral ground or purer motives than her opponents. He is, of course, not the first to take such an approach. The same could also be said not only of anti- Ellen White polemicists, but also the pioneering scholarship of Ronald Numbers, Jonathan Butler, and Ronald Graybill in the 1970s and 1980s.¹ But while the work of these scholars involved serious turbulence in their relationship with the Adventist church, Valentine's book is a self-described "believer's history," published by Pacific Press. And there's no mistaking the "believer" part. Valentine has served the church for decades as a pastor, professor, and administrator, and is currently chair of the Department of Administration and Leadership at La Sierra University. He is the author of several scholarly works on Adventist history, including *W. W. Prescott: Forgotten Giant of Adventism's Second Generation* (Review and Herald, 2005). He conveys a deep desire to help his church derive fuller, richer nurture from the writings that perpetuate Ellen White's prophetic ministry. It seems valid, then, to discuss first the book's contribution to historical understanding, then comment on its significance for the believing community, recognizing that these categories cannot be neatly or fully separated.

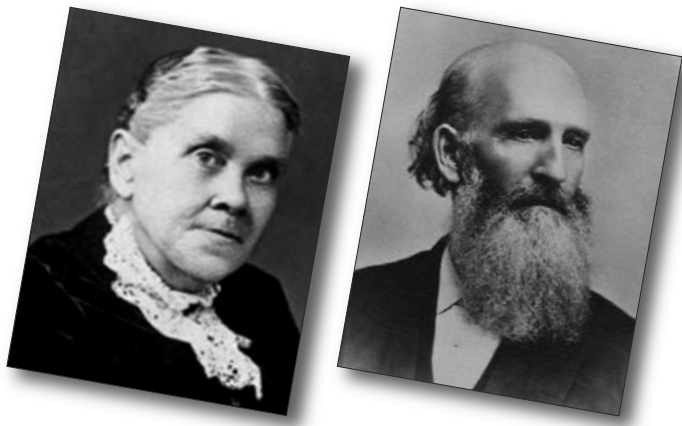
Prophecy and Administration in Tension

Valentine undertakes a dual historical task. He seeks first to analyze the interaction between the two foremost channels of governance in the church: the charismatic authority of Ellen White and the institutional authority of the General



Conference. In so doing, one of his most valuable and original achievements is illuminating the perspectives of the presidents—the complexities they faced, and the varying ways and extent to which each took initiatives to shape events, rather than simply function as passive instruments of directives from Ellen White.

Still, the author's foremost interest, and surely that of his potential readers, remains with the prophet. Thus,



Ellen and husband James White, who died in 1881

Valentine's second major goal is to broaden the range of contextual factors considered in studying Mrs. White's work. Going beyond simply the historical circumstances—the consideration of “time and place” that she herself urged as essential—Valentine contends for much fuller attention to the role of personal circumstances—family and financial stresses, and, bound up with these, emotional and physical health.

Valentine also brings gender into the picture, though he does not press it very far as an analytical tool. Nonetheless, his narrative provides revealing close-ups of the female prophet's struggle to bring prophetic authority to bear on the male leaders in the denomination in the decades following the death of her husband, James, in 1881.² Valentine picks up the story in 1888, when Norwegian-born Ole A. Olsen assumed the General Conference presidency, replacing George I. Butler, who bitterly opposed Ellen White's tolerance, then endorsement, of the “new theology” proponents, Alonzo T. Jones and Ellet J. Waggoner.

Olsen, the most yielding of the presidents in responding to Ellen White's exhortations, turned out to be the least effective in implementing her wishes, making him, in turn, the brunt of increasingly sharp rebukes.

As Ellen White saw it, Olsen's mandate, as an outsider to Battle Creek, was to break up the dominance that a small circle of leaders held over the Review and Herald Publishing Association and the General Conference itself, particularly in its financial affairs. Antagonism built between these leaders and Ellen White as she decried their resistance to the spiritual and theological reforms sparked by the 1888 conference and charged them with rapacious business practices, harsh treatment of employees, and injustice to authors, not least herself, with regard to marketing, royalties, and copyrights.

After leaving for Australia in 1891 with tensions high over such matters, Ellen White became increasingly critical of Olsen's indirect, conciliatory style of dealing with powerful figures she opposed, such as Harmon Lindsay, General Conference treasurer, and Archibald R. Henry, who not only managed the Review and Herald but also chaired the General Conference Association, the holding corporation for the denomination's legal and financial affairs. With Olsen's weakness, the problems in Battle Creek had only worsened, she wrote in 1894, characterizing the denomination's venerable publishing company as “a den of thieves and money changers.”³

At the General Conference, progress on organizational reforms to decentralize denominational administration was halting at best. Meanwhile, the depression that began in 1893 placed severe financial pressure on the church, already deeply in debt, making Olsen even more dependent on the expertise of men such as Henry, whose skill as an investor brought badly needed financial relief benefit to the denomination, even as his creative financial schemes at times seem to have shaded into venality.

As Ellen White's frustrations grew, she came to regard her move to Australia as a serious mistake, for which she blamed Olsen. She had talked him out of relinquishing office in 1893, but as the 1897 General Conference approached it became clear that she wanted a change, and Olsen seems to have been genuinely relieved to step down.

However, the election of George A. Irwin—a man about whom she knew little—came as a disappointing surprise to Ellen White. She had favored the denomination's leading educator, W. W. Prescott, as best equipped to lead out in the desired reforms. She was initially cool towards Irwin, and more than a year after he took office commented in a letter to E. J. Waggoner that the “proper” persons had not yet taken leadership in Battle Creek. Yet as Irwin made dili-

gent efforts to implement her counsel, with a measure of greater success than Olsen, their relationship warmed. Along with his receptivity, Irwin seemed to take somewhat greater initiative in sending her his questions and assessments, even correcting her facts on occasion.

Despite this gradual growth of rapport, and despite key personnel changes (including the removal of Henry) and implementation of reforms at the Review and Herald, Ellen White continued an unrelenting barrage of testimonies denouncing management of the publishing work in 1898 and 1899. With the General Conference appearing impotent to resolve this and other problems, and as the structural reforms, which she advocated to break up the “kingly power” held by a few men, were stalled, the intensity of her frustration reached its peak. Her declaration in 1898 that she no longer regarded the General Conference as “the voice of God” is relatively familiar, but Valentine highlights some even more vivid passages from the same manuscript: She declared, for example, that the leaders in office were no more qualified for the task “than are children to guide steamships over the broad ocean.”⁴

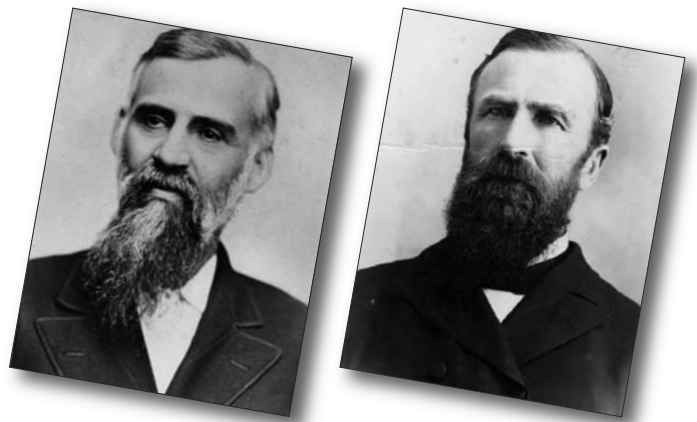
The steamship image may have suggested itself because the question of her return to America had been under consideration for some time, and she finally decided to do so in 1900, with the 1901 General Conference on the horizon. I found Valentine’s narrative of the run-up to the transformative conference held in Battle Creek that year particularly riveting. He brings to light how interconnected concerns in the United States, Australia, and South Africa shaped events, and how the South African Wessels family, major donors to the church whose largesse was drawn from a diamond fortune, played an influential role. In all of this, alignments began to solidify over Dr. John Harvey Kellogg’s growing assertion of the independence his medical missionary enterprises had from denominational governance.

The relationship between Ellen White and Arthur G. Daniells, who took the helm in 1901, was the closest of the three that Valentine analyzes, but also the one in which the pressure exerted by the prophetic and presidential poles of authority was the most bi-directional. The question of which of these two strong-willed leaders was the more dominant in their relationship has been a matter of much speculation and debate. Valentine does not attempt a definitive resolution of the question, but

the impressive range of evidence he brings together advances the discussion.

Though Ellen White was the spiritual mother of the entire Adventist family, the epochal struggle for the soul of the denomination that followed the 1901 conference pitted two of her closest “sons” against each other. The nurture that Kellogg received from the Whites is fairly well known, but it may be less well known that while in Texas during the late 1870s, James and Ellen also shared their home for a year with newlyweds Arthur and Mary Daniells. Arthur, in his first assignment in denominational service, was assisting R. M. Kilgore as “tentmaster.” Daniells’ sojourn with the Whites had been a pleasant one, and his bond with Ellen White had strengthened as they had worked closely together in Australia during the 1890s.

Their relationship, however, had its share of friction, and it was by no means a foregone conclusion that she would side with him against Kellogg, though she did so when push came to shove. Valentine shows how Ellen White, following the 1901 conference, continued to demonstrate considerable support for the decentralizing aspects of organizational reform. She wanted the church’s



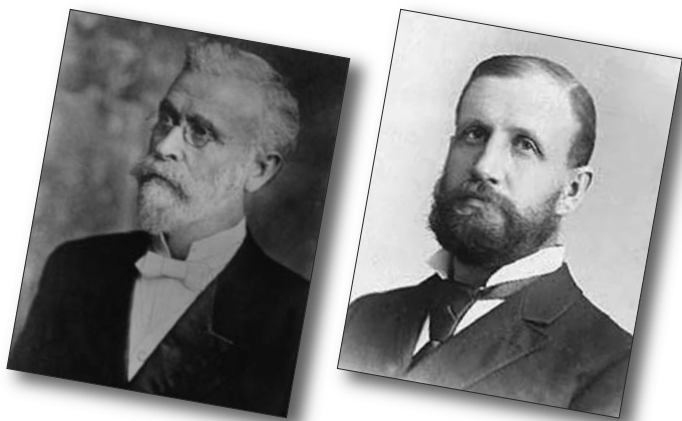
General Conference Presidents George I. Butler and Ole A. Olsen

reformers and innovators, such as Jones, Waggoner, David Paulson, Percy T. Magan, Edward L. Sutherland, and her son Edson to thrive with as much freedom as possible from the strictures of an overbearing General Conference administration. Daniells, on the other hand, emphasized the centralizing aspect of reform: achievement of greater coordination and unity by bringing the agencies for various lines of church endeavors under the umbrella of conference administration.

While Daniells took a firm and unyielding stand

against Kellogg's refusal to accept General Conference oversight of Battle Creek Sanitarium and the Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association, Ellen White repeatedly pushed the president to make efforts for conciliation. Until the stormy Lake Union Conference session of 1904 brought an end to hopes for such efforts, Daniells and his allies were never sure on which side Ellen White would end up. Daniells apparently took some credit for influencing the prophet away from her sympathies with Kellogg, and, arguably, never pursued reconciliation in as whole-hearted and persistent fashion as she would have liked. In a sense, then, one could say that Daniells "won" this round, though she kept him off balance throughout.

However, Ellen White did not surrender her resistance to top-down authority. If Kellogg was too defiant, powerful, and theologically fuzzy to be entrusted with independence, she believed it could and should be afforded those more in harmony with her agenda. Daniells's greatest perplexity and most direct clash with Ellen White came on this point. Ellen White wanted Daniells both to endorse Magan and Sutherland in conducting their enterprises in the South on an independent basis *and* to make a large appropriation from the denominational treasury to their Madison Sanitarium in Nashville. In other words, they



GC President G. A. Irwin and educator W. W. Prescott

were to be allowed to solicit donations from the faithful that might otherwise be given through regular denominational channels, while at the same time receiving funds given through those regular channels—funds desperately needed to support countless denominational institutions around the world—all the while remaining unaccountable to denominational leadership. Daniells was diplomatic yet

firm in his resistance. Ellen White never abandoned her position, but eventually made peace with the reality that the sanitarium could not be financially sustained.

With regard to evangelistic work in the large cities, Ellen White's exhortations held greater sway. A series of escalating reproofs of Daniells' failure to address this matter culminated with her declaration in 1910 that he was no longer "prepared to direct the work of the General Conference."⁵ Such a strong reproof from the prophet, even at the age of 83, was enough to topple a president, even one as strong as Daniells. In discussing the matter with his colleagues, Daniells expressed willingness to leave the presidency and accept reassignment. Instead, the General Conference Committee granted him a one-year leave to conduct public evangelism, which he did in New York City. For Daniells, the greatest value of the experience seemed to be gaining firsthand awareness that the denomination was not well prepared to work effectively in the cities. Yet the fact that the initiative had been undertaken was enough to lift the burden that had so strongly pressed on Ellen White's soul.

Stressed-out Prophet?

If reception of prophetic counsel sometimes meant daunting, even overwhelming challenges for church presidents, exercising the prophetic gift was no easy matter either. In his crucial Chapter 11, Valentine pulls together his case for greater attention to the personal factors affecting the prophet—"emotions, health concerns, and specific life circumstances"—in constructing a "hermeneutical paradigm" for understanding Ellen White's writings.⁶

Here and throughout the book, Valentine brings to light a gamut of human contingencies in communicating the messages of divine origin, including rare occasions in which they were sent to the wrong person. Most striking of all are Ellen White's own self-doubts and frustrations about communicating the Lord's messages. She had to balance her duty to convey messages of reproof with her perception of the recipient's ability to receive it, and more than once worried that she had been too harsh or hasty or otherwise inadequate. Misunderstanding and misapplication of her testimonies at times compounded her frustration.

Valentine suggests that the hyperbole, extreme metaphors, and "super-heated language" to which Ellen White often resorted should not be taken with mechanical literalism. That seems noncontroversial. He ventures onto

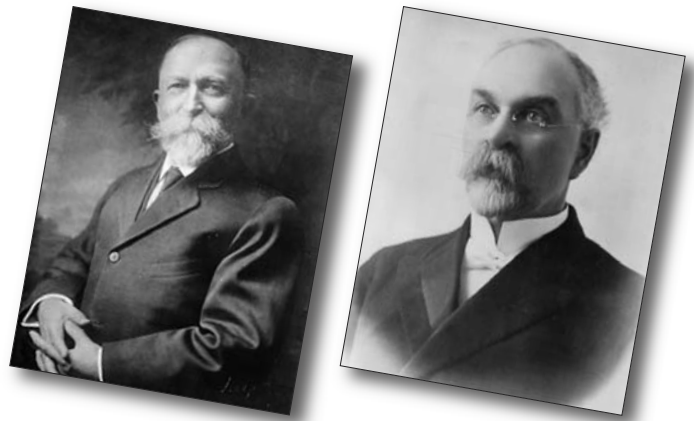
riskier ground, however, in weighing the influence of such factors as sleep deprivation, stressful circumstances, and self-interest, raising the possibility that calculated prophetic principle was not always the governing impulse in writings.

He is particularly persuasive in depicting the impact of her circumstances and emotional outlook while in Australia. Severe financial “embarrassment” (debt) causing her to fall behind in paying wages to her staff and curtailing her ability to support projects important to her—her own in Australia and her son, Edson’s, in the American South—surely colored the intensity of her denunciations of the unjust, oppressive practices of the *Review and Herald*. During this time, she declared (in retrospect) that “his satanic majesty was in the management of my books.”¹⁷

Two reservations come to mind, however. The first has to do with the extent to which the personal, emotional factors that Valentine highlights were in the driver’s seat, rather than prophetic principle. For example, did a large measure of the fervor of Ellen White’s calls for outreach to African Americans in the South in the 1890s derive from the fact that it was her son who took the lead in the project? Did her seemingly ceaseless, and, in global perspective, seemingly disproportionate demands that resources be invested in that work in the 1900s reflect a diminished passion for *world* missions, now that she was back in the United States? In raising these possibilities, Valentine by no means suggests that her motivations were devoid of important principles. Indeed, he points out that in portraying the denominational leaders’ diversion of funds away from the needy black South, in such terms as “oppression” and “robbery,” Ellen White was doing what prophets do, taking “the side of the minority and the marginalized and the downtrodden...over against the establishment and the status quo.”¹⁸

However, in pitting this idealism against the presidents’ practical need to oversee worldwide distribution of limited funds in a balanced way, Valentine may underplay the keenness of Ellen White’s prophetic insight and the depth of her principled commitment to a cause that stood at the forefront of her concerns for nearly twenty years. The strength of her convictions about the need to rectify the failure of Adventists, and American Christians in general, to “do justice and love mercy” with regard to the freed slaves, comes through in her address “Our Duty to the Colored People,” given in 1891, several years before Edson took up the challenge. In a *Review and Herald* article published early

in 1896, Ellen White referred to the education and consequent expansion of economic opportunity entailed in the holistic “missionary enterprise” that she was advocating as “the best *restitution* that can be made to those who have been robbed of their time and deprived of their education.” This analysis broadens the context for considering the



Dr. John Harvey Kellogg and Arthur G. Daniells

rhetorical extremes of Ellen White’s critique of church leaders. Shifting resources away from the “southern work” involved more than just prioritizing one worthy church project over another, but failure to address the “heavy debt upon the American nation” from the legacy of slavery and missed opportunities of the Reconstruction period immediately following the Civil War.⁹

A second reservation has to do with the distinctiveness of the 1890s with regard to the impact of bitter conflict, the pressure of harsh circumstances, and the consequences for emotional balance on Ellen White’s writings. Valentine’s richly textured portrayal of her circumstances in Australia is worth the price of the book in itself, and I am open to the proposal that controversy and emotional upheaval had an especially strong effect on the prophet during that decade. My impression, though, is that similar conflicts and supercharged rhetoric appear throughout much of Ellen White’s career. The extent to which that is true, however, would correspondingly serve to expand the value of Valentine’s study.

Moreover, reservations aside, Valentine clearly succeeds in establishing the necessity of greater attention to factors influencing Ellen White’s state of mind and heart than has generally been given. This is so, if for no other reason than that he shows Ellen White herself acknowledging such factors and even admonishing church leaders to take them

into account. Following the 1903 General Conference, when she had explicitly and publicly sided with him against Kellogg, she cautioned A. G. Daniells and his allies not to use her most strongly worded reproofs of the doctor so as to alienate him beyond the possibility of reconciliation. “Do not use the words that I have spoken under great perplexity and distress, to hasten a crisis,” she pled. It was time now to “step softly and wear the gospel shoes.”¹⁰

Honest Politics

The value of Valentine’s work for Adventism as a living community of faith can best be expressed, in my view, by citing one of the New Testament’s richest passages on spiritual gifts, Ephesians 4:11–16. In brief, *The Prophet and the Presidents* offers a significant advance toward the maturity that comes through wise and diligent appropriation of the gifts Christ gave to build up the church, his body. My guess, though, is that not everyone will share this positive assessment of its spiritual impact. That is reason for gratitude, not only to the author but also to Pacific Press Publishing Association for its willingness to risk some controversy, and to the Ellen G. White Estate for facilitating the research. While the warm endorsement from Robert Olson, retired director of the White Estate, strategically placed on the front cover, cannot be taken to represent the views of current officers, Valentine’s acknowledgements and endnotes suggest an open

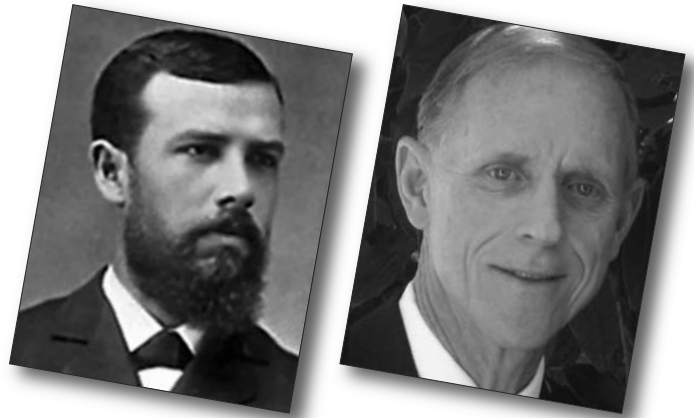


James Edson White and E. J. Waggoner

and supportive atmosphere for research, including freedom of access to necessary documents.

Moreover, it is not difficult to imagine an endorsement from W. C. White, for Valentine can be seen as moving forward in the direction toward which the prophet’s son

pointed. Valentine describes how W. C. W., in seeking to help the church adjust to the prospect and then reality of the loss of a living prophet, tried to counteract the “idealized and oversimplified” conceptions about Ellen White that had become widespread. He believed that a proper understanding of the “spirit of prophecy” could only come about in connection with a “better understanding of all the other gifts in the church.”¹¹ Similarly, A. G. Daniells rejected the verbal inspiration of Ellen White’s writings,



W. C. White and author Gilbert M. Valentine

seeing the validation of her prophetic gift instead in the fruit of her ministry.¹²

Valentine’s intensive and broad-ranging exercise in contextualization has led him to see evidence of Ellen White’s extraordinary prophetic gift along similar lines. He is not drawn to stories about clairvoyant phenomena or amazing predictions come true, or claims for one hundred percent accuracy and consistency. Rather, he is impressed by the “rich tapestry” of Adventist experience produced by the interaction of three agencies: 1) Ellen White—the passionate visionary and risk-taker who sometimes got angry, wrote impulsively, questioned herself, and changed her mind; 2) those who found her prophetic voice credible but also sometimes questioned it; and 3) divine providence.

A. G. Daniells paid a political price for his views of Ellen White’s authority, which he expressed with candor at the 1919 Bible Conference. His ouster from the General Conference presidency in 1922 came about in part through exploitation of a kind of fundamentalism about Ellen White that was appealing in its absolutism and sensationalism, but untruthful to history and unfaithful to her own appeals.

Political use of the prophetic gift in Adventism is not only inevitable; it can be legitimate. Works such as *The Prophet and the Presidents* that “speak the truth in love” can make for more open, honest, and productive politics. A church well informed about Ellen White’s career and how her prophetic gift functioned will be less easily manipulated by selective and distorted use of her writings under the guise of exalting her authority. It will also be better equipped to withstand the toxic winds generated by Ellen White haters. Most importantly, it will be better positioned to find in the central themes that animate her writings deeper unity in Christ, and thereby grow and be built up in love. ■

References

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2. I draw this framing of Ellen White’s career from Jonathan M. Butler, “Ellen, Mother of Millions,” *Signs of the Times* (February 1984): 12–15.
3. Valentine, 102.
4. ———, 132–133.
5. ———, 289.
6. ———, 306.
7. ———, 324.
8. ———, 230.
9. Republished in *The Southern Work* (1901), 54, emphasis supplied.
10. Valentine, 257–258.
11. ———, 299–300.
12. “The Use of the Spirit of Prophecy In Our Teaching of Bible and History,” July 30, 1919, transcribed proceedings of the Bible Conference of 1919 in *Spectrum* 10 (May 1979): 28–30.

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Upcoming Events at Adventist Forum Chapters

New York Forum

Columbia University, St. Mary’s Church

December 3, 2011

Ed Samuel, architect, philosopher, and scientist
“Beauty Matters”

December 10, 2011

Alexander Carpenter, visual arts and religion teacher at Pacific Union College; Spectrum Blog editor
“The End of Adventism: Does Our Eschatology Corrupt Our Ethics?”

December 17, 2011

Special Christmas Celebration
Our Christmas Celebration, through music and scripture

Central Florida Chapter

February 3–4, 2012

Jon Dybdahl, author and immediate past president Walla Walla University
“Towards an Adventist Spirituality”
Forest Lake SDA Church

February 18, 2012

Iman Mubammad Musri, president Islamic Society of Central Florida

San Diego Forum

The Tierrasanta SDA Church

February 18, 2012

David Neff, editor, Christianity Today
“A Better World: How compassion and justice can flourish alongside eschatology”

May 4 & 6, 2012

John R. Jones, PhD, associate professor of Religion, La Sierra University
“The B-List: Early Christian Writings That Didn’t Make the Cut—and what they tell us about the early church”