

## Is the Ellen White Era Over—Or Has It Just Begun? | BY DAVID THIELE



At first glance, the title of this article may appear to be a joke or sheer nonsense. Of course the Ellen White Era is not over! Sales of Ellen White's books are still high. The General Conference President is pushing for a worldwide distribution of *The Great Controversy*. A recent survey of young Australian Adventists (ages fifteen to twenty-five) found almost 60 percent of those surveyed were "very

familiar" or "extremely familiar" with Ellen White's writings; almost half had at least ten of her books in their home and almost three-quarters had at least five of them; nearly 60 percent thought her writings worthy of attention today, and 80 percent saw Ellen White as moderately, very and extremely important in their personal faith development.<sup>1</sup>

Yet despite these facts and figures, the question remains: Is the Ellen White era over? It is neither a joke nor nonsense. The question is forced upon us by one simple, unchangeable fact: Ellen White died in 1915, almost a hundred years ago. Since she died at age eighty-nine, she has now been dead longer than she was alive. Now there is a very simple, facile response to this: the Bible writers lived even further in the past than Ellen White and the Bible era has not passed because of it. This is true as far as it goes, but it may also be beside the point.

Adventists have traditionally drawn a clear distinction between writing and non-writing prophets.<sup>2</sup> These labels are not entirely adequate because "non-writing prophets" sometimes wrote! This can clearly be demonstrated from scripture (Josh. 10:13; 2 Sam 1:18; 1 Chron. 29:29; 2 Chron. 9:29, 12:15). The distinction then is between "canonical" and "noncanonical" prophets. Adventist apologists have consistently grouped Ellen White with the "non-writing," that is, "noncanonical" prophets. It is clearly impossible to do otherwise and retain any sense of *Sola Scriptura* or any claim to be a Bible-based Christian church.

Exactly what that distinction means in terms of Ellen White's authority vis-à-vis the Bible is an issue that remains unsettled. A variety of answers have been proposed, but none seem to have been able to sweep the field.<sup>3</sup> But the fact that Adventists have *always* affirmed a difference between canonical and noncanonical prophets, and have

always placed Ellen White in the latter category, means that we cannot now simply jump from the continuation of the Bible era to the continuation of Ellen White's era.

What then is the difference between a canonical and a noncanonical prophet? Here again, Adventist apologists have generally been remarkably consistent in their comments. Canonical prophets were entrusted by God with a message that had eternal relevance—or at least “eternal” for the duration of the sinful world. The message is primarily a message of salvation, but it also provides a revelation of the character of God and the core principles of behavior that should govern the lives of his people in this sinful world. Herbert Douglas puts it this way: “The primary purpose of the Bible is to give later readers a clear understanding of the plan of salvation and the highlights exposing the great controversy between Christ and Satan.”<sup>4</sup> Noncanonical prophets, in contrast, are focused on the context in which they live. They provide concrete application to that context. The messages they conveyed “were of local and relatively temporary value.”<sup>5</sup> Their writings are not intended, by God, to be for his people for all time. This does not suggest or imply any difference in the inspiration of canonical and noncanonical prophets—only a difference in function.

The Bible provides a useful case study illustrating the role of noncanonical prophets in the encounter of Nathan and David (2 Sam. 12:1–7). The story is well known: David has committed adultery with Bathsheba and consigned her husband, Uriah, to death in the battlefield. Nathan seeks an audience with David and tells him a story of a rich man who takes a poor man's sole lamb to feed a guest. David is filled with righteous indignation until Nathan points out that the story is actually about David.

Eric Livingston has argued that this story shows that noncanonical prophets (in this case Nathan) have authority, occasionally even over canonical prophets (in this case David).<sup>6</sup>

However, this misses the point entirely. For a start, such a view is highly anachronistic. David neither recognized himself as a canonical prophet nor was he so recognized by anyone else at that time. It is certainly strange to associate his actions with regard to Bathsheba and Uriah with his prophetic calling. To understand the story as an illustration of the authority of noncanonical prophets vis-à-vis canonical prophets is surely not reading it in its own terms.

Nathan does not reveal new theological truth to David, nor does he provide new principles of living that David was previously unfamiliar with. David knew that adultery (and murder) was wrong. Moses had been crystal clear on this in the Torah. Certainly David had punished murderers before (2 Sam. 1:15, 4:9–12). What then is the issue here? David manages to convince himself that these principles, which had general validity, did not apply to him as *king*. There was no king in Israel when Moses wrote. But in David's time Israel had a king “like the nations.” As with totalitarian dictators of today, the kings of the nations in the ancient Middle East were prone to assume all sorts of privileges denied to lesser mortals—and who was to stop them? This is exactly what David did to Bathsheba and Uriah! Nathan does not reveal new truth or new principles, but he makes a powerful application of the eternal principles already revealed by the earlier canonical writer.

How does this model work in the case of Ellen White? It is actually a perfect fit. She proclaims that she is a lesser light pointing to the greater light.<sup>7</sup> The “greater light” with this model contains the eternal principles; the lesser light, a specific application of those principles. More tellingly, Ellen White states categorically that if the church had studied the Bible as it should have, there would not have been a need for her ministry at all. This is obviously an incomprehensive, incoherent statement if Ellen White saw her purpose as the revelation of new truth, but it fits perfectly

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with the model that sees her role as providing an application of biblical principles and teachings. Such an application could be discovered by the study of the Bible itself.

Clearly, Ellen White's comments in certain areas are far more detailed than those found in Scripture. Her teachings on health are a case in point. But it is scarcely unusual that the application of a principle be more extensive than the principle itself! If it is a biblical principle that we should care for our bodies—a position I think is easily defensible—then a question arises: What does this mean in practical terms? In Ellen White's context, it meant vegetarianism, among other things. Would we see her insist on the same application of this principle on the Pacific island nation of Kiribati, where the only local diet options are fish and pumpkin tips? Surely not! Her application was specific to her era and not universal.<sup>8</sup> The biblical principle of care for our health is, however, universal. This coheres with George Knight's evaluation of what he calls "the myth of the inflexible prophet."<sup>9</sup>

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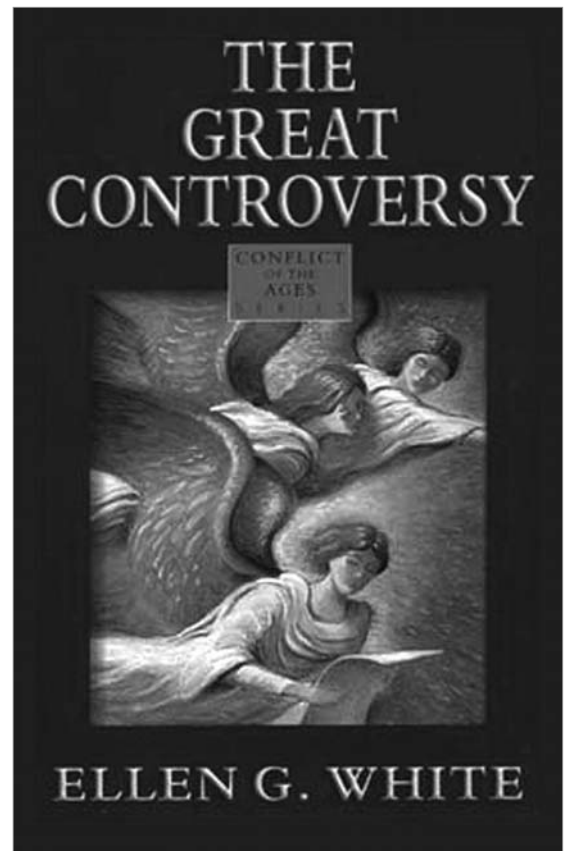
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This may also explain why Ellen White's position on alcohol appears far more stringent than that made explicit by the biblical writers. Although they condemn drunkenness, it is impossible to show that they condemned the use of alcohol altogether. However, when Ellen White applied the biblical principles relating to alcohol in the heyday of the American temperance movement, she supported a strict abstinence position. The question to ask is not whether Ellen White's comments on the topic have universal applicability or whether they are "biblical" in the strictest sense (i.e., specifically taught in Scripture), but rather whether they reflected the message of God in the context to which she spoke directly.<sup>10</sup>

But this brings us back to the key issue: Ellen White died in 1915. The world she lived in was in many ways closer to that of Abraham than it is to our world. She lived in a world without jet travel, the Internet, instant messaging, satellite communications, Global Position-



ing Systems, smart phones and in vitro fertilization. Yet these are things we take for granted. We have firsthand familiarity with most of them and know about the rest. Even television was unimaginable to Ellen White.

At the most basic level of all, language has changed during the generations since Ellen White's death. This is seen with stunning clarity in the use of the word *intercourse*, which Ellen White uses hundreds of times but never with the sexual referent that the word predominantly has today.<sup>11</sup> The change of language has led to the production of "modern language" editions of key Ellen White books.<sup>12</sup> Inevitably, much of Ellen White's counsel cannot be taken literally anymore. Is there any Adventist today who believes that women should be taught to saddle a horse? How, then, is this problem addressed? It is addressed by the simple expedient of reinterpreting Ellen White's application of biblical principle to a new situation—by providing a reapplication of her application!<sup>13</sup>

It is instructive to look at Ellen White's con-

demnation of Spiritualism, which was growing in popularity in her day. She warned that Spiritualism would be an instrument in fomenting the final eschatological crisis.<sup>14</sup> However, Spiritualism as known in Ellen White's day is quite passé today. Her comments are reinterpreted as having reference to the New Age Movement. This is undoubtedly a valid reinterpretation, but it is equally clear that it was not Ellen White's primary intention.

One may wonder if Ellen White's comment—that of all the books she had written, the one she most wanted circulated to the public was *The Great Controversy*—might not provide another example.<sup>15</sup> *The Great Controversy*, originally published in 1888, was written against an American backdrop in which the predominant white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant culture was feeling threatened by an influx of Catholic migrants.<sup>16</sup> The dominant culture of the day was deeply anti-Catholic.<sup>17</sup> *The Great Controversy*, which has its first explicitly anti-Catholic statement on page 42, fit this cultural milieu perfectly. The net effect of circulating *The Great Controversy* among the public in this context is easy to imagine. Protestant readers were immediately predisposed to the book, with its strong defense of biblical truth in the face of the Catholic threat. Readers identified with those who stood boldly for biblical truth against Catholic opposition—the Waldenses, Jan Hus, Jerome of Prague, and Martin Luther. Up to this point, readers are challenged by nothing and the credibility of the author is reinforced in their mind. Then the challenges: the discredited William Miller also followed Bible truth! The despised “Jewish” Sabbath is Bible truth! The world will again be divided between those who follow the Bible and those who persecute them. At this point each reader is challenged: “Do I truly stand on the Bible alone or on tradition? Will I stand for biblical truth as did the heroes of the Reformation, if it means being grouped with the despised and discredited? These issues are apparently about to come to eschatological climax. Where will I stand?”

The cultural milieu today is radically different. The 1960 election of a Catholic, John F. Kennedy, as president of the United States was controversial in its day, but did not prove to be the end of the republic.<sup>18</sup> President Ronald Reagan's appointment of an American ambassador to the Vatican twenty years later, by contrast, passed virtually without comment.<sup>19</sup> The long papacy of the charismatic, popular, and world-travelling Pope John Paul II saw unprecedented favorable reactions to Catholicism even among secularists.<sup>20</sup> All of this is in keeping with the increased acceptance in Western society of a post-modern worldview—with its disdain for absolutism, dogmatism, and sectarianism.

Today's readers, then, enter an utterly foreign world when they open *The Great Controversy*. Unlike the readers in Ellen White's day, nothing is familiar to them. Rather than a comfortingly familiar defense of Bible truth, modern readers perceive bigotry and narrow-mindedness. Such a bigoted screed is scarcely worth reading and is likely to be discarded.

How then might we make sense of Ellen White's comments on getting *The Great Controversy* before the public? She is talking about evangelistic strategy. Her advice is a contextualized application of a very sound principle, which she articulates clearly elsewhere: start where the people are; start with topics which build credibility; hold challenging truths until such a foundation is laid.<sup>21</sup> It may well be that in order to do what Ellen White *meant* we may have to do the *opposite* of what she actually said!

Of course, Ellen White wrote many things that are timeless. When she directly echoes Scripture, this is most evident. Some of her most powerful theological statements about God and salvation fit into this category as well. As Arthur L. White has observed in another context, “Truths are quite as much truths in the abstract as in an immediate setting. The truth expressed in the words, ‘God is love,’ needs no context or explanation.”<sup>22</sup> However, he absolutely fails to deal with

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those many statements—predominantly in her counsels—which depend on a historical context to be correctly understood. Thus, the timelessness of some of Ellen White's writings is not evidence that her era continues.

There are two primary arguments against seeing the Ellen White era as over. On the one hand, Gerhard Pfandl has argued that inspiration confers authority on a prophet and that such authority is permanent.<sup>23</sup> Thus, he writes that if archaeologists discovered the book of Nathan it would still be an *authoritative* book. This is surely not a valid argument, and it is actually difficult to see what it means in practical terms. *Authority* is a function of purpose. It may be conferred by inspiration, but the question of the purpose and range of that authority remains. If the *purpose* of the book of Nathan was to give an *authoritative* application of principles to David, surely the authority of the writing ceases with the passing of its purpose.

There is only one further argument against seeing the Ellen White era as over. Did not Ellen White herself declare that her writings would be available to guide the church "as long as time shall last"?<sup>24</sup> This, she suggests, would obviate the need for a new prophet to arise. While it is certainly true, it is equally true that Ellen White did not envisage a delay of a century or more between her demise and the Second Coming of Jesus. It is quite clear that she saw the Second Advent as *imminent*.<sup>25</sup> If the Second Advent had occurred in the time frame she envisaged, it would have happened within her era. But this did not happen, and the question of the validity of her comment in light of that changed situation necessarily arises.

So, is the Ellen White era over? It is not for me or any other individual to say. Rather, that is something for the community as a whole to wrestle with. What can be said with certainty is that the passing of time is making the issue urgent. Traditional Adventist apologetics may need to be abandoned if we insist that the Ellen White era is not over. If we need to translate Ellen White's writings into modern English, and

find them as directly applicable a century and more after her death as they were during her own lifetime, we may well ask: "Is Ellen White also among the [canonical] prophets?" ■

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## References

1. "Students surveyed on Ellen White," *South Pacific Division Record* (October 1, 2001).
2. *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1957), 90–99.
3. The difference in perspective among Ron Graybill, Graeme Bradford, and Herbert Douglas, for example, at this point seem to differ considerably. See Graybill, Ron "Ellen White's Role in Doctrinal Formation," *Ministry* (October 1981), 7–11; Bradford, Graeme, *More Than a Prophet* (Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspectives, 2006), 205–11; Douglas, Herbert, *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1998), 416–425.
4. Douglass, Herbert E., *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1998), 17.
5. Jemison, T. Housel, *A Prophet Among You* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1955), 73.
6. Livingston, Eric, "Inquire of the Lord," *Ministry* (April 1981), 4–6.
7. White, Ellen G., *Evangelism* (Berrien Springs, MI: Review and Herald Publishing Association), 257.
8. A useful comparison is provided by A. G. Daniels at the 1919 Bible Conference, where he relates Ellen White's response to Daniels' report of a vegetarian Adventist worker he had met in Scandinavia who lived mostly on the north wind. According to Daniels, Ellen White shook her head and quietly said "When will they ever learn?" when he related this situation to her. See, "The Bible Conference of 1919," *Spectrum* 10, no. 1 (1979), 23–57. Daniels thus provides strong evidence that Ellen White did not see the details of her health message having universal applicability.
9. Knight, George R., *Myths in Adventism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1985), 17–26.
10. Given the wealth and power of the alcohol industry today, not to mention the human misery it contributes to, I have no doubt Ellen White would take a very similar stance

today. It is, of course, precisely the existence of the alcohol industry that makes the situation now so different from that of the biblical writers.

11. An electronic search of Ellen White's published writings came up with three-hundred-eighty-two hits for this word.

12. For a survey of this practice see Fagal, William, "Adapting the Writings of Ellen White: Is there a Need?" *Adventist World* (May 2011), 38–39.

13. It needs to be stressed that such reapplications of biblical principles can still be valid because the underlying biblical principle has not changed. The process, however, does raise the question of whether it would not be better—and simpler—to simply make a new application directly from the biblical principle.

14. See, for example, Ellen White's comments regarding Spiritualism in *The Great Controversy*, page 588. Earlier in the same work she links "Spiritualism" directly to the "mysterious rapping" (553). There is no doubt that this is the form of Spiritualism she envisaged playing a role in the final crisis.

15. White, Ellen G., *Colporteur Ministry* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1953), 127–128.

16. Butler, Jonathan, "The World of Ellen White and the End of the World," *Spectrum* 10, no. 2 (1979): 2–13.

17. Bruinsma, Reinder, *Seventh-day Adventist Attitudes Toward Roman Catholicism 1844–1965* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1994), 15–19.

18. Reinder Bruinsma reports that the US Department of Justice identified one-hundred-forty-four producers of anti-Catholic literature in connection to the Kennedy presidential campaign. Of course, the early campaign by the first Roman Catholic presidential candidate Alfred Smith ended in failure when he lost the Democratic Party nomination in 1924. See Bruinsma, *Adventist Attitudes*, 259–61.

19. Bruinsma notes that "practically every major Protestant organization and publication protested" the earlier attempt of President Harry S. Truman to appoint Mark Clark as ambassador to the Vatican in 1949 (*Adventist Attitudes*, 258). This appointment never took place, a fact that again highlights the changes in attitudes between Truman's presidency and the presidency of Ronald Reagan.

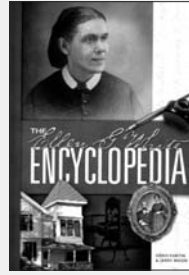
20. One might point to the twenty-four pages—much of in the tone of fulsome praise—which *Time* dedicated to Pope John Paul II at the time of his death. Other secular media were equally enamored.

21. White, Ellen G., *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2003), 119–20.

22. White, Arthur L., "A Defense of Compilations," *Spectrum* 16, no. 3 (1985), 19.

23. Pfandl, Gerhard, "The Authority of Non-Canonical

## New Books on Ellen White



Released at the end of 2013, *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* is 1,465 pages of information about the Prophet. It includes photographs, maps, and a chronology of her life as well as a biography, a genealogy chart, a chart of the relationships between her early books, lists of her letters and manuscripts, and two sections of alphabetical entries with one on her biography and one on topical issues. There are essays on her writings, her theology, and how her statements measure up to current science. The list of contributors includes one-hundred-eighty-two names of present and past scholars. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon edited the volume published by Review and Herald Publishing Association, with Michael W. Campbell serving as assistant editor and George R. Knight as the consulting editor.

The Review and Herald plans to release another volume in 2014 titled *Ellen G. White Letters & Manuscripts with Annotations*.



*Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet* is the title of a book to be released in the summer of 2014 by Oxford University Press. Edited by Terrie Dopp Aamodt, Gary Land, and Ronald L. Numbers, it is the product of a group of scholars who met in 2009 to discuss Ellen White and her contribution to American religious history. Seven of the contributors to *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* also contributed to this volume, but fourteen other contributors wrote chapters. This volume analyses White as a prophet, author, speaker, and builder. It also discusses her in the context of society and culture, science and medicine, war, slavery, and race. It examines her testimonies, theology, and legacy.

Look for reviews of these books in upcoming issues of *Spectrum* magazine.

Prophets," *The Gift of Prophecy* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2008), Lesson for February 19, 2009.

24. White, Ellen G., *Selected Messages*, 1 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1958), 5.5.

25. Brinsmead, Bernard H., "An Analysis of 'Prophetic Tension' in the Eschatology of E. G. White," *Daniel 8:14, The Day of Atonement and the Investigative Judgment*, ed. Desmond Ford (Casselberry, FL: Euangellion, 1980), A246–A255. See also, Thompson, Alden, "The Angels Always Say the Time is Short," accessed January 27, 2012: [http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:HgVXJPE9TYwJ:people.wallawalla.edu/~alden.thompson/text/unpublished\\_lectures\\_sermons\\_papers/eschatology\\_the\\_angels\\_always\\_say\\_the\\_time\\_is\\_short.rtf+Alden+THompson+%22The+e+Angels+Always+say%22&cd=1&hl=pt-PT&ct=clnk&gl=tl](http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:HgVXJPE9TYwJ:people.wallawalla.edu/~alden.thompson/text/unpublished_lectures_sermons_papers/eschatology_the_angels_always_say_the_time_is_short.rtf+Alden+THompson+%22The+e+Angels+Always+say%22&cd=1&hl=pt-PT&ct=clnk&gl=tl).

In order  
to do what  
Ellen White  
meant we  
may have to  
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