

## John Calvin, John Wesley, and Ellen White's *Steps to Christ*: A Comparison | BY NORMAN H. YOUNG

For a religious book to go from being an immediate success to becoming a Christian classic, now in its one-hundred-twenty-fifth year since its publication in 1892, is indeed a rare literary phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> Published by the conservative Chicago firm of Fleming H. Revell, *Steps to Christ*, despite its brevity, went to a third printing “within six weeks of the first issue.”<sup>2</sup> It was to give the book a wide distribution that the Fleming H. Revell company was chosen.<sup>3</sup> The publisher began in

1870 and concentrated on practical aspects of the Christian faith. Revell was the brother-in-law of the evangelist Dwight L. Moody, whose writings and input influenced the practical Christian direction of the company.<sup>4</sup> The title does not indicate the scope of the book's range, as it not only describes the process of conversion, but also focuses on the life of the believer; that is, *Steps with Christ*.<sup>5</sup>

### The Human Predicament

It is in the practical Christian life that Ellen White reveals most clearly her “Wesleyan Arminian theological understanding,” but not uncritically.<sup>6</sup> In a well-known statement in a letter to John Newton, Wesley confessed, “I think on justification just as I have done any time these seven and twenty years, and just as Mr. Calvin does. In this respect I do not differ from him an hair's breadth.”<sup>7</sup> There are two areas where John Calvin, John Wesley, and Ellen White come within a “hair's-breadth” of one another: the depravity of humans, and the righteousness that is by faith. All three believed that the fall had so vitiated the human capacity to choose the good, that salvation of necessity depended wholly on the grace of God. It is this belief in the impotence, or bondage, to use Luther's term, of the will to initiate any independent move toward God where Calvin, Wesley, and White draw close to one another.<sup>8</sup>

Humans, according to Ellen White, were “made captive by Satan, and would have remained so forever had not God specially interposed.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, “it is impossible for us, of ourselves, to escape from the pit of sin in which we are sunken. Our hearts are evil, and we cannot change them.” “Education, culture, the exercise of the will, human effort ... are powerless” to change us from sin to holiness. Christ's “grace alone can quicken the lifeless faculties of the soul, and attract it to God, to holiness.”<sup>10</sup> The human predicament is emphasized when she de-



John Calvin

IMAGE SOURCE: [HTTP://LIBRARY.CALVIN.EDU/HDA/NODE/4611](http://library.calvin.edu/hda/node/4611)

clares that “everything depends on the right action of the will”; but it is the will that is captive to sin, so how can we choose? Only with the help of the intervening (Wesley called it “prevenient”) grace of God. Thus, in the matter of human depravity, White reflects the language of Calvin and Wesley, as the quotations below demonstrate:

... whatever is in man, from the understanding to *the will*, from the soul even to the flesh, has been defiled and crammed with this concupiscence [lust]. Or, to put it more briefly, the whole man is of himself nothing but concupiscence (Calvin, *Institutes*).<sup>11</sup>

Yet so depraved is his [human] nature that he can be moved or impelled only to evil. But if this is true, then it is clearly expressed that man is surely subject to the necessity of sinning (Calvin, *Institutes*).<sup>12</sup>

Now he truly desires to break loose from sin, and begins to struggle with it. But though he strive with all his might, he cannot conquer: sin is mightier than he. He would fain escape; but he is so fast in prison, that he cannot get forth. He resolves against sin, but yet sins on: he sees the snare, and abhors and runs into it. So much does his boasted reason avail—only to enhance his guilt, and increase his misery! Such is *the freedom of his will*; free only to evil; free to “drink in iniquity like water”; to wander farther and farther from the living God, and do more “despite to the Spirit of grace” (Wesley, “The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption”).<sup>13</sup>

The other [Christianity] declares that all men are “conceived in sin,” and “shapen in wickedness;”—that hence there is in every man a “carnal mind, which is enmity against God; which is not, cannot be, subject to” His “law;”

and which so infects the whole soul, that “there dwelleth in” him, “in his flesh,” in his natural state, “no good thing”; but “every imagination of the thoughts of his heart is evil,” only evil, and that “continually” (Wesley, “Original Sin”).<sup>14</sup>

You feel that sin has separated you from God, that you are in bondage to the power of evil. The more you struggle to escape, the more you realize your helplessness. Your motives are impure; your heart is unclean. You see that your life has been filled with selfishness and sin. You long to be forgiven, to be cleansed, to be set free (White, *Steps to Christ*).<sup>15</sup>

### Righteousness by Faith

The second area that Wesley had in mind when he claimed he did “not differ from him [Mr Calvin] a hair’s breadth” is righteousness by faith.<sup>16</sup> Calvin believed that justification included reconciliation and definitely excluded any dependence on human works, whether ritual or moral; “the righteousness of faith is reconciliation with God, which consists solely in the forgiveness of sins.” “Consequently, such righteousness can be called, in a word, ‘remission of sins’.”<sup>17</sup> Wesley agrees with this and so does White, as the quotations below verify:

Therefore, we explain justification simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favour as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness (Calvin, *Institutes*).<sup>18</sup>

The plain scriptural notion of justification is pardon, the forgiveness of sins. It is that act of God the Father, whereby, for the sake of the propitiation made by the blood of his Son, he ‘showeth forth his righteousness’ (or mercy) ‘by the remission of the sins that are past’ [Rom.

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3:25] (Wesley, "Justification by Faith").<sup>19</sup>

In the matchless gift of His Son, God has encircled the whole world with an atmosphere of grace as real as the air which circulates around the globe (White, *Steps to Christ*).<sup>20</sup>

He lived a sinless life. He died for us, and now He offers to take our sins and give us His righteousness. If you give yourself to Him, and accept Him as your Saviour, then, sinful as your life may have been, for His sake you are *accounted* righteous. Christ's character stands in place of your character, and you are accepted before God just as if you had not sinned (White, *Steps to Christ*).<sup>21</sup>

He is waiting to strip them of their garments stained and polluted with sin, and to put upon them the white robes of righteousness: he bids them live and not die (White, *Steps to Christ*).<sup>22</sup>

### The Gift of Good Deeds

Calvin makes a clear distinction between the work of God *for us* (death and resurrection of Christ) and the work of God (Holy Spirit) *in us* (regeneration/sanctification). These for Calvin are distinguishable but inseparable: "Therefore Christ justifies no one whom he does not at the same time sanctify. These benefits are joined together by an everlasting and indissoluble bond, so that those whom he illumines by his wisdom, he redeems; those whom he redeems, he justifies; those whom he justifies, he sanctifies."<sup>23</sup> Having *obtained* justification (forgiveness and reconciliation or peace with God), the believer (the elect) does not *retain* it by works of the law. Good deeds in the believer are a gift of God and are never totally perfect. "There is no doubt that whatever is praiseworthy in works is God's grace; there is not a drop that we ought by rights to ascribe to ourselves."<sup>24</sup> Wesley, in part, and White concur with this:

What is "justification" (*sic*) ... it is not the being made actually just and righteous. This is *sanctification*, which is, indeed, in some degree, the immediate *fruit* of justification, but nevertheless is a distinct gift of God and of a totally different nature. The one implies what God *does for* us through his Son; the other, what he *works in* us by his Spirit (Wesley, "Justification by Faith").<sup>25</sup>

So we have nothing in ourselves of which to boast. We have no ground for self-exaltation. Our only ground of hope is in the righteousness of Christ *imputed to us*, and in that wrought by His Spirit working in and through us (White, *Steps to Christ*).<sup>26</sup>

### The Nature of Grace

All three agree that the solution to mankind's bondage to sin is God's grace, but Wesley and White differ from Calvin over the nature of that grace. Wesley and White believe that the believer, enabled by God, must accept God's grace, whereas Calvin taught that those elected to salvation could not refuse God's grace. Ellen White is clear on this: "He invites us to give ourselves to Him, that He may work His will in us. It remains for us to choose whether we will be set free from the bondage of sin, to share the glorious liberty of the sons of God."<sup>27</sup> "He does not force the will";<sup>28</sup> "Through the right exercise of the will, an entire change may be made in your life. By yielding up your will to Christ, you ally yourself with the power that is above all principalities and powers."<sup>29</sup> "It is peace that you need,—Heaven's forgiveness and peace and love in the soul ... It is yours if you will but reach out your hand and grasp it."<sup>30</sup> This is Wesleyan, but not Calvinism. Calvin's view requires a robust conviction of being the elect of God.

Besides this, the reprobate never receives anything but a confused awareness of grace, so that they grasp a shadow rath-

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er than the firm body of it. For the Spirit, strictly speaking, seals forgiveness of sins in the elect alone, so that they apply it by special faith to their own use ... Only his elect does he account worthy of receiving the living root of faith so that they may endure to the end [Matt 24:13] (Calvin, *Institutes*).<sup>31</sup>

Calvin believed that if acceptance of God's gift of grace was a human choice it morphed the gift into a reward. Yet Wesley and White denied this: "We do not earn salvation by our obedience; for salvation is the free gift of God, to be received by faith."<sup>32</sup> White, like Wesley, may get within a "hair's breadth" of Calvin, but that margin is crucial. In an unequivocal denial of predestination she asserts that "Satan will constantly present allurements to induce us to break this tie,—to choose to separate ourselves from Christ. Here is where we need to watch, to strive, to pray, that nothing may entice us to *choose* another master; for we are always free to do this."<sup>33</sup> The union between humanity and Christ "can never be broken by any power save the *choice of man himself*."<sup>34</sup> Both Wesley and White are hostile to Calvin's doctrine of predestination as the following quotations make clear.

We call predestination *God's eternal decree*, by which he determined with himself what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition; rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others. Therefore, as any man has been created to one or the other of these ends, we speak of him as predestined to life or death (Calvin, *Institutes*).<sup>35</sup>

If all the passions, the tempers, the actions, of men are wholly independent on their own choice, are governed by a principle exterior to themselves, then there can be no moral good or evil. There can be neither virtue nor vice, neither good nor bad passions or tempers. The sun does much good—but it

is no virtue—but he is not capable of moral goodness. Why is he not? For this plain reason: because he does not act from choice (Wesley, "The Struggle with the Calvinists").<sup>36</sup>

It is *no arbitrary decree on the part of God* that excludes the wicked from heaven; they are shut out by their own unfitness for its companionship (White, *Steps to Christ*).<sup>37</sup>

What you need to understand is the true force of the will. This is the governing power in the nature of man, the power of decision, or of choice. Everything depends on the right action of the will. The power of choice God has given to men; it is theirs to exercise. You cannot change your heart, you cannot of yourself give to God its affections; but you can *choose* to serve Him. You can give Him your will (White, *Steps to Christ*).<sup>38</sup>

## Sanctification

One place where Ellen White comes closer to Calvin than to Wesley is in the area of sanctification.<sup>39</sup> Calvin taught that human holiness was never totally free of the contamination of sin and therefore never beyond continuing faith in the grace of Christ. Sanctification was through union with Christ, it was progressive, and the process of growth never ceased in this life.

This restoration is not accomplished either in a minute of time nor in a day, nor in a year; but God abolishes the corruptions of the flesh in his elect in a continuous succession of time, and indeed little by little; and he does not cease to cleanse them of their filth, to dedicate them to himself as temples, to reform their senses to true piety, so that they exercise themselves all their lives in penitence, and know that this war never comes to an end until death.<sup>40</sup> (Calvin, *Origins*)

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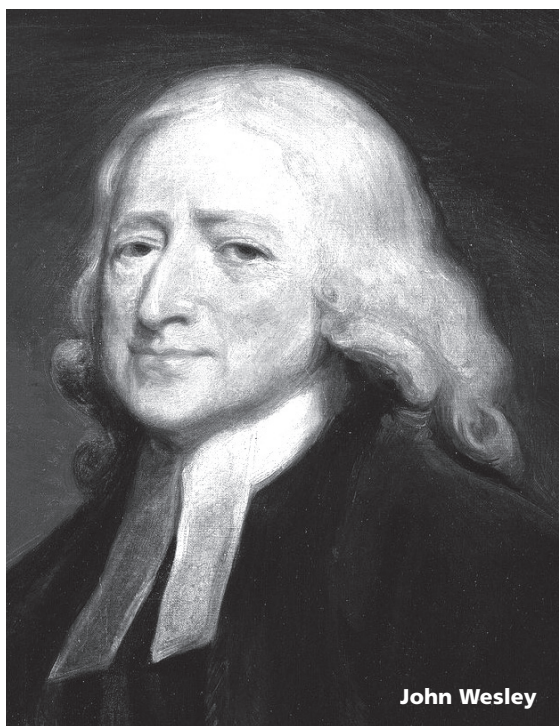
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of sanctification being a life-long process, even if they agree on many other aspects of sanctification. According to Wesley, when the repentant sinner comes to Christ by faith and experiences “peace with God,” “in that very moment—*sanctification* begins,” which coincides with being born again. The joy of this moment might lead some to think “that all sin is gone, that it is utterly rooted out of their heart and has no more any place therein!” But temptations come and sin revives “showing it [sin] was but stunned before, not dead.” So sanctification continues the battle against sin, the putting to death of our evil nature and focusing our lives on good works. It is thus “we wait for entire sanctification, for a full salvation from all our sins—from pride, self-will, anger, unbelief” (quotations are drawn from Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation” and “Thoughts on Christian Perfection”).<sup>41</sup>

In this process of sanctification there is a deepening repentance beyond that which preceded justification. It involves vigorous universal obedience, zealous keeping of all the commandments, self denial and daily taking up our cross, prayer, fasting, and a close attendance on all the ordinances of God.<sup>42</sup> For some this earnest endeavour will climax with an influx of the

Holy Spirit that abolishes sin, root and branch, in an instant. According to Wesley this “second blessing” has four aspects. First “that Christian perfection is that love of God and our neighbour which implies deliverance from *all* sin.” Second, “that this is received merely *by faith*.” Third “that it is given *instantaneously*, in one moment.” Fourth, “that we are to expect it, not at death, but *every moment*; that *now* is the accepted time, *now* is the day of salvation.”<sup>43</sup>

Following this instantaneous sanctification (or “Christian perfection,” “entire sanctification,” “perfect or pure love,” “the great salvation,” “the second blessing”), the recipient will still be encumbered with infirmities, ignorance, and mistakes.<sup>44</sup> But they will love God with their full strength, heart, and mind, which “implies that no wrong temper, none contrary to love, remains in the soul; and that all the thoughts, words, and actions are governed by pure love.”<sup>45</sup> What need then of such a one of the mediation of Christ? For the omissions, shortcomings, mistakes in judgment, and defects of various kinds of the wholly sanctified, though these for Wesley are not properly sins.<sup>46</sup> Sin for Wesley is “a voluntary transgression of a known law,” but an involuntary transgression of a divine law, known or unknown” is not properly a sin.<sup>47</sup>

In a word, entire sanctification is a second blessing of God when love floods into the soul of the justified. It is “pure love reigning alone in the heart and life, this is the whole of scriptural perfection.”<sup>48</sup> Perfection means “perfect love. It is love excluding sin, love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul.”<sup>49</sup> Wesley was always about holiness and perfection, and his May 24, 1738, Aldersgate conversion did not change that. Justification was merely the door to sanctification; the latter was the “real religion.” “Justification was ultimately a means to this end [of perfection], not the end in itself.”<sup>50</sup> Calvin on the other hand united justification and sanctification through our union with Christ, but sanctification never superseded justification.

Early in her life Ellen White knew she had been justified, but she felt bereft of the later

blessing of “entire sanctification.”<sup>51</sup> In the days of the transition from Millerism to Seventh-day Adventism there were frequent outbreaks of extreme claims of “entire sanctification.” “Its advocates,” White warned, “teach that sanctification is an instantaneous work, by which, through faith alone, they attain to perfect holiness. ‘Only believe,’ they say, ‘and the blessing is yours.’ No further effort on the part of the receiver is supposed to be required.”<sup>52</sup> In writing this White rejects the central teaching of John Wesley, and sides more with Calvin on this point. Indeed, “there is no such thing as instantaneous sanctification. True sanctification is a daily work, continuing as long as life shall last.”<sup>53</sup> “Sanctification is not the work of a moment, an hour, a day, but of a life time ... So long as Satan reigns, we shall have self to subdue, besetting sins to overcome; so long as life shall last, there will be no stopping place, no point which we can reach and say, I have fully attained. Sanctification is the result of lifelong obedience.”<sup>54</sup> Calvin would celebrate these words; Wesley would choke on them.

## Habitual Words and Acts

Ellen White, in *Steps to Christ*, is clearly Wesleyan in her understanding of the Christian faith and life. Even so, both Wesley and White reflect Calvin’s view of the power of sin over humans, and his understanding of justification by faith as totally dependent on God’s grace through His mercy and forgiveness of sins. However, Wesley and White reject Calvin’s denial of the divine restoral of the power of human choice, both in accepting and in abandoning the divine gift of salvation. Yet White departs from Wesley and draws nearer to Calvin in stressing justification’s continuing bond with sanctification, and especially her denial of any climax of sanctification in this life with an instantaneous gift of perfection. As she says, “the character is revealed, not by occasional good deeds and occasional misdeeds, but by the tendency of the habitual words and acts [of the believer].”<sup>55</sup> She seems to allow more than Wesley when she

speaks of the character of the sanctified being “imperfect,” and “their life faulty,” with “shortcomings and mistakes.”<sup>56</sup> So Ellen White, true to her Wesleyan viewpoint, on occasion, exceeds her mentor in getting within a “hair’s breadth” of Mr. Calvin. ■

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## Footnotes:

1. After I had submitted this manuscript, my friend Dr. John Skrzypaszek, Director of the Ellen G. White/SDA Research Centre at Avondale College of Higher Education, drew my attention to a recent edition of *Steps to Christ* with a 68-page historical introduction by Dr. Denis Fortin including, also by him, an introduction and notes to each chapter. Dr. Skrzypaszek kindly lent me his personal copy. This is a beautifully crafted edition in imitation nineteenth-century classic style. Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*: with historical introduction and notes by Denis Fortin (One hundred twenty fifth Anniversary Edition; Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press 2017). Quoted in the endnotes below as Fortin, “Introduction.” Within the text of this article I shall largely but not exclusively quote from *Steps to Christ*. The pagination is taken from the small pocket edition, with the copyright in the name of Ellen G. Wright (1908).

2. Revell himself enthused that just reading the book would enlist one in promoting and extending its circulation. It is, he said, an “eminently helpful and practical work” that inspired both the young Christian and the mature believer alike. Quoted in Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: Volume 4, The Australian Years (1891–1900)* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1983), 36.

3. It was reprinted seven times in its first year and is now translated into more than 165 languages. T. Poirier, “A Century of Steps,” *Advent Review* (May 14, 1992): 14–15; James R. Nix, “Steps to Christ at 125,” *Adventist World* (November 2016): 24–25.

4. The suggestion of Revell as publisher was made by G. B. Starr, an early Adventist, who at one time worked with Dwight L. Moody. See Russell Staples, “Steps to Christ” in Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon *et al.* (eds), *The Ellen G. White*

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*Encyclopedia* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013), 1197–98. The Revell Company was taken over by the Baker Publishing Group in 1992.

5. See Michael Sokupa, “Mining *Steps to Christ*,” *Adventist World* (June 2017): 24–25. The origin of the title is unknown, but it seems that a group of teachers and ministers endorsed the title when the manuscript was enthusiastically received by them in 1891 during a convention at Harbor Heights, Michigan. Nix, “*Steps to Christ* at 125,” 24; Herbert E. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White* (Nampa, ID: Pacific, 1998), 444.

6. The Wesleyan tradition balances divine sovereignty with human responsibility, righteousness by faith with sanctification through the Holy Spirit. See Staples, “*Steps to Christ*,” 1198.

7. John Wesley, “To John Newton,” Londonderry, May 14, 1765. Conveniently found in Albert C. Outler (ed), *John Wesley* (New York: OUP, 1964) 78. Cited as Outler.

8. Fortin, “Introduction,” 28–31; 35–36.

9. White, *Steps to Christ*, 17, 43.

10. *Ibid.*, 18; italics added.

11. Calvin, *Institutes*, Book 2, Chapter 1.8, LCC, I.252; italics added. As quoted in John T. McNeill (ed) *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols; London: SCM, 1960). Cited as LCC.

12. *Ibid.*, Chapter 3.5, LCC, I.296.

13. Wesley, “The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption,” *Sermon* 9, Edward H. Sugden, *Wesley’s Standard Sermons* (2 vols; London: Epworth, 1921), I.188–89; italics added. Cited as Sugden.

14. Wesley, “Original Sin,” *Sermon* 38, Sugden, II.223.

15. White, *Steps to Christ*, 49.

16. Fortin, “Introduction” 36–40.

17. Calvin, *Institutes*, Book 3, Chapter 11.21, LCC I.751.

18. *Ibid.*, Chapter 11.2, LCC I.727.

19. Wesley, “Justification by Faith,” Outler, 202. Ellen White also relates justification to pardon. “Whatever his profession may be he is not justified, which means pardoned.” Ellen G. White, *My Life Today*, 250; “As the penitent sinner, contrite before God, discerns Christ’s atonement in his behalf, and accepts this atonement as his only hope in this life and the future life, his sins are pardoned. This is justification by faith.” Ellen G. White, *The Faith I Live By*, 116.

20. White, *Steps to Christ*, 68.

21. *Ibid.*, 62; italics added.

22. *Ibid.*, 53.

23. Calvin, *Institutes*, Book 3, Chapter 16.1, LCC I.798.

24. *Ibid.*, Chapter 15.3, I. LCC 790. Compare Ellen White’s statement that “This robe [of Christ’s righteousness], woven in the loom of heaven, has in it not one thread of human devising.” Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, 311.

25. Wesley, “Justification by Faith,” Outler, 200–201.

26. White, *Steps to Christ*, 63; italics added. “The righteousness by which we are justified is imputed; the righteousness by which we are sanctified is imparted. The first is our title to heaven, the second is our fitness for heaven.” White, *The Faith I Live By*, 116.

27. White, *Steps to Christ*, 44.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*, 48.

30. *Ibid.*, 49.

31. Calvin, *Institutes*, Book 3, Chapter 2.11, LCC, I.555–56.

32. White, *Steps to Christ*, 61.

33. *Ibid.*, 72; italics added except “choose.”

34. *Ibid.*; italics added.

35. Calvin, *Institutes*, Book 3, Chapter 21.5, LCC, II.926; italics added.

36. Wesley, “The Struggle with the Calvinists,” Outler, 480–81.

37. White, *Steps to Christ*, 18; italics added.

38. *Ibid.*, 47; italics original.

39. Fortin, “Introduction,” 40–52.

40. Commentary on 1 Corinthians 1:8 as quoted in François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Thought* (E.T.; London: Collins, 1963), 243.

41. For these two essays see Outler, 271–282; 283–298.

42. John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: Epworth, post 1767), 63.

43. *Ibid.*, 48–49; italics original.

44. Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (3rd ed.; London: Epworth, 2002) 396.

45. John Wesley, *Plain Account*, 49.

46. *Ibid.*, 52.

47. *Ibid.*, 53.

48. *Ibid.*, 61.

49. Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” Outler, 275.

50. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 391.

51. See *Life Sketches*, 28–29.

52. Ellen White, *The Great Controversy*, 471.

53. Ellen G. White, *The Sanctified Life*, 10; *My Life Today*, 248.

54. Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 560–61.

55. White, *Steps to Christ*, 57–58.

56. *Ibid.*, 64.