

NOTEWORTHY



Delegates to Bible Conference, Washington, D. C., July, 1919. (Source: *Adventist Review*)

“I HAVE HAD TO ADJUST MY VIEW OF THINGS”

Lessons from the 1919 Bible Conference

BY DENIS FORTIN



They were guarded. At least that is my impression after reading the transcript of the 1919 Bible Conference. A. G. Daniells, president of the General Conference, and W. W. Prescott, field secretary of the General Conference, may have been fairly open and candid about the comments they made but I think there is some hesitation in their answers. They are not as open and candid as I think they could have been or even wished to be.

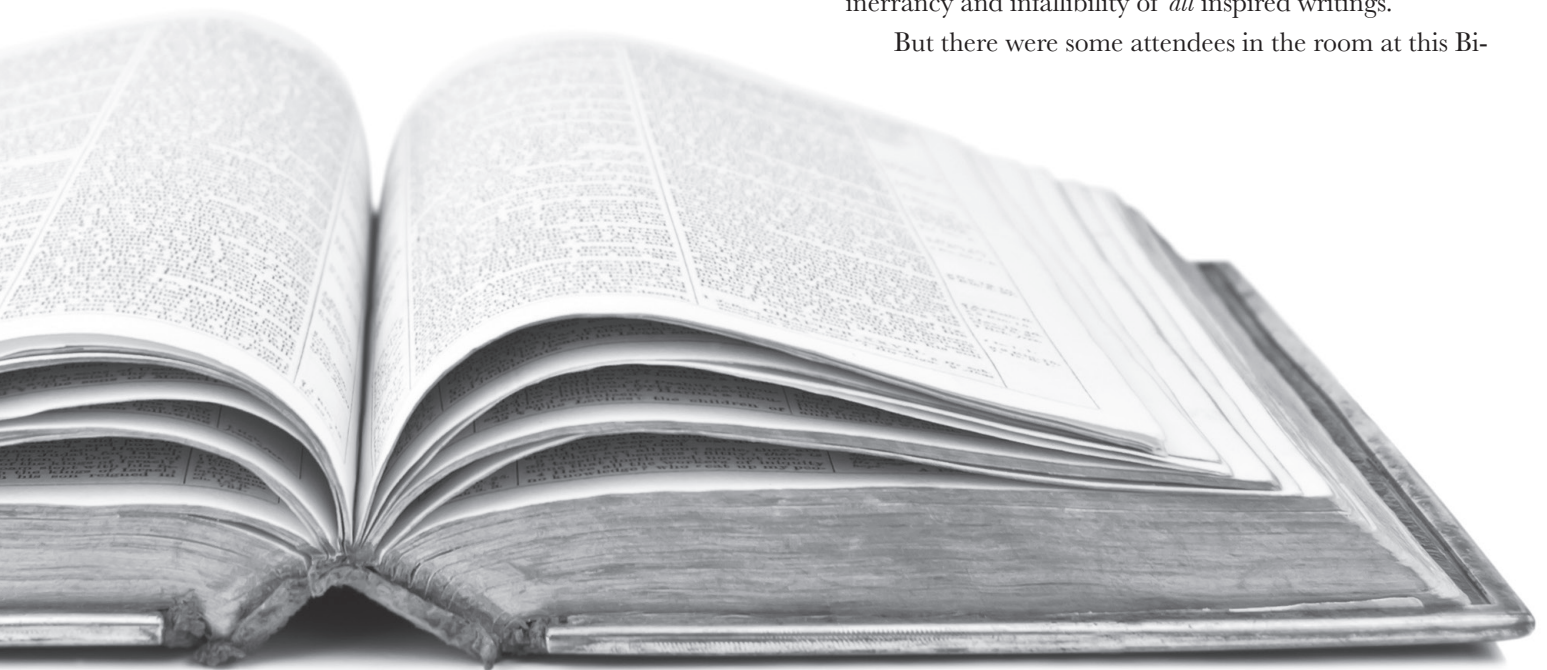
They knew that some of their colleagues in the room, church leaders, history and Bible teachers in Seventh-day Adventist colleges in North America, were inflexible in their views of some traditional Adventist teachings, and had a verbal view of inspiration. They were what we would come to call fundamentalists. They also viewed Ellen White's writings as inerrant and infallible in all matters of teachings, whether biblical interpretation, historical facts, or health and science information. Their reading of inspired writings tended to be simple and literalistic—taking the Bible and the writings of Ellen White as they read, with little consideration of context, culture or history, or even less one's own interpretive assumptions.

The six-week long event was in its fourth week.¹ The main purpose for the gathering had been to provide time for reflection and discussion of difficult subjects and points of interpretation teachers faced in their interrelated disciplines. They were facing some difficult challenges.

Their own study, and new discoveries and publications in the fields of biblical interpretation and history, were questioning some of the details of prophetic interpretation in Adventist teachings and doctrines. New information and insights challenged the accuracy of biblical and historical facts and chronologies that Adventists had used to buttress their interpretations of prophecies. Prophetic timelines were now quietly questioned or at any rate lacked the required certainty of evangelistic fervor to convince new converts.

And, consequently, the writings of Ellen White also were discussed. She had written numerous books and articles on biblical history, biblical themes, and biblical and Christian history. How were her writings to be used in matters of biblical and historical facts? Were her inspired writings the needed sword to cut the Gordian knots of their difficult challenges? Many teachers and evangelists used her writings to settle points of historical accuracy and biblical interpretation. In this, their position was similar to the Mormons who viewed the writings of their prophet as superseding the Bible. Their view of inspiration gave a hierarchical authority to Ellen White's writings. The Adventist position, supported by Ellen White, that there is no degree of inspiration between canonical and non-canonical prophets—a prophet is either inspired by the Holy Spirit or he is not—favored a predisposition toward the inerrancy and infallibility of *all* inspired writings.

But there were some attendees in the room at this Bi-



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ble Conference who knew better than to ascribe inerrancy and infallibility to Ellen White's writings. The problem though with this opinion is that if one were to say Ellen White's writings are not infallible or inerrant, what does this imply for the Bible? Holding the view that there is no degree of inspiration between canonical and non-canonical prophets inherently posed this unavoidable comparison and consequent conclusion. If one is not inerrant or infallible then nor is the other. As evangelical fundamentalism sought to organize a resistance to inroads made by modern critical biblical scholarship, for Seventh-day Adventists to challenge the inerrancy and infallibility of Ellen White's writings was tantamount to side with modern critical methodologies. Thus, almost inevitably, Seventh-day Adventist teachers and evangelists had no other moral and religious choice than to ally themselves with the evangelical fundamentalist perspective. What else could they do?

But, how honest would this position be?

Daniells and Prescott knew a lot more than they were willing to share. But what they shared with the attendees was earth shattering and unnerving for those who already leaned toward fundamentalism. And, as the Bible Conference proceeded and discussed some of these issues, rumors and insider revelations of the discussions were leaked to church members and leaders. An atmosphere of suspicion was obvious, which also created a hesitation to share more.

Daniells and Prescott had seen firsthand how Ellen White's books were prepared and they could not espouse their inerrancy and infallibility. The education of church members about Ellen White's writings, or lack of education more accurately, was a major point of concern. Many of the facts about her inspiration, how her writings were prepared, and their purpose, had not been clearly and honestly presented to church members. This in turn had led to a faulty view of their inspiration and the purpose of her writings.

On July 30, 1919, attendees held a special session to discuss with A. G. Daniells the use of Ellen White's writings in the teaching of Bible and history. Daniells began the conversation with the attendees by stating,

First of all, I want to reiterate what I stated in the talk I gave some evenings ago on this sub-

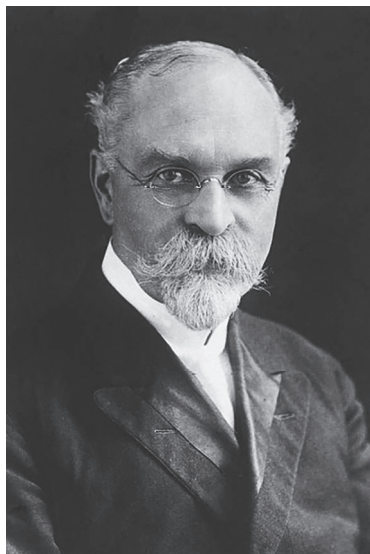
ject, that I do not want to say one word that will destroy confidence in this gift [of prophecy; i.e., Ellen White's writings] to this people. I do not want to create doubts. I do not want to in any way depreciate the value of the writings of the spirit of prophecy.²

But some things needed to be said about Ellen White's writings and the facts about their composition should demonstrate that her writings were not inerrant and infallible, nor were they intended to be the last word on matters of biblical interpretation, history, science, and health. Yet, Daniells was well aware that for some church members learning about this information could lead to a loss of faith and he knew he could then be branded as an unbeliever in Ellen White's ministry. He took the risk nonetheless and discussed how some books of Ellen White had been prepared to illustrate that she was not inerrant or infallible, and that her books were not to be the last word in matters of interpretation or history.

First, take her book *Sketches from the Life of Paul*, published in 1883. Soon after its publication the book had been criticized for its heavy dependence on Conybeare and Howson's *The Life and Epistles of the Apostle Paul* (1855). Entire chapters of her book followed the same sequence of events or commentaries as given by Conybeare and Howson. Many paragraphs and sentences were almost identical. The level of dependency was a shock to many readers. Of course, Ellen White had not intended to deceive anyone—she had recommended Conybeare and Howson's book “as a book of great merit, and one of rare usefulness to the earnest student of the New Testament history.”³ But there had been rumors of a lawsuit for plagiarism. For Daniells, this book and how it had been prepared demonstrated to him that Ellen White's inspiration was not a verbal inspiration but rather an inspiration at the level of unique guidance of what to select from another author to use as a spiritual commentary on biblical stories of the life of Paul. Conybeare and Howson's book was a work of careful scholarship—but not Ellen White's book, and it should not be taken as one, unless people were willing to claim indirectly that Conybeare and Howson's writings were somehow inspired as well.⁴

The preparation of *The Great Controversy* had also raised the same questions. After visiting Europe from 1885

to 1887, Ellen White had decided to revise *Spirit of Prophecy*, volume 4 (published in 1884), and make it a stand-alone book. The book came out in 1888 with a few extra chapters and many other chapters revised and/or expanded. By 1909, the printing plates for the 1888 edition were worn out and need-



A. G. Daniells (left) and W. W. Prescott (right)

ed to be redone. Ellen White decided to revise the book again and asked a few pastors to search for new quotes from known historians to replace the ones found in the 1888 edition. She wished to insert quotes that could be more easily found to support her historical and interpretational claims. In the introduction to the 1911 edition, she explained this process and the purpose for these historical quotes and her dependence on them. Prescott was the colleague who provided her with the most revisions to historical quotes and recommendations to edit offensive wording (if the book were to be offered to the non-Adventist public). At first, he explained, he had not wanted to do this research for her because he could not understand how his assistance could be incorporated into a book that claimed to be inspired. If Ellen White did not do all the work in the preparation of a book, including the selections from other authors, how could this book be considered “inspired.”

Prescott explained to the attendees at the Bible Conference that he had talked this over with W. C. White and said to him,

Here is my difficulty. I have gone over this and suggested changes that ought to be made in order to correct statements. These changes have been accepted. My personal difficulty will be to retain faith on those things that I can not [*sic*] deal with on that basis.

Prescott then commented to the attendees, “But I

did not throw up the spirit of prophecy, and have not yet; but I have had to adjust my view of things.”⁵

As I see it, a major part of Prescott’s concerns and difficulties had to do with the inspiration of a book that has been put together by people other than Ellen White. For Prescott, Ellen White was

certainly not verbally inspired. But his work on the last edition of *The Great Controversy* also challenged his understanding of thought inspiration. How could it even be “thought inspiration” when Ellen White’s thoughts in a book did not come from God but from books she selected materials from, and from an assistant who provided her with quotes from other books? If Adventists have rejected degrees of inspiration are there then levels of inspiration? And consequently, what is the purpose of the writings of a prophet who evidently has a level of inspiration that is even less comprehensive than thought inspiration?

These were difficult questions and experiences that Daniells and Prescott had to wrestle with and resolve in their own minds. Their experience with Ellen White led them to set aside any inclination toward verbal inspiration, but, to a large degree, even thought inspiration was not an entirely adequate model.⁶

The preparation of *The Desire of Ages* while Ellen White was in Australia was another example of why Daniells and Prescott could not subscribe to verbal inspiration. Ellen White herself had admitted that her assistant, Marian Davis, was her “bookmaker” and had helped her prepare the manuscript of the book. Like almost all of Ellen White’s books, *The Desire of Ages* was also a compilation and adaptation of White’s prior writings combined with material taken from other authors. Marian Davis had done much of this work under Ellen White’s supervision. How could this book even be considered thought inspired, given Davis’s huge involvement in its preparation?

My work on the 125th-anniversary edition of *Steps*

to Christ, published in 2017 by Andrews University Press, demonstrated for the first time how extensive and far-reaching Marian Davis's work was in the preparation of Ellen White's books. The intricate rearrangement of paragraphs and sentences taken from various documents in Ellen White's writings up to about 1890, primarily articles in the *Review and Herald*, *Signs of the Times*, and published testimonies in *Testimonies for the Church*, to create topical chapters in *Steps to Christ* amounted to careful editorial work and compilation. Such a careful work, at times fairly complex and elaborate, took time, lots of effort, and a keen editorial mind. In today's context, the work Davis did on *Steps to Christ*, and all other books she worked on,⁷ would be openly acknowledged at least in the preface of the book, if not on the title page.⁸ This is in part a reason why another assistant of Ellen White, Fannie Bolton, was dismissed from employment. Bolton felt recognition should be openly given to White's assistants and her insistence on this caused too much tension and misapprehension. Given what we know today about the preparation of Ellen White's books, we should have given this kind of explanation in the preface of every one of her books for a few decades by now. Although *Steps to Christ* was prepared under Ellen White's supervision and final approval, and almost all the content material taken from her prior writings, the final product is, in my estimation, the steps to Christ as Marian Davis understood Ellen White's thought on these steps to Christ. What model of inspiration explains how this book is inspired?⁹

At this Bible Conference, held just four years after Ellen White's death, some participants were candidly discussing the facts they knew about the preparation of her writings. Their conclusions arising out of their experience, and what they had seen in the preparation of her books, and what they had contributed to their revisions, led them to say that her books were to be used for both devotional and spiritual guidance, for individual church members and for the church at large, but not as final authority or infallible word on issues of biblical, historical, and scientific interpretations. They were as honest as they could be without giving the impression that they were denigrating the usefulness and inspiration of these writings. But they were guarded because they were setting themselves up for a massive amount of criticism if their honest views were made known or misunderstood.

The problem Daniells, Prescott, and others were facing was two-fold. First, if they affirmed that Ellen White's writings were not to be used as the final word on the interpretation or validation of controverted historical or scientific facts, they would be accused of not believing in their inspiration. Already, by 1919, Adventist expositors had almost convinced the entire membership that the inspiration of Ellen White's writings meant they were infallible and inerrant. Therefore, they *were* to be used as the last word in matters of controverted historical and scientific facts.

A second part of the problem they faced had to do with how the membership would react to knowing so many facts and details about how Ellen White really prepared her books. There was great fear among participants at the Bible Conference that if any of them openly admitted this information, the membership in general would lose faith in her writings. Already, Dudley Canright and some others had revealed a number of facts about this in their criticisms of Ellen White's writings, and Daniells and Prescott had no inclination to give any public validation to any of Canright's accusations and revelations—even though they likely knew he was right for some of them.

There was also a great fear among participants at the Conference that if any of them admitted openly that Adventist prophetic interpretation so far may have been wrong in some aspects of its interpretation, and that Ellen White's insights were not to be used to solve these questions, then again the membership would be disappointed and lose faith. A very strong sense of triumphalist infallibility dominated Adventist ethos and mindset by 1919. The same refrain had been used in 1888 with Jones and Waggoner's new interpretations of the ten horns of Daniel 7 and of the identity of the law in Galatians 3: If some biblical interpretations were based somehow on inaccurate facts and were to be admitted, then people could lose faith in the message. So how to be honest and yet be faith-building at the same time was a major conundrum they all faced.

On August 1, 1919, G. B. Thompson, also serving as field secretary for the General Conference, stated perhaps more ably than anyone else what the problem was.

It seems to me that if we are going to preach the Testimonies and establish confidence in them, it does not depend on whether they are verbally

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inspired or not. I think we are in this fix because of a wrong education that our people have had. . . . If we had always taught the truth on this question, we would not have any trouble or shock in the denomination now. But the shock is because we have not taught the truth, and have put the Testimonies on a plane where she says they do not stand. We have claimed more for them than she did. My thought is this, that the evidence of the inspiration of the Testimonies is not in their verbal inspiration, but in their influence and power in the denomination.¹⁰

Quite a thoughtful insight I would say. So the question remains: One hundred years later, what role do we play as educators in the proper education of our church membership regarding these questions of inspiration, the preparation of Ellen White's books, and the role they should have in our heritage? Perhaps this is the kind of reflection we should have as we mark this centennial. What have we learned and how differently should we do our work of teaching?

Soon after the Bible Conference was over, it was decided that the transcripts of the meetings would not be made public. Much of what had been discussed was considered too incendiary and troubling. So, the transcripts were placed in a box in the GC archives and within a few years forgotten. The pattern of obfuscation Thompson cautioned about would be continued. Instead of honestly correcting the false information passed on about Ellen White's inspiration, the preparation of her books, the use of secondary sources, and the extensive role and assistance of her colleagues, church leaders and teachers preferred to hide the information and perpetuate misinformation

and developing myths about her inerrancy and infallibility, and the role of her writings in any future Seventh-day Adventist history and theology.

In my endorsement of Michael Campbell's book on the history of the 1919 Bible Conference, I state the following,

For over half a century, few people knew about the discussions that happened at this 1919 Bible Conference. Church administrators, pastors and teachers had wrestled with obvious challenges to many aspects of Adventist prophetic interpretation and the role the writings of Ellen White should have in biblical and historical interpretations. The opinions were clearly divided but the shadow of Fundamentalism created a context of hesitation and uncertainty in which honest and candid discussions were impeded and willfully buried. The truth seemed to be inconvenient. Had the transcripts of this Conference been made known shortly after it was held, Seventh-day Adventism would likely be vastly different today.¹¹

But the transcripts were not made available. They were buried and with them much information about the difficult challenges our colleagues faced one hundred years ago.

Of course, this lack of transparency was possible because church leaders were in charge and mechanisms of accountability were not functioning very well. There is nothing we can do about this burial of information, but as a historian and theologian I am led to wonder about the consequences of this decision and what it caused us unwittingly to become.

What lessons can we learn from this? A number of lessons I have learned from our predecessors' experience at the 1919 Bible Conference and what we have experienced as a church since then have led me to say, like Prescott, that I also have had to adjust my view of things.

Christian faith and beliefs are the outcome of a set of factors. Protestants in general speak of *sola scriptura*, the Scripture alone, as the rule of faith and practice. Of course, other factors come into the picture and it is never really only the Bible that informs or shapes what people come to believe and practice in their faith community. Most Protestant communities have confessions of faith or doctrinal statements that were adopted in order to consolidate various positions on matters of faith and practice. All of them give priority to Scripture, but over time they have given Scripture a primary position of authority rather than a sole authority, and as time goes confessions of faith take on more defining authority to set the boundaries of acceptable faith expressions within their communities.¹² Likely this is where we find ourselves as Seventh-day Adventists today with our Twenty-Eight Fundamental Beliefs, *Church Manual*, and endless numbers of church policies, along with the writings of Ellen White as now understood and emphasized. These documents provide the essential boundaries of what is acceptable within our community.

We are familiar with the Wesleyan quadrilateral to comprehend God's will and how people appropriate God's revelation: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. The four sides of this quadrilateral are not of equal length (the quadrilateral is not a square); therefore, these four elements are not of equal authority in shaping a faith community. It is perhaps more helpful to understand this relationship as similar to a trapezoid with one side, Scripture, longer than the others, with experience and reason helping to understand the revelation of God through Scripture and as evidenced in the history of His people (tradition).¹³

Yet, the experience side of the trapezoid may be much longer than we think or wish to admit. The unconscious role of experience in the shaping of our faith community has been neglected in religious studies of our denomination.

By concealing the conversations of the 1919 Bible Conference, our community lost information about our

colleagues' honest questions regarding various matters of Adventist interpretations and about Ellen White's ministry and the purpose of her books. Instead, a certain perception of inerrancy and infallibility was passed on. As George Knight in his recent book chronicles and analyzes, what later generations received was a biased and mistakenly informed understanding of her writings. Ellen White's afterlife took on aspects of a mythology. What we have here is a natural evolution of a tradition or a received belief as it is shaped and crafted by some information and by the lack of other kinds of information. What later generations come to believe is different from what earlier generations knew. Unknowingly and unconsciously, but sometimes intentionally and purposefully, a community's experience of its faith shapes and transforms what future generations come to understand what God is saying to them.

In the theological context of the time, in the fundamentalist era of the 1920s to 1940s, for some pastors and teachers, fear of being ostracized or branded as unorthodox was a powerful deterrent to being honest and to revealing what they knew. What later generations come to believe is mediated through intermediary generations and experiences. In our case, the intermediary generations hid some information that did not harmonize with their view of revelation and inspiration and passed on a view that was in agreement with their horizon. The concealing of the transcripts of the 1919 Bible Conference and avoiding open discussions on difficult topics created a discontinuity in the reception of information about various aspects of our heritage.

In historical-theological studies we look at the development of doctrines, beliefs, movements, and ideas. In our Adventist discussions, we speak of truth being progressive when attempting to explain the changes that have happened among us, whether regarding some aspects of the relationship between faith and good works, from non-Trinitarian views of God to Trinitarianism, or developments in our eschatology. To some extent this model of progressive truth is inadequate and restrictive; it lacks



perspective and may be a touch too naïve. Certainly, people in successive generations transform and reshape beliefs as they discover new information, but also as their contexts influence them, and at times force them, to adapt their beliefs. Then, rather than experiencing the progressive discovery of new truths or new insights into truth, we should speak instead of the continuity, unity, clarity, and normativity of what is believed in relationship with the past. Successive generations often look for what pioneers taught, believed, and practiced, and seek to identify the marks of continuity and unity with the past statements of beliefs and practices. These past beliefs and practices are also clarified for a current generation and, finally, a new normative way of understanding beliefs and practices is accepted. The transformation of beliefs and practices is not only progressive, it is also affected along the way by a number of factors. What a community comes to believe is affected and shaped by its imperfect, even flawed, human life, history, and experiences.

I think it is easy to see that the study of our current beliefs and practices very often reveals this process. Take any discussion about ordination and you will see how we have tried to look for continuity with Scripture and early Adventist practices. We have sought to confirm our continuity with the past, seeking statements and precedents to endorse one or the other points of view. We also seek to understand Ellen White's thoughts on such discussions, seeking in her writings continuity, unity, and normativity.

Although this approach to the study of the development of beliefs and practices has good credentials, an adaptation of this model presents itself as perhaps more useful to reflect on the consequences and lessons to be learned from the 1919 Bible Conference and I'm grateful to Greg Howell for pointing this out (in a footnote) in his dissertation proposal at Regent University.¹⁴

The development of beliefs and practices of a given faith community, and how these beliefs and practices are interpreted, is not a static experience; it is part of a flow

of time and ideas, passed on from one generation to the next and massaged into either a reinvigorated reappraisal of those past beliefs and practices or as updated and amended beliefs and practices to fit new perspectives and a new context.

This is not to deny the denomination's desire to maintain intrinsic continuity with its past, but in terms of historical and theological development it is granted that with each successive generation a denomination's beliefs and practices undergo a development at the hands of those who take the heritage of the past and slightly reshape or even willfully transform it to meet the needs of new situations and problems that were not previously considered. Thus, the development or the evolution of beliefs and practices is not so much a "development" or a progressive discovery of truth, as it is a "reception."

In his study of the development of doctrines and beliefs, Ormond Rush offers four bipolar issues of a reception model of the "development" of doctrines which perhaps offers us a better way to understand the lessons to be learned from the 1919 Bible Conference.¹⁵

The first bipolar issue of what later generations receive from prior generations is a matter of both continuity and discontinuity. Continuity with the past is something to be constantly cherished and valued. Yet Adventist identity is not something static and it changes with each generation. Later generations receive the normative beliefs and practices from prior generations, as they continue to be handed down as fixed elements of the Adventist heritage or "tradition." Receiving these beliefs and practices, as part of a living reception, stimulates new concretizations

of these beliefs and practices in new contexts that become genuine responses to God's guidance in the church. Thus, new formulations or adaptations of beliefs and practices, that have not previously been part of the received "tradition," emerge appropriately and necessarily as part of a community's experience of divine guidance in its history. Continuity is thus paired with some discontinuity. It is



The 1919 Bible Conference was held only four years after Ellen White's funeral (pictured), in Battle Creek, Michigan.
(SOURCE: Courtesy of the Ellen G. White Estate, Inc.)

George Knight who said once that if James White were to be alive today, he would not join the Seventh-day Adventist Church because he would likely object to a number of our fundamental beliefs. (And in reverse, many of us would probably not be comfortable in James White's church.) While many of our current beliefs are clearly in continuity with the time of James White, some are also in discontinuity.

If there is some continuity and discontinuity with the past for each successive generation, there is naturally going to be both unity and plurality of beliefs and practices as well. In this second bipolar issue, unity of beliefs and practices, as stated in our Twenty-Eight Fundamental Beliefs, will be in tension with a plurality of interpretations and expressions of these beliefs and practices. According to Rush,

This plurality emerges from diverse cultural, linguistic, geographical, economic, political, philosophical horizons, producing receptions as diverse as Asian or Australian theologies, feminist or liberation theologies, or theologies emerging out of particular contexts or issues. The unity of faith is not disrupted by such plurality, but rather this plurality reveals the universal power of the living tradition to address the salvific needs of all peoples and its power to disclose in diverse contexts the mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ.¹⁶

In our own Adventist context, this would mean that each generation receives an understanding of beliefs and practices that will naturally be contextualized and emerge in some fashion as different from what emerges in a different environment. There is thus an element of newness in what appears because God's guidance of people in different contexts looks different for people from the exterior looking in. Is it any surprise therefore that we would be so diverse in our understanding of the role of a pastor and the meaning of ordination? But what needs to be embraced here is that this is part of God's will and guidance for his church; that both unity and plurality are willed of God. As one traces the history of the reception of our beliefs and practices from one generation to the next, we see a dialogue between God and his church that looks both identical and different.

Typically, Adventists, like other Christians, are uncomfortable with diversity and plurality of views and practices. So Rush asks, "But within this plurality and perhaps conflict of interpretations, who judges what is true, and by what criteria?" This reception model highlights the need for those who judge the legitimacy of various views to discern local expressions of beliefs and practices. It does not do away with the need for maintaining the unity of faith, but those who are entrusted with the responsibility of validating and maintaining what is true of one's received heritage must also be able to stimulate and promote dialogue between such plurality of receptions, and not just merely take hold of the negative task of judging deviance or non-compliance.¹⁷

A third bipolar issue in the reception of beliefs and practices is clarity and ambiguity. As each generation strives to express and articulate beliefs accurately, our cultural and linguistic limitations will inevitably cause some distortions. According to Rush, "Some doctrines and dogmas name a truth about God with such sufficient clarity that they endure as classics of the tradition. But no reception, past or present, is distortion-free."¹⁸

"So, what of those received elements that a community, from its present perspective, now rejects as being incompatible with its reception" of the heritage of the past? Rush answers that:

Some elements of the tradition, explicitly or by default, the community may deem to be less important in its construction of Christian identity, and allow those elements to recede to the background in its Gestalt of the tradition. Some elements it judges, from present sensibilities and horizons, to be in fact blockages to the full impact of the tradition's alterity. There is perceived to be in the tradition an ambiguity that is not simply a legitimate plurality of expression nor a benign conflict of interpretations, but is named to be an ideological distortion that continues to limit current expectation horizons.¹⁹

A good example of this phenomenon among us is the rejection of last-generation theology, a part of Adventist heritage that is now perceived as an ideological distortion of the Gospel. Another example is our rejection of our non-Trini-

tarian heritage, which is also now perceived as being a theological distortion of the biblical witness about God.

One last bipolar issue deals with both normativity and relativity. As we think of our own statements of fundamental beliefs (1931, 1980, 2015), we may see that Rush is right when he states that “doctrinal formulations [as in the Nicene Creeds] become classic, normative texts of the tradition because they bring the divine alterity to bear and effect horizontal change in the very way God is experienced, and therefore named.” These statements become “classic and normative therefore because they (1) encapsulate some content of christian [*sic*] belief, (2) engender committed worship, (3) illumine the perplexities of human existence, and (4) stimulate and empower committed christian [*sic*] praxis.”²⁰ As decades went by, we can see how our own statements of beliefs have become more and more normative. And today, in some segments of our church, our compendia of church policies and inherited practices appear to be even more normative than the Twenty-Eight Fundamental Beliefs.

But if some documents of our heritage act as normative statements of our beliefs and practices, there is an inherent relativity to all this, according to Rush. While statements of beliefs and practices are normative to set the boundaries of a faith community, they are relative as long as they are only on paper and not lived (or received) by the community. Their normativity is dependent on their reception and internalization. “Their normativity is relative to their power to continue conveying the truth” of our heritage “and empowering believers to live that truth.”²¹ Statements of beliefs “are relative in their function as encapsulations of some content of Christian belief” because they were written within a particular context. A quick comparison of our 1931 statement of beliefs with our current one will show that they were written within a different context.²² “Human horizons are always partial and moving, depending on one’s viewpoint.” The expression of truth and the clarity

of its language remain tied to our human horizon. And the language of our statements of beliefs is relative in a deeper theological sense. “The truest and clearest expression of belief never eliminates the otherness of God’s mystery.” In a sense, “truth is absolute for God, but not for us” and our understanding of truth and of God is always limited by the depth of our relationship with God.²³

Rush’s reception model of a faith community’s heritage is helpful to understand and analyze the consequences of and the lessons to be learned from the 1919 Bible Conference. One hundred years later, we can see that decisions made after the Conference impacted what future generations received from our heritage and how it shaped what we have become, what we now experience. For good and for bad, history cannot be undone. And there are consequences to the actions of former church leaders, teachers, and pastors.

The decision to not release the transcripts of the discussions, the lack of transparency about the writings of Ellen White, how they were prepared and their role in shaping our religious beliefs and theology, the lack of honesty about the difficult interpretational issues history and Bible teachers faced, created and allowed a context that shaped the Adventist religious experience for generations since then. The heritage we have received was unconsciously and unknowingly shaped by their decisions. We should not demonize them for what they decided. They lived in a real context, *their context*; they feared that people in general would misunderstand the information they had access to and had discussed together. After all, in the year following the end of World War I, the Great War to end all wars, our colleagues then had a genuine sense of the nearness of the *eschaton*. So why upset believers with information that was likely going to be misconstrued and misunderstood, and even cause them to lose faith in their message? A pragmatic, spiritual, and pastoral reason consciously guided their experience.

By concealing the conversations of the 1919 Bible Conference, our community lost information about our colleagues’ honest questions regarding various matters of Adventist interpretations and about Ellen White’s ministry and the purpose of her books.

Thus, history cannot be undone and one hundred years later our context has been shaped by their context. So, our experience as a denomination today is embodying the reception of their experience and their heritage, and we experience these four bipolar issues in our church. This is what we have received from A. G. Daniells, W. W. Prescott and others.

Today our faith, our beliefs and practices have been shaped by both continuity and discontinuity, by both unity and plurality, by both clarity and ambiguity, and by both normativity and relativity. In 1919, no one set out to pass on their heritage of our faith to the next generation with these issues and concepts in mind; but they did.

When, in the 1970s and 1980s, the transcripts of the 1919 Bible Conference were discovered in the archives of the General Conference, when colleagues became aware of Ellen White's dependency on secondary sources for some of her most important works, many church members and scholars were shaken by such "discoveries." But in 1919, these were known facts by many of Ellen White's most trusted colleagues and by her son, W. C. White. So when *Spectrum* published a number of stunning articles about Ellen White's literary sources, when Walter Rea, Ronald Numbers, and Desmond Ford published their studies,²⁴ they revealed to the Adventist membership what Daniells, Prescott and many others had feared would cause loss of faith. And it did indeed. And those who revealed this information were branded as unorthodox. The consequences of the 1919 Bible Conference are therefore still with us.

While we value unity of faith expressions we live with plurality. We are in continuity with our early pioneers in some aspects of our faith and we are in great discontinuity from them for other aspects. While we prize clarity of faith and practices, we see ambiguity at times and in some areas. While we prefer clear norms, we know much about relativity. We have a set of beliefs and practices that unites us and at the same time creates plurality among us, and that is because each of us understands our faith, beliefs and practices with a different set of cultural lenses that invariably creates various levels of clarity and ambiguity, and hence we ascribe to these beliefs and practices also different levels of normativity and relativity.

Yet, what I think we need to acknowledge candidly is that since the 1970s and 1980s the same kind of obfuscation and lack of authenticity has persisted. And I

wonder to what extent this lack of authenticity to deal with difficult subjects is also something we have received as part of our heritage. Have lack of authenticity and deficiency in historical and theological honesty become part of our denominational character? Some of these issues discussed in 1919 are still not honestly discussed today and are not addressed properly by us, teachers, and by church leaders. Sometimes for political gain and financial support, there is a systemic under-education of the membership about these various issues. We remain quiet and when teachers try to reveal some evidence about these facts to provide a more accurate view to their students, a prevalent anti-intellectual context, still conditioned by fundamentalism, rapidly endangers their professional career or brands them as unorthodox. So, we are guarded as much as Daniells and Prescott were a hundred years ago. And when some uninformed church members "discover" some "new" insights into all these issues, they are just as unprepared today to face the shaking of their faith as people were in 1919, or as we were a generation ago.

Sometimes I am not so hopeful when I see how some difficult issues regarding our beliefs and practices are handled by our church leaders: when leaders seem to force their understanding of our faith and practices as normative on the rest of the church, as if they are imbued with some perfect supernatural gift of wisdom the moment they take office.²⁵ But I see hope if we were to really embrace God's guidance in a different way, understanding the bipolarity of religious faith and its transmission and reception from prior generations: embracing the natural continuity and discontinuity with our past heritage, the unity and plurality of ways our past heritage is now received and constantly reshaped into a variety of customs and cultures, the clarity and ambiguity with which our past experience and the major documents of our heritage are understood, and both the normative and relative function they are given to shape our current and future horizons; all this as part of God's guidance for the large, international, multi-generational, multicultural and ever so diverse church we have become. If Prescott had to adjust his view of things, I think we are very much in need of the same experience. That is perhaps the best lesson we could learn from the 1919 Bible Conference.

Endnotes

1. The conference was held from July 1 to August 9, 1919, at Washington Missionary College (now Washington Adventist University) in Takoma Park, Maryland.

2. Quoted in George R. Knight, *Ellen White's Afterlife: Delightful Fictions, Troubling Facts, Enlightening Research* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2019), 127. The subject of conversation on July 30 was "The Use of the Spirit of Prophecy in Our Teaching of Bible and History."

3. An advertisement for Conybeare and Howson's book appeared in *Signs of the Times*, February 22, 1883: 96, with her endorsement: "The Life of St. Paul by Conybeare and Howson, I regard as a book of great merit, and one of rare usefulness to the earnest student of the New Testament history."

4. For a discussion of Daniells' experience at the 1919 Bible Conference and his views on inspiration, see Benjamin McArthur, *A. G. Daniells: Shaper of Twentieth-Century Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2015), 380–407.

5. Quoted in Knight, *Ellen White's Afterlife*, 168. For discussions of Prescott's views on inspiration, see Denis Kaiser, "Trust and Doubt: Perceptions of Divine Inspiration in Seventh-day Adventist History (1880-1930)" (PhD dissertation, Andrews University, 2016), 256-295; Gilbert Valentine, *W. W. Prescott: Forgotten Giant of Adventism's Second Generation* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2005), 276-283; and Gilbert M. Valentine, "The Church 'drifting toward a crisis': Prescott's 1915 Letter to William White," *Catalyst* 2 (November 2007): 32–94.

6. It should be observed that the now well-known document Manuscript 24, 1886, in which Ellen White explains her "theory" of thought inspiration, that she adapted from Calvin E. Stowe, *Origins and History of the Books of the Bible* (1867), was very likely not known by attendees of the 1919 Bible Conference and could not have framed their perception of Ellen White's inspiration nor of the biblical writers. This document was published for the first time in *Selected Messages*, Book 1, in 1958.

7. According to Robert Olson, Marian Davis prepared ten books: *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 4 (1884), *The Great Controversy* (1888), *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5 (1889), *Patriarchs and Prophets* (1890), *Steps to Christ* (1892), *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing* (1896), *The Desire of Ages* (1898), *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6 (1900), and *The Ministry of Healing* (1905). Robert Olson, "Davis, Mary Ann 'Marian,'" *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, ed. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2013), 362–363.

8. See Denis Fortin, "Historical Introduction," in Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, with historical introduction and notes by Denis Fortin (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2017), 1–20.

9. In the 1980s, as Adventists wrestled again with views and models of inspiration in response to the new findings of Walter Rea, Ron Numbers and others, George Rice, at the time professor of New Testament studies at the Seminary, published a most helpful study of Luke's model of inspiration and composition of his gospel. This model would have helped, to some extent, Daniells and Prescott in 1919. George E. Rice, *Luke, A Plagiarist?* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1983).

10. Quoted in Knight, *Ellen White's Afterlife*, 160. The subject of conversation on August 1 was listed as "The Inspiration of the

Spirit of Prophecy as Related to the Inspiration of the Bible." Thompson makes a distinction between an objective ontological criterion for the inspiration of Ellen White's writings (their verbal inspiration) and a subjective functional criterion (their role and function). His obituary gives more information about his personal and professional life, *Review and Herald*, July 24, 1930: 28.

11. Michael W. Campbell, 1919: *The Untold Story of Adventism's Struggle with Fundamentalism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2019), 3.

12. See, Edith M. Humphrey, *Scripture and Tradition: What the Bible Really Says* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 9–17.

13. See Fortin, "Historical Introduction" in Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (2017), 24–26.

14. Greg Howell's proposal seeks to study Seventh-day Adventist biblical hermeneutics and do a historical review of the denomination's stance on biblical interpretation from 1957.

15. Ormond Rush, "Reception Hermeneutics and the 'Development' of Doctrine: An Alternative Model," *Pacifica* 6.2 (1993): 125–140. Rush credits Hans Robert Jauss (1921–1997) for his insights into reception theory of the development of doctrines and beliefs of a faith community.

16. Rush, "Reception Hermeneutics," 135.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 135–136.

19. *ibid.*, 136.

20. *Ibid.*, 137.

21. *Ibid.*

22. See my comparative study of our earliest statements of beliefs in Denis Fortin, "Nineteenth-century Evangelicalism and Early Adventist Statements of Beliefs," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 36, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 51–67.

23. Rush, "Reception Hermeneutics," 137.

24. Walter T. Rea, *The White Lie* (Turlock, CA: M & R Publications, 1982); Ronald L. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); Desmond Ford, "Daniel 8:14, the Day of Atonement, and the Investigative Judgment" (1980).

25. I still claim that our church polity is predominantly episcopal with some attributes of presbyterianism. Denis Fortin, "Church Governance in Times of Conflict," *Adventist Today* 26, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 4–7.

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