

THE DISCIPLINE *of Heaven*

BY RONALD GRAYBILL

I have studied Ellen White’s first vision for years. I even traced the exact wording changes in a dozen different reprintings over a century. I have seen how the Pentecostal “Hallelujahs” of first printing were muted into the liturgical “Allelujahs” of geriatric Episcopalians in the final version. Then Malcolm Bull finds a whole new level of meaning in the manners of the heavenly court depicted in the first vision. Somehow, in the midst of the post-Disappointment chaos and confusion, this skinny, sickly teenager, Ellen Harmon, glimpsed the stately order and discipline of heaven.

Bull uses the term “manners” to refer to Ellen White’s insistence that to be fitted for heaven, the *manner* of one’s speech and deportment must be elevated and refined, not “rude, harsh” or “course and uncouth.”¹ Satan’s departure created vacancies in the heavenly ranks, which

Ellen White said would be filled by those who could acquire the necessary good manners. Very frequently, when Ellen White mentions the need for refined manners,



Courtesy of the Ellen G. White Estate, Inc.

White Family, ca. 1864

Very frequently, when Ellen White mentions the need for refined manners, it is because angels are watching or because good manners are necessary if saints are to take their places among angels.

Yes, those who hope to be companions of angels must develop refined manners. There will be “a kind thoughtfulness for others, for this was characteristic of Christ.”

it is because angels are watching or because good manners are necessary if saints are to take their places among angels. Bull even posited Adventists are some sort of post-millennialists because they achieve millennial perfection before stepping seamlessly into heaven.

For Ellen White, especially did one’s speech, both public and private, reflect the desired manners. Uncouth speech should be avoided; common, cheap expressions should be replaced by sound and pure words. No wrong intonations or incorrect accents or emphasis were allowed. Even pronunciation was important. A nasal tone and thick, unclear speech was to be eschewed. On the other hand, Ellen White said that even excellent penmanship had nothing to do with preparation for heaven. This was contrary to the Victorian belief that good penmanship was a sure indication of self-discipline and a good character. After all, Ellen White’s own handwriting was far from an example of elevated manners.²

One’s clothing must also reflect elevated manners. Women should be simple and unpretending in dress. Men’s dress should be neat, but not foppish. Even baptismal robes should be “well-shaped garments, and made of suitable material.”³

When it comes to children and youth, Ellen White turned to Harvey Newcomb’s 1853 book *How to Be a Man*, and held up his exhaustive example of “the neat, orderly and careful boy” in a letter to her sons, then published it in *Appeal to the Youth*. In this boy’s room one found everything in order. “When he undresses, every article of his clothing is folded and laid together in the order. . . . He never considers himself dressed, till he has washed his hands and face, cleaned his teeth, and combed his hair; and he never thinks of setting down to the table with dirty hands. But the sloven boy exposes himself to sour looks and chiding, by his dirty habits.”

Yes, those who hope to be companions of angels must develop refined manners. There will be “a kind

thoughtfulness for others, for this was characteristic of Christ.” “The work of educating the mind and manners may be carried forward to perfection.” One begins to suspect that perfectly reproducing the character of Christ—which must be achieved by “his people” before he returns—entails refined manners as well as ethical perfection.⁴

Endnotes

1. Ellen G. White, *Testimony for the Church*, No. 32 (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1885): 91 [5T335]; Ellen G. White, “The Cultivation of the Voice,” *Review and Herald* 55 (Feb. 5, 1880): 81 [GW91].
2. Ellen G. White, *Christian Education*, (Battle Creek, MI: International Tract Society, 1893), 123; Ellen G. White, *Testimony for the Church*, No. 10 (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press, 1864), 53 [1T445]; Ellen G. White, “The Healdsburg College,” Manuscript 22, 1886 [Ev 668]; Ellen G. White, *Testimony for the Church*, No. 17 (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press, 1869), 90 [2T267]; Ronald D. Graybill, *Visions and Revisions, A Textual History of Ellen G. White’s Writings* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Oak and Acorn Publishing, 2019), 23.
3. Ellen G. White, “Simplicity in Dress,” Manuscript 1, 1877 (October 23, 1877) [CG413]; Ellen G. White, *Testimony for the Church*, No. 29 (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publ. Assn., 1880), 13 [4T291]; Ellen G. White, “Personal Labor Required of the Ministers,” *Review and Herald* 72 (March 5, 1893): 145.
4. Ellen G. White, “Are We in the Faith?” *Review and Herald* 61 (April 29, 1884): 273 [GW92]; Ellen G. White, *Testimony for the Church*, No. 28 (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publ. Assn., 1879), 152 [4T358]; Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (Melbourne, Australia: Echo Pub. Co., 1900), 69 [COL69].



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A FRESH PAIR *of Spectacles*

BY GILBERT VALENTINE

Malcolm Bull’s insightful but overlooked sociological analysis of Adventism offers a fresh pair of spectacles with which to see ourselves. He asks us, for example, to re-think the ideas implied in the construction of society evident in Ellen White’s earliest portrayal of heaven—the illuminating result of giving her first vision a careful close reading. The description she gives of heaven is in terms of an absolute monarchy reflecting the royal courts of seventeenth-century Europe

rather than a robust, free-wheeling, individualistic republic with a democratic “we the people” as its foundation stone. The strict order of heaven, in Ellen White’s first vision, has tight constraints on behavior, duties, and its rigid work assignments, all set in a hierarchy where commands are to be followed and no one questions their place. This structure, she asserts, is to be reflected in the pattern of life for saints on earth in preparation for that heavenly society. Bull sees an intriguing conundrum here when he

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highlights not the timing of the descent of Christ from heaven (before or after the millennium), but rather the status and experience of the saints before or after the millennium. The perfected pattern of a constrained, well-mannered life is to be achieved before the Advent. That which post-millennialists look for at the end of the millennium, Adventists see as having to be achieved before the millennium. In this sense, Bull suggests half-way through his essay that Adventist eschatology should be seen as not pre-millennial but at least “partially post-millennialist.” By the end of his argument, he is even more sure. Adventist eschatology is simply “postmillennialist rather than premillennialist.” Twentieth-century “last-generation theology,” which does not just look for a perfected generation before the advent but makes the time of the advent contingent upon such a status, would seem to support Bull’s observation even more strongly. An intriguing irony for Adventist theology.

Bull offers another insightful explanation of why Adventist experience has been limited to just one charismatic prophetic voice in its midst. Adventists have for a long time made the case that Ellen White’s counsel helped the emerging Sabbatarian movement, during the 1840s, avoid the entanglements of fanaticism and to distance themselves from it. Malcolm Bull provides a more nuanced and sophisticated analysis that supports this thesis but extends it. Ellen White’s charisma was actually part and parcel of the charismatic community in which it first appeared. It would otherwise have been most unlikely to have received validation. Without the presence of a charismatically conditioned community, he argues, the charisma of Ellen White would have been rejected. But Ellen White’s earliest visionary experience of heaven emphasized order and dignity—the very things her worship surroundings lacked. The didactic product of her visions emphasized that the good order of heaven should

be reflected in the church. There should be good manners and the avoidance of uncontrolled charismatic outbreaks. Thus, there could be no prophet after her. Having exited up into the loft of institutionalism and having encouraged formal, routinized organization, she pulled up the ladder of her charisma and no one could follow her. It has been difficult ever since even just for women ministers to receive proper validation in the movement.

Adventist cosmology, eschatology, and ethics are linked in paradoxical ways. We may be not who we think we are. A view through a sociological frame of reference can be profoundly helpful with so many fresh insights.



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