

**Ellen White as an Adult:
Marriage, Motherhood, and Ministry**
Jerry Moon

I. Introduction

II. EGW Was an Evangelist before She Was Called to the Prophetic Ministry

- A. Call to Evangelism
 - 1. At age 15, assurance
 - 2. Immediately began leading other teens and young marrieds to Christ
- B. Call to Prophetic Ministry
 - 1. 16 at Great Disappointment, Oct. 22, 1844
 - 2. 17th birthday, Nov. 26, 1844
 - 3. 17 at first vision, late December 1844/January 1845
- C. Evangelism, the work of making faithful disciples for Jesus, was the foundation of her prophetic ministry
 - 1. She saw her primary *identity* as a disciple and lover of Jesus.
 - 2. She saw her primary *work* as bringing others to love and serve Him too (General Conference Biographical Information Blank, 1909).

III. From Friendship to Courtship

- A. James White's Early Years
 - 1. Born Aug. 4, 1821
 - 2. Middle child of nine
 - 3. At 7, he was physically feeble with poor eyesight. "His eyes would cross when he tried to read." Thiele, 34.
 - 4. Instead of attending school, he worked on the farm.
 - 5. Became six feet tall and exceptionally strong.
 - 6. About age, 18, vision became normal.
 - 7. At 19, entered first grade and in 12 weeks earned a certificate to teach elementary school. Virgil Robinson, *James White*, 16-17.
 - 8. Fall of 1840, became teacher of a country school.
- B. Similarities between James and Ellen's early lives
 - 1. Both he and Ellen were born in small towns in Maine,
 - 2. both their fathers were early engaged in farming and later moved into manufacturing,¹
 - 3. both had fathers who were devout lay leaders in their respective churches, and were noted for their personal spirituality.²

¹Robert Harmon was a hatmaker and sometime farmer; John White was a farmer who became a shoemaker.

²Robert Harmon was a Methodist lay exhorter, cast out for his Millerite leanings. John White was sprinkled as a Congregationalist, then immersed as a Baptist, and still later became convinced that the beliefs of the Christian Connection were "more liberal [less dogmatic] and scriptural" than those of the Calvinistic Baptists. He was cast out by the Baptists for communing with the Christians. Both sets of parents, Robert and Eunice Harmon, and John and ____ White, in later life became adherents of the church founded by their children, James and Ellen.

4. Both came from large families. Ellen was the youngest of eight children; James was the middle child of nine.
5. Both had early health problems that interfered with formal schooling and limited their prospects for success in life.
6. Ellen had an accident at age nine that interrupted her schooling. James had an illness before age three that left him with crossed eyes, so that formal schooling was impractical. He worked on his father's farm until age 19, when he spent 12 weeks in grade school and earned the equivalent of an eighth grade diploma. He later spend 29 weeks in high school.³
7. Both had parents who were deeply pessimistic about their children's prospects.
 - a. Ellen's parents were told she was "ruined" by her accident;⁴
 - b. James's illness "cut off" his parents "hopes" for his life.⁵
8. Both James and Ellen had a high regard for education, and both were largely self-educated.
 - a. Ellen recalled, "It was the hardest struggle of my young life to yield to my feebleness, and decide that I must leave my studies, and give up the hope of gaining an education."⁶
 - b. James struggled for months between his love for education and his convictions of a call to preach, before he "finally gave up all for Christ and his gospel, and found peace and freedom."⁷
9. Both James and Ellen were acquainted with depression on account of their personal trials.
 - a. After her accident destroyed her physical attractiveness, Ellen felt "the idea of carrying my misfortune through life was insupportable."⁸
 - b. Before James's eyesight cleared up, restoring his potential "to become a man," he confessed that he had viewed himself as "nearly worthless in the world," and "regretted" his "existence."⁹

IV. James White's Call to Ministry

1. At age 21 (1842) he accepted Miller's message
2. With great reluctance but under heavy conviction he surrendered his ambitions for college and became a preacher.
3. Winter 1842-43: Held evangelistic meetings; in country school houses, eastern Maine. With seven sermons and a borrowed horse he led more than 1,000 people to Christ.
4. April 1843, ordained to the gospel ministry (Christian Connection). Spalding, 1:45-52.

II. James White's First Impression of Ellen

"I first met her in the city of Portland, in the state of Maine. She was then a Christian of the most devoted type. And although but 16, she was a laborer in the cause of Christ in public and from house to house." *Life Sketches*, 1880 edition, p. 126, cited in 1 Bio 71.

III. Ellen Meets James

1. February 1845 trip to eastern Maine
 2. At Orrington, James White heard her tell her first visions, 2SG 38
- a. He believed her visions were from God.

³*Life Incidents*, 14.

⁴2SG 8-9

⁵*Life Incidents*, 12.

⁶*Life Sketches*, 19.

⁷*Life Incidents*, 25.

⁸2SG 8-9

⁹*Life Incidents*, 13.

- a. He noted her physical frailty and ill-health.
- b. In 1845, there was a lot of prejudice and sometimes even mob violence against Millerites.
- c. She was accompanied by Sarah Jordan, but what could Sarah do against a mob?
- d. So James White offered his horse and sleigh for transportation, and also volunteered to arrange and organize her meetings.
- 3. For three months they traveled, holding meetings “almost everyday.” Thus they “visited most of the Advent bands in Maine and eastern New Hampshire” (Otis Nichols to William Miller, April 20, 1845, in 1 Bio 74-75); cf. 2SG, 38.
- 4. Ellen: “As for marriage, we never thought of it, because we thought the Lord would come very soon.” 1 Bio 84
- E. Factors that Changed their Attitude Toward Marriage
 - 1. Despite their carefulness to never travel alone, rumors began to circulate.
 - 1. Ellen, 5'2", 80 pounds, tuberculosis, frequently fainting, needed a strong escort and “legal protector.”
 - 2. They shared a commitment to shepherding the scattered Adventists.
 - 3. Ellen had received a vision assuring her she could trust James White. 1 Bio 83-84
 - 4. In individual prayer, they each became convinced they could serve God more effectively married than single. 1 Bio 110-111.

IV. Marriage

- A. Took place August 30, 1846, in a civil ceremony.
- B. Strengths of the White’s Marriage
 - 1. Prior devotion to God.
 - 2. Willingness to make any sacrifice necessary to follow God’s will.
 - 3. Shared belief that the Adventist movement had been specially raised up by God.
 - 4. Shared values.
 - a. Frugal with money.
 - b. Frugal with time. “A waste of time is a waste of intellect,” (EGW, *Health Reformer*, Dec. 1, 1872.
 - 5. Both believed that God had chosen Ellen as a special messenger to the Adventist believers. While James occasionally chafed under divine rebuke sent through his wife, he never faltered in his basic confidence in the validity of her prophetic gift.
 - 6. Committed to full-time team ministry. Jerry Moon, “Interpersonal Relationships in the Family of James and Ellen G. White,” 16-17, 21-22.
 - 7. Deep affection and consistent, unconditional love.
 - a. James: “We were married August 30, 1846, and from that hour to the present [1880] she has been my crown of rejoicing.” *Life Sketches*, 1880 edition, 126, 127. 1 Bio 112.
 - b. Ellen: “I feel that he is the best man that ever trod shoe leather.” 1 Bio 84
- C. Stresses on the Whites’ Marriage
 - 1. Extreme poverty (in early years). Coon, 10.
 - 2. No home of their own (first five years).
 - Where they lived: (1 Bio 113, 134, 162-163, 180, 215, 229-230).
 - 1846—Ellen’s parents, Portland, Maine
 - 1847—Howlands, Topsham, Maine
 - 1849—Beldens, Rocky Hill, Connecticut
 - 1850—Bro. Harris, Port Byron, New York
 - 1851—First rented house, borrowed furniture, Saratoga Springs, New York
 - 1852—Second rented house, purchased second-hand furniture, Rochester, New York
 - 1855—Third rented house, Battle Creek, Michigan

1856—Built their Wood Street cottage in Battle Creek

3. Disagreements over raising children, especially Edson
4. James White's multiple strokes and consequent emotional problems (gloomy, irritable, critical, defensive, domineering). He suffered at least four strokes: Aug. 16, 1865; Apr. 27 and May 13, 1873; Aug. 4, 1881 (see V. Robinson, 171, 241, 282, 297-300; cf. 267-269).
5. Despite these stresses, the White's marriage was one of deep love, mutual respect, and equal partnership.

V. Ellen White as Mother of Four Sons

- A. Henry Nichols White, born Aug 26, 1847, died in 1863 at age 16.
- B. James Edson White, (1849-1928)
 1. Had a tumultuous youth, not thoroughly converted until age 44 (*Early Adventist Educators*, 146).
 2. From his steamboat, the *Morning Star*, he pioneered SDA work among African-Americans.
 3. Founded Southern Publishing Association, Southern Missionary Society (forerunner of Southern Union Conference) and more than 50 primary schools.
- C. William Clarence (W.C.) White, born 1854, died in 1937 at age 83.
 1. To age 43, he followed his father's footsteps in publishing and church administration; became acting president of the General Conference for six months (1888-89) and first president of the Australasian Division (1894-97).
 2. During his last 40 years he spent more and more time assisting his mother and after her death, he became the leading trustee of her writings.
- D. John Herbert White, born Sept. 20, died Dec. 14, 1860, of erysipelas, an acute infectious disease, characterized by fever and widespread deep-red inflammation of the skin, and caused by a type of streptococcus bacteria.
- E. Ellen White and Child Training.
 1. Took very seriously the work of character formation (Moon, *W.C. White*, 34).
 2. Had realistic expectations about children's behavior (ibid. 34-35).
 3. Received visions, rebuking, and correcting her and James for some mistakes they were making in their parenting (ibid. 46-48).
- F. Her Greatest Sacrifice
 1. One of the great trials of Ellen White's life was that she and James were frequently away from home for six, eight, or ten weeks at a time, during which time the boys were left in the care of others. She longed for a time when it would not be necessary for her to be separated from her children.
 2. "The greatest sacrifice I was called to make in connection with the work was to leave my children to the care of others." 1T 101.
 3. In December 1850: she wrote to friends,

I had the privilege of being with my oldest boy two weeks [Henry was three years old]. He is a lovely dispositioned boy. He became so attached to his mother, it was hard to be separated from him; but as our time is all employed in writing and folding and wrapping papers, I am denied the privilege of having his company. My other little one [Edson, then seventeen months old] is many hundred miles from me. Sometimes Satan tempts me to complain and think my lot is a hard one, but I will not harbor this temptation. . . . I have this consolation that God is pleased with my sacrifice, that of offering up my children to him. Do pray for me. I need much grace to perform my duty faithfully and deliver the straight messages that God lays upon me to deliver. Letter 30, 1850, cited in Moon, *W. C. White*, 35.

VI. Character and Personality

G. Timidity

1. At age 15, paralyzed by fear of praying in prayer meeting. Struggle was so intense for three weeks that she lost weight for dread of praying in prayer meeting.
2. At age 17, “naturally so timid and retiring that it was painful” for her to “meet strangers” (1T 62).
3. God’s repeated command, “Make known to others what I have revealed to you” (1T 62, 64) so terrified her that “for some time” she avoided the Adventist meetings that were held in her own parents’ home. Lost her assurance; feared herself lost.
4. Finally she was persuaded to attend a meeting, where united prayer broke through her despondency and helped her yield to God’s call (1T 64).
5. As she began traveling and speaking, she gradually overcame her fear of meeting strangers and speaking publically.

H. Spunky courage when aroused by fear or anger.

1. Confronting an abusive teacher in grade school (MS 8a, 1891, p. 3).

I. Reluctance to displease people.

1. Distressed to see others “troubled or grieved.”
 - a. It was “hard to relate the plain, cutting testimonies” (1T 73).
 - b. When testimonies were rejected, she blamed herself. She “anxiously watched the result” of each reproof, and if it was not accepted, she would go into analyzing her delivery of the message, wondering if she had made it too strong.
2. Vision: Jesus’ frown of disapproval
3. Warning: If she softened down the messages of rebuke, she would be held accountable for the loss of souls.
4. Promise: If she faithfully delivered straight testimonies “to the end,.” she would “eat of the tree of life” and “drink of the river of the water of life” (1T 73-74).

J. Telling the “plain, cutting, truth

1. Because of God’s warnings to her of the consequences of altering the divine message.
2. Because she believed that knowing the truth was essential to Christian growth.

“I speak plainly. I do not think this will discourage a true Christian; and I do not want any of you to come up to the time of trouble without a well-grounded hope in your Redeemer. Determine to know the worst of your case. Ascertain if you have an inheritance on high. Deal truly with your own soul (1T 163).
3. This practice seems harsh to us.
 - a. Sometimes it was harsh.
 - b. It seems harsher to us than it did then, because of current emphasis on self-esteem and political correctness.

K. Not a “controller”

1. Did not ask unthinking obedience from family or co-workers.
2. Insisted on individual accountability to God.
 - a. Example 1: Avondale land. Moon, *W. C. White*, 200-202.
 - b. Example 2: Counsels to W. C. White. Moon, *W. C. White*, 213-221, 439-445.
3. Respectful to colleagues, even when rebuking (Letter 2a, 1882, 4-5; in G. R. Knight, *Walking with Ellen White*, 47).

L. Sense of humor. Source: Roger W. Coon, “Ellen G. White: The Person-II; The Wit and Wisdom of the Prophet”.

1. Why some doubt she had a sense of humor:
 - a. No broadly smiling photographs.

- b. She did warn against the misuse of humor in certain situations.
 - c. She did condemn a certain *kind* of humor—cheap, irreverent, and degrading humor (see below).
 - d. Some who love to quote her are themselves long-faced, humorless religionists, and it’s natural for hearers to associate the one quoting with the one being quoted (Coon, 11-12).
2. Good Humor
- a. Described:
 - (1) “Deft wit that never destroys, lightly and judiciously used for a good (‘right’) purpose” (Coon, 4).
 - (2) Good humor produces wholesome laughter that is an expression of sudden joy, gladness, or happy surprise at the natural incongruities of life.
 - b. Recommended in Scripture:
 - Prov 17:22: “A merry heart does good like medicine.”
 - Eccl 3:4: There is “a time to laugh.”
 - Luke 6:21: “Blessed are you who weep now for you shall laugh.”
 - c. Evidenced in creation: monkeys, puppies, kittens, kangaroos, duckbills.
 - d. Approved and practiced by Ellen White.
 - (1) “Christians should be the most happy and cheerful people that live. . . . But many professed Christians do not correctly represent the Christian religion. They appear gloomy, as if under a cloud” (MYP, 363).
 - (2) 19 times she speaks approvingly of “innocent amusements.”
 - (3) “Not . . . a sin to laugh” (18 MR 369).
3. Bad humor
- a. Described
 - (1) Artificial or perverted humor that wounds and destroys people.
 - (2) Jest, joking, or levity, that belittles sacred things.
 - (3) Especially condemned: such behavior in ministers.
 - (4) Worst of all: such joking in the pulpit or about the Bible.
 - b. Ellen White’s warnings against: (Ev 206-211, 640-645).
 - (1) “cheap nonsense” (Ev 210–211).
 - (2) “frivolous, joking” minister (Ev 643).
 - (3) “jesting and joking” that is “a denial of Christ” (Ev 645).
 - c. Examples:
 - (1) A disastrous use of sermon humor
 - (2) Inappropriate use of beneficial humor as tension-breaker in an evangelistic meeting.
4. Ellen White’s practice supports her teaching about humor
- a. “Memorable epigrams” (witty sayings tersely expressed) (Coon, 13).
 - (1) On unbecoming clothing (CG 415, 1T 464).
 - (2) On tedious public prayers (4T 70-71).
 - b. She could also laugh at herself
 - (1) On her own plain dress:
 - “My clothes come into style about every seven years.” (EGW to Jenny Ireland as told by granddaughter Grace Jacques to Jim Nix: Coon, 12).
 - (2) On her weight:
 - “There is much more to Sister White than many people realize.” (Ron Graybill, *Insight*, Aug. 14, 1973; Glen Baker, *Adventist Review*, April 30, 1987; Coon, 13).
 - (3) On coping with negative feelings: Question to G. B. Starr: “What do you do for a ‘blue’ day?” G. B. Starr, visiting at Elmshaven, quickly found a copy of *Steps to Christ*, opened to

the chapter, "What to Do with Doubt," and handed it to her. She looked at it, chuckled and said, "Oh you!"

5. An Example of Ellen White's Use of Humor in the Pulpit.

- St. Helena, CA, SDA church (in 1995, the American Legion hall).
- Late summer, church packed, no air conditioning, few windows, poor ventilation.
- Ellen G. White preaching, noticed congregation trying to stifle smiles.
- Behind her, W. C. White had gone to sleep, beard resting on his shirt front.
- How does a veteran speaker adapt to an interruption?
- "Don't blame Willie." "I'm the one who taught him to sleep on the platform on the Sabbath."
- Acknowledging their disbelief, she continued: "When Willie was a baby, I had no baby-sitter; so I had a Battle Creek carpenter make me a cradle on rocker-arms, just exactly the width of the pulpit." "While preaching I used my foot to rock the cradle, to keep him asleep, lest he awaken and disturb the service." "So don't blame Willie, blame me. I'm the one who taught him to sleep in church on the platform on Sabbath."
- The congregation enjoyed a hearty chuckle (that did not awaken Willie).
- As quickly as she had interrupted herself, Ellen returned to her sermon, and her audience immediately forgot the sleeping minister and gave her their full attention (Coon, 15).

1. Never lost her sense of humor

- a. Broken hip, Feb. 15, 1915, led to her death July 16, 1915.
- b. A few weeks before her death, Ellen White had lost all desire for food, but her nurse Sara McInterfer was coaxing her to eat. "Well, Sara," Ellen White protested, "I would not want to die before my time by overeating." (6 Bio, 425).

G. Did not see herself as perfect or infallible

2. Regularly asked "leading brethren" to examine and critique her articles and books before publication.
3. Confessed faults to others and asked their forgiveness
 - a. Husband: MS 14, 1868; Letter 27, 1876
 - b. Children: WCW, 34-36, 48, 52.
4. "I wish that self should be hid in Jesus. I wish self to be crucified. I do not claim infallibility, or even perfection of Christian character. I am not free from mistakes and errors in my life. Had I followed my Saviour more closely, I should not have had to mourn so much my unlikeness to His dear image" (Letter 27, 1876, to James White)

H. A person of genuine humility

5. Experience of Mrs. M. J. Nelson, then in her 20s, hired in 1902 as nurse and housekeeper for Ellen White, then 75 years of age.
6. Ellen G. White did not make herself a standard for any other Christian's experience (she held all, including herself, to the Bible standard).
3. As Mrs. Nelson crossed the continent to enter Mrs. White's employ, she contemplated, "I am going to the home of the prophet. How will it be?" The evening of the first day Mrs. White and the new housekeeper had a little time together and after quite a silence, Mrs. White spoke, pausing between each sentence:

"Sister Nelson, you have come into my home. You are to be a member of my family. You may son Willie may be lost.

"But the dear Lord has a remnant people that will be saved and go through to the Kingdom, and it remains with each of us as individuals whether or not we will be one of that number."—

As related to A. L. White in 1939 by M. J. Nelson, reported in *Messenger to the Remnant*, 127.

VII. Summary

- A. Ellen White saw her primary work as evangelism—bringing people to love and serve Jesus.
- B. James White was already an effective evangelist before he met Ellen.
- C. Their decision to marry was based on individual prayer leading to the conviction that marriage would increase their effectiveness in ministry.
- D. Marriage: August 30, 1846
- E. They had a strong and affectionate marriage despite major stresses in their lives.
- F. They had four sons: Henry, Edson, Willie, and John Herbert. The middle two survived to adulthood.
- G. As a mother, Ellen loved her boys and found separation from them her “greatest sacrifice.”
- H. Personality and character traits—she was:

Naturally timid, but . . .

Could be spunky when aroused by fear or anger.

Distressed to upset people, but . . .

Called to give “plain, cutting testimonies.”

Developed a habit of telling the precise truth about people, but . . .

Refused to make herself a criterion for the Christian experience of others.

Condemned cheap, irreverent, and degrading humor, but . . .

Approved and exercised an innocent, wholesome sense of humor.

Did not see herself as perfect, infallible, or free from mistakes and errors, but . . .

Accepted rebuke, forgiveness and correction both from Christ, and from her family and colleagues.

For her failings, she accepted full responsibility,
but . . .

For her accomplishments, she gave the glory to
God.

VIII. Review Questions for Exam Preparation

1. Give some similarities between James and Ellen's early lives.
2. What factors led them to decide to be married?
3. Know the date of their marriage.
4. Give the names of their sons and a one-sentence description of the life of each of them.
5. Which of her personality characteristics is most interesting to you? Are there others not listed above that should be?

IX. Acknowledgments and Recommended Reading

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