

ELLEN G. WHITE ESTATE

HERMENEUTICS:  
INTERPRETING A  
19TH-CENTURY  
PROPHET IN THE  
SPACE AGE

ROGER W. COON



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**Hermeneutics  
Interpreting a  
19th-Century Prophet in  
the Space Age**

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**Ellen G. White**

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### **About the Author**

Ellen G. White (1827-1915) is considered the most widely translated American author, her works having been published in more than 160 languages. She wrote more than 100,000 pages on a wide variety of spiritual and practical topics. Guided by the Holy Spirit, she exalted Jesus and pointed to the Scriptures as the basis of one's faith.

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by Roger W. Coon <sup>44</sup>

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## Instructional Objectives

After studying this continuing education minicourse, you should be able to do the following:

1. Recognize that while a “private interpretation” of inspired writings may seem to satisfy personal needs, the prophetic writer’s ultimate purpose (see [2 Peter 1:20](#)) is not accomplished until you understand the principles underlying his or her message to you.

2. Realize that what an inspired writer means may be even more important in arriving at truth than what the writer says. (The words of the message are the symbols; understanding their meaning is the goal.)

3. Recognize that the use of rational, objective rules/tools of hermeneutics (the science and art of deriving meaning) is not only legitimate and valid but also necessary in order to discern correctly the message that the inspired writer meant to convey.

4. Identify and employ the appropriate role/tool to resolve various hermeneutical problems, thus “rightly dividing the word of truth” ([2 Timothy 2:15](#)).

## Introduction

“‘Herman’—who?”

“Hermeneutics.”

What is hermeneutics anyway? One definition is “the science and art of deriving meaning.” It is a core consideration in any study of theology, or of prophetic writers. Yet when one seeks to apply hermeneutical principles—interpretation—to the writings of the Bible or Adventism’s prophet, Ellen White, the response sometimes comes: “Hermeneutics? So who needs it?”

Increasingly the question is raised within Adventist circles, “How do you interpret a ‘horse-and-buggy’—era prophet in an age of space shuttles and cyclotrons?” It is a good question; it deserves a good answer.

Of course, if one defines relevance as inversely proportional to the distance in time, then the Bible would become even more irrelevant, for the New Testament was written nearly two millennia ago.

But how are we to understand the writings of a prophetess who lived only 15 years into our 20th century? Life was very different then. The first Hollywood feature motion picture did not flash upon the screens of theaters until 1915, the year of Ellen White’s death. The first commercial radio station did not begin to broadcast until five years later. And the first commercial television station did not come on line until 1939.

Can Ellen White really speak *meaningfully* to *our* time? The answer, as in the case of the biblical prophets, is an emphatic though qualified, “Yes.” As with Moses, Jeremiah Daniel, and Paul, so with Ellen: it is often necessary to apply generally accepted principles of hermeneutics—interpretation—in order to determine what the prophet *means* rather than simply what the prophet *says*.

[2] Not all Seventh-day Adventists would agree. Many feel sincere concern (if not fear), that “liberals” will exploit this device in order to “water down” (if not totally nullify) the Word of God by clev-

erly “spiritualizing away” the obvious point and intent of inspired statements.

Nor are such concerns unfounded. In the days of Jesus the religious teachers did just that with their “Corban” doctrine which in effect totally nullified the fifth precept of the Decalogue. Jesus declared: “Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect” ([Matthew 15:6](#)). Indeed, “explaining” must never be allowed to degenerate into “explaining away.”

However, those who insist that we need no rules of hermeneutics must contend with an unintended irony: the “no-hermeneutics” position is, itself, a hermeneutical position! This might be called the “Plain-English” or “Mary” hermeneutic (after the counsel of the mother of Christ at the Cana wedding feast, “Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it”—[John 2:5](#)).

A woman once wrote to the White Estate about Ellen White’s statements on the eating of cheese. In response, I believe I first recounted the various statements and strictures made by the prophet. I then gave some contextual background regarding the times in which the prophet had written—lack of pasteurization, generally filthy conditions in dairies of the day, etcetera.<sup>1</sup>

The recipient shared my reply with a lady physician who rebuked me strongly. She wrote:

I have always wondered why it is so hard for us to read English. To me, when Sr. White wrote in *Ministry of Healing*, “Cheese... is wholly unfit for food,” I accepted it, and we never used the aged yellow cheese.

When I asked Doctor...[another female physician] about cheese, she said, “If God took all the trouble to send an angel from heaven down to tell Sr. White that

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<sup>1</sup>Endnotes See Otto L. Beirman, *The Good Old Days—They Were Terrible*. (New York: Random House, 1974), [John 2:8](#), “Health,” pp. 135-154. Today, objections to cheese may be raised because of the high incidence of leukemia among cows, high saturated fat and sodium content of cheese, and the potential for allergic reactions.—Letter, Milton G. Crane, M.D., to Roger W. Coon, November 30, 1987. Dr. Crane is research professor emeritus, Loma Linda University, and presently director of medical research, Weimar Institute, Weimar, California. He has written two helpful monographs concerning the use of cheese: “The Role of Cholesterol and Excess Fat in Disease” (c. 1984) and “Does’ Every Body’ Need Milk?” (c. 1985).

cheese was wholly unfit for food, I am going to believe it.” I thought that was a good answer....

I only hope you do not go against the writings of Sr. White and “White-wash” an unclean thing. It has been unconditionally condemned for food.

I resisted the temptation to respond to these physicians (both of whom are often seen on the platforms of their respective churches) with a parallel reply:

If God took all the trouble to send an angel to tell the Apostle Paul “Let the women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak” [1 [Corinthians 14:34](#), NAS], <sup>2</sup> I am going to believe that, too. And shouldn’t you?

Well, is cheese—*all*cheese—“*unconditionally* condemned for food”? <sup>3</sup> Are women *never* to speak publicly in a church building? This is what God’s prophets have *seemed* to say. But is that what the prophets really *meant*?

Hermeneutics, rightly employed, could, I believe, come to our rescue in both situations. The goal of hermeneutics is “rightly dividing the word of truth” ([2 Timothy 2:15](#), KJV). Hermeneutics seeks to achieve balance, and to avoid distortion.

The earliest preaching (as we think of preaching today) took place in the postexilic synagogues of Palestine. It involved hermeneutics: “They read in the book in the law of God distinctly [margin: “with an interpretation”], and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading” ([Nehemiah 8:8](#)). The New International Version says: “They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.” <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Scripture quotes credited to NASB are taken from The New American Standard Bible.© 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

<sup>3</sup>See Roger W. Coon, “Ellen G. White’s Counsels Concerning the Eating of Cheese,” unpublished manuscript, Ellen G. White Estate, 1988.

<sup>4</sup>From Holy Bible: Neu’ International Version. Copyright © 1978 by the New York International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

## Chapter 1—The Need for Hermeneutics

So who needs hermeneutics? We all do—for at least a half-dozen reasons:

1. *Although the words may be intelligible, the meaning of the statement may still remain unclear.* [3]

I recently saw an auto bumper sticker that admonished, “Do It!” I comprehended the words—they were in “Plain English.” But I did not at once clearly understand their meaning (though I could guess, since we unfortunately live in the age of the double meaning!).

2. *Some make the mistaken assumption of the synecdoche—that a part always equals the whole.*

An earnest Spirit-of-Prophecy-believing Adventist with an acute mental-health problem was urged by his uncle to seek professional therapy. He declined, citing Ellen White’s statement that Satan works through the science of psychology <sup>1</sup> as sufficient deterrent to keep him from visiting any psychologist.

Yet the same writer also said elsewhere that “the true principles of psychology are found in the Holy Scriptures.” <sup>2</sup> Is there a hermeneutic to harmonize the two statements?

3. *Words evolve in meaning.*

Even a prophet’s words! The King James Version was translated into the Elizabethan English of 1611. Some 350 years later, in 1955, Luther A. Weigle, Dean Emeritus of Yale University Divinity School, published a list of 857 *Bible Words That Have Changed in Meaning*. <sup>3</sup> *Today that list undoubtedly could be expanded still further.*

As language evolves, the meaning of words moves, over a period of time, from a general to a more specific meaning. *Conversation*

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<sup>1</sup>Ellen G. White, [Testimonies for the Church 1:290-302](#) (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1944). (Referred to hereafter as 1T.)

<sup>2</sup>Ellen G. White, [The Review and Herald, November 12, 1895](#), reprinted in [My Life Today, 176](#) (Washington: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1952).

<sup>3</sup>(New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1955).

today signifies oral discourse between two or more persons. But in 1611 the word had a much broader meaning: it included one's total life-style. When Paul wrote to a young ministerial intern at Ephesus to "be thou an example of the believers...in conversation" (1 Timothy 4:12), he was talking about a lot more than mere words!

Similarly, the word *meat* in 1611 was simply a synonym for *food*. Later it came to designate "flesh food" only. And more recently it has evolved to refer to one particular category of flesh—for, strictly speaking, poultry and fish are *not* today considered to be meat.

When Ellen White used the term "shut door" in 1852, she meant something altogether different than in 1844. And so it goes.

An adequate hermeneutic might help to sort out these problems.

#### 4. *Cultural factors affect meaning.*

The Bible is basically an Eastern book. In the East people show respect—even today—by removing their footwear (see Exodus 3:5 where God tells Moses to remove his sandals). However, in the West today, people show respect by removing the garment covering the opposite extremity of the human body. When the national anthem is played at the beginning of a major-league baseball game in the United States or Canada, all of the players remove their caps and place them over their hearts for the duration of the song.

#### 5. *Circumstances alter meaning.*

Two men in the New Testament asked virtually the identical question—and received vastly different answers! The rich young ruler asked Christ, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17). He was told to sell his possessions, give the proceeds to the poor, and then follow Jesus. When the jailer at Philippi asked Paul and Silas, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30), he was told simply to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

A hermeneutic might help us understand the superficial discrepancy here by pointing out that the problem of the first man was one of coveting wealth, while the problem of the other (steeped in Greek philosophy) was one of belief.

#### 6. *A word may have different meanings—even in the same book.*

[4] In Ellen White's incomparable biography of Christ she speaks of the events of Resurrection morning: "Christ came forth from

the tomb glorified.”<sup>4</sup> Yet a scant 25 pages later she states, “The Holy Spirit was not yet fully manifested; for Christ had not yet been glorified.”<sup>5</sup>

Hermeneutics might help unravel this seeming paradox by pointing out that the author meant *physical appearance* in the first use of the word glorified. The concept of *hierarchical status* dictated her later use of the word.

7. *Lastly, a given act or a given word maybe interpreted quite differently by the same person, or by two persons who approach identical data from different perspectives.*

I was driving in New Zealand several years ago when an oncoming motorist flashed his headlights at me. I clearly recognized this as some sort of signal. But what did he *mean*? Was he reminding me that it was getting toward dusk, and I should turn on my headlights? Or was he warning me of a radar trap farther down the road? It was difficult to know.

A *Los Angeles Times* reporter several years ago told an after-dinner audience a story, probably apocryphal, that he heard from a Jewish rabbi. It aptly illustrates the hermeneutical problem in which two persons interpret the same data in radically different ways.

Pope Leo IX, who lived in the 11th century, reportedly was urged by his cardinals to rid Rome of the Jews. (Anti-Semitism is not an invention of the 20th century!)

“Well,” said the pope, “I can’t just do it out of hand; I’ll have to give them a test first.” So he informed the Jewish community in the Holy City that they should send a representative who would be asked three questions. If the respondent did not answer each of the questions correctly, the Jews must leave.

Understandably, this caused great consternation as the Jews assembled in their local synagogue. One voice spoke up, “Rabbi, you’ll have to go.” But the rabbi protested, “I’m just the rabbi of this congregation, while the pope is the head of the whole civilized world.”

Someone else then said, “We’ll have to send a Talmudic scholar. They’re good at reasoning.” But a scholar protested: “What do you

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<sup>4</sup>Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, 780 (Mountain View: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1940). (Referred to hereafter as DA.)

<sup>5</sup>*The Desire of Ages*, 805.

mean? The pope has been educated by the greatest scholars of all time.”

In the confusion a voice spoke from the back of the room. Moishe, a tailor, declared, “I’ll go. I’ve been answering foolish questions from Christians all my life. What’s three more?”

It was ridiculous, absurd; but in the confusion, Moishe did indeed go. The pope explained the ground rules. Moishe Battalion nodded impatiently and said, “OK; get started.”

The pope pointed a single finger at Moishe. Immediately, Moishe pointed two fingers back at the pope. The pope was impressed.

For the second question, the pope silently raised both his arms above his head, forming a large circle. Moishe looked, then stabbed a finger toward the ground in a very determined way.

The pope, utterly astonished said, “You know, that’s right, too! It’s most remarkable!, But you’ve got to get the last question right, if your people are to be allowed to remain in Rome.”

So the pope reached under his robes and pulled out an apple. Moishe took it in at a glance, and promptly pulled out of his satchel some matzo—a flat piece of unleavened bread.

The pope responded, “You’re absolute right. This is the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen. Your people may stay.”

As Moishe left by one door, the cardinals entered another. “Why did you let them off?” they complained. “You had a chance to get rid of these pesky, troublesome people. And you let them stay!”

But the pope defended himself, saying, “What could I do? It was quite a remarkable performance, really. I put out one finger, meaning that there is but one God. And he put out two, meaning that the Father and Son are as one.

[5] “Then I formed a circle in the air, meaning there is unity only in heaven. And he said, by pointing to the ground, Yes, but the kingdom of God is on earth.

“Then I pulled out this apple, as an example of that terrible, pestilential heresy that the world is round. And he brought our a dull, flattened disc, proving that the world is flat!”

Meanwhile, Moishe returned to the temple, where all was in confusion. He cried, “Don’t get so excited. We’re staying.”

The people were incredulous: “You mean you beat the pope?”



“Of course,” Moishe responded. “You’ve got to know how to handle these Christians.”

“What happened?” they demanded to know.

“Well,” said Moishe, “he pointed one finger at me, meaning I’m going to poke out your right eye, So I pointed two fingers back at him, saying, I’m going to poke out *both* of yours.

“Then he made a circle with his arms, meaning, We’re going to round up every one of you Jews, and get rid of you. And I said, We’re staying right here.

“Then he took out his lunch, so I took out mine.”

## Chapter 2—Three Rules of Hermeneutics

During World War II one of the branches of the U.S. Navy was known as the “Seabees.” The name was derived from the acronym of their more prosaic title, “Construction Battalion.” Their motto is germane to our study of inspired writings: “Give us the tools, and we will finish the job.”

There *are* tools that will unlock the meaning of the prophetic writings. Three very simple rules of interpretation—hermeneutics—were suggested more than 30 years ago by an Andrew University religion professor, T. Housel Jemison, in his college textbook on prophetic guidance, *A Prophet Among You*.<sup>1</sup> The rules are simple, easily applied, and work equally well, whether deriving meaning from the Scriptures or from the more recent writings of Ellen G. White.

### A. Hermeneutic No. 1

Take ALL that the prophet has said upon the topic under consideration before drawing a final conclusion.

The reason is immediately apparent: statements in isolation, however true, may present only one facet of the subject. Taken alone, such statements may well serve only to distort truth rather than facilitate correct understanding.

This rule finds its roots in Scripture: “For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line; line upon line; here a little, and there a little” ([Isaiah 28:10](#); cf. also [verse 13](#))

When surveying some topics in the writings of Ellen White this will not take long. Upon some subjects she was virtually silent: abortion, mechanical and chemical methods of birth control, radio and television programming, to mention only a few.

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<sup>1</sup>(Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1955), [Acts 16:23](#).

Upon other topics she wrote relatively little. Concerning life insurance she spoke only once, in 1867,<sup>2</sup> and upon the subject of wearing the wedding band there is only one statement, written in 1892.<sup>3</sup>

Tantalizingly little, also, is found in her writings concerning a special resurrection of three categories of individuals immediately *prior* to the second coming of Christ. (They are not a part of the first general resurrection of the righteous, or the second general resurrection of the wicked at His coming at the end of the millennium.) We have only two sources of published materials upon this intriguing question.<sup>4</sup>

Conversely, some topics have a plethora of material. The three-volume *Comprehensive Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White*<sup>5</sup> contains 30 pages (59 columns) of references to the person and work of the Holy Spirit, and 87 pages (174 columns) of references to the person and work of Jesus Christ! Even allowing for a certain amount of inevitable cross-referencing, this represents an immense body of materials of both subjects. Clearly one could not survey either topic in a single Sabbath afternoon of research. [6]

Let us examine, now, a sampling of topics upon which the application of Jemison's first principle of hermeneutics is critical to gaining a correct understanding of prophetic writings:

*The human nature of Christ.* One subject is agitating a substantial segment in Adventism today, often generating more heat than light. It is this: "Was the human nature of Christ like that of Adam *before* he sinned, or like that of Adam *after* he sinned?"

<sup>2</sup>IT, pp. 549-551. For a contemporary view of Seventh-day Adventist Church leaders, see "Seventh-day Adventists and Life Insurance," an unpublished manuscript prepared by the General Conference (c. 1985) which summarizes an earlier (April 1957) 50-page report prepared by a joint committee of General Conference and Ellen G. White Estate personnel, "Provision for the Day of Need."

<sup>3</sup>Ellen G. White. *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, 180, 181 (Mountain View: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1944). (Referred to hereafter as TM.)

<sup>4</sup>\_\_\_\_\_, *Early Writings*, 285 (Washington: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1945); *The Great Controversy*, 637 (Mountain View: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911); \_\_\_\_\_. *Selected Messages 2:263* (Washington: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958);. (Referred to hereafter as *The Great Controversy*, 2 SM.)

<sup>5</sup>(Mountain View: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1962).

The editors of *Ministry* felt the subject was important enough to devote half of an issue to the topic.<sup>6</sup> Spokespersons for the two views had equal erudition, theological qualification, and spirituality. More interestingly, both were ardent disciples of Ellen White, and both quoted at substantial length from her writings to support their diametrically opposed viewpoints!

This raises an interesting—and urgent—question: are the inspired writings like a wax nose, which can be twisted and bent in any direction, to “prove” any and every vagrant idea that captures the attention—and acceptance—of God’s people?

Emphatically not! The problem, at times, may be that we are simply asking the wrong questions.

For example, Morris Venden briefly addressed the question of the human nature of Christ in his daily devotional volume, *Faith That Works*.<sup>7</sup> He suggests that we may have erred in trying to force this issue into an *either-or* category. For, he says insightfully, in certain respects the nature of Jesus was that of Adam before sin. (Jesus certainly did not have a basic predisposition or “bent” to do evil, as does every other human being born into this world.) However, in certain other respects Jesus shares the characteristics of the human nature of every son and daughter of Adam since the Fall.<sup>8</sup>

*The completion of the Atonement.* I conducted a week of spiritual emphasis at a Seventh-day Adventist college outside North America several years ago. At that time questions concerning the Atonement and the High-Priestly ministry of Jesus in the heavenly sanctuary were being raised within the church.

During the week, I mentioned briefly one of the principal differences between Seventh-day Adventists and their evangelical brethren. I said that while evangelicals believe that the atonement of Jesus was completed at Calvary, Adventists draw the distinction between the *sacrifice* of Christ being complete at the cross (“Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many”—[Hebrews 9:28](#)), and the

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<sup>6</sup>June 1985 issue.

<sup>7</sup>(Washington: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1980), pp. 3.18-50.

<sup>8</sup>Robert W. Olson, secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate, has written recently about this vexatious, thorny conundrum. See “The Humanity of Christ” and “Christ’s Human Nature;” both unpublished manuscripts. Ellen G. White Estate, July 2, 1986.

Atonement being completed at some yet-future time when sin and sinners have been eradicated from the universe.

Sabbath afternoon was devoted to a question-answer session. One member of the audience took near-violent exception to my earlier remark. He sent forward a half-dozen carefully arranged quotations from Ellen White on the subject. They were carefully arranged so that each succeeding statement was more powerful than the previous one. His quotations seemed to say, essentially, that the Atonement *was* completed at the cross.

My response went something like this:

1. These statements from Ellen White do seem to support the idea that the Atonement was complete at the cross.

2. Though inspired and a diligent Bible student, Ellen White was not a trained theologian. When she employed theological terms, she did not speak as precisely or specifically as would a seminary-trained theologian. For example, she sometimes used the words inspiration, revelation, and illumination interchangeably and synonymously, something professional theologians would never do. To them these terms represent separate, discrete categories.

3. Therefore, what Ellen White said is indeed important, but what she meant by what she said is even more important (especially [7] to those who believe in thought-inspiration—as she did—rather than in mechanical verbal inspiration).

4. The only way to determine Ellen White's true meaning is to follow Jemison's first rule of interpretation: Take all that the prophet has said upon the subject before you attempt to draw your final conclusions.

5. When one does this, I believe he or she will conclude that the Atonement itself was not complete at the cross, though the sacrifice indeed was.

Our only basis for understanding the Atonement is found in the types-and-shadows figures given by God at Sinai, which Moses permanently enshrined in the Pentateuch.

There it was called the "*Day of Atonement*," not the "Event" of atonement. While the animal sacrifice that day was crucial, it was not all. For atonement is a process, not an event. On the Day of Atonement things did not come to a halt with the sacrifice of the animal—other events continued through nightfall. Blood, once shed,

had to be ministered. The scapegoat had to be led, “by the hand of a fit man,” out into the wilderness. And so on, until day’s end.

Our very word *atonement* comes from an Old English word meaning, literally, “at-one-ment.” It signifies restoring or putting right a sundered relationship.

Research will produce perhaps as many (or even more) statements from Ellen White to demonstrate that a lot of things had to happen *after* Calvary before the broken relationship between humans and their Creator would finally be mended.

*Does God kill sinners?* A former Seventh-day Adventist licensed minister who currently operates an independent broadcast and publications ministry in the Pacific Northwest has become one of the most prominent (and vocal) spokesmen for an idea shared by a growing number. He teaches that God does not, has not, and never will kill the wicked. He uses several Ellen White statements to prove his case. A number of people have written the White Estate to inquire if her writings are being manipulated and perhaps distorted to support this theory.

In the first chapter of *The Great Controversy* Ellen White discusses the final punishment of sinners in the context of the fate of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. A superficial reading of pages 36 and 37 (as well as some of her other writings) might lead one to conclude that God is not involved personally in the destruction of sinners. Certain statements seem to suggest that Satan and his angels are the *real* destroyers, and that sinners destroy themselves as a consequence of the evil lives they have lived.

Like Israel of old *the wicked destroy themselves*; they fall by their iniquity. By a life of sin, they have placed themselves so out of harmony with God, their natures have become so debased with evil, that the manifestation of His glory is to them a consuming fire.<sup>9</sup>

Advocates of the God-does-not-kill-sinners theory sometimes cite another Ellen White statement to support their position. “The same destructive power exercised by holy angels when God commands, will be exercised by evil angels when He permits.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>The *Great Controversy*, 37, italics supplied.

<sup>10</sup>The *Great Controversy*, 614.

There is danger, however, in overlooking one truth while emphasizing (or overemphasizing) another. It is true that after the close of probation much devastation in our world will be caused by Satan and evil angels. Yet it is equally true that “destructive power” is at times exercised by holy angels “when God commands.”

The paragraph that precedes the sentence in question reminds us that before the Exodus one of God’s angels destroyed all the firstborn among the Egyptians in that 10th and crushing plague ([Exodus 12](#)). One angel from heaven also destroyed 70,000 men in Israel as a consequence of David’s sin in numbering Israel ([1 Chronicles 21](#)). Both acts of destruction took place at the express command of Jehovah.

Statements implying that God does not kill sinners must be viewed in the light of other statements by the same writer. In *The Desire of Ages*, Ellen White speaks of the warfare against God’s law, begun in heaven by Lucifer, which will conclude at the end of time. By then each angel and human will have chosen one side or the other. [8]

And so she writes, “This is not an act of arbitrary power on the part of God.”<sup>11</sup> But the issue is the *character* of God, not the *activity* of God. She makes the point that God does not act arbitrarily. He incurs no condemnation for murder when He finally exterminates the wicked. He is *not to blame*—those ultimately lost simply reap the inevitable result of their chosen course of action.

In this extended message, Ellen White quotes from [Ezekiel 28:16](#) (“I will destroy thee, O covering cherub”), even as she elsewhere quotes from [2 Thessalonians 2:8](#) (“And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume. . . .and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming”)

In speaking of the destruction of Jericho, Mrs. White remarks that:

*God’s judgments were awakened against Jericho....The Captain of the Lord’s host (Jesus) Himself came from heaven to lead the armies of heaven in an*

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<sup>11</sup>[The Desire of Ages, 764.](#)

attack upon the city. Angels of God laid hold of the massive walls and brought them to the ground.<sup>12</sup>

In *Patriarchs and Prophets*, when Mrs. White speaks of the Flood she at least twice refers to “*God’s judgments.*”<sup>13</sup> In an 1876 unpublished manuscript entitled “The Days of Noah,” she pointedly observed:

The plea may be made that a loving Father would not see His children suffering the punishment of God by fire while He had the power to relieve them. But God would, for the good of His subjects and for their safety, punish the transgressor. God does not work on the plan of man. He can do infinite justice that man has no right to do before his fellow man. Noah would have displeased God to have drowned one of the scoffers and mockers that harassed him, but God drowned the vast world. Lot would have had no right to inflict punishment on his sons-in-law, but God would do it in strict justice.

Who will say God will not do what He says He will do?...The Lord is coming in flaming fire to take vengeance on those sinners who know not God and obey not His gospel.<sup>14</sup>

When Ellen White says “the wicked destroy themselves,” she does not address the activity of God. Instead, she is describing God’s character—especially His justice. She applies in a practical way the biblical doctrine that we reap what we sow.

*A sin to eat eggs?* A letter to a “Brother and Sister E,” first published in a tract for the Battle Creek church in 1869, and subsequently included in *Testimonies for the Church* under the caption “Sensuality in the Young,”<sup>15</sup> contained this simple, straightforward counsel: “Eggs should not be placed upon your table.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup>*Testimonies for the Church* 3:264, italics supplied.

<sup>13</sup>Ellen G. White. *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 100, 101 (Mountain View: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1913).

<sup>14</sup>*Manuscript 5, 1876*. The entire document is now available through Manuscript Releases 816, 843, and 963 by the White Estate Trustees.

<sup>15</sup>*Testimonies for the Church* 2:390-411.

<sup>16</sup>*Testimonies for the Church* 2:400.



An examination of other statements by the same writer helps to modify what earlier appeared to be an all encompassing prohibition:

1. Some 33 years later [1902] Ellen White wrote that “in some cases the use of eggs is beneficial. The time has not come to say that the use of milk and eggs should be totally discarded.”<sup>17</sup>

2. In 1905 she added: It is true that persons in full flesh and in whom the animal passions are strong need to avoid the use of stimulating foods. Especially in families of children who are given to sensual habits, eggs should not be used. But in the case of persons whose bloodmaking organs are feeble—especially if other foods to supply the needed elements cannot be obtained—milk and eggs should not be wholly discarded.<sup>18</sup>

3. And, finally, in 1909 Mrs. White further elaborated: While warnings have been given regarding the dangers of disease through butter, and the evil of the free use of eggs by small children, yet we should not consider it a violation of principle to use eggs from hens that are well cared for and suitably fed. Eggs contain properties that are remedial in counteracting certain poisons.<sup>19</sup>

[9]

In her testimony, Ellen White, in effect, cautioned, “If you’re trying to put out a fire, use water, not gasoline!”

*A sin not to kneel for prayer?* A decade ago while I was teaching at Pacific Union College I witnessed an interesting incident at an on-campus student picnic. The grass on the playing field was wet with dew so the campus chaplain, gathering the students for a brief devotional message, concluded by saying, “Let’s bow our heads for a word of prayer.”

A small knot of students conspicuously (and, in my opinion, ostentatiously) withdrew a short distance. While their classmates reverently bowed their heads, this small group knelt on the wet grass for the duration of the prayer.

The same group also would pointedly kneel in the church sanctuary for *all* prayers—invocation, benediction, offertory—and not merely for the main pastoral prayer. If challenged, they would cite

<sup>17</sup>Testimonies for the Church 7:135.

<sup>18</sup>Chapter entitled, “Extremes in Diet.” in Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, 320 (Mountain View: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1909) (Referred to hereafter as MH.)

<sup>19</sup>Testimonies for the Church 9:162.

the words of Ellen White in *Selected Messages*, Book Two: “This [kneeling] is the proper position always.”<sup>20</sup>

The inclusion of that word, *always*, did not preclude other modes of prayer, as becomes clear when one reads two other statements from the same author:

There is no time or place in which it is inappropriate to offer up a petition to God. There is nothing that can prevent us from lifting up our hearts in the spirit of earnest prayer. In the crowds of the street, in the midst of a business engagement, we may send up a petition to God and plead for divine guidance.<sup>21</sup>

It is not always necessary to bow upon your knees in order to pray. Cultivate the habit of talking with the Saviour when you are alone, when you are walking, and when you are busy with your daily labor. Let the heart be continually uplifted in silent petition for help, for light, for strength, for knowledge. Let every breath be a prayer.<sup>22</sup>

Obviously, when Paul instructed Christians to “Pray without ceasing,” he did not expect them to spend their entire lives upon their knees. The context of Ellen White’s first statement makes it clear that she was talking about the main (“pastoral”) prayer in a Sabbath worship service.

In at least three documented instances in 1908 and 1909 (one of them a General Conference session), Mrs. White invited the congregation to stand with her in an act of rededication, and to remain standing while she prayed for them.<sup>23</sup>

W. E. Read in “Our Posture in Prayer” notes that there are two records of the Temple—and, further, that he apparently offered two

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<sup>20</sup>[Selected Messages 2:311](#)

<sup>21</sup>Ellen G. White, [Steps to Christ](#), 99 (Mountain View: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1956).

<sup>22</sup>[The Ministry of Healing](#), 510, 511.

<sup>23</sup>Arthur L. White, “Standing for Prayer.” unpublished manuscript, Ellen G. White Estate, February 17, 1960.

prayers. In one he knelt,<sup>24</sup> whereas in the other he stood.<sup>25</sup> Read concludes that “when prayers of confession were offered, *kneeling* was the posture, but that when a prayer of benediction (blessing) was offered, standing was the posture.”<sup>26</sup>

*Should Christians ever seek professional counseling?* One final example will suffice to illustrate Jemison’s first rule of hermeneutics—take all that the prophet has said before drawing a final conclusion.

I have taught the graduate course in the writings of Ellen White at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University for the past five years. Each quarter while I am on that campus I audit a course offered by some other seminary instructor dealing with a subject in which I have a large interest but little information.

One year I took Dr. Garth Thompson’s course in “Pastoral Counseling.” I had never studied this subject on the undergraduate level, and felt the course would help my understanding and sharpen my technique.

On the first day of class Dr. Thompson handed out a three-page compilation of 13 Spirit of Prophecy statements which seemed to indicate that Christians need not seek counsel of other human beings but should go directly to the Lord for help. [10]

After examining the document one student asked, “Well, then, why are we taking this course?” Dr. Thompson smiled and said, “Before you run to the records office for a drop slip, come tomorrow and read a second compilation I have prepared for you.”

The next day he passed out another three-page compilation of 17 Ellen White statements, which seemed to indicate that under certain circumstances it was appropriate to seek counsel of another human being.

Why the seeming discrepancy? Was Ellen White talking out of both sides of her mouth? No. In the first compilation the thrust

<sup>24</sup>1 Kings 8:54 2 Chronicles 6:13; 7:3.

<sup>25</sup>1 Kings 8:22, 23, 55.

<sup>26</sup>Unpublished manuscript in White Estate archives, undated, p. 3. W. E. Read (1883-1976), a scholar who held various church administrative posts in the Northern European Division, was field secretary of the General Conference (1945-1958) at the time he prepared this document.

was on “allow[ing] another to do your thinking for you,”<sup>27</sup> “placing one’s responsibility upon someone else and wait[ing] for them to tell us what to do.”<sup>28</sup> Mrs. White criticized going “first to human agencies for an understanding of....duty....It is a wrong education to teach our people to lean on human aids, instead of going to the Lord in prayer.”<sup>29</sup>

The counseling process, as conducted by professionals, does not consist of merely giving advice. (It is interesting that Ellen White was far in advance of her time—and still far in advance of some in *our* day—when she spoke disapprovingly of *that* kind of counseling!)

In the second compilation the emphasis was placed upon the need for undershepherds with “an ear that can listen with sympathy to heartbreaking recitals of wrong, of degradation, of despair and misery,”<sup>30</sup> “*listen*” rather than “judge,” “accuse,” “condemn,” or “advise.”

Indeed, Ellen White saw some as having been “called to reach out to others” in various perils—disabled souls perplexed with doubt, burdened with infirmities, weak in faith, and unable to grasp the Unseen: but a friend whom they can see coming to them in Christ’s stead, can be a connecting link to fasten their trembling faith upon Christ.<sup>31</sup>

Mrs. White did not see counseling as a role in which one human being simply “gives advice” to another (nor do professional counselors today). She did see a place for those who can listen, encourage, canvass various options for practical solutions, and help someone whose mind and thinking processes may be “frozen” from trauma to “thaw out” and return to normal autonomous functioning.

All of the foregoing simply reinforced within me the conviction that if one truly wishes to know what the prophet means, it is imperative to take all that the prophet has said on the subject before

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<sup>27</sup>The Review and Herald, April 16, 1889, p. 1; (Hereafter referred to as RH).

<sup>28</sup>The Desire of Ages, 668.

<sup>29</sup>Ellen G. White. Letter 324, Oct. 3, 1907, to a church administrator, reprinted in *The Upward Look*, 290 (Washington: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1982). (Referred to hereafter as UL.)

<sup>30</sup>\_\_\_\_\_, *Gospel Workers*, p. 184 (Washington: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1915).

<sup>31</sup>The Desire of Ages, 297.

coming to a final conclusion, lest one be led to an abstraction or distortion, and not arrive at truth.

Clearly the context in some cases may limit the application of that statement. This leads us to Jemison's second principle of hermeneutics:

### B. Hermeneutic No. 2

*If a statement seems inconsistent with the general tenor of related statements, study the context—internal and external—in your effort to resolve the apparent discrepancy.*

The internal context deals with what the inspired writer wrote immediately before, or immediately after, the difficult statement. The external context deals with such issues as: To whom was the statement written? When was it written? Why was it written? What circumstances called it forth?

The problem of context may be particularly acute in connection with compilations of thematic materials. Sometimes there is insufficient quoted material to determine context. And sometimes statements are strung together that produce a conclusion altogether different from that intended by the author.

Some, recognizing the potential for misunderstanding and distortion in compilation preparation, refuse to read any compilation of Ellen White's writings—even those prepared by the White Estate itself. They are sometimes quite surprised to learn that preparing thematic compilations from her writings was one of three duties Mrs. White gave the trustees of her estate in their charter. [11]

The well-intentioned (though mistaken) souls who refuse to read any Ellen White book "that she didn't write as a book," are further chagrined to learn that some compilations of her writings were prepared under her supervision!

*The Desire of Ages.* For example, was not written as an author customarily writes a book—chapter 1, then chapter 2, and so on. This incomparable biography of our Lord was a *compilation*. When Mrs. White and her chief literary assistant, Marian Davis, began the "Life of Christ project," as it was initially known, they assembled everything Mrs. White had written about Jesus—sermon

transcripts, essays, book chapters, unpublished manuscript materials, even fragments from correspondence.

These items were arranged in rough chronological order. Then Mrs. White proceeded to (1) write materials to fill the “gaps,” (2) rewrite some materials that seemed unclear, and (3) expand other materials if supplementary visions had amplified her prior understanding. Thus *The Desire of Ages* was in reality a compilation.<sup>32</sup>

Mrs. White strenuously protested against the abuse and misuse of her writings by some of the compilation makers of her own day. In 1901 she wrote that

Many men take the testimonies the Lord has given, and apply them as they suppose they should be applied, picking out a sentence here and there, taking it from its proper connection, and applying it according to their idea. Thus poor souls become bewildered, when could they read in order all that has been given, they would see the true application, and would not become confused. Much that purports to be a message from Sister White, serves the purpose of misrepresenting Sister White, making her testify in favor of things that are not in accordance with her mind or judgment.... Please let Sister White bear her own message.<sup>33</sup>

Ellen White clearly recognized that the context of a statement could influence the reader’s understanding of the truth she intended to convey. Note these statements:

“Regarding the testimonies, nothing is ignored: nothing is cast aside: but time and place must be considered.”<sup>34</sup> In 1875 she declared, “That which can be said of men under certain circumstances, cannot be said of them under other circumstances.”<sup>35</sup>

James White, in responding to an inquiry from “a brother at Monroe, Wis.,” concerning problems faced by his wife in attempting

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<sup>32</sup>See Robert W. Olson, “How the Desire of Ages Was Written” (Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1979), 47 pages.

<sup>33</sup>[Selected Messages 1:44, 45](#) (from Ms. 21, 1901).

<sup>34</sup>ISM, p. 57 (from Ms. 23, 1911).

<sup>35</sup>[Testimonies for the Church 3:470](#).

to counsel and guide the church, wrote in the *Review and Herald* in 1868 concerning another aspect of the problem of context—and the importance of the reader in determining to whom, when, and why a given Ellen White statement was made:

She works to this disadvantage, namely: she makes strong appeals to the people, which a few feel deeply, and take strong positions and go to extremes. Then to save the cause from ruin in consequence of these extremes, she is obliged to come out with reproofs for [these] extremists in a public manner. This is better than to have things go to pieces: but the influence of both the extremes and the reproofs are terrible on the cause, and brings upon Mrs. W. a threefold burden. Here is the difficulty: What she may say to urge the tardy is taken by the prompt to urge them over the mark. And what she may say to caution the prompt, zealous, incautious ones is taken by the tardy as an excuse to remain too far behind. <sup>36</sup>

Now let us examine a sampling of topics upon which the application of Jemison’s second principle of hermeneutics is critical to gaining a correct understanding of what the prophet meant by what she said:

*A sin to laugh?* Some months ago a writer contacted the White Estate and asked us to verify a statement purported to have come from the pen of Ellen White. As I looked at it, I shook my head in disbelief. I have yet to read every published word of Mrs. White’s— [12] much less all of the as-yet-unpublished words (her total literary output is estimated at 25 million words over a period of 70 years). However, I have gained a “feel” for statements that sound like her. This one certainly did not sound like the Ellen White I had come to love and respect.

“Christ often wept but was never known to laugh...imitate the divine, unerring Pattern.” <sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup>*The Review and Herald*, March 17, 1868, p. 220, 31:14.

<sup>37</sup>Ms. 11, 1868, p. 2.

I immediately noticed the ellipsis, indicating that in the original the sentences did not appear consecutively. (At least the “compiler” was honest enough to show the gap—many are not!)

I went to our vault to check the context in which she wrote. I noted immediately that this testimony related to a “Sister X” who had a serious spiritual problem. Mrs. White warned that “a work must be accomplished for her before she can be without fault before the throne of God.”

What was the problem? In brief, Sister X had not learned to control her tongue. She felt at perfect liberty to say anything that came into her head, justifying this on the basis that if she didn’t tell all, she was a hypocrite. “She has not seen the necessity of entirely controlling the tongue, the unruly member.”

Mrs. White next quoted the counsel found in [James 3:2-18](#), and then addressed Sister X directly:

My sister, you talk too much...Your tongue has done much mischief. It has been a world of iniquity...Your tongue has kindled a fire and you have enjoyed [standing back and watching] the conflagration....Dear sister, there must be in you an entire transformation of character. The tongue must be tamed. Your words must be select, well chosen....You sport and joke and enter into hilarity and glee....<sup>38</sup>

It is clear that the counsel was directed toward one who had an acute problem in controlling her tongue—one given to excessive “levity, glee, careless, reckless words, speaking at random, laughing, jesting, and joking.”<sup>39</sup>

While warning against this excessive tendency to “sport and joke and enter into hilarity and glee,” Mrs. White pointed out that “Christ is our example...Christ often wept but was never known to laugh.”

But she immediately added, “I do not say it is a sin to laugh on any occasion.” (These words the original compiler had left out, for obvious reasons!) Mrs. White added, a few lines farther on,

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<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 1, 2.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 2.



“Christian cheerfulness is not condemned by the Scriptures, but reckless talking is censured.”<sup>40</sup>

So Ellen White was *not* saying that since Christ is the Christian’s example, and He never laughed, the Christian should never laugh either. The context—criticism of “reckless talking”—and the additional qualifying statements about it not being a sin ever to laugh or to be cheerful, help clarify what was originally an unbalanced presentation of the counsel of God’s special messenger to His people.

*A sin to eat eggs?* We have already noted that although Mrs. White wrote “Brother and Sister E” to the effect that “eggs should not be placed upon your table,” other subsequent statements modify this prohibition from being used in a general, across-the-board manner.

One of those other statements includes a precautionary qualifier (“Especially in families of children who are given to sensual habits”) that we will now explore further. Going back to the internal context of the original counsel to “Brother and Sister E,” we discover that this was precisely the problem that called forth her counsel to avoid eggs in the home of the “E” family. For she warned them in this long letter that “your children have practiced self-abuse [masturbation],”<sup>41</sup> “your eldest son has enervated his entire system.... Your second child is fast following in his steps, and not one of your children is safe from this evil.”<sup>42</sup>

*A sin to wear the wedding band?* Ellen White made only one published statement concerning the wedding band,<sup>43</sup> so it does not take long to follow Jemison’s first rule: gather all statements on the subject. In applying Jemison’s second rule (examine the internal and external context), we find that her statement was written in Australia in 1892. It was addressed jointly to (1) Australian members and church workers, (2) American missionaries serving in Australia, and also (3) Americans living in their own homeland.

Speaking first to the American missionaries in Australia, Mrs. White said it was not necessary for them to wear the wedding band “down under.” Although it was an obligatory custom for citizens of the British Empire, everyone knew that the custom was not so

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 2, 3.

<sup>41</sup>[Testimonies for the Church 2:392.](#)

<sup>42</sup>[Testimonies for the Church 2:400.](#)

<sup>43</sup>[Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers, 180, 181.](#)

“imperative” in America. Indeed, “Americans can make their position understood by plainly stating that the custom is not regarded as obligatory in our country [in the 1890s].”

Still addressing her fellow Americans, Mrs. White considered the wearing of a wedding band by U.S. Adventists as a “leavening process which seems to be going on among us.” She emphasized that “not one penny should be spent for a circlet of gold to testify that we [American Adventists] are married.”

But Ellen White was *also* addressing the *Australian* church members. She did *not* say that *they* should nor spend “one penny” for a wedding band. On the contrary, Ellen White (who had herself been a missionary in several parts of the world) recognized that in some parts of the world at that time “the custom is imperative.”

She laid down only two conditions for those living in such places: (1) the custom must be viewed culturally as “imperative,” and (2) the individual Adventist must feel able to wear the wedding band “conscientiously.”

If those conditions intersected, Ellen White affirmed, “we have no burden to condemn those who have their marriage ring.” (Of course, she was speaking here of the simple, nonjeweled wedding band, which she never placed in the category of ornamental jewelry.)

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*Wrong to say “I am saved”?* One of the most tragic spiritual realities in the Seventh-day Adventist Church today is that so many of our members—including the students in our schools—not only have a low self-image, but also feel no assurance of salvation.

This situation is not helped when one reads—out of context—such statements from the pen of Ellen White as the following:

“Those who accept the Saviour, however sincere their conversion, should never be taught to say or to feel that they are saved. This is

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<sup>44</sup>See Roger W. Coon. “Ellen G. White, the Wedding Band, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church,” unpublished manuscript, Ellen G. White Estate. (Outline of a lecture presented in SDA Theological Seminary course GSEM 5i4 entitled “The Ellen G. White Writings,” Berrien Springs, Michigan, December 2, 1987.)

misleading.”<sup>45</sup> And, again, a Christian “should never dare to say, ‘I am saved.’”<sup>46</sup>

The internal context of both of these declarations makes it clear that Ellen White is speaking in the framework of the popular (but nonbiblical) doctrine of “Once saved, always saved.” (In theological circles this is known as the “doctrine of eternal security.”)

Note, however, the context of the first statement: Ellen White was discussing Simon Peter. She described how his “self-confidence” and “boastful assertions” to Christ in Gethsemane paved the way for his shameful denial of Christ in the court of Caiaphas early the next morning. After the Resurrection Christ restored Peter to his ministry and place among the Twelve, and Peter experienced a genuine conversion. “The once restless, boastful, self-confident disciple had become subdued and contrite.”<sup>47</sup> Now note the three sentences that immediately precede the declaration, “Those who accept the Saviour, however sincere their conversion, should never be taught to say or to feel that they are saved“:

Peter’s fall was not instantaneous, but gradual. Self-confidence led him to the belief that he was saved, and step after step was taken in the downward path, until he could deny his Master. Never can we safely put confidence in self, or feel, this side of heaven, that we are secure against temptations.<sup>48</sup>

And then, after the troublesome sentence in question, we read, farther on:

Every one should be taught to cherish hope and faith; but even when we give ourselves to Christ and know that He accepts us, we are not beyond the reach of temptation....

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<sup>45</sup>Ellen G. White, [Christ’s Object Lessons](#), 155 (Mountain View: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1941). (Referred to hereafter as COL.)

<sup>46</sup>ISM, p. 314.

<sup>47</sup>[Christ’s Object Lessons](#), 154.

<sup>48</sup>[Christ’s Object Lessons](#), 155.

Those who accept Christ, and in their first confidence say, I am saved, are in danger of trusting to themselves. They lose sight of their own weakness and their constant need of divine strength. They are unprepared for Satan's devices, and under temptation many, like Peter, fall into the depths of sin.... Our only safety is in constant distrust of self, and dependence on Christ. <sup>49</sup>

Let us now read the second statement in its immediate context:

We are never to rest in a satisfied condition, and cease to make advancement, saying, "I am saved." When this idea is entertained, the motives for watchfulness, for prayer, for earnest endeavor to press on to higher attainments, cease to exist. No sanctified tongue will be found in uttering these words till Christ shall come....As long as man is full of weakness—for of himself he cannot save his soul—he should never dare to say, "I am saved." <sup>50</sup>

While Ellen White saw danger in this unbiblical, false doctrine of eternal security, she also knew that Christians may indeed have assurance of eternal life with Christ in their day-to-day walk on this earth:

It is the privilege of everyone who has a part in any branch of the Lord's work [she here is speaking of Christians as a whole, not simply of denominational employees] to know that his sins are forgiven, and to rejoice in the assurance of a higher life in the courts above.... With the hope and assurance that Christ has promised, how can we be unhappy? <sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup>ISM, p. 314.

<sup>51</sup>Ellen G. White, [Letter 299, October 22, 1905](#), to the helpers at Paradise Valley Sanitarium, reprinted in [This Day With God, 304](#) (Washington: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1979).

Following Christ's example of unselfish service, trusting like little children in His merits, and obeying His commands, we shall receive the approval of God. <sup>52</sup>

If you are right with God today, you are ready if Christ should come today. <sup>53</sup>

The last letter Ellen White ever wrote, 13 months before her death, on June 14, 1914, <sup>54</sup> was penned not only for the benefit of a personal friend, "but also for other faithful souls who are troubled by doubts and fears regarding their acceptance by the Lord Jesus Christ." <sup>55</sup> This letter breathes out the fragrance of God's acceptance and our assurance to a superlative degree.

Thus the statements counseling against a Christian's saying, "I am saved," must be viewed within not only the immediate context of warnings against the false doctrine of eternal security, but also within the broader framework of oft-repeated declarations concerning our assurance of eternal life in and through Jesus Christ.

### C. Hermeneutic No. 3

At the risk of oversimplification, we can say that all prophets, when giving counsel and instruction, are doing one of two things: they are either (1) declaring a *principle* (an unchanging rule of human conduct that applies to everyone in all ages and all places), or (2) applying a principle to an immediate situation. This application could be called a *policy*.

Principles never change; but policies may (and, indeed, do), as the circumstances may change. This brings us to our third rule of hermeneutics:

*Attempt to determine whether the prophet's counsel is a statement of principle or of policy.*

Once you have separated the two, you have a further responsibility. If the counsel is a policy, you must seek to identify the principle on which it is grounded. That principle will have a contemporary

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<sup>52</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, Ms. 120 Oct. 3, 1905, reprinted in [The Upward Look](#), 295

<sup>53</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, [Letter 36, 1901](#) reprinted in [In Heavenly Places](#), 227 (Washington: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1967)

<sup>54</sup> [Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers](#), 516-520.

<sup>55</sup> [Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers](#), 516.

application, though it may well be quite different from the earlier one made by the prophet.

Let us study some specific cases to see how this rule works:

*Every girl trained to harness/drive a horse?* In 1903 Ellen White's book *Education* was published. This book is required reading in Principles of Christian Education classes in Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities around the world. It contains many valuable principles and concepts.

Because of this it is valued by even non-Adventist educators as a resource and reference work. Dr. Florence Stratemeyer, for many years professor of education at Teachers College, Columbia University, explained several decades ago why she kept this work in her own personal library:

Written at the turn of the century, this volume was more than fifty years ahead of its times.... I was surprised to learn that it was written by a woman with but three years of [formal] schooling.

The breadth and depth of its philosophy amazed me. Its concept of balanced education, harmonious development, and of thinking and acting on principle are advanced educational concepts [in 1959, when this statement was made by Dr. Stratemeyer].

The objective of restoring in man the image of God, parental responsibility, and the emphasis on self-control in the child are ideals the world desperately needs. <sup>56</sup>

But *Education* not only contains these (and other) principles, which never change; it also contains policies that may (and do) change as the circumstances alter.

One such is found in this statement: "If girls...could learn to harness and drive a horse, and to use the saw and hammer, as well as the rake and the hoe, they would be better fitted to meet the emergencies of life." <sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>The *Review and Herald*, August 6, 1959, p. 13; cited in Francis D. Nichol, *Why I Believe in Mrs. E. G. White* (Washington: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1964), p. 62.

<sup>57</sup>Ellen G. White. *Education*, 216, 217 (Mountain View: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1903).

In all of my worldwide travel I have never found an Adventist school that teaches girls (or boys, for that matter!) to harness and drive a horse. None of our schools, today, follows this educational counsel of Ellen White.

Does this mean that we have “abandoned the ‘blueprint,’” as some critics are quick to allege? Not at all.

First of all, Ellen White never gave us a “blueprint” for operating an educational, medical, or any other kind of institution. (We have no record of her ever having even used the word *blueprint*. She certainly would have disclaimed the concept,<sup>58</sup> for the word—as used today—implies a set of detailed drawings covering every part of a proposed building. It describes the structure as viewed from all angles and includes a detailed list of specifications indicating the quantity of each item of building material required for the project. Ellen White never gave any such specifications for Adventist education.)

Ellen White *did* present some timeless, changeless principles, as well as some applications of those principles in the context of her times.

The *policy* here was: teach girls to harness and drive horses. The *principle* upon which it was based is: education, for girls as well as boys, should be practical. (This would better fit the child “to meet the emergencies in life.”)

In 1903 most Seventh-day Adventist church members in North America lived on farms, far from large cities or towns. Rural electrification, and even telephone service, were still decades into the future for most farmers. If the husband and father became ill, emergency medical attention might be required. A daughter might be the only one able to go. Furthermore, knowing how to harness and drive a horse would enable a young woman to contribute to the operation of a farm or family business.

Today we still believe in the principle of practical education espoused by Mrs. White, even if we adapt and modify some of her policies to meet the realities of life in our day.

While I was teaching at Pacific Union College Walter Cox, chairman of the industrial-arts department, and his colleagues discussed

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<sup>58</sup>For an extended discussion of the myth of the educational “blueprint,” see George R. Knight, *Myths in Adventism* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1985), especially chapters 4 and 5.

the principles of practical education. They tried to find ways to adapt Mrs. White's counsel to meet contemporary needs.

They came up with a course that is still offered: "Powder-puff Mechanics." Enrollment is limited to girls. The class teaches basic facts about automobiles. (For example, there are three openings in a motor vehicle—one for water, one for gasoline, and one for oil, and don't ever mistake one for another!) Before the girls complete the course they can change a tire and even do a minor engine tune-up.

Ellen White's counsel (policy) on harnessing/driving horses, as found in *Education*, is, quite frankly, ignored in that school (and in Seventh-day Adventist schools around the world). However, the principle undergirding it is being implemented in very creative ways on many of our campuses.



## Chapter 3—An Integrated Model for Hermeneutical Application

Now that we have examined Jemison’s three principles of hermeneutics, and applied them in selected instances, let us try to bring what we have learned together and apply it in a case study or two.

An itinerant evangelist of the Church of Christ came to Napa, California, where he placed a large advertisement in the local newspaper promising to destroy the doctrines of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in a presentation one Thursday night, and to demolish their prophet for an encore the following week. I attended both sessions. In the second session he “proved” the Seventh-day Adventist Church was a false church because it was founded by a woman who defied the teachings of the Apostle Paul forbidding women to speak in Christian churches!

Well, how do we handle such issues? Let us apply the three principles of hermeneutics we have just learned in a case study:

### A. Hermeneutic No. 1

It will not take long to take all that the prophet had to say on this subject, for he spoke about it only twice to the Christian churches in Corinth and in Ephesus (where Timothy was a young minister):

“I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet” (1 Timothy 2:12, NASB). And:

“Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak...” (1 Corinthians 14:34, NASB).

That didn’t take long, did it? That’s all that Paul said on the subject. But what did Paul *mean* by what he said? What principle was he setting forth in his letter to first-century believers? And what message does he have for those who attend Christian churches nearly two millennia later?

## B. Hermeneutic No. 2

Let's start by examining the internal context, by noting what Paul said just before and after the sentences under question:

[17] Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension. Likewise I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments; but rather by means of good works, as befits women making a claim to godliness. Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet (1 Timothy 2:8-12, NASB).

God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints. Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says. And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church (1 Corinthians 14:33-35).

In both passages Paul talks of prayer and other religious exercises in public places of worship. He is obviously concerned about maintaining a spirit of reverence. Apparently there was a problem in the Christian churches of Ephesus and Corinth.

Concerning women worshipers in particular, Paul expressed concern about a possible lack of modesty and discretion. And he not only inveighed against ornamental jewelry, but also braided hair.

Cultural historians of the Mediterranean basin of the first century A.D. <sup>1</sup> report that some bolder women would weave strands of silver and gold thread into their hair as they braided it. Then, when they walked in direct sunlight, the light rays would bounce off these metallic threads, “knocking out” the eyes of any male in close proximity. For reasons that applied also to ornamental jewelry, Paul was concerned that Christian women not draw undue attention to themselves—and their bodies—a practice favored by pagan (and often shameless) women.

Patently, there was nothing immodest or indiscreet about females braiding their hair—it was what went into the hair that incurred the apostle's displeasure, for practical as well as theological reasons.

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<sup>1</sup>See, especially, the work of Mikhail I. Rostovtzeff.

As we examine the external context we find that Paul was combatting three problems: (1) irreverence, (2) sexual immorality, and (3) the nature of Greek and Jewish culture of those times.

*Irreverence.* There appears to have been a problem in maintaining reverence in the early Christian churches. Unlike the custom in Jewish synagogues, women and men worshiped together.

Probably no institution apart from Christianity freed the women of the New Testament world as did the religion of Jesus. In their newfound freedom these Christian women (who had always been required to remain silent in Jewish synagogues) now exercised their liberty by calling out questions when they did not understand something the preacher had just said. This caused confusion and irreverence in the churches of Corinth and Ephesus.

*Sexual immorality.* Second, and of even greater urgency, problems relating to sexual immorality in these cities threatened the very existence of the Christian church. Both cities shared a unique problem, as far as Christians were concerned.

At the time Paul wrote, Corinth was a leading commercial metropolis in Greece, one of the largest, richest, and most important cities of the Roman empire. With a population of 400,000, it was surpassed in size only by Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch. It was “a renowned and voluptuous city, where the vices of East and West met.”<sup>2</sup>

“Sin City,” that’s what it was, universally known for its rampant immorality. To call a young woman a “Corinthian girl” was tantamount to calling her a prostitute. “To Corinthianize,” meant to lead an immoral life. In its pagan rituals, vice was consecrated as religion.

Strabo, a historian of Paul’s day, wrote a 17-volume *Geography* of the Mediterranean basin in which he speaks of the low moral state in Corinth. On the edge of town there stood a limestone hill nearly 2000 feet high. On its top stood a large, ornate temple dedicated to the worship of Aphrodite (known elsewhere as Venus), the goddess of fertility and sexual love.

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<sup>2</sup>Henry H. Halley, *Halley’s Bible Handbook*, 24th edition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1965), p. 593.

Aphrodite’s temple had 1000 priestess-prostitutes whose salaries came from local taxes. These “ladies of the night” were honored citizens of the town; they even had reserved seats in the local Corinthian amphitheaters. <sup>3</sup>

[18] Ephesus had its temples, too. “Great is Diana of the Ephesians” was the rallying cry of the silversmiths, makers of tourist trinkets (replicas of Diana and of her temple). They feared that Paul’s preaching might imperil not only the local religion but also their livelihood ([Acts 19:23-41](#)). The hundreds of priestess-prostitutes at Diana’s temple in Ephesus were called Melissae (which, curiously, translates as “bees”). Their function paralleled that of their sisters in Corinth. <sup>4</sup>

Paganism always has managed to couple spiritism (spiritualism) with sexual immorality. <sup>5</sup> This is what Paul, in part, was up against.

To illustrate: let us say that a Christian in Corinth was laboring in a certain guild. His benchmate, a pagan, noticed that this fellow was different from the other men in the factory: he didn’t swear or tell dirty stories. He cared about people and was always trying to help them, even when he had nothing to gain personally from doing so.

The pagan came to respect and admire the Christian. He may have figured out that it was the Christian’s religion that made him what he was.

This paved the way for the Christian to invite his pagan benchmate to church the next Sabbath morning. As they walked into the church and took a seat on the front pew, the leaders of the Sabbath school program were filing onto the platform to begin the service.

This was the first time the pagan had ever been in a *Christian* church. The daughters of Zion are often fair to behold, and the Sabbath school superintendent this week was a strikingly attractive woman.

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 595. See also William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*. revised edition (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), pp. 2, 3. (Referred to hereafter as *Corinthians*). Also helpful is Barclay’s *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, revised edition (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), p. 67. (Referred to hereafter as *Timothy*.)

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, *Timothy*, p. 67.

<sup>5</sup>See [Numbers 25:1-15](#) and [Psalm 106:28](#).

Innocently, the pagan nudged the Christian, and said, "I'd like to meet that lady after the service." (While he'd never been in a Christian church before, he had been to the temple on the hill, and he knew about the ladies who led out in the services *there!*)

During the intermission, before the worship service began, the Christian called the superintendent over to introduce the new visitor. Of course, she was glad to welcome him.

Unwittingly, the pagan made an obscene suggestion. The woman was horrified and visibly recoiled. The pagan didn't know what he'd done wrong, but obviously he had committed a *faux pas*.

Nothing immoral took place. But it was as true then as it is today: embarrass a visitor in your church and he'll never darken the door again.

So Paul (who spent 18 months in Corinth) decided some rules were needed to head off dangerous situations such as this.

*Culture.* Thirdly, Paul was challenging culture, a most formidable task. Greek and Jewish culture agreed on relatively few things in the first century A.D., but they did agree on the role and status of women.

In Jewish culture (out of which Christianity developed), women, officially, had a very low position. They literally didn't count. When the Gospels report that Jesus fed 5000 on one occasion and 4000 on another occasion, from the proceeds of a peasant boy's lunchbox, that meant so many thousand men. (Jesus actually fed perhaps 15,000 to 20,000 total persons on each of those occasions!)

William Barclay described the status of Jewish women in biblical times:

In Jewish law she was not a person but a thing; she was entirely at the disposal of her father or of her husband. She was forbidden to learn the law; to instruct a woman in the law was to cast pearls before swine. Women had no part in the synagogue service; they were shut apart in a section of the synagogue, or in a gallery, where they could not be seen. A man came to the synagogue to *learn*; but, at the most, a woman came to *hear*. In the synagogue the lesson from Scripture was read by members of the congregation; but not by women, for

that would have been to lessen “the honour of the congregation.” It was absolutely forbidden for a woman to teach in a school; she might not even teach the youngest children.... Women, slaves and children were classed together. In the Jewish morning prayer a man thanked God that God had not made him “a Gentile, a slave or a woman.”...A strict Rabbi would never greet a woman on the street, not even his own wife or daughter or mother or sister. It was said of woman: “Her work is to send her children to the synagogue; to attend to domestic concerns; to leave her husband free to study in the schools; to keep house for him until he returns.”<sup>6</sup>

[19] In the world of Greek culture, the status of woman was equally low. Sophocles, an early male chauvinist, earned the ire of feminists from his day to ours with such maxims as: “Silence confers grace upon a woman.” Thus, women, “unless they were very poor or very loose in their morals, led a very secluded life in Greece.”<sup>7</sup>

The respectable Greek woman led a very confined life. She lived in her own quarters into which no one but her husband came. She did not even appear at meals. She never at any time appeared on the street alone; she never went to any public assembly. The fact is that if in a Greek town Christian women had taken an active and a speaking part in its work, the Church would inevitably have gained the reputation of being the resort of loose women.<sup>8</sup>

In reality, Paul had no alternative but to issue rules to govern the activities of Christian women in the churches of his day and place.

### C. Hermeneutic No. 3

When Paul issued his dictum enforcing silence upon women in Christian churches he was either stating a principle (which never changes), or he was making a policy application. Which was it?

If he were enunciating a principle, then such would, of necessity, apply with equal force today. Add thus the Church of Christ evan-

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<sup>6</sup>Timothy. pp. 66, 67.

<sup>7</sup>Barclay, Corinthians, p. 136.

<sup>8</sup>Barclay, Timothy, p. 67.

gelist could logically accuse the Seventh-day Adventist Church as being a false church because it doesn't follow a law of the Bible.

But if we are in trouble, so are others: in the days of Jesus a woman—Anna—prophesied in the temple in Jerusalem concerning the future role of the baby Jesus. There is no evidence that she was scolded or condemned for inappropriate behavior by the male priest who witnessed it all (see [Luke 1:25-38](#)).

Four prophetesses are mentioned by name in the Old Testament, at least one of whom (Miriam) led the choir in front of the whole congregation ([Exodus 15:20, 21](#))!

No, logic and consistency compel me to believe that Paul's counsel against women speaking in church was a policy, rather than a principle. But upon what principle(s) was it based? I see at least five separate principles in Paul's writings upon which he based his policy. These principles are binding upon us today—though they may well have a somewhat different application than in Paul's day.

1. [1 Corinthians 14:40](#): "Let all things be done decently [Paul was concerned with morality] and in order [he was equally concerned about reverence in the house of God]."

2. [1 Thessalonians 5:22](#): "Abstain from all appearance [as well as the substance] of evil."

3. [1 Corinthians 8:9](#) and [Romans 14:13, 21](#): Don't place a stumbling-block in front of a weak brother (or sister).

4. [1 Corinthians 6:12](#): Paul never taught that, strictly speaking, all things were lawful; for sin, by definition, is lawbreaking. He meant instead that though some things are in themselves lawful, they are not expedient. He abstained from them for reasons related to circumstances.

5. [1 Timothy 2:9](#): Modesty is to be cultivated by all women (and all men, too!).

I am totally satisfied that Paul's counsel to Corinth and Ephesus that women not speak in church is a policy to meet a particular situation. It was his temporary caution to the members there. It would apply equally today in any place where there are circumstances that are identical with those Paul had to face in Corinth and Ephesus.

No, Paul wasn't antifemale, as feminists have sometimes mistakenly charged. And God wasn't down on women, either.

We have noted Paul's policy. But his permanent principle regarding women, I believe, is found in [Galatians 3:27, 28](#): "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

[20] There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, *there is neither male nor female*; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (NASB, emphasis supplied).

Paul and other New Testament writers depict women in strong leadership roles. Barclay points to a few:

- Mary, a Galilean peasant girl, was chosen (without the aid of any human male) to give birth to and train the One who would become our Saviour.
- Four women, of all them disciples, remained by the cross at a time when it was dangerous to identify and affiliate with Jesus. Women also were the first to see and proclaim the risen Lord.
- Priscilla (with her husband Aquilla) served as a valuable teacher in the early Christian church, and led the mighty Apollos to a knowledge of the truths of salvation.
- The four daughters of Philip served as prophetesses.
- The [16th chapter](#) of Romans records the names of many other women whom Paul esteemed. <sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 68.



## **Conclusion**

Hermeneutics is the science and art of deriving meaning. Its goal is to “rightly divide the word of truth.” The central objective of hermeneutics is the twin task of achieving balance and avoiding distortion.

Three principles of hermeneutics, advocated by T. Housel Jemison, are particularly helpful in determining what the prophet meant by what he or she said.

As you study, pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that He may lead you into all of the truth you are capable of comprehending.