

ELLEN G. WHITE ESTATE

**SOME
HERMENEUTICAL
PRINCIPLES
BEARING ON THE
ELLEN G. WHITE
WRITINGS**

PAUL A. GORDON

**Some Hermeneutical
Principles Bearing On
the Ellen G. White
Writings**

Ellen G. White

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Overview

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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 Paul A. Gordon

The Ellen G. White Estate

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Introduction

The renowned writer and philosopher Mark Twain was once asked if he was bothered by those portions of the Bible that he did not understand. He replied, “No, the parts that bother me most are those I do understand!” A correct knowledge of the Bible is a problem to many people. But perhaps some, like the philosopher, understand more than they might wish they did.

To know what the Bible and the modern messenger are saying is important to every Seventh-day Adventist. We believe that we are a special people with a unique message for the world. This message includes acceptance of the prophetic gift in our midst. To reject or dissect that gift actually puts us in greater peril than if we had never heard of it. Ellen White once issued the following challenge:

God is either teaching His church, reproving their wrongs and strengthening their faith, or He is not. This work is of God, or it is not. God does nothing in partnership with Satan. My work for the past thirty years bears the stamp of God or the stamp of the enemy. There is no halfway work in the matter. The *Testimonies* are of the Spirit of God, or of the devil.—[Testimonies for the Church 4:230](#).

It is clear that Ellen White saw no middle ground. Either she was speaking for God or she was not. She saw rejection of what she said as rejection of the Lord’s counsel.

One of the first problems that confronts us is that the more remote a writer is from those who read, the more need there is for rules of use to bridge the gap. This calls for what we formally term “hermeneutics,” a word from the Greek, meaning “to interpret, to explain.”

When we apply principles of hermeneutics in our study of the Bible and the writings of Ellen White, we need to ask such questions

- [2] as: How do we correctly understand them? What are the principles by which they are to be read? What were the writers thinking about? Is there a context? What about cultural differences? Is the passage literal or mystical? Can the content be transferred to a contemporary situation? Do we need to understand it all before knowing the *parts*? Not all of these questions can be answered fully in this study. But we will especially focus on Ellen White's understanding of what she has written, and also how we can understand it.

Chapter 1—Communication Problems

In 1886 Ellen White suggested communication problems from four different sides. Her comments are pertinent to her own writings as well as the Bible.

1. Problems for the Writer:

Human minds vary. The minds of different education and thought receive different impressions of the same words, and it is difficult for one mind to give to one of a different temperament, education, and habits of thought by language exactly the same idea as that which is clear and distinct in his own mind.—[Selected Messages 1:19](#).

2. Problems Created by the Reader:

Some are “not honest.” They do not want “to see and understand the truth.” Others “misconstrue” the writer’s words. Some “wrest” the words “from their true meaning.” Others have problems because of the “perversity of the human mind,” and “read ... to please themselves.” And there are those whose “presuppositions, prejudices, and passions” “darken the understanding.” She wrote of some readers who “turn the truth of God into a lie. In the very same way that they treat the writings in my published articles and in my books, so do skeptics and infidels treat the Bible” (*Ibid.*).

3. General Problems:

There are “imperfections of human language,” “the Scriptures were given. . . piece by piece” and “there is not always perfect order or apparent unity.” “Superficial knowledge” will lead to talk of [3] “contradictions of the Bible.” The Bible is “not given to us in grand superhuman language,” and “everything that is human is imperfect.” “Different meanings are expressed by the same word,” and there is “not one word for each distinct idea.” (*Ibid.*)

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4. How to Read:

To the “honest” man the writer will be able to “convey his meaning for all practical purposes.” We are to understand that the Bible was given “not in a continuous chain,” but “through successive generations.” Bible truths must be “searched, dug out, by painstaking effort.” We must search “with a heart prepared to receive divine impressions.” Truths should be traced out with “patience, thought, and prayer.”

It seems clear that Ellen White saw as a major problem human unwillingness to accept and understand truth for one reason or another. She urges readers: “Cling to your Bible as it reads, and stop your criticisms in regard to its validity, and obey the Word, and not one of you will be lost” ([Selected Messages 1:18](#)).

In *The Great Controversy* Ellen White says it in still another way:

The truths most plainly revealed in the Bible have been involved in doubt and darkness by learned men, who, with a pretense of great wisdom, teach that the Scriptures have a mystical, a secret, spiritual meaning not apparent in the language employed. These men are false teachers. It was to such a class that Jesus declared: “Ye know not the Scriptures, neither the power of God.”

The language of the Bible should be explained according to its obvious meaning, unless a symbol or figure is employed. Christ has given the promise: “If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine.”

If men would but take the Bible as it reads, if there were no false teachers to mislead and confuse their minds, a work would be accomplished that would make angels glad and that would bring into the fold of Christ thousands upon thousands who are now wandering in error.—[The Great Controversy, 598-599](#).

Note three statements from Ellen White on how she was instructed regarding getting the message across to those who would read:

5. Use of simple language:

I try to put the thoughts into such simple language that a child can understand every word uttered.—[Letter 61a, 1900](#).

6. Careful choice of words:

I am exceedingly anxious to use words that will not give anyone a chance to sustain erroneous sentiments. I must use words that will not be misconstrued and made to mean the opposite of that which they were designed to mean.—*Ms 126, 1905*.

7. She was to use the language of the Scriptures:

It has been presented to me that, so far as possible, I am to impart instruction in the language of the Scriptures; for there are those whose spiritual discernment is confused, and when their errors are reproved, they will misinterpret and misapply what I might write, and thus make of none effect the words of warning that the Lord sends. He desires that the messages He sends shall be recognized as the words of eternal, truth.—[Letter 280, 1906](#).

Chapter 2—Presenting the Message

Ellen White gave messages in most all of the ways the Bible prophets did. She preached sermons. She wrote letters. Some 4500 articles appeared in, various church journals from her pen. She wrote more than twenty-five books in her lifetime. She also gave counsel in personal interviews.

But prophets are not all alike. Some were counselors to kings. Others gave dramatic messages to cities or nations. Still others quietly wrote out their messages. Some were political leaders, while others were reformers. This latter role is the most common one. In the Old Testament Jeremiah, Elijah, and Elisha were reformers, and in the New Testament there was John the Baptist.

[5] Ellen White was called to be a reformer. Her messages, for example, on health, diet, dress and education are reformatory in nature. She also spoke in doctrinal areas. This included (1) explaining of Scripture; (2) guidance away from false doctrines, and (3) presenting correct teachings. Again, what she said was to reform. She wrote to administrators, to ministers, to teachers, to publishing workers, to those connected with medical work, and to parents and children. This, too, called for reform.

Still another major writing task was the development of the controversy theme. She wrote of human beings on the visible stage of action, but more important, of the working of invisible forces of good and evil behind the scenes. This presentation included a consideration of the future and how to prepare for it.

Some Challenges

With such a variety of topics and types of writing, it should not be surprising that questions have arisen as to whether it was all inspired of God or whether some of it only reflected Ellen White's ideas. Next we look at some of these difficulties.

1. Was She Influenced by Others?

One of our ministers in 1893 wrote to Ellen White that he felt she did not understand a certain subject on which he had written, and he tried to straighten her out. She wrote back to him: “You think individuals have prejudiced my mind. If I am in this state, I am not fitted to be entrusted with the work of God” ([Selected Messages 2:63](#)).

In 1850 a woman told Ellen White about a minister who had done something wrong. Not long after this, she sent a testimony to this minister. When the woman heard of it, she expressed regret for what she had told her. Ellen White wrote back:

What if you had said ever so much, would that affect the visions that God gives me? If so, then the visions are nothing.... God has shown me the true state of Brother_ _ _____. I know from the vision that his influence has been bad.... What you said, Sister_____influenced me not at all. My opinion has nothing to do with what God has shown me in vision.—[Letter 1, 1851](#).

When it was suggested that she was influenced by her husband, [6] Ellen White said, “My husband has no control of these manifestations of the Spirit of God. Many times he has been far away when I have had visions” ([Letter 2, 1814](#)). She said the same regarding her son: “I want to say, never repeat to another soul as long as you live the words that W. C. White manipulates my writings and changes them. This is just what the devil is trying to make all believe” ([Letter 143, 1906](#)).

Ellen White more than once “confessed” her real influence:

Unbelief is expressed by the words, “Who has written these things to Sister White?” But I know of no one who knows them as they are, and no one could write that which he does not suppose has an existence. Someone has told me,—He who does not falsify, misjudge, or exaggerate any case.—*Special Testimony for Review and Herald Office*, p. 16.

At another time she said it this way:

Some are ready to inquire: Who told Sister White these things? They have even put the question to me: Did anyone tell you these things? I could answer them: Yes, yes, the angel of God has spoken to me.—[Testimonies for the Church 3:314](#).

2. Is Part from God and Part from Ellen White?

Ellen White met this question several times. In 1888 she wrote quite plainly to one man:

You have talked over matters as you viewed them, that the communications from Sister White are not all from the Lord, but a portion is her own mind, her own judgment, which is no better than anybody else's judgment and ideas. This is one of Satan's hooks to hang your doubts upon to deceive your soul and the souls of others who will dare to draw the line in this matter and say, this portion which pleases me is from God, but that portion which points out and condemns my course of conduct is from Sister White alone, and bears not the holy signet. You have in this way virtually rejected the whole of the messages, which God in His tender, pitying love has sent you to save you from moral ruin.—[Letter 16, 1888](#).

At another time she wrote:

I have my work to do, to meet the misconceptions of those who suppose themselves able to say what is testimony from God and what is human production. If those who have done this work continue in this course, Satanic agencies will choose for them.... Those who have helped souls to feel at liberty to testify what is of God in the testimonies and what are the uninspired words of Sister White, will find that they were helping the devil in his work of deception.—[Letter 28, 1906](#).

When we accept part of what has been written and reject other parts, in effect we are setting *ourselves* up as judges of inspiration. Ellen White put it rather bluntly when she said there are “some professed believers” who “accept certain portions of the *Testimonies* as the message of God, while they reject those portions that condemn their favorite indulgences” ([Testimonies for the Church 9:145](#)).

3. Private Interpretation

Ellen White was concerned about those who put their own interpretations on what she had written:

For months my soul has been passing through intense agony on account of those who have received the sophistries of Satan and are communicating the same to others, making every conceivable interpretation in various ways to destroy confidence in the gospel messages for this last generation, and in the special work which God has given me to do. I know that the Lord has given me this work, and I have no excuse to make for what I have done.—[Letter 86, 1906](#).

Writing to a prominent doctor and minister she said:

When I am meeting with evidences that these communications will be treated by some in accordance with the human judgment of those who shall receive them; when I realize that some are watching keenly for some words which have been traced by my pen and upon which they can place their human interpretations in order to sustain their positions and to justify a wrong course of action,—when I think of these things, it is not very encouraging to continue writing.—[Letter 172, 1906](#).

4. Wresting the Scriptures and the Testimonies

As Ellen White considered her work, she compared how men treated Christ’s words with the way they sometimes treated hers:

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The lessons of Christ were often misunderstood, not because He did not make them plain, but because the minds of the Jews, like the minds of many who claim to believe in this day, were filled with prejudice. . . . Many study the Scriptures for the purpose of proving their own ideas to be correct. They change the meaning of God's Word to suit their own opinions. And thus they do also with the testimonies that He sends. They quote half a sentence, leaving out the other half, which, if quoted, would show their reasoning to be false. God has a controversy with those who wrest the Scriptures, making them conform to their preconceived ideas.—
[Manuscript 22, 1890.](#)

The reason why many Jews in Christ's day could not understand Scripture is that "unaccustomed to *accept God's Word exactly as it reads*, or to *allow it to be its own interpreter*, they read it in the light of their maxims and traditions" (*Ms 24, 1891*, emphasis supplied). In the following broad statement she counsels us regarding the same problem. Note the several hermeneutical principles suggested:

Be careful how you interpret Scripture. *Read it with a heart opened to the entrance of God's Word*, and it will express heavens light, giving understanding unto the simple. This does not mean the weakminded, but those who do not stretch themselves beyond their measure and ability in trying to be original and independent in reaching after knowledge above that which constitutes true knowledge.

All who handle the Word of God are engaged in a most: solemn and sacred work; for in their research they are to receive light and a correct knowledge, that they may give to those who are ignorant, Education is the inculcation of ideas which are light and truth. Everyone who *diligently and patiently searches* the Scriptures that he may educate others, entering upon the work *correctly and with an honest heart, laying his preconceived ideas*, whatever they may have been, and his *hereditary*

prejudices at the door of investigation, will gain true knowledge.

But it is very easy to put a false interpretation on Scripture, placing stress on passages, and assigning to them a meaning, which, at the first investigation, may appear true, but which by further search, will be seen to be false. If the seeker after truth will *compare Scripture with Scripture*, he will find the key that unlocks the treasure house and gives him a true understanding of the Word of God. Then he will see that his first impressions would not bear investigation and that continuing to believe them would be mixing falsehood with truth.—*Ms. 4, 1896*. (Emphasis supplied.)

Ellen White had unreserved confidence in the Bible. Writing in 1888, she said: “The Lord has preserved this Holy Book by His own miraculous power in its present shape—a chart or guidebook to the human family to show them the way to heaven.” She went on to say, “I take the Bible just as it is, as the inspired Word. I believe its utterances in an entire Bible.” She characterized the Bible as “prepared for the poor man as well as the learned man,” and “fitted for all ages and all classes.” She talked of its “simplicity and plain utterance” as being “comprehended by the illiterate, by the peasant, and the child as well as by the full-grown man or the giant in intellect.” ([Selected Messages 1:15, 17, 18.](#))

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Chapter 3—How She Explains Herself

It is pertinent to our study to examine how Ellen White, in a few rare instances, explained earlier statements or defended her position.

1. Christian Experience and Views Supplement—1854

In 1854, when she published a supplement to her first book, *Christian Experience and Views*, she explained and amplified a few earlier statements. She discussed what she had said about the Sabbath, the open and shut door, spirit manifestations, descriptions of God the Father, and certain questions on stewardship. She explained context and meaning and attempted to clear up misunderstanding regarding circumstances. In other words, as a writer she did a hermeneutical examination of herself. (See [Early Writings, 85-96.](#))

2. Review and Herald—1867

We find another such effort in the [The Review and Herald, October 8, 1867](#). There she gives answers to a series of questions that had been posed. Let's look at them as she did.

The first question was: "Did you receive your views upon health reform before visiting the health institute at Dansville, New York, or before you had read works on the subject?" In reply, she pointed out that her vision on health reform came on June 6, 1863, and she said, "I did not visit Dansville till August, 1864, fourteen months after I had the view." She adds, "I did not read any works upon health until I had written *Spiritual Gifts*, Volumes III and IV, *Appeal to Mothers*, and had sketched out most of my six articles in the six numbers of *How to Live*."

[10] Some readers had noticed similarities between her counsel and that of contemporary health reformers. She answered this question: "After I had written my six articles for *How to Live*, I then searched the various works on hygiene and was surprised to find them so nearly in harmony with what the Lord had revealed to me." This

suggests at least two important points: (1) truth was not always the exclusive possession of the prophet, and (2) that which is uninspired was tested by the inspired.

Another question was: “Does not the practice of the sisters in wearing their dresses nine inches from the floor contradict Testimony #11, which says they should reach somewhat below the top of a ladies’ gaiter boot? Does it not also contradict Testimony #10 which says they should clear the filth of the street an inch or two without being raised by the hand?”

She replied:

The proper distance from the bottom of the dress to the floor was not given to me in inches. . . . I was not shown a ladies’ boot. . . . but *I was left to describe the length of the proper dress in my own language the best I could.*—(Emphasis supplied)

She follows with the thought: “Having become fully satisfied that nine inches comes the nearest to the sample shown me, I have given this number of inches in [Testimony] #12, as the proper length in regard to which uniformity is very desirable.” An interesting insight into her method of writing!

She then talks of wearing a reform dress of her own design, and that many of the women “have received my testimony, and have followed my example from principle, and not as a result of being urged.” Another important point!

The fourth question in the article was: “Is there not danger of brethren and sisters taking extreme views of the health reform?” Her answer to this question is brief and direct: “This may be expected in all stirring reforms.” She follows with a rather pungent comment: “It is the duty of those everyway qualified to teach it, to make people believe and obey and all others should be silent and be taught.” [11]

A fifth question: “Is there not danger of urging the health reform upon others before they are prepared to receive it?” Again her answer is to the point and direct: “There is.” She then reminds readers that the Lord gradually opened up this truth and “has led us with a gentle hand and tender care, step by step, until we have reached the reform

in health.” She urges others to do the same. The counsel is still pertinent today!

The sixth question: “If the visions are so important for the church, why so long before the subject of health reform was brought out?” Her answer again illustrates her method of working. She says she “had written thousands of pages” since her last health vision of “personal testimony which most of our people know nothing about,” and “hundreds of letters relative to the establishment of a health institute of which still more are ignorant.” This reference to thousands of pages and hundreds of letters is interesting to us at the White Estate because all communication went out in handwritten form and was not preserved by Ellen White. But she *does* make an important point. She *had* been circulating the messages, the best way that she knew—by personal counsel.

A seventh and final question is a curious one. A Conference Committee asks about a rumor that she played certain games and that “you play checkers, and carry a checker board with you as you visit the brethren from place to place.” The reply is again very direct. She denies playing any of the games, stating that she does not even know “how to play the games mentioned.” She then proceeds to tell of her personal experience at Dansville, New York, a non-Adventist medical institution where she had taken her sick husband for treatment after a physical breakdown.

[12] At this institution physical labor had been discouraged for invalids and playing cards, chess, checkers, and dancing had been urged as a means to restore health. This procedure she had been shown *in vision* to be false, and after a short stay at Dansville, she left. Within days after leaving, she had been shown again *in vision* (Dec 25, 1865) that Adventists should establish their own medical facilities with practices in harmony with what she had been shown. This included education as well as healing. The Western Health Reform Institute was opened in Battle Creek, and a health journal also appeared, both in that same year.

Her giving of context helps us to understand the counsel more clearly. The story of her personal efforts to bring her husband back to health is well known. This effort was made more difficult because of what her husband in his weakened condition accepted at Dansville.

3. Testimonies for the Church, Volume 5—1889

One other explanation of her work can be found in [Testimonies for the Church 5:692-698](#). Here Ellen White deals with certain rumors about what she had said about the judgment, a minister being saved, and that she had confessed to error and a wrong spirit at a certain meeting. She denied all of these rumors and then commented:

During my labors in connection with the work of the Lord I have not made it a practice to vindicate my own cause or to contradict reports that have been put in circulation in regard to myself. To do this would occupy my time to the neglect of the work which God has appointed me.—[Testimonies for the Church 5:691](#).

She then talks about the problems that Christ had with rumors:

Those who listened to the words of Christ heard and reported His teaching just according to the spirit that was in them. It is ever thus with those who hear God's word. The manner in which they understand and receive it depends upon the spirit which dwells in their hearts. . . .If persons listen to God's message of reproof, warning, or encouragement while their hearts are filled with prejudice, they will not understand the true import of that which was sent them to be a savor of life unto life.—[Testimonies for the Church 5:694-695](#). (Emphasis supplied.)

In connection with a correct reading of her counsels, she makes still another important observation:

To all who have a desire for truth I would say: Do not give credence to unauthenticated reports as to what Sister White has done or said or written. If you desire to know what the Lord has revealed through her, read her published works.—[Testimonies for the Church 5:696](#).

[13]

Chapter 4—Autobiographical Writing

Several times during her lifetime Ellen White wrote out her personal life experiences. The first account was her first small book, printed in 1851, titled *The Christian Experience and Views of Mrs. Ellen G. White*. She provided a supplement to this in 1854. (Both of these are now included in *Early Writings*.) In 1860 she prepared *Spiritual Gifts*, Volume II, as a record of her experiences. Another life sketch appeared at the beginning of *Testimonies for the Church*, Volume 1. In 1886 she included a journal of her travel and appointments in early months in Europe in a book called *Historical Sketches of the Foreign Missions of the Seventh-day Adventists*. The final personal record of events appeared as *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White* in 1915, the year of her death. This account drew heavily on the earlier ones.

In the preface of SG, Volume II, she wrote:

In preparing the following pages, I have labored under great disadvantages, as I have had to depend in many instances, on memory, having kept no journal till within a few years. In several instances I have sent the manuscripts to friends who were present when the circumstances related occurred, for their examination before they were put into print. I have taken great care, and have spent much time, in endeavoring to state the simple facts as correctly as possible.—2SG, p. iii.

A very unusual statement from Ellen White. It appears that the common, everyday account of events in her life she did not consider inspired. It is the only such area of writing that she so characterizes. She states it another way in [Selected Messages 1:39](#):

There are times when common things must be stated, common thoughts must occupy the mind, common letters must be written and information given that

has passed from one to another of the workers. Such words, such information, are not given under the special inspiration of the Spirit of God. Questions are asked at times that are not upon religious subjects at all, and these questions must be answered. We converse about houses and lands, trades to be made, and locations for our institutions, the advantages and disadvantages.—[Selected Messages 1:39](#).

[14]

Chapter 5—How to Study the Books

There are certain keys that Ellen White offers in regard to the study of her writing. We have already observed several, but let's look at others.

1. Progression of knowledge:

Some references have already been made to this point. We know, for example, that the health message was built on a series of visions, each one adding further details. The same could be said for her counsel in several other areas. Elder James White wrote:

“I have yet many things to say unto you,” said Jesus, “but ye cannot bear them now.” Jesus knew how to lead along the minds of His disciples. The Lord also knew how to introduce to His waiting people the great subject of health reform, step by step, as they could bear it, and make a good use of it, without souring the public mind.

It was twenty-two years ago the present autumn [1848] that our minds were called to the injurious effects of tobacco, tea, and coffee, through the testimony of Mrs. White.... When we had gained a good victory over these things, and when the Lord saw that we were able to bear it, light was given relative to food and dress and the cause of health reform among our people moved steadily forward, and great changes were made.—[The Review and Herald, November 8, 1870](#). (Quoted in [Counsels on Diet and Foods, 495-496](#).)

2. Change of circumstances:

Writing in 1903, Ellen White says that “if girls. . . could learn to harness and drive a horse. . . they would be better fitted to meet the emergencies of life” ([Education, 216-217](#)). In 1894 she cautioned

against the purchase of bicycles, calling them a “craze” ([Testimonies for the Church 8:51-52](#)). In 1902 church leaders were counseled against using brick or stone for building sanitariums, because the resulting buildings were “generally cold and damp” ([Testimonies for the Church 7:83](#)). She said, “We need roomy buildings; and if brick is too costly, we must build of wood” (*Ibid.*).

These three statements represent the kind of messages that could be hard to understand today unless we consider them in the light of the times in which they were written. Yet, there are principles that continue to be valuable for similar situations. In some cases the clues are found internally in the writing itself. In others, external evidence helps us to understand. [15]

Another illustration is in order. The Avondale School in Australia opened in April, 1897. In the first term, attendance grew from ten to sixty. Students ranged in age from 14 to 28, with most of them on the younger side. Classes were mostly to the eighth grade, but a few higher. Ellen White gave the following counsel when they were well into the first term:

We have labored hard to keep in check everything in the school like favoritism, attachments, and courting. We have told the students that we would not allow the first thread of this to be interwoven with their school work.—[Letter 145, 1897](#).

This statement was quoted in later catalogues for the school. When, C. W. Irwin, who served as principal, came to Pacific Union College he thought to impose the same restrictions. At that time the manuscript for Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students was being prepared, largely from Ellen White’s writings from earlier years. However, she did not include the foregoing counsel.

Professor Irwin was asked to read the manuscript and was disappointed that this restriction was not included. He wrote to W. C. White, who in turn took it to his mother, but she would not consent to its inclusion in a volume of general counsel that would govern our educational institutions, including our colleges. Instead, she wrote for the chapter, “Department of Students,” where this statement would naturally have appeared:

In all our dealings with students, age and character must be taken into account. We cannot treat the young and the old just alike. There are circumstances under which men and women of sound experience and good standing may be granted some privileges not given to the younger students. The age, conditions, and the turn of mind must be taken into consideration.—[Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students, 101.](#)

[16]

3. Look for principles:

The previous consideration leads us to a third rule for study. We are to look for principles when we read. There are numerous illustrations of this. In her dress counsels, for example, Ellen White gives principles. These include modesty, good taste, simplicity, economy, and appropriateness to the age. Ellen White suggests that we are to look for principles as we study the Bible and what she wrote:

The Word of God abounds in general principles for the formation of correct habits of living, and the testimonies, general and personal, have been calculated to call. . . .attention more especially to these principles.—[Testimonies for the Church 5:663-664.](#)

4. Avoid extremes:

James and Ellen White often had to lead out in reforms. In an editorial in the [The Review and Herald, March 17, 1868](#), James White shares some of the problems they faced in attempting to implement these reforms:

Mrs. White needs the help of all who can help in the cause of truth and reform. The people generally are slow to move, and hardly move at all. A few move cautiously and well, while others go too fast. . . .He who is but partly reformed himself, and teaches the people, will do some good. He who sees the duty of reform, and is full strict enough in any case, and allows of no

exceptions, and drives matters, is sure to drive reform into the ground, hurt his own soul, and injure others.

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 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. White a three-fold 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.—[The Review and Herald, March 17, 1868.](#)

Some time ago I studied the *Index* listings of Ellen White's comments on extremes. It was every enlightening. Extremes are to be avoided in dress ([Messages to Young People, 350](#)). Some take an "extreme view of health reform" and are in danger of "preparing tasteless dishes" ([Testimonies for the Church 9:162](#)). "Neatness and order are essential to comfort, but these virtues should not be carried to such an extreme as to make life a period of unceasing drudgery" ([The Adventist Home, 152](#)). Parents are not to "err upon the side of indulgence" or go to the "opposite extreme and rule their children with a rod of iron" ([Testimonies for the Church 4:368-369](#)).

[17]

We are not to cry "peace" on one hand or go to a "second extreme" of "always hammering at the people in a harsh unChristlike manner" ([Evangelism, 281](#)). To some "religion is a tyrant" and they are "chilled by the innocent laugh from the youth or from anyone" and others "must ever be on the stretch to invent new amusements and diversions" ([Testimonies for the Church 1:565](#)). She objects to "fanatics" who have a "tendency to run. . . from one extreme to another entirely opposite" ([Testimonies for the Church 5:305](#)).

In doctrines there are some that go to "great extremes" and are "critical and sharp, and very tenacious in holding their own conceptions of what the truth means" ([Medical Ministry, 269](#)). She says

that many “have taken the extreme meaning of what has been shown in vision, and then have pressed it until it has had a tendency to weaken the faith of many in what God has shown” ([Testimonies for the Church 1:166](#)). She says the Word of God contains “nothing strange, nothing extreme, nothing over-done” ([Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers, 90](#)). She even cautioned that “lawful habits can be carried to an extreme as the antediluvians did” ([Temperance, 141](#)). And finally, in summary, she says, “Do not go to any extreme in anything” ([Selected Messages 1:379](#)).

5. Counsel for similar situations:

[18] There were times when counsel was sought when there had been no direct revelation. Frequently she wrote, basing what she said on earlier similar situations. For example, in 1885, while she was in Europe, church leaders asked for guidance on religious liberty. She replied:

You inquire in regard to the course which should be pursued to secure the rights of our people to worship according to the dictates of our own conscience. This has been a burden of my soul for some time, whether it would be a denial of our faith and an evidence that our trust was not fully in God. But I call to mind *many things God has shown me in the past in regard to things of a similar character*, as the draft and other things. I can speak in the fear of God, it is right we should use every power we can to avert the pressure that is being brought to bear upon our people.—[Letter 55, 1886](#). (In [Selected Messages 2:334-335](#).) (Emphasis supplied.)

Another illustration comes from a letter which was written in 1893 to a man who had become involved with the “loud cry” movement with its message that the Seventh-day Adventist church was Babylon. She wrote:

This matter has been brought before my mind in other cases where individuals have claimed to have messages for the Seventh-day Adventist church, of a similar

character, and the word has been given me “Believe them not. I have not sent them, and yet they ran.”—[Selected Messages 2:63-64](#).

6. Study in context:

Many times the understanding of a statement can be made plain when we look at paragraphs or pages immediately preceding or immediately following the passage under examination. Internal evidence will often give a great deal of light. Some statements of this character have already been considered, such as the bicycle testimony.

7. There is opportunity for doubt:

Three comments from Ellen White illustrate this thought:

While God has given ample evidence for faith, He will never remove all excuse for unbelief. All who look for hooks to hang their doubts upon, will find them. And those who refuse to obey God’s Word until every objection has been removed, and there is no longer an opportunity for doubt, will never come to the light. . . . Unbelief strengthens as it is encouraged; and if men, instead of dwelling upon the evidences which God has given to sustain their faith, permit themselves to question and cavil, they will find their doubts constantly becoming more confirmed.—[The Great Controversy, 527](#).

In her discussion of the prophetic role, she wrote:

[19]

Satan has ability to suggest doubts and to devise objections to the pointed testimony that God sends, and many think it a virtue, a mark of intelligence in them, to be unbelieving and to question and quibble. Those who desire to doubt will have plenty of room. God does not propose to remove all occasion for unbelief. He gives evidence, which must be carefully investigated with a humble mind and a teachable spirit, and all should

decide from the weight of evidence.—[Testimonies for the Church 5:675-676](#).

And one more on the opportunity for doubt:

If you refuse to believe until every shadow of uncertainty and every possibility of doubt is removed you will never believe. The doubt that demands perfect knowledge will never yield to faith. Faith rests upon evidence, not demonstration.—[Testimonies for the Church 5:69](#).

Chapter 6—What About Compilations?

There are a few other questions that deserve consideration. Of concern to many people are the compilations that have been published since Ellen White's death. Let's consider some facts that may be surprising. First of all, several of the books that came from Ellen White's pen during her lifetime grew and developed out of a background of writing. At the earliest stage, counsels often appeared as pamphlets or small books. As more visions were received, these subjects were expanded and the books were enlarged. The controversy story went through such a growth, beginning with a 219 page book in 1858, and developing through *Spiritual Gifts* and *Spirit of Prophecy* volumes before finally coming to the present Conflict of the Ages series of between 3000 and 4000 pages. All of this expansion took place during Ellen White's lifetime. It was one of her largest writing projects from the beginning.

The *Testimonies, for the Church* were developed over a span of years between 1855 and 1909. Drawing from letters and manuscripts and articles, these counsels were published in a growing series that kept pace with the needs of the church. Other books like *Steps to Christ* and *Ministry of Healing* were also compiled.

But what about the compilations prepared since her death? Can they be trusted? Who gave authority for such work? The answer is found in Ellen White's last will and testament in which she asked that income from her books be used "for the printing of compilations from my manuscripts." [20]

Because she had done such compiling during her lifetime, she obviously saw no reason for such a practice to change. True, there was the advantage of her own personal supervision while she lived. Yet she felt comfortable enough with this procedure that she requested that the Trustees should be asked to continue such work after her death.

Certain precautions are observed by those who gather materials for compilations in the office. We have all of Ellen White's known

letters and manuscripts, her articles, and books from which to draw material. When a compilation is planned, this reservoir of material is used. Often as a compilation is prepared, her emphasis becomes clear and even an outline is suggested by her presentation.

Some compilations might be considered encyclopedic. They are collections of material in abbreviated, concise form. For this reason, some may not read smoothly, or make easy transitions from one paragraph to another. They should be recognized for what they are—representative counsel on the subject considered.

When a compilation is prepared it can draw on all the counsel on a particular subject or for a particular group of people. This necessitates excerpting in some cases, because materials on a topic may be included in a larger document that deals with many unrelated subjects. Every reference in a compilation is carefully authenticated as to the original source, with an effort to include enough content so that the statement makes sense on its own. Then the original source is noted so that the reader may study the statement in the larger context as well, if desired.

[21]

Chapter 7—Use of Secretaries and Assistants

Why did prophets at times use assistants? Jeremiah had a secretary and Paul had assistants. Ellen White also was assisted in the preparation of her manuscripts for mailing and publication. Her husband helped her. Other secretaries worked on editorial details for her. But the words were hers. Ellen White edited too. Many of the letters and manuscripts in our files have her handwritten marks and notes on them. Some show signs of three editings, all in her hand. This tells us something about inspiration. It is clear that her messages did not come by dictation.

Chapter 8—The Use of Non-Inspired Sources

Another question frequently is raised. What about Ellen White's use of non-inspired sources? Perhaps the most familiar use of these sources is her quoting of historians. In the introduction of *The Great Controversy* she tells what she did and why:

In some cases where a historian has so grouped together events as to afford, in brief, a comprehensive view of the subject, or has summarized details in a convenient manner, his words have been quoted; but in some instances no specific credit has been given, since the quotations are not given for the purpose of citing that writer as authority, but because his statement affords a ready and forcible presentation of the subject.—GC p. xi-xii.

The messenger of the Lord was also interested in the teachings and practice of health reformers of her day. When she discovered to her surprise the similarities between their work and hers in some areas, she determined to prepare a series of six pamphlets with some of these comparisons noted. These appeared in 1865 and were bound together in a book, *Health or How to Live*. In this work she compared what the Lord had shown her in vision with statements from leading health reformers of her day.

[22] Through the years Ellen White developed an extensive library that included histories, biographies, and commentaries on the Bible. It is apparent that her occasional reference to these aided her in descriptions and language as she prepared her books. Her son, W. C. White, refers to this in responding to an inquiry:

In the writing of her books, she has sometimes found it very difficult and laborious to put into language the scenes presented to her; and when she has found in the language of another a correct representation of the

thought presented to her, she has sometimes copied sentences and paragraphs,—feeling that she had a perfect right to do this; that it was her privilege to utilize the correct statements of other writers, of the scenes that have been presented to her.—WCW to J. J. Gorrell, May 13, 1904.

Bible writers did the same. Some consulted chronological records. Others sometimes quoted non-inspired writers, and still others gained information from contemporaries. John, for example, learned from Nicodemus regarding his interview with Jesus and then wrote the account in his gospel. (See [The Desire of Ages, 177.](#))

Chapter 9—The “Lesser Light”

In the [The Review and Herald, January 20, 1903](#), Ellen White made a statement that has often been used to characterize her writing. Speaking of her books she said:

The Lord has sent His people much instruction, line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little, and there a little. Little heed is given to the Bible, and the Lord has given a lesser light to lead men and women to the *greater light*.—[Colporteur Ministry, 125](#). (Emphasis supplied.)

Some Adventists have suggested that this statement shows that the Bible is more authoritative—that Ellen White’s writing is something less. Others have characterized her writing as no more than a helpful commentary on Scripture.

[23] But what did she mean when she referred to her writing as a “lesser light” shining on the “greater light” of Scripture? We should first note that both are *light*. This suggests some possibilities: What has been written and spoken did not originate with the prophet. It had been given supernaturally as light. from the Lord Himself.

Ellen White many times received information or “light” from visions that was not in agreement with her thinking or practice at the time. Sometimes the light thus given required major adjustment in her personal habits of living. The counsel on flesh food is only one illustration.

All the prophets who arose were surely “lesser lights” to those who preceded them. Joshua considered Moses as authority on which to build his role as leader and prophet. From Moses’ time on, all the prophets who followed him accepted his record as authoritative. As each prophet appeared, he built on the authority of those who had gone before. The accepted, tested, proven Word of God was always the “greater light” to the prophets.

Three clear evidences of this would be that (1) the prophets quoted Scripture as authority for what they were saying, (2) they extolled former, prophets, and (3) they were humble in their call to the prophetic office.

When Ellen Harmon (White) was called to her work at age 17, she pled with the Lord to give it to someone else. At least two others had received a similar call, before her—William Foy and Hazen Foss. Foy became confused and dropped out of the picture. Foss rejected the call. Ellen White wanted to be excused, but the Lord reminded her that to reject the call would imperil her own salvation. After reluctantly accepting, she asked that the Lord would keep her from pride. This He promised to do by sending affliction whenever she was tempted. We can only wonder how often illnesses that she suffered were the result of the Lord’s fulfilling His promise.

As she continued her work and the evidence grew that the Lord [24] was speaking through her, she spoke with increasing confidence about the Source of her messages. With the Apostle Paul, she was sure that the Holy Spirit had spoken through her:

When this work was first given me, I begged the Lord to lay the burden on someone else. The work was so large and broad and deep that I feared I could not do it. But by His Holy Spirit the Lord has enabled me to perform the work which He gave me to do.—[Selected Messages 1:32-33](#).

I have written many books, and they have been given a wide circulation. Of myself I could not have brought out the truth in these books, but the Lord has given me the help of His Holy Spirit.—[Selected Messages 1:35](#)

I am just as dependent upon the Spirit of the Lord in relating or writing a vision as in having the vision. It is impossible for me to call up things which have been shown me unless the Lord brings them before me at the time that He is pleased to have me relate or write them.—[Spiritual Gifts 2:293](#).

Although I am as dependent upon the Spirit of the Lord in writing my views as I am in receiving them, yet the words I employ in describing what I have seen

are my own, unless they be those spoken to me by an angel, which I always enclose in marks of quotation.—[Selected Messages 1:37](#).

Some Conclusions

The work of the prophet in history has never been easy. Again we are reminded that the greatest barrier to understanding for many is human pride and an unwillingness to change or admit wrong. Bible prophets, as well as Ellen White, had no choice about (1) receiving the prophetic call, (2) when the visions would come, or (3) what the visions would contain. It should not surprise us that thirty years after she began her work, Ellen White wrote to a friend:

I have felt for years that if I could have my choice and please God as well, I would rather die than have a vision, for every vision places me under great responsibility to bear testimonies of reproof and of warning, which has ever been against my feelings, causing me affliction of soul that is inexpressible. Never have I coveted my position, and yet I dare not resist the Spirit of God and seek an easier position.—[Letter 2, 1874](#).

[25] The prophetic role was an awesome one. To say that you were speaking for God was no small claim. Jeremiah tells of the Lord's anger with false prophets who claimed to be speaking for Him: "I will bring evil upon them," the Lord said. "I am against the prophets. . . .that use their tongues, and say He saith. Behold, I am against them that prophesy false dreams, . . .and cause my people to err by their lies and by their lightness" ([Jeremiah 23:12, 31, 32](#)).

The Lord not only asks us to prove Him, but also to test and prove His *prophets*. We are urged to "try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world" ([1 John 4:1](#)). There is no need to blindly accept every message that comes to us from those who claim to speak for God. We are to study the messages, proving and testing them. When this work is done carefully and prayerfully and we have determined that God has truly spoken, then the prophet's message tests *us*.

Washington, D.C.

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