

# Some Principles for Correctly Interpreting the Writings of Ellen G. White

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## Begin With a Healthy Outlook

First, begin your study with a **prayer** for guidance and understanding. The Holy Spirit, who inspired the work of prophets across the ages, is the only one who is in a position to unlock the meaning in their writings.

Second, we need to approach our study with an **open mind**. Most of us realize that no person is free of bias, no one is completely open-minded. We also recognize that bias enters into every area of our lives. But that reality doesn't mean that we need to let our biases control us.

A third healthy mind-set in the reading of Ellen White is that of **faith** rather than doubt. As Mrs. White put it, "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*, vol. 3, p. 255). "God gives sufficient evidence for the candid mind to believe; but he who turns from the weight of evidence because there are a few things which he cannot make plain to his finite understanding will be left in the cold, chilling atmosphere of unbelief and questioning doubts, and will make shipwreck of faith" (*ibid.*, vol. 4, pp. 232, 233).

If individuals wait for all possibility of doubt to be removed, they will never believe. That is as true of the Bible as it is of Ellen White's writings. Our acceptance rests on faith rather than on absolute demonstration of flawlessness. Ellen White appears to be correct when she writes that "those who have most to say against the testimonies are generally those who have not read them, just as those who boast of their disbelief of the Bible are those who have little knowledge of its teachings" (*Selected Messages*, book 1, pp. 45, 46).

## Focus on the Central Issues

A person can read inspired materials in at least two ways. One is to look for the central themes of an author; the other is to search for those things that are new and different. The first way leads to what can be thought of as a theology of the center, while the second produces a theology of the edges. Doing a theology of the edges may help a person arrive at "new light," but such light in the end may look more like darkness when examined in the context of the central and consistent teachings of the Bible.

What makes the teachings of many apostles of "new light" so impressive is their obvious sincerity and the fact that much of what they have to say may be needed truth. How can we tell when we are on center or chasing stray geese near the edges of what is really important? In her book *Education*, Ellen White wrote, "The Bible is its own expositor. Scripture is to be compared with scripture. The student should learn to view the Word as a whole, and to see the relation of its parts. He should gain a knowledge of its *grand central theme*, of God's original purpose for the world, of the rise of the great controversy, and of the work of redemption. He should understand the nature of the two principles that are contending for supremacy, and should learn to trace their working through the records of history and prophecy, to the great consummation. He should see how this controversy enters into every phase of human experience; how in every act of life he himself reveals the one or the other of the two antagonistic motives; and how, whether he will or not, he is even now deciding upon which side of the controversy he will be found" (p. 190; italics supplied).

A similar passage on the "*grand central theme*" of the Bible defines the central theme of Scripture even more precisely. "*The central theme of the Bible,*" we read, "*the theme about which every other in the whole book clusters, is the redemption plan, the restoration in the human soul of the image of God.*" "Viewed in the light" of the grand central theme of the Bible, "every topic has a new significance" (ibid., p. 125; italics supplied).

In such passages we find our marching orders for the reading of both the Bible and the writings of Ellen White. *Read for the big picture; read for the grand central themes.* The purpose of God's revelation to humanity is salvation. That salvation focuses on the cross of Christ and our relationship to God. All our reading takes place within that context, and those issues closest to the grand central theme are obviously of more importance than those near its edges.

It is our task as Christians to focus on the central issues of the Bible and Ellen White's writings rather than on marginal ones. If we do so, the marginal issues will fit into place in their proper perspective within the context of the "grand central theme" of God's revelation to His people.

## Account for Problems in Communication

The process of communication is not as simple as we might at first suspect. The topic was certainly at the forefront of James White's thinking as he watched his wife struggle to lead the early Adventists down the path of reform. In 1868 he wrote that "*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*" (*Review and Herald*, Mar. 17, 1868; italics supplied).

As we read Ellen White's writings we need to keep constantly before us the difficulty she faced in basic communication. Beyond the difficulty of varying personalities, but related

to it, was the problem of the imprecision of the meaning of words and the fact that different people with different experiences interpret the same words differently.

"Human minds vary," Mrs. White penned in relation to Bible reading. *"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. . . . The Bible must be given in the language of men. Everything that is human is imperfect. Different meanings are expressed by the same word; there is not one word for each distinct idea. The Bible was given for practical purposes.*

"The stamps of minds are different. All do not understand expressions and statements alike. Some understand the statements of the Scriptures to suit their own particular minds and cases. Prepossessions, prejudices, and passions have a strong influence to darken the understanding and confuse the mind even in reading the words of Holy Writ" (*Selected Messages*, vol. 1, pp. 19, 20; italics supplied).

What Ellen White said about the problems of meanings and words in regard to the Bible also holds true for her own writings. Communication in a broken world is never easy, not even for God's prophets.

We need to keep the basic problems of communication in mind as we read the writings of Ellen White. At the very least, such facts ought to make us cautious in our reading so that we don't overly emphasize this or that particular idea that might come to our attention as we study God's counsel to His church. We will want to make sure that we have read widely what Ellen White has presented on a topic and studied those statements that may seem extreme in the light of those that might moderate or balance them. All such study, of course, should take place with the historical and literary context of each statement in mind.

## **Study All Available Information on a Topic**

When we read the full range of counsel that Ellen White has on a topic, the picture is often quite different than when we are dealing with only a part of her material or with isolated quotations. Many times in her long ministry Ellen White had to deal with those who took only part of her counsel. "When it suits your purpose," she told the delegates of the 1891 General Conference session, "you treat the Testimonies as if you believed them, quoting from them to strengthen any statement you wish to have prevail. But how is it when light is given to correct your errors? Do you then accept the light? When the Testimonies speak contrary to your ideas, you treat them very lightly" (*ibid.*, p. 43). It is important to listen to all the counsel.

Along this line we find two approaches to the Ellen G. White writings. One assembles all her pertinent material on the subject. The other selects from Mrs. White only those sentences, paragraphs, or more extensive materials that can be employed to support a particular emphasis. The only faithful approach is the first. One important step in being true to Ellen White's intent is to read widely in the available counsel on a topic.

But not only must we base our conclusion on the entire spectrum of her thought on a topic; our conclusion must harmonize with the overall tenor of the body of her writings. Not only bias, but also unsound premises, faulty reasoning, or other misuses of her material, can lead to false conclusions.

## Avoid Extreme Interpretations

The history of the Christian church is laced with those who would place the most extreme interpretations on God's counsels and then define their fanaticism as "faithfulness." A leaning toward extremism seems to be a constituent part of fallen human nature. God has sought to correct that tendency through His prophets.

Even though balance typified Ellen White's writings, it does not always characterize those who read them. Ellen White had to deal with extremists throughout her ministry. In 1894 she pointed out that "there is a class of people who are always ready to go off on some tangent, who want to catch up something strange and wonderful and new; but God would have all move calmly, considerately, choosing our words in harmony with the solid truth for this time, which requires to be presented to the mind as free from that which is emotional as possible, while still bearing the intensity and solemnity that it is proper it should bear. We must guard against creating extremes, guard against encouraging those who would either be in the fire or in the water" (*Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 227, 228).

Nearly four decades earlier Mrs. White had written that she "saw that many have taken advantage of what God has shown in regard to the sins and wrongs of others. They 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*, vol. 1, p. 166).

Part of our task in reading Ellen White is to avoid extreme interpretations and to understand her message in its proper balance. That in turn means that we need to read the counsel from both ends of the spectrum on a given topic.

A case in point is her strong words about playing games. "In plunging into amusements, match games, pugilistic performances," she wrote, the students at Battle Creek College "declared to the world that Christ was not their leader in any of these things. All this called forth the warning from God." A powerful statement, it and others like it have led many to the conclusion that God frowns on *all* games and ball playing. But here, as on all extreme interpretations, one should use caution. After all, the *very next* sentence reads: "Now that which burdens me is the danger of going into extremes on the other side" (*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 378).

As the following statements demonstrate, Ellen White did not hold for either extreme on the topic of ball playing and games. Speaking of parents and teachers, she wrote: "If they would gather the children close to them, and show that they love them, and would manifest an interest in all their efforts, and even in their sports, sometimes even being a child among children, they would make the children very happy, and would gain their love and win their confidence" (*ibid.*, p. 18).

As we noted in the preceding section, it is important to read the full spectrum of what Ellen White wrote on a topic before arriving at conclusions. That means taking into consideration what appear to be conflicting statements that not only balance each other but may at times even appear to contradict each other. Of course, as shown in the next two sections, the historical and literary contexts generally hold the reason for Ellen White's extreme statements. When we understand the reason she said something a certain way, we can see how what appears to be contradictory bits of advice often balance each other out. With those understandings in place we will be ready to examine the underlying principles of the particular topic we are studying.

When we read the balancing and mediating passages on a topic, rather than merely those polar ones that reinforce our own biases, we come closer to Ellen White's true perspective. In order to avoid extreme interpretations, we need not only to read widely regarding what Mrs. White said on a topic, but we need also to come to grips with those statements that balance each other out at each end of the spectrum on a given subject.

## Take Time and Place Into Consideration

We need to take the time and place of Ellen White's various counsels into consideration. She did not write them in a vacuum. Most of them met problems faced by specific individuals or groups in quite specific historic contexts.

For example, in the 1860s Ellen White suggested that women should shorten their skirts. Why? Because in her day skirts dragged on the ground. In the process they picked up the filth of a horse-and-buggy culture among other things. Such skirts also had other problems that Ellen White and contemporary reformers of her day repeatedly pointed out. Thus she could write that "one of fashion's wasteful and mischievous devices is the skirt that sweeps the ground. Uncleanly, uncomfortable, inconvenient, unhealthful--all this and more is true of the trailing skirt" (*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 291).

But what was true of her day is generally not true of ours. Of course, one can think of some traditional cultures that still mirror the conditions of the nineteenth century. In those cultures the counsel fits without adaptation. But we must adapt it for most cultures today.

Part of the needed adaptation is reflected in *The Ministry of Healing* quotation we read above. If the problem with trailing skirts was that they were unclean, uncomfortable, inconvenient, and unhealthful, then it seems safe to assume that some of the principles of correct dress in this case would be that it is clean, comfortable, convenient, and healthful. Such principles are universal, even though the idea of shortening one's skirt has roots in time and place. Further reading in the Bible and Ellen White furnishes other principles of dress that we can apply to our day. Modesty, for example, comes to mind.

It can't be too heavily emphasized that time and place are crucial factors for our understanding as we read Ellen White's writings. One way to use her writings improperly is to ignore the implications of time and place and thus seek to apply the letter of each and every counsel universally.

In Ellen White's writings such counsels as those urging schools to teach girls "to harness and drive a horse" so "they would be better fitted to meet the emergencies of life" (*Education*, pp. 216, 217); warning both young and old in 1894 to avoid the "bewitching influence" of the "bicycle craze" (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, pp. 51, 52); and counseling an administrator in 1902 not to buy an automobile to transport patients from the railroad station to the sanitarium because it was a needless expense and would prove to be "a temptation to others to do the same thing" (Letter 158, 1902) are clearly conditioned by time and place. Other statements that may also be conditioned by time and place are not so obvious (especially in those areas we tend to feel strongly about), but we need to keep our eyes and mind open to the possibility.

Another aspect of the time and place issue in Ellen White's writing is that for many of her counsels the historical context is quite personal, since she wrote to an individual in his or her specific setting. Always remember that behind every counsel lies a specific situation with its own peculiarities and for an individual with his or her personal possibilities and problems. Their situation may or may not be parallel to ours. Thus the counsel may or may not be applicable to us in a given circumstance.

## Study Each Statement in Its Literary Context

In the preceding section we noted that it is important to understand Ellen White's counsel in its original historical context. In this section we will examine the importance of reading her statements in their literary framework.

People have too often based their understandings of Mrs. White's teachings upon a fragment of a paragraph or upon an isolated statement entirely removed from its setting. Thus she writes that "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" (*Selected Messages*, book 3, p. 82). Again she comments about those who by "separating . . . statements from their connection, and placing them beside human reasonings, make it appear that my writings uphold that which they condemn" (Letter 208, 1906).

Ellen White was repeatedly upset with those who pick out "a sentence here and there, taking it from its proper connection, and applying it according to their idea" (*Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 44). On another occasion she observed that "extracts" from her writings "may give a different impression than that which they would were they read in their original connection" (*ibid.*, p. 58).

W. C. White, Ellen White's son, often had to deal with the problem of people using material out of its literary context. In 1904 he noted that "much misunderstanding has come from the misuse of isolated passages in the Testimonies, in cases where, if the whole Testimony or the whole paragraph had been read, an impression would have been made upon minds that was altogether different from the impression made by the use of selected sentences" (W. C. White to W. S. Sadler, Jan. 20, 1904).

The study of literary contexts is not an optional luxury on inspired statements--it is a crucial part of faithfully reading Ellen White's writings. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of studying Ellen White's articles and books in their contexts rather than merely reading topical compilations or selecting out quotations on this or that topic through the use of indexes or computer printouts. Such tools have their places, but we should use them in connection with broad reading that helps us to be more aware not only of the literary context of Ellen White's statements but also of the overall balance in her writings.

## Recognize Ellen White's Understanding of the Ideal and the Real

Ellen White often found herself plagued by "those who," she claimed, "select from the testimonies the strongest expressions and, without bringing in or making any account of the circumstances under which the cautions and warnings are given, make them of force in every case. . . . Picking out some things in the testimonies they drive them upon every one, and disgust rather than win souls" (*Selected Messages*, book 3, pp. 285, 286).

Her observation not only highlights the fact that we need to take the historical context of Ellen White's statements into consideration when reading her counsel, but also indicates that she put some statements in stronger or more forceful language than others. That idea leads us to the concept of the ideal and the real in Mrs. White's writings.



When Ellen White is stating the ideal, she often uses her strongest language. It is as if she needs to speak loudly in order to be heard. One such statement appears in *Fundamentals of Christian Education*. "Never," she exhorted, "can the proper education be given to the youth in this country, *or any other country*, unless they are separated a *wide distance from the cities*" (p. 312; italics supplied).

Now, that is about as forceful a statement as she could have made. Not only is it adamant, but it appears to imply universality in terms of time and space. There is no stronger word than "never." In its strictest meaning it allows no exceptions. She uses the same sort of powerful, unbending language in terms of location--"in this country, or any other country." Once again a plain reading of the words permits no exceptions. We are dealing with what appears to be a universal prohibition regarding the building of schools in cities. But the statement is stronger than that. Such schools are not merely to be out of the cities, but "separated a wide distance" from them. Here is inflexible language that does not suggest any exceptions.

At this point it is important to examine the historical context in which she made the statement. According to the reference supplied in the book (p. 327), this counsel was first published in 1894. But by 1909 the Adventist work in large cities was increasing. And those cities had families who could not afford to send their children to rural institutions. As a result, Ellen White counseled the building of schools in the cities. *So far as possible*," we read, ". . . schools should be established outside the cities. *But* in the cities there are many children who could not attend schools away from the cities; and for the benefit of these, schools should be opened in the cities as well as in the country" (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 201; italics supplied).

By this time you may be asking yourself how the same woman could claim that proper education could "never" be given in Australia "or any other country, unless they [schools] are separated a wide distance from the cities" (*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 312) and yet still advocate the establishment of schools in the cities.

The answer is that rural education for all children was the *ideal* that the church should aim at "so far as possible." But the truth is that the hard facts of life make such education impossible for some. Thus *reality* dictated a compromise if Christian education were to reach children from poorer families. Ellen White understood and accepted the tension between the ideal and the real.

Unfortunately, many of her readers fail to take that fact into consideration. They focus merely on Mrs. White's "strongest" statements, those that express the ideal, and ignore the moderating passages. As a result, as we noted above, "picking out some things in the testimonies they drive them upon everyone, and disgust rather than win souls" (*Selected Messages*, book 3, p. 286).

Ellen White has more balance than many of her so-called followers. Genuine followers must take into account her understanding of the tension between the ideal and the real in applying her counsel.

Ellen White had more flexibility in interpreting her writings than many have realized. She was not only concerned with contextual factors in applying counsel to different situations, but also had a distinct understanding of the difference between God's ideal plan and the reality of the human situation that at times necessitated modification of the ideal. For that reason it is important that we don't just operate on the "strongest expressions" in her writings and seek to "drive them upon everyone" (ibid., pp. 285, 286).

## Use Common Sense

Seventh-day Adventists have been known to differ and even argue over some of Ellen White's counsel. That situation is especially true of those statements that seem so straightforward and clear. One such statement appears in volume 3 of the *Testimonies*: "Parents should be the *only* teachers of their children until they have reached eight or ten years of age" (p. 137; italics supplied).

That passage is an excellent candidate for inflexible interpretation. After all, it is quite categorical. It offers no conditions and hints at no exceptions. Containing no "ifs," "ands," "ors," or "buts" to modify its impact, it just plainly states as fact that "parents should be the *only* teachers of their children until they have reached eight or ten years of age." Mrs. White first published the statement in 1872. The fact that it reappeared in her writings in 1882 and 1913 undoubtedly had the effect of strengthening what appears to be its unconditional nature.

Interestingly enough, however, a struggle over that statement has provided us with perhaps the very best record we possess of how Mrs. White interpreted her own writings.

The Adventists living near the St. Helena Sanitarium in northern California had built a church school in 1902. The older children attended it, while some careless Adventist parents let their younger children run freely in the neighborhood without proper training and discipline. Some of the school board members believed that they should build a classroom for the younger children, but others held that it would be wrong to do so, because Ellen White had plainly stated that "parents should be the *only* teachers of their children until they have reached eight or ten years of age."

One faction on the board apparently felt that it was more important to give some help to the neglected children than to hold to the letter of the law. The other faction believed that it had an inflexible command, some "straight testimony" that it must obey. To put it mildly, the issue split the school board. An interview with Mrs. White was arranged.

Early in the interview Mrs. White reaffirmed her position that the family should ideally be the school for young children. "The home," she said, "is both a family church and a family school" (*Selected Messages*, book 3, p. 214). That is the ideal that one finds throughout her writings. The institutional church and school are there to supplement the work of a healthy family. That is the ideal.

But, as we discovered in the previous section, the ideal is not always the real. Or, to say it in other words, reality is often less than ideal. Thus Ellen White continued in the interview: "Mothers *should* be able to instruct their little ones wisely during the earlier years of childhood. If every mother were capable of doing this, *and would* take time to teach her children the lessons they should learn in early life, *then* all children could be kept in the home school until they are eight, or nine, or ten years old" (*ibid.*, pp. 214, 215; italics supplied).

Here we begin to find Mrs. White dealing with a reality that modifies the categorical and unconditional nature of her statement on parents being the only teachers of their children until 8 or 10 years of age. The ideal is that mothers "should" be able to function as the best teachers. But realism intrudes when Ellen White uses such words as "if" and "then." She definitely implies that not all mothers are capable and that not all are willing. But "if" they are both capable and willing, "then all children could be kept in the home school."



During the interview she remarked that "God desires us to deal with these problems sensibly" (ibid., p. 215). Ellen White became quite stirred up with those readers who took an inflexible attitude toward her writings and sought to follow the letter of her message while missing the underlying principles. She evidenced disapproval of both the words and attitudes of her rigid interpreters when she declared: *"My mind has been greatly stirred in regard to the idea, 'Why, Sister White has said so and so, and Sister White has said so and so; and therefore we are going right up to it.' "* She then added that *"God wants us all to have common sense, and He wants us to reason from common sense. Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relation of things"* (ibid., p. 217; italics supplied).

Ellen White was anything but inflexible in interpreting her own writings, and it is a point of the first magnitude that we realize that fact. She had no doubt that the mindless use of her ideas could be harmful. Thus it is little wonder that she said that "God wants us all to have common sense" in using extracts from her writings, even when she phrased those extracts in the strongest and most unconditional language.

## Discover the Underlying Principles

In July 1894 Ellen White sent a letter to the denomination's headquarters church in Battle Creek, Michigan, in which she condemned the purchase and riding of bicycles (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, pp. 50-53). At first glance it appears strange that such an issue should be considered important enough for a prophet to deal with. It seems especially odd when we note that the bicycle issue had been specifically revealed in vision.

How should we apply such counsel today? Does it mean that Seventh-day Adventists should not own bicycles?

In answering that question we first need to examine the historical context. In 1894 the modern bicycle was just beginning to be manufactured, and a fad quickly developed to acquire bicycles, not for the purpose of economical transportation, but simply to be in style, to enter bicycle races, and to parade around town on them. In the evening such parading included the hanging of Japanese lanterns on the bicycles. Bicycling was the "in" thing--the thing to do if you were anything or anybody on the social scale.

Extracts from an article entitled "When All the World Went Wheeling" will help us get into the historical context of the bicycle counsel. "Toward the end of the last century," we read, "the American people were swept with a consuming passion which left them with little time or money for anything else. . . . What was this big new distraction? For an answer the merchants had only to look out the window and watch their erstwhile customers go whizzing by. America had discovered the bicycle, and everybody was making the most of the new freedom it brought. . . . The bicycle began as a rich man's toy. Society and celebrity went awheel.

"The best early bicycle cost \$150, an investment comparable to the cost of an automobile today. . . . Every member of the family wanted a 'wheel,' and entire family savings often were used up in supplying the demand" (*Reader's Digest*, December 1951).

In the light of the historical context, Ellen White's statement in 1894 regarding bicycles takes on a new significance. "There seemed to be," she wrote, "a bicycle craze. Money was spent to gratify an enthusiasm in this direction that might better, far better, have been invested in building houses of worship where they are greatly needed. . . . A bewitching influence seemed to be passing as a wave over our people. . . . Satan works

with intensity of purpose to induce our people to invest their time and money in gratifying supposed wants. This is a species of idolatry. . . . While hundreds are starving for bread, while famine and pestilence are seen and felt, . . . shall those who profess to love and serve God act as did the people in the days of Noah, following the imagination of their hearts?

"There were some who were striving for the mastery, each trying to excel the other in the swift running of their bicycles. There was a spirit of strife and contention among them as to which should be the greatest. . . . Said my Guide: 'These things are an offense to God. Both near and afar off souls are perishing for the bread of life and the water of salvation.' When Satan is defeated in one line, he will be all ready with other schemes and plans which will appear attractive and needful, and which will absorb money and thought, and encourage selfishness, so that he can overcome those who are so easily led into a false and selfish indulgence."

"What burden," she asks, "do these persons carry for the advancement of the work of God? . . . Is this investment of means and this spinning of bicycles through the streets of Battle Creek giving evidence of the genuineness of your faith in the last solemn warning to be given to human beings standing on the very verge of the eternal world?" (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, pp. 51, 52).

Her counsel on bicycles is obviously dated. Within a few years bicycles became quite inexpensive and were relegated to the realm of practical transportation for young people and those without means, even as the larger culture switched its focus and desires to the four-wheeled successor of the humble bicycle.

While it is true that some of the specifics of the counsel no longer apply, the principles on which the specific counsel rests remain quite applicable across time and space.

And what are some of those principles? First, that Christians are not to spend money on selfish gratification. Second, that Christians are not to strive for mastery over one another by doing things that generate a spirit of strife and contention. Third, that Christians should focus their primary values on the kingdom to come and on helping others during the present period of history. And fourth, that Satan will always have a scheme to derail Christians into the realm of selfish indulgence.

Those principles are unchangeable. They apply to every place and to every age of earthly history. Bicycles were merely the point of contact between the principles and the human situation in Battle Creek during 1894. The particulars of time and place change, but the universal principles remain constant.

Our responsibility as Christians is not only to read God's counsel to us, but to apply it faithfully to our personal lives. The Christian's task is to search out God's revelations and then seek to put them into practice in daily living without doing violence to the intent of their underlying principles. That takes personal dedication as well as sensitivity to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

## **Realize That Prophets Are Not Verbally Inspired, Nor Are They Infallible or Inerrant**

"I was led to conclude and most firmly believe that every word that you ever spoke in public or private, that every letter you wrote under *any* and *all* circumstances, was as inspired as the ten commandments. I held that view with *absolute* tenacity against innumerable objections raised to it by many who were occupying prominent positions in

the [Adventist] cause," wrote Dr. David Paulson to Ellen White on April 19, 1906. Deeply concerned over the nature of Ellen White's inspiration, Paulson wondered whether he should continue to hold such a rigid view. In the process he raised the question of verbal inspiration and the related issues of infallibility and inerrancy. Since a correct understanding of such issues is of crucial importance in reading Ellen White and/or the Bible, we will examine each of them in this section.

Mrs. White replied to Paulson on June 14, 1906. "My brother," she penned, "you have studied my writings diligently, and you have never found that I have made any such claims [to verbal inspiration], neither will you find that the pioneers in our cause ever made such claims" for her writings. She went on to illustrate inspiration in her writings by referring to the inspiration of the Bible writers. Even though God had inspired the Biblical truths, they were "expressed in the words of men." She saw the Bible as representing "a union of the divine and the human." Thus "the testimony is conveyed through the imperfect expression of human language, yet it is the testimony of God" (*Selected Messages*, book 1, pp. 24-26).

Such sentiments represent Ellen White's consistent witness across time. "The Bible," she wrote in 1886, "is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. . . . The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen. . . .

"It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man's words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God" (ibid., p. 21).

We see the problematic nature of the issue of verbal inspiration illustrated in the life of D. M. Canright, at one time a leading minister in the denomination, but its foremost critic between 1887 and 1919. Canright bitterly opposed Ellen White. His 1919 book against her asserted that "every line she wrote, whether in articles, letters, testimonies or books, she claimed was dictated to her by the Holy Ghost, and hence must be infallible" (*Life of Mrs. E. G. White*, p. 9). We have seen above that Ellen White herself took just the opposite position, but that didn't stop the damage being done by those with a false theory of inspiration.

Before we go any further, perhaps we should define our terms. *Webster's New World Dictionary* describes "infallible" as "1. incapable of error; never wrong. 2. not liable to fail, go wrong, make a mistake, etc." It renders "inerrant" as "not erring, making no mistakes." It is essentially those definitions that many people *import* into the realm of the Bible and Ellen White's writings.

As to infallibility, Mrs. White plainly writes, "I never claimed it; God alone is infallible." Again she stated that "God and heaven alone are infallible" (*Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 37). While she claimed that "God's Word is infallible" (ibid., p. 416), we will see below that she did not mean that the Bible (or her writings) were free from error at all points.

To the contrary, in the introduction to *The Great Controversy* she sets forth her position quite concisely: "The Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will" (p. vii). That is, she did not claim that the work of God's prophets is infallible in all its details, but that it is infallible in terms of revealing God's will to men and women. In a similar statement Ellen White commented that "His Word . . . is plain on

every point essential to the salvation of the soul" (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 706).

W. C. White treats the same issue when he observes: "Where she has followed the description of historians or the exposition of Adventist writers, *I believe that God has given her discernment to use that which is correct and in harmony with truth regarding all matters essential to salvation*. If it should be found by faithful study that she has followed some expositions of prophecy which in some detail regarding dates we cannot harmonize with our understanding of secular history, it does not influence my confidence in her writings as a whole any more than my confidence in the Bible is influenced by the fact that I cannot harmonize many of the statements regarding chronology" (*Selected Messages*, book 3, pp. 449, 450; italics supplied).

In summary, it appears that Mrs. White's use of the term *infallibility* has to do with the Bible being completely trustworthy as a guide to salvation. She doesn't mix that idea with the concept that the Bible or her writings are free from all possible errors of a factual nature.

Thus the faithful reader's belief is not shaken if he or she discovers that Matthew attributed a Messianic prophecy, written centuries before Christ's birth, to Jeremiah when it was actually Zechariah who inferred that Christ would be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver (see Matt. 27:9, 10; Zech. 11:12, 13). Nor will one be dismayed over the fact that 1 Samuel 16:10, 11 lists David as the eighth son of Jesse, but 1 Chronicles 2:15 refers to him as the seventh. Neither will faith be affected because the prophet Nathan wholeheartedly approved of King David's building of the Temple but the next day had to backtrack and tell David that God didn't want him to build it (see 2 Sam. 7; 1 Chron. 17). Prophets make mistakes.

The same kind of factual errors can be discovered in Ellen White's writings as are found in the Bible. The writings of God's prophets are infallible as a guide to salvation, but they are not inerrant or without error. Part of the lesson is that we need to read for the central lessons of Scripture and Ellen White rather than the details.

What is important to remember at this point is that those who struggle over such problems as inerrancy and absolute infallibility are fighting a human-made problem. It is not anything that God ever claimed for the Bible or Ellen White ever claimed for the Bible or her writings. Inspiration for her had to do with the "practical purposes" (*Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 19) of human and divine relationships in the plan of salvation. We need to let God speak to us in His mode, rather than to superimpose our rules over God's prophets and then reject them if they don't live up to *our* expectations of what we think God should have done. Such an approach is a human invention that places our own authority over the Word of God. It makes us the judges of God and His Word. But such a position is not Biblical; nor is it according to the way Ellen White has counseled the church. We need to read God's Word and Mrs. White's writings for the purpose for which He gave them and not let our modern concerns and definitions of purpose and accuracy come between us and His prophets.

## **Avoid Making the Counsels "Prove" Things They Were Never Intended to Prove**

In the previous section we noted that Ellen White did not claim verbal inspiration for her writings or the Bible, nor did she classify them as either inerrant or infallible in the sense of being free from factual mistakes. In spite of the efforts of Mrs. White and her son to move people away from too rigid a view of inspiration, many have continued on in that

line. Down through the history of the denomination some have sought to use Ellen White's writings and the Bible for purposes for which God never intended them. Likewise, claims have been made for prophetic writings that transcend their purpose.

As a result, we find individuals who go to her writings to substantiate such things as historical facts and dates. Thus S. N. Haskell could write to Ellen White that he and his friends would "give more for one expression in your testimony than for all the histories you could stack between here and Calcutta" (S. N. Haskell to E. G. White, May 30, 1910).

Yet Ellen White never claimed that the Lord provided every historical detail in her works. To the contrary, she tells us that she generally went to the same sources available to us to get the historical facts that she used to fill out the outlines of the struggle between good and evil across the ages that she portrays so nicely in *The Great Controversy*. In regard to the writing of that volume, she wrote in its preface that "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." Her purpose in such books as *The Great Controversy* was "not so much . . . to present new truths concerning the struggles of former times, as to bring out facts and principles which have a bearing on coming events" (p. xii).

That statement of purpose is crucial in understanding her use of history. Her intention was to trace the dynamics of the conflict between good and evil across time. That was her message. The historical facts merely enriched its tapestry. She was not seeking to provide incontrovertible historical data. In actuality, as she put it, the "facts" she used were "well known and universally acknowledged by the Protestant world" (ibid., p. xi).

What is true of Ellen White's use of facts in post-Biblical church history is also true of her practice when writing of the Biblical period. As a result, she could ask her sons that they request "Mary [Willie's wife] to find me some histories of the Bible that would give me the order of events. I have nothing and can find nothing in the library here" (E. G. White to W. C. White and J. E. White, Dec. 22, 1885).

*"Regarding Mother's writings,"* W. C. White told Haskell, *"she has never wished our brethren to treat them as authority on history. . . . When '[The Great] Controversy' was written, Mother never thought that the readers would take it as an authority on historical dates and use it to settle controversies, and she does not now feel that it ought to be used in that way."* (W. C. White to S. N. Haskell, Oct. 31, 1912; italics supplied; cf. *Selected Messages*, book 3, pp. 446, 447.)

Twenty years later W. C. White wrote that "in our conversations with her [Ellen White] regarding the truthfulness and the accuracy of what she had quoted from historians, she expressed confidence in the historians from whom she had drawn, but never would consent to the course pursued by a few men who took her writings as a standard and endeavored by the use of them to prove the correctness of one historian as against the correctness of another. From this I gained the impression that the principal use of the passage quoted from historians was not to make a new history, not to correct errors in history, but to use valuable illustrations to make plain important spiritual truths" (W. C. White to L. E. Froom, Feb. 18, 1932).

Not only do we need to avoid using Ellen White to "prove" the details of history, but the same caution must be expressed in the realm of the details of science. In saying this I do

not mean to imply that there is not a great deal of accuracy in the scientific inferences of Ellen White's writings--and the Bible's, for that matter--but that we must not seek to prove this and that scientific detail from them.

Let me illustrate. Some claim that John Calvin, the great sixteenth-century Reformer, resisted Copernicus's discovery that the earth rotated around the sun by quoting Psalm 93:1: "The world also is stablished; that it cannot be moved." In a similar vein, many have pointed out that the Bible talks about the four corners of the earth and the fact that the sun "comes up" and "goes down." In such cases, the Bible is merely making incidental remarks rather than setting forth scientific doctrine.

Remember that the Bible and Ellen White's writings are not intended to be divine encyclopedias for things scientific and historical. Rather they are to reveal our human hopelessness and then point us to the solution in salvation through Jesus. In the process, God's revelation provides a framework in which we can understand the bits and pieces of historical and scientific knowledge gained through other lines of study.

## Make Sure Ellen White Said It

A fair number of statements are in circulation that apparently have been falsely attributed to Ellen White. How can we identify such statements? The first clue that they are apocryphal for those who are familiar with Ellen White's writings is that such statements are often out of harmony with the general tenor of her thought. That is, they seem strange when compared to the bulk of her ideas, appear to be out of place in her mouth. Strangeness, of course, is not proof that we are dealing with an apocryphal statement. It is merely an indication.

The safest way to test the authenticity of an Ellen White statement is to ask for the reference to its source. Once we know where it is found, we can check to see if Ellen White said it and also examine the wording and context to determine if it has been interpreted correctly.

The issue of supposed statements also came up in Mrs. White's lifetime. Her fullest treatment of the problem appears in volume 5 of *Testimonies for the Church*, pages 692 through 696. It can be examined profitably by all readers of Ellen White's writings:

"Beware," she says, "how you give credence to such reports" (p. 694). She concludes her discussion of the topic with the following words: "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. . . . Do not eagerly catch up and report rumors as to what she has said" (p. 696).

While we can no longer send supposed statements to Ellen White for her verification, we can contact the White Estate office at the General Conference headquarters or visit the nearest SDA- Ellen G. White Research Center to verify the authenticity of a statement or to inquire about other questions we might have.

[Condensed and adapted from George R. Knight, *Reading Ellen White* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1997), pp. 43-123. Available from Adventist Book Centers: 1-800-765-6955 or Review and Herald Publishing Association: <http://www.rhpa.org>]

<https://whiteestate.org/legacy/issues-herm-pri-html/>