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The Lesser and the Greater Lights: A Re-examination of the Relationship of the Writings of Ellen White to the Bible

Warren S. Ashworth
Pacific Union College

In a recent editorial William Johnsson reminded us again that as Seventh-day Adventists we are the “Remnant” spoken of in Rev.12:17.¹ In harmony with the characteristics of that “Remnant,” we will have the “testimony of Jesus,” which the apostle John identifies as the “spirit of prophecy.”²

Not having been born into a Seventh-day Adventist home, it came to me as a shock when at age sixteen I first heard that Adventists believed Ellen G. White to be a genuine manifestation of that “spirit of prophecy.” And as I soon discovered, she was often quoted in Adventist pulpits. My father, a Baptist, attended a Seventh-day Adventist church only twice, and both times came away asking, “Who is this Ellen White? Why don’t they use the Bible?” He never became an Adventist. That was in the 1950s. Times have changed, and the locus of preaching has gravitated more solidly to the Bible, but we do well often to remind ourselves what relationship her writings should have to Scripture.

What was Ellen White’s view of Scripture? Did she believe her writings to be equal to or even superior to the Bible? Did she understand them to be an indispensable addition to the Bible?

To correctly understand the answers to those questions, it is imperative that we understand her view of revelation and inspiration.

¹ William Johnsson, *Adventist Review*, May 14, 1998, 5.

² Rev 19:10. While the phrase “spirit of prophecy” applies in the broadest sense to the Holy Spirit and His work through all prophets, canonical and non-canonical, in the eschatological context of Rev 12:17 it is a distinguishing characteristic and as such must apply to a modern manifestation of the gift.

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Ellen White's Understanding of Revelation and Inspiration

The introduction to *The Great Controversy* and pages 15 to 23 of *Selected Messages*, vol.1, contain the clearest statements Ellen White wrote to aid our understanding of how God communicates divine truth. While she did not believe that God dictated His messages word for word to His specially chosen messengers (except on rare occasions), she would have firmly rejected the contemporary “encounter” view that holds that no divine messages were communicated to the prophets, and that the Bible therefore contains no absolute, normative truth.. While she did not believe that every individual word chosen was inspired (i.e. “God-breathed”), she did believe that the “men” were inspired. “Inspiration,” she wrote, “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.”³

She explained, “The writers of the Bible had to express their ideas in human language. It was written by human men.”⁴ Thus she believed that the “writers of the Bible were God’s penmen, not His pen.”⁵ And to clarify further she added, “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, thus the utterances of the man are the word of God.”⁶ The messages of the prophets, whether written or oral, were overshadowed and imbued, she believed, by the guiding ministry of the Holy Spirit. Thus she could declare, “I take the Bible just as it is, as the Inspired Word. I believe its utterances in an entire Bible.”⁷

Mrs. White acknowledged that there are mistakes in the Bible, but assured, “All the mistakes will not cause trouble to one soul, or cause any feet to stumble, that would not manufacture difficulties from the plainest revealed truth.”⁸ And she warned against “trying to find something to criticize in God’s Word.”⁹ It was her position that the essential truths of Scripture had been providentially preserved intact for all time. Thus, while acknowledging the presence of mistakes, she could declare, “In His Word, God has committed to men the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the revealer of doctrines, and the test of experience.”¹⁰

The Continuation of the Prophetic Gift

While we believe that the Bible is an “infallible revelation of His will,” and is the “standard,” unlike most other denominations we do not believe that the

³ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 1, 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰ Ellen White, *The Faith I Live By*, 13.

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genuine gift of prophecy ceased with the death of John the Revelator. Since our inception as a denomination, we have believed that Ellen White was another in the long line of prophet-messengers who, though not canonical, and different in purpose and function, was as inspired as were her prophetic forebears. That does not mean however that her writings are on an equal footing with Scripture. Just as those prophetic writers who followed Moses were judged to be genuine only if they did not contradict formerly revealed truth (cf. Isa. 8:20), so the New Testament writers were judged by their faithfulness to the teachings of the Old Testament. In the same way all later prophets must be judged by their unswerving confirmation of the entire Bible.

Pioneer Views of the Lesser and Greater Lights

As early as 1847, James White, while holding to a *prima scriptura* view, confirmed that God would continue to utilize the gift of prophecy. He explained,

The Bible is a perfect, and complete revelation. It is our only rule of faith and practice. But this is no reason why God may not show the past, present, and future fulfillment of his word, in these last days, by dreams and visions: according to Peter's testimony. True visions are given to lead us to God, and his written word; but those that are given for a new rule of faith and practice, separate from the Bible, cannot be from God, and should be rejected.¹¹

The same year the church was organized, Uriah Smith took issue with the *Sola Scriptura* position that many were using to repudiate any post-biblical manifestation of the prophetic gift. He wrote,

The Protestant principle, of 'the Bible and the Bible alone,' is of itself good and true; and we stand upon it as firmly as anyone can; but when re-iterated in connection with outspoken denunciations of the visions, it has specious appearance for evil. . . . When we claim to stand on the Bible and Bible alone, we bind ourselves to receive, unequivocally and fully, all that the Bible teaches.¹²

Under the title "Our Use of the Visions of Sr. White," J. N. Andrews, as editor of *the Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, wrote in 1870,

"The work of the Holy Spirit may be divided into two parts: First, that which is designed simply to convert and to sanctify the persons affected by it. Second, that which is for the purpose of opening the truth of God, and of correcting error, and of reproving and rebuking secret sins. This part of the work is wrought by what the Scriptures term Spiritual Gifts. These exist, not for the especial good of the person to whose trust they are committed, but for the benefit of the whole body of the church."¹³

¹¹ *A Word to the Little Flock*, p. 13.

¹² Uriah Smith, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 13, 1870. See Tim Crosby's article "Why I Don't Believe in *Sola Scriptura*," *Ministry*, October, 1987, 11-15.

¹³ J. N. Andrews, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, February 15, 1870.

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The understanding of the early leaders of the church was paralleled by Ellen White in her statement at the close of her first book in 1851, “I recommend to you, dear reader, the Word of God as the rule of your faith and practice. By that Word we are to be judged. God has, in that Word, promised to give visions in the ‘last days’; not for a new rule of faith, but for the comfort of His people, and to correct those who err from Bible truth.”¹⁴

In those early views are enunciated several of the principal purposes for the writings of Ellen White. James White identified perhaps the two most important ones: first, to lead us to God, and second, to lead us to the Word. Uriah Smith identified three others—clarifying and explaining the Bible, correcting error, and reproving and rebuking secret sins. In that initial written description, Ellen White added two more—for the comforting and consoling of His people, and to bring those back who wander from Bible truth. Those seven purposes alone would justify the value of, and explain the enduring interest in the writings of Ellen White.

Metaphors for Understanding

Greater Light/Lesser Light. To aid our understanding of the purposes for which God has communicated through Ellen White to His people in this late hour of human history, and to more clearly perceive the relationship of her writings to the Bible, six different metaphors prove helpful. The first comes from Gen. 1:16 “God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night.” Ellen White used that passage to create one of the most apt metaphors for understanding the value and purpose of her works, that of the “Greater Light/Lesser Light.”

By 1902, the church’s educational institutions were deeply in debt, and Mrs. White had decided to dedicate the proceeds from the sale of *Christ’s Object Lessons* to the reduction of the debt. In a published letter she urged all of the church members to help in this missionary venture, assuring them that the book contained “precious, comforting light” and that from the book’s pages “this light is to shine into the hearts of men and women, leading them to the Saviour.”¹⁵

A little later in her letter, she explained, “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.”¹⁶

Thus she draws our attention to two important realities—the Word of God is sorely neglected, and her writings were given to draw all back to it.

In a statement the meaning of which cannot be misunderstood, she declared,

¹⁴ Ellen G. White, *Early Writings*, 78.

¹⁵ Ellen G. White, “An Open Letter From Mrs. E. G. White to All Who Love the Blessed Hope,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 20, 1903, 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

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The Bible is the only rule of faith and doctrine. And there is nothing more calculated to energize the mind, and strengthen the intellect, than the study of the word of God. . . . If God's word were studied as it should be, men would have a breadth of mind, a nobility of character, and a stability of purpose, that is rarely seen in these times. Thousands of men who minister in the pulpit are lacking in essential qualities of mind and character, because they do not apply themselves to the study of the Scriptures. They are content with a superficial knowledge of the truths that are full of rich depths of meaning; and they prefer to go on, losing much in every way, rather than to search diligently for the hidden treasure.¹⁷

Earlier Light/Later Light. The second metaphor might be called "Earlier Light/Later Light." The Bible, written by some forty writers, the first of whom wrote over 3,000 years ago, has been God's universal revelation of His will and purpose universally and across time. In contrast, God called a modern prophet near the end of time to call people back to that earlier light. Thus she is that "later" light, reflecting and amplifying the "earlier" light..

Testor/Testee. The third metaphor is that of "Testor/Testee." Every nation of the world has national standards of measurement, establishing a recognized norm to which all other measurements are compared. While the working standards may be indistinguishable from the national standard, they are never used to test the national standard, but are always tested by it. In the same way, while the beauty, veracity, and relevance of the writings of Ellen White may be indistinguishable from the Bible, they are always and only the "working standard" to be tested by the Word.

National Map/State Map. Recognizing that Ellen White wrote far more than is found in the Bible,¹⁸ the metaphor of the "National Map/State Map" is particularly relevant. There are maps that cover everything, from the entire world, emphasizing the major characteristics of the planet, to local maps that cover a very small geographical area but do so in great detail. She was told, "Your testimony. . . . is to come down to the minutiae of life, keeping the feeble faith from dying, and pressing home upon believers the necessity of shining as lights in the world."¹⁹ The Bible portrays the great themes of God and His plan, and fundamental principles for Christian living, but in her writings God helps clarify for us the "minutiae."

Field/Lens. According to Denton Rebok, a well-known, North American Adventist minister, and life-long student of the Spirit of Prophecy,²⁰ Ellen White believed that Mrs. S. M. I. Henry had, in her metaphor of the "Field/Lens" cap-

¹⁷ Ellen White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, 126.

¹⁸ At 25 million words, she wrote approximately 100 times more than the New Testament contains.

¹⁹ Ellen White, *Life Sketches*, 202.

²⁰ Seventh-day Adventists often use the phrase "Spirit of Prophecy" to refer to the corpus of Ellen White's writings, recognizing nonetheless that her writings constitute only a modern-day continuation of the "spirit of prophecy" spoken of by the prophet John.

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tured “as clearly and as accurately as anyone could ever put into words,” the relationship of the Spirit of Prophecy to the Bible.²¹ Mrs. Henry said that the writings of Ellen White were like a lens and telescope through which we can look at the Bible, and are “subject to all telescopic conditions and limitations.” “Clouds” she explained,

may intervene between it and a heaven full of stars,—clouds of unbelief, of contention; Satan may blow tempests all about it; it may be blurred by the breath of our own selfishness; the dust of superstition may gather upon it. . . . If the lens is mistaken for the field we can receive but a very narrow conception of the most magnificent spectacle with which the heavens ever invited our gaze, but in its proper office as a medium of enlarged and clearer vision, as a telescope, the testimony has a wonderfully beautiful and holy office. . . . They are not the heavens, palpitating with countless orbs of truth, but they do lead the eye and give it power to penetrate into the glories of the mysterious living word of God.²²

In other words, a telescope doesn’t create more stars; it simply enables us to see more clearly the ones that are already there.²³ In support of that view, Ellen White wrote,

The written testimonies are *not to give new light*,²⁴ but to impress vividly upon the heart the truths of inspiration already revealed. Man’s duty to God and to his fellow man has been distinctly specified in God’s word; yet but few of you are obedient to the light given. Additional truth is not brought out; but God has through the Testimonies simplified the great truths already given and in His own chosen way brought them before the people to awaken and impress the mind with them, that all may be left without excuse.²⁵

Captain/Pilot. The final metaphor is one many find particularly useful. It is that of the “Captain/Pilot.” Uriah Smith, 32 at the time he wrote this in an editorial for the church paper, evidenced a clear understanding of the matter.

Suppose we are about to start upon a voyage. The owner of the vessel gives us a book of directions, telling us that it contains instructions sufficient for our whole journey. . . . but he also tells us that the latter part of our journey will be especially perilous. . . ‘but for this part of the journey,’ says he, ‘I have provided you a pilot, who will meet you, and give you such directions as the surrounding circumstances and dangers may require; and to him you must give

²¹ Denton Rebok, *Believe His Prophets* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1956), 181.

²² S. M. I. Henry, *The Gospel of Health*, January, 1898, 25-28.

²³ The material in Roger Coon’s third installment in a series of articles on revelation and inspiration in *The Journal of Adventist Education*, (Vol. 44, No. 3), February-March, 1982, 17-33, is especially helpful on the metaphors.

²⁴ Italics supplied.

²⁵ Ellen White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 605.

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heed.’ “With these directions we reach the perilous time specified, and the pilot, according to promise, appears. But some of the crew, as he offers his services, rise up against him. ‘We have the original book of directions,’ say they, ‘and that is enough for us. We stand upon that, and that alone; we want nothing of you.’ Who now heed that original book of directions? those who reject the pilot, or those who receive him, as that book instructs them? Judge ye.”²⁶

Ellen White as Interpreter of Scripture

In most areas of church and personal life we, as a church, have acknowledged and valued the presence of a God-given “harbor pilot” for these troubled and challenging times. Through her writings Ellen White continues to exalt the Word and call all back to the study of it.²⁷ The principles and truths of Scripture are clarified and simplified through her coming down to the “minutiae.”²⁸ A call to godly living and renouncing of sin is a note sounded faithfully throughout her writings.²⁹ In books like *Steps to Christ* and *The Desire of Ages* she provides hope, consolation, and heavenly solutions for the human dilemma. And she has much to teach regarding our understanding of final events, Christ’s second coming, and the preparation needed to meet them.³⁰ Though she died eighty-three years ago, she is still esteemed by most Seventh-day Adventists as a genuine prophet-messenger of God who has proven beyond doubt the “fruit” of her life and labor (Mt. 7:16, 20).

There is, however, an aspect of her ministry that merits especially careful investigation, and has been misunderstood—her role as interpreter of Scripture. Raoul Dederen notes three salient features of her in this role. First, “As interpreter of the Bible, Ellen White’s most characteristic role was that of an evangelist—not an exegete, nor a theologian, as such, but a preacher and an evangelist. . . . She was in the typical prophetic attitude, primarily desirous to press the text into service for the immediate objective, that of the spiritual quickening of her hearers or readers.” Second, “she never fails to emphasize the relevancy of the passage to her readers, and the importance of a proper response to the Word of God.” Third, he notes a “conspicuous feature. . .the amazing ease with which Biblical quotations and allusions come from her pen. . . . Her mind was thoroughly impregnated with the Scriptures.”³¹

²⁶ Uriah Smith, “Do We Discard the Bible by Endorsing the Visions?” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 13, 1863.

²⁷ *Testimonies*, vol. 2, 665; vol. 5, 665.

²⁸ *Testimonies*, vol. 2, 605.

²⁹ *Testimonies*, vol. 5, 667.

³⁰ *Great Controversy*, 593, 594. In his recent book *Reading Ellen White*, George Knight has identified not only the purposes of her writings, but the hermeneutical principles needed for correct interpretation of them.

³¹ “Ellen White’s Doctrine of Scripture,” in “Are There Prophets in the Modern Church?” Supplement to *Ministry*, July, 1977, 24H.

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Since her writings were so immersed in the Word, it is not surprising that A. T. Jones, in 1894, should describe her as an “infallible” interpreter of the Bible, even going so far as to state that the best way to study the Bible was “through them.”³² Though other modern self-proclaimed prophets cast themselves as the necessary “looking glass” through which to rightly interpret Scripture, Ellen White categorically rejected such a role. She emphatically declared that her writings are never to be put ahead of the Bible.³³

However, she recalled how, in her early ministry, “the power of God would come” over her and she “was enabled clearly to define what is truth and what is error.”³⁴ On several other occasions she confirmed that what she wrote was accurate and correct. “There is one straight chain of truth, without one heretical sentence, in that which I have written.”³⁵ The testimonies she asserted “never contradict His Word.”³⁶ The conclusion is unavoidable—Ellen White must have believed that when she made statements regarding doctrine, as well as any other topic, her statements were biblically and doctrinally sound. If that is true, why then did she oppose the use of her writings to determine doctrinal correctness? In 1910, when the church leaders were divided over the meaning of the “daily” in Daniel 8, S. N. Haskell insisted that they should come to an understanding of the term “by the aid of the Spirit of Prophecy,”³⁷ because Ellen White had written regarding the “daily” in *Early Writings*, but she refused.³⁸ “I entreat of Elders H, I, J, and others of our leading brethren, that they make no reference to my writings to sustain their views of ‘the daily.’ . . . I cannot consent that any of my writings shall be taken as settling this matter. . . . I have had no instruction on the point under discussion.”³⁹

It is important to note that she did not want “any” of her writings to be used in “settling” this doctrinal controversy. While it is reasonable to assume that what she had written was correct, based on statements like “There is one straight chain of truth, without one heretical sentence, in that which I have written,”⁴⁰ she was, nevertheless, not presenting a theological or exegetical explanation (the possible import of her statement, “I have had no instruction on the point. . .”).

Reflecting on the controversy over the “daily,” W. C. White felt he understood the reason for Ellen White’s position. “Some of the brethren,” he wrote,

are much surprised and disappointed because Mother does not write something decisive that will settle the question as to what is the ‘daily’ and thus bring an end to the present disagreement. At times I

³² *HM Extra*, December, 1894.

³³ *Evangelism*, 256.

³⁴ *Gospel Workers*, 302.

³⁵ *Selected Messages*, vol. 3, 52.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 32.

³⁷ S. N. Haskell to W. W. Prescott, November 15, 1907.

³⁸ *Early Writings*, 74, 75.

³⁹ *Selected Messages*, vol. 1, 164.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* vol. 3, 52.

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have hoped for this, but as I have seen that God has not seen fit to settle the matter by a revelation thru [sic] His messenger, I have come more and more to believe that it was the will of God that a thorough study should be made of the Bible and history, till a clear understanding of the truth was gained.⁴¹

Conclusions

It is reasonable to draw a number of conclusions from the experience with the “daily.”

1. She consistently refused to be the arbiter of truth. No doctrinal position was to be determined and defended on the basis of “Ellen White says.”
2. She wanted all to “wrestle” with the Scripture.
3. Using her as final arbiter would inevitably lead to biblical illiteracy.
4. In order to have any lasting credibility with our own church members, let alone with Christians of other faiths, all of our doctrines must be based solely and completely on the Bible.

While it is true that Ellen White’s writings are primarily “formative,” not “normative,”⁴² because they speak in subservience to the authority of Scripture, that is not to say that God did not, on occasion, use her to correct doctrinal errors. At critical junctures in our denomination’s history, she was used by God to significantly alter doctrinal views. Regarding the late 1840s, she writes: “At that time one error after another pressed in upon us; ministers and doctors brought in new doctrines. We would search the Scriptures with much prayer, and the Holy Spirit would bring the truth to our minds. . . . The power of God would come upon me, and I was enabled clearly to define what is truth and what is error.”⁴³

In 1898, to counteract the semi-arianism of Uriah Smith, she stated unequivocally, “In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived. . . . The divinity of Christ is the believer’s assurance of eternal life.”⁴⁴ At the General Conference session of 1901, she publicly refuted the “Holy Flesh” fanaticism that had impacted the conference leadership and workers in Indiana in 1900. In response to their belief that each must acquire a state of physical sinlessness as an essential preparation for translation, she wrote, “The teaching given in regard to what is termed ‘holy flesh’ is an error. All may now obtain holy hearts, but it is not correct to claim in this life to have holy flesh. . . . No human being on the earth has holy flesh. It is an impossibility.”⁴⁵ And in 1903 when the leadership and the

⁴¹ W. C. White to P. T. Magan, July 31, 1910. Italics supplied.

⁴² For a provocative discussion of the issue, see Ron Graybill, “Ellen White’s Role in Doctrinal Formation,” *Ministry*, October, 1981, 7-11.

⁴³ *Gospel Workers*, 302.

⁴⁴ Cf. *The Desire of Ages*, 24, 25, and Smith’s editorial in the *Review*, March 16, 1897.

⁴⁵ *Selected Messages*, vol. 2, 32.

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church began to anguish over Dr. Kellogg's espousal of pantheism, she wrote, "In the book *Living Temple* there is the alpha of deadly heresies."⁴⁶

Again in 1905, in response to A. F. Ballenger's views on the sanctuary that denied the fulfillment of prophecy in 1844 and repudiated the heavenly ministry of Christ in the investigative judgment, she was categorical:

when the power of God testifies as to what is truth, that truth is to stand forever as the truth. No after suppositions contrary to the light God has given are to be entertained. Men will arise with interpretations of Scripture which are to them truth, but which are not truth. . . . We are not to receive the words of those who come with a message that contradicts the special points of our faith.⁴⁷

The conclusion is unavoidable. While God wants His people earnestly to "wrestle" with the Word in the continual quest for truth, when some arose who instead "wrested" the "Word, He acted through His prophet to distinguish for all the line between truth and error. Ellen White's broad role as God's "messenger" has been succinctly described thus:

The fact that Mrs. White's own particular calling and vocation was that of a prophet suggests that her role is not merely devotional or pastoral, nor yet exegetical or theological, but prophetic. Although her ministry exhibits elements of all these other roles, it is apart from them, distinct. Prophetic authority is authority to bring God's message to bear on the root problems of human existence, to search out human perversity, and highlight human potential in Christ. A prophet may argue theologically, may offer devotional reflection, and may minister pastorally to God's people, but his message is usually more disturbing than a pastor's, more challenging than a devotional writer's, more gripping than a theological formulation, and more relevant than an exegetical exposition.⁴⁸

Seventh-day Adventists continue to investigate, broaden, and deepen their understanding of the gift of prophecy and its multi-faceted treasure of heavenly guidance through the life, labors, and writings of Ellen White. But the study and use of her writings come with a call for discretion:

In public labor do not make prominent, and quote that which Sister White has written, as authority to sustain your positions. Bring your evidences, clear and plain, from the Word of God. 'Thus saith the Lord' is the strongest testimony you can possibly present to the people. Let none be educated to look to Sister White, but to the mighty God, who gives instruction to Sister White.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ibid. vol. 1, p. 200. cf. *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, 255-328. *The Living Temple* was a 568 page book published in 1903 in which he presented his pantheistic views.

⁴⁷ Ibid. vol. 1, 161. cf. Manuscript Release #760. For additional information and explanation see Robert W. Olson, *101 Questions on the Sanctuary and on Ellen White* (Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1981), 38-45.

⁴⁸ Ron Graybill, "Ellen White's Role in Doctrine Formation," *Ministry*, October 1981, 8.

⁴⁹ *Selected Messages*, vol. 3, 29-30.

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The conclusion seems self-evident: If as Seventh-day Adventists we believe all that the Bible teaches, we will cherish the writings of Ellen White, and if we believe all that Ellen White teaches, we will cherish and exalt supremely the Word of God.