

ELLEN WHITE'S ROLE IN MINISTERING TO GOD'S END-TIME REMNANT

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Ellen G. White Estate

The Bible presents only a small sample of world history from the time it was written, largely focusing on the experience of the chosen people of God. There were a lot of things happening among other nations that do not get even a passing nod from the Bible writers. Scripture might be more accurately described as a chronicle of the controversy between good and evil in history. Ellen White supports this concept, when she says:

In the annals of human history, the growth of nations, the rise and fall of empires, appear as if dependent on the will and prowess of man; the shaping of events seems, to a great degree, to be determined by his power, ambition, or caprice. But in the word of God the curtain is drawn aside, and we behold, above, behind, and through all the play and counterplay of human interest and power and passion, the agencies of the All-merciful One, silently, patiently working out the counsels of His own will (*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 499, 500).

More than coincidentally, these comments are made in connection with the grandiose plans of Nebuchadnezzar to establish a "golden" kingdom in Babylon that would last forever. Ancient Babylon stood only 55 miles south of Baghdad, Iraq, in the Euphrates river valley. Saddam Hussein has made similar grandiose plans—in the same area of the world, today. But God still is in

control. When we draw the curtain of Bible prophecy aside, we discover that all such plans are doomed to failure.

Ellen White says much the same thing about her writings on the great controversy theme as she does about the Bible:

To unfold the scenes of the great controversy between truth and error; to reveal the wiles of Satan, and the means by which he may be successfully resisted; to present a satisfactory solution of the great problem of evil, shedding such a light upon the origin and final disposition of sin as to make fully manifest the justice and benevolence of God in all His dealings with His creatures; and to show the holy unchanging nature of His law, is the object of this book (*The Great Controversy*, p. xii).

For God's own reasons, the lives of some people and events of Bible times are recorded in great detail, while others scarcely get a verse or two. Some might think that the detailed chronicles are the most important. But this is not a satisfactory conclusion.

How can we say, for example, that the two chapter creation account in Genesis 1-2 is less important than the almost endless details about the Kings of Israel and Judah? The accounts of the Bible prophets also seem to be uneven. There were the little known prophets, who wrote no books. Then there were others, like Samuel, Daniel, and Elijah, who either wrote major messages, or received detailed coverage. Yet, each prophet received the prophetic call and was given an important work to do.

In the New Testament, the disciple John concluded his account of the life of Christ with a confession:

And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written (John 21:25).

In our time, the life, experience, and writings of Ellen White have been preserved in large quantity. From her prolific pen have come about 100,000 pages that we have on hand. A great host of witnesses, who worked with her and knew her, give additional details of her work. Sometimes the volume of the record seems almost overwhelming. But even at that, we do not have everything. In 1867, a question was asked:

Your last vision was given December, 1865. Many inquire, "If the

visions are so important for the church, why so long before the subject of Health Reform was brought out?

Her answer:

I have written thousands of pages since that time of personal testimonies which most of the people know nothing about. I have written hundreds of letters relative to the establishment of a Health Institute of which still more are ignorant (*Review and Herald*, Oct. 8, 1867).

We do not have a single one of these testimonies and letters written during this brief time period. All of those personal testimonies were hand written. No copy is preserved today. Many of the Bible prophets wrote more than we know, too. But, again, the amount written or preserved does not necessarily determine the relative importance of any prophet. Because we live closer to Ellen White's lifetime, and because we have methods for preserving what she wrote, we have a larger quantity available than for any Bible prophet.

Every prophet was important. God does nothing in a haphazard way. When He needed to reveal Himself to the human family, He most often called upon a prophet to bring a message. Amos says it most clearly: "Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing His plan to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7, NIV). The visions provided the major substance of the prophetic message. Whether they were making predictions or enunciating principles of right living, prophets always spoke by delegated authority from God. How else could Noah have preached about a coming flood? Or how could Paul have preached with such conviction about truth? Or how could Jeremiah have said, in almost every chapter of his book, "This is the word of the Lord?"

Ellen White was just as specific: "I have no special wisdom in myself; I am only an instrument in the Lord's hands to do the work He has set for me to do" (*Selected Messages*, Bk. 3, p. 46).

She was told in vision: "In all your communications, speak as one to whom the Lord has spoken. He is your authority" (*Life Sketches*, p. 433).

She also tells us: "My work . . . bears the stamp of God or the

stamp of the enemy. There is no halfway work in the matter" (*Testimonies*, vol. 4, p. 230).

Note two important facts in the above statements. First, the prophet is modest about herself. Second, she is absolutely sure of her message. Bible prophets demonstrate the same characteristics.

Ellen White's Role

Ellen White spoke about her role for the end time remnant repeatedly. In her first statement of understanding of her work, she said quite directly that the Bible "promised to give visions in the last days, not for a new vote of faith, but for the comfort of His people and to correct those who err from Bible truth" (*Early Writings*, p. 78). What was her work designed to accomplish?

1. *It was to be a message of comfort.* Ellen White's first vision, in December, 1844, showed her that Jesus was still leading the disappointed Adventists. Between 1844 and 1851, alone, Ellen White had eleven visions in which she saw Jesus as our High Priest, interceding in the heavenly sanctuary. She was shown that when that work was finished, He would come the second time to the earth. These visions obviously provided a backdrop for her husband's comments, when speaking of the disappointed Adventists, soon after 1844:

We have witnessed the flowing tears . . . as the literal Sanctuary in heaven has been pointed out, and the literal Jesus shown to be standing before the mercy seat (that is over the ark of the Ten Commandments) still pleading His blood for the errors of His people (*Review and Herald*, Feb. 17, 1852).

Contrary to what some may claim, Adventists continue to take comfort from this fact. We have placed our confidence in Christ's blood for assurance of eternal life. And both the cross and His intercession in heaven are necessary. Ellen White puts it simply: "The intercession of Christ is as essential to the plan of salvation as was His death" (*The Great Controversy*, p. 489).

The first passover, when Israel left Egyptian slavery, teaches the same truth. The Israelites were instructed to kill a lamb. But they also were required to sprinkle the blood on the doorpost. Without that sprinkling, the firstborn in the family would die.

Comfort is given on the personal level as well as for the church

as a whole. Six months after her husband, James, died, Ellen White wrote to a newly widowed friend:

My dear afflicted sister, I know by experience what you are passing through. I have been going over the road with you that I have so recently traveled (Letter 1e, 1882).

Again, even in the midst of strong correction to a girl with many problems, Ellen White did not forget to give comfort: "I do not consider your case hopeless; if I did, my pen would not be tracing these lines. In the strength of God you can redeem the past" (*Testimonies*, vol. 2, p. 562).

2. *It was to contain messages of correction for "those who err from Bible truth."* We might be tempted to say: "Of course. Why not?" But there is quite a difference between false and genuine prophets. Genuine prophets give correction, regardless of the object of the correction. The false usually focus on flattery and praise. Their correction is either erratic or non-existent. Ellen White's messages repeatedly kept the church unified in belief and practice. They still do this by bringing us back to God's Word.

3. *It was intended to bring confirmation and support for truth.* The sanctuary is not the only doctrine where Ellen White's visions provided help. From the beginning, there was a great temple of truth to build. She and her husband, James, met with the "scattered flock" in Sabbath conferences in 1847-1849. In these conferences, those present studied from the Bible to see what it taught. Finally, the results of their study was confirmed by vision. (See *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2, pp. 97-99, for example.)

4. *It helps defend the faith.* The first defection from the Adventist church occurred in 1854, before we had even taken our name. It was fostered by the "Messenger Party." Interestingly enough, Ellen White seemed to welcome their final separation from the church. When they formed their own organization, she perhaps smiled as she said: "A place is now open for all such where they can go and find pasture with those of their kind" (*Testimonies*, vol. 1, p. 122).

Self-appointed reformers continue to our day. Many of them call for Adventists to "come out of Babylon"—inferring that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is Babylon. But this is not what the "shaking" and "purging" are all about. The Advent movement is to

continue to the end. It is the rebels that are to be purged out. Taylor Bunch, many years ago, made this point:

Just as the Lord "purged" the Exodus movement by shaking out the rebels, so He will purge modern Israel of its rebels by "shaking" or "spewing" them out. In those two parallel movements the Lord does not call the faithful out in order to purify the church, but He purges or shakes out the rebels (*The Exodus Movement in Type and Antitype*, p. 5).

Throughout her ministry, Ellen White often was called upon to deal with extremes, offshoots, and heresy. Her counsel contains principles that still are valuable help for similar problems today.

An understanding of "the holy flesh" fanaticism, around the turn of the century, for example, helps us to know that true religion does not consist of a bedlam of emotion and noise. The counsel regarding pantheism, at about the same time, still has meaning in dealing with the "new age" movement and other so-called religious philosophies in our time.

5. *The counsel given has value for individual needs.* Just as the Bible writers did, Ellen White wrote on typical needs. All of us can learn from what has been written to others. Ellen White was shown in vision, that she should publish some of these personal testimonies:

If one is reproved for a special wrong, brethren and sisters should carefully examine themselves to see wherein they have failed and wherein they have been guilty of the same sin (*Testimonies*, vol. 5, p. 659).

This personal correction reached to the major leaders in the church. In 1872, J. N. Andrews was laboring on a detailed response to those who opposed the seventh-day Sabbath. Ellen White's counsel to him, although written long ago, sounds applicable to this day:

Long, labored arguments will interest but a few, for the people have to read as they run. Plain, pointed arguments, standing out as mileposts, will do more toward convincing minds generally than will a large array of arguments which cover a great deal of ground, but which none but investigating minds will have interest to follow. Our success will be in reaching common minds (*Testimonies*, vol. 2, p. 39).

While Andrews was spending long hours trying to answer every objection, she cautioned him, in words we still can understand:

Satan will stir up opponents enough to keep their [defenders of the faith] pens constantly employed, while other branches of the work will be left to suffer (Ibid).

6. *The messages contain counsel for preachers, teachers, medical personnel, and other full-time church employees.* There is a large amount of counsel in this area. It always will have practical value. Ellen White calls for high personal standards of conduct and positive attitudes between administrators and those working under their direction. She defends the abused. Methods of work, in preaching, teaching, healing, and many other areas, are clearly delineated.

Ellen White was even a major advocate of a church retirement program in order that those who had given their lifetimes in service, would not be dependent upon the charity of others. The present retirement plan can be traced directly to her encouragement.

7. *It encouraged organization, with all of its ramifications.* There was a need for organization of the church from its beginning. In a very direct way, publishing, medical facilities, and schools became a part of the organizing process. And there was a need for a financial structure. Systematic benevolence was followed by tithing. A mission work was begun, and subsequent re-organization so that each area of the world could take care of its own governance needs. The prophetic voice always played a significant part in developing a strong working organization.

8. *It calls us to a deep spiritual experience.* Ellen White's most circulated book is *Steps to Christ*. It teaches in a practical way how we can come to Jesus and how to live the Christian life. The prophetic messenger took a leading role in advancing belief in righteousness by faith. Her counsels on victorious Christian experience surpass anything written, outside of the Bible. Yet this aspect of her writing might be the least appreciated or known, especially among Adventists.

9. *It encourages correct standards and lifestyle.* Response to the counsel given involves reform in many areas. There is clear guidance for choosing a life work or a marriage partner. And there is counsel for all family related needs, too. Adventists have had

healthful living principles for decades, that are just now being understood and appreciated in the world around us. Ellen White's pen has given us an advantage in educational concepts, in dress standards, and a general lifestyle that is unequalled. This aspect of her writing probably is widely discussed among Adventists, but is less uniformly accepted.

10. *It provides insight into the future.* Future events to expect, how to prepare for Christ's second advent, and how to live in this judgment time are presented clearly. The need for the Holy Spirit and His power for living our lives and finishing the preaching of the gospel, is invaluable.

There are two sides to these insights. They bring both *information* and *preparation*. We can discover what is going to happen. We can also discover what must be done to prepare for it now, before probation closes and Jesus returns to earth.

Incidentally, the major part of Ellen White's work did not deal with predictions. It has been estimated that less than five percent of her writings contain a predictive element. Her writing is more important for its insight and understanding, than for merely being aware of what is going to happen in the future.

There is a major difference between false and genuine prophets on this very point. False prophets make predictions their major claim for attention. But often their predictions contain no call for change or reform. The genuine prophet, in contrast, speaks about the future in the framework of repentance and reformation.

11. *It calls for commitment.* This commitment includes more than becoming a church member. It involves understanding how to use our talents and gifts to help hasten the advent of Christ. We are given ample counsel about stewardship of our time, money, and talents.

12. Finally, *it is both historical and timeless.* We need to be able to tell the difference between these two sides of Ellen White's work. Times change, as do circumstances. This is an important reason for reading both the Bible and the writings of Ellen White, looking for principles.

We must not allow the historical to overshadow the timeless. If the Bible is relegated only to telling history, it become no more than an interesting story book. It will only gather dust on the shelf.

Its stories and its history must be brought into a present perspective. We need to know that the experiences of its characters have lessons for our lives today.

The same can be said for Ellen White's writing. It, too, will only become a dust catcher if we think of it merely as interesting history. In some ways we tend to be harder on the more recent gift than on the ancient. The Pharisees of Christ's day were, too. They professed loyalty to the prophets "of old" while at the same time they were plotting the death of Christ.

Appreciating the Prophetic Gift

At the beginning of this study we made the point that the Bible only records a sample of what was happening. What we have has been preserved under divine direction. It is a record of God and His special people, His intervention in their behalf, and the eventual resolution of the controversy between good and evil.

The Bible considers right or wrong by means of ethical rules and principles. And the modern prophetic voice does the same:

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*, vol. 5, p. 664).

John saw the end-time remnant church as having "the testimony of Jesus Christ"—the Spirit of Prophecy. If we understand all of the prophetic symbols and times correctly, we are in that end time.

Have we had a prophet in our midst, or is it all a hoax? I believe we have had one, and I rejoice.

No apologies need to be made for the presence of the prophetic gift in the church known as the "end-time remnant." Our church's earliest leaders pointed to the prophetic gift among them, as one further evidence that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the "remnant" spoken of in Scripture. Further, they saw it as an evidence that the beliefs of the church are Bible-based. After all, the Bible predicted through its last writer, that the remnant would be blessed with a prophetic ministry.

READERS' RESPONSES

A Final Word from the Editor

Leo R. Van Dolson

The large number of letters received in response to our last issue has been encouraging. Two of the writers mention that they not only read, but carefully study each issue from cover to cover. Allow me to take this opportunity to thank our readers who have responded so favorably. However, the ATS executive committee has taken an action that we should not use space to publish letters to the editors, unsolicited articles, book reviews, or extended responses to published articles. Because of limited funding and the necessity of keeping the number of pages in the journal to a minimum, it is our policy at present to publish only papers presented at international society meetings. But that does not mean that we do not enjoy receiving your reaction. These reactions help us understand better what we might do to be more helpful to you in what we do print. Even the two negative letters I have received, prompt me to point out once again that the views expressed are those of the people making the presentations, not of the editors or the society. My suggestion would be that, if any of you readers wish clarification or have questions for the authors, you write directly to them.

For the most part, the papers published in this issue were presented at the Adventist Theological Society meeting in New Orleans on November 16, 17, 1990. That means we are a year behind in publishing. The committee has decided that we will do our best to catch up by putting articles in this journal and the next one from subsequent meetings. For that reason, three of the articles in this journal are papers that were presented at the international ATS meeting at Keene, Texas on March 7-10, 1991. These include the articles by Richard Davidson, Paul Gordon and Jack Blanco. Unfor-