

Ellen G. White's Ministry in the Seventh-day Adventist Church

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Seventh-day Adventists believe that God bestows upon all members of his church in every age spiritual gifts which are to be employed in ministry for the common good of the church and of humanity. These gifts are apportioned by the Holy Spirit to each believer and provide abilities and ministries needed by the church to fulfill its divinely ordained mission and functions.¹ Adventists believe these gifts are to function for the perfecting of the saints and for the edification of the body of Christ until his return. Just as they were needed in the early church to confirm the work of the apostles and to provide guidance in the young congregations, these gifts are also needed today. While Adventists recognize the unique position of the Bible as the sole criterion by which all claims to spiritual gifts must be evaluated, the Bible itself points to a continuing manifestation of spiritual gifts in the Christian Church until the return of Christ and particularly at the end of time. On the basis of Revelation 12:17 and 19:10, Adventists hold that the gift of prophecy is an identifying mark of the people of God in the last days. This gift they believe was manifested in the life and ministry of Ellen G. White.

¹Adventists, along with Pentecostal Christians, believe in the perpetual manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit until the second coming of Christ. 1 Corinthians 12:9-11, 27, 28; Ephesians 4:8, 11-13; Romans 12:4-8; Acts 6:1-7; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; 1 Peter 4:10, 11.

Adventists have argued that while Ellen White's ministry and writings are valued as a genuine gift of the Spirit, her authority is considered secondary to the Bible. Adventists see a similarity between the ministry of non-canonical prophets and that of Ellen White. The Bible describes the work of many prophets who did not write any portion of Scripture. Enoch, Gad, Nathan, Huldah, and even John the Baptist are such non-canonical prophets. Although genuine prophets and empowered by the Holy Spirit to minister to Israel during a particular period of time, these prophets did not write any section of the Bible. Yet their ministry is considered genuine, valid, and authoritative. Adventists perceive the role and ministry of Ellen White in a similar way. Her ministry is believed to be a spiritual gift to the church in the last days to provide guidance to Adventists in the fulfillment of their mission and to help prepare God's people for the second advent of Christ. Her writings are thus viewed as secondary to Scripture.

Ellen White was born Ellen Gould Harmon in 1827 in Portland, Maine. She was raised in a devout Methodist home and in her teen years accepted Jesus as her Savior. In the early 1840s she became a believer in the imminent return of Christ and joined the Millerite Second Advent movement. She had her first vision in December 1844, at the age of 17, and thus reluctantly began a lifelong prophetic ministry that lasted until her death in 1915. In 1846 she married James White, a Christian Connexion minister, who had also joined the Advent Movement in the early 1840s. Together with other colleagues they founded the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. During her lifetime Ellen White provided prophetic guidance to the denomination through her influence, sermons, and numerous books and periodical articles. It is estimated that she wrote over 100,000 pages of manuscripts during her 70 years of ministry and addressed a wide variety of subjects and interests. She wrote on many biblical themes, church

organization and pastoral ministry, lifestyle issues, education, health and temperance, home life, and mission.

Ellen White's numerous books fall into two major categories. First, she wrote extensively on biblical themes and stories. Her best known books are part of a series called the "Conflict of the Ages" series which include five books on the story of the conflict between good and evil, from the fall of Lucifer to the new earth.² She also authored *Steps to Christ* (1892) on themes related to doctrine of salvation, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing* (1896) on the Sermon on the Mount, and *Christ's Object Lessons* (1900) on the parables of Jesus.

²The "Conflict of the Ages" series include the books *Patriarchs and Prophets* (1890) which covers the fall of Lucifer to the reign of king David, *Prophets and Kings* (1916) from the reign of Solomon to the end of the Old Testament; *Desire of Ages* (1898) on the life and ministry of Christ; *Acts of the Apostles* (1911) on the early church, and *The Great Controversy* (1911) from the fall of Jerusalem to the new earth.

Much of her writings also dealt with various aspects of ministry and Christian life. Often the contents of her letters, manuscripts, sermons, and periodical articles were reshaped to form books on particular subjects. Such is the nine-volume series of *Testimonies for the Church* which she published between 1855 and 1909, and books on *Education* (1903), *Ministry of Healing* (1905), and *Gospel Workers* (1915). In her last will and testament she made provision for her estate to continue the publication of her books and also print compilations of her writings as church leaders would see fit. Thus through the years many other books have been published from her published and unpublished letters and manuscripts files. All of Ellen White's published writings are available on CD-ROM and on the Ellen G. White Estate website.³ Her unpublished letters and manuscripts are available for consultation at many research centers in the United States and overseas and are currently in the process of being published by section. Ellen White is the most prolific American woman author in the history of the United States thus far. She is also the most translated author with her book *Steps to Christ* translated into more than 120 languages. Perhaps one day someone at the United States Postal Service office will be convinced to issue a stamp in her honor.

When it comes to the writings of Ellen White, the main question in the mind of many Evangelical Christians pertains to the relationship of Ellen White's writings to the Bible and their role in the shaping of Seventh-day Adventist beliefs. The rest of this paper will seek to address this question by (1) referring to some statements Ellen White made in this regard, (2) examining her role in the development of distinctive Adventist doctrines, and (3) reflecting on

³The official Seventh-day Adventist website about Ellen White and her writings is found at www.whiteestate.org.

the theological value of her writings.

Ellen White and the Bible

One of the earliest and clearest statements regarding what Ellen White believed to be her relationship to the Bible is the following, “I recommend to you, dear reader, the word of God as the rule of your faith and practise [sic]. By that word we are to be judged. God has, in that word, promised to give visions [i.e. a reference to her own ministry] 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.”⁴

Mrs. White believed in the supremacy and ultimate authority of the Word of God. The following comment was written in 1888 when many Adventist ministers were debating the concept of righteousness by faith. What I find enlightening in this statement is her understanding of the issues related to critical scholarship and her own strong faith in the Word of God.

I take the Bible just as it is, as the Inspired Word. I believe its utterances in an entire Bible. Men arise who think they find something to criticize in God’s Word. They lay it bare before others as evidence of superior wisdom. These men are, many of them, smart men, learned men, they have eloquence and talent, the whole lifework [of whom] is to unsettle minds in regard to the inspiration of the Scriptures. They influence many to see as they do. And the same work is passed on from one to another, just as Satan designed it should be, until we may see the full meaning of the words of Christ, “When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8). . . .

Brethren, cling to your Bible, as it reads, and stop your criticisms in regard to its validity, and obey the Word, and not one of you will be lost. The ingenuity of men has been exercised for ages to measure the Word of God by their finite minds and limited comprehension. If the Lord, the Author of the living oracles, would throw back the

⁴*The Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G. White* (1851), p. 64; reprinted in *Early Writings* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1945), p. 78

curtain and reveal His wisdom and His glory before them, they would shrink into nothingness and exclaim as did Isaiah, “I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of people of unclean lips” (Isaiah 6:5). . . .

Men of humble acquirements, possessing but limited capabilities and opportunities to become conversant in the Scriptures, find in the living oracles comfort, guidance, counsel, and the plan of salvation as clear as a sunbeam. No one need be lost for want of knowledge, unless he is willfully blind. We thank God that the Bible is prepared for the poor man as well as for the learned man. It is fitted for all ages and all classes.⁵

⁵Manuscript 16, 1888 published in *Selected Messages* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1958), vol. 1, pp. 17-18. One of the most forceful statement she made about the value and authority of Scripture is the following: “In the Bible the will of God is revealed to His children. Wherever it is read, in the family circle, the school, or the church, all should give quiet and devout attention as if God were really present and speaking to them.” *Testimonies for the Church* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1948), vol. 5, p. 84.

Many other passages in her writings could be quoted to highlight her unwavering faith in the supreme authority of Scripture for Christian beliefs and practice. Ellen White understood her ministry to be a gift of God to the Seventh-day Adventist church to help members live committed Christian lives in preparation for the second coming of Jesus. Her writings were never intended to replace the Bible but to help people see the precious gems of truth in the Bible and to point them to the Bible as their authority and guide. It is in this context that in 1903 she penned the following explanation: “Little heed is given to the Bible, and the Lord has given a *lesser light* [i.e. her writings] to lead men and women to the *greater light* [the Scripture].”⁶

In 1889, Ellen White felt people needed to be reminded of the nature and role of her writings for the church and wrote a 38-page document, published in her *Testimonies for the Church*.⁷ In this document she gave extracts from what she had written over the years regarding her work. She commented that “The word of God abounds in general principles for the formation of correct habits of living, and the testimonies [i.e. her writings], general and personal, have been calculated to call their attention more especially to these principles.”⁸ “The written testimonies are not to give new light, but to impress vividly upon the heart the truths of inspiration already revealed. . . . The *Testimonies* are not to belittle the word of God, but to exalt it and attract minds to it, that the beautiful simplicity of truth may impress all.”⁹ She also emphasized that knowledge of her writings was not a test of fellowship and that her writings

⁶*Review and Herald*, January 20, 1903.

⁷“The Nature and Influence of the ‘Testimonies,’” in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, pp. 654-691.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 663-664.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 665.

were not to be used to prove biblical teachings to unbelievers.¹⁰

Ellen White's Role in the Development of Seventh-day Adventist Doctrines

Perhaps one of the subjects concerning Ellen White's ministry that brings up the most inquiries has been in regard to her involvement and influence in the development of Seventh-day Adventist doctrines. Many believe that her visions were the origin of the distinctive doctrines of Adventism. However, a brief look at the historical development of the distinctive doctrines of Adventism reveals a different picture. Adventist pioneers accepted a set of distinctive doctrines based on their study of the Bible and Ellen White's influence in these early years was often limited to confirmation and clarification of these doctrines. Never was she the initiator of these doctrinal beliefs.

Second Advent of Christ. Adventists take their name from their belief in the imminent, visible, and literal second advent of Christ which will then be followed by the millennium (premillennialism). They are not the only Christians to believe in a premillennialist eschatology and many believed in this understanding of the second coming of Christ long before the time of Ellen White. She herself learned of this doctrine as a young Methodist girl, along with other members of her family, as she listened to lectures of William Miller and other early Adventist preachers. This doctrine has a solid biblical foundation and is still accepted today by numerous Christians in many denominations, although we will agree that there are a variety of premillennialist interpretations. During her years of ministry in the Seventh-day Adventist church Mrs. White used her influence to reassert this doctrine among Adventists and to invite

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 668-669. See also *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, pp. 327-329.

Adventists to be ready for Christ's advent.

Observance of the Seventh-day Sabbath. A knowledge of the doctrine of the seventh-day Sabbath was first brought to Adventists in early 1844 in Washington, New Hampshire, by Rachel Oaks (later Preston), a Seventh Day Baptist. Far from being an innovation of the nineteenth century, the seventh-day Sabbath as a day of rest and worship has been observed by Christians since the beginning of Christianity and by Seventh Day Baptists since the seventeenth century. In early 1845, two ministers in the Washington, New Hampshire, area, Thomas Preble and Frederick Wheeler, accepted this doctrine and began to propagate their views. Thus it came to the attention of Joseph Bates, who, with James and Ellen White, would later become one of the three co-founders of the Seventh-day Adventist church. When Bates first approached Ellen White on the doctrine of the Sabbath in 1846, her initial reaction was negative. "I did not feel its importance," she later wrote, "and thought that he erred in dwelling upon the fourth commandment more than upon the other nine."¹¹ In August 1846, Bates published his first tract, *The Seventh-day Sabbath, A Perpetual Sign*, and gave a copy of it to James and Ellen White. From the biblical evidence presented in the book, and not because Ellen had received a vision, they decided to accept this doctrine.¹² In 1874 she recalled in a letter to John Loughborough, "I believed the truth upon the Sabbath question before I had seen anything in vision in reference to the Sabbath. It was months after I had commenced keeping the Sabbath before I was shown [in vision] its importance."¹³

¹¹*Life Sketches of Ellen G. White* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1915), p. 95.

¹²*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 75.

¹³Letter 2, 1874, published in *Manuscript Releases* (Silver Spring, MD: E. G. White Estate, 1990), vol. 8, p. 238.

A similar scenario took place regarding the time to begin the observance of the Sabbath, an issue that was not settled among Sabbatarian Adventists until November 1855. Four views of when the Sabbath begins coexisted among them during the late 1840s and early 1850s: (1) sunrise Saturday morning; (2) midnight Friday night (“legal time”); (3) 6 p.m. Friday (“equatorial time”), the position favored by Bates, who knew that the sun rises at 6 a.m., and sets at 6 p.m., at the equator; and (4) sunset on Friday, the Jewish and Seventh Day Baptist position. J. N. Andrews was commissioned to study out the matter from Scripture, and write a report for a conference in Battle Creek in November 1855. On the basis of biblical evidence, Andrews concluded that the proper time to begin the Sabbath was sunset on Friday.¹⁴ While the attendees at this conference accepted Andrews’ biblical study and conclusions, Bates initially held out for “equatorial time,” and so did Ellen White who sided with Bates. Three days later, however, during a season of prayer “at the closing of the conference,” Ellen White received a vision correcting her position, which she immediately shared with the other believers.¹⁵ In subsequent years, she continued to give her strong support to the doctrine of the Sabbath and its theological and spiritual meaning. She also provided numerous counsels regarding Sabbath keeping. But it can hardly be said that Adventists got their distinctive belief regarding the Sabbath from Ellen White.

Christ’s Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary. One of the major beliefs of the Millerite Second Advent movement in the early 1840s was the belief that Jesus would return to the earth

¹⁴J. N. Andrews, “Time for Commencing the Sabbath,” *Review and Herald*, December 4, 1855, pp. 76-78.

¹⁵Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Years*, vol. 1, 1827-1862 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1985), pp. 322-325; cf. *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 116.

around 1843 or 1844. Millerites, along with many other biblical commentators before their time, came to this conclusion by studying the time prophecies of the book of Daniel, specially chapters 8 and 9. When Jesus did not return as predicted in the fall of 1844, a general disappointment followed and Millerites sought to understand their spiritual experience and the meaning of the prophecies of Daniel that had led them to believe that Christ would return that year. A few of them came to understand that the prophetic calculations they had done were accurate but that the event predicted was mistaken. A study of the Bible, extending over a period of months, first done by Hiram Edson, O. R. L. Crosier, and Frederick Hahn, led a small group of Millerite Adventists to conclude that the two phases of priestly ministry in the Old Testament sanctuary services were a type of Christ's ministry in the heavenly sanctuary after his ascension, and that Christ had begun a new phase of his ministry in October 1844 in preparation for his second coming. Edson, Crosier, and Hahn published their findings in the *Day-Dawn* (Canandaigua, New York) during the winter of 1845-1846 and again as an "Extra" in the *Day-Star* (Cincinnati, Ohio) of February 7, 1846.

Ellen White's first written statement upon this subject came about a year after the conclusions of Edson, Crosier, and Hahn had been published. In a letter to Eli Curtis, April 24, 1847, she wrote, "The Lord showed me in vision, more than one year ago, that Brother Crosier had the true light on the cleansing of the sanctuary, etc., and that it was His will that Brother C. should write out the view which he gave us in the *Day-Star Extra*, February 7, 1846. I feel fully authorized by the Lord to recommend that *Extra* to every saint."¹⁶ Here also her role was largely to confirm the conclusions of these brethren, not to initiate them. In later years she

¹⁶*A Word to the 'Little Flock'*, p. 12.

repeatedly urged church members to read articles upon this subject written by the pioneers of the Advent Movement.¹⁷ Although Ellen White received visions on the subject of the heavenly sanctuary between 1845 and 1851, she consistently referred church members to articles written by the pioneers explaining from Scripture the doctrine of the sanctuary. In these articles, her visions and writings are never used to back up their views.

¹⁷Cf. Letter 99, 1905, published in *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1946), p. 26. In 1983, Paul A. Gordon, then associate secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate, collected over 400 articles on the sanctuary doctrine and related topics published between 1846 and 1905. The anthology he produced, *Pioneer Articles on the Sanctuary, Daniel 8:14, the Judgment, 2300 Days, Year-day Principle, [and the] Atonement, 1846-1905*, contained 1,009 pages.

Three Angels' Messages of Revelation 14. The messages proclaimed symbolically by three angels in Revelation 14 form the basis of Adventist self-understanding and missionary consciousness. In the first message an angel proclaims the everlasting gospel and the hour of God's judgment to all nations (14:6, 7). The second message proclaims the fall of Babylon (14:8) while the third message warns against the mark of the beast (14:9-11). References to these messages were made during the Millerite Second Advent movement. William Miller and his associates used the imagery of the first angel's message to teach that the time of God's judgment had arrived and that Christ would soon return. Charles Fitch seems to have been the first to preach on the second angel's message on July 26, 1843. This message referring to the fall of Babylon never really "caught on" among Millerite preachers, although many believers accepted it. Previously, Protestants had tended to identify Roman Catholicism with spiritual Babylon. Fitch broadened the category to include contemporary Protestants who had turned from the doctrine of an imminent second advent. While the Millerite movement had been fairly well received by most Protestant denominations until then, in fact it had been an ecumenical movement, Fitch's message caused a rift and much antagonism. Joseph Bates was the first Sabbatarian Adventist minister to articulate and integrate all three messages with the doctrines of the Sabbath and the heavenly ministry of Christ. In his pamphlets published between 1846 and 1848, he argued that the observance of the Sabbath was the seal of God and the keeping of Sunday was a mark of the beast. Revelation 14:12 concludes these three messages by pointing out that in the end of time, and as a result of the preaching of these three messages, God's remnant people will be identified as those who keep the commandments of God and have the faith of Jesus. Adventists have understood these messages to be a divine commission to warn the

world of the soon coming of Christ and to invite all people to observe all of God's commandments, including the seventh-day Sabbath, and to follow the example of the life of Jesus and to rely on his mercy and grace for salvation. During this period of time, Ellen White wrote little on the three angels' messages and her role was limited to endorsing the presentations made by other speakers and writers with the exception of one vision on the seal of God she received in December 1848 that significantly enhanced Bates' understanding of the subject at that time. In later years she continued to affirm the value of the three angels' messages as key to Adventist identity and purpose.¹⁸

¹⁸Ellen White wrote in 1909, "In a special sense Seventh-day Adventists have been set in the world as watchmen and light bearers. To them has been entrusted the last warning for a perishing world. On them is shining wonderful light from the word of God. They have been given a work of the most solemn import—the proclamation of the first, second, and third angels' messages. There is no other work of so great importance. They are to allow nothing else to absorb their attention. The most solemn truths ever entrusted to mortals have been given us to proclaim to the world. The proclamation of these truths is to be our work. The world is to be warned, and God's people are to be true to the trust committed to them. They are not to engage in speculation, neither are they to enter into business enterprises with unbelievers; for this would hinder them in their God-given work." *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, 19.

Conditional immortality and annihilation of the wicked. Adventists believe in the intrinsic unity of human life and that all essential aspects that characterize human life (e.g. knowledge, emotions, will) can exist only in dependence of bodily functions; human life does not include inherent immortality. Immortality is only conferred by God on the day of the resurrection. Hence, the intermediary state between death and the resurrection is perceived as a deep sleep, one that is deprived of all the cognitive attributes of bodily life. This view also embraces the annihilation of the wicked at the end of time and does not support the concept of an eternal hell. George Storrs, a Methodist minister who became a Millerite preacher in 1842, is believed to have been the first in the Millerite Second Advent movement to advocate the unconscious state of human beings in death. Storrs' ideas influenced Eunice Harmon who shared them with her daughter, Ellen, who was about 15 years old then. Ellen's initial reaction was one of strong disapproval; but after a careful study of the biblical evidence, she accepted it.¹⁹ Later, she became a strong advocate of Storrs' "soul-sleep" doctrine of conditional immortality, and she considered it to be one of the half-dozen "pillar" doctrines of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.²⁰ Her role in promoting it, however, was largely in the nature of endorsing Storrs' views; she did not bring any major new ideas.

These distinctive doctrines of Adventism are part of the core of Adventist teaching, they are what make us a distinctive group of Christians but they are not all the doctrines we believe. Adventists share many other doctrines with Evangelical Christianity, including the Trinity, the

¹⁹*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, pp. 39, 40.

²⁰Manuscript 13, 1889, cited in *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, 30, 31. In this manuscript Ellen White highlighted that the core "landmark" doctrines of Adventism are the heavenly ministry of Christ, the three angels' messages of Revelation 14, the immutability of the commandments of God, with special emphasis on the Sabbath, and the non-immortality of the soul.

centrality of Scripture, creation *ex-nihilo*, the substitutionary atonement of the death of Christ, salvation by grace through faith in Christ, justification and sanctification by faith, the church and its ministry, believer's baptism by immersion, the Lord's Supper, and the new earth as the inheritance of the redeemed. Ellen White affirmed all these doctrines in her writings.

Between April 1848 and December 1850, about twenty-three Sabbatarian Bible Conferences were held to hammer out the distinctive doctrines of what would become Seventh-day Adventism. These conferences were meetings of believers and interested people who came together from varying distances, usually on a weekend, during which participants studied the Bible, prayed, and fasted. The pioneers who led out in these meetings were mainly James White and Joseph Bates. Although Ellen White attended, her participation and influence in the discussions were limited. In 1904 she recalled her experience during these conferences: "During this whole time [1848-1850] I could not understand the reasoning of the brethren. My mind was locked, as it were, and I could not comprehend the meaning of the scriptures we were studying. This was one of the greatest sorrows of my life" (ISM 207). She went on to explain that sometimes when the brethren were at a standstill in their study, she would have a vision to confirm the understanding of some texts they had arrived at or to point out a mistake in an interpretation. It was only after the participants at these conferences had reached a dead-end, so to speak, that her visions played an influential role and that role was limited to guidance and confirmation and not to the formation or generation of new ideas or beliefs.

A more complete history of the development of Adventist beliefs indicates, however, that Adventists did not always adhere to some of the teachings we hold today. While many other Christians tend to believe that Ellen White had a detrimental role on the development of

Adventist beliefs, restraining Adventists in what they can believe or forcing them to believe certain distinctive and odd doctrines, what is not well known is the formative and shaping role her writings had on the development of a solid doctrinal orthodox position. Many early Adventists were Arians or semi-Arians in their understanding of the divinity of Christ and viewed the Holy Spirit only as a power emanating from God the Father. Ellen White's influence was beneficial in helping the denomination at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in adopting an orthodox view of the divinity of Christ and personhood of the Holy Spirit.²¹ She also helped the denomination steer away from some pantheistic views at the same time.²² The same can be said regarding the role of the Law of God in salvation. Early on Adventists tended to be legalists and many promoted, if not altogether believed, in salvation by faith and works. Although Ellen White never advocated such a view, she used her influence to bring many of her colleagues and the young denomination to a clear understanding that salvation is by grace alone through faith in Christ, that it is a gift of God that cannot be purchased by our good works, and that our good works are the fruit of the work of God in our lives.²³ So for Adventists, Ellen White's influence and role in the development of our doctrines and teachings was beneficial; albeit secondary to Scripture, it was nonetheless important.

²¹See George R. Knight, *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), pp. 110-117; Jerry Moon. "The Adventist Trinity Debate, Part 1: Historical Overview," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* (41:1) Spring 2003, pp. 113-129) and "The Adventist Trinity Debate, Part 2: The Role of Ellen G. White," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* (41:2) Autumn 2003, pp. 275-292.

²²*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, pp. 255-304.

²³See Knight, *A Search for Identity*, pp. 100-110. A good example of Ellen White's writings that highlight her emphasis on salvation by faith in Christ is the compilation of sermons and articles *Faith and Works* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1979).

Theological Themes in Ellen White's Writings

While I readily admit that Ellen White was not a theologian, nor was she trained in biblical studies, her writings present many theological themes and ideas which expand on the biblical stories. Herbert Douglass has commented correctly that “The uniqueness of Ellen White’s contribution lies not in total originality of thought but in her synthesis of divinely revealed insights and the results of her own reading and observations.”²⁴

Like John Calvin’s theology is centered around the organizing principle of the sovereignty of God, Ellen White’s theological themes integrate various strands of her thought into a unified network of concepts and provide an interpretative framework for not only single documents or books, but for entire sectors of her writings (such as health, education, family living).²⁵ George Knight has identified seven of those themes in her writings: the love of God; the great controversy between good and evil; Jesus, the cross, and salvation; the centrality of the Bible; the second coming of Jesus; the third angel’s message and Adventist mission; and practical Christianity and character development.²⁶

Illustrative of how she understood the theological articulation of Bible doctrines and of her theological themes are the following statements.

On the theme of the great controversy:

²⁴*Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1998), p. 256.

²⁵George R. Knight, *Meeting Ellen White: A Fresh Look at Her Life, Writings, and Major Themes* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1996), p. 109.

²⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 109-127.

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.²⁷

On the theme of salvation:

²⁷*Education* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1903), p. 190.

The central theme of the Bible, the theme about which every other in the whole book clusters, is the redemption plan, the restoration in human soul of the image of God. From the first intimation of hope in the sentence pronounced in Eden to that last glorious promise of the Revelation, "They shall see His face; and His name shall be in their foreheads" (Revelation 22:4), the burden of every book and every passage of the Bible is the unfolding of this wondrous theme,—man's uplifting,—the power of God, "which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." 1 Corinthians 15:57.²⁸

On the theme of atonement:

The sacrifice of Christ as an atonement for sin is the great truth around which all other truths cluster. In order to be rightly understood and appreciated, every truth in the word of God, from Genesis to Revelation, must be studied in the light that streams from the cross of Calvary. I present before you the great, grand monument of mercy and regeneration, salvation and redemption,—the Son of God uplifted on the cross. This is to be the foundation of every discourse given by our ministers.²⁹

Seventh-day Adventists certainly value the writings of Ellen White and give them a measure of doctrinal and theological authority, albeit secondary to Scripture. But I wonder to what extent the way Adventists use the writings of Ellen White is different from what other evangelical denominations do with the writings of their founders. I've been told that Lutheran pastors are required to affirm their assent to the Book of Concord before they are ordained. Reformed Christians hold in high esteem the writings of John Calvin and the canons of the

²⁸*Education*, pp. 125-126.

²⁹*Gospel Workers* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1915), p. 315.

Synod of Dort. Methodists value the writings of John Wesley and an Arminian theological framework. The Westminster Confession of Faith is an authoritative document for Presbyterians. Although these Christian denominations do not categorize these writings as inspired, in contrast to what Adventists do with the writings of Ellen White, nonetheless these writings hold authoritative value in these denominations and serve as a compass for doctrinal orthodoxy and theological education. Yet all these denominations also claim to have Scripture as their sole authority in matters of faith. I think this would be a subject of discussion that could be very informative and enlightening. Adventists know that the writings of Ellen White influence their theological thinking and Christian life, I wonder to what extent Evangelical Christians realize how much the writings of their church founders influence their theological thinking and Christian life. One contribution I believe Adventists can make to dialogues with Evangelical Christians is how to interface the primacy of Scripture's authority with the secondary authority given to writings of church founders and professions of faith.

Much more could be said about the role and ministry of Ellen White in Seventh-day Adventism. We could look at her personal life as a mother, a wife, a friend, a counselor. We could observe her as a soul-winner and evangelist, an anti-slavery advocate and a temperance reformer. But I'll conclude with a quote from A. G. Daniells, then president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, who gave a short summary of Ellen White's contributions at her funeral in Battle Creek, Michigan, on July 24, 1915.

Perhaps we are not wise enough to say definitely just what part of Mrs. White's life work has been of the greatest value to the world, but it would seem that the large volume of Biblical literature she has left would prove to be of the greatest service to mankind. Her books number upwards of twenty volumes. Some of these have been translated into many languages in different parts of the world. They have now reached a circulation of more than two million copies, and are still going to the public by

thousands.

As we survey the whole field of gospel truth – of man’s relation to his Lord and his fellow men – it must be seen that Mrs. White, in all her teaching, has given these great fundamentals positive, constructive support. She has touched humanity at every vital point of need, and lifted it to a higher level.³⁰

³⁰*Life Sketches of Ellen G. White*, p. 475.