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Ellen G. White: Side Issues or Central Message?

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Introduction

Seventh-day Adventists have written extensively about Ellen White during the approximate 150 years of their history. The majority of these writings were intended either to prove the genuine nature of her prophetic gift or to defend from a wide spectrum of criticisms,¹ such as charges of historical errors, plagiarism, psychological trances, and theological pitfalls.²

Discussions of these issues, on the positive side, have helped our people significantly to understand Ellen White's role and writings. The faith of many church members has been strengthened. On the negative side, the discussions have led many Seventh-day Adventist scholars and ministers into a more issue-focused approach to those writings.

The purpose of the present article is to consider briefly the need (1) to recognize the dangers of such an issue-focused approach, (2) to shift away from sidetracking issues to the core of Ellen White's message, (3) to understand the great themes of her message, and (4) to live in accordance to that message.

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Dangers of an Issue-Focused Approach

Seventh-day Adventist scholars and ministers need to be well-informed with regard to the main charges raised against Ellen White's prophetic gift so they can deal with the objections properly whenever necessary. But they should also be aware of the dangers involved in the task of responding to those charges.

One of the dangers is the temptation to spend so much time with the negative side of a specific issue that the beauty of the message related to it is lost. This may happen because some of the most complex and speculative issues require almost an endless solution process. There are also mysteries in the divinely inspired writings which may never be fully grasped by the human mind.³

Another danger is the strong tendency that an issue-focused approach to Ellen White's writings may develop an apologetic-legalistic emphasis. As the apologetic burdens of the pre-1888 era led many Seventh-day Adventists to a legalistic approach, so modern discussions about technicalities of Ellen White's writings might foster a lifeless investigation of those writings. Some may even end their study with the distorted impression that the main purpose of her writings is to criticize and straighten up the lives of others.

An issue-focused approach to Ellen White's writings may also distort the reader's understanding of the overall thematic balance of those writings. A serious problem is generated when sidetrack issues and peripheral subjects replace the study of the central themes of the writings. This generates a reader-deceived paradigm, which largely ignores the purpose of the original writer.

From Side Issues to the Core of the Message

Many persons are very interested in the details of Ellen White's personal life. Others are more concerned with the mechanics of her inspiration and with her literary style. Still others have specialize in finding answers in her writings to all sorts of issues. Such knowledge

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is useful, however, only to the extent it helps to strengthen personal faith in the broader scope of her message. How regrettable is the fact that there are persons more concerned with issues related to those writings than with the actual message proclaimed by the same writings.

There are also those whose main concern gravitates around certain specific topics. Such subjects as eschatology, health reform, perfection, and Christ's nature during the incarnation are mistakenly identified by them as the core of her work. As insightful as her teachings on these topics may be, an honest interpreter of Ellen White will never subscribe to the reductionism of the "hourglass principle,"⁴ by which the broadness of her message is reduced to a single theme. We should never allow side issues or single doctrines to absorb us in such a way that we lose sight of the major themes of her message.

To accept Ellen White's prophetic guidance means, indeed, much more than just to vindicate her from criticisms or to expose a few aspects of her message. It means to uphold the overall thrust of her message, allowing every theme to play its specific role within the whole thematic scope of the message.

Vern S. Poythress's concept of a multi-perspective "symphonic theology"⁵ may contribute to our better understanding of Ellen White's message. Instead of having many thematic solos, it would be far more insightful and enriching if those solos were merged into a thematic symphony that would preserve the beauty of the author's original intention. This may sound like a challenging task, but it would be the most appropriate way to understand Ellen White's message.

Such a comprehensive study of Ellen White's message does not necessarily coerce anybody away from the Bible. To allow those writings to carry out their basic function—(1) to direct "attention to the Bible," (2) to aid "in understanding the Bible," and (3) to help "in applying Bible principles in our lives,"⁶—will lead us, indeed, to a better appreciation of Bible truth.

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Understanding the Foundational Themes of the Message

Although Ellen White (as Martin Luther and John Wesley) never actually systematized her theological thoughts, several of her statements provide helpful glimpses for such a systematization.⁷ In the following presentation I will consider briefly her view of such foundational themes as God, the cosmic controversy, the everlasting covenant, the sanctuary, the three angels' messages, and the remnant.⁸ I strongly believe that her expositions of these themes are very helpful for the understanding of the Bible message.

God as the Unfolding Center. Ellen White speaks of God as “the great center” from Whom “all life proceeds” and to Whom “all service, homage, and allegiance belong” (cf. Acts 17:24-28).⁹ Her view of God as the center is a dynamic concept which unfolds itself from the three Persons of the Godhead¹⁰ to Their work of redemption. So, she qualifies as centers not only the Godhead but also Christ and His atoning sacrifice.

Speaking of Christ's status within the broad spectrum of the Seventh-day Adventist message, White asserts:

The truth for this time is broad in its outlines, far reaching, embracing many doctrines; but these doctrines are not detached items, which mean little; they are united by golden threads, forming a complete whole, with Christ as the living center.¹¹

In regard to Christ's atoning work, the same author states that “Christ, and Him crucified” is “the great central interest.”¹² The cross of Calvary is regarded as “the great center,”¹³ and the atonement, as “the great substance, the central truth.”¹⁴ She explains that “the cross must occupy the central place because it is the means of man's atonement and because of the influence it exerts on every part of the divine government.”¹⁵

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The Cosmic Controversy as the Framework. The entire drama of human existence is placed by Ellen White within the framework of the great controversy between God and Satan, and the corollary struggles between good and evil, truth and error, and those who serve God and those who follow Satan (cf. Rev 12). Advising the student of Scripture, she states that he

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.¹⁶

The Everlasting Covenant of Grace as the Basis of Salvation. Ellen White explains that in the context of this great controversy, God saves human beings through His everlasting covenant of grace. She declares:

the salvation of the human race has ever been the object of the councils of heaven. The covenant of mercy was made before the foundation of the world. It has existed from all eternity, and is called the everlasting covenant. So surely as there never was a time when God was not, so surely there never was a moment when it was not the delight of the eternal mind to manifest His grace to humanity.¹⁷

By viewing the biblical covenants as progressive stages in the development of God's everlasting covenant of grace, Ellen White maintains a very balanced typological relationship between the old and the new covenants.¹⁸ The covenant at Sinai, for instance, is regarded by her as intended to restore the principles of the everlasting covenant

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made previously with Abraham, allowing the Israelites to see “their sinfulness and their need of pardon” and “feel their need of the Saviour revealed in the Abrahamic covenant and shadowed forth in the sacrificial offerings.”¹⁹

God’s everlasting covenant of grace is portrayed by the same author as finding its *typical* expression in the earthly sanctuaries of the OT (cf. Exod 25:8) and its *antitypical* expression in the heavenly sanctuary of the NT (cf. Heb 8 and 9).²⁰

The Sanctuary as the Organizing Motif. Analyzing the writings of Ellen White, we can see that she perceives the biblical sanctuary as something broader and far more reaching than a single doctrine among others. She actually identifies the sanctuary as the organizing motif of Bible truth:

From the creation and fall of man to the present time, there has been a continual unfolding of the plan of God for the redemption through Christ, of the fallen race. The tabernacle and temple of God on earth were patterned after the original in heaven. Around the sanctuary and its solemn services mystically gathered the grand truths which were to be developed through succeeding generations.²¹

The ending of the 2300 days of Daniel 8:14 in 1844 is recognized by White as the starting point of both the cleansing of the true sanctuary in heaven and the end-time restoration of the sanctuary-connected system of Bible truth on earth. She explains that the early Sabbatarian Adventist understanding of the sanctuary “opened to view a complete system of truth, connected and harmonious, showing that God’s hand directed the great Advent Movement, and revealing present duty as it brought to light the position and work of His people.”²²

She regards “the correct understanding of the ministration in the heavenly sanctuary” as “the foundation of our faith,”²³ because:

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The sanctuary in heaven is the very center of Christ's work in behalf of men. It concerns every soul living upon the earth. It opens to view the plan of redemption, bringing us down to the very close of time, and revealing the triumphant issue of the contest between righteousness and sin.²⁴

Upholding a close interrelationship between Christ and His sanctuary, White asserts truthfully that "Christ, his character and work, is the center and circumference of all truth, he is the chain upon which the jewels of doctrine are linked. In him is found the complete system of truth."²⁵ Thus, the sanctuary is identified by her as the basic motif which organizes the Bible doctrines around "Christ as the living center."²⁶

The Three Angels' Messages as the Eschatological Proclamation. This Christ-centered, sanctuary-organized doctrinal system is seen by Ellen White as restored in its end-time eschatological setting through the proclamation of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14:6-12. She speaks metaphorically of those messages as actual steps leading to the "solid, immovable platform" of present truth.²⁷

Recalling the early Sabbatarian Adventist experience, she explains:

Many saw the perfect chain of truth in the angels' messages, and gladly received them in their order, and followed Jesus by faith into the heavenly sanctuary. These messages were represented to me as an anchor to the people of God. Those who understand and receive them will be kept from being swept away by the many delusions of Satan.²⁸

That the three angels' messages comprise embryonically the major components of the Seventh-day Adventist doctrinal system is evident from the fact that she refers several times to that system in terms of those messages²⁹ and, more specifically, of the third angel's message.³⁰

The Remnant as the Missiological Result. The preaching of an

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integrated system of present truth by the three angels' messages is viewed by Ellen White as raising up and preparing a remnant people for Christ's Second Coming (cf. Rev 12:17; 14:12).³¹

She states "God is leading a people out from the world upon the exalted platform of eternal truth, the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus."³² "The third angel's message must do its work of separating from the churches a people who will take their stand on the platform of eternal truth."³³

Honest souls will see the straight chain of present truth. They will see its harmonious connections, link after link uniting into a great whole, and will lay hold upon it. The present truth is not difficult to be understood, and the people whom God is leading will be united upon this broad, firm platform.³⁴

Those who stand upon this platform are described by Ellen White as protected by Christ in the setting of the cosmic controversy (cf. Rev 12:17). She explains:

The adversary of souls is determined to oppose all who plant their feet on the platform of eternal truth, who would uplift the banner on which is inscribed, The commandment of God and the faith of Jesus. They are the objects of Satan's deadly hatred. But rest assured that Christ fights with His army. He himself leads His followers, and He will renew the strength of every faithful soldier.³⁵

And she adds: "Unless we stand on the elevated platform of eternal truth, we shall be swept away by the tide of delusive error that is sweeping over the world."³⁶

With these concepts in mind, we suggest that the broad theological setting provided by the interrelationship of the themes previously mentioned is the correct starting-point for the study of Ellen White's message.

Living in Accordance to the Message. Even with understanding and emphasizing the great themes of Ellen White's

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message, we face the risk of missing their main purpose: to lead us into a true *saving experience*. Doctrinal theory is very important, but it does not mean anything for us without the sanctifying influence of the truth on the whole personal life (cf. John 17:17).

Ellen White herself warns of this problem when she states that “many accept an intellectual religion, a form of godliness, when the heart is not cleansed.”³⁷ “A man may hear and acknowledge the whole truth, and yet know nothing of personal piety and true experimental religion. He may explain the way of salvation to others, and yet himself be a castaway.”³⁸

Some may be satisfied with lifeless technicalities and side issues related to Ellen White’s writings, or even with a theoretical knowledge of her message. But we should go beyond the theoretical level into a true saving experience with Christ and His teachings. According to her own words:

As the flower turns to the sun, that the bright beams may aid in perfecting its beauty and symmetry, so should we turn to the Sun of Righteousness, that heaven’s light may shine upon us, that our character may be developed into the likeness of Christ.³⁹

Conclusion

Understanding Ellen White’s message will be worthless for us if we do not permit it to have a sanctifying influence on our lives. Beyond the theoretical level, we need to allow the message to lead us into a true saving experience with Christ and His teachings. If Christ becomes the actual center of our religious experience, we will be really delighted in knowing more and more of His will as it is presented in the writings of Ellen White.

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Endnotes

1 Several of those writings are referred to in Alberto R. Timm, "History of Inspiration in the Seventh-day Adventist Church (1944-1994)" (Unpublished paper, the original draft of which was read at the 1993 Scholars' Convention of the Adventist Theological Society in Silver Spring, Maryland, on November 19, 1993), pp. 10-21, 28-34, 41, 46-47, 50-54, 58-95, passim.

2 Some of the main criticisms against Ellen White appear in Dudley M. Canright, *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced: After an Experience of Twenty-eight Years by a Prominent Minister of that Faith*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1989); Idem, *Life of Mrs. E. G. White, Seventh-day Adventist Prophet: Her False Claims Refuted* (Cincinnati, [OH]: Standard Publishing Company, 1919); Ingemar Lindén, *Biblicism, apokalyptik, utopi, Adventismens historiska utforming: USA samt dess svenska utveckling till o. 1939* (Uppsala: [University of Uppsala], 1971); Idem, *The Last Trump: An Historico-Genetical Study of Some Important Chapters in the Making and Development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1978); Idem, *Adventismen vid Skiljevägen* ([Sweden]: n.p., 1983); Ronald L. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); Idem, *Prophetess of Health: Ellen G. White and Origins of Seventh-day Adventist Health Reform*, rev. and enl. ed. (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1992); Desmond Ford, *Daniel 8:14, the Day of Atonement, and the Investigative Judgment* (Casselberry, FL: Euangelion Press, 1980); Desmond Ford and Gillian Ford, *The Adventist Crisis of Spiritual Identity* (Newcastle, CA: Desmond Ford Publications, 1982); Walter Rea, *The White Lie* (Turlock, CA: M & R Publications, 1982); Ronald D. Graybill, "The Power of Prophecy: Ellen G. White and the Women Religious Founders of the Nineteenth Century" (Ph.D. Diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1983); and Thomas R. Steininger, *Konfession and Sozialisation: Adventistische Identität zwischen Fundamentalismus and Postmoderne* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993).

3 See E[llen] G. White, *Gospel Workers*, rev. and enl. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald, 1948), p. 312; Idem, *Steps to Christ* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, n.d.), pp. 105-113.

4 I am indebted to Dr. George W. Reid, director of the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference of SDAs, who first called my attention to the concept that most of the so-called "heresies" come into the church through the "hourglass principle." As the whole sand of the hourglass is required to pass through the small reduction hole, so some people reduce the whole Bible and/or Ellen White's messages to a single doctrine.

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5 See Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987).

6 T. Housel Jemison, *A Prophet Among You* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1955), p. 371. See also *ibid.*, pp. 364-374; Roy E. Graham, *Ellen G. White: Co-Founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, American University Studies, series 7, Theology and Religion, vol. 12 (New York: Peter Lang, 1985), pp. 140-184.

7 A helpful starting point for the study of Ellen White's view of basic themes of the Seventh-day Adventist message and the interrelationship between them can be found in her books *Early Writings* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1945), pp. 63, 250-261; *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1974), pp. 168-278, *passim*; *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Nashville, TN: Southern, 1946), pp. 28-32, 52-54.

8 For further study of these foundational themes, see Alberto R. Timm, "The Sanctuary and the Three Angels; Message, 1844-1863: Integrating Factors in the Development of Seventh-day Adventist Doctrines" (Ph.D. Diss., Andrews University, 1995), pp. 397-420, 476-477.

9 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 6:236. See also *Ibid.*, p. 237; *Idem*, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1956), p. 77; *idem*, *Gospel Workers*, p. 396.

10 Some of Ellen White's most significant statements on the Trinity are found in her book *Evangelism*, pp. 613-617. See also *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1957), pp. 641-646.

11 Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1986), 2:887. See also *Ibid.*, 1:158, 383-388.

12 *Idem*, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1962), p. 331.

13 *Idem*, in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1976), 4:1173.

14 *Idem*, *Evangelism*, p. 223.

15 *Idem*, *Testimonies for the Church*, 6:236.

16 *Idem*, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1952), p. 190.

17 *Idem*, "Spiritual Growth," *Signs of the Times*, June 12, 1901, p. 3

18 See e.g., *Idem*, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1958), pp. 363-373; *Idem*, "The Two Dispensations," *Review and Herald*, March 2, 1886, p. 129; *Idem*, "In the Wilderness with God," *Youth's Instructor*, July 18, 1901, p. 226.

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- 19 Idem, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 371-372.
- 20 See Idem, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 23-26; Idem, *Education*, pp. 35-38; Idem, *Christ in His Sanctuary* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1969).
- 21 Idem, *The Faith I Live By* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1958), p. 194.
- 22 Idem, *Great Controversy* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1950), p. 423.
- 23 Idem, *Evangelism*, p. 221.
- 24 Idem, *Great Controversy*, p. 488.
- 25 Idem, "Contemplate Christ's Perfection, Not Man's Imperfection," *Review and Herald*, August 15, 1893, p. 513.
- 26 Idem, *Selected Messages*, 2:87.
- 27 Idem, *Early Writings*, pp. 258-259.
- 28 Ibid., p. 256.
- 29 See e.g., Idem, *Great Controversy*, pp. 311-312, 355-356, 435-438, 594-595, 603-612; Idem, *Testimonies for the Church*, 5:455-456.
- 30 See e.g., Idem, *Last Day Events* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1992), p. 199-202; idem, *Testimonies for the Church*, 5:206-207; 6:241.
- 31 See e.g., Idem, *Selected Messages*, 2:384-385; idem, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, pp. 32-62.
- 32 Idem, *Testimonies for the Church*, 3:446.
- 33 Ibid., 6:61.
- 34 Ibid., 1:326.
- 35 Idem, "Lessons from the Parable of the Unjust Judge," *Signs of the Times*, September 15, 1898, p. 3.
- 36 Idem, "Medical Missionary Training Schools," in MS 169, 1902; published in Idem, *Manuscript Releases* (Silver Spring, MD: E. G. White Estate, 1993), 19:54.
- 37 Idem, *Steps to Christ*, p. 35.
- 38 Idem, *Evangelism*, p. 682.
- 39 Idem, *Steps to Christ*, p. 68.