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ESSENTIALS IN INTERPRETING ELLEN G. WHITE'S WRITINGS TO AN ASIAN AUDIENCE

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Introduction

An incident involving a young couple, which occurred during the early part of my ministry, highlights the issue we will discuss in this paper.

The husband was a metallurgical engineer and an associate professor of metallurgical engineering in one of the most prestigious state universities in Mindanao, the Philippines. The wife was a Certified Public Accountant. She ran a home-based accounting firm serving some of the big businesses in the city. She also taught at the university. This young couple was also active in the local church. They loved the Lord. They loved the church. He served as the youth fellowship president for the entire district which I pastored. She served as the trusted treasurer of a rich suburban Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) church.

Both were very intelligent. They had varied interests. The young engineer in particular was not only interested in science, politics, and the like, but he was also interested in religious studies. He subscribed to some journals and magazines on theology. One could say that he was an open-minded person. He even read materials which attacked the teachings and practices of the SDA Church.

One day the engineer invited me to his home because he wanted me to listen to a visiting pastor who was to discuss issues regarding the state of the SDA Church worldwide. I was alarmed. I knew the visiting pastor. He was my supervising minister during my internship. He was a former mission/conference president. A short time before, he had left denominational employment. He had become one of the most effective "evangelists" for an offshoot movement. He eloquently presented his case, arguing that the Church and its leadership had

become corrupted beyond repair. The Church had become "Babylon." He then unloaded his bombshell. He quoted Ellen G. White almost verbatim, saying that the voice of the General Conference, even in session, was no longer to be considered as the voice of the Lord.¹

I was shocked, embarrassed, and angry inside. I knew this pastor. I knew that he loved Ellen White's writings. How could he say those words? But I also wondered, "If Ellen White really said those alleged statements, what did she really mean?"

The incident cited above could be repeated a thousand times elsewhere, in various forms. Many concerned, sincere, committed church members around the world present teachings, even sermons, the way this minister did to my young parishioners. One only has to count the websites established by these people to be amazed at how much energy and effort are spent to call this church to self-reformation. The form and cause may vary. The motives and methods may be suspect. But one thing is common: the majority of these so-called reformers use Ellen White's writings to "prove" their arguments. What is surprising is that even if the proponents rely heavily on the same source, they oftentimes come up with differing emphases or even conflicting conclusions. What could be the problem? Do Ellen White's writings contribute to the problem? The answer is No. The problem lies in how the people use, misuse, abuse, interpret, or misinterpret Ellen White's writings.

This paper discusses the essentials in interpreting Ellen White's writings. The discussion basically employs concepts and representative statements and cases from Ellen White's own writings to illustrate the basic principles. The discussion is presented with the common, cyberspace-age, Asian church member as the ultimate beneficiary of this academic exercise.

The Need for Principles of Interpretation

Can we not just take Ellen White's writings as they are, in plain English? Is it necessary to have rules of interpretation? Roger Coon, longtime Associate Secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate, offers half a dozen reasons why basic principles are necessary in understanding and interpreting Ellen White's writings.² Coon's list includes the following:

1. Although the words may be intelligible, the meaning of the statement may still remain unclear. I once saw on a jeepney a sticker mounted over a picture of

¹A statement of Ellen White referring to the General Conference as "no longer the voice of God," is found in Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases: From the Files of the Letters and Manuscripts Written by Ellen G. White* (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1981-93), 17:185. Ellen G. White was one of the founders of the SDA church.

²Roger W. Coon, "Hermeneutics: Interpreting a 19th Century Prophet in the Space Age," *Journal of Adventist Education*, Summer 1988, 17-19.

the body of a sensuous woman. The sticker read, in Tagalog: "*Kung ikaw ay nakasakay, ako ay hinihimatay*" (I faint when you are on board"). Considered in its immediate context, this one-liner might appear to be pornographic. But what the driver really meant to say was, "Welcome! I am delighted to have you on board my jeepney."

There are statements in Ellen White's writings which may have the possibility of double meanings; thus, the need for rules of interpretation.

2. Some make the mistaken assumption of the synecdoche—that a part always equals the whole. George R. Knight, in his book *Reading Ellen White*, quotes a poem by John Godfrey Saxe which illustrates the problem of adapting the synecdoche approach to interpreting Ellen White's writings.³ The well-known poem compares the efforts of six blind men to describe an elephant based on what they feel when they touch one of its parts. Though each correctly describes what he feels, he is wrong in the generalization he makes regarding the whole animal.

3. Words evolve in meaning. As a young man I felt uncomfortable every time I read the KJV of Matt 19:14. Every time I read the passage I asked myself, "Why did Jesus require children to *suffer* before they could come to Him?" It was only in college that I realized that "suffer," in seventeenth century English, meant "allow" or "permit."

Many English words have evolved in meaning. The phrase, "I am happy and gay," indicated a positive attitude several years ago. Not anymore. Announcing that you are "happy and gay" today could result in a lot of misunderstanding. Several English words used in the KJV have narrower meanings today. Take, for example, the word "conversation." Today it means oral discourse between two or more persons. When the KJV was written it meant one's whole way of life. Another example is the word "meat." Today it means flesh food; then, it meant food in general. The same is true with Ellen White's writings. She has employed words which have evolved in meaning; thus, the need for hermeneutical rules.

4. Cultural factors affect meaning. I once heard of a real incident which happened between an American missionary and a Filipino student at the Adventist University of the Philippines. The American missionary was alone in his car going to Manila. The student was waiting for a jeepney to take him to Manila. The missionary stopped when he saw the student and asked, "Can I give you a ride? I am going to Manila." Surprised, the student forgot his English and yelled back, "Oo," in the Visayan dialect, which means "Yes." Hearing the "Oo," the American sped off without the student. The student wondered why the missionary left without him even after he had indicated he wanted to go to Manila. He later realized that "Oo" sounds like "Uh-uh" and really means "No" to some Americans, not "Yes."

³George R. Knight, *Reading Ellen White* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1997), 63-64.

5. Circumstances alter meaning. Coon illustrates this point by citing two narratives in the NT, those of the rich, young ruler and the jailer at Philippi.⁴ They both asked virtually the same question (see Mark 10:17 and Acts 16:30). The first asked Christ, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" He was told to sell his possessions, give to the poor, and follow Jesus. When the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas what must he do to be saved, he was told to simply believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Why the two differing answers to the same question? The circumstances provide the clue. The rich, young ruler asked the question while coveting wealth, while the problem of the jailer was one of belief.

Ellen White died in 1915 when computers, even televisions, were still unknown. Her world and circumstances were definitely different from ours today. Thus, we should read her writings conscious of the difference in circumstances.

6. Lastly, a given act or a given word may be interpreted quite differently by two persons who approach identical data from different perspectives. The following incident took place at one of the Ellen G. White Research Centers, located in an equatorial country. A researcher, browsing Ellen White's diary, happened to read her narration that on a certain Friday evening they were still working late in the farm, up to about eight o'clock in the evening. The student was horrified. He concluded that Ellen White had violated the Sabbath. Eight o'clock is definitely nighttime in his part of the world. Did Ellen White break the Sabbath? Certainly not. A closer look reveals that during that time of the year, at that particular place, the sun sets at about 9:30 p.m. The researcher made a wrong conclusion based on his own equatorial perspective.

From the preceding discussion, it is clear that we need hermeneutical rules for interpreting Ellen G. White's writings. We will now discuss three essential principles for interpreting the wide array of Ellen White's writings.

Three Principles for Interpreting Ellen White's Writings

Understandably, the three essential principles mentioned below may not cover all those demanded in interpreting Ellen White's writings, but they are considered basic if one expects to rightly understand her written works.

1. Establish the authority of Ellen White's writings relative to that of the Bible.

Technically, this is not a hermeneutical principle. But anybody who intends to interpret Ellen White's writings correctly should wrestle with this matter first and foremost. Many faulty conclusions evolving from the reading of Ellen White's writings are caused by inadequate handling of this issue.

⁴See Coon, 18.

Shall we place Ellen White's writings and the Bible on the same level? Can we substantiate the formation of our Christian beliefs by quoting Ellen White? To some, it is even irreverent to ask these questions. By their practice, many have placed Ellen White's writings not only on the same level with the Bible, but even above it.

Two points should be included in discussing this essential. The first is the fact that Ellen White's ministry and writings are a manifestation of the gift of prophecy clearly taught in the Bible. In other words, her ministry and writings are of divine origin, similar to that of the biblical prophets. It may even be hinted that it is a continuation of the biblical ministry of the gift of prophecy.⁵ Further, it is necessary to establish that her ministry is in itself a fulfillment of Bible prophecy (Joel 2:28). As the biblical prophets were called by God for a specific purpose, so was Ellen White called to write and teach. It should be added, however, that although the writings of Ellen White are of divine origin, they cannot be added to the canon of sacred Scripture. Neither can her writings function as the foundation and final authority of faith and practice. Let us allow Ellen White to speak for herself:

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. "Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness; that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work." Tim. 3:16, 17, Revised Version.

Yet the fact that God has revealed his will to men through his Word, has not rendered needless the continued presence and guiding of the Holy Spirit. On the contrary, the Spirit was promised by our Saviour, to open the Word to his servants, to illuminate and apply its teachings. And since it was the Spirit of God that inspired the Bible, it is impossible that the teaching of the Spirit should ever be contrary to that of the Word.

The Spirit was not given—nor can it ever be bestowed—to supersede the Bible; for the Scriptures explicitly state that the Word of God is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested.⁶

⁵See A. G. Daniels, *The Abiding Gift of Prophecy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1936). For a homiletical treatment of the same, see Reuel U. Almocera's sermon, "Surviving the Age of Gullibility," for the Spirit of Prophecy Day, 12 October, 2002, Ellen G. White Research Center, Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, Cavite, Philippines.

⁶Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan: The Conflict of the Ages in the Christian Dispensation* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1888), 4.

Again, she declares,

Our position and faith is in the Bible. And never do we want any soul to bring in the Testimonies ahead of the Bible.⁷

In 1894, she wrote,

In public labor do not make prominent, and quote that which Sister White has written, as authority to sustain your positions. To do this will not increase faith in the testimonies. Bring your evidences, clear and plain, from the Word of God. A “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.⁸

Seven years later she maintained the same position,

Lay Sister White to one side. Do not quote my works again as long as you live until you can obey the Bible. When you make the Bible your food, your meat and your drink, when you make its principles the elements of your character, you will know better how to receive counsel from God. I exalt the precious Word before you today. Do not repeat what I have said, saying, “Sister White said this,” and “Sister White said that.” Find out what the Lord God of Israel says, and then do what He commands.⁹

As in the days of Ellen White, many are doing exactly the reverse of what she said in the paragraphs quoted above. Thus, as early as 1851, her husband, James White, the editor of the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, the official organ of the SDA movement, cautioned the members to make the relationship between the Bible and Ellen White’s writings clear. He wrote,

Every Christian is therefore in duty bound to take the Bible as a perfect rule of faith and duty. He should pray fervently to be aided by the Holy Spirit in searching the Scriptures for the whole truth, and for his whole duty. He is not at liberty to turn from them to learn his duty through any of the gifts. We say that the very moment he does, he places the gifts in a wrong place, and takes an extremely dangerous position. The Word should be in front, and the eye of the church should be placed upon it, as the rule to walk by, and the fountain of wisdom, from which to learn duty in “all good works.” But if a portion of the church err from the truths of the Bible, and become weak, and sickly, and the flock become scattered, so that

⁷Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1946), 256. “The Testimonies” is a reference to her own writings.

⁸Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1958, 1980), 3:29.

⁹*Ibid.*, 3:33.

it seems necessary for God to employ the gifts of the Spirit to correct, revive and heal the erring, we should let him work.¹⁰

It is clear that Ellen White and the leaders of the SDA movement during her day considered the Bible as the supreme authority, as well as the final test of faith and doctrine. Does this mean that her writings do not have authority? Does this mean that her inspiration is inferior to that of the Bible writers? Ellen White's writings may not be equally authoritative with that of the Bible, but they have authority due to the fact that the source of inspiration is the same. Further, her writings are authoritative because they derive their strength from the authoritative source itself, the Holy Scriptures. As long as her writings exalt the Scriptures and bring people back to them, remaining faithful to the teachings of the authoritative word of God, they should always be authoritative. This concept should lead us to the second point in our discussion of this essential: the purpose, role, and function of Ellen White's writings.

It could be said that Ellen White's writings serve a different purpose than that of the Bible. This is already implied in the statements quoted above. A closer look, however, at the purpose of Ellen White's writings reinforces their authority. She describes their purpose as follows:

I took the precious Bible and surrounded it with the several *Testimonies for the Church*, given for the people of God. Here, said I, the cases of nearly all are met. The sins they are to shun are pointed out. The counsel that they desire can be found here, given for other cases situated similarly to themselves. God has been pleased to give you line upon line and precept upon precept. But there are not many of you that really know what is contained in the *Testimonies*. You are not familiar with the Scriptures. If you had made God's word your study, with a desire to reach the Bible standard and attain to Christian perfection, you would not have needed the *Testimonies*. It is because you have neglected to acquaint yourselves with God's inspired Book that He has sought to reach you by simple, direct testimonies, calling your attention to the words of inspiration which you had neglected to obey, and urging you to fashion your lives in accordance with its pure and elevated teachings.

The written testimonies are not to give new light, but to impress vividly upon the heart the truths of inspiration already revealed . . . 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.¹¹

¹⁰James White, "The Gifts of the Gospel Church," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, 21 April 1851, 70. See also idem, "Time to Commence the Sabbath," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, 25 February 1868, 168.

¹¹Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 5:664-65.

Ellen White's writings exalt the Bible, bring people back to the Bible, help people understand the Bible, rebuke sin, and encourage obedience to the Bible.¹² Above all, her writings uplift Jesus as the only answer to humanity's problems. These are reasons enough to make her writings authoritative.

Therefore, we must firmly establish the authority of Ellen G. White's writings relative to that of the Bible. This is the first essential. The most concise document which illustrates the present understanding of SDAs on this issue is found in the statement released by the Biblical Research Institute in 1982, entitled, "The Inspiration and Authority of the Ellen G. White Writings." I quote a portion of the document to end our discussion on the first essential principle.

The following affirmations and denials speak to the issues which have been raised about the inspiration and authority of the Ellen White writings and their relation to the Bible. These clarifications should be taken as a whole. They are an attempt to express the present understanding of Seventh-day Adventists. They are not to be construed as a substitute for, or a part of, the two doctrinal statements quoted above [Beliefs #1 and #17 of the 27 Fundamental Beliefs].

Affirmations

1. We believe that Scripture is the divinely revealed Word of God and is inspired by the Holy Spirit.
2. We believe that the canon of Scripture is composed only of the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments.
3. We believe that Scripture is the foundation of faith and the final authority in all matters of doctrine and practice.
4. We believe that Scripture is the Word of God in human language.
5. We believe that Scripture teaches that the gift of prophecy will be manifest in the Christian church after New Testament times.
6. We believe that the ministry and writings of Ellen White were a manifestation of the gift of prophecy.
7. We believe that Ellen White was inspired by the Holy Spirit and that her writings, the product of that inspiration, are applicable and authoritative especially to Seventh-day Adventists.
8. We believe that the purposes of the Ellen White writings include guidance in understanding the teaching of Scripture and application of these teachings, with prophetic urgency, to the spiritual and moral life.

¹²Ellen G. White, *The Colporteur Evangelist: Instruction to Colporteurs* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1902), 37. See also idem, *Colporteur Ministry* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1953), 125; idem, *Ye Shall Receive Power* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1995), 232; idem, "The End of All Things Is at Hand," *Australian Union Conference Record*, 15 March 1905, 5; idem, "An Open Letter: From Mrs. E. G. White to All Who Love the Blessed Hope," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, 20 January 1903, 15; idem, *Evangelism*, 257; idem, *Selected Messages*, 3:30.

9. We believe that the acceptance of the prophetic gift of Ellen White is important to the nurture and unity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
10. We believe that Ellen White's use of literary sources and assistants finds parallels in some of the writings of the Bible.

Denials

1. We do not believe that the quality or degree of inspiration in the writings of Ellen White is different from that of Scripture.
2. We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White are an addition to the canon of Sacred Scripture.
3. We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White function as the foundation and final authority of Christian faith as does Scripture.
4. We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White may be used as the basis of doctrine.
5. We do not believe that the study of the writings of Ellen White may be used to replace the study of Scripture.
6. We do not believe that Scripture can be understood only through the writings of Ellen White.
7. We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White exhaust the meaning of Scripture.
8. We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White are essential for the proclamation of the truths of Scripture to society at large.
9. We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White are the product of mere Christian piety.
10. We do not believe that Ellen White's use of literary sources and assistants negates the inspiration of her writings.¹³

2. Gather all data or statements on the subject under investigation, considering each statement's literary and historical context, before drawing any conclusion.

It is very easy to arrive at wrong conclusions if judgments are based solely on isolated statements. Let us consider some examples to prove our point. First, let us take the classic example about eating eggs.

On 6 March 1869, Ellen White told the congregation of Battle Creek Tabernacle, "You place upon your tables butter, eggs, and meat, and your children partake of them. They are fed with the very things that will excite their animal passions and then you come to meeting and ask God to bless and save your children. How high do your prayers go?"¹⁴ In the same year, she wrote a letter to an SDA couple in which she outlined certain problems in their home involving two adolescent children, and she stated flatly: "Eggs should not be placed upon your

¹³Biblical Research Institute, "The Inspiration and Authority of the Ellen G. White Writings," *Adventist Review*, 23 December 1982, 9.

¹⁴White, *Testimonies*, 2:362.

table. They are an injury to your children.”¹⁵ Taking these statements at face value, one might readily conclude that Ellen White did not endorse eating eggs. But did she really advise SDAs in general to abstain from the use of eggs in their diet? If we follow the second principle suggested above, we will hesitate to make an outright conclusion. The following statement appears to be in contrast to the statements quoted above:

Get eggs of healthy fowls. Use these eggs cooked or raw. Drop them uncooked into the best unfermented wine you can find. This will supply that which is necessary to your system. Do not for a moment suppose that it will not be right to do this. . . . I say that milk and eggs should be included in your diet. . . . Eggs contain properties which are remedial agencies in counteracting poisons.¹⁶

Do not eat eggs. Eat raw eggs. These counsels appear to be in opposition to each other. Yet, both come from the same author. Did Ellen White get confused on the topic? Let us take another example.

One Sabbath morning Ellen White was sitting on the platform of the Battle Creek Tabernacle while a minister was about to lead the congregation in a pastoral prayer. As the minister appeared to remain standing for the prayer, Ellen White whispered hoarsely, “Get down on your knees.” In reporting this experience later, she added the comment, “This is the proper position always.”¹⁷ Many have taken this single passage as an injunction to always pray in a kneeling posture. If the second principle suggested above is followed, this practice is not always required. Let us consider other statements on posture in prayer. We find quotations such as the following:

Both in public and in private worship, it is our privilege to bow on our knees before the Lord when we offer our petitions to Him.¹⁸

There is no time or place in which it is inappropriate to offer up a petition to God. . . . In the crowds of the street, in the midst of a business engagement, we may send up a petition to God We should have the door of the heart open continually and our invitation going up that Jesus may come and abide as a heavenly guest in the soul.¹⁹

¹⁵Ibid., 2:400.

¹⁶Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Diet and Foods* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1976), 366-67.

¹⁷White, *Selected Messages*, 2:311.

¹⁸Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers: Instruction for All Who Are “Laborers Together with God”* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1948), 178.

¹⁹Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, n.d.), 99.

We must pray constantly, with a humble mind and a meek and lowly spirit. We need not wait for an opportunity to kneel before God. We can pray and talk with the Lord wherever we may be.²⁰

It is not always necessary to bow upon your knees in order to pray.²¹

We will be saved from making inappropriate conclusions if we simply gather all pertinent data regarding the topic under consideration before making final conclusions. But this principle must be pushed further. It is necessary to gather the data in their historical and literary context. This is especially true when there is a perceived superficial inconsistency or discrepancy that appears not to be in harmony with the larger body of data. Ellen White herself encouraged this. She said in 1875, "That which can be said of men under certain circumstances cannot be said of them under other circumstances."²² In 1904 she wrote something in the same tenor: "God wants us all to have common sense, and He wants us to reason from common sense. Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relation of things."²³ And here is the classic quote from Ellen White regarding this provision: "Regarding the testimonies, nothing is ignored; nothing is cast aside; but time and place must be considered."²⁴

There are some things that are true in one context that may not be true in another. Some things that are true at one time may become untrue at another. Thus, there is a need to discover the context of every given counsel before making final conclusions. Let us go back to the issue regarding "the voice of the General Conference" as no longer "the voice of God," mentioned at the beginning of this discussion. Studying the issue in its context saved my budding ministry and the faith of my young parishioners.

In 1875 Ellen White wrote concerning the General Conference in session: "But when the judgment of the General Conference, which is the highest authority that God has upon the earth, is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be maintained, but be surrendered."²⁵ However, in the early 1890s, a new situation developed. In 1891, Ellen White wrote that the advisers to the General Conference president, Elder O. A. Olsen, were blinding his eyes to the truth in regard to the manner in which the work of the church should be properly conducted. "They decided they would have their own way and carry out the matter

²⁰White, *Selected Messages*, 3:266.

²¹Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1942), 510.

²²White, *Testimonies*, 3:470.

²³White, *Selected Messages*, 3:217.

²⁴Ibid, 1:57.

²⁵White, *Testimonies*, 3:492.

as they chose.”²⁶ Thus the proper process for decision making at the General Conference was being thwarted by a few men of questionable motives.

This was the reason I was obliged to take the position that there was not the voice of God in the General Conference management and decisions. Methods and plans would be devised that God did not sanction, and yet Elder Olsen made it appear that the decisions of the General Conference were as the voice of God. Many of the positions taken, going forth as the voice of the General Conference, have been the voice of one, two, or three men who were misleading the Conference.²⁷

The following year, Ellen White explained very carefully the difference between the authority of the General Conference as a body of believers in general session and the authority of a few officers of the General Conference making decisions by themselves. In so doing, she explained the reasons for her statements regarding the General Conference as the voice of God:

At times, when a small group of men entrusted with the general management of the work have, in the name of the General Conference, sought to carry out unwise plans and to restrict God’s work, I have said that I could no longer regard the voice of the General Conference, represented by these few men, as the voice of God. But this is not saying that the decisions of a General Conference composed of an assembly of duly appointed, representative men from all parts of the field, should not be respected. God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority. The error that some are in danger of committing, is in giving to the mind and judgment of one man, or of a small group of men, the full measure of authority and influence that God has vested in His church, in the judgment and voice of the General Conference assembled to plan for the prosperity and advancement of His work.²⁸

In this context, it is not difficult to understand her later statements, frequently cited, in which she supposedly reversed her position and declared that she no longer regarded the voice of the General Conference as the voice of God.²⁹ In 1901, however, when the General Conference was reorganized to decentralize the leadership and make it more representative of the world field, Ellen White was quick to declare that “the Lord Himself interposed to set things in order,”³⁰ and to restore the authority of the General Conference based on the new order of things. Despite the fact that the reorganization of 1901 was to a large degree neutralized by the 1903 General Conference session, she continued to uphold the authority of

²⁶White, *Manuscript Releases*, 17:166.

²⁷Ibid., 167.

²⁸White, *Testimonies*, 9:260-61.

²⁹White, *Manuscript Releases*, 3:205 (1895); *ibid.*, 17:185 (1896); *ibid.*, 17:216 (1898).

³⁰Ibid., 3:205.

the church when assembled as a representative body of believers. Her last statement appeared in 1911: "God has invested His church with special authority and power which no one can be justified in disregarding and despising, for he who does this despises the voice of God."³¹

3. Work sensibly to determine the underlying principles and then apply the principles personally and consistently.

Ellen G. White wrote in 1907, "My writings will constantly speak, and their work will go forward as long as time shall last."³² How can this happen when many of her counsels have now become dated (see the following examples)? How can this happen when she did not directly address many problems we have today, such as violent television programs, pornography on the Internet, and even cloning?

Her writings are still relevant because they contain not only specific counsels but principles which are as applicable today as they were during her time. Ellen White expected that we should treat the inspired writings as relevant and authoritative even today. She wrote in 1909,

The great conflict is right at hand in which all will take sides. In it the whole Christian world will be involved. Daily, hourly, we must be actuated by the *principles* of the Word of God. Self must be sanctified by the principles of the righteousness, the mercy, and the love of God.

At every point of uncertainty, pray, and earnestly inquire, "Is this the way of the Lord?" With your Bibles before you, consult with God as to what He would have you do. *Holy principles* are revealed in the Word of God. The source of all true wisdom is found in the cross of Calvary.³³

Again,

The Bible is the guidebook that is to decide the many difficult problems that rise in minds that are selfishly inclined. It is a reflection of the wisdom of God, and not only furnishes *great and important principles*, but supplies practical lessons for the life and conduct of man toward his fellow man.³⁴

We find the same tenor when Ellen White spoke about her own writings:

³¹Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles in the Christian Dispensation* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 164.

³²White, *Selected Messages*, 1:55.

³³Ellen G. White, *Sermons and Talks* (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990, 1994), 2:308. Emphasis mine.

³⁴Ellen G. White, *The Upward Look* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1982), 187. Emphasis mine.

I was then directed to bring out *general principles*, in speaking and in writing, and at the same time specify the dangers, errors, and sins of some individuals, that all might be warned, reprov'd, and counseled. I saw that all should search their own hearts and lives closely to see if they had not made the same mistakes for which others were corrected and if the warnings given for others did not apply to their own cases. If so; they should feel that the counsel and reproofs were given especially for them and should make as practical an application of them as though they were especially addressed to themselves.³⁵

Notice that Ellen White said that her writings contain general principles and specific counsels. The specific counsels may not be applicable to us today, but the principles are timeless and universal in application. Let us now proceed to examine three examples illustrating that seemingly dated counsels, perceived to be impractical and even contradicting or confusing, are still relevant for us today.

Teaching Girls to Harness and Drive Horses

In 1903, Ellen White said that “if girls, in turn, could learn to harness and drive a horse, . . . they would be better fitted to meet the emergencies of life.”³⁶ Taking this counsel seriously, some Adventist reformers today decry the lack of teaching girls to harness horses in our schools. They advocate that we should follow the blueprint strictly. Naturally, this view is impractical today. True, this was a specific counsel in 1903. And it was practical, because that was a horse-and-buggy culture. Now, in our cyberspace society, it is no longer practical. But does this mean that we can now discard the counsel? Not at all, because the counsel contains principles which are applicable in our day. At a closer look, what Ellen White was advocating was practical education in our schools. If we should apply this counsel in principle in our days, we may expect Ellen White to say that girls who know how to drive and maintain cars “would be better fitted to meet the emergencies of life.” The counsel is still relevant because of its underlying principle.

Purchasing and Riding of Bicycles

In July 1894, Ellen White sent a letter to the denomination’s headquarters in Battle Creek, Michigan, in which she condemned the purchase and riding of bicycles.³⁷ How should we apply such counsel today? Does it mean that SDAs should not own bicycles?

In answering this question we need to examine the historical context (as suggested in essential principle number 2). It is clear from the context that Ellen

³⁵White, *Testimonies*, 2:687. Emphasis mine.

³⁶Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1952), 216–17.

³⁷White, *Testimonies*, 8:50-53.

White was not so much against buying and owning bicycles as she was against the spirit of idolatry, competition, and self-aggrandizement that had become evident in the bicycle craze at Battle Creek. Some of the specifics of the counsel no longer apply, but the principle on which the counsel rests remains applicable across time and space.

And what are the principles behind this particular case? George Knight, in his treatment of the subject, lists the following: (1) Christians are not to spend money on selfish gratification; (2) Christians are not to strive for mastery over one another by doing things that generate a spirit of strife and contention; (3) Christians should focus their primary values on the kingdom to come and on helping others during the present period of history; and (4) Satan will always have a scheme to derail Christians into the realm of selfish indulgence.³⁸

The counsel on the purchase and riding of bicycles is still relevant today. It has underlying principles which could be applicable to anyone in this generation.

Entrance Age of School Children

The issue of the age at which children should enter school is still debated in the church today. In 1872, Ellen White wrote, "Parents should be the only teachers of their children until they have reached eight or ten years of age."³⁹ The word "only" in the statement implies inflexibility. The statement does not have room for exceptions. Does this mean that we cannot in any case send our children to school before they reach at least eight years of age? Even during her lifetime, this issue had already surfaced. In fact, her own grandchildren were involved. So the church leaders arranged an interview with her to determine her definitive interpretation of the statement. Fortunately for us, most of the interview was recorded.⁴⁰

Throughout the document we see that Ellen White is flexible. She is also a realist and, above all, she puts emphasis on underlying principles rather than on the specifics of the counsel. At the beginning of the interview Ellen White readily stated the ideal. The ideal is that the home should be a church and a school for the children. Then she said,

Mothers should be able to instruct their little ones wisely during the earlier years of childhood. *If* every mother were capable of doing this, and would take time to teach her children the lessons they should learn in early life, then all children could be kept in the home school until they are eight, or nine, or ten years old."⁴¹

Unfortunately, today many mothers are not capable. Some are able, but because they need to work, they do not have time to teach their children, even

³⁸Knight, 102-3.

³⁹White, *Testimonies*, 3:137.

⁴⁰White, *Selected Messages*, 3:214-26.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 3:214. Emphasis mine. (Notice the word "If": it shows flexibility).

during this early age. Ellen White recognized this. That is why she said that we should handle this situation sensibly.⁴² In fact, it was in the context of this problem that she wrote with passion,

That is how it is, and my mind has been greatly stirred in regard to the idea, 'Why, Sister White has said so and so, and Sister White has said so and so; and therefore we are going right up to it.' God wants us all to have common sense, and He wants us to reason from common sense. Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relation of things."⁴³

Notice that she said to use common sense. This implies that we should not grab any counsel blindly without reasoning or common sense. Mindless uses of her counsels are harmful. This is illustrated by a story about missionaries at Solusi Mission, Rhodesia, in 1894. Taking Ellen White's counsel on avoiding drugs seriously and inflexibly, the faithful health reformers never took quinine during a major outbreak of malaria in 1898. Of the seven who arrived in Rhodesia in 1894, only three survived. Two recovered in the hospital. The one remaining missionary was the "unfaithful" one. He had used quinine, arguing that a missionary who uses harmful drugs is better than a dead missionary. He used common sense, though he violated the ideal.

In the same vein, Ellen White was questioned by a missionary in the South Pacific who refused to give his oldest son quinine because of her counsel on harmful drugs. "Would I have sinned," he asked her, "to give the boy quinine when I knew of no other way to check malaria and when the prospect was that he would die without it?" In reply she said, "No, we are expected to do the best we can."⁴⁴

The cases mentioned above show that we are expected to exert effort to understand the counsels sensibly. Frequently counsels represent an ideal situation, but practical realities should be considered. Reason and common sense are necessary in interpreting Ellen White's writings. A balance between faith and God-given reason is necessary. Extremes are harmful. Inspiration should always guide rational thinking.

If the above essential procedures are followed faithfully, Ellen White's writings will still speak to us today. They will still be relevant to Asians even in this cyberspace age. The writings could bring out underlying principles which will help us lead a balanced Christian life in the name of Jesus Christ, the Savior and Lord of mankind.

⁴²Ibid., 3:215.

⁴³Ibid., 3:217.

⁴⁴Ibid., 2:281.

Conclusion

By creating a mnemonic device using the initials of the prophetess, we may grasp the essentials needed to interpret Ellen G. White's writings profitably, correctly, and accurately:

1. **E**stablish the authority of Ellen White's writings relative to that of the Bible.
2. **G**ather all data or statements on the subject under investigation, considering each statement's literary and historical context before drawing any final conclusion.
3. **W**ork sensibly to determine the underlying principles, then apply those principles personally and consistently.

When we faithfully, consistently, and honestly follow these essential principles, we will be on the way to better understanding the message of this messenger of God.