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**RESPONSE TO REUEL U. ALMOCERA'S PAPER
"ESSENTIALS IN INTERPRETING
ELLEN G. WHITE'S WRITINGS
TO AN ASIAN AUDIENCE"**

NESTOR C. RILLOMA, Th.D.

Editor, Philippine Publishing House

Caloocan City, Philippines

Dr. Reuel Almocera targets the Adventist populace in his presentation on the essentials for interpreting Ellen G. White's writings to an Asian audience. I understand this audience to be referring to the ordinary, yet important, members of our local churches. I believe Almocera assumes that most of our local church members, particularly in Asia, have very limited access to Ellen White's writings. Because of this, the problem of misuse, abuse, and misinterpretation is a reality. This therefore creates a need for local church members to have the basic knowledge and essential tools for making the study of her writings relevant, dynamic, and beneficial. The paper is geared toward the goal of equipping local church members with the proper frame of reference for the interpretation of the message given to Ellen White.

Almocera's approach in his presentation lends itself more to anecdotal than to propositional realities. His paper enumerates the essential hermeneutical elements intertwined in the short accounts and incidents he cites as examples. This approach is more acceptable to the general reader, for it directly presents what he intends his audience to absorb and internalize. The experiences mentioned intensify the need to possess the essentials enumerated in the process of interpreting Ellen White's writings.

My response is categorized in three areas of concern: strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations.

Strengths

1. Although the paper is intended to cater to the needs of the general membership of the church, the writer maintains a level of professional and scholarly writing using proper documentation of references and ideas borrowed from other published works.

2. Introducing the subject by using a personal experience, the author, I believe, catches the interest and attention of the readers, for his experience is repeated in situations where offshoots and other renegade groups of the SDA church attack, accuse, and trouble local church members.

3. The examples cited from the writings of Ellen White are common ones pointed out by those who want to cause division and create confusion through the issues raised, which are hermeneutical in nature.

4. The emphasis on the need to have the essential principles for interpreting the writings of Ellen White as the central focus of the paper is a necessary emphasis to which church leaders, educators, and theologians must give priority.

5. In his introduction, the author delimits the coverage and contents of the presentation to bring to the consciousness of the readers the essentials for correctly interpreting Ellen White's writings.

6. In presenting his ideas, the writer refuses to use theological vocabulary, which could have served as an obstacle for the popular audience's understanding of the tissues he brings out.

7. Finally, the author employs a good memory device by using the initials of Ellen G. White for his readers to easily remember the three essentials pointed out in the paper.

Weaknesses

1. The essentials for interpreting the writings of Ellen White are borrowed concepts that were originally used by T. Housel Jemison. Roger W. Coon also used the concepts, as reflected in his subtitle, "Three Rules of Hermeneutics." This should have been acknowledged in the footnotes.

2. There is a need to give examples from the writings of Ellen White on the five reasons cited to reinforce and intensify the need for hermeneutical principles.

3. The example of working on a farm on Friday evening, cited under point 6 of needs for principles for interpreting Ellen White's writings, should have been documented for readers to further investigate.

4. It would have been easier for readers to appreciate the third essential had the paper defined "principle" and further included a list of criteria on how to discover a principle from the writings of Ellen White. Differentiating a principle from a guideline or policy would have been beneficial to the common reader.

5. Contextualizing the three essentials in interpreting Ellen White's writings in the Asian context should have been reflected in the paper. The personal training and immersion of the writer in the different Asian cultures should have helped to make the paper relevant to an Asian audience. The title of the paper promises to offer this to the readers.

Recommendations

There is a need to present a macro perspective on the importance of the essentials mentioned in the paper in relation to the theological landscape of the Seventh-day Adventist church. From 29 April to 8 May 2002 some forty-five church leaders gathered to consider the topic, "Theological Unity in a Growing World Church." The General Conference President, Jan Paulsen, gave the keynote address entitled, "The Theological Landscape." The present concern of Almocera's paper would impact two of the ten issues identified by the leadership that are facing the Adventist church today.

The first focus is on the question of identity. It is necessary to continue to create a profile of our Adventist identity in our pulpits, classrooms, and research, even in our printed materials and publications. A better understanding of the ministry of Ellen White and the authority of her writings serve as a pillar and a landmark in maintaining our unique identity as a prophetic movement. The three essentials in the paper would aid our church members in having a common ground of understanding the gift of prophecy exemplified in Ellen White's writings.

The second focus is on the issue of the remnant. Adventists believe that they are special. This remnant concept would always include the perception about the role of Ellen White in the Adventist church. This does not mean exclusivity as perceived by some. Adventist church members need to be constantly aware of the implications of any claim to be the remnant church with a special message for the world. The three essentials for interpreting Ellen White's writings are factors that would help to establish our members on the historic foundation of our faith and direct their focus on the benefits derived from the gift of prophecy given to the remnant church.

My deepest concern, however, is with regard to the role of the ordinary church member who silently inquires on the question of methodology. How can an ordinary church member (a) establish the authority of Ellen White's writings relative to that of the Bible; (b) gather all data on the subject under investigation, considering each statement's literary and historical context before drawing his conclusion; and (c) work sensibly to determine the underlying principles and apply them personally and consistently?

The three essentials call for action on the part of pastoral leadership. First, there is the need for a consistent, systematic, and thorough process of educating and teaching our members on the role of Ellen White in the Adventist Church. There is no substitute for providing our members with the biblical and theological

basis of our faith directly related to our affirmation about the gift of prophecy exemplified in the life and ministry of Ellen White.

Second, greater efforts, coupled with financial appropriations, should be the thrust of the leadership of the church in providing our church members access to the published writings of Ellen White. It is a fact that, generally, local church members only have access to the writings of Ellen White through the Conflict of the Ages Series, *Steps to Christ*, and selected quotations published in morning devotionals. A visit to the homes of our parishioners reveals this reality. It would be very difficult for our members, most pastors included, to personally study the issues raised by reformers and offshoot groups if they do not have full access to the published works of Ellen White.

Third, our members need to be trained in the area of discovering principles in the writings of Ellen White. The paper would have been more beneficial if this concern had been addressed. Those who oppose the leadership of the church are more equipped with published statements and materials, while our workers and members starve because of a lack of information. This need is preceded by a need to develop the habit of reading and studying the available writings.

Fourth, our people should distinguish the minor from the major issues in the writings of Ellen White. Most of the examples cited in the paper are minor ones or without bearing on our personal salvation and relationship with Jesus: eating eggs, the proper position in prayer, the voice of the General Conference, teaching girls to harness and drive horses, purchasing and riding bicycles, and the entrance age of school children. These are not the major themes of the writings of Ellen White. Let us avoid repeating the blunder of majoring in minors.

The Ellen G. White Estate has identified seven major themes in the writings of Ellen White, which are as follows:

1. The Love of God
2. The Great Controversy
3. Jesus, the Cross, and Salvation through Him
4. The Centrality of the Bible
5. The Second Coming
6. The Third Angel's Message and the Adventist Mission
7. Practical Christianity and the Development of Christian Character

These, I believe, should be the basic targets of the essentials pointed out in the paper. Church members will be edified and blessed if the issues related to these themes are thoroughly studied and questions related to them answered and clarified.

One last concern of this response is how the Asian mind will adapt to the three essentials. Here are three suggestions that may serve as a starting point:

1. Discover parallel situations and incidents in the Asian culture that are similar to those incidents in the writings of Ellen White.

2. Avoid creating an issue if the situation is not a concern for church members in Asian churches.

3. Equip church members with materials that can be used in their daily personal study by conducting regular seminars, Bible conferences, and symposia.

Finally, Almocera's ideas apply to us as leaders of the Adventist Church in our dual responsibilities—both pastoral and theological. Shepherding the flock means feeding and instructing them on the basic issues and contents of our faith. Theologically, we are guardians of the truth entrusted to the church by our Lord. This includes securing the correct and proper interpretation of the contents of the Adventist faith. To this end we are called upon by our Lord to be committed and competent in the management of God's people, particularly in Asia.