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## **SANCTIFICATION AND SALVATION IN ELLEN G. WHITE'S EARLY RELIGIOUS THOUGHT**

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### **Introduction**

Ellen White was reared in a Methodist home and baptized as a Methodist. Examination of her early published writings reveals a great emphasis on sanctification and right behavior. Her preoccupation with holiness and human responsibility tends to raise questions concerning the early development of her concept of salvation, especially with respect to the relationship between sanctification and salvation. The problem addressed in this study is that of seeking to understand how factors in her early life, especially her early experience in the Methodist Church, influenced her early religious development.

The purpose of this paper is (1) to investigate the influence of Methodism in relationship with other significant factors on the formation and development of Ellen White's early religious thought; and (2) to examine how these influences may have affected her views concerning the relationship between sanctification and salvation.

### **Ellen White's Early Religious Environment**

Ellen Gould Harmon-White<sup>1</sup> and her twin sister Elizabeth were born to Robert and Eunice Harmon at Gorham, Maine, on 26 November 1827 as the last of eight children in the Harmon family.<sup>2</sup> Sometime between 1831 and 1833, the family

<sup>1</sup>Ellen White's married name is used throughout this study although she was not married until 1846.

<sup>2</sup>Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 1:9.

moved about twelve miles east to the seacoast town of Portland, where Ellen's father practiced the trade of hat making.<sup>3</sup> There Ellen spent most of her childhood and youth.

According to Ellen White, her parents were "devoted members" of the Methodist Episcopal Church during her early years. In that church they "held prominent connection," "labored for the conversion of sinners," and helped to "build up the cause of God" for some forty years.<sup>4</sup> Ellen's father served as an "exhorter" and led out in Methodist meetings.<sup>5</sup> As Methodists, Ellen's parents were expected to show a continuing desire for salvation by attending to such "ordinances of God" as regular public worship, listening to the word of God read and expounded, studying the Bible, family and private prayer, and fasting.<sup>6</sup>

Methodist religious leaders were urged to take special interest in the young. Where there were ten or more children whose parents belonged to a Methodist society, society leaders were to meet with the children every week, or a least every other week. Leaders and/or parents were admonished to "procure our instructions or catechisms" for the children. Teachings presented in the catechisms were to be explained and impressed on the hearts of the children. Children were urged to read the Methodist catechisms and commit their teachings to memory.<sup>7</sup> The catechisms were to be used as extensively as possible, both at Sunday school and at home. Preachers were to "enforce upon parents and Sunday school teachers the great importance of instructing children in the doctrines and duties of our holy religion."<sup>8</sup> Whenever church leaders visited a home, they were to talk and pray with the children there. Elders, deacons, and preachers were to keep a list of the names of

<sup>3</sup>Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White*, vol. 1, *The Early Years* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1985), 18.

<sup>4</sup>White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 1:9.

<sup>5</sup>Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1915), 38.

<sup>6</sup>Methodist Episcopal Church, *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: B. Waugh and T. Mason, 1835), 80. Hereafter cited as *Doctrines and Discipline*, 1835.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 59. Cf. Methodist Episcopal Conference, *The Catechisms of the Wesleyan Methodists: Compiled and Published by Order of the British Conference: Revised and Adapted to the Use of Families and Schools Connected with the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 3 vols. (New York: J. Emory and D. Waugh, 1829). These catechisms were first published in America in 1826. They were used extensively by the Methodist Episcopal Church in the north until 1852, and by Methodists in the south until at least 1910. The first catechism was designated "for children of tender years." It is hereafter referred to as *Catechism 1*. The second catechism was prepared "for children of seven years of age and upwards," and is hereafter referred to as *Catechism 2*. The third catechism was intended "for the use of young persons," and is hereafter referred to as *Catechism 3*.

<sup>8</sup>Methodist Episcopal Church, *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), 62. Hereafter cited as *Doctrines and Discipline*, 1840.

the children, and when any gave evidence of being spiritually awakened, admit them into the society.<sup>9</sup> Prior to being accepted into the church, all candidates for membership were to be examined before the congregation by the minister in charge, and "give satisfactory assurances both of the correctness of their faith, and their willingness to observe and keep the rules of the Church."<sup>10</sup>

The effectiveness of the religious influences that surrounded Ellen White during her early years was evidenced by the conversion of all eight Harmon children to the Methodist faith.<sup>11</sup> Ellen herself experienced conversion while attending a Methodist camp meeting.<sup>12</sup> After being baptized some time later, she was received into the Methodist Episcopal Church as a member.<sup>13</sup>

### Interest in Christ's Second Coming

When Ellen was nine years old, she found a scrap of paper that told of a man in England who was preaching that the world would be consumed in about thirty years. Interested, she took the scrap home and read it to her family. As she thought about the predicted event, she was seized with "great terror." She could hardly sleep for several nights, and prayed continually that she would be ready for Christ's return.<sup>14</sup>

### Serious Injury

Ellen was still nine years old when she was struck on the nose by a stone thrown in anger by an older school acquaintance.<sup>15</sup> The injury was serious. Only her mother believed that she would live.<sup>16</sup> For three weeks she remained in a state of unconsciousness.

<sup>9</sup>Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Church* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), 1:215. In this reference, Bangs appears to have been quoting from the *Doctrines and Discipline* voted at the 1784 General Conference at which the Methodist Episcopal Church was officially organized in North America. Cf. *Doctrines and Discipline*, 1835, 59-60.

<sup>10</sup>*Doctrines and Discipline*, 1840, 84.

<sup>11</sup>White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 1:9.

<sup>12</sup>Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2, *My Christian Experience, Views and Labors in Connection with the Rise and Progress of the Third Angel's Message* (Battle Creek, MI: n.p., 1860), 12. Hereafter cited as *Spiritual Gifts*, 2.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>14</sup>Ellen G. White, "Mrs. Ellen G. White: Her Life, Christian Experience, and Labors," 20 January 1876. This article is part of an autobiographical series with the same title in *Signs of the Times*, 6 January- 11 May 1876. Reprinted in Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times Articles*, 4 vols. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, n.d.), 1:21.

<sup>15</sup>White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 2:7.

<sup>16</sup>White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 1:10.

After regaining consciousness, Ellen lay for many weeks in a large cradle made for her. During that time she was “reduced almost to a skeleton.”<sup>17</sup> Overhearing friends remark with pity on her appearance, she requested a mirror and was shocked by what she saw. Her nose had been broken, and every feature of her face seemed changed.<sup>18</sup>

Ellen’s injury profoundly affected her emotional and spiritual life. The thought of carrying her disfigurement through life seemed unbearable to her. Seeing no pleasure in life, she had no desire to live, but “dared not die,” for she was “not prepared.”<sup>19</sup> Concerned about her spiritual condition, and fearing that she might not live, she found some measure of relief through prayer. Recalling her childhood feelings in later years, she wrote,

When Christian friends visited the family, they would ask my mother if she had talked with me about dying. I overheard this and it roused me. I desired to become a Christian and prayed as well as I could for the forgiveness of my sins. I felt a peace of mind resulting. I loved every one and felt desirous that all should have their sins forgiven and love Jesus as I did.<sup>20</sup>

The sense of pardon and peace Ellen had found did not last. Because of the continuing physical effects of the injury, school authorities advised that she be withdrawn from school until her condition should improve.<sup>21</sup> She never returned to school except for a brief period of attendance at a female seminary when she was about twelve years old.<sup>22</sup> Sensitive to the treatment she received from others because of her disfigurement and inability to attend school, she often felt “mortified and wretched in spirit” and sought out some lonely place in which to brood over her trials.<sup>23</sup> Her ambition “to become a scholar” was thwarted by inability to concentrate on her studies. Feeling “unreconciled” to her “lot,” she sometimes “murmured against the providence of God for thus afflicting me,”<sup>24</sup> and felt condemned for allowing “such rebellious thoughts” to “take possession” of her mind.<sup>25</sup> Reflecting on this period she wrote,

<sup>17</sup>White, *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White*, 17.

<sup>18</sup>White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 2:8-9.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 9.

<sup>20</sup>White, *Signs of the Times Articles*, 1:20.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 14; White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 1:13. Because of chronological inaccuracies in some of Ellen White’s autobiographical accounts, there is room for some uncertainty concerning her exact age when she attended the female seminary.

<sup>23</sup>White, *Signs of the Times Articles*, 1:20.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>White, *Signs of the Times Articles*, 1:21.

The happy confidence in the Saviour's love that I had enjoyed during my illness, was gone. . . . At times my sense of guilt and responsibility to God lay so heavy upon my soul, that I could not sleep but lay awake for hours, thinking of my lost condition and what was best for me to do. . . . My prospect of worldly enjoyment was blighted, and heaven was closed against me.<sup>26</sup>

### Attendance at the 1840 Millerite Meetings

In March 1840, William Miller presented a series of lectures in Ellen's home town of Portland on his belief that Christ would return to earth about the year 1843, only a few years away. Like many others, Ellen went to hear his "solemn and powerful" sermons at the Casco Street Christian Church.<sup>27</sup>

Miller's lectures had a "great effect" upon Ellen, yet it seemed hard for her to "give entirely up to the Lord."<sup>28</sup> She "knew" that she "must be lost" if Jesus would come and find her as she then was. At times she was "greatly distressed" about her "situation."<sup>29</sup> In spite of coming forward to take her place at the "anxious seat" with "hundreds" of other "seekers" responding to Miller's invitation, Ellen remained in "darkness and despair."<sup>30</sup>

### Conversion and Probation in the Methodist Church

During the "following summer," Ellen accompanied her parents to a Methodist camp meeting at Buxton, Maine. Still spiritually anxious, she was "fully resolved to seek the Lord in earnest there, and obtain, if possible, the pardon of my sins."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid. According to L. D. Flemming, pastor of the Casco Street Christian Church, more than two hundred persons professed conversion in meetings which continued after Miller's departure. Several grogshops were converted into meeting houses, one or two gambling places were shut down, and small prayer meetings were established in almost every part of the city. On April 4, Fleming went to one such meeting in the business section of town, where he found thirty or forty men from different denominations gathered together for prayer at eleven o'clock in the morning. See F. D. Nichol, *The Midnight Cry* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1944), 76-78.

<sup>28</sup>White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 2:12.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>White, *Signs of the Times Articles*, 1:21.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid. While the "following summer" would seem to have been the summer of 1840 that followed Miller's first series of lectures at Portland in March, it may actually have been the summer of 1841. This possibility is raised by consideration of the probable length of her probationary period in the Methodist Church which began shortly after her return from the Methodist camp meeting at which she experienced conversion, and presumably lasted until the time of her baptism. This chronological uncertainty is discussed below in connection with the time of her baptism.

Reference to her conversion experience, which took place during one of the meetings at Buxton, is found in several of her autobiographical editions. In 1851 she stated simply, "at the age of eleven years I was converted."<sup>32</sup> In 1860 she declared, "I commenced there to seek the Lord with all my heart. My mind was in great distress; but at a prayer meeting I found relief."<sup>33</sup>

Not long after returning home from the camp meeting at which she experienced conversion, Ellen, with several other persons, was taken into the Methodist Church on probation.<sup>34</sup> Ellen herself seems to have felt the need for such a period. In 1852 she wrote that at the time of her conversion a minister had spoken to her about being baptized. She had told him she could not be baptized then, but wanted first to see if she could "endure the trials a Christian must endure" before she received such a "solemn ordinance."<sup>35</sup> This decision seems to have reflected a great concern for sanctification and a tendency to feel that she must be consistently good in order to remain in God's favor. She often feared that she was not a true Christian and was "harassed by perplexing doubts" as to the genuineness of her conversion.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup>Ellen G. White, "Experience and Views," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Extra, 21 July 1851, [1]-2. Reprinted in Ellen G. White, *Present Truth and Review and Herald Articles*, 6 vols. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, n.d.), 1:13-14.

The assertion that she was converted at the age of eleven is probably not correct. She was born in November 1827. Her conversion appears to have occurred after her attendance at Miller's lectures in March 1840, and thus could not have taken place earlier than the summer of 1840, about four months after her twelfth birthday. In the same article, she wrote that she attended Miller's second series of lectures at Portland when she was thirteen. This is incorrect, since these lectures were in June 1842, more than six months after her fourteenth birthday.

<sup>33</sup>White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 2:12.

<sup>34</sup>White, *Signs of the Times Articles*, 1:23. Ellen White has given little information about the nature and purpose of the probationary period, but according to *Doctrines and Discipline*, 1840, 84, prospective members were not to be received into the church unless "recommended by a leader with whom they have met at least six months on trial, and have been baptized." The fact that those desiring membership must "*on examination by the minister in charge, before the Church, give satisfactory assurances both of the correctness of their faith, and their willingness to observe and keep the rules of the church*" suggests that they probably received instructions during the probationary period. Emphasis mine.

<sup>35</sup>Ellen G. White, "Communications," *Youth's Instructor*, December 1852, 21.

<sup>36</sup>White, *Signs of the Times Articles*, 1:23.

### Attendance at the 1842 Millerite Meetings

From 4-12 June 1842, William Miller conducted a second series of lectures at Portland.<sup>37</sup> Ellen attended these meetings and was impressed by what she heard, but felt that she was “not holy, not ready to see Jesus.”<sup>38</sup>

Responding to the first invitation for sinners to come forward for prayer, she found some relief from her anxiety. Yet she “knew” that a “great work” must be done in order for her to be prepared for heaven. She was “hungering and thirsting for full salvation, and an entire conformity to the will of God.” She longed for entire sanctification, for “full and free salvation, but knew not how to obtain it”<sup>39</sup> Her feelings were apparently based, as earlier, on “despair of at once attaining to the perfection of Christian character.”<sup>40</sup>

### Baptism

In spite of her continuing anxiety, Ellen was baptized by immersion in the sea (Casco Bay) with eleven other candidates and received into full membership in the Methodist Church on the same day.<sup>41</sup> From the sequence of events presented in her autobiographical accounts, it appears that her baptism occurred prior to her attendance at Miller’s lectures. Documentary evidence indicates, however, that she was received into the Methodist Church on 26 June 1842, two weeks after Miller left Portland.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>37</sup>See “Portland Conference and Lectures,” in *Signs of the Times*, 22 June 1842, 96. This journal was published by Millerites and should not be confused with the later *Signs of the Times* in which Ellen White’s 1876 series of autobiographical articles was published.

<sup>38</sup>White, *Present Truth and Review and Herald Articles*, 1:13. Cf. White, *Signs of the Times Articles*, 1:23.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>White, *Signs of the Times Articles*, 1:22.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>42</sup>The membership records of the Portland Methodist Episcopal Church of which Ellen (Harmon) White became a member, give only the year of her baptism on the page which records her immersion. The page which records her being disfellowshipped gives 26 June 1842 as the date of her entry into the church. According to her testimony, this was the same day as her baptism. A photocopy of pertinent membership records from Ellen’s church is available at the Ellen G. White Research Center, Andrews University, in DF 571.

Although it is possible that the date given in the Methodist Church records for Ellen’s acceptance into the church as a member is incorrect, it would seem more likely that the actual sequence of events is reversed in her autobiographical accounts. Other chronological discrepancies in her autobiographical accounts have already been noted. In addition, none of these accounts gives a specific date for her baptism as do the church records.

Baptism was an emotional experience for Ellen. Recalling the event, she wrote in 1860, "When I arose out of the water, my strength was nearly gone, for the power of God rested upon me. Such a rich blessing I never experienced before. I felt dead to the world, and that my sins were all washed away."<sup>43</sup>

### Perplexity Concerning Sanctification

After Miller's departure from Portland and Ellen's subsequent baptism and full acceptance into the Methodist Church, she frequently attended Millerite meetings that continued in the Casco Street Church. She believed Jesus would come soon, and "constantly dwelt upon the subject of holiness of heart."<sup>44</sup> A tendency to regard acceptance by God as dependent on sanctification seems evident in her later description, "I longed above all things to obtain this great blessing [holiness of heart], and to feel that I was entirely accepted of God."<sup>45</sup> She explained,

My ideas concerning justification and sanctification were confused. These two states were presented to my mind as separate and distinct from each other. Yet I failed to comprehend the difference or understand the meaning of the terms, and all the explanations of the preachers increased my difficulties.

I felt that I could only claim what they called justification. In the Word of God I read that without holiness no man should see God. Then there was some higher attainment that I must reach before I could be sure of eternal life.<sup>46</sup>

Since her confusion and anxiety occurred while she was a Methodist, examination of the relationship between sanctification and salvation as taught by Methodists seems appropriate.

### Wesley's Views about "Entire" Sanctification

According to Wesley, sanctification is "in some degree, the immediate *fruit* of justification."<sup>47</sup> Indeed, "In that instant [of justification]" believers are "'born

<sup>43</sup>White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 2:13.

<sup>44</sup>White, *Signs of the Times Articles*, 1:24.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid. Reference to Heb 12:14 suggests that her belief in the need for holiness was grounded in Scripture, not Methodism. However, this passage was emphasized by Wesley and reflected a Methodist emphasis.

<sup>47</sup>John Wesley, "Justification by Faith," *The Works of John Wesley*, vols. 1-4: *Sermons*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984-1987), 1:187. Cited hereafter as *Sermons*. Emphasis mine.



from above,' 'born of the Spirit.' There is a *real* as well as a *relative* change."<sup>48</sup> Sanctification begins at the new birth. Believers "go on from grace to grace;" are "careful to 'abstain from all appearance of evil';" are "'zealous of good works';" and "walk in all his [God's] ordinances blameless," but they are not yet entirely sanctified. They "wait for entire sanctification, for a full salvation" from all their sins in which they "'go on to perfection'," or "perfect love" which excludes all sin and fills the heart, "taking up the whole capacity of the soul."<sup>49</sup> While a justified Christian should be "so far perfect as not to commit sin," it is only those who "are strong in the Lord," and "have overcome the wicked one," of whom it can be said that they are "in such a sense perfect, as, secondly, to be freed from evil thoughts and evil tempers."<sup>50</sup> To Wesley, being "sanctified throughout" meant being "renewed in the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness."<sup>51</sup> It meant being a "perfect Christian" and "loving God with all our heart, and mind, and soul."<sup>52</sup> He avoided the term "sinless perfection" and taught that perfection in this life does not exclude minor "involuntary transgressions" or mistakes which he did not regard as sin.<sup>53</sup>

While Wesley regarded sanctification as a gradual work of grace, he held that "entire" sanctification (being "sanctified, saved from sin and perfected in love") is an instantaneous work.<sup>54</sup> He noted that it is often not received until a little before death, because it is generally not expected sooner.<sup>55</sup> Perfection is available

<sup>48</sup>Wesley, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," *Sermons*, 2:158. The "relative" change was justification, pardon, forgiveness, and acceptance with God based on the blood and righteousness of Christ as the "meritorious cause." The "real" change was inward renewal and the process of sanctification. *Ibid.*, 157-60.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 159-60.

<sup>50</sup>Wesley, "Christian Perfection," *Sermons*, 2:116-17.

<sup>51</sup>John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Cincinnati: Swormsted and Poe, 1859), 45.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>53</sup>In Wesley's words: "(1.) Not only sin, properly so called—that is, a voluntary transgression of a known law—but sin, improperly so called—that is, an involuntary transgression of a divine law, known or unknown—needs the atoning blood. (2.) I believe that there is no such perfection in this life as excludes these involuntary transgressions, which I apprehend to be naturally consequent on the ignorance and mistakes inseparable from mortality. (3.) Therefore *sinless perfection* is a phrase I never use, lest I should seem to contradict myself. (4.) I believe a person filled with the love of God is still liable to these involuntary transgressions. (5.) Such transgressions you may call sins, if you please: I do not, for the reasons above mentioned." *Ibid.*, 68-69. See also pp. 42-43, 64, 116-17, 171.

<sup>54</sup>Wesley, "The Scripture Way to Salvation," *Sermons*, 2:168-69. Cf. Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, 35-36, 82.

<sup>55</sup>Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, 50. Note also pp. 50-59, 170, 175. According to Wesley, perfection usually comes many years after justification, but can come much sooner.

at any time after justification.<sup>56</sup> Although it is received by simple faith, God “does not, will not, give that faith unless we seek it with all diligence, in the way which He hath ordained.”<sup>57</sup> As believers wait for “perfection,” they are to be vigorous in obedience, to zealously keep all of God’s commandments, and to closely attend to all the ordinances of God.<sup>58</sup>

In the light of Ellen White’s frequent sense of guilt and anxiety, it is important to note Wesley’s contrasting teaching that those who have not yet reached “entire” sanctification should continue in peace and joy until they are perfected in love.<sup>59</sup> He insisted that the repentance that follows justification differs widely from that which precedes justification in that it “implies no guilt, no sense of condemnation, no consciousness of the wrath of God.”<sup>60</sup> Further, though he believed for a time that those who reached the state of “entire” sanctification could not fall from grace, he later became convinced that they could, but that “entire sanctification” could be regained.<sup>61</sup>

There was, however, a further aspect to Wesley’s concept of sanctification that must undoubtedly have been closely related to Ellen White’s spiritual anxiety. While Wesley opposed those who “contend that a man must be sanctified, that is, holy, before he can be justified,” he added, “unless they mean that justification at the last day, which is wholly out of the present question.”<sup>62</sup> The fundamental importance he attached to “entire” sanctification as an essential preparation for “final” justification seemed evident in 1745 when he asked, “Is it not written. . . ‘Without holiness no man shall see the Lord’? And how then, without fighting about words, can we deny that holiness is a condition of final acceptance?”<sup>63</sup>

### “Entire” Sanctification in American Methodism

Wesley’s views concerning sanctification and “entire” sanctification were reflected, and at times given considerable emphasis, in American Methodism. According to early New England Methodist preacher Freeborn Garretson, the purpose of preaching is to awaken sinners and bring them to Christ, and to urge believers to attain holiness of heart and life. This objective should be accomplished by pressing the old “Methodistical doctrines” of justification by faith, the direct evidence by God of forgiveness, and adoption into His family.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 63.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 83.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 84.

<sup>60</sup>Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” *Sermons*, 2:164.

<sup>61</sup>Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, 135-36, 155, 171.

<sup>62</sup>Wesley, “Justification by Faith,” *Sermons*, 1:191.

<sup>63</sup>John Wesley to Thomas Church, *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A. M., Sometime Fellow of the Lincoln College, Oxford*, 8 vols., ed. John Telford (London: Epworth, 1931), 2:187-88. Hereafter cited as *Letters*.

Preachers should not be ashamed of the “unfashionable doctrine” of Christian perfection, but urge “travail of soul, not only for justification, but for sanctification and the evidence of it.”<sup>64</sup> Garrettson’s views appear to have been in harmony with Wesley’s 1785 letter to him urging that as soon as any converts found peace with God, he should “exhort them to go on to perfection,” for “the more strongly and vigilantly you press all believers to aspire after full sanctification as attainable now by simple faith the more the whole work of God will prosper.”<sup>65</sup>

John Leland Peters has suggested that there was a lack of effective effort in America to make personal application of the doctrine of “entire sanctification” for about two decades prior to the mid 1830s. By the mid 1830s, however, some sectors of the church began to be agitated because of a renewed emphasis on holiness.<sup>66</sup> In 1835, Mrs. Phoebe Palmer and her sister Mrs. Sarah Langford began to sponsor a weekly prayer meeting for women called the “Tuesday Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness” at the Palmer home in New York. In 1837 Palmer experienced “entire” sanctification. Thereafter she strongly promoted this “unspeakable blessing” among fellow Christians. In 1839 Mrs. T. C. Upham, who likewise experienced “entire” sanctification, opened the door for all who were interested, including men, to attend the Tuesday holiness meetings. About the same time, Timothy Merrit began to publish the *Guide to Christian Perfection*, later changed to *Guide to Holiness*.<sup>67</sup> The *Guide* reported in May 1840 that “it is believed that no year of our experience as a Church has been as fruitful in sanctification as the past.”<sup>68</sup>

In 1840, ministers at the Methodist General Conference were challenged in a pastoral address to personally experience sanctification. In the address it was declared:

The doctrine of *entire sanctification* constitutes a leading feature of original Methodism. But let us not suppose it enough to have this doctrine in our standards: let us labour to have the *experience* and the *power* of it in our *hearts*. Be assured, brethren, that if our influence and usefulness, as a religious community, depend

<sup>64</sup>Cited in George Claud Baker Jr., *An Introduction to the History of Early New England Methodism, 1789-1839* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1941), 25-26.

<sup>65</sup>John Wesley to the Rev. Freeborn Garrettson, *Letters*, 7:276.

<sup>66</sup>John Leland Peters, *Christian Perfection in American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1956), 121.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 109-10. It is interesting to speculate if Pheobe Palmer’s emphasis on sanctification may have been associated with the Millerite movement. Her Millerite leanings are evidenced by her authorship of “Watch Ye Saints,” hymn number 598 in the *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1985). The words of this hymn depict the imminent second advent of Christ.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 115.

upon one thing more than any other, it is upon carrying out the great doctrine of sanctification in our life and conversation. When we fail to do this, then shall we lose our pre-eminence; and the halo of glory which surrounded the heads, and lit up the path of our sainted fathers, will have departed from their unworthy sons. O brethren, let your motto be, "Holiness to the Lord."<sup>69</sup>

The available evidence suggests that there was a widespread response to this call for renewed emphasis on sanctification. In 1841 the *Methodist Quarterly Review* noted that the "*work of holiness* is reviving among us," and declared that there had been "clear, sober, and Scriptural professions of that state among our people."<sup>70</sup>

### "Entire" Sanctification and Religious Enthusiasm

From its earliest beginnings, American Methodism was primarily a missionary movement.<sup>71</sup> By preaching faith, repentance, and holiness, preachers sought to arouse hearers emotionally so they would "immediately show signs of God's work"<sup>72</sup> upon them. Such preaching tended to foster religious enthusiasm, and early revivals were often characterized by emotionalism that included various types of physical manifestation. Reporting on a revival that occurred in 1797 in the Penobscot circuit of Maine, Jesse Lee reported: "Many professed to be awakened and converted, and some Christians professed to be sanctified."<sup>73</sup> Something "new and strange" in that part of the country was that some people, "when struck under conviction, would fall helpless on the floor; and some Christians, when very happy, would lose the use of their limbs, and lie helpless for some time."<sup>74</sup> According to Lee, "The work was generally acknowledged to be of God."<sup>75</sup>

The period between 1800 and 1805 was a time of "gigantic" camp meetings where "Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist ministers worked side by side, where crowds were numbered in the hundreds and frequently the thousands, and where

<sup>69</sup>Methodist Episcopal Church, *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Held in the City of Baltimore, 1840* (New York: G. Lane & C. B. Tippet, 1844), 161. Emphasis mine.

<sup>70</sup>Cited in Peters, 114-15. Emphasis mine.

<sup>71</sup>Wayde Crawford Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions, Part One: Early American Methodism 1769-1844*, vol. 1: *Missionary Motivation and Expansion*, (New York: Board of Mission and Church Extension of the Methodist Church, 1950), 100.

<sup>72</sup>Baker, 25.

<sup>73</sup>L. Jesse Lee, *Short History of the Methodists in the United States of America Beginning in 1766, and Continued till 1809* (Baltimore, MD: Magill and Cline, 1810), 218.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

scores were swept into mass hysteria by the frenzied proceedings."<sup>76</sup> At one "General Meeting" in 1802, fifteen ministers, including Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists, preached to a crowd of about three thousand. Preaching, praying, and singing continued all Friday night and again Saturday night. At the close of the sacrament on Sunday evening, "some fell to the earth beneath the power of the Lord; the work went on, and the meeting continued all night."<sup>77</sup> Monday morning was the "greatest time of all. The people were crying for mercy on all sides."<sup>78</sup>

By 1825, the practice of holding camp meetings was, according to Johnson, "almost exclusively a Methodist institution."<sup>79</sup> As frontier areas became more developed, camp meetings tended to become smaller, more effectively managed, more highly systematized, and less disorderly and emotional.<sup>80</sup> Still, a considerable amount of religious enthusiasm seems to have been manifested among Methodists in Maine during Ellen White's childhood.

### Effects on Ellen White

The renewed emphasis on sanctification and perfection among Methodists during the late 1830s and early 1840s coincided with the time of Ellen White's conversion, probationary period, baptism, and acceptance into the Methodist Church as a member. This emphasis probably contributed substantially to her frequent spells of spiritual anxiety during that period of her life.

Prior to her conversion, Ellen White had felt "despair of at once attaining to the perfection of Christian character."<sup>81</sup> She had sought for the pardon of her sins and tried to give herself to the Lord, but had not experienced the "spiritual ecstasy" that she had been led to believe would be evidence of her acceptance with God, and "dared not believe" that she was converted without it.<sup>82</sup> Yet the demonstrations of religious enthusiasm that were often associated with "entire" sanctification perplexed her. While at the camp meeting where she experienced conversion, she saw people clap their hands, shout at the top of their voices, and appear very excited. Meetings continued all night in some places as people prayed for "freedom from sin and the sanctification of the Spirit of God."<sup>83</sup> Some fell to

<sup>76</sup>Charles A. Johnson, *The Frontier Camp Meeting: Religion's Harvest Time* (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1955), 41, 49. He also notes that the precise origin of camp meetings is uncertain, but that they became common around 1800. *Ibid.*, 31-40.

<sup>77</sup>Lee, 286.

<sup>78</sup>Lee, 287.

<sup>79</sup>Johnson, 80.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>81</sup>White, *Signs of the Times Articles*, 1:22.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

the ground and remained motionless for a period of time under the influence of strong mental excitement. Many believed these physical manifestations to be evidence of sanctification, but she was uncertain. "Terrified by such peculiar demonstrations, and at a loss to understand them," she "despaired of ever becoming a Christian if, in order to obtain the blessing, it was necessary . . . to be exercised as these people were."<sup>84</sup>

Although Ellen had found some relief at Miller's lectures in June 1842 and felt pardoned and cleansed from sin at the time of her baptism shortly thereafter, her anxiety returned, due largely to her concern over the question of "entire" sanctification. As she continued to attend Millerite meetings after Miller left Portland, she "constantly dwelt upon the subject of holiness of heart."<sup>85</sup> That she tended to regard continuing acceptance by God and favor with Him as being dependent, at least in part on sanctification, seems evident from her statement: "I longed above all things to obtain this great blessing [holiness of heart], and to feel that I was entirely accepted of God."<sup>86</sup> Christian friends urged her, "Believe in Jesus *now!* Believe He accepts you *now!*" She tried to do so, but was unable to feel the same electrifying "exaltation of spirit" others seemed to feel. She seemed "different from them, and forever shut out from the perfect joy of holiness of heart."<sup>87</sup>

The opposition toward belief in the imminent return of Christ which Ellen witnessed among some Methodists who claimed "entire" sanctification apparently added to her perplexity. Their attitude did not seem consistent with the holiness they professed. Yet she wondered if true sanctification could be found only among the Methodists and feared that she might be shutting herself off from the experience she so greatly desired by continuing to attend the "Advent meetings."<sup>88</sup> At the same time, her belief in the Millerite message intensified her desire to experience "entire" sanctification. Looking back at her turmoil, she wrote in 1876,

I studied over the subject [sanctification] continually, for I believed that Christ was soon to come, and feared He would find me unprepared to meet Him. Words of condemnation rang in my ears day and night, and my constant cry to God was, What shall I do to be saved?<sup>89</sup>

Ellen White's spiritual anxiety about her seeming inability to experience "entire" sanctification was heightened by the concept of eternal hellfire taught by Methodists. In 1876 she observed:

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid.

The frightful descriptions that I had heard of souls lost in perdition sank deep into my mind. Ministers in the pulpit drew vivid pictures of the condition of the damned. They taught that God never proposed to save any but the sanctified. The eye of God was upon us always, every sin was registered and would meet its just punishment. God himself was keeping the books with the exactitude of infinite wisdom, and every sin we committed was faithfully recorded against us.<sup>90</sup>

On the basis of this belief, Ellen came to view God "as a tyrant, who delighted in the agonies of the condemned."<sup>91</sup> It seemed hard for her to believe that He would condescend to save her from the terrible doom reserved for sinners.<sup>92</sup>

### Experience of "Entire" Sanctification

It was probably not long after her baptism that Ellen felt impressed, while praying for the "blessing" of sanctification, that she should pray aloud at a small group prayer or "social" meeting. Timid and unaccustomed to praying or speaking in public, she was afraid of becoming confused, having to stop, and being again, unable to express her thoughts. A severe inner conflict ensued. "My sufferings were intense," she recalled. "Sometimes for a whole night I would not dare to close my eyes, but would . . . quietly leave my bed and kneel upon the floor, praying silently with a dumb agony that cannot be described."<sup>93</sup> Fearing the horrors of everlasting hellfire, she felt unable to live long under such mental stress, yet "dared not die and meet the terrible fate of the sinner."<sup>94</sup> Every time she went to God in secret prayer, she thought of the "unfulfilled duty" and felt that her prayers were only "mocking God." Finally she ceased to pray altogether, and "settled down in a melancholy state which increased to deep despair."<sup>95</sup> She remained in this state for three weeks.

While in this state of despair, Ellen had two dreams that gave her "a faint ray of light and hope."<sup>96</sup> In the first she saw a temple into which all who were to be saved before the close of time must enter. Outside the temple was a multitude of people deriding those attempting to enter. Ellen braved the taunts of the crowd

<sup>90</sup>Ibid.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid.

<sup>92</sup>It may have been sometime in 1843 that Ellen White abandoned belief in the immortality of the soul and, in so doing, rejected the idea of eternal torment. See *ibid.*, 1:27-28.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid.

<sup>95</sup>White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 2:16. Cf. White, *Signs of the Times Articles*, 1:24. The precise time of this three week period is uncertain, but it was probably not more than a few months after her baptism in June 1842.

<sup>96</sup>White, *Present Truth and Review and Herald Articles*, 1:13.

“knew that it was our sins that caused this lamb to be thus torn and bruised,” and that “all who entered the temple must come before the lamb and confess their sins” in order to join a “happy throng” of people who were occupying “elevated seats” in front of the lamb.<sup>97</sup>

Filled with a sense of shame at the thought of confessing her sins in the presence of others, Ellen was hesitantly approaching the lamb, but had not yet reached it, when suddenly a trumpet sounded, the building shook, the temple “seemed to shine with awful brightness, and then all was dark, terrible [sic] dark.”<sup>98</sup> The company of “those who had seemed so happy” was gone, and Ellen was left alone in complete darkness with a horror of mind that she later felt unable to adequately describe. When she awakened from the dream, she could not at first convince herself that it had only been a dream. Commenting in 1860 on her feelings after the dream, she wrote, “Surely, thought I, my doom is fixed, I have slighted mercy, and grieved the Spirit of the Lord away, never more to return.”<sup>99</sup>

The second dream came soon after the first. In this dream Ellen was sitting in deep despair thinking that if only Jesus were on earth and she could talk with Him in person, He would understand her sufferings and would have mercy on her. Soon a beautiful being entered the room, asked if she would like to see Jesus, assured that she could, and asked her to follow him. She was then led up a steep, frail staircase to a door through which she passed into the presence of Jesus.<sup>100</sup>

Although the face of Jesus reflected benevolence as well as majesty, His piercing gaze seemed to read Ellen’s heart and all the circumstances of her life. She tried to avoid looking at Him in her dream, but to no avail. Then Jesus smiled, drew her near, laid His hand upon her, and said, “Fear not.” Overwhelmed with relief and joy, she fell prostrate at His feet. While lying there helpless, she witnessed “scenes of glory and beauty.”<sup>101</sup>

In her dream, Ellen was given a coiled green cord which she was told to wear near her heart and stretch out whenever she wanted to see Jesus. She was admonished to use it frequently, or it would become knotted and hard to straighten out. Placing the cord near her heart, she returned to earth praising the Lord and telling others where to find Him. She understood the green cord to represent faith.<sup>102</sup>

Ellen White’s first dream heightened her spiritual anxiety. Her fear that she had “grieved the Spirit of the Lord away, never more to return” clearly demonstrates that she was afraid she had committed the unpardonable sin. The second dream gave her hope of forgiveness and courage to confide in her mother.

<sup>97</sup>White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 2:16-17.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., 18-19.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid., 19-20.



At her mother's suggestion, she sought the counsel of Elder Stockman, a young Methodist minister who preached the Millerite message. Elder Stockman listened sympathetically to her story. He assured her that there was hope for her through the love of Jesus, and that her agony of mind was evidence that God's Spirit had not left her but was striving with her. As grievous as the misfortune of her injury had been, he told her, she would in the great future life realize the wisdom of God's providence that had seemed so cruel.<sup>103</sup>

Ellen was greatly comforted by Elder Stockman's sympathetic attitude, kind words, and sincere prayer on her behalf. Returning to her home, she went before the Lord in prayer, promising to do and to suffer anything He might require of her if only the "smiles of Jesus" would illuminate her heart. That same evening at a Millerite prayer meeting, she acted upon her promise. When the time came for prayers, she knelt with others. After several prayers had been offered, she began to pray. "As I prayed the burden and agony of soul that I had so long felt left me, and the blessing of God came upon me like the gentle dew."<sup>104</sup>

During this experience of spiritual and emotional ecstasy, Ellen "lost consciousness" of all that was going on around her and was unaware of everything but "Jesus and His glory."<sup>105</sup> When she was at first "struck down," some at the prayer meeting were alarmed and were about to run for a doctor. Ellen's mother urged them not to worry, assuring them that the "wondrous power of God" had prostrated Ellen, and that she would be all right. When Ellen finally "awoke to realization," she found herself being cared for by others in her uncle's home where the prayer meeting had been held. Not until the next day did she recover sufficiently to return to her home. Describing her feelings after this experience, she declared:

Faith now took possession of my heart. I felt an inexpressible love for God, and had the witness of his Spirit that my sins were pardoned. My views of the Father were changed, I now looked upon him as a kind and tender parent, rather than a stern tyrant compelling men to a blind obedience. My heart went out towards him in a deep and fervent love. Obedience to his will seemed a joy, it was a pleasure to be

<sup>103</sup>White, *Signs of the Times Articles*, 1:25.

<sup>104</sup>White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 2:20.

<sup>105</sup>White, *Signs of the Times Articles*, 1:25-26. Ellen White's experience of prostration appears to have been quite similar to other reported incidents of prostration. One such "strange circumstance" related by Lee occurred in October 1806. A young woman who was "under conviction" at a camp meeting "fell on the floor, and was both helpless and speechless." She was soon taken into a tent where friends sat up with her through the night. When she was finally able to speak the next morning, her first words were, "Love, love, love: Glory, glory, glory." She then sank again into a helpless state that lasted for about nine days, after which her speech returned, and she was "well and happy, and able to go about, and attend to business." See Lee, 218, 281, 316-18.

in his service. My path was radiant before me, no shadow clouded the light that revealed to me the perfect will of God.<sup>106</sup>

The night after receiving “so great a blessing,” Ellen went to a hall where “the Advent people worshiped” and there related what God had done for her. Elder Stockman, who was present at the meeting, was deeply moved by her experience. Soon thereafter she was asked to give her testimony at a conference being held in the Portland Christian Church. Upon hearing her experience, many wept, others praised God, and when “sinners were invited to arise for prayers,” many responded to the call.<sup>107</sup> However, the reaction of the Methodists to Ellen’s testimony at a Methodist class meeting was not so positive. She had indicated that belief in the imminent return of Christ had been instrumental in her sanctification experience because it had “stirred” her “soul” to “seek more earnestly for the sanctification of the Spirit of God.” According to Ellen, “The class leader interrupted me, saying, ‘you received sanctification through Methodism, through Methodism, sister, not through an erroneous theory.’”<sup>108</sup>

The significance that Ellen White placed upon this experience is evident in her various autobiographical editions. In 1860 she wrote, “I had at last found the blessing I had so long sought for—entire conformity to the will of God. . . . I have not since, for so long a time, been perfectly free in the Lord.”<sup>109</sup> And in 1876 she declared, “For six months not a shadow clouded my mind, nor did I neglect one known duty.”<sup>110</sup>

Ellen White did not specifically identify her experience as “entire” sanctification, but it seems apparent that she regarded it as such at the time. The experience was preceded by prayer for the blessing of sanctification and holiness of heart. It included physical prostration, which was seen by many Methodists as one evidence of “entire” sanctification. Even though she had questioned the necessity and validity of such physical manifestations, she had doubted the genuineness of her conversion without them. After experiencing physical prostration, she wrote of the experience as part of the “witness of the Spirit” that her sins had been pardoned. Her declarations that she lived in “complete conformity to the will of God,” and that for six months she was completely at peace with God, felt love in her heart, and “did not neglect one known duty” seem consistent with the Methodist understanding of Christian perfection associated with “entire” sanctification, and thus provide strong evidence that she conceived of the experience as “entire” sanctification. Her subsequent use of the term

<sup>106</sup>White, *Signs of the Times Articles*, 1:26.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid.

<sup>108</sup>White, *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White*, 46.

<sup>109</sup>White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 1:22, 27.

<sup>110</sup>White, *Signs of the Times Articles*, 1:26.

“sanctified” in talking with Methodists about the experience seems to substantiate this conclusion.

### **Conclusion**

Methodism, as communicated to Ellen White by her parents and church, was a primary factor in the development of her early religious experience. The Methodist emphasis on sanctification, and especially the renewed emphasis on “entire” sanctification during her childhood and teen years undoubtedly contributed significantly to her own emphasis on sanctification, especially in her early writings.

Ellen White’s injury at the age of nine, and its physical and emotional results, helped to shape her spiritual life and make her more sensitive to religious issues and interests. It seems likely that feelings of inferiority because of her disfigurement and inability to remain in school with her peers added to her interest in the Millerite message and her desire for Christ to come very soon, since His coming could bring deliverance from her condition. At the same time, however, her understanding of Methodist teachings concerning “entire” sanctification and her continuing inability to experience the emotional exaltation and joy with which she associated it because of feelings of discontent with God for allowing her injury and unhappiness, led to intense feelings of guilt and fear of Christ’s return. The dynamic tension between desire for Christ’s return and fear of His return was eased by her dream of seeing Jesus and subsequent experience of “entire” sanctification.

Ellen White’s insistence that it was belief in Christ’s return that led her to seek earnestly for sanctification was not unjustified. However, it must be recognized that Methodism played a very significant role also, since it placed great emphasis on the need for “entire” sanctification and defined its nature, conditions, and results.

### **Suggestions for Further Study**

First, in later years Ellen White rejected belief in instantaneous “entire” sanctification and held that while justification is the work of a moment, sanctification is the work of a lifetime. A study of how and why this change occurred could be helpful.

Second, Ellen White’s beliefs in the condition of believers after the “close of probation” appears to somewhat parallel the condition expected by Methodists in “entire” sanctification. A study of the similarities and differences could lead to greater understanding of Ellen White’s eschatology.