

## HERMENEUTICS AND THE WRITINGS OF ELLEN G. WHITE

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### Introduction

Hermeneutics is the “science and art” of “deriving meaning” or “interpreting literary documents.”<sup>1</sup> Derived from the Greek *hermēneuō*, it simply means to interpret, explain, or to translate.<sup>2</sup> It is a process by which the interpreter “seeks to bridge the vast linguistic, historical, social, and cultural gaps that exist between the ancient and modern worlds” so that the text(s) may be understood in the contemporary situation.<sup>3</sup> Hermeneutics is, therefore, a core consideration in the study of Ellen G. White’s (EGW) writings.<sup>4</sup>

Two recent incidents reminded me of the need for a working hermeneutics when interpreting EGW’s writings. The first dealt with a university student who was

<sup>1</sup>William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 5; Cf. Herbert E. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1998), 372; Roger W. Coon, “Hermeneutics: Interpreting a 19th-Century Prophet in the Space Age,” *Journal of Adventist Education* (Summer 1988), 16-30.

<sup>2</sup>Roger S. Boraas, “Hermeneutics,” *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and David B. Barrett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 2:531, notes that in the NT, when the term is used with the prefixes *dia* and *meta*, it may be translated as “interpret” (Luke 24:27), “explain” (Luke 24:27 NEB), “translate” (John 1:38,42), or “mean” (Heb 7:2). See too L. Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation: Sacred Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 11.

<sup>3</sup>Klein et al., 6. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 14, insist that the goal of hermeneutics is neither uniqueness nor trying to find out what no one else has ever seen, but rather discovering the “plain meaning” of the text. Cf. Ng Kah Seng, *SEARCH: An Exegetical Process in Sermon Preparation* (Silang, Cavite, Philippines: AIAS Publications, 1989), 1-4.

<sup>4</sup>EGW (1827-1915) was a co-founder of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church which has a worldwide membership of over twelve million, with projected phenomenal growth. She was a prolific writer, and since she is considered a prophetess, her works hold a certain authority among Adventists. Cf. Coon, 16.

disciplined for wearing jewelry, a violation of school policy.<sup>5</sup> The second stemmed from a question as to whether or not EGW approved of marriages between people of different races or cultures. This was raised due to a partial reading of a statement where EGW speaks of “objecting to the marriage of the white race with the black.”<sup>6</sup>

Other examples may be cited but the above underscore two important factors. First, the writings of EGW, if wrongly interpreted, pose the potential for major misunderstanding in contemporary situations; second, sound principles of hermeneutics are crucial for a correct understanding and application of EGW’s writing today. The questions now raised include (1) What role does the modern interpreter play in the hermeneutical process? (2) How can the interpreter avoid the pitfalls of misinterpreting the writings of EGW? In the following discussion I answer these queries by highlighting the importance of hermeneutics in the interpretation of EGW’s material and then suggesting three foundational principles necessary for sound understanding of her inspired messages.

### The Importance of Hermeneutics

The inspiration of Scripture (2 Tim 3:16)<sup>7</sup> is the foundation upon which the principles and process of hermeneutics are built.<sup>8</sup> Hermeneutics is essential because

<sup>5</sup>According to the university, the prohibition for wearing a “wedding ring” (jewelry) is based on the counsels of Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1962), 180-81.

<sup>6</sup>Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages From the Writings of Ellen G. White* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1958), 2:343-44.

<sup>7</sup>Geoffrey W. Grogan, “Hermeneutics, Biblical,” *New 20th Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 386, notes the biblical emphasis in passages such as Neh 8:7-8; Matt 13:51; 15:16,17; Luke 24:27,32,44, 45; Acts 8:30-35; 2 Tim 2:14-19; 3:15-17; and 2 Pet 3:15-17. Berkhof, 11, insists that it is only as we recognize the principle of the divine inspiration of the Bible that we can maintain the theological character of *hermeneutica sacra* (hermeneutics dealing with the Bible as the inspired word of God). Spiros Zodhiates, “*Theopneustos*,” *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Iowa: World Bible Publishers, 1992), 729, says that “inspiration” is derived from *theopneustos*, a combination of two Greek words, *Theos*, “God” and *pneo*, “to breathe” or “blow.” It implies that the Bible entails an intrinsic and authoritative message from God which needs to be understood through the interpretive process.

<sup>8</sup>Gerhard F. Hasel, *Biblical Interpretation Today: An Analysis of Modern Methods of Biblical Interpretation and Proposals for the Interpretation of the Bible as the Word of God* (Lincoln, NE: College View Printers, 1985), 100-13, discusses the foundations of biblical interpretation. Idem, “Principles of Biblical Interpretation,” in *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. Gordon M. Hyde (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1974), 164, insists that sound and adequate principles of interpretation must be developed to rightly understand the message of God to us. According to Raoul Dederen, “Revelation, Inspiration, and Hermeneutics,” in *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. Gordon M. Hyde

unless our interpretations are guided by objective rules or principles, our acceptance of God's message through EGW may only be theoretical. The importance for such guidelines is brought to focus in three interrelated foci: (1) the need for hermeneutics, (2) the search for meaning, and (3) the quest for balance.

### **The Need for Hermeneutics**

It has been rightly observed that correctly understanding inspired writing "is an arduous and often puzzling task."<sup>9</sup> Such may also be the case with EGW's writings for several reasons:<sup>10</sup>

1. A significant gap in time exists between EGW and us. This proposition recognizes that the world in which EGW lived has changed in substantial ways during the past one hundred years. This means that the time gap between hers and ours has undergone changes in the social, cultural, political, and religious perspectives.<sup>11</sup> An adequate hermeneutic will help one to understand that EGW's counsel regarding intermarriage was couched in the context of circumstances and conditions that had the potential for "controversy, confusion and bitterness" between the Black and the White races.<sup>12</sup>

2. The culture in EGW's time affected the meaning of what she said. For example, the statement that "not one penny should be spent for a circlet of gold to testify that we are married"<sup>13</sup> reflects an American cultural ideal of EGW's time. This is especially poignant in light of her counsel to missionaries serving outside of the USA. She stated that in countries where the custom is imperative, we have no burden to condemn those who have their marriage ring; let them wear it if they can do so conscientiously; but let not our missionaries feel that the wearing of the ring will increase their influence one jot or tittle.<sup>14</sup>

(Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1974), 1-2, God has spoken but what He has said demands interpretation. The need to interpret His word increases in proportion to the distance the text stands in terms of the time and culture of the author from our own.

<sup>9</sup>Klein et al., 3.

<sup>10</sup>The following points have been deduced from Fee and Stuart, 16, 17; Coon, 17-19; Klein et al., 3-20; Seng, 2-4; Douglass, 386-91.

<sup>11</sup>See Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, 12-14, on some of the challenges of Bible interpretation due to the distance in time: (1) the gap between the ancient texts and our modern world; (2) the gap between the occurrence of events and when they were recorded; and (3) the cultural, social, and religious shifts.

<sup>12</sup>White, *Selected Messages*, 2:343, clearly indicates that her counsel is not an issue of racial inequality. She firmly believed in the equality of all races and the brotherhood of humankind.

<sup>13</sup>White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, 181.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*

For that reason, EGW's 1895 recommendation not to spend a penny for the purchase of a wedding ring does not necessarily affirm its validity today.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the American culture of the present day is quite different from that of her time. Roger W. Coon's counsel concerning the importance of cultural factors in understanding EGW is therefore quite appropriate. He says that SDAs believe EGW was influenced, sometimes very strongly, by the era of her day. However, she was not a "prisoner" of her culture, unable to transcend it. Hence, an understanding of that time will assist us in understanding EGW and her writings.<sup>16</sup>

3. Language evolves and words change meaning over time. Many words that are found in the 1611 KJV are now obsolete. Examples include: "ear" for "plow" (1 Sam 8:12); "meat" for "food" (1 Tim 4:3); "corn" for "grain" (Gen 41:35); "prevent" for "precede" (1 Thess 4:15); and "let" for "hinder" (2 Thess 2:7).<sup>17</sup> Likewise, EGW also used words which have changed in meaning from her day. For example, EGW's understanding of the "shut door" after her Midnight Cry vision of December 1844 was different to that of her contemporary advocates who thought the world would end in 1843-44. Herbert E. Douglas notes that her developing clarity regarding the Sabbatarian Adventist work of missions led to the worldwide vision in the 1850s.<sup>18</sup> Hence, an adequate hermeneutic is needed to help solve some of these problems. The above factors are far from being exhaustive but they underscore the importance of hermeneutics in order to properly interpret EGW's writings.

### The Search for Meaning

The Bible, as the salvific message of God, is entrusted to humanity (see 2 Cor 2:17; 4:2,5-6; 5:19-20). Therefore, the primary goal of biblical hermeneutics is to help us comprehend the will of God in this inspired book.<sup>19</sup> According to 2 Tim 2:15, the goal is expressed as rightly dividing the word of truth in order to achieve balance and avoid distortion. A similar challenge faces the interpreter when

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Roger W. Coon, Course Outline for GSEM 534 The Writings of Ellen G. White, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, 1993, 13. Cited hereafter as GSEM 534. A similar idea is brought to the forefront when interpreting scripture according to Raymond C. Kelcy, "Identifying the Pericope and Its Context," in *Biblical Interpretation: Principles and Practice*, ed. F. Furman Kearley, Edward P. Myers, and Timothy D. Hadley (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 79.

<sup>17</sup>Committee on Problems in Bible Translation, *Problems in Bible Translation* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1954), 41, underscores that words may have one meaning at one time and quite a different one at a later period. Cf. Coon, "Hermeneutics," 117-18, who notes the change in meaning of some 350 words in the 1955 edition of the KJV compared to the initial 1611 version.

<sup>18</sup>Douglass, 502.

<sup>19</sup>Dederen, 2.

trying to make sense of what EGW originally “meant” in her writings and what she “means” today for the modern reader.<sup>20</sup> Hence, the foremost task of the interpreter is to ascertain her primary message and be able to make valid applications for contemporary Christians.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Quest for Balance**

Finding balance in our interpretation of EGW’s writing is easier said than done. Sometimes fanciful interpretations, often leading to extreme conclusions, may take place.<sup>22</sup> The Bible metaphorically speaks of the importance of “walking” in truth and adhering to all the commandments of God (Luke 1:6; 2 John 4). The frequent occurrence of such expressions as “walk” (John 12:35; Rom 13:13; Gal 5:16) or “run” (Hab 2:2; 1 Cor 9:24; Gal 2:2; Phil 2:16) suggests the necessity of following closely the “way” leading to “life.” To do otherwise leads to “destruction” (Matt. 7:13,14). Here the Christian duty is portrayed as avoiding both edges of extremity on the narrow path toward the goal of life, a “crown of glory,” the symbol of victory.<sup>23</sup> In short, the Bible teaches the need for balance.

EGW concurs with the metaphoric intent of scripture in her first vision, when she speaks of those who took their eyes off Jesus, and who stumbled and fell off the path into the dark and wicked world below.<sup>24</sup> Her concern for balance is evident in her counsels to guard against “bigotry and prejudice,”<sup>25</sup> to refrain from “extreme”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Douglass, 386-91, suggests the following basic rules for interpretation: (1) the recognition of inspiration, (2) recognizing the change of word definitions, (3) understanding the use of hyperbole; (4) understanding the meaning of phrases in which a word is used, (5) recognizing the possibility of imprecise expressions, (6) looking carefully at the immediate context, (7) recognizing that the meaning of words can change in new contexts, and (8) recognizing the challenge of semantics.

<sup>21</sup>See Seng, 2, in dealing with this when interpreting the Bible. Hasel, “Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics,” 170, in speaking of the Bible underscores that the goal of interpretation is to comprehend the fuller import and deeper meaning of the writer and to transmit these aspects to the modern reader.

<sup>22</sup>Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 5:305, says that human nature tends to run from one extreme to another.

<sup>23</sup>See Coon, “Ellen White and Hermeneutics: It’s Importance and Place,” GSEM 534, 4-7.

<sup>24</sup>Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1945), 14-15.

<sup>25</sup>White, *Testimonies*, 4:63, 569.

<sup>26</sup>White, *Testimonies*, 2:538, against extremes in health reform; idem, *Testimonies*, 1:565, against extremes in amusements and sports.

lifestyle habits, and to practice “balance,”<sup>27</sup> “moderation,”<sup>28</sup> and “temperance.”<sup>29</sup> Stressing this point, Coon appeals to EGW’s writings and insists on staying in the “middle-of-the-road.”<sup>30</sup> He explains that extremists are harmful to the SDA Church at large.<sup>31</sup> The role, then, of the modern interpreter of EGW is to be attuned to the need for hermeneutics, being mindful of the distance in time, culture, and language between EGW and us. He/She must also be diligent in the search for meaning while also being constantly vigilant in maintaining balance.

### Foundational Principles

The need for sound principles of hermeneutics to protect SDAs from any extremity in understanding EGW’s writing is quite urgent. T. Housel Jemison (1914-1963), an eminent SDA theologian, teacher, and writer, early on discussed three principles necessary for the study of EGW’s works.<sup>32</sup> These include (1) The general teaching of all the applicable counsels should be studied before conclusions are drawn; (2) the time, place, and circumstances of the giving of certain messages should be considered; and (3) one should try to discover the principle involved in any specific counsel. I will modify each of these principles and illustrate them with specific examples from her writings. They are cast in the negative, but with a positive intent.

<sup>27</sup>White, *Testimonies*, 6:291.

<sup>28</sup>Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 2:363, for moderation even in doing Gospel work.

<sup>29</sup>Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1942), 211; idem, *Testimonies*, 6:256.

<sup>30</sup>Coon, “Ellen White and Hermeneutics: It’s Importance and Place,” GSEM 534, 4-7.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 6. Extremists bring disrepute to the SDA Church because they injure and hinder the cause of truth, make Christian duties burdensome, raise false standards and expect everyone to reach them, and are used by Satan to cast contempt on the work of the Holy Spirit. Cf. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1950), 8; idem, *Evangelism as Set Forth in the Writings of Ellen G. White* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1946), 610-11. Coon, “Hermeneutics/Introduction,” GSEM 534, 4-7, also indicates certain topics in EGW’s writings that extremists use to create confusion in the church. These include issues on health reform, diet, dress, recreation, education theory and practice, religious experience and practice, racial issues, cultural issues, debt, and homemaking.

<sup>32</sup>T. Housel Jemison, *A Prophet Among You* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1955), 432-50. Cf. Coon, “Ellen White and Hermeneutics: Jemison’s First Rule,” GSEM 534, 1-12; idem, “Ellen White and Hermeneutics: Jemison’s Second Rule,” GSEM 534, 1-15; idem, “Ellen White and Hermeneutics: Jemison’s Third Rule,” GSEM 534, 1-8. These three “rules” elaborate on Jemison’s principles and provides detailed illustrations from EGW’s works. Douglass, 394-407, expands Jemison’s three principles to a list of eight hermeneutical rules. See also Gerhard Pfandl, “How Shall We Use The Writings of Ellen White?” *Adventist Professional* 7 (1995): 13-15.

### Never Overlook the Overall Counsel on a Given Topic

In certain regions of the world church, health reform has become a major issue of contention using statements drawn from EGW's writings. It is, therefore, critical that her overall counsel regarding health reform be considered in totality. To this end, we shall examine both her absolute and variable statements. The first refers to what may seem to be policy statements while the second assists the interpreter in determining the underlying principle on a given topic.

#### a. Absolute Statements

Vegetables, fruits and grains should compose our diet. *Not an ounce of flesh meat should enter our stomachs.* The eating of flesh is unnatural. We are to return to God's original purpose in the creation of man. . . . Among those who are waiting for the coming of the Lord, meat eating will eventually be done away; flesh will cease to form a part of their diet. We should ever keep this end in view, and endeavor to work steadily toward it.<sup>33</sup>

God demands that the appetite be cleansed, and that self-denial be practiced in regard to those things which are not good. This is a work that will have to be done before His people can stand before Him a perfected people.<sup>34</sup>

#### b. Variable Statements

Where plenty of good milk and fruit can be obtained, there is rarely any excuse for eating animal food; it is not necessary to take the life of any of God's creatures to supply our ordinary needs. In certain cases of illness or exhaustion, it may be thought best to use some meat, but great care should be taken to secure the flesh of healthy animals. It has come to be a very serious question whether it is safe to use flesh food at all in this age of the world. It would be better never to eat meat than to use the flesh of animals that are not healthy. *When I could not obtain the food I needed, I have sometimes eaten a little meat; but I am becoming more and more afraid of it.*<sup>35</sup>

We do not mark out any precise line to be followed in diet; but we do say that in countries where there are fruits, grains and nuts in abundance, flesh food is not the right food for God's people. I have been instructed that flesh food has a tendency to animalize the nature, to rob men and women of that love and sympathy which they should feel for everyone, and give the lower passions control over the higher powers of the being. If meat eating was ever

<sup>33</sup>Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Diet and Food* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1946), 380 (emphasis mine).

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 381.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 394 (emphasis mine).

healthful, it is not safe now. Cancers, tumors and pulmonary diseases are largely caused by meat eating. We are not to make the use of flesh food atest of fellowship, but we should consider the influence that professed believers who use flesh foods have over others.<sup>36</sup>

I cannot say to them: You must not eat eggs, or milk, or cream; you must use no butter in the preparation of food. The gospel must be preached to the poor, and the time has not yet come to prescribe the strictest diet.<sup>37</sup>

When you see that you are becoming weak physically, it is essential for you to make changes, and at once. Put into your diet something you have left out. It is your duty to do this. 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. . . . And eggs contain properties which are remedial agencies in counteracting poisons. . . .<sup>38</sup>

A meat diet is not the most wholesome of diets, and yet I would not take the position that meat should be discarded by everyone. Those who have feeble digestive organs can often use meat, when they cannot eat vegetables, fruit or porridge.<sup>39</sup>

EGW's absolute statements seem to insist on a strict vegetarian diet to be practiced by Adventist believers in every country of the world while awaiting the second coming of Christ. It may also imply that unless one becomes a vegetarian, Christian perfection would not be attained. Her variable statements indicate the need to consider the practical realities of living in a sinful world as one shares the health message with others. EGW's overall approach to health is relevant and balanced.

Although she indicates that the Edenic diet (Gen 1:29; Gen 3:17-18) is the best for human consumption, she cautions that (1) reform should be progressive in

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 159.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 206.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 367.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 394-95.

nature;<sup>40</sup> (2) we refrain from the dangers of extremes in health reform,<sup>41</sup> and (3) she recognizes that due to sin, the reality in different places or situations may be far from the ideal, hence the need for common sense dietary reforms to be practiced in real life situations.<sup>42</sup> Her counsel for common sense helps us to see her desire for balance.

It is impossible to make an unvarying rule to regulate everyone's habits, and no one should think himself a criterion for all. Not all can eat the same things. Foods that are palatable and wholesome to one person may be distasteful, and even harmful to another.<sup>43</sup>

We don't make the health reform an iron bedstead cutting people off or stretching them out to fit it. One person cannot be a standard for everybody else. What we want is a little sprinkling of good common sense.<sup>44</sup>

Unless one considers the overall counsel of EGW regarding health reform, it is quiet easy to become dogmatic on a precise line of reform to be followed by every practicing Seventh-day Adventist. However, EGW rejects the notion of a standard criterion and appeals for the practice of common sense dietary reform.

#### Never Overlook the Time, Place and Context of Writing

Let us consider one EGW statement in the area of education:

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 366, "Let the diet reform be progressive."

Ibid., 380, "Again and again I have been shown that God is trying to lead us back, step by step, to His original design—that man should subsist upon the natural products of the earth."

Ibid., 355, "Fruits, grains, and vegetables, prepared in a simple way, free from spice and grease of all kinds, make, with milk or cream, the most healthful diet. . . . Some, in abstaining from milk, eggs, and butter, have failed to supply the system with proper nourishment, and as a consequence have become weak and unable to work."

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 202, "Health reform becomes health deform, a health destroyer, when it is carried to extremes." She cautions about the following extremes: the use of large amounts of sugar or mush, too much amounts of food, discarding milk from the diet, meals without salt, tasteless dishes, meals without eggs, dishes without cream, no butter in food preparation, diet lacking proper elements, and vegetables prepared only in water. Ibid., 196-212.

<sup>42</sup>White, *The Ministry of Healing*, 319, "There is real common sense in dietetic reform. The subject should be studied broadly and deeply, and no one should criticize others because their practice is not, in all things, in harmony with his own."

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Ellen G. White, "Sermons and Talks," vol. 1, 12, in *The Published Ellen G. White Writings* (Silver Spring, MD: The Ellen G. White Estate, 1994) [CD-ROM].

Since both men and women have a part in homemaking, boys as well as girls should gain a knowledge of household duties. To make a bed and put a room in order, to wash dishes, to prepare a meal, to wash and repair his own clothing, is a training that need not make any boy less manly; it will make him happier and more useful. And if girls, in turn, could learn to harness and drive a horse, and to use the saw and hammer, as well as a rake and the hoe, they would be better fitted to meet the emergencies of life.<sup>45</sup>

When EGW first penned this counsel in 1903, most SDAs in North America lived in isolated, rural communities. Her emphasis was on practical education, enabling both boys and girls to “be better fitted to meet the emergencies of life.”<sup>46</sup> Considering the context of the time, it would have been critical for girls to learn how to harness a horse. As Coon asserts, “If a daughter did not know how to harness/drive a horse, the summoning of a physician might be an impossibility—and the patient might die unnecessarily.”<sup>47</sup> This principle helps the interpreter to understand that emphasis is to be placed on the necessity of practical education. In contemporary situations, the principle may be understood in terms of a girl learning how to drive a car, as opposed to harnessing a horse.

Like other literary works, the writings of EGW were construed in a particular context. If her counsels are lifted out of context, the meaning of her writings may be misinterpreted.<sup>48</sup> For example, take the statement that “the frequenters of the theater and the ballroom, put eternity out of their reckoning.”<sup>49</sup> In certain areas of the world church this has been used to formulate a kind of unwritten policy, strictly prohibiting watching movies in a theater. But does this statement mean that theater-going is not permissible? Close attention must be given to the context of the passage in order to be faithful to EGW’s primary intention. Let us consider the above issue in its entirety:

The day of the Lord is approaching with stealthy tread; but the supposed great and wise men know not the signs of Christ’s coming or of the end of the world. Iniquity abounds, and the love of many has waxed cold. There are thousands upon thousands, millions upon millions, who are now making their decision for eternal life or eternal death. The man who is wholly

<sup>45</sup>Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1952), 216-17.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Coon, “Ellen White and Hermeneutics: Jemison’s Third Rule,” GSEM 534, 2.

<sup>48</sup>In a similar view Seng, 33-41, discusses this point in terms of the importance of surveying the literary context of a passage in Scripture by examining its historical, geographical, and cultural backgrounds. Cf. Douglass, 390-91; Fee & Stuart, 22-25. Kelcy, 80-81, notes three benefits of such contextual study: (1) It brings an understanding of the underlying thought of the passage, (2) it enables the student to determine how a particular word is being used in the pericope, and (3) it produces in a student a greater degree of faith because he is dealing with the word of God.

<sup>49</sup>White, *Testimonies*, 6:407.

absorbed in his counting room, the man who finds pleasure at the gaming table, the man who loves to indulge perverted appetite, the amusement lover, *the frequenters of the theater and the ballroom, put eternity out of their reckoning.* The whole burden of their life is: What shall we eat? What shall we drink? And wherewithal shall we be clothed? They are not in the procession that is moving heavenward. They are led by the great apostate, and with him will be destroyed.<sup>50</sup>

The context certainly clarifies the ambiguity. EGW's statement has nothing to do with the watching of movies but rather with those who are wholly absorbed in pleasure seeking. Indeed, Coon has rightly cautioned that EGW was totally silent regarding cinemas or the watching of "movies," or videos.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, in this case, a direct or literal application of EGW's statement would be pushing her intended meaning too far. The interpreter cannot afford to overlook the time, place, and context of her writing.

#### Never Overlook the Principle in Specific Counsel

Some instructions in scripture, although couched in a specific cultural setting, were intended to teach some general principle. To "watch" (1 Pet 4:7; 2 Tim 4:5) and "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17) does not mean to be physically idle, but connotes maintaining a constant and active connection with heaven.<sup>52</sup> Likewise the "remnant" of Revelation who are described as "virgins" undefiled with women does not mean that none of God's people are to marry.<sup>53</sup> EGW affirms that "the word of God abounds in general principles for the formation of correct habits of living, and the testimonies, general and personal, have been calculated to call their attention more especially to these principles."<sup>54</sup> This also applies to the interpretation of her own counsels. As she herself experienced, when it was not possible to obtain a wholesome diet, she would settle for the best food that was available under the

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 406-07 (emphasis mine).

<sup>51</sup>Coon, "Ellen White and Hermeneutics: Jemison's First Rule," GSEM 534, 1, reminds us that the first Hollywood film was D. W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation," produced in 1915, the very year EGW died. Other topics on which EGW was silent include radio programs (introduced in 1920), television programs (first aired in 1939), chemical and mechanical contraception or birth control (first practiced in 1960), as well as abortion, cremation, and organ transplants. Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>"Pray without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17)," *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary (SDABC)*, rev. ed., ed. Francis D. Nichol (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1976-80), 7:255. Cf. 1 Thess 5:14 and 2 Thess 3:15 regarding the apostles' warning against idleness.

<sup>53</sup>Rev 14:4 refers to the saints who have kept themselves aloof from Babylon and were not defiled by association with the union of religious elements rallied by Satan. See "Virgins (Rev. 14:4)," *SDABC*, 4:826.

<sup>54</sup>White, *Testimonies*, 4:323; 5:663, 664.

situation, which may mean the eating of flesh food.<sup>55</sup> This may be illustrated in an occasion during the 1890s in Australia where she advised the cooking of some “chicken broth” for her sick neighbor.<sup>56</sup> In another example, EGW suggested pure grape juice as a food supplement for medicinal purposes.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, the general principle of health reform is eating whatever is best, permissible, and available under the circumstances in which one lives. Hence, the responsibility of the interpreter is to find the general principle in a given counsel of EGW and to make appropriate application. To do otherwise is irresponsible hermeneutics.

### **Conclusion**

The need for hermeneutics has never been more urgent in SDA life and practice. Unless our search for meaning and balance is guided by specific rules of interpretation, misunderstanding of EGW’s writings remains a major problem. In order to remain faithful to the primary intentions of EGW’s writing, one must adhere to certain dynamic principles: never overlook the overall counsel on a given topic; never overlook the time, place and context of writing; and never overlook the general principle of her counsels.

Undoubtedly, sometimes the basic principles of hermeneutics have been ignored by SDAs, resulting in misinterpretation and misrepresentation of EGW. Ironically, the result is that the very message that was intended to enrich life has become fodder for contention in the church. Further, SDAs appear suspicious to nonbelievers. Safety lies in educating members regarding the principles of hermeneutics so that upon application of its principles, God’s message for the SDA Church may remain relevant and meaningful.

<sup>55</sup>See Douglass, 310-17.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 310-11.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 10.