

OLD PROPHET, NEW APPROACHES: 45 YEARS OF CRISIS AND ADVANCE IN ELLEN WHITE STUDIES

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1. The Wonderful World of Ellen White in the Early 1960s

It was a wonderful world and Ellen White was secure in it, at least inside the borders of Adventism in the early 1960s when I joined the church. We had the flawless authority on almost everything of importance. If we needed help in understanding the meaning of a Bible passage all we had to do was check White's comments, greatly facilitated by the scriptural index of the newly published *Comprehensive Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White* and *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, which helpfully supplied White input in the discussion of the verses themselves, an "Ellen G. White Comments" section at the end of the discussion of each biblical chapter that provided references to her major remarks for many verses from her published writings, and a major section of "Ellen G. White Comments" at the end of each volume drawn from her unpublished writings and periodical articles that supplied material for a great many verses. With such an array of material at hand it was easy to feel that she was indeed the ultimate Bible commentator, a divine one, "far above all other commentators," as the editor of the *Review and Herald* put it.¹ In fact, one of my great literary ambitions in my early Adventist life was to compile all of her comments on each verse in the entire Bible on the meaning of each scriptural passage. Such would provide the final word on biblical interpretation.

It was also a wonderful world in the realm of doctrine and theology. I do not exactly know what my college religion teachers actually believed

¹ F. M. Wilcox, "The Testimony of Jesus," *Review and Herald*, June 9, 1946, 62.

on the topic, but Ellen White appeared to settle most theological issues for them. She certainly did for us students. It was off to the *Index* or other Ellen White resources if we had a theological problem that needed a divine answer. The Bible, of course, was important, most important theoretically, but in practice White had the final authoritative word, even on the most marginal and esoteric points. We did a great deal of theology from her writings on such topics as the human nature of Christ. We were glad to have her writings since the Bible did not say much on the topic. We used them to generate our homemade compilations to provide the final answer on topics not sufficiently covered in Scripture.

That was just the beginning of that magical world. White was not only a divine, inspired Bible commentator and a great source for doctrine, but she was also authoritative for history, chronology, science, and anything else she spoke on. Beyond that, those in my group had no doubt that she was infallible and inerrant and probably verbally inspired. On that last point, verbal inspiration, we were beginning to have some doubts since Book One of *Selected Messages* had been published recently in 1958 and was throwing cold water on that position, but we were deep in recent Adventist practice on the point and made large arguments based on her choice of this word or that and even used the structural flow of her sentences to nail down our points.

When it came to the source for her writings we had not the slightest doubt. It all (except for such minor secular bits of information like the number of rooms in the Paradise Valley Sanitarium) came straight from heaven, as if there were some kind of pipeline from the throne of God through the top of Ellen White's head and out through her fingertips. And *voilà*, we had divine revelation transposed into divine inspiration. Revelation was the only model most of us ever thought of. Ideas of borrowing and possible plagiarism were far from my pure mind on the topic.

If those good things were not enough, we were told by some authorities that she was 100 years ahead of her time. Combining all of those things with her flawless character and you had the best thing on earth. I still remember us students deciding if something was right or wrong by trying to discover White's practice on the topic. Thus, we could even provide the ultimate answer on such questions, such as is it a sin to wash dishes on Sabbath? In my pre-college year, I asked Alma McKibbin, who had lived with White in her younger years, questions about White that I hoped would provide the final answer to certain esoteric points that I was struggling with. I still remember her sorrowfully looking at me undoubtedly sensing my legalistic frame of mind.

At any rate, those early 1960s were a wonderful world for those who believed White to be God's messenger, but that wonderful world ended

somewhat abruptly and even violently by the hands of those who felt they had been deceived. The ending itself was good, even if the manner in which it ended was less than helpful.

2. Flashback: The Construction of the Wonderful World of Ellen White in the 1920s through the 1950s

Before I move on to the reconstruction of the world of Ellen White studies in the 1980s, it is important to take a brief look at the creation of the false perspectives and their victory in the minds of apparently the vast majority of Adventists. The formative era in the solidifying of the development of these wrong perspectives was the years between 1920 and 1960, the period that a significant sector of the denomination's perfectionistic right wing now views as the era of "Historic Adventism." The wrong ideas did not just happen with the arrival of those decades. To the contrary, overblown and false ideas of Ellen White's inspiration had already had a long history before 1920.

For example, the issue of verbal inspiration was certainly evident in the 1880s when Ellen White sought to rather unsuccessfully revise her *Testimonies for the Church*.² It became even more problematic after *The Great Controversy* revision of 1911, which stimulated S. N. Haskell to make his ideas explicit on the points that she was verbally inspired and that her works should be used to validate historical facts and dates.³ Perhaps David Paulson put the pre-1920 perspective of some as precisely as anyone when he wrote that "I was led to conclude and most firmly believe that *every* word that you ever spoke in public or private, that *every* letter you wrote under *any* and *all* circumstances, was as inspired as the ten commandments. I held that view with *absolute* tenacity against innumerable objections raised to it by many who were occupying prominent positions in the cause."⁴

Not only were understandings of White's writings being verbally inspired and authoritative for historical details widely held, but the same can be said of their usefulness to validate doctrinal issues and the

² See Jerry Allen Moon, *W. C. White and Ellen G. White: The Relationship between the Prophet and Her Son* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1993), 122-129.

³ See George R. Knight, "The Case of the Overlooked Postscript: A Footnote on Inspiration," *Ministry*, August 1997, 9-11.

⁴ David Paulson to Ellen G. White, Apr. 19, 1906.

interpretation of the Bible. Those points are evident from the struggles over the law in Galatians and the ten horns of Daniel in the 1888 era and the conflict over the daily in the early twentieth century.⁵

Thus plenty of evidence exists for false understandings of White's gift before the 1920s. Such misunderstandings were not nearly as widespread as they would be after her death and the crisis of the 1920s. An illustration of that fact is the openness of the denomination's leadership at the 1919 Bible Conference, which found A. G. Daniells, W. W. Prescott, and others with a very open view of inspiration, including denials of inerrancy and verbal inspiration, and very cogent discussions that White's writings should not be used as a Bible commentary or as a source for doctrine or historical fact. The discussions also were quite frank regarding her use of sources.⁶

That openness by those who had worked closely with White came at the wrong time. The larger Protestant culture was in the midst of what it viewed as a death struggle between liberalism and fundamentalism, with the central issue being the nature of the inspiration of the Bible. While the liberals argued the untrustworthiness of the Bible on factual issues and the idea that it was basically like other books in its origin and construction, the fundamentalists went to the opposite extreme, claiming that it was not only verbally inspired but also beyond error (at least in its original autographs) in historical and other facts.⁷

The impact of the Protestant struggle on American culture and thinking is difficult to overestimate. It split denominations, created new ones, and altered the shape of the religious landscape. In the process, Seventh-day Adventism was massively affected as it was polarized toward the camp of the verbalists and inerrantists. In consequence, those church leaders who had spoken openly about issues related to inspiration

⁵ See George R. Knight *Angry Saints: Tensions and Possibilities in the Adventist Struggle over Righteousness by Faith* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1989), 104-109; Gilbert M. Valentine, *W. W. Prescott: Forgotten Giant of Adventism's Second Generation* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2005), 214-235.

⁶ See "The Use of the Spirit of Prophecy in Our Teaching of Bible and History, July 30, 1919," *Spectrum*, May 1979, 28, 30, 34-36, 39, passim; Michael W. Campbell, "The 1919 Bible Conference and Its Significance for Seventh-day Adventist History and Theology" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2008).

⁷ For helpful treatments of fundamentalism, see George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978).

at the 1919 conference lost their positions and the minutes of the conference were shelved and would not be rediscovered for decades, at which time their openness came as a shock to a generation nurtured on concepts of inspiration developed between 1920 and 1960.

Among those whose careers were overthrown was A. G. Daniells, president of the General Conference from 1901 to 1922. The charge against Daniells, Prescott, and others was led by Claude E. Holmes and J. S. Washburn, who in the early 1920s wrote and circulated such tracts as *Have We an Infallible "Spirit of Prophecy"?* and *The Startling Omega and Its True Genealogy*, in which they condemned Daniells and others for their views on inspiration and aggressively upheld the writings of Ellen White as authoritative for doctrine and history and as infallible in the sense of being beyond error. Beyond that, Holmes defined White's writings as "Scripture."⁸ Such ideas and charges in the explosive context of the 1920s were enough to help unseat Daniells at the 1922 General Conference session, during which Holmes' and Washburn's tracts were circulated to the delegates.

The drift toward fundamentalist assumptions regarding inspiration was also evident in such leaders as F. M. Wilcox, editor of the *Review and Herald*, who disclaimed any belief in verbal inspiration at the 1919 conference, but noted in 1928 that he held to the verbal inspiration of the Bible and Ellen White.⁹ Other indicators for the shift are found in the General Conference-sponsored textbook by B. L. House that claims that "the selection of the very words of Scripture in the original languages was overruled by the Holy Spirit"¹⁰ and the "Valuable Quotations" section of *Ministry* in 1931 that gave its approval to the idea that the Bible as inspired by the Spirit was "without a flaw or error" and was authoritative and without mistakes in its historical data and other fields of human knowledge which it touched.¹¹

While such positions were never voted as the official position of the denomination, they progressively dominated Adventist thinking in the following decades, although not everyone accepted them, but the balance

⁸ Claude E. Holmes, *Have We an Infallible "Spirit of Prophecy"?* (N.p.: [The Author], 1920), 11.

⁹ 1919 Bible Conference Minutes, Aug. 1, p. 3; F. M. Wilcox to L. E. Froom, Aug. 5, 1928.

¹⁰ Benjamin L. House, *Analytical Studies in Bible Doctrines for Seventh-day Adventist Colleges* (Berrien Springs, MI: College Press for the General Conference Department of Education, 1926), 66.

¹¹ "Valuable Quotations," *Ministry*, June 1931, 20, 21.

of thinking on the topic had definitely shifted. In that context, it is undoubtedly significant that Walter Martin and Donald Grey Barnhouse, the two men who extended the hand of fellowship to Adventists in the 1950s, were leaders in American fundamentalism rather than middle of the road (on issues of inspiration) evangelicals. Instead of the Adventist/Evangelical Conferences, they should be titled the Adventist/Fundamentalist Conferences.

In summary, the decades after Ellen White's death witnessed a decided shift in the understanding of the majority of Adventists toward the assumptions of the 1920s fundamentalists. Although they were not formally stated, those assumptions permeated Adventist thinking. The majority of Adventists had taken those assumptions on the inspiration of the Bible and applied them to the writings of White. In the process, the denomination had set itself up for a rude awakening.

3. The End of the Wonderful World of Ellen White in the 1970s and Early 1980s

Cracks in the widely held position on Ellen White and her inspiration and authority began in 1970 when *Spectrum* published several articles on White that called for a re-examination of her writings in terms of her relationship to other authors and the social and intellectual context in which she wrote. The next few years saw *Spectrum* publish several articles that indicated that White had used material from other authors in her own writings. The articles claimed that her borrowing was especially extensive in her historical works.

While such borrowing would not have been so much of a surprise to nineteenth-century Adventists who often found the works she utilized advertised in the *Review and Herald* and thus could have seen the parallels, it came as a major blow to a generation of church members nurtured on the myths of her uniqueness and the concept that everything a prophet writes comes directly from God through revelation. Of course, observant readers could have noted her mention of her use of the works of others in the introduction to *The Great Controversy*.¹² Most probably did not think much about the full implications of what they were reading. Nor did the introduction provide information on the extent of usage. At any rate, the facts uncovered through historical research threatened not only the

¹² Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1939), xii.

mythology that had grown up around White but also the authoritative role that she had come to play in the church.

The next stage in the development of the new research on White came in 1976 when Ronald L. Numbers, grandson of a General Conference president, published *Prophetess of Health* through Harper and Row. Numbers argued that she was not only a child of her times in regard to many of her ideas on health but that she had drawn upon the ideas of health reformers of her day and even copied from them. The most damning finding for Numbers was that on the basis of textual comparison he had concluded that she had lied about her use of certain sources. The Ellen G. White Estate responded to Numbers' book with *A Critique of the Book Prophetess of Health*, also published in 1976. That volume presented a chapter-by-chapter evaluation, arguing that Numbers had left out important evidence and had at times misread his sources on significant points. The *Critique* also concerned itself with what it believed was an "air of cynicism" that pervaded the book.¹³

The years following 1976 saw a continuing examination of White and her work. One endeavor along that line involved Walter Rea, an Adventist pastor. Rea's research had led him to the conclusion that White's borrowing in such books as *The Desire of Ages* and *Patriarchs and Prophets* was extensive but not admitted. In response to Rea's claim, Neal Wilson, president of the General Conference, appointed a committee to meet with Rea and examine his evidence. While some committee members found Rea's research lacking in scholarly precision, the committee as a whole was convinced that her borrowing from contemporary works was more widespread than previously believed.¹⁴ In 1982 Rea published his findings in *The White Lie*. His title reflects an extension and magnification of Number's accusation of her dishonesty. For Rea her whole corpus of writings was becoming a lie. For him and others it was not only her writings that had become problematic but also her integrity as a person.

The combined effect of the books by Numbers and Rea, along with the *Spectrum* articles, was the intellectual equivalent of throwing a bomb into what had become since the 1920s the "settled understanding" of White and her gift. By 1982 the wonderful world of White had been challenged and shattered in the eyes of many thinking Adventists.

¹³ Ellen G. White Estate, *A Critique of the Book Prophetess of Health* (Takoma Park, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1976), 11.

¹⁴ See George R. Knight, *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2000), 186.

The major critics of White across time have tended to follow a pattern. Namely, they had begun their journey fully embracing the wonderful world of her inerrancy, exclusive dependence upon revelation in her writings, and “perfect” character, among other perspectives. When they found their views threatened they reacted (perhaps overreacted is a better descriptor) and rejected both her and her writings with gusto. That was true of D. M. Canright in the late 1880s, A. T. Jones and A. F. Ballenger in the early twentieth century, Numbers and Rea in the 1970s, and Dale Ratzlaff in the 1980s. One of Numbers’ college classmates, for example, reports that in his younger years Numbers viewed Ellen White as the final word,¹⁵ while Rea spent a great deal of his energy compiling massive documents from her writings on such topics as the books of Daniel and Revelation. For him, her inspired writings were a divinely inspired commentary. Then he concluded that they had been plagiarized. His faith in White and her writings had been shattered.

There is an important lesson here. Namely, that claiming too much for White and her writings eventually leads to disaster. W. C. White saw that point clearly in 1912 in meeting S. N. Haskell’s overblown ideas. “I believe, Brother Haskell,” W. C. White wrote, “that there is danger of our injuring Mother’s work by claiming for it more than she claims for it, more than Father ever claimed for it, more than Elder[s] Andrews, Waggoner, or Smith ever claimed for it. I cannot see consistency in our putting forth a claim of verbal inspiration when Mother does not make any such claim, and I certainly think we will make a great mistake if we lay aside historical research and endeavor to settle historical questions by the use of Mother’s books as an authority when she herself does not wish them to be used in any such way.” It is of great significance to realize that White saw the same dangers. At the end of one copy of her son’s letter we find the following handwritten note: “I approve of the remarks made in this letter. Ellen G. White.”¹⁶

The dangers of claiming too much for White and her writings also came up during the very open and frank discussions on her work at the 1919 Bible Conference. Daniells, for example, noted that one way to hurt a student’s relationship to White and her gift was “to take an extreme and unwarranted position” on her works. “You can do that...; but when that student gets out and gets in contact with things [i.e., the facts], he may be

¹⁵ Interview with Virginia Smith, January 2015.

¹⁶ W. C. White to S. N. Haskell, Oct. 31, 1912.

shaken, and perhaps shaken clear out and away. I think we should be candid and honest and never put a claim forth that is not well founded.”¹⁷

The warning signs had been placed on the table by those who had worked closely with White, but those signs were ignored and even suppressed (as in the case of the 1919 Bible Conference minutes) in the polarizing atmosphere of the 1920s and a new generation of leaders who were more distant from immediate contact with the prophet and how she worked. Between the 1920s and the 1960s, mythology regarding her writings and her gift became dominant. In the end, as W. C. White had predicted, it “hurt Mother’s work.” In fact, it hurt it much more than he probably expected. Such are the hard lessons when a church forgets its history, or when it puts forth claims that cannot be substantiated when faced with exacting scrutiny. One lesson to be learned is that the church and its members will be healthier when we get as much as possible of the truth about Ellen White on the table and then disseminate it. Only in that way can the criticisms of those who have built upon false conceptions be put to rest.

4. From the End of the Wonderful World of Ellen White to the Construction of a More Adequate Understanding in the 1980s

Moves toward a healthier and more accurate understanding of Ellen White and her gift took a major step forward in 1980 with the publication of *Selected Messages*, Book Three, which devoted 135 of its 465 pages to providing authoritative and enlightening documents that shed light on her ministry. Section two, “Principles of Inspiration,” had 8 chapters that included material on such topics as the primacy of the Bible, how she received her visions, and how she presented and understood her divine messages. Section three, “The Preparation of the Ellen G. White Books,” highlighted her use of literary assistants along with chapters on how she worked in the development of such books as *The Desire of Ages*.

Those sections did much to begin the re-education of the church. However, not least in importance in Book Three of *Selected Messages* were the three appendices from the pen of W. C. White, who had worked extremely closely with his mother during the second half of her ministry. The most extensive is his 1911 presentation to the General Conference

¹⁷ A. G. Daniells, in “The Use of the Spirit of Prophecy,” 36.

Council on the revised edition of *The Great Controversy*. In that presentation White noted that his mother never claimed to be an authority on history and that she received divine guidance in the selection of material from historians as she filled out the great controversy theme shown her in vision.¹⁸

The other two appendices were letters that W. C. White penned to W. W. Eastman in 1912 and L. E. Froom in 1928 and 1934. W. C. White is extremely open and candid about her use of sources from both Adventist and non-Adventist authors. In those letters he reiterated several of the themes he had set forth in his 1911 discussion of the revised *Great Controversy*, but he also expanded his discussion in helpful ways. For example, W. C. White wrote to Froom on January 8, 1928, that “notwithstanding all the power that God had given her to present scenes in the lives of Christ and His apostles and His prophets and His reformers..., she always felt most keenly the results of her lack of school education. She admired the language in which other writers had presented to their readers the scenes which God had presented to her in vision, and she found it both a pleasure, and a convenience and an economy of time to use their language fully or in part in presenting those things which she knew through revelation, and which she wished to pass on to her readers.”¹⁹

W. C. White could be even more explicit. Thus in talking about Adventist publications he noted that at times “Mother found such perfect descriptions of events and presentations of facts and of doctrines written out in our denominational books, that she copied the words of these authorities.”²⁰

Such straight talk was a start in helping people understand Ellen White and her writings, but it was only a beginning. Robert Olson, director of the Ellen G. White Estate from 1978 to 1990, followed up that beginning in March 1981 with his widely circulated *One Hundred and One Questions on the Sanctuary and on Ellen White*. That little book, in its candid approach, continued the discussion begun by the third volume of *Selected Messages*. Olson’s book might have justly been titled *Frank Discussions about the Sanctuary and Ellen White*.

One Hundred and One Questions had sections on such topics as literary borrowing, copying, the use of literary assistants, the perfect prophet

¹⁸ W. C. White, in Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, Book Three (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1980), 437-439, 441.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 460.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 447.

image, inerrancy, and verbalism. Perhaps one of the most unexpected ones dealt with White as a Bible commentator. Olson probably shook up more than one reader when he wrote that “Ellen White’s writings are generally homiletical or evangelistic in nature and not strictly exegetical.” He then illustrated how she used the same verse to make quite different points, accommodating the words to fit her presentations. Olson noted in the same section that “to give an individual complete interpretive control over the Bible would, in effect, elevate that person above the Bible. It would be a mistake to allow even the apostle Paul to exercise interpretive control over all other Bible writers. In such a case, Paul, and not the whole Bible, would be one’s final authority.”²¹

In 1981 Robert Olson was not teaching the same things on the topic that he had when he was my teacher at Pacific Union College in the early 1960s. By the early eighties, he had had to face the hard facts of the shortcomings of the wonderful world of Ellen White approach and those facts were transforming his outlook and presentations. He was not the only one. There was a significant segment of the church’s scholars who were on the same journey of discovery and transformation.

One of the most important initiatives by the General Conference during the early 1980s was the hiring of Fred Veltman, whose doctoral degree was in the exacting area of textual analysis, to intensively study White’s use of sources in *The Desire of Ages*. After the equivalent of five years of full-time study, Veltman concluded that White had borrowed extensively but that it was not blind borrowing. To the contrary, she “used the writings of others consciously and intentionally.” Such borrowing indicates that she had “originality” and was not “slavishly dependent upon her sources.” White’s “independence,” Veltman pointed out, “is ... to be seen in her selectivity. The sources were her slaves, never her master.” In short, while she did use sources more extensively than generally recognized, she crafted her finished product to fit the message she sought to get across to her readers.²²

Following another line of investigation, George Rice published *Luke, a Plagiarist?* in 1983. His starting point was that Adventism’s understanding of Ellen White was vulnerable because it had a very inadequate view of inspiration, having focused its understanding nearly entirely on a model of inspiration in which prophets receive their information by revelation

²¹ Robert W. Olson, *One Hundred and One Questions on the Sanctuary and on Ellen White* (Washington, DC: Ellen G. White Estate, 1981), 41-44.

²² Fred Veltman, “*The Desire of Ages* Project: The Conclusions,” *Ministry*, December 1990, 11-15.

directly from heaven. To indicate the inadequacy of that position, Rice demonstrated from the gospel of Luke how the Bible writers used research and existing documents to produce their inspired books. That broader view of inspiration had obvious implications for the debate on White's inspiration and use of sources. As Rice put it, "the charge that Ellen White cannot fill the role of a spokesperson for God or that she could not possibly have received the gift of prophecy because she 'borrowed' is rooted in a misunderstanding of inspiration. Once the Lucan model is established and accepted, this model can then be allowed to explain the work of Ellen White."²³

Rice had effectively driven a wedge between the concepts of inspiration and revelation by demonstrating that not everything that is inspired by God comes through the experience of divine revelation. The freshness of that thought is indicated on the copyright page of the book in which the publisher sought to protect itself by defensively stating that "the purpose of this book is to investigate a concept of inspiration not generally held by most Seventh-day Adventists. Although the publisher believes that this book will stimulate a constructive study of this subject, this book does not represent an official pronouncement of the Seventh-day Adventist Church nor does it necessarily reflect the editorial opinion of the Pacific Press Publishing Association."²⁴

Rice's book brought a strong reaction from the fundamentalistic administration of the Seventh-day Adventist theological seminary and certain elements in the General Conference's Biblical Research Institute. Ellen G. White Estate director Robert Olson saw its explanatory power and brought Rice on as an associate director even though up to that time he had not specialized in the fields of White's writings or Adventist studies.

The Rice book, with its iconoclastic demonstration of the separation of inspiration and revelation, which set forth revelation as only one possible source for inspired writings, shook up settled ideas on the topic, but his findings dovetailed theoretically with those of Veltman. Combined, they began to provide Adventism with the foundation to develop a more sophisticated understanding of revelation and inspiration.

More specifically related to Ellen White concerns than Rice's work was the publication of my *Myths in Adventism* in 1985. Unlike Olson and Rice, I was not especially concerned with defending White or developing an apologetic for her or her writings. I was merely trying to understand what

²³ George E. Rice, *Luke, a Plagiarist?* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1983), 110.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, [iv].

I was reading and trying to teach. That was crucial to me because I sensed that the explanatory models of the time were inadequate, and where they were adequate they had not been sufficiently developed or illustrated from her own writings against the historical background in which she wrote and applied her counsels. The opening chapter, "The Myth of the Inflexible Prophet," undoubtedly got the most attention and cut into the newest territory. In a world in which the independent Ellen White compilation makers used White's quotations as if they all had the same background, I sought to demonstrate a hermeneutic based on her own interpretation of her writings that argued for the use of literary and historical contexts, common sense, her understanding of the distinction between the real world and the ideal world, and other principles that there was not necessarily a single White position on a given topic. Rather than one position, one could find several quite different positions and counsels of her understanding on how to apply Christian principles on many topics. In essence, I was putting forth the hypothesis that to do justice to White and her writings the denomination would have to develop a much more sophisticated and sensitive hermeneutic. That chapter hit a live nerve in the Adventist world and was soon republished in abbreviated form in the *Adventist Review*.²⁵ The rest of the chapters confronted such myths as that of White being a hundred years ahead of her time and sought to rectify many serious misconceptions about White's counsel deeply rooted in the denomination's thinking and practice. One of the fallouts from the publication of *Myths* was a phone call from Olson with my first invitation to join the White Estate team at General Conference headquarters.

The late 1980s found me still struggling with trying to better understand White and the proper use of her writings. Perhaps my most significant research during those years was an examination of the use of authority at the 1888 General Conference session. Up to that time many aspects of the Minneapolis event had been explored, but no one had examined the struggle over authority in any depth yet. The available documentation was massive. For me, the most important finding was that White refused to let her writings be used to interpret the meaning of Bible passages or to establish doctrine. I presented my findings in my daily lectures in Nairobi, Kenya, to the General Conference Annual Council in 1988, where they raised some eyebrows and generated some resistance, but they should not have if the claims of White are taken seriously. After all, she herself repeatedly and emphatically claimed that there must be

²⁵ George R. Knight, "The Myth of the Inflexible Prophet," *Adventist Review*, April 3, 1986, 14, 15.

biblical evidence for every doctrine and practice.²⁶ That had always been her position,²⁷ as well as that of her husband and the other pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It was only later (probably in the 1880s) that the denomination began to rely on her for Bible interpretation and doctrinal extensions. Those approaches, although widely practiced in the denomination in the 1920s to the 1960s, were in essence heresy rather than orthodoxy from the perspective of Adventism's founding generation and White.

At its clearheaded best, the denominational leaders had always recognized that White should not be used as authority for such things as doctrine. Theory is one thing and practice another, especially when many leaders still had a belief that some of Adventism's early beliefs had in one way or another found their genesis in White's writings, a perspective definitely put to rest in the 1990s by those who researched the topic.²⁸ Even with the findings spelled out and documented some have been aggressively criticized for not giving a larger role to White in the process. The sad fact is that White mythology not only dies hard but also has a tendency to spontaneously resurrect.

A final initiative during the 1980s at breaking up such concepts as Ellen White being 100 years ahead of her time was *The World of Ellen G.*

²⁶ See Knight, *Angry Saints*, 100-115, for numerous claims by Ellen White on this point.

²⁷ Some have suggested that the point regarding EGW's relation to the Bible in the resolution of theological differences breaks down in her treatment of A. F. Ballenger's problem over the sanctuary teaching in 1905. On that occasion she came across much more authoritatively than she did during the Galatians and "daily" conflicts. Thus, the Ballenger incident is an excellent test case. As a preliminary hypothesis, it seems to me that we find a fundamental difference between Ballenger's case and the other two. From EGW's perspective, Adventist scholars had already thoroughly studied from the Bible the point at issue, whereas the law in Galatians and the "daily" still needed more attention when disagreement arose over them. As a result, she related to Ballenger's situation differently than she did in the other cases. Such a hypothesis has yet to be tested, but it should prove to be an interesting and meaningful task for some scholar in the future. It should be noted that EGW's seemingly variant treatment of Ballenger's situation should not be attributed to some historical development in her theological assertiveness, since the Galatians and "daily" controversies chronologically span the Ballenger incident.

²⁸ See, for example, Knight, *Search*; Rolf J. Pöhler, *Continuity and Change in Adventist Teaching: A Case Study in Doctrinal Development* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000); Merlin D. Burt, "The Historical Background, Interconnected Development, and Integration of the Doctrines of the Sanctuary, the Sabbath, and Ellen White's Role in Sabbatarian Adventism from 1844 to 1849" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2002).

White, published in 1987 under the editorship of Gary Land. That volume of essays did much to help Adventists see the historical context in which she lived and wrote and how her concerns and many of her solutions were those of her era.

These works were significant but are merely the tip of a very large iceberg of studies related to Ellen White. The eighties saw a multitude of articles, research papers, shelf documents, and even dissertations and thesis on the topic.²⁹ By the end of the 1980s most of the creative work on the recreation of Ellen White had been completed.

The 1990s and beyond saw a relaxation on the debate over critical issues related to Ellen White, even though Alden Thompson's *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (1991) stirred up a bit of a tempest in some circles. Most of the books published after the eighties tended to consolidate information, expand on ideas put forth in the 1980s, and make the information more widely available. Major agents in that endeavor were Herbert Douglass's encyclopedic *Messenger of the Lord* (1998), my own four small volumes on Ellen White (*Meeting Ellen White* [1996], *Reading Ellen White* [1997], *Ellen White's World* [1998], and *Walking With Ellen White* [1999]), and *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, edited by Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon and published in 2013.

The most significant exception to the consolidation and exposition pattern in the post-eighties decades was Don S. McMahon's *Acquired or Inspired? Exploring the Origins of the Adventist Lifestyle* (2005). McMahon's path breaking study divided Ellen White's counsels on health into what he called the "whats" and the "whys." He found her remarkably accurate on the specific counsel that she gave but only comparable with her contemporaries in the reasons for that counsel.³⁰ That conclusion, even though it has been criticized for inadequate methodology,³¹ matches well with what can be demonstrated about her visions as they relate to the use of historical sources and it fits well with the Adventist understanding of

²⁹ See, for example, the following extensive collections of documents. Robert W. Olson, comp. *Periodical Articles Concerning Inspiration, Ellen G. White, and Adventist History* (Washington, DC: Ellen G. White Estate, 1986); Roger W. Coon, comp. *Anthology of Recently Published Articles on Selected Issues in Prophetic Guidance*, vol. 1:1980-1988; vol. 2:1989-1992.

³⁰ For a popularized version of McMahon's book, see Leonard Brand and Don S. McMahon, *The Prophet and Her Critics* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2005).

³¹ The criticism indicates need for a study utilizing tighter controls. However, McMahon's conclusion definitely lines up with what we can already demonstrate about Ellen White's use of sources in such areas as history, indicating that he is probably onto a valid track that needs further investigation to test his hypotheses.

inspiration as set forth in the period after 1980. Needless to say, what is now known about White and her use of sources in history and the medical field has major ramifications for some of her statements on scientific issues, many which appear to be problematic.

Two other important books pushing the frontiers of Ellen White studies in the early twenty-first century are Gilbert Valentine's *The Prophet and the Presidents* (2011) and Jud Lake's *Ellen White under Fire: Identifying the Mistakes of Her Critics* (2010). While the latter volume signals a more sophisticated approach to Ellen White apologetics that utilizes many of the understandings developed since the 1970s, Valentine's treatment (following Jerry Moon's study of the relationship between W. C. White and his mother³²) points the way to a whole realm of new insights on how the gift of prophecy worked in the everyday world of White as a person interacting with individuals with the gift of administration. This is a fruitful area for extended future research that has the potential to shed a great deal of light on the function of White in the church and the nature of her gift.

Two other recently published multi-authored volumes, *Understanding Ellen White* and *The Gift of Prophecy in Scripture and History* (both 2015), continue to extend the new understandings of Ellen White, but the latter work has especially enriched the discussion through its examination of the gift of prophecy in the Bible and Christian history. *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet*, published by Oxford University Press in 2014, finds its primary significance in repackaging views of Ellen White and her work for non-Adventist readers rather than in pushing into new territory on the nature of her inspiration.

The findings of the recent decades would have been anathema in the times of the wonderful world of the 1920s through the 1960s. The hard facts set forth by the critical researchers and writers of the late sixties and early seventies pushed those writing in the 1980s and beyond to take a second look at White's work, the denomination's understanding of inspiration, and the mythology that largely grew up around her after her death in 1915. Unfortunately, the depth of the problems associated with the traditional approach and the revolutionary findings of the eighties and beyond have all too often not registered with the average member in the pew. As a result, viewing certain aggressive internet sites can throw them into disarray. The education of the Adventist public is an ongoing need, as are explorations into areas of White studies that still need to be looked at seriously.

³² Jerry Allan Moon, *W. C. White and Ellen G. White: The Relationship between the Prophet and Her Son* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1993).

5. Possible Future for Ellen White Studies

Even though great progress in understanding has taken place in Ellen White studies, there are topics large and small on every hand that need significant work if we are to adequately understand God's gift and how best to utilize it. What follows is a list of suggested topics. There are others, but these are illustrative of places to start.

At the top of my list is a three-volume project on inspiration. They would include the historical development of the understanding of inspiration in the Christian church, a theological study of the topic, and, most important, an *inductive* study of the Scriptures to develop a truly biblical understanding of inspiration and hermeneutics. The last volume is the most crucial, since endless controversy has resulted from superimposing human theories on the Bible instead of examining the internal evidences, which are much more plentiful than most people realize.

This cluster of proposed books is focused on the Bible rather than White, but she has suffered from many of the same impositions regarding inspiration as the Bible. George Rice has already demonstrated the power of the study of biblical models to help us understand White. Also important in the general area of these three volumes is the history of inspiration in Adventist circles. The good news is that Denis Kaiser worked on at least part of that topic as the focus of his Ph.D. dissertation.

Another topic that needs honest discussion might be framed as the borders of inspiration. In short, might there be uninspired material in an inspired writer's corpus? The border has been traditionally defined by Arthur White, who distinguished between the religious and the secular in Ellen White's published and unpublished writings. Thus, religious thoughts are inspired, but such topics as the number of rooms in the Paradise Valley Sanitarium were uninspired common knowledge. That works well until one reads in a published Ellen White book that God "cannot love those who are dishonest" and that God does not love wicked children.³³ Really! That is not what the Bible teaches. Are there any other types of children, given the fact that those not involved in "nasty sins" are caught up in such vegetarian, pharisaical sins as spiritual pride and self-sufficiency? If the published statements above are inspired, Ellen White is in deep trouble. Some years ago I set forth another possible answer to the

³³ Ellen G. White in *An Appeal to the Youth* (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Assn., 1864), 42, 62.

issue related to her central themes,³⁴ but much more work needs to be done.

Another illustration of the unclear edge between what is inspired and not inspired is Ellen White's *Health Reformer* articles in the early 1870s. Due to the problematic content in some of them, Arthur White, in a private conversation with Robert Olson and myself in Takoma Park in June 1985, noted that he wanted to write a section in his six-volume biography explaining that such articles did not come under the inspired category; that she was merely providing articles to fill up the pages of her regular column. I discouraged him from treating the issue in the biography because it needed more space and might be misunderstood. I have since repented of my suggestion.

Another area that needs significant work is that of compilations. Ellen White was clear in her will that she wanted compilations on various topics to be published from her unpublished files. While that is true, most Adventists are somewhat confused as to the proper use of such works. In my earlier years, for example, I even read such works as *Counsels on Diet and Foods* for morning worship. The book has its uses but that is not one of them.

A more serious issue related to compilations is the power inherent in the labeling and ordering of the quotations. For years I was going to publish an article titled "Making Ellen White Say What She Never Said." A prime example of the power of labeling is found on page 650 of *Questions on Doctrine*. In a section of a compilation of Ellen White quotes on the human nature of Christ the compiler entered a heading that reads, "Took Sinless Human Nature." That is the exact opposite of her statements on the topic, but the compilers had a point they wanted to make and utilized a heading to have Ellen White make it for them. That particular instance of manipulation and dishonesty had disastrous results as it became a major factor in the crisis over *Questions on Doctrine* (1957) that set the stage for the ongoing division in the denomination between the General Conference position and that of the perfectionistic sectarians in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a division that continues to cause endless problems more than a half century later.³⁵ Although *Questions on Doctrine*

³⁴ See George R. Knight, *Reading Ellen White* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1997), 55-57, building upon 46-54.

³⁵ For the human nature of Christ problem in *Questions on Doctrine*, see the extended footnotes in *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine*, Annotated Edition (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2003), 516-526; 533-547. For information on the crisis, see the "Historical and Theological Introduction to the Annotated Edition," xiii-xxxvi.

is not among the compilations put out by the White Estate, it illustrates my point.

Here it is important to make a necessary point. I do not believe that the major problem is with those compilations developed in the White Estate offices under conditions that were established to insure as much objectivity and balance as possible. My concern is with those early on developed by various General Conference departments, such as *Counsels on Diet and Foods* (1938) by H. M. Walton of the Health and Temperance Department, *Messages to Young People* (1930) by J. F. Simon, an associate in the Missionary Volunteer Department, and *Country Living* (1946) by E. A. Sutherland of the Adventist Commission on Rural Living.

A helpful illustration is found in the section entitled "Perfecting Holiness" in *Counsels on Diet and Foods* (1938), page 382, which comes right after the section on "Preparing for Translation." Because of certain issues in the passage³⁶ I decided to investigate the original document and all subsequent publications of it. That took me back to MS 86, 1901, entitled "The Need of Medical Missionary Work," its 1902 publication in the *Review* labeled "A Reform Needed," and to *Counsels on Health* (1923) that utilized the "Reform Needed" title.³⁷ Up to that point in time the usage had been faithful to the original manuscript. Then came *Counsels on Diet and Foods* (1938) that published it under the heading of "Perfecting Holiness" in the context of a section on preparing for translation. Those were not the topics of the original manuscript.³⁸ My conclusion was that

³⁶ My issues with the passage changed over time. Early in my journey the problem was the lack of perfectionistic language. Later it was the fact that the vegetarians aligned with Kellogg who eventually left the church rather than the "predicted" meat eaters of the passage.

³⁷ Ellen G. White, "A Reform Needed," *Review and Herald*, May 27, 1902, 8, 9; Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Health* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1957, first published in 1923), 575-579.

³⁸ The original manuscript is quite forceful on the need for health reform in the context of ministerial resistance to the work of J. H. Kellogg, but it makes no argument regarding perfection in the context of preparing for translation. The sentiments in the manuscript itself are certainly appropriate for inclusion in *Counsels*, but the current labeling and sequencing have claimed ideas for MS 86 that are not faithful to the original. Such manipulation of ideas traditionally has had in Adventist history a less than helpful impact on those who tend to see sin and perfection in terms of lifestyle and final generation theology rather than in the framework set forth by Ellen White and the Bible. The problem in CD 382 brings to mind Ellen White's much needed advice in "Proper Use of the Testimonies on Health Reform" not to "select statements from the testimonies" (without considering their contexts) and "make them as strong as possible" (*Selected Messages*, Book 3, 283-287).

somebody³⁹ had a burden on the subject and through the power of labeling and the sequencing of quotations made Ellen White say what she had never said. That, to put it mildly, is misleading. My present concern is to suggest that it is better to be proactive in validating and annotating⁴⁰ such compilations than it is to wait until someone creates a crisis that we are forced to react to, as happened in the 1970s.

My problem with J. F. Simon's work on *Messages to Young People* is of a different nature to the one with *Counsels on Diet and Foods*. Here the problem is one of balance. Simon's moral difficulties are well documented.⁴¹ His personal struggles may have colored the structure of the book, even though his infidelities apparently did not take place or surface until after he had completed his compiling work. For years I have heard the complaint that the volume tends to be negative and fails to emphasize Ellen White's gospel-oriented, Christ-centered message to young people. I have often wondered if the compiler might have been struggling with his own demons. That could possibly account for section II, "The Conflict with Sin," being by far the largest of the volume's 15 sections (more than twice the pages and almost twice the number of chapters as any other section). This is merely a hypothesis, but it does appear that the volume presents a biased selection of White's messages to young people. It would be a gift of the White Estate to Adventist young people everywhere if there was a *Messages to Young People* that sets forth the Christian life in the context of Jesus Christ, His love for them, and the provisions of the Gospel. It is in that context that the sanctified life, walking with Jesus, and the struggle with sin must take place. An action was taken to revise the book in 1967, but nothing came of it.⁴² The need is for a positive, balanced book that helps young people clearly see God's

³⁹ Probably Dr. H. M. Walton, director of the Health and Temperance Department of the General Conference from 1937-1946, did the original work of compilation and circulated the manuscript in mimeograph form before it was published by the White Estate. See Q & A File 43-D-9 which has two pages of a letter attached from A. L. White to H. M. Walton.

⁴⁰ If problems are found, it seems that annotated editions of these compilations may be the only way to move forward, since—if some people's favorite proof passages are removed—the White Estate would be accused of suppression. Annotation is a messy solution, but the problem may also be messy. I do not really know how big the problem is since CD 382 is the only passage I have investigated.

⁴¹ See, for example, Ron Graybill to Tim Poirier, Oct. 29, 1990; [Home Missionary Dept.] to H. H. Cobban, Aug. 19, 1932; A. R. Mazat to J. C. Kozel, Jan. 13, 1966; Q & A File 43-D-9.

⁴² "Action of the Large Committee on *Messages to Young People*," Sept. 7, 1967.

message of forgiving, transforming, and empowering grace for them. Such would have a better chance of leading them to love White's counsel rather than seeing her as one with a negative and legalistic message.

A problem of a different sort is raised by the material in *Country Living*, compiled by the highly opinionated and often one-sided E. A. Sutherland while he was director of the Adventist Commission on Rural Living. Denis Fortin has pointed out that while "*Country Living* has been one of the smallest ... of Ellen White's writings," it has also been one of the "most influential compilations" of her thoughts.⁴³ Of special influence has been the one-sided selection (especially emphasized in labeling) of counsel on labor unions and rural living. The original bias of the booklet was bad enough, but its influence was multiplied by replication without balancing quotations in later compilations such as *Selected Messages*.⁴⁴ Missing is the parallel material in Ellen White's counsel on fostering evangelistic work by living in the cities and even moving into them for missionary work⁴⁵ and the fact that she was just as much against big business combinations as she was against labor unions.⁴⁶ The truth is that she was opposed to oppressive combinations of any sort that would restrict the freedom of Christians to serve God. One result of such one-sided selection and labeling of her counsel is that Adventism has very little presence in many urban areas, especially those heavily industrialized and unionized. The denomination is currently struggling with the results of such one-sided emphases. Seemingly small issues can produce large results, especially when dealing with the writings of one who claims the prophetic gift. Adventist publications need to be as faithful as possible in setting forth more fully White's generally balanced counsel.

⁴³ Denis Fortin, "*Country Living*," *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, 743.

⁴⁴ Ellen White, *Selected Messages*, Book 2, 1958, 141-144 for labor unions, 354-359 for rural living. The section on unions has been moved from *Country Living* as an unchanged unit (9-12) while the material on rural living has come from various pages of *Country Living* without change (except the deletion of two paragraphs on 2 SM 356). All of the content in the *Selected Messages* section is found in *Country Living*. No balancing quotations have been entered for either labor unions or rural living.

⁴⁵ See George R. Knight, "Cities, Living in"; R. Clifford Jones, "City Evangelism," *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, 714-718.

⁴⁶ George R. Knight, *Ellen White's World* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1998), 122-127. It should be pointed out that all of the anti-union statements in *Country Living* come from 1902 through 1904. Earlier in Adventist history the denomination's approach to labor conflicts tended to side with the working class on the basis of James 5. The changed relationship between labor unions and Sunday issues provided the stimulus for the new emphasis. Time and place are crucial in Ellen White studies.

In summary I will just note a couple of fruitful areas that I would like to see developed and then move on to my final thoughts. On my wish list I would like to see someone undertake the task of publishing a set of the *Testimonies* with the real names (wherever known) in the text. A bit of historical commentary on each testimony that provides bibliographic leads would make such a work even more valuable. Also valuable would be an inductive study of Ellen White's use of various Bible passages and the lessons to be gleaned from such usage. Then I would like to see a book-length treatment that picks up Robert Olson's assertion that White "never just sat down and wrote a book" like other authors write books.⁴⁷ Such a book would be a historical journey all the way from *Experiences and Views* up through *Prophets and Kings* and would of necessity deal with her use of sources, literary assistants, and her personal files, how revelation entered in, and so on. The finished product would be helpful as well as informative.

I would like to close with one important thought. One of the unfortunate facts in the history of White studies is that both her detractors and her supporters have all too often held (many times below the level of consciousness) the same false presuppositions related to such issues as verbal inspiration, inerrancy, and the perfect prophet syndrome. Such presuppositions have created both accusations and defenses that are wrongheaded. My prayer for the next generation of Ellen White scholars is that they will move forward with both eyes open as they seek to be absolutely honest and rigorous in the investigation of a topic of great importance to the church.

⁴⁷ Robert W. Olson, "Olson Discusses the Veltman Study," *Ministry*, Dec. 1990, 18.