

The Proper Role of Ellen G. White's Writings In Resolving Church Controversies

William Fagal, Associate Director
Ellen G. White Estate

What role, if any, should the writings of Ellen G. White have in resolving disputed issues of interpretation in the Seventh-day Adventist Church? The question stems from the high regard that the church has for her ministry and counsel. Seventh-day Adventists believe that Ellen G. White manifested the gift of prophecy, a gift promised to the last-day church in such Bible passages as Joel 2:28-31, Ephesians 4:11-14, and Revelation 12:17 and 19:10. Should her writings, then, have a part in addressing matters of controversy in the church? If so, what should their role be?

We will seek answers largely from the writings of Ellen G. White themselves. First we will note her own instructions on the proper method for determining truth and on how her writings relate to that method. Then we will examine some practical examples of how this process functioned in her relationship to certain controversies in her own day. Finally, we will note briefly some of her counsel about how to address controversial matters.

Ellen G. White Statements Regarding Methodology

A foundational statement from Ellen G. White about establishing our beliefs is this one, from *The Great Controversy*, p. 595:

But God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reforms. The opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils, as numerous and discordant as are the churches which they represent, the voice of the majority—not one nor all of these should be regarded as evidence for or against any point of religious faith. Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain “Thus saith the Lord” in its support.

Satan is constantly endeavoring to attract attention to man in the place of God. He leads the people to look to bishops, to pastors, to professors of theology, as their guides, instead of searching the Scriptures to learn their duty for themselves. Then, by controlling the minds of these leaders, he can influence the multitudes according to his will.

This statement offers a stirring challenge, and not just to those outside the Adventist faith to whom the statement was especially addressed and who may have followed human teachings rather than Scripture. It also challenges Seventh-day Adventists who may have done the same thing unwittingly or may be tempted to do so. The statement does not rule out the work of pastors, church officials, and theologians, but it holds that these may not substitute for the Scriptures and the believer's own study of the Scriptures. Since believers are responsible to God individually, they are under individual obligation to go to the Bible themselves to search out and discover its teachings. They are to look for the plain statements of Scripture to establish or disprove any doctrine or precept.

The choice of words here is significant. While a doctrine is a teaching or a statement of belief, the dictionary defines a precept as "a command or principle intended esp. as a general rule of action."¹ According to Ellen G. White, the Bible is to define them both. So we should look to Scripture not only to delineate our beliefs, but also to let it guide what we do. This would logically apply not only to our personal behavior and ethics, but also to matters of church governance and practice, especially those intended as "a general rule of action."

We find this point made again in similar terms in a message to those who would attend the 1888 General Conference session: "The word of God is the great detector of error; to it we believe everything must be brought. The Bible must be our standard for every doctrine and practice. We must study it reverentially. We are to receive no one's opinion without comparing it with the Scriptures. Here is divine authority which is supreme in matters of faith" (*The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, pp. 44, 45). While the statement from *The Great Controversy* referred to "doctrine or precept," this one says that the Bible must be our standard for "every doctrine and practice." Ellen White did not limit the applicability of Scripture as the standard for what the church does.

¹ Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th ed. (2003).

In *Christ's Object Lessons*, pp. 39, 40, Ellen White noted the all-too-human tendency to place our own judgment above the Word:

In our day, as of old, the vital truths of God's word are set aside for human theories and speculations. Many professed ministers of the gospel do not accept the whole Bible as the inspired word. One wise man rejects one portion; another questions another part. They set up their judgment as superior to the word; and the Scripture which they do teach rests upon their own authority. Its divine authenticity is destroyed. Thus the seeds of infidelity are sown broadcast; for the people become confused and know not what to believe. There are many beliefs that the mind has no right to entertain. In the days of Christ the rabbis put a forced, mystical construction upon many portions of Scripture. Because the plain teaching of God's word condemned their practices, they tried to destroy its force. The same thing is done today. The word of God is made to appear mysterious and obscure in order to excuse transgression of His law. Christ rebuked these practices in His day. He taught that the word of God was to be understood by all. He pointed to the Scriptures as of unquestionable authority, and we should do the same. The Bible is to be presented as the word of the infinite God, as the end of all controversy and the foundation of all faith.

Again, her emphasis was on the Bible as the source of truth and the standard by which to evaluate all teachings. The Bible is "to be understood by all," and its authority "unquestionable." It is to be "the end of all controversy and the foundation of all faith."

Ellen G. White wrote strongly about the hazards of looking to humans instead of to Scripture, as in this statement:

God wants us to depend upon Him, and not upon man. He desires us to have a new heart; He would give us revealings of light from the throne of God. We should wrestle with every difficulty, but when some controverted point is presented, are you to go to man to find out his opinion, and then shape your conclusions from his?—No, go to God. Tell Him what you want; take your Bible and search as for hidden treasures. (*Selected Messages*, bk. 1, p. 415)

There are many more statements from her that make a similar point. In her view, we have an obligation to search the Word of God for ourselves. The thoughts and opinions of others, even prominent and educated people, are not to be decisive for us. The Bible is to fill that role.

Then how do her counsel, ministry, and writings figure into this, if at all? Do these statements upholding the authority of Scripture rule out a role for her in helping the church resolve matters of controversy? Apparently not. Note her own description of her role in relation to Scripture:

I recommend to you, dear reader, the Word of God as the rule of your faith and practice. By that Word we are to be judged. God has, in that Word, promised to give visions in the “*last days*”; not for a new rule of faith, but for the comfort of His people, and to correct those who err from Bible truth. (*Early Writings*, p. 78)

While upholding the central role of Scripture as the rule of faith and practice, she specified that last-day visions were given to comfort God’s people and “to correct those who err from Bible truth.” This indicates that we may expect to find guidance in her writings to help us understand what Bible truth is and to prevent our mistaking it or straying from it. It also implies that we may find some Bible matters, even important ones, on which there is not a definitive, “plain ‘Thus saith the Lord’” that instantly and clearly resolves the difficulty. Such situations will require deeper study, bringing together all of what Scripture says on a topic and seeing how it may fit together. By her own testimony we should give priority to such study of the Bible, but when we have done so and there is still danger of conflict, controversy, disunion, or error, we may legitimately turn to her writings to see whether they may point us toward a better understanding of Scripture and toward a resolution of the difficulty with which we are grappling. They may indeed help to correct us when we “err from Bible truth.”

Ellen White believed that the same Spirit who had inspired and guided the Bible writers also spoke through her visions and writings: “In ancient times God spoke to men by the mouth of prophets and apostles. In these days He speaks to them by the testimonies of His Spirit. There was never a time when God instructed His people more earnestly than He instructs them now concerning His will and the course that He would have them pursue” (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 661). She further expressed the relationship of these writings to Scripture in the following statement:

In the Scriptures God has set forth practical lessons to govern the life and conduct of all; but though He has given minute particulars in regard to our character, conversation, and conduct, yet in a large measure, His lessons are disregarded and ignored. Besides the instruction in His Word, the Lord has given special testimonies to His people, not as a new revelation, but that He may set before us the plain lessons of His Word, that errors may be corrected, that the right way

may be pointed out, that every soul may be without excuse. (*Selected Messages*, bk. 3, p. 31, emphasis added)²

This belief in the divine origin of these writings, whether of Scripture or the writings of Ellen G. White, has consequences. Divine origin places a responsibility on us for our use and handling of these materials (cf. Luke 10:16). As Ellen White expressed it, “The Holy Ghost is the author of the Scriptures and of the Spirit of Prophecy. These are not to be twisted and turned to mean what man may want them to mean, to carry out man’s ideas and sentiments, to carry forward man’s schemes at all hazards” (*ibid.*, p. 30). In our efforts to use such writings to resolve controversies, we are under obligation to face honestly what they actually say and follow it. We are not free to slant these writings, to quote them selectively, to try to use them to support our own views or what we wish they had said, in order to carry forward our desires at all costs. As Joseph Bates, J. H. Waggoner, and M. E. Cornell wrote in a statement about spiritual gifts that they were commissioned to prepare for the 1855 conference we will refer to below, “While we regard them [the visions] as coming from God, and entirely harmonizing with his written word, we must acknowledge ourselves under obligation to abide by their teachings, and be corrected by their admonitions.”³

In the setting of the post-Minneapolis controversies over righteousness by faith, Ellen White wrote the following revealing word of caution:

Nothing frightens me more than to see the spirit of variance manifested by our brethren. We are on dangerous ground when we cannot meet together like Christians, and courteously examine controverted points. I feel like fleeing from the place lest I receive the mold of those who cannot candidly investigate the doctrines of the Bible. Those who cannot impartially examine the evidences of a position that differs from theirs, are not fit to teach in any department of God’s cause. What we need is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Without this, we are

² Compare her similar statement that includes more explicitly the role of her writings to “specify what is truth”: “[T]he Lord has given me much light that I want the people to have; for there is instruction that the Lord has given me for His people. It is light that they should have, line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little. This is now to come before the people, because it has been given to correct specious errors and to specify what is truth. The Lord has revealed many things pointing out the truth, thus saying, ‘This is the way, walk ye in it.’”—Letter 127, 1910.” (*Selected Messages*, bk. 3, p. 32)

³ Joseph Bates, J. H. Waggoner, and M. E. Cornell, “Address Of the Conference Assembled at Battle Creek, Mich., Nov. 16th, 1855,” *Review and Herald*, December 4, 1855, pp. 78, 79. Quoted portion from p. 79. Their assignment is recorded in “Business Proceedings of the Conference at Battle Creek, Mich.,” *ibid.*, p. 76.

no more fitted to go forth to the world than were the disciples after the crucifixion of their Lord. Jesus knew their destitution, and told them to tarry in Jerusalem until they should be endowed with power from on high. (*Review and Herald*, February 18, 1890)

In our controversies today, we must bring the right spirit to our discussions, to examine impartially positions that differ from our own, in a courteous and Christlike attitude. For this, according to Ellen White, we need the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This baptism supersedes the importance of whether any one side in the controversy wins or loses.

Ellen G. White's Contributions in Resolving Controversies

We will examine in some detail three instances of Ellen White's involvement in controverted issues among the believers. The first two of these are widely known, but they are included here because they are essentially paradigmatic, illustrating for us how Ellen White's gift was properly to function in relation to controversies in the church. The third instance, lesser known and quite unusual, still contributes to our understanding of the role of her gift.

1. Early Doctrinal Development

In the aftermath of the 1844 Millerite disappointments (spring and fall), when Jesus did not return as expected, the believers experienced a crisis of faith. Most concluded that, as attractive and convincing as the Millerite prophetic interpretations had been, they must simply have been wrong. A small handful, however, could not deny the validity of their experience nor show how their prophetic calculations had erred. As they began to understand the Bible's teaching about the sanctuary, which explained what had happened in 1844, they also came across other Bible teachings that were new to them, which they needed to understand. As they studied, they often had differences of opinion about the meaning and significance of certain Bible passages. In some cases they could resolve these together, but in other cases they could not. People from New England then were known for their independent

thinking. They brought this independence with them to their study, and often the result was conflict and disunion.

Much later, in the setting of certain contested issues, Ellen White described their early experience:

Many of our people do not realize how firmly the foundation of our faith has been laid. My husband, Elder Joseph Bates, Father Pierce, Elder [Hiram] Edson, and others who were keen, noble, and true, were among those who, after the passing of the time in 1844, searched for the truth as for hidden treasure. I met with them, and we studied and prayed earnestly. Often we remained together until late at night, and sometimes through the entire night, praying for light and studying the Word. Again and again these brethren came together to study the Bible, in order that they might know its meaning, and be prepared to teach it with power. (*Selected Messages*, bk. 1, p. 206)

The fact that they had to meet repeatedly, and sometimes for long sessions, suggests that finding agreement was a struggle, despite their desire to know and follow truth.

This account of their difficulties calls to mind Ellen White's description of the first of the well-known Bible conferences of 1848 to 1850, which may represent a later stage of this doctrinal development process. Of the Conference in Volney, New York, she wrote in 1860:

Our first conference was at Volney in Bro. Arnold's barn. There were about thirty-five present, all that could be collected in that part of the State. There were hardly two agreed. Each was strenuous for his views, declaring that they were according to the Bible. All were anxious for an opportunity to advance their sentiments, or to preach to us. They were told that we had not come so great a distance to hear them, but had come to teach them the truth. Bro. Arnold held that the 1000 years of Revelation 20 were in the past; and that the 144,000 were those raised at Christ's resurrection. And as we had the emblem of our dying Lord before us, and [were] about to commemorate his sufferings, Bro. A. arose and said he had no faith in what we were about to do; that the Sacrament was a continuation of the Passover, to be observed but once a year. (*Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2, pp. 97, 98)

Clearly, our pioneers did have conflicts of understanding. Bible study was the primary means they employed to resolve such conflicts. But Ellen White recounted how God aided them in this process. Continuing with the first narrative we quoted above, we find her describing what happened when they arrived at an impasse:

When they came to the point in their study where they said, "We can do nothing more," the Spirit of the Lord would come upon me, I would be taken off in vision, and a clear explanation of

the passages we had been studying would be given me, with instruction as to how we were to labor and teach effectively. Thus light was given that helped us to understand the scriptures in regard to Christ, His mission, and His priesthood. (*Selected Messages*, bk. 1, pp. 206, 207)

Did they accept this light simply because it came from her by way of vision? Some may have done so, as we might take from this statement highlighting a further unusual element in the events:

During this whole time I could not understand the reasoning of the brethren. My mind was locked, as it were, and I could not comprehend the meaning of the scriptures we were studying. This was one of the greatest sorrows of my life. I was in this condition of mind until all the principal points of our faith were made clear to our minds, in harmony with the Word of God. The brethren knew that when not in vision, I could not understand these matters, and they accepted as light direct from heaven the revelations given. (*Ibid.*, p. 207)

But another factor may also have been operational, beyond the fact that the instruction came by way of vision. These independent-minded Bible students were not credulous simpletons who were easily swayed by unusual circumstances. Most Millerites had turned against contemporary visions as a source of divine light and guidance. Among the small group that was seeking to resolve the problems without surrendering their Millerite understanding of the prophetic time periods, Joseph Bates, for one, had been slow to accept the validity of Ellen White's visions, and surely there were others of a similar skeptical mind. It is reasonable to conclude that the early believers accepted the interpretations she gave in these circumstances not only because they had come by means of vision, but because despite their strongly-held opinions, they could see that these interpretations really *did* provide a clear explanation of the texts that had perplexed them. The consistency and power of truth was convincing to them. And they were sincere in their desire for truth—sincere enough to surrender their own cherished ideas when something more coherent and comprehensive came to their attention, something that they knew ultimately was *scriptural*, and that they would have to be able to defend against all challenges on the basis of Scripture.

In summary of this instance, we find that guidance through the visions did not displace Bible study. In fact, it did not come at all until those early believers had exhausted their resources of Bible study and still had not been able to come into unity. When prophetic guidance did come, it pointed

them back to Scripture, opening their eyes to ways in which their views, which they had sought to show from Scripture, were actually unscriptural and in need of modification or surrender. They found not only unity but a solid, defensible Bible position as a result.

2. *Time to Begin the Sabbath Hours*

Sometimes, though, the prophetic guidance that helped the church resolve a controversy was not as explicit and overt as in the example we have just seen. Joseph Bates, “the apostle of the Sabbath,” influenced James and Ellen White to begin keeping the Sabbath around the time of their marriage in August of 1846. They, in turn, introduced many more people to it, even as Bates continued to spread the knowledge of it far and wide. Bates taught that no matter where one was, the Sabbath began at 6 p.m., which was sunset at the equator. For ten years most Sabbathkeeping Adventists kept it from 6 p.m. Friday to 6 p.m. Saturday. However, conflicting ideas began to bring division. As early as 1848, some in Connecticut, following the practice of the Seventh Day Baptists, urged sunset to sunset. Around the same time, on the basis of Matthew 28:1 (“In the end of the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week . . .”), some in Maine began keeping it from sunrise Saturday to sunrise Sunday. A vision sent to Ellen White, calling attention to the Bible’s instruction that “from even unto even, shall ye celebrate your sabbath” (Lev. 23:32), showed this latter to be a false interpretation and checked its spread. But the question of sunset versus 6 p.m. lay unresolved. James White wrote at the time, “Let us stand fast in the Sabbath as God has given it to us and Brother Bates. God has raised up Brother Bates to give this truth. I should have more faith in his opinion than any other man’s.”⁴ The diversity of practice on something as important as the Sabbath was threatening the internal unity of the movement and the cohesion of its witness to the world.

In 1855 James White asked the budding young scholar, J. N. Andrews, to research the matter and present his findings for others to consider. Andrews’s written report was presented to a conference

⁴ James White to “My Dear Brother,” July 2, 1848, quoted in Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Years 1827-1862* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Company, 1985), p. 200.

at Battle Creek on Sabbath, November 17, 1855, and published in the *Review* of December 4, the same year. Using nine Old Testament passages and two from the New Testament, Andrews showed conclusively that “even” and “evening” in relation to the beginning of the Sabbath were identical to sunset. As the paper was read to the conference that Sabbath morning, people could see that while Bates’s position had not been wrong in principle, calling as it did for the Sabbath to begin in the evening, it was incorrect in detail, making 6 p.m. the uniform starting time for the Sabbath instead of the more variable but easily-identified sunset time.

The attendees at the conference were quite unified in seeing that this truly was what Scripture taught and in recognizing that this obligated them to change their practice. However, there were a few holdouts, among them Joseph Bates and Ellen White. She seems to have reasoned that they had kept the Sabbath from 6 p.m. for nearly ten years, and they had been blessed in it. Her earlier vision endorsing the “evening” time had said nothing against 6 p.m. She must have wondered, Wouldn’t changing now put them in a bad light before the world to which they had witnessed? Why must they change now? On November 20, however, after the conference closed, she had a vision that addressed issues such as these, either directly or by implication. Her account of the vision appears in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, pp. 113-116, with the specific matters regarding the Sabbath appearing on p. 116:

I saw that it is even so: “From even unto even, shall ye celebrate your Sabbath.” Said the angel: “Take the word of God, read it, understand, and ye cannot err. Read carefully, and ye shall there find *what* even is, and *when* it is.” I asked the angel if the frown of God had been upon His people for commencing the Sabbath as they had. I was directed back to the first rise of the Sabbath, and followed the people of God up to this time, but did not see that the Lord was displeased, or frowned upon them. I inquired why it had been thus, that at this late day we must change the time of commencing the Sabbath. Said the angel: “Ye shall understand, but not yet, not yet.” Said the angel: “If light come, and that light is set aside or rejected, then comes condemnation and the frown of God; but before the light comes, there is no sin, for there is no light for them to reject.” I saw that it was in the minds of some that the Lord had shown that the Sabbath commenced at six o’clock, when I had only seen that it commenced at “even,” and it was inferred that even was at six. I saw that the servants of God must draw together, press together.

The implications here are significant. At the outset of the statement above, we find the angel addressing the matter of when to begin the Sabbath, not by explicitly stating the correct time, but by referring Ellen White back to Scripture. This would suggest that by now the Scriptures on this point were really not unclear to her, for the angel offered no further explanation of them. After hearing Andrews's paper read, she really knew that the Bible taught the sunset position, but it was hard for her to admit it even to herself. She clung to the 6 p.m. position not because Scripture actually taught it, but because of a personal bias toward it from her experience with Sabbathkeeping up to that point and from her regard for Joseph Bates, who had brought the knowledge of the Sabbath to her. After the angel's statement pointing her back to Scripture on this point, she appears to have acknowledged that sunset is what Scripture actually teaches, for she pressed it no further. Instead, she raised other points that now *presuppose* the validity of the sunset time: Has God's frown been on us for observing the wrong time? If not, is it really necessary for us to change what we've been doing? The angel's answer to the first question was No, God had not been frowning on them, in light of their former imperfect understanding of the matter from the Bible, an understanding that was now corrected. To the second question, the angel's reply indicated that irrespective of our past understanding, we are obligated to follow the Bible, or we are rejecting the light that God allows to shine on us. No matter how embarrassing it might be for them to admit that they had been wrong for all these years, when they discover that their practice has been contrary to Scripture, they must change, to bring it into harmony with the Bible. And then the vision closed with an appeal for unity, implying that they would not have unity in diversity with their current plurality of understanding and practice on an issue as important as this.

Soon, along with other attendees, both Ellen White and Joseph Bates accepted the sunset time.⁵

They were able to do so not because Ellen White had a vision stating that this was the correct time

⁵ Years later, James White described the matter this way: "At the close of the conference at Battle Creek referred to above, the ministers and others, especially interested in the cause had a special season of prayer for the prosperity of the cause, and in that meeting Mrs. W. had a vision, one item of which was that sunset time was

(which it did not actually do), but because the vision pointed them to the clear teaching of Scripture, and they could see that sunset was indeed what Scripture taught. They determined to bring their practice into harmony with Scripture, and there was unity. Andrews's paper was published in December in the *Review*, and the wider group of adherents changed their practice to follow what the Bible taught on this subject.

To summarize, then, in this instance the visions of Ellen White pointed to Scripture, as in the previous case, but here they offered no Scripture interpretation at all. Rather, they pointed the believers back to the Bible and, by implication, to the interpretations they already had but were reluctant to accept.

3. *The Law in Galatians*

The last instance we will examine in some detail relates to the 1888 controversy regarding righteousness by faith. Over the years since the beginning of the Sabbathkeeping Adventist movement, the focus on the "present truth" of the Sabbath as part of the unchangeable and binding law of God had led to an emphasis on the law that, in practical terms, overshadowed the centrality of Jesus for salvation and the importance of faith in Him and His abiding presence. In contrast to this prevailing emphasis, E. J. Waggoner and A. T. Jones focused on the person and work of Jesus, driving home the fact that salvation is by grace through faith alone, on the basis of Christ's perfect works. The saved believer will keep the law because the grace of God has changed his heart, but this law-keeping does not cause or contribute to his salvation. To the established leadership of the church, this seemed to undermine the importance of the law and the Sabbath.

correct. This settled the matter with Bro. Bates and others, and general harmony has since prevailed among us upon this point." James White, "Time to Commence the Sabbath," *Review and Herald*, February 25, 1868, p. 168. Uriah Smith wrote, "[W]hat was shown her in vision concerning the commencement of the Sabbath, was contrary to her own sentiment at the time the vision was given." Uriah Smith, "Not Satisfactory," *Review and Herald*, August 30, 1864, p. 109.

Ellen White had been teaching aspects of the “new view” publicly since at least the 1850s, when she applied the Laodicean message of Revelation 3, which called for repentance and for reception of the “gold,” “white raiment,” and “eyesalve,” to the little flock that was keeping the Sabbath, contrary to the movement’s practice at the time of applying it to the “nominal churches.”⁶ In an 1889 sermon, she claimed regarding the central message of Jones and Waggoner,

Why, I have been presenting it to you for the last 45 years—the matchless charms of Christ. This is what I have been trying to present before your minds. When Brother Waggoner brought out these ideas in Minneapolis, it was the first clear teaching on this subject from any human lips I had heard, excepting the conversations between myself and my husband. (*Sermons and Talks*, vol. 1, pp. 116, 117)

Her support for Jones and Waggoner’s position is well known and needs no belaboring here. Her own scriptural presentation of righteousness by faith appears in her famous book *Steps to Christ*, first published in 1892 in the wake of the 1888 controversies.

What is of interest for our question, though, is a lesser-known aspect of the controversies, dealing with the meaning of Paul’s reference to the law in Galatians 3, especially in verses 24, 25. The standard Adventist position on these verses was that if the law “was added because of transgression, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made” (v. 19), and if “the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ” (v. 24), but “after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster” (v. 25), this law with its temporary function surely could not be the eternal law of Ten Commandments. Rather, this must refer to the ceremonial law, which did indeed point to Christ and was no longer needed after the Messiah had come and died. Jones and Waggoner, however, taught publicly that the law Paul wrote of here was in fact the Ten Commandments. This fed the suspicion of many that these two men were antinomian and were promoting a gospel contrary to the Scriptures and the established faith of the body.

⁶ See the chapters, “Be Zealous and Repent,” “The Shaking,” and “The Laodicean Church,” in her *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, pp. 141-146, 179-184, and 185-195. The latter chapter clearly distinguishes the recipients of the Laodicean message from the “nominal churches” (p. 192).

It was not the first time that such a teaching had arisen in our ranks. In 1854 J. H. Waggoner, a prominent minister and the father of E. J. Waggoner, had written a book or large pamphlet called *The Law of God: an Examination of the Testimony of Both Testaments*, published by the young movement's Advent Review Office in Rochester, New York, before the 1855 move to Battle Creek. The elder Waggoner had taken the position that the law referred to in Galatians 3 was the moral, not the ceremonial, law. He left no flexibility for his position, stating that "not a single declaration" in Galatians "referred to the ceremonial or Levitical law" (p. 74).⁷ Much later, Uriah Smith wrote of this matter in a letter in which he recalled that a couple of years after Waggoner's publication, "Sister White . . . had a vision in which this law question was shown her, and she immediately wrote J. H. Waggoner that his position on the law was wrong," and the work was taken off the market.⁸ The issue did not arise again for many years.

In the mid-1880s, Waggoner's son, Ellet J. Waggoner, was an associate editor of *Signs of the Times* in Oakland, California, and a Bible teacher at Healdsburg College. He was deeply impressed by a message from Ellen White that he heard read at camp meeting. As he listened, he seemed to see Christ hanging on the cross for his sins. It was a deeply personal, life-changing encounter with Jesus which, in a similar fashion as with William Miller's conversion some 70 years earlier, launched him into an intense period of Bible study. And, like Miller, he felt that he must make this saving truth about Jesus known to others.⁹ Ellen White indicated, without elaboration, that the subject of the law in Galatians had been discussed at a recent General Conference session before Minneapolis. This was almost certainly due to the fact that Waggoner and Jones had been writing about it in *Signs of the Times* as a part of their larger interest in righteousness by faith. Later Waggoner would present a series of studies on the law in Galatians at the Minneapolis session.

⁷ The portion of Waggoner's book relevant to our discussion here (pp. 70-83) is reproduced in *Manuscripts and Memories of Minneapolis* (Nampa, Id.: Pacific Press, 1988), pp. 11-14.

⁸ Uriah Smith to W. A. McCutchen, Aug. 8, 1901, found in *ibid.*, p. 305.

⁹ See Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers* (Nampa, Id.: Pacific Press, 2000), pp. 176-178.

What role did Ellen White have in resolving this controversial point? She evidently intended to share with the leadership, and perhaps especially with Waggoner and Jones, what she had written more than 30 years earlier to Waggoner's father. A year and a half before Minneapolis, with the controversy over the law in Galatians already going strong, she wrote to Waggoner and Jones and included these comments relating to it:

I did see years ago that Elder [J. H.] Waggoner's views were not correct, and read to him matter which I had written. The matter does not lie clear and distinct in my mind yet. I cannot grasp the matter, and for this reason I am fully convinced that presenting it has been not only untimely, but deleterious. (*Manuscript Releases*, vol. 9, p. 215)

Earlier in the same letter, she wrote:

I have something to say to you that I should withhold no longer. I have been looking in vain as yet to get an article that was written nearly twenty years ago [cir. 1867] in reference to the "added law." I read this to Elder [J. H.] Waggoner. I stated then to him that I had been shown his position in regard to the law was incorrect, and from the statements I made to him he has been silent upon the subject for many years. . . . (*Ibid.*)

Two things here are especially intriguing. First, Ellen White stated that the matter was not entirely clear to her now. This is reminiscent of the first case we considered, where she wrote that her mind was "locked." Was this another case in which God interposed to limit her normal involvement? We may not be able to say with certainty. Second, she had been "looking in vain" for something she had sent to J. H. Waggoner years before. This may have been her own communication to him in the 1850s regarding his book (in which case she simply mistook the approximate time of it), or it may have been an article someone else had written that she shared later with Waggoner. But in either case, she had not been able to locate it, something that was perhaps unusual for her. Whatever the ultimate cause of these two phenomena may have been, it would have been possible for God to fill the void by visions had He seen fit to do so. In the absence of such divine intervention, the net result is that statements from the prophet were not forthcoming to preempt Bible study on this point.

So this singular incident, in which the prophet was not able to locate materials she had previously written or obtained nor even to recall clearly the details of the matter, points again to the

fundamental conclusion about the proper role of Ellen White in resolving controversy in the church. Her writings are not to serve as a short cut in our Bible study. We are obligated to search the Scriptures, together, to find the truth of God's Word. Yet this obligation still leaves room for those writings to come in when the process is well along, to call attention to things we may have overlooked or "to correct those who err from Bible truth."

Later, Ellen White would write more plainly about the law in Galatians. In 1900, she wrote, "I am asked concerning the law in Galatians. What law is the schoolmaster to bring us to Christ? I answer: Both the ceremonial and the moral code of ten commandments" (*Selected Messages*, bk. 1, p. 233). In 1896, she wrote, "'The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith' (Galatians 3:24). In this scripture, the Holy Spirit through the apostle is speaking especially of the moral law. The law reveals sin to us, and causes us to feel our need of Christ and to flee unto Him for pardon and peace by exercising repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (*ibid.*, p. 234). But even in connection with the Minneapolis conference, when she realized that E. J. Waggoner's position differed from hers, she still took a restrained stance in addressing those differences:

Dr. Waggoner has spoken to us in a straightforward manner. There is precious light in what he has said. Some things presented in reference to the law in Galatians, if I fully understand his position, do not harmonize with the understanding I have had of this subject; but truth will lose nothing by investigation, therefore I plead for Christ's sake that you come to the living Oracles, and with prayer and humiliation seek God. Everyone should feel that he has the privilege of searching the Scriptures for himself, and he should do this with earnest prayer that God will give him a right understanding of His word, that he may know from positive evidence that he does know what is truth. (*The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, p. 163)

The above three examples do not exhaust the incidents we could cite in which Ellen White faced some controversial matter in the church. I will just mention several more. In the case of Dr. Kellogg's advocacy of pantheistic (more properly, panentheistic) views in his book *The Living Temple*, she at first made no response at all. She wrote that though "the sentiments advocated in the book did not bear the endorsement of God, and that they were a snare that the enemy had prepared for the last days," "I thought that this would surely be discerned, and that it would not be necessary for me to say anything

about it" (*Selected Messages*, bk. 1, pp. 202, 203). This indicates that we should not expect her to have spoken out on every controversy that arose, especially if matters were handled appropriately through regular channels. Later, of course, she wrote extensively and passionately in opposition to Kellogg's views. In the case of Albion Fox Ballenger's discordant views on the Sanctuary, we do not find Ellen White explaining the Scriptures on the controverted points, responding to specific items on which she believed Ballenger had gone astray. Rather, we find her simply warning, for example, that "our Brother Ballenger is presenting theories that cannot be substantiated by the Word of God," and apparently leaving it to the able Bible expositors of the church to take up the details of exegesis.¹⁰ Another we could mention is her references to disagreements over the meaning of the term "the daily" in Daniel 8, in which she asked the parties involved not to use her writings to try to sustain their positions on this point that she called minor. Her reason: "I have had no instruction on the point under discussion, and I see no need for the controversy. Regarding this matter under present conditions, silence is eloquence."¹¹ But the examples we have examined will serve to establish a general pattern for the proper use of Ellen G. White's writings in addressing controverted points in the church, particularly those relating to Scripture.

How to Address Controversial Matters

From the foregoing incidents that received the major treatment, and especially in connection with the last one, we may note Ellen White's instruction about how to go about resolving controversies. These will fall under four imperatives: come in the right spirit, pray and search the Scriptures, listen to one another, and protect the church.

¹⁰ For a brief account of the Ballenger controversies, see Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Elmshaven Years 1900-1905* (vol. 5 of the six-volume biography), pp. 398-413. The quote given above, from Manuscript 59, 1905, appears on p. 409 of this volume.

¹¹ *Selected Messages*, bk. 1, p. 164. This is from a compiled chapter entitled, "Our Attitude Toward Doctrinal Controversy," which encompasses pp. 164-168.

1. *Come in the Right Spirit*

Ellen White wrote about the counsel she had given to the 1888 attendees regarding their spirit, an account found in *Selected Messages*, book 3, pp. 163-167. A few portions of that account are highlighted here, along with some other material.

Set Aside Gloom. Ellen White gave this counsel to the delegates at Minneapolis, where conflict over issues and concern over the church's future were heavy on the hearts of many, and some were even suspicious of her in these controverted matters:

I felt deeply moved by the Spirit of the Lord Sabbath afternoon [Oct. 13, 1888] to call the minds of those present to the love God manifests to His people. The mind must not be permitted to dwell on the most objectionable features of our faith. In God's Word, which may be represented as a garden filled with roses and lilies and pinks, we may pluck by faith the precious promises of God, appropriate them to our own hearts, and be of good courage—yes, joyful in God—or we may keep our attention fastened on the briars and thistles and wound ourselves severely and bemoan our hard lot.

God is not pleased to have His people hanging dark and painful pictures in memory's hall. He would have every soul plucking the roses and the lilies and the pinks, hanging memory's hall with the precious promises of God blooming all over the garden of God. He would have us dwelling upon them, our senses sharp and clear, taking them in in their full richness, talking of the joy that is set before us. (*Selected Messages*, bk. 3, p. 163)

In at least some, a better spirit began to prevail. Ellen White added this observation about it: "Light and freedom and blessing came to the hearers and there was hearty response to the words spoken" (*ibid.*, p. 164). But others turned against her when she did not support their views. Her comments, though, indicate that we should approach a controverted point with a spirit of confidence that God can do a mighty work with us, in us, and through us, bringing His church out on the other side with new strength and purpose. We should come not in the expectation of a battle, but of a blessing. We should seek such a blessing from Him.

Come in Meekness. She observed, "All needed to learn lessons in the school of Christ. Jesus has invited, 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For

my yoke is easy, and my burden is light' (Matthew 11:28-30). If we daily learn the lessons of humility and lowliness of heart, there will not be the feelings which existed at this meeting" (*ibid.*, pp. 165, 166).

Surrender Hard Feelings. Still addressing the spirit in Minneapolis, she wrote, "There are some differences of views on some subjects, but is this a reason for sharp, hard feelings? Shall envy and evil surmisings and imaginings, evil suspicion, hatred, and jealousies become enthroned in the heart? All these things are evil and only evil. Our help is in God alone" (*ibid.*, p. 166). We should view each other as brothers and sisters in the cause of Christ.

2. *Pray and Search the Scriptures.*

Bring the Right Spirit to Prayer and Bible Study. Immediately following the call to surrender hard feelings, she set out our work for us when we face controversy: "Let us spend much time in prayer and in searching the Scriptures with a right spirit—anxious to learn and willing to be corrected or undeceived on any point where we may be in error. If Jesus is in our midst and our hearts are melted into tenderness by His love we shall have one of the best conferences we have ever attended" (*ibid.*).

Let the Word Speak. We must let truth, not the achievement of our personal agendas, be our goal. To those who would soon assemble at the Minneapolis General Conference session, Ellen White made this plea:

Let the word of God which you take in your hands be studied with simplicity. Cherish for it reverence, and study it with honesty of purpose. We are not to set our stakes, and then interpret everything to reach this set point. Here is where some of our great reformers have failed, and this is the reason that men who today might be mighty champions for God and the truth, are warring against the truth. (*The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, p. 44)

Pray for the Holy Spirit and for Unity. In the context of the discussion over the law in Galatians, Ellen White wrote:

We know that if all would come to the Scriptures with hearts subdued and controlled by the influence of the Spirit of God, there would be brought to the examination of the Scriptures a calm mind, free from prejudice and pride of opinion. The light from the Lord would shine upon His Word and the truth would be revealed. But there should be prayerful, painstaking effort and much patience, to answer the prayer of Christ that His disciples may be one as He is one with the Father. The earnest, sincere prayer will be heard and the Lord will answer. The Holy Spirit

will quicken the mental faculties and there will be a seeing eye to eye. "The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple" (Psalm 119:130). (*Selected Messages*, bk. 3, pp. 167, 168)

3. *Listen to One Another*

Hear the Opposing Viewpoints Presented Fully and Fairly. Rather than quash one side of the discussion with which she might not agree, Ellen White took a more open position regarding investigation. "Then the question was asked whether I thought the matter had better drop where it was, after Brother Waggoner had stated his views of the law in Galatians. I said, 'By no means. We want all on both sides of the question'" (*Ibid.*, p. 174).

Bring a Respectful, Christlike Spirit; No Thrusts. Immediately following her call to hear both sides, Ellen White made this appeal:

But I stated that the spirit I had seen manifested at the meeting was unreasonable. I should insist that there be a right spirit, a Christlike spirit, manifested such as Elder E. J. Waggoner had shown all through the presentation of his views; and that this matter should not be handled in a debating style. The reason I should urge that this matter should be handled in a Christlike spirit was that there should be no thrust made against their brethren differing with them. As Elder E. J. Waggoner had conducted himself like a Christian gentleman they should do the same, giving the arguments on their side of the question in a straightforward manner. . . . (*Ibid.*)

4. *Protect the Church*

Guard the Unity of the Wider Church. The counsels cited above relate to those who have come together to wrestle with a controverted issue. But Ellen White had different counsel in respect to the wider church, notably in relation to its publications. Here is what she published in 1889 to the believers at Oakland, California, the seat of the Pacific Press at the time, as part of a larger article on "Practical Godliness":

One point will have to be guarded, and that is individual independence. As soldiers in Christ's army, there should be concert of action in the various departments of the work. No one has the right to start out on his own responsibility and advance ideas in our papers on Bible doctrines when it is known that others among us hold different opinions on the subject and that it will create controversy. The first-day Adventists have done this. Each has followed his own independent judgment and sought to present original ideas, until there is no concerted action among them, except, perhaps, in opposing Seventh-day Adventists. We should not follow their example. Each laborer should act with reference to the others. Followers of Jesus Christ will not

act independently one of another. Our strength must be in God, and it must be husbanded, to be put forth in noble, concentrated action. It must not be wasted in meaningless movements. (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, pp. 534, 535)

Remember How We Faced Controversy When We Did It Well. In 1892, still in the aftermath of the Minneapolis controversies, in a *Review* article Ellen White reflected on the movement's struggles over issues in its early days. Her statement summarizes much of what we have examined here, adds additional detail, and constitutes an earnest appeal that is well suited to our situation today.

Those who sincerely desire truth will not be reluctant to lay open their positions for investigation and criticism, and will not be annoyed if their opinions and ideas are crossed. This was the spirit cherished among us forty years ago. We would come together burdened in soul, praying that we might be one in faith and doctrine; for we knew that Christ is not divided. One point at a time was made the subject of investigation. Solemnity characterized these councils of investigation. The Scriptures were opened with a sense of awe. Often we fasted, that we might be better fitted to understand the truth. After earnest prayer, if any point was not understood, it was discussed, and each one expressed his opinion freely; then we would again bow in prayer, and earnest supplications went up to heaven that God would help us to see eye to eye, that we might be one, as Christ and the Father are one. Many tears were shed. If one brother rebuked another for his dullness of comprehension in not understanding a passage as he understood it, the one rebuked would afterward take his brother by the hand, and say, "Let us not grieve the Holy Spirit of God. Jesus is with us; let us keep a humble and teachable spirit;" and the brother addressed would say, "Forgive me, brother, I have done you an injustice." Then we would bow down in another season of prayer. We spent many hours in this way. We did not generally study together more than four hours at a time, yet sometimes the entire night was spent in solemn investigation of the Scriptures, that we might understand the truth for our time. On some occasions the Spirit of God would come upon me, and difficult portions were made clear through God's appointed way, and then there was perfect harmony. We were all of one mind and one Spirit.

We sought most earnestly that the Scriptures should not be wrested to suit any man's opinions. We tried to make our differences as slight as possible by not dwelling on points that were of minor importance, upon which there were varying opinions. But the burden of every soul was to bring about a condition among the brethren which would answer the prayer of Christ that his disciples might be one as he and the Father are one. Sometimes one or two of the brethren would stubbornly set themselves against the view presented, and would act out the natural feelings of the heart; but when this disposition appeared, we suspended our investigations and adjourned our meeting, that each one might have an opportunity to go to God in prayer, and without conversation with others, study the point of difference, asking light from heaven. With expressions of friendliness we parted, to meet again as soon as possible for further investigation. At times the power of God came upon us in a marked manner, and when clear light revealed the points of truth, we would weep and rejoice together. We loved Jesus; we loved one another.

In those days God wrought for us, and the truth was precious to our souls. It is necessary that our unity today be of a character that will bear the test of trial. We are in the school of the Master here, that we may be trained for the school above. We must learn to bear

disappointment in a Christ-like manner, and the lesson taught by this will be of great importance to us.

We have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn. God and heaven alone are infallible. Those who think that they will never have to give up a cherished view, never have occasion to change an opinion, will be disappointed. As long as we hold to our own ideas and opinions with determined persistency, we cannot have the unity for which Christ prayed. (*Review and Herald*, July 26, 1892)

Conclusion

Ellen G. White did not teach us to take her writings as our standard. She directed the church to Scripture for that purpose. She did, however, recognize that the instruction God had given her could, in those cases, help the church in its quest for Bible truth by correcting error and pointing out truth. This function is not to be a shortcut to bypass thorough Bible study and earnest prayer, but may legitimately supplement those fundamental activities. In addition, she gave us instruction about how to relate to each other while working through the issues: in respect and love for one another, in tender care for one another's reputation, we are to come in the right spirit, pray and search the Scriptures together, listen to one another, and protect the church.

This is our call and commission as we meet together to try to resolve the issue before us.