

The Seventh-day Adventist Church's Understanding of Ellen White's Authority

**Exhibit One. From *The Adventist Review*, December
23, 1982.**

Also appeared in *Ministry*, February 1983.

The Inspiration and Authority of the Ellen G. White Writings

**[Ten Affirmations and Ten Denials on Ellen White's
Authority]**

Issued by the Biblical Research Institute of The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

A statement of present understanding

In response to requests, a statement on the relationship of the writings of Ellen G. White to the Bible was prepared initially by an ad hoc committee of the General Conference. The statement was published in the July 15 [1982] Adventist Review and August [1982] issue of Ministry with an invitation to readers to respond to it. Suggestions from readers and from several groups have led to a refinement of the statement to its present form. Although it is not a voted statement, we believe that the worldwide participation in its development makes it a reflection of the views of the church on the topic it addresses. -- Biblical Research Institute.

In the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs voted by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists at Dallas in April, 1980, the Preamble states: "Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed and hold certain fundamental beliefs to be the teaching of the Holy Scriptures." Paragraph one reflects the church's understanding of the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures, while paragraph seventeen reflects the church's understanding of the writings of Ellen White in relation to the Scriptures. These paragraphs read as follows:

1. The Holy Scriptures

The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God, given by divine inspiration through holy men of God who spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In this Word, God has committed to man the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God's acts in history. Support is found in these Bible passages: 2 Peter 1:20,21; 2 Timothy

3:16,17; Psalms 119:105; Proverbs 30:5,6; Isaiah 8:20; John 17:17; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; Hebrews 4:12.

17. The Gift Of Prophecy

One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church and was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White. As the Lord's messenger, her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction. They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested. Support is found in these Bible passages: Joel 2:28,29; Acts 2:14-21; Hebrews 1:1-3; Revelation 12:17; Revelation 19:10.

The following affirmations and denials speak to the issues which have been raised about the inspiration and authority of the Ellen White writings and their relation to the Bible. These clarifications should be taken as a whole. They are an attempt to express the present understanding of Seventh-day Adventists. They are not to be construed as a substitute for, or a part of, the two doctrinal statements quoted above.

AFFIRMATIONS

1. We believe that Scripture is the divinely revealed word of God and is inspired by the Holy Spirit.
2. We believe that the canon of Scripture is composed only of the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments.
3. We believe that Scripture is the foundation of faith and the final authority in all matters of doctrine and practice.
4. We believe that Scripture is the Word of God in human language.
5. We believe that Scripture teaches that the gift of prophecy will be manifest in the Christian church after New Testament times.
6. We believe that the ministry and writings of Ellen White were a manifestation of the gift of prophecy.
7. We believe that Ellen White was inspired by the Holy Spirit and that her writings, the product of that inspiration, are applicable and authoritative, especially to Seventh-day Adventists.
8. We believe that the purposes of the Ellen White writings include guidance in understanding the teaching of Scripture and application of these teachings, with prophetic urgency, to the spiritual and moral life.
9. We believe that the acceptance of the prophetic gift of Ellen White is important to the nurture and unity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
10. We believe that Ellen White's use of literary sources and assistants finds parallels in some of the writings of the Bible.

DENIALS

1. We do not believe that the quality or degree of inspiration in the writings of Ellen White is different from that of Scripture.
2. We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White are an addition to the canon of Sacred Scripture.

3. We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White function as the foundation and final authority of Christian faith as does Scripture.
4. We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White may be used as the basis of doctrine.
5. We do not believe that the study of the writings of Ellen White may be used to replace the study of Scripture.
6. We do not believe that Scripture can be understood only through the writings of Ellen White.
7. We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White exhaust the meaning of Scripture.
8. We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White are essential for the proclamation of the truths of Scripture to society at large.
9. We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White are the product of mere Christian piety.
10. We do not believe that Ellen White's use of literary sources and assistants negates the inspiration of her writings.

We conclude, therefore, that a correct understanding of the inspiration and authority of the writings of Ellen White will avoid two extremes: (1) regarding these writings as functioning on a canonical level identical with Scripture, or (2) considering them as ordinary Christian literature.

Exhibit 2: The Gift of Prophecy

[Excerpt from *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . : A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines* (Washington, D.C.: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1988), pp. 227, 228.]

The Spirit of Prophecy and the Bible. The writings of Ellen White are not a substitute for Scripture. They cannot be placed on the same level. The Holy Scriptures stand alone, the unique standard by which her and all other writings must be judged and to which they must be subject.

1. *The Bible the supreme standard.* Seventh-day Adventists fully support the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*, the Bible as its own interpreter and the Bible alone as the basis of all doctrines. The founders of the church developed fundamental beliefs through study of the Bible; they did not receive these doctrines through the visions of Ellen White. Her major role during the development of their doctrines was to guide in the understanding of the Bible and to confirm conclusions reached through Bible study.^[1]

Ellen White herself believed and taught that the Bible was the ultimate norm for the church. In her first book, published in 1851, she said, "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."^[2] She never changed this view. Many years later she wrote, "In His Word, God has committed to men the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the revealer of doctrines, and the test of experience."^[3] In 1909, during her last address to a general session of the church, she opened the Bible, held it up before the congregation, and said, "Brethren and sisters, I commend to you this Book."^[4]

In response to believers who considered her writings an addition to the Bible, she wrote, saying, "I took the precious Bible and surrounded it with the several *Testimonies for the Church*, given for the people of God. . . . You are not familiar with the Scriptures. If you had made God's Word your study, with a desire to reach the Bible standard and attain to Christian perfection, you would not have needed the *Testimonies*. It is because you have neglected to acquaint yourselves with God's inspired Book that He has sought to reach you by simple, direct testimonies, calling your attention to the words of inspiration which you had neglected to obey, and urging you to fashion your lives in accordance with its pure and elevated teachings."^[5]

2. A guide to the Bible. She saw her work [p. 228] as that of leading people back to the Bible. "Little heed is given to the Bible," she said, therefore "the Lord has given a lesser light to lead men and women to the greater light."^[6] "The Word of God," she wrote, "is sufficient to enlighten the most beclouded mind and may be understood by those who have any desire to understand it. But notwithstanding all this, some who profess to make the Word of God their study are found living in direct opposition to its plainest teachings. Then, to leave men and women without excuse, God gives plain and pointed testimonies, bringing them back to the Word that they have neglected to follow."^[7]

3. A guide in understanding the Bible. Ellen White considered her writings a guide to a clearer understanding of the Bible. "Additional truth is not brought out; but God has through the *Testimonies* simplified the great truths already given and in His own chosen way brought them before the people to awaken and impress the mind with them, that all may be left without excuse." "The written testimonies are not given to give new light, but to impress vividly upon the heart the truths of inspiration already revealed."^[8]

4. A guide to apply Bible principles. Much of her writings apply the Biblical counsels to everyday life. Ellen White said that she was "directed to bring out general principles, in speaking and in writing, and at the same time specify the dangers, errors, and sins of some individuals, that all might be warned, reproved, and counseled."^[9] Christ had promised such prophetic guidance to His church. As Ellen White noted, "The fact that God has revealed His will to men through His Word, has not rendered needless the continued presence and guiding of the Holy Spirit. On the contrary, the Spirit was promised by our Saviour, to open the Word to His servants, to illuminate and apply its teachings."^[10]

The Challenge to the Believer. Revelation's prophecy that the "testimony of Jesus" would manifest itself through the "spirit of prophecy" in the last days of earth's history challenges everyone not to take an attitude of indifference or disbelief, but to "test everything" and "hold on to the good." There is much to gain--or lose--depending on whether we carry out this Biblically mandated investigation. Jehoshaphat said, "Believe in the Lord your God, and you shall be established; believe His prophets, and you shall prosper" (2 Chron. 20:20). His words ring true today, as well.