

T. Housel Jemison on the Relationship of Ellen White to the Bible

Jemison was the author of *A Prophet Among You*, the textbook for SDA college classes during the 1950s-1980s. I read it myself as a college student. All bold in text is my emphasis (editor).

A Prophet Among You (1955)

Chapter 19—"The Ellen G. White Writings and the Bible"

"And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night." Genesis 1:16. We sometimes see the moon during the day, but only faintly; it does not rule the day. In the daytime it only calls attention to the brightness of the sun. As God has given two lights in the heavens to rule the day and the night, He has placed two lights in the spiritual world of these last days. The two are pointed out in these words: "The Lord has sent His people much instruction, line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little, and there a little. Little heed is given to the Bible, and the Lord has given a lesser light to lead men and women to the greater light. Oh, how much good would be accomplished if the books containing this light were read with a determination to carry out the principles they contain!" Ellen G. White, in *Review and Herald*, Jan. 20, 1903, quoted in *Colporteur Ministry*, page 125. (Italics added.) Here Ellen White refers to her writings as the "lesser light" intended by God to lead men and women to the "greater light" of the Bible. To use the two lights rightly we must understand their relation to each others—the place of each and its use.

The Bible is explicit in indicating its place as the standard of truth and the basic guide of life. No other message or writings can ever take the place of the word of God. It is the standard by which all who claim to have truth are to be tested. Isaiah 8:20. It endures forever. 1 Peter 1:25. It is truth. John 17:17. It points the way to salvation. John 5:39, last part. It is the agent in sanctification or Christian growth. John 17:17. It is the weapon of the Christian—the sword of the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 6:17.

Throughout her writings, Ellen White fully recognizes and emphasizes this primacy of the Scriptures. Two brief, comprehensive sentences from the introduction to *The Great Controversy* state her view succinctly: "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." Page vii.

The Place of the Ellen White Writings

The manifestation of the gift of prophecy is accorded a prominent position among the marks of identification of the remnant church. It is one of the two major indications of the identity of the remnant. "And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ." Revelation 12:17. The attitude of the remnant church toward the commandments is indicative of its attitude toward the entire Bible, and the gift of prophecy is intended to aid in gaining a right understanding of the Bible and in developing right relationships to it. "God has seen fit in this manner to bring the minds of His people to His word, to give them a clearer

understanding of it.”Testimonies for the Church, vol. 5, p. 663. The Bible and the spirit of prophecy writings serve different purposes, but they serve as a unit to convey God's will to His people. “God is leading out a people and establishing them upon the one great platform of faith, the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus.”Ibid., vol. 3, p. 447.

“As the end draws near and the work of giving the last warning to the world extends, it becomes more important for those who accept present truth to have a clear understanding of the nature and influence of the Testimonies, which God in His providence has linked with the work of the third angel's message from its very rise.”Ibid., vol. 5, p. 654. Full benefit from the study of these writings will come only to those who know why they have been given to the church and what God intends to accomplish through them.

Relation of Writings to the Bible

One of the clearest portrayals of the relationship existing between the Bible and these special messages to the Seventh-day Adventist Church is found in Testimonies, vol. 5, pp. 664, 665. “I took the precious Bible and surrounded it with the several Testimonies for the Church, given for the people of God. Here, said I, the cases of nearly all are met. The sins they are to shun are pointed out. The counsel that they desire can be found here, given for other cases situated similarly to themselves. God has been pleased to give you line upon line and precept upon precept. But there are not many of you that really know what is contained in the Testimonies. 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.”

Ellen White recognized that her writings were to be tested by the Bible. “The Spirit was not given—nor can it ever be bestowed—to supersede the Bible; for the Scriptures explicitly state that the word of God is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested.”*The Great Controversy*, page vii.

Sometimes the question is raised, “If we give sufficient attention to the Bible, have we any need for the Ellen White writings?” The query can be answered best by noticing more of the reasons for the giving of the messages to Ellen White. The following are drawn from among those mentioned in the section “The Nature and Influence of the ‘Testimonies,’” in *Testimonies for the Church*, volume 5, pages 654-691.

1. To exalt the Bible. “The Testimonies are not to belittle the word of God, but to exalt it.”Page 665.

Throughout these writings the Bible is always held in the same high esteem, and every attempt is made to cause minds to give the Book first place in the thinking. At the close of the first Ellen White book, *Experience and Views*, page 64, is this note of urging: “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.” The same note rings through all the books, articles, and letters. In commenting on Mrs. White's attitude toward the Bible, W. A. Spicer told of this incident:

“This lifting up of Holy Scripture as supreme was the keynote sounded through this gift of the spirit of prophecy to the very end. At the General Conference held in Washington, D.C., in 1909, with representatives attending from all continents and the islands of the sea, Mrs. White in her old age met with the world representatives of the movement for the last time. At the close of the days of conference, she came to the platform to bid farewell to the workers with whom she had been associated so many years. She felt the conviction that it was doubtless the last time she would meet with the general body in conference. Even so it proved to be. After a few words of parting greeting, Mrs. White turned to the pulpit, and lifted from it the Bible lying there. Opening the book, she held it forth on hands that trembled with age, and said to the audience:

“Brethren and sisters, I commend unto you this Book.’

“Laying the Book of books upon the pulpit, she turned from the pavilion. Her last personal message to the world delegates sounded the keynote of all her life and testimony.”W. A. Spicer, *Certainties of the Advent Movement*, page 202.

Writing of the place of the Bible in the system of Christian education, Ellen White asked: “What book can compare with the Bible?” Then she answered her own question:

“An understanding of its teachings is essential for every child and youth, and for those of mature age; for it is the word of God, given to guide the human family to heaven. In the world today there are gods many and doctrines many. Without an understanding of the Scriptures it is impossible for the youth to understand what is truth, or to discern between the sacred and the common.

“The word of God should stand as the highest educating book in our world, and should be treated with reverential awe. It should be placed in the hands of the children and youth as the great lesson book, that they may know Him whom to know aright is life eternal....

“What more important knowledge can be gained than that which outlines the fall of man, and the consequences of that sin which opened the floodgates of woe upon the world; which tells of Christ's first advent? The incarnation of Christ, His divinity, His atonement, His wonderful life in heaven as our advocate, the office of the Holy Spirit,—all these vital themes of Christianity are revealed from Genesis to Revelation. Each is a golden link in the perfect chain of truth. Why, then, should not the Scriptures be exalted in every school in our land?”*Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, page 427.

2. *To attract minds to the Bible.* “The Testimonies are not to belittle the word of God, but to exalt it and attract minds to it.”*Testimonies*, vol. 5, P- 665.

In these writings Bible truths are presented so simply and so beautifully that the closer one studies them the more he is drawn to a study of the Bible. The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* lists at the close of each chapter of comment the references in the Ellen White writings that deal with some portion of the Bible chapter. There are approximately fifty thousand such references in the seven volumes of the commentary. All the Ellen White books are so filled with Bible quotations and Bible language that the mind is directed continually to the source of

the ideas involved.

3. *To call attention to truths neglected.* “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.”Ibid.

4. *To impress truths already revealed.* “The written testimonies are not to give new light, but to impress vividly upon the heart the truths of inspiration already revealed.”Ibid.

It is not enough simply to call attention to neglected truths, but frequent repetition is necessary to fix the truth in the mind. Whenever you refer to the Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White, you will notice how often the messages deal with familiar truths in an attempt to keep them constantly before the people.

5. *To awaken minds.* Through the Testimonies God has brought great truths “before the people, to awaken and impress the mind with them, that all may be left without excuse.”—Ibid. Without help some minds are not able to grasp great spiritual truths. These minds need awakening. Some have not been fully awakened to the importance of beginning the Sabbath on time until they have read: “We should jealously guard the edges of the Sabbath. Remember that every moment is consecrated, holy time.”*Testimonies*, vol. 6, p. 356. Others have not seen the need for guarding well the health until they have read a statement like this: “It is just as much sin to violate the laws of our being as to break one of the Ten Commandments, for we cannot do either without breaking God's law. We cannot love the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength while we are loving our appetites, our tastes, a great deal better than we love the Lord.”Ibid., vol. 2, p. 70. Still others have not realized their true importance to God until they have read: “The Saviour would have passed through the agony of Calvary that one might be saved in His kingdom.”*The Desire of Ages*, page 483.

6. *To simplify truths.* “Additional truth is not brought out; but God has through the Testimonies simplified the great truths already given.”*Testimonies*, vol. 5, p. 665. Simplification of the statement of great truths or phases of spiritual experience is a most practical and helpful contribution of the Ellen White writings.

“Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend.”*Steps to Christ*, page 97.

“Faith is trusting God,—believing that He loves us, and knows best what is for our good.”*Education*, page 253.

Sanctification is “daily dying to self and daily conformity to the will of God.”*Life Sketches*, page 237.

7. *To bring out principles and help apply them.* “I was then directed to bring out general principles, in speaking and in writing.”*Testimonies*, vol. 2, p. 687; also vol. 5, p. 660.

The stating of basic principles is more important than instructing in the details as to how one should act under certain circumstances. A principle is a fundamental, unchangeable truth, or

a settled rule of action. It applies at all times and in every situation. Detailed instruction may vary to meet circumstances in different parts of the world or according to the changing situations that come with the passing years; but principles, rightly understood and applied, are of enduring value.

8. *To instruct in details.* “Your testimony ... is to come down to the minutiae of life, keeping the feeble faith from dying, and pressing home upon believers the necessity of shining as lights in the world.” *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 608; also vol. 5, p. 667.

As helpful as are general principles, it is necessary that much detailed instruction be given so that all members of the church can see examples of how the principles may be applied. Such instruction is especially helpful as guidance to new believers, and as a reminder to those who have long been Christians. Two Ellen White books published in recent years contain much detailed counsel—*The Adventist Home*, and *Child Guidance*. Such items are covered as the wise choice of a life companion, where and how to establish a home, suggestions regarding furnishings, the place and responsibilities of father and mother in the home, how to rear the children, family financial affairs, and relaxation and recreation.

The question is sometimes asked, “Are the Ellen White writings regarded by Seventh-day Adventists as being above, equal to, or below the Bible in importance?” Actually, no one of these classifications places the two in their right relationship. They cannot be compared in that fashion. The Bible and the Ellen White writings were given for two closely related purposes. Each stands alone in its appointed sphere. Reference to the preceding eight points and the summary chart will indicate that the Bible stands alone as the rule of faith and practice for Christians. Summarizing the objectives of the Ellen White writings we see that they are intended to serve three basic purposes: (1) to direct attention to the Bible, (2) to aid in understanding the Bible, and (3) to help in applying Bible principles in our lives. The moment we recognize the correct place of each set of writings, we remove any possibility of confusion that would result from attempting to make comparisons.

Knowing our need, God has given us particular guidance that will make our Bible study more helpful to us in our Christian growth. In our day when the great deceiver is working zealously, no Christian can afford to neglect or set aside any help that God has offered him. Our whole spiritual life will be enriched, and our preparation to meet the deceptions of the future will be more sure if we take advantage of all the instruction God has placed at our disposal. Failure to do so will jeopardize our whole experience.

Is Anything Added?

What is the meaning of such expressions as “Additional truth is not brought out,” and “The written testimonies are not to give new light”? **Are there not descriptions given and details enumerated in the Ellen White books that are not mentioned in the Bible? Certainly, or there would be little purpose in the giving of these messages. Are these not “additional truth” and “new light”? Not at all. The writings introduce no new topic, no new revelation, no new doctrine. They simply give additional details and round out subjects already a part of the Scripture record. The whole realm of spiritual truth is encompassed by the Bible. There is no need for more to be added. But further details, incidents, and applications made in these modern writings lead to keener perception and**

deeper understanding of the truth already revealed. “The Lord has given a lesser light to lead men and women to the greater light.”

SUMMARY

1. It is essential for every Seventh-day Adventist to understand the relationship that exists between the Bible and the Ellen White writings.
2. The Bible is the standard of truth and the guide to Christian living.
3. The commandments of God and the spirit of prophecy constitute prominent marks of identification of the remnant church.
4. The Ellen White writings claim to fulfill at least the following functions:
 1. To exalt the Bible.
 2. To attract minds to the Bible.
 3. To call attention to truths neglected.
 4. To impress truths already revealed.
 5. To awaken minds.
 6. To simplify truths.
 7. To bring out principles and help apply them.
 8. To instruct in details.
5. In these last-day writings nothing new is introduced; but Bible truth is applied to daily life, and details of experiences not fully described in the Bible are given (pp. 364-373).