

EGW AND HERMENEUTICS

Consider the Context: Internal and External

Introduction:

When there is a seeming inconsistency/discrepancy in some of the materials that do not seem to be in harmony with the general tenor of the counsels, one needs to check the context of the particular statement.

Definition of Terms:

Internal Context: Within the document itself. What the writer said in the passage either just before or after the sentence(s) in question.

External Context: The historical background. When, where, why, and to whom was the statement written.

I. Context and Meaning:

A. Much of the meaning in one's own human experience is bound up with "context" (referred to as "connection" by EGW).

B. Context makes a difference with God.

1. Ps. 87: 4-6 tells us that in God's final judgment, context will make an important difference.

2. Ps. 103:14 tells us that God knows our individual "frame." He "remembers" that we are but "dust," and He pities us.

Jesus knows us individually, and is touched with the feeling of our infirmities. He knows us all by name. He knows the very house in which we live, the name of each occupant. He has at times given directions to His servants to go to a certain street in a certain city, to such a house, to find one of His sheep. Every soul is as fully known to Jesus as if he were the only one for whom the Savior died. The distress of every one touches His heart . . . He cares for each one as if there were not another on the face of the earth" (DA 479-80).

3. Isa. 51:1 reminds us that God wants context to make a difference with us: we are to look to the rock from which we were hewn and to the hole of the pit from which we were dug.

4. Luke 12:48 gives Christ's own words to us that context counts with Him: "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required: and to whole men have committed much, of him will they ask they more."

C. The importance of context in human experience--EGW:

1. "Two people may engage in the same acts of outward worship, yet the service of one, when weighted in the golden scales of the sanctuary, may be found wanting, while the service of the other may be accepted [by God]. Only the service that is performed in sincerity, with a humble, contrite heart, is acceptable to God." (Letter 39, Feb. 28, 1903, in UL 73)

2. "When the leaders of God's people depart from principle, and bring dishonor on His

cause, their sin is greater than the sin of those whose opportunities and privileges have been fewer.” (Ms 119, Oct. 7, 903, in UL 294)

II. General Principles Regarding the Importance of Context:

- A. **1875:** “That which can be said of men under certain circumstances cannot be said of them under other circumstances.” (3T 470; reprinted in 5T 670)
- B. **1884:**
 - 1. “In order to sustain erroneous doctrines or unchristian practices, some will seize upon passages of Scripture separated from the context, perhaps quoting half of a single verse as proving their point, when the remaining portion would show the meaning to be quite the opposite. With the cunning of the serpent they entrench themselves behind disconnected utterances construed to suit their carnal desires. Thus do many willfully pervert the word of God.” (GC 521:1)
 - 2. “Others, who have an active imagination, seize upon the figures and symbols of Holy Writ, interpret them to suit their fancy, with little regard to the testimony of Scripture as its own interpreter, and then they present their vagaries as the teachings of the Bible.” (*Ibid.*)
- C. **1904:** “God wants us all to have common sense, and He wants us to reason from common sense. Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relation of things.” (3SM 217)
- D. **1911:** “Regarding the testimonies [of EGW], nothing is ignored; nothing is cast aside; but time and place must be considered” (1SM 57).
Note that “time” and “place” are not synonymous terms but are two separate, discrete categories. Some things may be true at one “time.” that are not true at another “time.” Similarly, upon a given day, some things may be true in one “place,” and yet may not be true, in another place, on the very same day!

III. Case Studies in “Time”

- A. **“Not One in” Statements:**
 - 1. In 1893, EGW wrote that “not one in 20” of SDA members were ready to face their Creator in the final judgment. (ChS 41)
 - 2. In 1895, she wrote in a similar vein: “Not one in 100” in the church were doing enough missionary work. (8T 148)
 - 3. Three possibilities for present application of statement:
 - a. The situation today could be identical to the situation when the statement was uttered in the 1890’s. If so, the statement would apply equally.
 - b. The situation today is a little better than that of the 1890’s. If so, the statement will not apply today.
 - c. The situation today is conceivably worse than that of the 1890’s
 - 4. Important considerations to be kept in mind:
 - a. It will take the same divinely inspired insights of the prophet who uttered the original statement to know whether or not the situation today is identical, better, or worse than the time in which the statement was originally made; a non-prophet cannot know for sure.
 - b. If the 1890’s statements are true today, it certainly is not because they were then.

B. The Time When Probation Closes:

1. In Letter 20, Jan. 16, 1898, EGW wrote: “We are still in probationary time.”
2. Is that statement true today--nearly a century later?
 - a. Some hold that this is still true--that probation lingers yet.
 - b. Others believe otherwise, e.g. Jeanine Sautron, the French woman who claims to have been given EGW’s prophetic gift, alleges that probation for all SDA’s closed in the spring of 1991.
3. However, whether the statement that we are still in probationary time is still true today, we know that the time is coming when that which was true on Jan. 16, 1898, will no longer be true because of subsequent intervening developments. “Michael” (Christ) will one day “stand up” (Dan. 12:1) and declare that those who are “unjust” will forever remain such,, and that all those deemed “righteous” and “holy” will continue to be holy (Rev. 22:11).

C. Should we equate the “Voice of the General Conference” with the “Voice of God”?

1. In 1875 EGW wrote concerning the General Conference:

When the judgment of the General Conference, which is the highest authority that God has upon earth, is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be maintained, but be surrendered. (3T 492)
2. In the 1890's, however, the prophet took a position diametrically opposed to that of 1875:
 - a. 1895: “The voice of the General Conference has been represented as an authority to be heeded as the voice of the Holy Spirit. But when members of the General Conference Committee become entangled in business affairs and financial perplexities, the sacred, elevated character of their work is in a great degree lost.” (Ms 33, 1895, in MR #1118)

Note that one of the two particular problems cited here is waning spirituality on the part of members of the GC Committee and its stated cause.

 - b. 1896: “The voice from Battle Creek which has been regarded as authority in counseling how the work should be done, is no longer the voice of God.” (Letter 4, July 1, 1896)
 - c. 1898: “It has been some years since I have considered the General Conference as the voice of God.” (Letter 77, Aug. 26, 1898)
3. The GC Session of 1901, however, began to mark a further transition, back to her earlier 1875 position.
 - a. It opened April 2 and closed April 23, with 267 delegates, representing 75,000 church members, four-fifths of which lived in North America. During this session, EGW changed her mind again on the “voice of God” issue. In a morning talk, she said:

The people [in the church] have lost confidence in those who have the

management of the work [G. C. leaders]. Yet we hear that the voice of the Conference is the voice of God. Every time I have heard this, I have thought it was almost blasphemy. The voice of the Conference ought to be the voice of God, but it is not, because some in connection with it are not men of faith and prayer, they are not men of elevated principle . . . Two or three voices are not to control everything in the [whole world] field.” (Ms 37, April 1, 1901, pp. 1, 8)

b. Speaking to leaders in the Battle Creek College library in the afternoon meeting, she added: “In reference to our Conference, it is repeated o’er and o’er, that it is the voice of God . . .” (But, from the context of the remarks which immediately followed, it is obvious that she thought that the time had now passed) (Ms 43a, April 1, 1901, p. 2).

c. On April 2 (the opening day), she addressed the delegates immediately after the address of the GC President. She said:

That these men should stand in a sacred place, to be as the voice of God to the people, as we once believed the General Conference to be, that day is past. What we want now is reorganization. We want to begin at the foundation, and to build upon a different principle.” (1901 GCB, p. 25, col. 1)

d. By the afternoon of April 4, a “Committee on Plan and Organization” had not only been created, but was already beginning to report back initial proposals regarding line-and-staff structural change; and EGW enthusiastically approved: “I want to say, from the light given to me by God, there should have been, years ago, organizations such as are now [being] proposed.” (*Ibid.*, p. 68)

e. When the Session closed on April 23 with a Missionary Farewell Service, EGW noted

Wrongs--serious wrongs--have been committed in Battle Creek. I did not know how we would get along at the meeting. The Lord gave me instruction regarding this . . . Who do you suppose has been among us since this Conference began? Who has kept away the objectionable features that generally appear in such a meeting? Who has walked up and down the aisles of this Tabernacle?--The God of heaven and His angels . . . They have been among us, to work the works of God.

Angels of God have been at work here. The Lord knew our needs, and sent us food, . . . showing us how we should work. We have been trying to organize

the work in right lines. The Lord has sent His angels, . . . telling us how to carry the work forward.

I was never more astonished in my life than at the turn things have taken at this meeting. This is not our work. God has brought it about. Instruction regarding this was presented to me, but until the sum was worked out at this meeting, I could not comprehend this instruction. God's angels have been walking up and down in this congregation. I want every one of you to remember this, and I want you to remember, also, that God has said that He will heal the wounds of His people" (*Ibid.*, pp. 463, 464).

4. Post-1901 Session: With changes in leadership personnel and in organizational machinery, EGW reverted to her 1875 position and is then opposed to the 1890's position.

Only two months later, EGW was concerned that Edson White was erroneously taking pre-1901 Session statement of his mother and misapplying them in the post-1901 Session milieu, and she wrote him:

Your course would have been the course to be pursued, if no changes had been made in the General Conference. But a change has been made, and many more changes will be made, and great developments will be seen. No issues are to be forced.

It hurts me to think that you are using the words which I wrote prior to the Conference [to apply them now]. Since the Conference great changes have been made.

A terribly unjust course has been pursued in the past. A want of principle has been revealed. But in pity to His people, God has brought about changes . . . The course of action which before the Conference might have been a necessity is no longer a necessity, for the Lord Himself interposed to set things in order . . ." (Letter 54, June, 1901)

5. 1909: By this year, EGW is out of the 1890's mode and back in the 1875 mode:

God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority. (9T 261)

6. 1911: She took her final stand.

God has invested His church with special authority and power which no one can be justified in disregarding and despising, for he who does this despises the voice of God. (AA 164)

Note that Ellen White took different positions at different times, depending on the situation at that time. Time factors, therefore, are sometimes quite crucial when a prophet says

something, for things true at one time may well not be true at another.

IV. Case Studies in “Place”:

A. Assurance of Salvation:

1. At the turn of the century, EGW wrote: “Those who accept the Savior . . . should never be taught to say, or feel, that they are saved.” (COL 155:1; cf. 1SM 314:2)
2. Internal Context: EGW is here speaking within the framework of the false “Doctrine of Eternal Security” (“Once saved, always saved!”). (See COL 155:1-3). There are, however, many other statements in her writings in which she makes it clear that if the Christian maintains a daily connection with the Lord, living up to known light, he/she may yet have confidence and assurance of his/her personal acceptance with God. (Additional reference: 1SM 382:2, 392:1, and 394:1; COL 157:1-3; SC 64:1; 3SM 195:4-196:3; OHC 49; FE 135:2, from RH, Aug. 21, 1888; RH, May 12, 1896:4; and UL 320).

B. Whether Ministers Should Ever Use EGW’s Words in the SDA Pulpit:

1. EGW wrote upon various occasions:
 - a. “The words of the Bible, and the Bible alone, should be heard from the pulpit.” (PK 626, 1969)
 - b. “In public labor do not make prominent, and quote that which Sister White has written” (3SM 29)
 - c. “The Testimonies of Sister White should not be carried to the front. God’s word is the unerring standard.” (Ev 256)
2. Internal Context:
 - a. Statement #1 is addressed to the nominal Christian churches of our world--not to SDA preachers. She here draws a contrast between preaching the philosophy and traditions of man vs. the inspired word of God.
 - b. Statements #2 & 3 were specifically addressed to SDA evangelists, in the context of their need to prove the doctrines they were teaching from the Bible, rather than from the Spirit of prophecy writings since God’s Word is where SDA’s obtained them in the first place.

C. Interracial Relationships between Caucasians and African-Americans in SDA Churches:

1. With regard to interracial marriage, EGW, in 1896, advised against it since it would inevitably result in “controversy,” “confusion,” “bitterness,” and “hindrance.” (MS 7, 1896, cf. Letter 36, 1912, cited in SM 343, 344)
2. With regard to general race relationships within the church, EGW wrote in a 1903 letter to her son and daughter-in-law, Edson and Emma, who were doing evangelistic work among the ex-slaves in the southern United States:
 - a. “We cannot lay down a definite line to be followed in dealing with the subject. In different places, and under different circumstances, the subject will need to be handled differently. In the south, where the race prejudice is so strong, we could do nothing in presenting the truth [there] were we to deal with the color-line question as we deal with it in the North.” (Letter 202, Sept. 11, 1903; cited in 4MR 22, 23, cited in 4MR 22, 23, and in “The Color Line,” 9T 213-22)
 - b. “I think I have already written that the colored people should not urge that they be placed on an equality with white people.” (4MR 23)

3. Internal Context:

- a. EGW was not a bigoted racist, as some might infer from a superficial reading of some of her pronouncements.
- b. However, there are potentially serious practical social problems in daily living involved in interracial marriages, particularly as they affect the emotional health of the children born into such a union. This was one of EGW's strong, almost over-riding prime concerns, as she spells them out in "Important Factors in Choosing a Life Companion." (SM. 481-84)

EGW pragmatically was also concerned with the difficulties of promoting the work of her church in the context of existing social prejudices, especially in the Southern United States. In areas where this prejudice was strong, she knew that to mix the races in public meetings and social occasions would preclude success in effort to reach those afflicted with the gospel.

4. External Context:

- a. At the time these were penned, there were state laws prohibiting social mingling between whites and blacks in most of the Southern U.S. states, which sometimes even extended to prohibition of marriage between races (Miscegenation laws).

Concerning such social mores and legal enactments, EGW cautioned her church "to avoid entering into contention" (9T 213); they were told, repeatedly, not to agitate the question publicly (pp. 209, 211, 215), and to say as little as possible about the subject (p. 206), although she personally found such laws and customs to be exceedingly repugnant. The anti-miscegenation laws were not declared unconstitutional and voided by the U.S. Supreme Court until 1967.

Note that EGW took an entirely different position toward SDA compliance with the U.S. fugitive slave laws of 1787, 1793, and 1850, which legally required U.S. citizens to return any runaway slaves to their lawful owners. She was in total harmony with some of the Northern personal liberty laws, which prohibited state and local officers from complying with those laws. She participated in "underground railway" operations and encouraged SDA members not to obey the federal fugitive-return laws.

V. The Question of Compilations:

1. The question of legitimacy and acceptability of preparing thematic compilations of the EGW writings is frequently raised because of the potential for misrepresenting her views by quoting them out of context. *The Desire of Ages* was a compilation of Mrs. White's writings, prepared by chief literary assistant Marian Davis, and personally supervised by EGW, in the 1870's, 1880's, and 1890's. *Christ's Objects Lessons*, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessings*, *Education*, and *The Ministry of Healing* were also compilations, prepared during her lifetime and under her personal supervision.
2. EGW was herself conscious of the substantial potential for misrepresentation of her views in compilations. During her lifetime she, at times, forbade some individuals, who had requested her permission to prepare and publish such privately prepared works, from pursuing such activity.

To a church member who wrote, asking such permission, she responded:

I can see plainly that should every one who thinks he is qualified to write books, follow his imagination and have his productions published, insisting that they be recommended by our publishing houses, there would

be plenty of tares sown broadcast in our world. Many from among our own people are writing to me, asking with earnest determination the privilege of using my writings to give force to certain subjects which they wish to present to the people in such a way as to leave a deep impression upon them.

It is true that there is a reason why some of these matters should be presented; but I would not venture to give my approval in using the testimonies in this way, or to sanction the placing of matter which is good in itself in the way which they propose.

The person who makes these propositions, for ought I know, may be able to conduct the enterprise of which they write in a wise manner; but nevertheless I dare not give the least license for using my writings in the manner which they propose. In taking account of such an enterprise, there are many things that must come into consideration; for in using the testimonies to bolster up some subject which may impress the mind of the author, the extracts may give a different impression than that which they would were they read in their original connection.
(*The Writing and Sending Out of the Testimonies to the Church*, pp. 25, 26, as cited in 1SM 58)

3. Do these words mean that EGW was opposed to the making of any compilations of her writings, apart from her own personal supervision?
 - a. In preparing her Last Will and Testament, EGW gave her five designated Trustees three tasks to perform after she was gone.
 - (i) To promote her writings in the language in which she wrote them--English.
 - (ii) To foster the translation and publication of those writings into other foreign languages.
 - (iii) To prepare thematic compilations of her writings, upon various subjects, as a need might conceivably arise within the church.
(Francis D. Nichol. *Ellen G. White and Her Critics*, pp. 674-78).

Conclusion:

EGW waged a life-long fight against the misuse of her writings, especially the practice of removing them from their original context. During her lifetime some well-intentioned members misquoted and misconstrued her, making it appear that she taught things which were positions against which she was unalterably opposed.