

# **Ellen G. White: The Person--II**

## **The Wit and Wisdom of the Prophet**

### **Introduction:**

Ellen G. White lived in the Victorian Era--an age when the use of humor in the pulpit was widely condemned by the general public and also by the SDAs. This was especially so with their prophet. On more than one occasion, therefore, EGW addressed the question of the use of humor and its appropriateness, especially in the pulpit of her church.

The topic of humor and the EGW proscriptions against employing it in the pulpit are of particular interest to two groups within Adventism today:

1. **SDA Youth:** Most perceive EGW as a humorless and negative old lady who was always pointing a finger at the youth of her church, censuring them for whatever activity that was fun. However, those who know the real Ellen White have found her to be possessed of a delightful sense of humor.
2. **SDA Clergy:** EGW had a great deal to say about jesting, joking, and levity, particularly in the SDA pulpit, almost of all which was negative. Many, if not most, of her strictures were directed at the use of humor from the pulpit of her church. However, some ministers who have given thoughtful and earnest study of her writings have felt that there is legitimate distinction being drawn between *jesting* and *joking* and *levity* on the one hand and a judicious, deft use of wholesome, legitimate humor.

### **I. Toward a Christian Theology of Joy and Laughter:**

#### **A. From Scripture:**

1. Christ's Beatitudes (KJV) traditionally begin with "Blessed are . . . ."
  - a. Many contemporary translators render "blessed" more accurately in today's English as "Happy are . . . ."
  - b. Jesus certainly made laughter desirable when he declared, "Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh" (Luke 6:21, KJV).
2. Jesus had a lot to say about the desirability of joy:
  - a. Repenting sinners fill all heaven with joy (Luke 15:7).
  - b. His expressedly stated goal for His followers was "that My joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full" (John 15:11).

- c. A cursory examination of “joy” in a concordance of the New Testament reveals its importance and desirability.
3. The Old Testament also places an importance upon joy and laughter:
- a. The name Isaac that Sarah gave to her long-delayed firstborn is translated into English as “laughter,” for, she declared, “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh [for joy] with me” (Genesis 21:6, NIV).
  - b. David also encouraged gladness:
    - (i) “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us be glad and rejoice in it” (Psalm 118:24, NIV).
    - (ii) “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the lands! Serve the Lord with gladness!” (Psalm 100:12, RSV)
    - (iii) “Break forth into joyous song and sing praises! . . . . Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together” (Psalm 98:4,8, RSV).
    - (iv) “Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy” (Psalm 126:2, NIV).
  - c. Solomon, wrote:
    - (i) “A merry heart doeth good like a medicine” (Proverbs 17:22).
    - (ii) “To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under the heaven. [There is] . . . a time to weep, and a time to laugh” (Ecclesiastes 3: 1, 4).

**B. From Ellen White:**

“Christians should be the most cheerful and happy people that live. They may have the consciousness that God is their Father and their everlasting Friend. But many professed Christians do not correctly represent the Christian religion. They appear gloomy, as if under a cloud.” (MYP 363)

**C. Some General Observations:**

- 1. Quaker theologian D. Elton Trueblood wrote a 127-page treatise on *The Humor of Christ: A Significant But Often Unrecognized Aspect of Christ’s Teaching* [Harper, 1964]:
  - a. Among the examples he cites are Christ’s references to King Herod

being a “fox” (Luke 13:32 ) and camels going through the eye of a needle (Matthew 19:24, Mark 10:25, Luke 18:25).

- b. He pointed out that Christ’s humor was always situation-focused, rather than merely word-focused.
2. Perhaps one key to unlocking the apparent paradox of the Bible’s appearing to favor joy, lightness, and humor, while Ellen White seems to interdict all manifestations of humor is to draw the distinction between **good humor** and **bad humor**.
    - a. **Good Humor:** deft wit that never destroys, lightly and judiciously used for a good (right) purpose.
    - b. **Bad Humor:** those categories against which EGW inveighed were jesting, joking, levity. Note that EGW not only interdicted all three categories for clergy in the pulpit but for SDA Christians in general social situations.
  3. There are indications that God Himself has a sense of humor as demonstrated in His derision at the wicked:
    - a. “He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall have them in . . . derision” (Psalm 2:4).
    - b. “The Lord shall laugh at him; for He seeth that his day is coming” (Psalm 37:13).
    - c. “But Thou, O Lord, shalt laugh at them; Thou shalt have all the heathen in derision” (Psalm 59:8).
    - d. “I will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when you fear” (Proverbs 1:26).

## II. The SDA Minister and the Pulpit:

In using the counsels of the inspired writings, ministers should beware of two approaches:

- A. Rationalization: the attempt to “make the worse appear the better reason” (*Paradise Lost*, line 112). Jesus had warned against “making the Word of God of none effect through your tradition” (Mark 7:13, cf. Matthew 15:6).
- B. Watering down the instruction of God: The attempt to explain away the truth.

## III. The Ellen White Counsels:

- A. Most of the EGW strictures against humor deal with the inadmissibility of jesting, joking, and levity and are grouped together in two compilations:

1. Ev. 206-11: “Stories, Anecdotes, Jestings, and Joking”
2. Ev. 640-44: “Avoiding Jestings and Joking”

B. Typical are five statements on the topic:

1. “Amusement is not to be interwoven with instruction in the Scriptures. When this is done, the hearers, amused by some cheap nonsense, lose the burden of conviction.” (Ev 210, 211)
2. “Some form the habit of relating anecdotes in their discourses, which have the tendency to amuse and remove from the mind of the hearer the sacredness of the Word which they are handling.” (Ev 208-209)
3. “Let them be careful, lest by attempting during their discourse to cause laughter, they dishonor God.” (Ev 211)
4. “If he is a frivolous, joking man, he is not prepared to perform the duty laid upon him by the Lord . . . . The flippant words that fall from his lips, the trifling anecdotes, the words spoken to create a laugh, are all condemned by the word of God and are entirely out of place in the sacred desk.” (Ev 643)
5. “All sang-froid [six] which is so common . . . , all lightness and trifling, all jesting and joking, must be seen . . . to be . . . a denial of Christ. It unfits the mind for solid thought and solid labor. It makes men inefficient and superficial, and spiritually diseased . . . . Let every minister be sedate . . . yet . . . cheerful and happy.” (Ev 645)

**B. Some Important Distinctions:**

1. Anecdotes that are “trifling” are not to be used; but EGW clearly did not intend, by this statement, to interdict the use of **all** illustrative material in sermons.
2. While there is a class of “amusement” which is characterized as “cheap nonsense” (the kind that causes the hearers in a religious service to lose the burden of Holy Spirit-indicted conviction), a case may be made for “innocent amusement(s),” expressions Mrs. White used 19 times in her published writings--and these may have positive benefits.

3. The deliberate attempt to cause laughter is condemned and may be categorized as “joking for the joke’s sake.” However, this need not eliminate anything that might bring a smile to the hearer’s face to relieve a tense moment in a decision-making sermon on testing truth.
4. The condemnation of such activities as being “flippant,” “frivolous,” “trifling,” “jesting,” and “joking” is made in the EGW writings in a clearly defined context. We, therefore, should not stretch the application to make it universal. Besides, the intended purpose of the speaker and the manner in which he proceeds will have a conditional bearing in the matter.

**C. The Position of Contemporary Preachers:**

1. William Fagal (1919-1989), founder of the “Faith for Today” Adventist telecast:

I can’t believe that Ellen White meant that there should never be any light touch to life. I draw a distinction--even as I’m sure she drew a distinction--between jesting and joking on the one hand, and a judicious light touch of humor, of wit, on the other.

The man who cracks jokes, who takes his work in the pulpit lightly, not seriously, is to be condemned. I’m against humor merely for the sake of humor. . . . I condemn the man who gets up just to get the people to laugh.

But there’s good humor and there’s bad. That which is clearly inappropriate should never be used. I never make the people laugh for the laugh’s sake. I never shock for shock’s sake. I never use the after-dinner sort of wit . . . . And I never, never make puns upon [the words of] the Scriptures. (Roger W. Coon, *The Public Speaking of William A. Fagal of “Faith for Today”: America’s First National Television Pastor*. [Ph. D. thesis, Michigan State University, 1969], I: 306, 307).

2. Clovis Chappell, the 20th Century’s foremost exponent of the biographical sermon form, makes the same distinction between “bad” and “good” humor for use in the pulpit:

All we do is bring joy, a little kick, into life. . . . Humor? I couldn’t get along without it. It’s better to have bad eyesight than no sense of humor. There

is, of course, a danger here that one will major on minors. I tell few jokes, actually; and never joke for the joke's sake. Humor that counts is spontaneous--there is much humor in the Bible (the Pharisee who strains the gnat out of his wine, and then gulps down a camel!). No, laughter and tears are the warp and woof of life. If you leave them out of preaching, you are leaving out life itself”  
(Roger W. Coon, interview with Clovis G. Chappell, Waverly, TN, June 11, 1962; cited in Ph. D. thesis, p. 327).

### **III. Practical Benefits From the Use of “Good” Humor:**

#### **A. Therapeutic Benefits:**

1. The medical benefits are increasingly being noted by contemporary writers:

The Hebrew word translated “merry” means “joyful,” “glad.” The kind of merriment intended is not the boisterous hilarity that is sometimes justified by reference to this Bible verse. A joyful heart is one that knows peace, freedom from guilt and fear, and contentment with the circumstances of life.

Four hundred years ago, Robert Burton, in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, cited authorities who said, “Humor purges the blood, making the body lively and fit for any manner of employment.” The philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), believed a hearty laugh to be “a good way to jog internally without going outdoors.

On the other hand, research of grieving persons has revealed a decrease in the number of white blood cells, the “soldiers” that combat germs. The body’s defenses against disease are weakened by grief. Significantly, the place where blood cells are manufactured is bone marrow. (Virginia E. Davidson and Ernest H. J. Steed, *Proverbs*, Adult Sabbath School Lesson, Teachers’ Edition, Fourth Quarter, 1991, p. 117).

2. In their book *Time Out: Daily Devotions for Workaholics*, Gary E. Hurst, Mike Kachura, and Larry d. Sides, answer the question: “What happens when we laugh”?

The brain releases chemicals called endorphins, which give us our feelings of well-being. On the other hand, stress depletes vital neurochemicals, bringing on depression and anxiety. It is very important, therefore, to cultivate your sense of humor.

God presented this concept long before science was able to verify it. A merry heart necessitates that we allow ourselves the opportunity to relax and enjoy the fruits of our labors. We must be careful not to write off lightness as foolish and trivial. Do not be fooled into thinking that life is all serious business. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991, Selection for January 11)

3. Jeris Bragan provides an illustration:

Laughter produces great emotional strength, even in the face of death. Exactly how this works may be uncertain, but the saying is indeed true: He who laughs lasts! Gloom gobbles up strength. Joy multiplies it. The clinically depressed person hardly has the strength to begin each day.

At Age 50 Norman Cousins suffered from a chronic debilitating disease of the connective tissue that involved severe inflammation of the spine and joints, making it painful even to turn over in bed. In *Anatomy of an Illness* he described how laughter and joy relieved his pain and helped him move toward health again.

Intrigued by Cousins’ theory, researchers at UCLA’s prestigious medical school invited him to join their staff in 1979. After 10 years of the most scientific testing of “the laughter connection” in maintaining health, Cousins published *Head First: The Biology of Hope and the Healing Power of the Human Spirit*. In this work he marshaled compelling laboratory evidence that showed how love, hope, faith, will to live, festivity, purpose,

and determination make a radical difference in how many patients recover from serious illness.

Today some hospitals for chronically ill patients have “laugh rooms” in which humorous magazines, books, and movies can be used by patients--with remarkable results.

Consider this modern development in medicine and then read this 3,000 year-old verse from Proverbs: “A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones” (Prov. 17;22, NIV).

When things go badly, when no one is very happy with anyone else, when all is tension and despair, what we often need is what God offers us in abundance--more joy, more laughter.

(“Lighten Up! Laugh!.” *Adventist Review*, July 25, 1991, pp. 10, 11)

#### **B. Benefits to Speakers:**

1. Proper, appropriate humor that illustrates a point can be a “shaft into hearts”: “if in an illustration there is something humorous that is right to the point, then humor can bring a great truth.” (William A. Fagal, Sr., cited in Coon thesis, p. 307).
2. Humor has proven to be an excellent means of gaining rapport with an audience, especially at the beginning of a presentation.
3. It may serve as a vital, on-going, feedback for the speaker, for it enables him/her to discern whether or not the point just made “got across” or not.
4. For most experienced speakers, especially in evangelism, a judicious use of humor may help in relieving tension when a controversial point has to be made.

#### **IV. Dangers in the Use of Bad Humor:**

##### **A. In Interpersonal Relationships:**

EGW very perceptibly recognized that some humor not only isn't funny, but it may be used to disguise a barbed arrow of criticism with the intent to wound or even destroy the other. Ellen White wrote:

Sanctity of the Family Circle--There is a sacred circle around every family which should be preserved. No other one has any right in that sacred circle. The husband and wife should be all to each other. The wife should have no secrets to keep from her husband and let others know, and the husband should have no secrets to keep from his wife to relate to others. The heart of the wife should be the grave[yard] for the faults of the husband, and the heart of the husband the grave[yard] for his wife's faults.

Never should either party indulge in a joke at the expense of the other's feelings. Never should either the husband or wife in sport or in any other manner complain of each other to others, for frequently indulging in this foolish and what may seem perfectly harmless joking will end in trial with each other and perhaps estrangement.

I have been shown that there should be a sacred shield around every family. (Manuscript 1, 1855; cited in AH 177:1)

**B. In the Adventist Pulpit--the Misuse of Humor:**

1. Levity leads to irreverence: Joking for the sake of the joke is inappropriate, beneath the dignity of the sacred desk. A preacher is out of place when he appears as a comedian.
2. Humor is often unethically used by the clergy, especially in evangelism, with the intent to manipulate the emotions of the audience for personal advantage.
3. Aroused emotions sometimes provide a handy climate (and rationalization) for obtaining "decisions" for the Lord. Peter Marshall, declared that emotion might be legitimately used to provide the springboard for action much better than reasoning though he despised emotionalism and drew the sharp distinction between the use of emotion and that of emotionalism. (Catherine Marshall, *A Man Called Peter* [McGraw-Hill: 1951], pp. 193-194).
4. The power of the Word is diluted, negated, even destroyed, when the Scriptures are made the butt of a joke, for the hearer, upon hearing the text, will associate it with the joke rather the sacred truth in the passage.

**V. Did Ellen White Have a Sense of Humor?**

**A. Reasons why many did not think so:**

1. There is no photograph of her in a smiling pose. In Ellen White's day, photographs were taken in long, tedious time-exposures, during which the subject(s) dare not move even a muscle--to do so would blur the image upon the photographic plate. Most subjects, therefore, posed very stiffly and formally, with a sober expression upon the face.
2. Since Mrs. White had a great deal to say against the employment of "bad" humor, in social life and in the pulpit, many erroneously assume that she was herself a humorless person.
3. Some who are themselves possessed of a harsh, stern, censorious spirit have misused the EGW writings, and others tended to identify the author of those quotations with the same harsh spirit of the compilers.

**B. The Nature of Ellen White's Sense of Humor:**

1. Ellen White's sense of humor was not the gross, slapstick kind of humor, but a deft, subtle, flashing, sparkling kind of wit which betrayed her as an exceedingly genuine, warm-hearted human being, in love with both life and people.
2. EGW's granddaughters, Grace Jacques and Ella M. Robertson, testified that she could always see the funny side of things and had no use for "sour piety," e.g., on one occasion, EGW was reported to have said to a family member: "You look like patience on a monument looking down on grief!"

**C. Examples of Ellen White's Sense of Humor:**

1. EGW was capable of characterizing an undesirable situation with a memorable epigram:
  - a. On Unbecoming Dress:
    - (i) "There is a class who are continually harping upon pride and dress, who are careless of their own apparel, and who think it is virtue to be

dirty, and dress without order and taste; and their clothing often looks as if it flew and lit upon their person.” (RH, Jan. 23, 1900; cited in CG 415)

- (ii) “I would advise those [women] who prepare for themselves a short[er] dress for working purposes to manifest taste and neatness in getting it up. Have it arranged in order, to fit the form nicely. Even if it is a working dress, it should be made becoming, and should be cut after a pattern. Sisters when about their work should not put on clothing which would make them look like images [”scarecrow”] to frighten the crows from the corn. “ (1T 464)

b. On Tedious Public Prayers:

Long prosy talks and prayers are out of place anywhere, and especially in the social meeting. Those who are forward and ever ready to speak are allowed to crowd out the testimony of the timid and retiring. Those who are most superficial generally have the most to say. Their prayers are long and mechanical. They weary the angels and the people who listen to them.” (4T 70, 71)

- 2. Upon one occasion EGW instructed her personal secretary to write a thank-you note to a lady who had sent Ellen a gift sweater that turned out to be several sizes too small. Ellen told the secretary kindly to inform the donor that “There is

much more to Sister White than many people realize!”  
(Cited by Ron Graybill [*Insight*, August 14, 1973])

3. Upon one occasion James and Ellen were separated for a period of time because of their respective travel obligations. James, concerned about the lack of news from home, dashed off a postal card to his wife, to which she replied with irony:

We received your few words last night on a postal card: “Battle Creek, April 11. No letters from you in two days. James White.

This lengthy letter was written by yourself. Thank you, for we [now] know you are living. No letter from James White previous to this since April 6, 1876.” (Letter 5, 1876)

4. One day while James and Ellen were riding in a railroad coach, the windows of which were not sealed because of air conditioning needs, they were eating a picnic lunch. James, upon finishing drinking from a bottle he had brought along, in an almost mechanical gesture, tossed the bottle out of the open coach window. Ellen, mildly protesting against such “wastefulness,” gently remonstrated: “Well, you could have at least save the cork.” (Roger W. Coon interview with Arthur L. White, undated)

5. James could be difficult. Once, in exasperation, Ellen wrote a letter from Healdsburg to their son, “Dear Willie, Father is trying to be a cabbage-head . . . .” (Letter 5, June 24, 1878)

6. Once, while J. S. Washburn was interviewing Ellen White, a young man entered the room and informed the prophet, “The brethren have asked you to attend the Iowa camp meeting. Will you

go?” Whereupon, Ellen, gesturing by lifting her foot from the floor and then replacing it, responded: “I have put my foot down that I am not going to the Iowa camp meeting.” After the young man had left to deliver the message, EGW looked at Washburn, and grinned: “But I haven’t put it down so hard that I can’t lift it, if I want to!” She is later reported to have attended the camp meeting.

7.

En route back to America after nine years in Australia and the South Pacific, EGW’s ship stopped briefly on Sabbath, September 8, 1890, in the harbor at Apia, Samoa. A small boat came to the side of the ship to transport passengers to the beach, but since even it could not land on the shore, large, scantily-clad Samoan men waded out to carry them the final distance. Two of these nationals joined their arms to make a “chair” upon which to carry Ellen to land. When she had arrived, she sat down upon a large rock to await the rest of her party. Ethel May Lacey-White, who was wearing a long dress, was, however, told to clamber upon the back of a single, very portly (and near-naked) Samoan who was already holding her four-year-old

daughter, Grace, with one hand, and an umbrella with the other), and to wrap her arms around his neck, and her legs around his rather ample girth. Ellen, observing the sight of her rather prim-and-proper daughter-in-law being carried in such an awkward, ungainly, undignified fashion, became so hysterical with laughter that she actually fell off from the rock upon which she was sitting. (Ethel May Lacey White Currow, "Life With My Mother-in-law," *Adventist Review*, July 7, 1983, p. 5)

8.

One Sabbath afternoon, EGW she was speaking in the local church in St. Helena, California. It was a warm August day. The building was filled to capacity. There were few windows in the structure, and the ventilation was exceedingly poor. Willie, her son, was sitting upon the platform behind Mrs. White. While she was speaking, she noticed that a number in the congregation were unsuccessfully trying to stifle smiles upon their faces. She knew that she had not said anything remotely humorous, and so she, in a gesture, managed to maneuver herself, the better to see what was going on behind her that was so amusing. As the meeting had

worn on, Willie had become drowsy, and nodded off, with his chin-whiskers now resting fully upon his shirt-front. EGW took the entire situation in at a glance and recognized that she must do something to defuse the situation, or her words would be totally lost upon her hearers. She stopped speaking, smiled, and in a confidential tone admonished the congregation, "Don't blame Willie. If anyone is to blame, it is me--his mother. For I was the one who taught Willie to sleep on the rostrum on the Sabbath! When Willie was a baby, I had no baby-sitter; so I had a Battle Creek carpenter make me a cradle on rocker-arms, just exactly the width of the pulpit in the Tabernacle. I would then place Willie in the cradle before the worship service began; and while I was preaching, I would use my right foot to rock the cradle, to keep him asleep, lest he awaken and disturb the service. So, don't blame Willie; blame me. I was the one who taught him to sleep in church on the platform on Sabbath!"

(Roger W. Coon interview with Arthur L. White, August, 1959, Washington, D.C.; cited in Coon Ph. D. thesis, pp. 306-307)

**Conclusion:**

Concerning humor, a number of contemporary writers have discussed it from several points of view, but all of their contributions add up to one great truth: humor is human, and humor is necessary for human survival. “A sense of humor is a sense of proportion” (Khalil Gibran, *Flesh*, p. 165), and Ellen White displayed a sense of good humor in her daily life as well as in her writing. However, she made a distinction between jesting, joking, and levity and deft wit used for a right purpose.