

Hermeneutics: Is the Counsel a Principle or a Policy?

Introduction:

1. **Rule #1:** Take all (or as much as you can obtain) of what the prophet has written concerning the subject under research before drawing your own conclusion.
2. **Rule #2:** Check the context--both external as well as internal--of any statement that seems to suggest the existence of a problem.
3. **Rule #3:** Recognize that every time the prophet is giving counsel, he/she is either stating or applying a principle to a situation in a statement of policy.

I. Definitions, Characteristics, Applications:

A. Principle:

1. Definition of: a principle is an unerring, unchanging rule of human conduct or behavior.
2. Characteristics of: a principle is
 - a. Universal: a principle applies to all men and women in all places.
 - b. Eternal: a principle applies to all historical time periods; principles never change--the vertical aspect.

B. Policy:

1. Definition of: A policy is the application of some eternal principle to a particular contextual situation.
2. Characteristics of: Policies, unlike the principles upon which they are grounded, may change, as the circumstances which can call them forth may change.

II. EGW Distinguishes Between Principles and Policies:

A. Principles:

A frequently-recurring theme in the EGW writings is a call to principled living.

1. In 1869-70 she wrote: "Every Christian will have to learn to . . . be

controlled by principle . . . controlled by the principles of God's word
(2T 347, 459)

2. Typical is this appeal, written in 1899: "There are practical lessons in the Word of God . . . That Word teaches living, holy principles which . . . men . . . are to bring into the daily life here, and carry with them to the school above We need the Word of God revealed in living characters. What pure, excellent language is found in the Word of God! What elevating, ennobling principles!" (Ms 96, July 20, 1899, cited in UL 215)

3. In 1909, she father amplified this theme: "The great conflict is right at hand in which all will take sides. In it the whole Christian world will be involved. Daily, hourly, we must be actuated by the principles of the Word of God. Self must be sanctified by the principles of righteousness, the mercy, and the love of God.

"At every point of uncertainty, pray, and earnestly inquire, 'Is this the way of the Lord?' With your Bibles before you, consult with God as to what He would have you do. Holy principles are revealed in the Word of God." (Letter 94a, June 6, 1909, cited in UL 171)

B. Policies:

1. EGW recognized that the Bible contains policies, as well as principles, both of which play a significant role in our deciding on how God would have us to live.

In 1896, she wrote:

By studying the Word of God, and carrying out its precepts in all their business transactions, men [and women] may carefully discern the spirit that controls the actions. In the place of following human impulse and natural inclination, they may learn, by diligent study, the principles that should control the sons and daughters of Adam.

The Bible is the guidebook that is to decide the many difficult problems that rise in minds that are selfishly inclined. It is a reflection of the wisdom of God, and not only furnishes great and important principles, but supplies practical lessons [policies] for the life and conduct of man toward his

fellow man. It gives minute particulars [policies] that decide our relation to God and to each other. It is a complete revelation of the attributes and will of God in the person of Jesus Christ, and in it is set forth the obligation of the human agent to render wholehearted service to God, and to inquire at every step of the way, ‘Is this the way of the Lord?’” (Letter 22, 1896, cited in UL 187)

2. To summarize,
 - a. The Goal for every Christian: to follow the way and will of the Lord
 - b. The Method: to study both principles and policies, as found in the inspired writings, applying both in hermeneutically appropriate ways.

III. Case Studies:

A. Teaching Girls to “Harness and Drive” Horses:

1. In 1903, EGW counseled young women: girls who “could learn to harness and drive a horse . . . would be better fitted to meet the emergencies of life.” (Ed 216, 217)
2. Today the counsel is not applied in SDA colleges.
3. Rule #2 requires us to examine context in examining potentially troublesome statements.
 - a. Internal Context: It is apparent that here EGW is urging girls, as well as boys, to obtain a practical education (the principle), in order to be better fitted to meet life’s emergency situations.
 - b. External Context: In 1903, when these words were first published, many of the SDAs in North America lived in isolated rural communities.
 - (i) Electricity was used in some places in some rural places.
 - (ii) Rural telephones were at least three decades in the future.
 - (iii) If the husband/father were to become injured or seriously ill, it was imperative for the wife/mother to remain at his side to render first-aid. If the daughter did not know how to “harness and drive” a horse, the summoning of a physician

might be impossible, and the victim dies prematurely.

4. Application today:
 - a. Pacific Union College's Industrial Education Department offers women students an elementary-level course in auto mechanics. The rudimental elements of auto care, maintenance, changing a tire are taught.
 - b. While this provision does not meet the letter of EGW's counsel (her policy), it meets the spirit and principle.

B. The Propriety of Varied Physical Postures in Prayer:

1. One Sabbath morning EGW was sitting on the platform of the Battle Creek tabernacle as a minister was about to lead the congregation in the morning prayer. As he appeared to intend remain standing, EGW, calling him by name, whispered hoarsely, "Get down upon your knees!" In reporting this experience later, she commented: "This is the proper position always." (2SM 311)

Does this mean that it is never appropriate to sit or to stand while prayer is being offered?

2. Internal Context: Public and Private Worship.
 - a. "Both in public and private worship, it is our privilege to bow on our knees before the Lord when we offer our petitions to Him." (GW 178)
 - b. "There is no time or place in which it is inappropriate to offer up a petition of God In the crowds of the street, in the midst of a business engagement, we may send up a petition to God We should have the door of the heart open continually and our invitation going up that Jesus may come and abide as a heavenly guest in the soul." (SC 99)
 - c. "We may commune with God in our hearts When engaged in our daily labor, we may breathe out our heart desire, inaudible to any human ear" (GW 258)
 - d. "We must pray constantly, with a humble mind and a meek and lowly spirit. We need not wait for an opportunity to kneel before God. We can pray and talk with the Lord wherever we may be." (Lt 342, 1906, cited in 3SM 266)
 - e. "It is not always necessary to bow upon your knees in order to pray." (MH 510, 511)

3. An examination of Scripture will prove helpful in resolving the seeming contradictions:
 - a. The unconverted Pharisees would “pray standing.” (Matt. 6:5)
 - b. Solomon at the dedication of his temple, knelt for a prayer of confession (1 Kings 8:54) but stood for other prayer and for the benediction. (1 Kings 8: 14, 22, 23, 55)

4. An examination of EGW’s own personal experience in offering public prayers reveals she employed different bodily postures:
 - a. In one prayer, she and the congregation knelt, after first standing in consecration. (RH, Mar. 11, 1909, cited in 3SM 267)
 - b. Upon another occasion in Europe, she instructed the people to remain seated for the prayer. (Diary, Feb. 20, 1887, cited in 1SM 147 and 3SM 267, 268)
 - c. Upon at least three other occasions, she stood and invited the people to stand with her.
 - (i) March 7, 1908, at Oakland, CA (3SM, 268, 269)
 - (ii) Feb. 8, 1909, also at Oakland (3SM 269)
 - (iii) May 18, 1909, at a GC Session in Takoma Park, MD (3SM 269, 270)
 - d. D. E. Robinson, one of the EGW’s secretaries (1902-15), wrote on March 4, 1934, “I have been present repeatedly at camp meetings and General Conference sessions in which Sister White herself has offered prayer with the congregation standing, and she herself standing.” (3SM 267, footnote)
 - e. EGW’s grandson, Arthur L. White, added:

That Ellen White did not intend to teach that on every prayer occasion we must kneel is made clear both by her words and her example. To her there was no time or place where prayer was not appropriate. Her family testified that in her home those at the dining table bowed their heads and not their knees. She was not known to kneel for the benediction at the close of services she attended. The earnest

counsel on kneeling would seem to have its principal application in the worship services in the house of God and private devotions at home. In public ministry there were times when she stood for prayer.” (3SM 270, footnote)

5. From various of her writings, at least two principles appear to emerge:
 - a. Reverence for God: “There should be an intelligent knowledge of how to come to God in reverence and godly fear with devotional love. There is a growing lack of reverence for our Maker, a growing disregard of His greatness and His majesty.” (Ms 84b, 1897, cited in 2SM 312)
 - b. Dependence upon God: “Both in public and private worship it is our duty to bow down upon our knees before God when we offer our petitions to Him. This act shows our dependence upon God. (2SM 312)
 - c. In her personal diary she makes her intended meaning explicit: On Feb. 13, 1892, in Melbourne, Australia, she mentions having to be carried up a long stairway to a meeting hall in the arms of her son and a layman because of being “compassed with infirmities,” and she lamented: “I was not able to bow my knees in the opening prayer or when I entered the desk [pulpit] as I usually do, but the form is not the essential part. My heart went up to God in earnest prayer and He did help me and I believe gave me a decided message for the people assembled.” (MS 29, 1892)
6. It becomes clear that it is not a violation of principle to stand for certain prayers (invocation, benediction, or consecration prayer), or to sit for certain other prayers (an offertory or a consecration prayer). This must also taken into consideration the culture of any particular country.

C. School-Entrance Age of SDA Children:

1. In 1872, EGW wrote her first major treatise upon Christian education (“Proper Education”)
 - a. “Parents should be the only teachers of their children until they have reached eight or ten years of age.”
 - b. “The only schoolroom for children from eight to ten years of age should be in the open air amid the opening flowers and nature’s

beautiful scenery.” (3T 137)

2. In 1904, when W. C. White’s children were denied admissions at the SDA elementary school at St. Helena, CA, on the basis of EGW’s earlier counsel, EGW set forth the following principles:
 - a. The admission of any child should be not be considered on the basis of a particular age limit, but rather that parents and teachers should do that which is best for the individual child under any given circumstance, e.g. some children develop motor co-ordination skills earlier than others, and there are certain family situations in which it is more desirable for children to be in a school than at home. They are to do “the very best possible” to achieve the “harmonious development” of the individual child.
 - b. They are to exercise “common sense.” With regards to this she said, “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. Vegetarianism vs. Flesh Diet:

1. At the time of her first vision, EGW was still a pork-eater. It was not until 19 years later that the light on vegetarianism was given (RH, Oct. 8, 1863, cited in CD 481, #1). Because she was a great meat-eater, she had a “special battle to fight” against appetite (2T 371), but she accepted the light on health reform (Ms 50, 1904, cited in CD 482, #3), and “broke away from everything at once.” (2T 371)
2. For the next 30 years she would occasionally depart, temporarily, from her habitual practice of excluding flesh articles from her diet, in at least three categories of “emergency” situations:
 - a. Problems in travel, where it was especially difficult in those days to obtain a vegetarian, non-flesh diet.
 - b. Therapeutic use in certain medical situations.
 - c. Transition periods in her extended family, between the departure of a cook who knew how to cook vegetarian food, and the training of the replacement cook.
3. Despite these temporary departures from habitual vegetarianism, EGW claimed ever to have followed principle in the matter of her diet:

- a. **1870:** “I have not changed my course a particle since I adopted the health reform. I have not taken one step back since the light from heaven upon this subject first shone upon my pathway . . . I left off these things from principle. I took my stand on health reform from principle. And since that time, brethren, you have not heard me advance an extreme view of health reform that I had to take back. I have advanced nothing but what I stand to today.” (2T 371, cited in CD 483, 484, #5).
 - b. **1897:** “I present these matters before the people, dwelling upon general principles.” (Ms 29, 1897, cited in CD 493, #24)
 - c. **1904:** At the age of 76, she reported she was experiencing better health than she had in her younger days, and she attributed this improvement in health to following “the principles of health reform.” (Ms 50, 1904, cited in CD 482, 33)
 - d. **1908:** “It is reported by some that I have not lived up to the principles of health reform, as I have advocated them with my pen. But I can say that so far as my knowledge goes, I have not departed from those principles.” (Letter 50, 1908, cited in CD 491, #23)
 - e. **1909:** “It is reported by some that I have not followed the principles of health reform as I have advocated them with my pen; but I can say that I have been a faithful health reformer. Those who have been members of my family know that this is true.” (T 158, 159)
4. Vegetarianism, however, is not a principle; it is rather a policy. It is a policy based upon certain eternal principles of health:
- a. Eat and drink to the glory of God. (1 Cor. 10:31)
 - b. Practice temperance in all things; total abstinence from all that is hurtful and harmful, and moderation in the use of that which is healthful. (PP 562; Te 138)
 - c. Promote and maintain life and good health:
 - (i) “Preserve the best health.” (YI, May 31, 1894, cited in CD 395, #700)
 - (ii) “We are, as it were, under bonds to our Maker to preserve our bodies in the very best condition of health that we may in our lives render to God perfect service. (19MR 314; cf. 14MR 222; YI, Nov. 8, 1900; MYP 69; MH 130; 3T 63)
 - (iii) “Eat that food which is most nourishing.” (9T 163)

E. Certain Practices Involved in Sabbath-Keeping:

1. **Cooking Upon the Sabbath:**

a. The Counsels:

- (i) “Cooking upon the Sabbath should be avoided.” (6T 357:3)
- (ii) “On Friday let the preparation for the Sabbath be completed. See that . . . all the cooking is done.” (6T 355:3).

b. The Context:

In EGW’s day cooking was a very complex, time-consuming task which involved a great deal of work; therefore, the basic food preparation for the Sabbath should be done on Friday, but it was permissible to heat up food on Sabbath.

c. The Principle(s):

Today, in some countries, ovens are electronically programmed to bake while the housewives are at worship. She also has microwave ovens. Cooking is longer a time-consuming chore.

2. **Sabbath Baths:**

a. The Counsel:

“On Friday let the preparation for the Sabbath be completed. See that all clothing is in readiness and that all the cooking is done. Let the boots be blacked and the baths taken.” (6T 355:3)

b. The Context:

There were no hot water heaters in those days. All water had to be heated on a wood-burning stove in the kitchen. Also, houses had no bathrooms such as we have today; baths were taken in the kitchen, in large tubs on the floor. The water had to be hauled indoors, one bucket at a time; then it had to be heated and then carried from the stove, once bucket at a time, to the tubs, and then removed again as waste water and thrown outdoors. Sabbath-keepers were then urged to take their baths on Friday afternoon, before the beginning of the Sabbath.

c. The Principle(s):

SDAs were to greet the Sabbath with clean bodies, and the work of bathing was to be done before the beginning of Sabbath hours.

d. Application of the Principle(s):

Today taking a shower is a much simpler process. If one is doing work on Friday, the counsel concerning taking the bath before sunset still equally applies, but the taking of a daily morning shower on Sabbath need not be interdicted by the counsels given.

Conclusion:

1. Our obedience to God's stated commands is not to be viewed as a sort of penance:

Earnestly and untiringly are we to strive to reach God's ideal for us. Not as penance are we to do this, but as the only means of gaining true happiness. The only way to gain peace and joy is to have a living connection with Him who gave His life for us, who died that we might live, and who lives to unite His power with the efforts of those who are striving to overcome." (HP 33:4)

2. His commands are not to be observed in any legalistic manner: "We are not merely to observe the Sabbath as a legal matter. We are to understand its spiritual bearing upon all the transactions of life." (6T 353:4)