

Reclaiming the Prophet

An Honest Defense of Ellen White's Gift

Essays by

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INTRODUCTION

Eric Anderson

HOW THIS BOOK WAS BORN

Over the weekend of October 22, 2023, an unusual conference met on the campus of Pacific Union College. The word, “secret,” would be misleading, although there was no public announcement of this meeting and virtually no audience. The theme for the small gathering was “Ellen White for Today.” Far from being artificially “diverse,” the conference was mostly made up of what one friendly observer called “aged workers.” Only one participant was in her thirties. The group was united by friendship and long reflection on Ellen White. (In fact, half a dozen of the participants from southern California had been meeting almost every week for years to share their current research.) The conference included five former college or university presidents, as well as several experienced teachers and researchers of church history. In the era of *YouTube*, none of the presentations was recorded.

The conference had been built around a shared insight—or a simple hunch. All the participants believed that the Seventh-day Adventist denomination faces a turning point. The belated publication of Donald R. McAdams’s research on the writing of *The Great Controversy* offered, we thought, a chance to move in a new direction. It was time to stop arguing about “what ain’t so” (to invoke the nineteenth-century humorist Josh Billings). It was time to move from demolition of false ideas to recognizing true ones. At the end of our analysis, what could we affirm?

In Ellen White’s day, most educated people recognized the Latin adage *abusus non tollit usum*—“Misuse does not nullify proper use.” The participants in the conference accepted that the critical scholarship of the last fifty years had established how Ellen White should *not* be used. Thanks to assiduous scholars, some of whom

paid a personal price for their discoveries, we now know what we should not claim about the Adventist prophet.

In the litany of negatives, we knew that Ellen White was neither unique nor infallible. She was not unmarked by her historical context. She was not the final authority for all Biblical interpretation. She was not always original, but often borrowed words and ideas from other writers, thoughtful men and women who did not themselves claim divine inspiration. She took for granted many (but not all) of the same ideas that the Methodists and Baptists of her time accepted, from amusements to the age of the earth. Even her apocalyptic vision was rooted in her own time. As she rebuked spiritualism, compromising Protestantism, and unchanging Catholicism, she did not describe the “final movements” of earth’s history in language that included communism, militant Islam, environmental crisis, or a resurgent, imperial China. She did not envision a relentless tide of secularism engulfing much of the world, including the homeland of the Reformation.

If all this was true—and the conference participants were not disposed to dispute these conclusions—these negatives gave a very incomplete picture. Something more was needed to capture the prophet’s spirit. Abuse did not explain away appropriate, reasonable, even inspiring use. The October 22 conference was ready to concede the basic validity of the critical contextualizing work and move on to the positive work of contributing to a denominational consensus on the proper use of the writings and ministry of this remarkable woman.

We owe too much to Ellen White to ignore her or join the angry voices dismissing her as a “fraud.” Her achievements far outweigh her imperfections—or the exaggerations of some of her followers.

She was a masterful institution-builder, playing an essential role in the creation of Adventist schools, hospitals, and church organizations. She was an inspiring writer, able to motivate dramatic change and breathtaking sacrifice in the lives of believers. Over the course of a long life, she often challenged entrenched “brethren of experience,” prodding Adventists away from sectarian or heterodox positions toward orthodox Christian understandings of the atonement, the Trinity, and the transforming power of God’s love. Shaped by many sources, she wrote devotional literature that appealingly described the attraction of holy living and Christian service. Indeed, many of the participants in the Angwin Conference could testify to the dramatic power of her words in their own lives. “*Steps to Christ* prompted my conversion,” said one. “I am an Adventist today because I read *The Great Controversy*,” testified another scholar.

The book you hold in your hands is based on the presentations, questions, and dinner-table debates of the “Ellen White for Today” conference. At last, there is an

audience. Each author engages some form of the question, “What can she teach us today?” Finding a positive answer about “proper use” of this providential gift is, we believe, the most pressing issue facing Adventism. In the pages that follow, readers will discover the beginning of a work of reconstruction. The goal is simple: to reclaim our prophet by honest affirmation of her gift.

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF ELLEN WHITE

Whenever I think about Ellen White, I remember a friend’s witticism. Although he is a theologian and far from a rigid traditionalist, he has grown tired of a certain irritating imbalance he detects among historians. Responding to his former teacher, Ronald Numbers, who found little miraculous or even deeply remarkable in the Adventist prophet, my friend exploded, “Let’s hear at least as much about her role in the creation of Loma Linda University as about her stray comments on ‘solitary vice’ and insanity!”

In other words, Ellen White’s earliest health pamphlet, *An Appeal to Mothers*, is not the summit of her health ideas nor the chief monument of her ministry. Just maybe, she should be evaluated by what she chose to emphasize in her mature work of 1905, *Ministry of Healing*.

Jokes—including my friend’s—employ hyperbole. But he had a point, I think. Discussion of Ellen White’s life and achievements has too often been a matter of combat in dense fog, with one side expending its energy capturing imperfections and the other side retreating, inch by inch, under extreme duress.

If we are to recover Ellen White as a woman in full, we should begin by reminding ourselves of her achievements. What does her statue look like from a hundred yards away—without any examination of chisel marks, faded graffiti, or traces of pigeon droppings? In other words, we need generalizations, even though we know that such statements usually require qualification, correction, or narrowing. It is useful to look up from our tree-counting to see an extensive forest. Now and then, we even need to ask, “Who planted this forest?” And “How do we preserve it?”

The authors of *Reclaiming the Prophet* will often employ the term, “prophet,” to describe Ellen White. The point is not to mystify readers nor to hide her ordinary thoughts or essential historical context. Using non-technical, layman’s language, a prophet is a person who (in God’s name) persuades—a leader who changes people’s behavior. To call Ellen White a prophet is to focus on what she built. Reluctant to take credit, she would insist that at every step of the way she was prompted,

prodded, and sustained by God's power. She would object, of course, to the title of this section—"The Achievements of Ellen White."

Yet as her spiritual heirs, we do need to think about what she accomplished. Even with a prophet, it is necessary to stand back, note long-term trends, and grant some credit to human effort. Otherwise, our assessments are likely to be skewed, unbalanced by flaws, or marred by improbable claims. "She was human, after all," should not shout down, "What hath God wrought," or even, "Look at the progress here."

Here are five generalizations that will be supported or assumed in the chapters that follow:

1. Ellen White led the Advent Movement from "fanaticism" to Christian orthodoxy.
2. Ellen White inspired the creation of a network of schools and medical institutions committed to re-creation and restoration.
3. Ellen White taught her followers to separate holy living from legalism.
4. Ellen White prodded Adventism into a world-wide mission that transcended its American roots.
5. Ellen White quietly rejected exaggerated claims about herself.

Contributors to this volume approach Ellen White's achievements in a variety of ways. Terrie Aamodt will tell us both new things and old things that we may have forgotten. The Adventist prophet was a woman in a culture that had very clear ideas about "women's work" and appropriate roles for males and females. Ellen White swam against strong tides, as she encouraged, rebuked, and warned. She turned a mother's role into something prophetic.

Jonathan Butler explains why he parts company with strident critics of "Sister White," who are ready to throw her out of the Adventist family for her imperfections. Just as we learn to live with our flawed relatives, we should see that if we reject Ellen White's leadership in our past, we are, in fact, recklessly sawing away on that proverbial limb that we are sitting on.

Gil Valentine knows that "the past is a foreign country" and helps us understand the language spoken there. Present-day readers, troubled by harsh and unsparing language, need to understand a culture that emphasized "plain speaking." Ellen White's style and temperament can be off-putting if we demand the warm, therapeutic approach prized in modern America. But that would be as unrealistic as expecting Isaiah to write in English.

Denis Fortin and Paul McGraw will underline facts that should be obvious, but in their retelling have become startlingly new. Ellen White was a preacher and devotional writer, untiringly calling her audience to complete commitment (or devotion) and faithful service. She succeeded in affirming both "the blessed hope"

and “occupy till I come”—that is, building schools and hospitals and sending missionaries to the ends of the earth. She was not an intellectual analyst or what would be called today a “public intellectual,” offering self-consciously insightful comments about the theoretical “direction” of history. She was not even a systematic theologian. Her theme, instead, was how to live in the time of the end.

In my chapter, I offer readers a thought experiment. If we are to understand the achievement of Ellen White, let us imagine an Adventist history without her. How would our history be distorted or changed in negative ways if she had died long before 1915? The point, of course, is to see more clearly what she contributed to the rise and progress of Seventh-day Adventism. As a result of her work, the denomination moved from a narrow backwater of Christianity into the broad mainstream of orthodoxy. The prophet led us into a clearer understanding of the work of the Son of God and the promise of his imminent return.

George Knight and Don McAdams will review the surprising evidence that Ellen White regularly rejected the voices that made her equal to the Bible or claimed that she was mistake-free. If we have too often made claims that we should not have made, we cannot blame her. Both men see the possibility of reclaiming the prophet by clearing away inappropriate assertions and revisiting missed opportunities. Indeed, they believe we are once again at a potential turning point.

Ron Graybill and Larry Geraty reflect on the various ways that Adventists have explained Ellen White’s ministry. It makes all the difference, they say, whether we are trying to explain our teachings to a wider Christian audience or whether we are talking to ourselves. Applying Ellen White for today requires clearer language than we have used in recent years.

Finally, a transplanted Dane offers an international perspective on the achievements of Ellen White. Niels-Erik Andreasen presents a reflective afterword on the implications of all the chapters in *Reclaiming the Vision*. After years of leadership at the denomination’s flagship university, he sees ways that her leadership could shape the Adventist future—free of some of the distinctive distractions of the nineteenth century. An Old Testament scholar, Andreasen reminds us that applying old documents to present concerns is never simple.

From start to finish, the authors of this book are committed to preserving the achievements of the Adventist prophet. In his or her own way, each scholar protests any approach that refuses to answer questions, ignores problems, or wastes a legacy. Together they are committed to reaffirming a providential gift.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

Reclaiming the Prophet answers four important questions:

1. Who was Ellen White? Terrie Aamodt, Jonathan Butler, and Gilbert Valentine offer fresh answers to this question, drawing our attention to neglected evidence.

2. How should we interpret her writings? Paul McGraw, Denis Fortin, and Eric Anderson suggest practical principles of interpretation for this nineteenth-century visionary.

3. What does it mean to “believe in” Ellen White? George Knight, Donald McAdams, Larry Geraty, and Ronald Graybill explain how to affirm her gift without exaggeration or misrepresentation.

4. Where do we go from here? Niels-Erik Andreasen reflects on how Seventh-day Adventism might apply an honest defense of our “Founding Mother.”

Books can provoke arguments. This one aims at inspiring thoughtful conversation rather than vehement shouting. Books about Ellen White can be controversial, with some authors rejecting her as a thief and an imposter and others insisting that she could do no wrong. We don’t find either extreme to be plausible.

Each of the contributors has been thinking about the issues addressed in this book for a long time—almost half a century in most cases. They have taught undergraduate, graduate, and seminary classes on Ellen White’s ministry, prepared Bible commentaries, written scholarly historical studies, and preached on the themes of “inspiration” and “revelation.” They have personally rejected the temptation either to vilify or glorify.

Each author is comfortable with calling what Ellen White did a gift. At the same time, they have no desire to ignore complications in the story, especially the humanity of the recipient of the gift. They hope that you will read with an open-minded yet prayerful spirit. They count on readers who want to learn from the words and example of this messenger of the Lord.

When you are finished, go back to the words of the prophet herself. Pick up your copy of *Steps to Christ* or *The Desire of Ages* or *Ministry of Healing* and look for the power that once moved you or people around you. Read her as if for the first time.

As Ellen White wrote in the crisis that followed 1888, “The question is ‘What is truth?’” She added in language that is hard to ignore: “It is not how many years have I believed that makes it the truth. You must bring your creed to the Bible and let the light of the Bible define your creed and show where it comes short and where the difficulty is.”

In that spirit, we invite you to read this book.

Seeing Ellen White whole, in the rich complexity of her earthly pilgrimage, may even remind readers of a song from her time—words that capture the way she saw the world:

“For the darkness shall turn to dawning,
And the dawning to noonday bright.
And Christ’s great kingdom shall come on earth,
The kingdom of love and light.”