



ELLEN
WHITE ON
LEADERSHIP

*Guidance for those
who influence
others*

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INTRODUCTION

Ellen White gets it! She understands the leader's heart, his or her longing to know and experience God, to do something meaningful and enduring in life, to grapple with twenty-first-century issues of poverty, alienation, diversity, inclusiveness, proactivity, integrity, and eternity.

Yet, she's dead!

No, I haven't had some mystical channeling with Ellen White. I'm only trumpeting the good news that her leadership principles transcend time and are more pertinent and applicable today than ever before. Further, these principles may be hugely encouraging to you in your own leadership responsibilities, giving you assurance that you aren't just "out there" alone trying to scale walls, cast visions, and maximize the positive potential of conflict. Ellen White helps you understand God's eagerness to help you!

During her seventy years of public ministry, Ellen G. White, one of the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, penned more than one hundred thousand manuscript pages of counsel, instruction, exhortation, and comfort. Included in this vast manuscript collection are many letters and testimonies to church leaders. Seventh-day Adventists hold that these messages were inspired by God to the same degree, but with less authority, as the biblical prophets.¹ But with the plethora of books on leadership available today, could Ellen White's voice still have relevance in the leadership dialogue? Many say Yes!

In a discussion of Doctor of Ministry projects in the cafeteria at a church retreat center, I outlined my proposed project on the involvement

of Adventist youth in evangelism to the Doctor of Ministry program director, Dr. Skip Bell. He listened attentively and suggested that while there was merit in my proposal, gathering together and analyzing the counsels of Ellen White on leadership might make a greater contribution to the Adventist world church and be more useful for my current ministry position as an associate director of the Ellen G. White Estate.

As I discussed this new possibility with my young-adult colleagues with whom I was taking classes at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, I discovered their intense interest in the subject of leadership and in current leadership literature. Many of those friends expressed a high level of interest in the subject of Ellen White's counsel on leadership because little that is uniquely Adventist has been published on the subject. Though a booklet-size compilation of Ellen White's counsels on Christian leadership exists, there remains a broadly recognized need for a larger, more-comprehensive study on her theoretical and experiential leadership counsel. Leadership literature has proliferated exponentially in the last decade, but Seventh-day Adventists who wish to study Ellen White's leadership counsel must sift through thousands of pages of published material. In addition, leaders interested in current leadership theories have no resources which compare Ellen White's counsel on leadership with that of contemporary leadership literature.

And who is a Christian leader? Hold on to your hats! A Christian leader is not only the conference president and the pastor of your church. *A Christian leader is anyone who uses his or her influence to promote Christ.* That definition can include parents or politicians, teachers or teens, zealots or zookeepers, as well as administrators in the traditional sense. If you long to influence people within your particular community context to pursue their God-given direction with energy and effectiveness, this book is for you!

1. See chapter 1 for extended treatment of the concept of Ellen White's role and authority.



CHAPTER I

Ellen White's Ministry and Counsels on Leadership

If you are a Christian, you are a leader! Part of our responsibility as followers of Jesus is to use our influence to lead others to follow Jesus. We do this in different ways, according to our spiritual gifts. Some of us may be administrators, many of us are parents, some are teachers, some are vision casters, and some of us have extraordinary talents for hospitality, praying, or fixing things. But unless you've been living in an isolated cave for the past ten years and have seen no one during that time, there are people in your life. Whatever your sphere of influence, be it family, classroom, community, local workplace, or even a global arena, knowing leadership principles will help you be a better leader.

Skeptical? Let's unpack your leadership potential further. Are you raising children? Leading a small group? Teaching a Sabbath School class? Are you a church elder, a head deacon or deaconess? Do you mentor youth in your neighborhood or church? Do you like to think about what "could be"? Do you enjoy making plans and carrying out goals? Do you have an entrepreneurial spirit? If you answered Yes to any of these, you have oodles of leadership opportunity and potential.

Ellen White gave many principles of leadership to her readers and through her example throughout her long life as an author and Christian leader. Why do Seventh-day Adventists believe that her leadership principles might have more consistent value than those of your next-door neighbor or favorite "airport author"? On what theological or biblical basis do Seventh-day Adventists grant credibility and authority to Ellen White's counsels to leaders? How could knowing the answer be useful to

you in your own leadership capacity? Well, suppose you're serving on an inner-city commission to combat AIDS and you share *The Ministry of Healing* with a social worker sitting next to you. She likes the book and asks you about Ellen White's background and her role in the Adventist Church. Here are some ideas that may be useful as you seek answers to questions about Ellen White's credibility and authority, whether these are your own questions or those of people in your sphere of influence.

Humanity's desire is to know God; God's desire is to restore in humanity the image of God. This restoration enables the Godhead to achieve intimacy of companionship and communication with Their created beings. This kind of companionship includes humanity's loving obedience as a response to His love and grace. The primary means through which God presently communicates that love, as well as His will for individuals, is through the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit works through various agencies: the Scriptures, impressions on the heart that are tested by His Word,¹ the book of nature, extra-biblical prophets,² and the community of faith. Thus, the discovery and practice of Spirit-inspired principles of leadership in the writings of one of His appointed prophets is a means by which the Christian leader can know and communicate with God Himself.

Ellen White's level of authority

The Seventh-day Adventist Church holds that the writings of Ellen White pass the biblical tests of confession in Christ³ and are in harmony with Scripture.⁴ Ellen White's messages do not contradict God's past revelation through prophets and through His Son, Jesus. Thus, Seventh-day Adventists consider Ellen White, though fallible, to be a divinely appointed spokesperson for God, in the same way that Old and New Testament prophets were appointed as God's messengers.⁵ Because Jesus foretold the emergence of false prophets as one of the signs of the imminence of His return, the implication is clear that there must also be true, or genuine, prophets at that same time.

While Seventh-day Adventists officially hold that Ellen White's writings are authoritative,⁶ her writings are also considered subordinate to the Scriptures, which is the locus of authority. Ellen White is considered by Adventists to be one who communicates messages from God⁷ for the edification, encouragement, and consolation⁸ of the church.⁹ There are Adventists who maintain that Ellen White's gift is primarily for spiritual

encouragement, but not for defining truth or correcting error. Yet, early Adventist leaders formally recognized God's revelations through Ellen White as having theological authority.¹⁰ Today, the Seventh-day Adventist position continues to be that one of the purposes for Ellen White's writings is guidance in understanding the teaching of Scripture and application of these teachings.¹¹

Ellen White herself saw her role to include the correction of error¹² and "to open the Scriptures to others as God has opened them to [her]."¹³ She stated, "I have a work of great responsibility to do—to impart by pen and voice the instruction given me, not alone to Seventh-day Adventists, but to the world."¹⁴

In times of crisis or calamity or deliverance, God has chosen to declare His will to humanity through a prophet. Thus Noah announced earth's impending destruction by the global deluge, Moses wrought deliverance of God's people from the Egyptians, Jeremiah and Isaiah warned of national calamity, and John heralded the arrival of the Messiah. As a church, we believe the destruction of the planet followed by the second coming of Jesus is imminent. It is unlikely that at earth's final crisis God would leave His people without prophetic guidance.¹⁵

At age seventeen, Ellen White received her first vision, and shortly thereafter she recognized her own calling by God to bear prophetic messages.¹⁶ Through seventy years of public ministry, she maintained that her calling was not from a human source, but was the voice of God speaking to her through His Holy Spirit.¹⁷

Ellen White's roots were in Methodism. She was baptized by immersion at age twelve and accepted into the membership of the Methodist church. Methodists of the nineteenth century were pietists with a strong emphasis on sanctification, and it was a Methodist minister who explained righteousness by faith in Christ alone to fourteen-year-old Ellen Harmon. Later, she described this event as pivotal in her Christian experience,¹⁸ changing her view of God from demanding and stern to that of a kind and tender parent.¹⁹ This early discovery of God as a loving Deity became an encompassing theme in her extensive writings.

The Scriptures were the lens through which Ellen White viewed theology and from which her worldview emerged. She considered the Bible to be its own expositor.²⁰ The centrality of the Scriptures was a recurring motif in both her writings and public speaking. As early as 1851 she could say, "I recommend to you, dear reader, the Word of God as the rule of your faith and practice." Thus, she saw the details and insights she

provides as an agency to clarify the truths of the Word of God.

The idea of a great controversy, the battle between Christ and His angels and Satan and His angels that extends from heavenly realms to the hearts and destinies of each human being, is central to Ellen White's values and philosophy. This concept permeates the Scriptures. She believed her place in the drama of the great controversy was as a messenger who would prepare people to meet the Lord with joy. In her view, the Bible provides all the instruction necessary for the believer to understand and accept Christ's offered salvation.²¹ Her writings and testimonies were "a lesser light to lead men and women to the greater light [the Bible]."²²

Scriptures were also foundational to two other eminent themes reiterated in Ellen White's writings—the second advent of Christ and the resulting need for the Advent movement to herald His coming. The Adventist mission, as Ellen White defined it, is evangelism and service.²³ She enjoined every church member, every Christian, to work for the salvation of those "for whom Christ died."²⁴

The atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross buttressed her theology of salvation. "Christ and Him crucified" should be the theme of every missionary effort.²⁵ "Lift up Jesus," she wrote. "Lift Him up in sermon, in song, in prayer."²⁶ She believed that people who bring the gospel to others are symbolized by the three angels of Revelation 14.²⁷ In her view, a sense of urgency should motivate Christians to evangelize for Christ, an urgency encouraged by the world events occurring both in her day and in the events she predicted would occur just before Jesus returns.

Ellen White did not claim authority as intrinsic in herself or from a superior status with God. Her authority, she believed, came to her only because she was a link in the chain of communication through which God gave instruction to His people. If an individual believes, as Ellen White did, that her messages were inspired by the same Spirit who inspired biblical prophets, then those messages must contain principles that are enduring and applicable to present and future leadership challenges.

Leaders who find Ellen White's voice authoritative will motivate and equip others in the church to evangelize across generations; make joyful, intentional provision for full gender inclusiveness and racial diversity; and find more and increasingly effective ways to serve the poor and marginalized.

1. John 16:14; Romans 2:14; Isaiah 8:20.
2. Joel 2:28, 29.
3. 1 John 4:1–3.
4. Isaiah 8:20.
5. Exodus 4:15, 16.
6. Biblical Research Institute, “The Authority of Ellen G. White Writings,” available from <http://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/documents/AuthorityEGWwritings.pdf>. (Retrieved 15 January 2008).
7. *Prophesying* has a broader meaning than mere “foretelling of future events.” The bulk of Ellen White’s “prophesying” is in the category of spiritual admonition, which appears to be the focus of 1 Corinthians 14:3.
8. 1 Corinthians 14:3.
9. *Early Writings of Ellen G. White* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 1945), 78.
10. Herbert E. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1998), 427, 428; James White, “The Gifts—Their Object,” *Review and Herald*, 28 February 1856.
11. Biblical Research Institute (22 May 2006).
12. *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 1980), 3:31.
13. *Testimonies for the Church* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1948), 8:236.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Amos 3:7.
16. *Early Writings*, 13–21.
17. “A Message to the Churches,” *Review and Herald*, 18 July 1907.
18. *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1915, 1943), 36, 37.
19. *Ibid.*, 39.
20. *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1943), 462.
21. “The Signal of Advance,” *Review and Herald*, 20 January 1903.
22. *Colporteur Ministry* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1953), 125.
23. *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1911), 9.
24. “Christ’s Commission,” *Review and Herald*, 10 June 1880.
25. *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Association, 1923), 272.
26. *Gospel Workers*, 1915 ed. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 1915, 1948), 160.
27. *Testimonies for the Church*, 5:455, 456.