

How to Interpret Ellen G. White's Writings

At the time of her death in 1915, Ellen G. White had produced more than one hundred thousand pages of published material. With such a large body of writings, written during an era (1845–1915) far removed from our twenty-first-century world, correct principles of interpretation are essential to understand her message. The following eight guidelines will aid the student in understanding the intended meaning of Ellen G. White's writings:

1. Study the Bible first, then go to Ellen G. White's writings. Ellen G. White never meant for her writings to be read in place of the Bible. For her, Scripture was the supreme source of God's revelation (*see* Bible; revelation and inspiration; and authority). "God's Word is the unerring standard. The Testimonies are not to take the place of the Word," she declared (Ev 256). Throughout her seventy-year prophetic ministry, her attitude toward the Bible was expressed thus: "My brethren and sisters, go to the Bible, and from it learn God's will concerning you" (5MR 250). Regular readers of

Ellen G. White's writings should make their first priority the study of the Bible.

Because Ellen G. White's writings are a manifestation of the postbiblical prophetic gift, the function of her writings is to give an inspired application of the Bible. Just as the biblical prophet Huldah authoritatively applied Scripture to her audience (2 Chronicles 34:24–28), so Ellen G. White applied Scripture in her writings. Thus, it only makes sense for readers of Ellen G. White to go first to the source from which the application comes. In this way, her writings are better understood and appreciated.

The order of reading should, therefore, be the following:

Bible → Ellen G. White

It should *not* be as follows:

Ellen G. White → Bible

2. Study all available information on a given topic. When studying a topic in Ellen G. White's writings, such as the Holy Spirit, the 144,000, or prayer, one should listen to the wide spectrum of her counsel. An isolated statement here or there does not always give the complete picture of her teaching on a subject. The Ellen G. White Estate has a text searchable website that includes virtually all of her published and unpublished writings (<https://egwwritings.org>). Its search engine enables the student to instantly pull up every instance in which a term or phrase is used in all her published writings. Reading through these references provides a more comprehensive understanding of Ellen G. White's thoughts on a topic. But a word of caution is in order: if the statements are not read in their literary context, the tendency is to read one's own ideas into them. The next

hermeneutical guideline is a good antidote for this dangerous practice.

3. *Study each statement in its immediate and larger literary context.* In Ellen G. White's writings, the literary context is the paragraphs, pages, documents, and books surrounding a particular statement. In the case of a letter, manuscript, or published article, one must look at a sentence or paragraph in light of the surrounding paragraphs and then as part of the entire document. In the case of a book, one must view the statement noting the surrounding paragraphs and pages in a chapter and eventually in light of the entire book. Regarding the larger context, every statement should be viewed in light of the Conflict of the Ages series. These five volumes—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, *Prophets and Kings*, *The Desire of Ages*, *The Acts of the Apostles*, and *The Great Controversy*—provide the theological framework for Ellen G. White's writings. They reflect her most mature theological thought on themes appearing earlier in her writings and thus should be carefully understood by any interpreter.

The practice of using a statement from Ellen G. White out of its context disrupts the flow of her thought. Like any organized writer, her flow of thought was a series of related ideas that she carefully laid out to communicate a specific concept. This meaningful communication involved a type of logical thought progression in which one thought led naturally to the next. In this way, she communicated like most people communicate—with a series of selected ideas, all linked together in a logical pattern. Thus, each sentence she wrote must be understood in light of the other ideas expressed in the context, which is her train of thought. To insert a foreign meaning, contrary to her original intention, is a violation of her rights as an author. Yet this is what some readers do with her writings on a regular basis.

Ellen G. White was very aware of the issue of literary

context in her writings. On several occasions, she commented on the way her writings were taken out of context:

Many men take the testimonies the Lord has given, and apply them as they suppose they should be applied, picking out a sentence here and there, taking it from its proper connection, and applying it according to their idea. Thus poor souls become bewildered, when could they read in order all that has been given, they would see the true application, and would not become confused. Much that purports to be a message from Sister White, serves the purpose of misrepresenting Sister White, making her testify in favor of things that are not in accordance with her mind or judgment (1SM 44).

In the same vein, she wrote, “Those who are not walking in the light of the message may gather up statements from my writings that happen to please them, and that agree with their human judgment, and, by separating these statements from their connection, and placing them beside human reasonings, make it appear that my writings uphold that which they condemn” (Lt. 208, 1906). In both of these statements, she uses the word *connection*; this carries the same meaning as the word *context*. Ellen G. White was thus sensitive to the way her writings were taken out of context by her followers. At one point of frustration, she remarked,

What I might say in private conversations would be so repeated as to make it mean exactly opposite to what it would have meant had the hearers been sanctified in mind and spirit. I am afraid to speak even to my friends; for afterwards I hear, Sister White said this, or Sister White said that.

My words are so wrested and misinterpreted that I am coming to the conclusion that the Lord desires me to keep out of large assemblies and refuse private interviews (3SM 82).

4. *Study each statement in its historical context.* Ellen G. White lived most of her life during the latter half of the nineteenth century. This general historical period, with its rapidly changing religious, political, and cultural landscape was the historical context of her day-to-day life experience. She lived through such political events as the war with Mexico (1846–1848), the Civil War (1861–1865), Reconstruction after the Civil War (1865–1877), the Spanish-American War (1898), and the beginning of World War I (1914–1918). Other important contexts include the foreign missionary movement (1810–early 1900s), the urbanization of America (1870s–1920s), and the temperance movement (1870s–1930s). She also observed and experienced the growth of spiritualism, the expansion of evangelicalism, the initiation of numerous social reforms, and the perpetuation of racial tensions. This rich and varied background cannot be ignored in the interpretation of her writings any more than the historical context of first-century Palestine can be ignored in interpreting the teachings of Jesus.

In the more specific historical context of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, time, place, and circumstances are the keys to unlocking the meaning of many of Ellen G. White's statements penned over a seventy-year period. On more than one occasion, she specified the importance of these categories for interpreting her writings. Regarding time, she wrote in 1875, concerning the advancement of the work of God, "that which may be said in truth of individuals at one time may not correctly be said of them at another time" (3T 471). Concerning circumstances in her writings,

she stated in 1904 that “circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relation of things” (3SM 217). Referring to her writings in 1911, she penned, “Regarding the testimonies, nothing is ignored; nothing is cast aside; but time and place must be considered” (1SM 57). Thus, Ellen G. White expressed concern that her readers keep the historical context of her writings in mind.

Several resources for understanding the historical context of Ellen G. White’s writings are Arthur L. White’s six-volume biography *Ellen G. White*; George R. Knight’s *Ellen White’s World: A Fascinating Look at the Times in Which She Lived*; Jud Lake’s *A Nation in God’s Hands*; *The World of Ellen G. White*, edited by Gary Land; and *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, edited by Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon.

5. *Discover the underlying principles.* In the study of Ellen G. White’s writings, it is important to understand the difference between principles and applications. A *principle* is a universal, timeless rule of human conduct or behavior. An *application* is when a principle is used in a specific, historically conditioned situation. For example, Mrs. White counseled men to “let their beards remain unshaven, . . . until the Sabbath is past” (ST May 25, 1882). Some take this statement as Sabbath keeping legislation that present-day Adventists do not follow. What Seventh-day Adventist preacher today, they argue, would come to church unshaven?

This is a classic case of overlooking the historical setting of the statement. In 1882, when this statement was penned, shaving consumed much more time than it does today. Men had to mix their own soap lather and sharpen their handheld straight razors on leather bands called *strops*. Today, because of electric shavers, shaving is a simple process, taking only a few minutes at most. Ellen G. White’s application of the underlying principle—avoiding any unnecessary labor that interferes with the spirit of the Sabbath—fit

the historical context of shaving in the nineteenth century. Would she tell men not to shave today? No. Most twenty-first-century Adventist men, depending on their culture, do not view shaving as violating the spirit of the Sabbath. But the underlying principle remains normative and can be applied to other activities. Therefore always look for the underlying, timeless principles.

6. *Stay balanced, and avoid extreme interpretations.* Adventist history is replete with people who had extreme interpretations of Ellen G. White's writings. Although balance typified her writings, this has not always been found in her followers. Some, for example, have taken her counsel "eggs should not be placed upon your table" (2T 399) to mean that all Seventh-day Adventists should not eat eggs. These readers have, however, missed the historical context of this letter in which Mrs. White addressed a specific family struggling with their diet (2T 712). She never meant this counsel to be applied to all Seventh-day Adventists, and she provided a balancing statement: "While warnings have been given regarding the dangers of disease through butter, and the evil of the free use of eggs by small children, yet we should not consider it a violation of principle to use eggs from hens that are well cared for and suitably fed. Eggs contain properties that are remedial agencies in counteracting certain poisons" (CD 207). The historical context of these statements reveals the balanced approach Ellen White took with regard to dietary counsel. Frustrated with those who had taken "extreme views of health reform" after reading her writings, she wrote that "health reform becomes *health deform*, a health destroyer, when it is carried to extremes" (CD 202; emphasis added). Thus, one should always look for balancing statements in Ellen G. White's writings.

Concerning those who would take radical views of her writings, she wrote:

It is the desire and plan of Satan to bring in among us those who will go to great extremes—people of narrow minds, who are critical and sharp, and very tenacious in holding their own conceptions of what the truth means. They will be exacting, and will seek to enforce rigorous duties, and go to great lengths in matters of minor importance, while they neglect the weightier matters of the law—judgment and mercy and the love of God. Through the work of a few of this class of persons, the whole body of Sabbath-keepers will be designated as bigoted, Pharisaical, and fanatical. The work of the truth, because of these workers, will be thought to be unworthy of notice (Ev 212).

7. *Remember that inspiration is not verbal dictation.* Although Ellen G. White took a more whole-person view of inspiration, some of her followers have taken a more rigid view known as *verbal dictation*. This view maintains that every word was dictated to the prophet by God. A classic example of this view of inspiration is found in the understanding of Dr. David Paulson, a cofounder of Hinsdale Sanitarium, who wrote to Ellen G. White and stated: “I was led to conclude and most firmly believe that *every* word that you ever spoke in public or private, that every letter you wrote under *any* and *all* circumstances, was as inspired as the Ten Commandments” (emphasis in the original). Her response was direct: “My brother,” she penned, “you have studied my writings diligently, and you have never found that I have made any such claims, neither will you find that the pioneers in our cause ever made such claims.” In the rest of her letter, she reinforced this statement with citations from her earlier writings on the topic (ISM 24).

Inspiration and interpretation go together like hand in

glove. Those supporters of Ellen G. White who espouse a more rigid view of inspiration tend to place too much emphasis on her words and sentences, void of their literary context, and consequently develop legalistic interpretations and applications. Detractors with a rigid view of inspiration also tend to emphasize words and sentences over context but use this view as a weapon to discredit Ellen G. White's teaching. Neither of these approaches to inspiration and interpretation is biblical or correct (see Jud Lake, *Ellen White Under Fire*, chap. 6).

8. *Maintain a healthy, spiritual mind-set.* In *Reading Ellen White* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald®, 1997), George R. Knight suggests two guidelines for maintaining a healthy, spiritual mind-set while reading Ellen G. White:

First, begin your study with a prayer for guidance and understanding. The Holy Spirit, who inspired the work of prophets across the ages, is the only one who is in a position to unlock the meaning in their writings. . . .

Second, we need to approach our study with an open mind. Most of us realize that no person is free of bias, no one is completely open-minded. We also recognize that bias enters into every area of our lives. But that reality doesn't mean that we need to let our biases control us (43).

A vital component of reading Ellen G. White's writings is to remember that they are not an "iron rod" to be used against others. Instead, it is vital to read them for oneself and live out those counsels consistently by applying them to one's own life. In this way, as Christian believers, we should show a spirit of love and tolerance toward others who may be at other points in their spiritual growth.

Another essential aspect is to maintain faith and trust in God, to exercise faith and avoid doubt. Concerning doubt, Ellen G. White counseled, “Many think it a virtue, a mark of intelligence in them, to be unbelieving and to question and quibble. Those who desire to doubt will have plenty of room. God does not propose to remove all occasion for unbelief. He gives evidence, which must be carefully investigated with a humble mind and a teachable spirit, and all should decide from the weight of evidence” (3T 255).

As you begin or expand your journey into Ellen G. White’s writings, it is our hope that you will read them for yourself. As you do so, we hope the following entries will be helpful.

Entries

A

abstemious/abstemiousness. A term used by Ellen G. White to emphasize a temperate lifestyle that avoids anything harmful to the body. From her perspective, John the Baptist was a model of an abstemious life (DA 100, 101, 275). She frequently recommended an “abstemious diet” as a key to healthful living (4T 501).

Adventist. A term used to describe a believer in the *second coming of Jesus Christ; most often used as a shortened form for Seventh-day Adventist after the organization of the denomination in 1863. Also used to refer to the followers of *William Miller.

Advent Review. A publication from 1850 that was combined with the *Present Truth* in 1850 to form the *Second Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, which later became the *Review and Herald*, and today is known as the *Adventist Review* and *Adventist World*.

affable. Easy to get along with. Ellen G. White describes “affable” as an important characteristic for husbands and

affection(s)

fathers (2T 383) and that Adventist youth should look to the affable example of the biblical Daniel (YI May 10, 1900).

affection(s). A term to describe human emotion(s) in regard to one another and to God. “True affection will overlook many mistakes; love will not discern them” (AH 47).

air. Ellen G. White highlighted the importance of pure and fresh air as being essential for health. The lungs need “full inspiration” lest the blood not be “properly vitalized” (MH 292). The word “air” can be used in a phrase such as “an air of piety” (DA 256) or “an air of authority” (DA 133) to describe certain situations.

alacrity. Cheerful and quick response to action. She admonished young mothers, for example, “to perform with alacrity the plain, uninteresting, homely, but most needful duties which relate to domestic life” (CG 74). Church workers should “labor with earnest alacrity” so that everything done “will bear the signature of God, and will make its impression on human minds” (GCB June 3, 1909).

Albigenses. Inhabitants of southern France who resisted Roman Catholic control. Ellen G. White portrayed them as the brethren of the *Waldenses (GC 271). *See also* Waldensians.

almoners. People who collect alms for the poor (9T 53).

amalgamation. A controversial term used in antebellum America (before the American Civil War) in a pejorative sense to describe the intermingling of races. Ellen G. White used the term to describe how Satan corrupted the world (3SG 64, 75; 1SP 69, 78). She also used the term in a moral sense to denote the combination of good with evil, which

corrupts the good. This term is used by critics to allege that Ellen G. White was a racist; but the overall thrust of her life, both before and after the Civil War, indicates that she was an ardent abolitionist and committed to race equality.

American Sentinel. A Seventh-day Adventist publication printed from 1886 to 1900 that advocated religious liberty. It was replaced in 1900 by the *Sentinel of Liberty*. In December 1901, it changed its name to *The Sentinel of Christian Liberty*, and continued until February 11, 1904, when it vanished until it was reborn with the shortened name of *Liberty* in 1906.

Andrews, John Nevins (1829–1883). Minister, author, and close friend of James and Ellen G. White. Converted in 1843, he began to observe the seventh-day *Sabbath in 1845. He first met the Whites in 1849 during which time Ellen G. White rebuked the rampant fanaticism of some Adventists. Andrews began pastoral ministry in 1850 and in 1856 married Angeline Stevens (1824–1872). For a time, Andrews gave up the ministry to farm in Waukon, Iowa, but returned to ministry in 1859. It was while he was there that he wrote the first edition of his seminal work *History of the Sabbath and First Day of the Week* (1859). Ellen G. White reprovved the Andrews family several times, which prompted confessions. Andrews is the “Brother A” in volume 3 of *Testimonies for the Church* (14, 15). In 1874, Andrews, along with his two children, Mary and Charles, went with Adhemar Vuilleumier, a student from Switzerland who had completed some training at Battle Creek, as the first official American-born denominationally sponsored missionaries of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Mary tragically died from tuberculosis in 1878. Ellen G. White’s severest rebuke to Andrews came in 1883, which prompted another contrite letter of *repentance. Andrews also succumbed to tuberculosis on October 21, 1883.