

ONE

The Wonderful World of Ellen White in the 1960s

It is good to be a living prophet. But it may be better to be a dead one. At least it is more peaceful.

That was certainly true for Ellen White in the Angwin–Pacific Union College (PUC) community in the early 1960s during my time as a student. Her days of conflict were over, her book sales were flourishing, and she was undoubtedly held in higher regard by a larger proportion of Adventists than she had been during her long life.

And to top it off, Ethel May White, Ellen White’s daughter-in-law and W. C. White’s widow, lived locally on Howell Mountain, and her son Arthur White was a frequent visitor to both her and Pacific Union College. The high points of Arthur’s visits were his Sabbath afternoon lectures. He was assured of speaking to a packed house in Irwin Hall (the college’s largest auditorium) as he rehearsed God’s prophetic leading in his grandmother’s life and ministry. Those were not-to-be-missed events for faculty, students, and community. The early 1960s were indeed the wonderful world of Ellen White, and she was secure in it, at least within the borders of Adventism.

That wonderful world was a general phenomenon in Adventism. And it was certainly a significant aspect of PUC from 1962 through 1965 while I was a student.

Not the least to be influenced by Ellen White’s authority was PUC’s religion faculty. I remember Leo Van Dolson’s course in the Life and Teachings of Jesus. The only books we read were by Ellen White, and his detailed syllabus was essentially a chronological and topical analysis of *The Desire of Ages* and *Christ’s Object Lessons*. Van Dolson even explained how he used Ellen White to determine the chronological flow of events in Christ’s life for those points that were not clear or appeared to be conflicted in the Bible. For him, Ellen White

was authoritative in every way. The same can be said for Robert W. Olson, who later followed Arthur White as the director of the Ellen G. White Estate. Olson also established the sequence of events in Christ's life from *The Desire of Ages*.¹ While I never took Daniel and Revelation from him, I remember his students carrying to class a compilation on those two biblical books that included the Ellen G. White Comments sections from the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*. Her comments were important and determinative in the presentations. I did take Olson's three-quarter sequence on Ellen White's life and writings. She, of course, was central due to the nature of the class. But what sticks out most prominently in my mind is that in the third quarter each student, on the basis of the Bible and Ellen White, was to develop a chart indicating the flow of events at the end of time. I still have mine filed away, replete with arrows and a massive number of Ellen White references and two from the Bible. Such charts were not peculiar to PUC but were ubiquitous in Adventism at that time.

Carl Coffman, who taught the practical topics, also held Ellen White to be centrally authoritative. Not only did he assign such books as *Gospel Workers* and *Testimonies to Ministers* as required reading, but he had each of us develop a loose-leaf notebook from Ellen White's writings with the various pages consisting of compilations on specific issues we might face in our ministry. William Hyde, who taught the systematic theology course, also let Ellen White be a deciding authority, although I do not remember him using her writings excessively in his courses on the Old Testament prophets. There is not the slightest doubt in my mind as I recall the authoritative, and even preeminent, role Ellen White's writings played in my PUC experience, especially in the Department of Religion.

But, and here is a crucial point, not all of the theological professors emphasized Ellen White or her authority. Among that group were Fred Veltman and Eric Syme. Of course, since Veltman only taught Greek and Greek exegesis at that time, one would not expect him to use Ellen White. But my impression from extended interaction with him is that he would never have used her for exegesis under any circumstances. More significant in this discussion is Syme, from whom I took Daniel and Revelation. I do not recall him ever using Ellen White's writings in that class. Midway between those who put Ellen White at the center and those who didn't was Lewis Hartin, who basically taught exegesis of the Pauline epistles from scripture and only pointed out a few times during the year that she had an opinion on this or that difficult passage.

A point of special significance in the above discussion is that the religion

faculty of PUC in the early 1960s was not agreed on the role of Ellen White in the classroom. We will see in the rest of this book that Adventists have never been united on the authority and proper use of Ellen White.

My impression of my fellow students, especially in the religious arena, is much more unified. With Ellen White, we had the flawless authority on almost everything of importance. If we needed help in understanding the meaning of a Bible passage, all we had to do was check Ellen White's comments, greatly facilitated by the scriptural index of the recently published *Comprehensive Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White* and the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*. The commentary helpfully supplied Ellen White input in the discussion of the verses themselves; it also had an "Ellen G. White Comments" section at the end of the treatment of each biblical chapter, which provided references to her most significant remarks for many verses from her books, and a major section of "Ellen G. White Comments" at the end of each volume, which was drawn from her unpublished writings and periodical articles that supplied material for a great many verses. With such an array of material at hand, it was easy to feel that she was indeed the ultimate Bible commentator, a divine one, "far above all other commentators," as the editor of the *Review and Herald* put it.² In fact, one of my great literary ambitions in my early Adventist life was to compile all of her comments on each verse in the entire Bible on the meaning of each scriptural passage. Such would provide the final word on biblical interpretation.

Her writings in the realm of doctrine and theology also provided us with the final word. It was off to the *Index* or other Ellen White resources if we had a theological problem that needed a divine answer. The Bible, of course, was important—most important theoretically—but in practice, Ellen White had the final authoritative word, even on the most marginal and esoteric points. We did a great deal of theology from her writings. We were glad to have her writings since the Bible did not say much on many topics. And we used them to generate our homemade compilations to provide the authoritative answer on topics not sufficiently covered in Scripture.

Ellen White was not only a divine, inspired Bible commentator and a valid source for doctrine, but she was also authoritative for history, chronology, science, and anything else she spoke on. Beyond that, those in my group had no doubt that she was infallible and inerrant and probably verbally inspired. On that last point, verbal inspiration, we were beginning to have some doubts since book 1 of *Selected Messages* recently had been published in 1958 and was throwing cold water on that position.³ But no matter, we were deep in recent Adventist practice on the point and made extensive arguments based on her

choice of this word or that and even used the structural flow of her sentences to nail down our points, practices reinforced by some of our teachers.

And when it came to the source for her writings, we had not the slightest doubt. It all (except for such minor secular bits of information as the number of rooms in the Paradise Valley Sanitarium) came straight from heaven, as if there were some kind of pipeline from the throne of God through the top of Ellen White's head and out through her fingertips. And *voilà*, we had divine revelation transposed into divine inspiration. And revelation was the only model most of us ever thought of. Ideas of borrowing and possible plagiarism were far from our pure minds on the topic.

And if those good things weren't enough, we were told by some authorities that she was 100 years ahead of her time. Combining all of those things with her flawless character, and you had the best thing on earth. I still remember us students deciding if something was right or wrong by trying to discover Ellen White's practice on the topic. Thus, we could even provide the ultimate answer to such questions as if it were a sin to wash dishes on Sabbath. During my precollege year, I crossed the street from my home in Mountain View, California, to ask questions of Alma McKibbin. She had lived with Ellen White in her younger years, and I hoped she would be able to provide final answers to certain esoteric points I was struggling with. I remember her looking at me sorrowfully, perhaps wondering whether I was nuts, and undoubtedly sensing my legalistic frame of mind.

Beyond the realm of academics, Ellen White's counsel was determinative at PUC in such areas as entertainment, recreation, and other aspects of conduct and dress. And a large portion of the students had arrived on campus with "Ellen White says" already ringing in their ears. In all too many cases, the prophet's words had been used to muscle them into correct Adventist paths throughout their lives—a practice that set them up with a desire to escape her influence and avoid her writings when the opportunity seemed justified in the 1970s.

The role of Ellen White at PUC in the early 1960s was a subset of the practices and attitudes of mainline Adventism at the time. The prophet was at the apex of her respect and authoritative position in the denomination. The Sabbath School quarterlies and typical sermons were peppered with Ellen White quotations and were often dominated by them. And in the theological crisis stimulated by the publication of *Questions on Doctrine* in 1957 (which sported three Ellen White compilations in its appendixes), the Adventist discussion was permeated by homemade Ellen White compilations on the nature of Christ, perfection, and almost every topic of interest. It was the age of

homegrown authoritative compilations. That, to a large extent, was how theology was done. The authoritative word of Ellen White settled the problem.

And her style and words themselves caught the attention of many in the 1920s through the 1960s. I have on my shelves a book published in 1953, titled *Literary Beauty of Ellen G. White's Writings*, that analyzes her writings by literary standards and finds her "a master of style."⁴ The influential M. L. Andreasen made the same point in 1948 when he admitted that he found it difficult to believe that a person with so little education could produce writings of such literary beauty. The only way that such beauty and style could be accounted for, he opined, was "on the basis of inspiration."⁵ Those were typical evaluations before researchers began to look carefully at her use of literary assistants.

In summary, the early 1960s was a wonderful time to be Ellen White. She was not only authoritative for exegesis and theology but also inerrant, infallible, 100 years ahead of her time, of a flawless character, and for many, verbally inspired. And to top it off, everything she wrote came straight from heaven through divine revelation.

The most remarkable thing about those early 1960s perspectives related to Ellen White is that she herself did not believe them nor agree with them. And neither did most of those of her contemporaries who worked closest with her.

1. Robert W. Olson, "Olson Discusses the Veltman Study," interview by David C. Jarnes, *Ministry*, Dec. 1990, 17.

2. F. M. Wilcox, "The Testimony of Jesus," *Review and Herald*, June 9, 1946, 62.

3. See E. G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1958), 21.

4. Gladys King-Taylor, *Literary Beauty of Ellen G. White's Writings* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1953), 123.

5. M. L. Andreasen, "The Spirit of Prophecy," chapel talk, Loma Linda, CA, Nov. 30, 1948.