

THE AUTHORITY OF THE ELLEN G. WHITE WRITINGS

Gerhard Pfandl

The Bible makes it clear that the true source and seat of authority is in God. (Ps 83:18). As Creator and Lord of all nature and history, God has the right to exercise authority over mankind (Isa 45:22, 23). In Old Testament times God delegated his authority to certain people called prophets (1 Sam 3:20; 9:9) with whom he communicated through visions and dreams (Num 12:6). They were God's spokespersons to the people (Ezek 24:21), just as Aaron was the spokesperson for Moses (Ex 4:16). In the New Testament, Jesus delegated his authority to his disciples and the New Testament prophets. Paul, therefore, could say in 1 Thess 2:13 "you received the Word of God which you heard from us . . . not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, as the Word of God." The prophetic word has authority because God gives it his authority. Moses knew that he was authorized to speak on God's behalf, Isaiah knew it, Paul and Peter knew it (2 Cor 10:8), and the people of God accepted them as his messengers.

I. The Authority of Non-canonical Prophets

In Scripture we find canonical prophets like Moses and Jeremiah, whose writings became part of the biblical canon, and non-canonical prophets like Nathan, Ahijah, and Iddo (2 Chron 9:29) whose books, though inspired, did not become part of the biblical canon. Why God selected some books and not others we do not know. Obviously, he knew what mankind would need to understand the plan of salvation. However, what the non-canonical prophets said or wrote was just as authoritative and binding for the people of their time as were the books of Moses and Isaiah (2 Sam 12:7-15). The authority of a prophetic book lies in its inspiration not in the book's place in the canon. But since John the Revelator's time the canon has been closed, and no other inspired books can be added to it.

If archaeologists would find the book of Nathan today it would not be added to the canon but would remain an inspired book outside of the canon. And whatever theological statements were to be found in it would remain inspired and authoritative statements outside of the canon. The canon is simply the collection of books which under God's guidance was put together as the rule of faith and practice for God's people by which everything else has to be measured. It contains everything a person needs to know to be saved.

The apostle Paul wrote a number of inspired letters which were lost, e.g., his letter to the Laodiceans (Col 4:16), or his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 5:9). If these letters were found today, they would not become part of the canon, but would remain inspired letters outside of the canon.

II. The Writings of Ellen White

Scripture is God's message for all time and all people. It is the measuring rod, the yard stick, against which everything else has to be measured. It is the supreme guideline for every Christian. The writings of Ellen White on the other hand are God's messages for a particular people – His remnant church, at a particular time in history – the end time. Her writings are not a new or additional standard of doctrine, but a help for the church in the time of the end. Hence her writings have a different purpose from Scripture, they are "the lesser light to lead to the greater light" (CM 125).

In 1982, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists issued a statement of affirmations and denials in regard to the Ellen G. White writings (*Ministry*, August 1982). One of the affirmations said, “We believe that Ellen White was inspired by the Holy Spirit and that her writings, the product of that inspiration, are applicable and authoritative especially to Seventh-day Adventists.” The denials made clear that while the quality or degree of inspiration in the writings of Ellen White is no different from that of Scripture, Seventh-day Adventists “do not believe that the writings of Ellen White are an addition to the canon of Sacred Scripture.”

It was concluded, therefore, that “a correct understanding of the inspiration and authority of the writings of Ellen White will avoid two extremes: (1) regarding these writings as functioning on a canonical level identical with Scripture, or (2) considering them as ordinary Christian literature.”

III. The Authority of the E. G. White Writings

Seventh-day Adventists reject the idea that there are degrees of inspiration. They believe that Ellen White was a messenger of God and that she was inspired like the Old and New Testament prophets. Now, if Ellen White was as inspired as the Old and New Testament prophets, what authority do her writings have? The answer can only be: They have the same authority the writings of the non-canonical prophets had for their time.

Ellen White left her readers in no doubt about the source of her writings. There were only two possibilities, “God is either teaching His church, reproofing their wrongs, and strengthening their faith, or He is not. This work is of God, or it is not. God does nothing in partnership with Satan. My work . . . bears the stamp of God, or the stamp of the enemy. There is no halfway work in the matter. The Testimonies are of the Spirit of God, or of the devil” (5 T 671). In a letter to the church in Battle Creek she wrote, “I do not write one article in the paper, expressing merely my own ideas. They are what God has opened before me in vision—the precious rays of light shining from the throne. . . .” (1 SM 27).

Because the source of what she wrote was divine, her words have authority. To those who refused to accept her writings as having divine authority she said, “When I send you a testimony of warning and reproof, many of you declare it to be merely the opinion of Sister White. You have thereby insulted the Spirit of God. You know how the Lord has manifested Himself through the Spirit of prophecy [a metonym for the writings of Ellen White]” (1 SM 27).

At the same time she emphasized her submission to the Bible, which she called “the greater light” (CM 125). “We are to receive God’s word as supreme authority” (6T 402), she wrote, and “The Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the revealer of doctrines, and the test of experience” (GC vii). Therefore, she said, “the testimonies of Sister White should not be carried to the front. God’s Word is the unerring standard . . . Let all prove their positions from the Scriptures and substantiate every point they claim as truth from the revealed Word of God” (Ev 256). At a meeting held in the Battle Creek College library on the eve of the General Conference of 1901 she told the leaders, “Lay Sister White right to one side. Don’t . . . ever quote my words again as long as you live, until you can obey the Bible” (SpM 167).

Yet, for her, this did not negate the manifestation of the prophetic gift in her ministry. “The fact that God has revealed His will to men through His word, has not rendered needless the continued presence and guiding of the Holy Spirit. On the contrary, the Spirit was promised by our Saviour, to open the word to His servants, to illuminate and apply its teachings” (GC vii).

IV. Acknowledgment by the Church

From the beginning, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has recognized the tremendous value and the authority of the writings of Ellen White. As early as 1855 the leadership of the Advent Movement publically stated that they regarded the writings of Ellen White as coming from God. Therefore, “we must acknowledge ourselves under obligation to abide by their teachings, and be corrected by their admonitions” (RH Dec. 4, 1855). Ever since then, General Conferences in session have from time to time issued statements expressing confidence in the writings of Ellen White “as the teaching of the Spirit of God” (RH, Feb. 14, 1871).

In 1980, the General Conference in session in Dallas, Texas, voted the adoption of the 27 Fundamental Beliefs. Belief number 17 deals with the gift of prophecy as manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White. It reads in part as follows: “As the Lord’s messenger, her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction.” Though nearly a century has elapsed since Ellen White laid down her pen, her inspired and therefore authoritative writings continue to be a guiding and unifying factor in the rapidly growing Seventh-day Adventist Church.

April 2004