

# ELLEN WHITE AS A THEOLOGIAN

Gerhard Pfandl

Although Ellen White never attended a theological seminary, nor did she write a systematic theology, there is no doubt that she wrote in the framework of a theological system, and through her visions contributed significantly to Adventist theology. While all our doctrines are solidly based on Scripture, Ellen White's prophetic ministry has provided guidance, insights, and theological discernment that have helped the church to come to a better understanding of biblical truths.

## I. Theological Discernment

It is well known today that Ellen White relied on a number of historical and theological sources in writing her books. While she at times borrowed words and phrases, as well as structure and patterns from other writers, her theology was her own.

For example, in writing on the topic of inspiration-revelation she used material from Calvin Stowe's *Origin and History of the Books of the Bible* but modified it to bring it into harmony with the light she had received from God. Calvin Stowe wrote, "It is not the words of the Bible that were inspired, *it is not the thoughts of the Bible that were inspired*; it is the men who wrote the Bible that were inspired." In Ellen White's writings this sentence reads, "It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired" (ISM 21).

Although using largely Stowe's wording Ellen White's theology is significantly different. She understood inspiration to apply to the thoughts of the writers, which Calvin Stowe denied. Ellen White believed only the words receive the impress of the human mind, Calvin Stow taught that the thoughts also receive the impress of the human mind.

David Neff, who has made an extensive study of the parallels between the Ellen G. White material and Calvin Stowe's book, came to the conclusion that "there are significant differences between the theories of revelation presented by Dr. Stowe and Mrs. White" and that "there is sufficient evidence to conclude that in this manuscript Mrs. White was not appropriating another man's ideas."<sup>1</sup>

## II. Theological Openness

While holding firmly to the basic Adventist doctrines, "the landmarks" as she called them,<sup>2</sup> Ellen White was always willing to accept new light. "The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people," she said, "is not a proof that our ideas are infallible. Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation."<sup>3</sup>

During the early decades of our church most of our leaders, including James White, were anti-Trinitarians. Ellen White herself made one or two statements that could be interpreted as anti-Trinitarian. In the context of her description of the fall of Satan, for example, she wrote, "The great Creator assembled the heavenly host, that he might in the presence of all the angels confer special honor upon his Son . . . The Father then made known that it was ordained by himself that Christ, his Son, should be equal with himself; so that wherever was the presence of his Son, it was his own presence."<sup>4</sup>

This statement cannot refer to Christ being less or different from the Father in nature since she says on the same page that "He was one with the Father before the angels were created." Whatever she meant when she wrote this, in the course of time she received more light which eventually led to her very clear Trinitarian statements at the turn of the century.

First, in 1897 she wrote, "In Him [Christ] was life, original, unborrowed, underived,"<sup>5</sup> and then in 1905 she wrote a warning to our workers connected with the medical work in which she unambiguously endorsed the Trinity doctrine. "The Son is all the fullness of the Godhead manifest" she stated, "the Comforter that Christ promised to send after He ascended to heaven, is the Spirit in all the fullness of the Godhead," therefore, "there are three living persons of the heavenly trio."<sup>6</sup>

Only someone who believed the Trinity doctrine would speak of “three living persons of the heavenly trio.” While most of the pioneers were anti-Trinitarians, Ellen White, on the basis of divine revelations, guided the church towards the Trinitarian position.

### III. Preventing Theological Error

A number of times the Lord through the ministry of Ellen White saved the church from serious theological errors:

- (1) *The Sabbath Conferences*. The doctrinal framework of the denomination was largely hammered out in 1848 during a series of long weekend gatherings known as Sabbath conferences. At these conferences many different views were put forward, “hardly two agreed” Ellen White wrote. “Some were holding serious errors, and each strenuously urged his own views, declaring that they were according to the Scriptures.”<sup>7</sup> Yet, invariably, when the weekend was over, there was unity of belief. Why?

In addition to earnest and extended Bible study and prayer the conferences saw the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit; but this intervention did not come until the participants had gone as far as they could go. “When they came to the point in their study where they said, ‘We can do nothing more,’ the Spirit of the Lord would come upon me. I would be taken off in vision, and a clear explanation of the passages we had been studying would be given me.”<sup>8</sup>

- (2) *Righteousness by Faith*. Until 1888 most Adventists thought that righteousness acceptable to God, with the help of the Holy Spirit, could be achieved by obedience to the commandments. In other words, sanctification was seen as the basis of salvation. Then at Minneapolis E. J. Waggoner taught that (a) Man’s obedience can never satisfy God’s law; (b) Christ’s imputed righteousness alone is the basis of our acceptance by God; and (c) we constantly need the covering of Christ’s righteousness, not just for our past sins.

In spite of strong opposition from the leading brethren, Ellen White supported Waggoner. “The Lord in His great mercy sent a most precious message to His people through Elders Waggoner and Jones” she wrote.<sup>9</sup> When she was asked what she thought of the message of Waggoner and Jones, she replied: “Why, I have been presenting it to you for the last forty-five years--the matchless charms of Christ. . . . When Brother Waggoner brought out these ideas in Minneapolis, it was the first clear teaching on this subject from any human lips I had heard, excepting the conversations between myself and my husband. I have said to myself, It is because God has presented it to me in vision that I see it so clearly, and they cannot see it because they have never had it presented to them as I have.”<sup>10</sup>

She never wavered in her commitment to the message of righteousness by faith. “It is the third angel’s message in verity” she wrote in 1890.<sup>11</sup>

- (3) *Pantheism*. At the beginning of the twentieth century Dr. H Kellogg, through his book *The Living Temple*, attempted to introduce pantheism into the church. At the 1903 Autumn Council of the General Conference Committee the issue was discussed for a whole day. When Elder A. G. Daniells returned to his home in the evening he found two messages from Ellen White waiting for him. “No one can imagine,” recounts Daniells, “the eagerness with which I read the documents that had come in the mail while we were in the midst of our discussions. There was a most positive testimony regarding the dangerous errors that were taught in *The Living Temple*.”<sup>12</sup>

The next morning as he read these messages to the assembled delegates the tide was turned. “Your message came on just the right day” he wrote to Ellen White, “a day earlier would have been too soon. I read it to the council yesterday, and it produced a most profound impression.”<sup>13</sup> Why did the messages come when they did? In her reply Ellen White told him that in a night vision she saw a ship approaching an iceberg and heard an authoritative voice crying out “Meet it.” The ship collided with the iceberg but it survived. “Well I knew the meaning of this representation,” she wrote, “I had my orders. . . . This is why you received the testimonies when you did.”<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

Much more could be said, but the point has been made: God through the ministry of Ellen White provided the church with vital counsel not only in the areas of health, education, organization, and mission but also in the area of theology. Without God's leading, this church it is likely that it would no longer exist or be another small church like the Advent Christian Church (25,000 members) which also grew out of the Millerite movement. While nothing and no one can take the place of Scripture, the role and position of Ellen White in the church is still of vital importance for the theological unity and harmony in the church.

---

<sup>1</sup>David Neff, "Ellen White's Theological and Literary Indebtedness to Calvin Stowe" (Unpublished manuscript, Ellen G. White Estate, DF 389-C).

<sup>2</sup>She identified as landmarks the cleansing of the sanctuary, the three angels' messages, the commandments of God, the Sabbath, and the non-immortality of soul. (CW 30).

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 35.

<sup>4</sup>*Spirit of Prophecy*, 1:17, 18.

<sup>5</sup>1SM, 296.

<sup>6</sup>Ev 614-615.

<sup>7</sup>LS 110.

<sup>8</sup>1SM 206, 207.

<sup>9</sup>TM 91-92.

<sup>10</sup>Sermon, Rome, New York, June 19, 1889 (5MR 219).

<sup>11</sup>Review and Herald, April 1, 1890 (Ev 190).

<sup>12</sup>5BIO 298.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 299.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 301.