

The Use of Ellen White in this Study

As this Bible study was initially prepared for Seventh-day Adventists, we frequently cite the writings of Ellen White. Because of this, we need to say a little bit about our use of Ellen White's writings and the limitations we impose on them in this study.

First of all, let's make it perfectly clear that we do believe that Ellen White was selected by God to receive a prophetic gift. She was used as a messenger to give instruction and guidance to the church in its formative years. She wrote timely letters of counsel to struggling church members. She advanced the cause of health and temperance. She wrote inspiring books with wonderful insights into the gracious and loving character of God. And – as with many prophets – she was given glimpses of events yet ahead of us, events of mammoth proportion.

However, having said that, we have tried to be very careful in our use of Ellen White's writings. For the purposes of this study we have tried to follow these guidelines:

1. We will use Ellen White's writings descriptively - not authoritatively.
2. We will not use Ellen White's writings to prove a point.
3. We will not let Ellen White's understanding of a passage restrict or limit our understanding of that passage.

While these restrictions may seem a bit arbitrary, they are actually founded in sound principles. Let's look at them one at a time.

1. We will use Ellen White's writings descriptively - not authoritatively.

The descriptive use of another writer's work is a common occurrence. In fact, Ellen White frequently used the Bible writings in just this way. I first discovered this when I stumbled on her use of Matthew 24:21-22. That passage talks of a great tribulation – greater than any that came before it or would come after – a time of trouble so great that no one would survive if it were not cut short.

Much to my surprise and consternation, I found that Ellen White seemed to apply this scripture both to the tribulation of the Dark Ages and to the future Time of Trouble prior to the return of Christ.¹

¹ In the Great Controversy, pages 266-7, she applied this passage to the persecution of the dark ages. "The persecution of the church did not continue throughout the entire period of the 1260 years.

I remember calling my pastor in a bit of distress. I was really troubled over the fact that she made application of this passage to two different persecution periods, while she knew that only one of them could really be the “greatest.” My pastor was a wise man, and took the time to explain to me that Ellen White often used scripture “descriptively.” In other words, she found that a particular passage expressed exactly what she wanted to say about a situation, and so she used it for that description. She wasn’t giving a Bible study on prophecy. She wasn’t saying that the text pointed to a specific event, or even arguing for multiple fulfillments. She was just making use of the word picture it painted.

Likewise, we find that the writings of Ellen White contain a rich treasury of *description*. In her long career as a writer, she just seemed to get better and better at painting vivid word pictures of the dramatic events she was shown. Since Adventists are familiar with those word pictures, it just makes good sense to use them...

... but not authoritatively. And that takes us to point number 2.

2. We will not use Ellen White’s writings to prove a point.

There are several assumptions that underpin the idea of using Ellen White to “prove a point”. First, we have to assume that she is an unquestionable expert on all points of scripture. Second, we have to assume that her every use of scripture was “authoritative” instead of “descriptive.” Third, we have to assume that God revealed to her all the truth he wishes us to know. Fourth, we have to assume that no human imperfections tainted any of her work.

That’s a lot of assumptions – not one of which is safe to make.

First, she never claimed to be an expert on all matters of scripture. In fact, she never set forth a systematic theology based on rigorous scriptural exegesis. That isn’t the way she used scripture. She used it pastorally.

Second, as we saw above, she often used scripture in a “descriptive” manner. Her statements on the Great Time of Trouble could be used by one person to “prove” it is behind us - whereas another may use them to “prove” that it is ahead of us. Both have E. G. White quotes to support their viewpoint – but neither of them has *proof* of anything. When she has used a scripture passage descriptively, we cannot turn it into an “authoritative” statement.

God in mercy to His people cut short the time of their fiery trial. In foretelling the "great tribulation" to befall the church, the Saviour said: "Except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened." Matthew 24:22. Through the influence of the Reformation the persecution was brought to an end prior to 1798."

Yet in Volume 1 of the Testimonies, Page 203-4, she applied the same passage to future events. "When Jesus leaves the most holy, His restraining Spirit is withdrawn from rulers and people. They are left to the control of evil angels. Then such laws will be made by the counsel and direction of Satan, that unless time should be very short, no flesh could be saved. "

Third, Ellen White never stated that all truth had been revealed to her. In fact, the opposite is true. She stated repeatedly that truth continues to advance², and was upset that people wanted to use her statements as absolutes³. She never stopped urging people to study the Bible⁴, pointing to it as the only reliable source of truth.

Fourth, she always considered her writings as human attempts to express the truths she understood. She was always on the lookout for inaccuracies and errors, and corrected them as soon as she became aware of them.

I have no doubt that Ellen White was used by God as a messenger. Scripture shows that God has frequently chosen such messengers. In fact, our study will look forward to a time when God will select 144,000 messengers to communicate with all mankind. But prophets are not infallible. It was the great prophet and Apostle Paul who pointed out that, "We know in part and we prophesy in part." If that was true of Paul, it is also true of every other prophet.

We cannot claim infallibility or omniscience for a woman who did not claim those things for herself⁵.

3. We will not let Ellen White's understanding of a passage restrict or limit our understanding of that passage.

This restriction stands on two pillars. The first is the "progressive truth" principle. Since truth is progressive we cannot be reflexively resistant to new discoveries that may be different than those held by Ellen White, Uriah Smith, William Miller, or anyone else. God may – and I think it is likely – choose to show His end-time servants a facet of prophecy's truth that has been previously clouded.

² "We must not think, 'Well, we have all the truth, we understand the main pillars of our faith, and we may rest on this knowledge.' The truth is an advancing truth, and we must walk in the increasing light." {CW 33.2}

³ "Many from among our own people are writing to me, asking with earnest determination the privilege of using my writings to give force to certain subjects that they wish to present to the people in such a way as to leave a deep impression upon them. It is true that there is a reason why some of their matters should be presented; but I would not venture to give my approval in using the testimonies in this way, or to sanction the placing of matter which is good in itself in the way which they propose." --Lt 49, 1894.

⁴ "Take time to study the Bible, the Book of books. There never was a time when it was so important that the followers of Christ should study the Bible as now." --YI, May 18, 1893.

⁵ "In regard to infallibility, I never claimed it; God alone is infallible. His word is true, and in Him is no variableness, or shadow of turning." --Letter 10, 1895.

"We have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn. God and heaven alone are infallible. Those who think that they will never have to give up a cherished view, never have occasion to change an opinion, will be disappointed. As long as we hold to our own ideas and opinions with determined persistency, we cannot have the unity for which Christ prayed." --The Review and Herald, July 26, 1892.

The second pillar of reasoning upon which this restriction rests is the primacy of the Bible as an avenue for divine communication. To the Christian there is no source with higher authority than Scripture. This has been understood from ancient times. The Bible is **the** standard to judge and evaluate all other claims of authority and truth. Paul even instructed the early church to reject the testimony of angels if it contradicted the truth they had already received.⁶

Ellen White well understood this concept, and referred to her writings as a “lesser light to lead men and women to the greater light.”⁷ She consistently spoke of the authority of the Scriptures, and resisted any effort to place her writings on equal footing with the Bible.

This third restriction is an important one for us Seventh-day Adventists. Over the last 20 years I have held serious discussions with scores of Seventh-day Adventists about the end-time prophecies of Revelation. Often I have encountered “scholars” who think that doing original research on a topic means first doing a “look-up” of anything that Ellen White had to say about the topic. Whatever Ellen White said becomes the starting point – and often the ending point – to their research.

The great problem with this approach is one of primacy. If the Bible is the truth by which even angels must be tested, then Ellen White must also be tested by the same standard. When we make Ellen White statements the guide by which we understand the Bible, we have turned the cart of interpretive authority upside down.

From what I have been able to learn of Ellen White, none of these restrictions on the use of her writings would surprise her or bother her. We know enough of Ellen White’s history to know of various positions that she held and then discarded as she received additional light.⁸ We know that she made numerous statements that the Bible should be our teacher, and that no human had the authority to interpret the Bible for another.

We know that she did not hold that her views were infallible, and stated that we needed to remain open to changing our positions as new truths are uncovered. This seems especially true of the Book of Revelation. In *Testimonies to Ministers* she strongly urged that Revelation be diligently studied, implying that additional light was to come from this source:

“When we as a people understand what this book means to us, there will be seen among us a great revival. We do not understand fully the lessons that it teaches.” *Testimonies to Ministers*, p.113

⁶ In Galatians 1:18 Paul wrote, “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!”

⁷ *Review and Herald*, January 20, 1903, Paragraph 9

⁸ Among other things, she accepted the nearness of the Second Coming when it was not popular. She first held, and then abandoned the “Open Door” teaching. She first rejected the Levitical food laws then accepted them.

Ellen White's position on Revelation

At the same time, we cannot deny that Ellen White was schooled in the Historicist school of thought regarding Revelation. It was her belief that the Seals and Trumpets were to be understood as historical events spanning the era from Jesus' day to ours. This was what she was taught, and barring any light by God on the subject, this is what she believed. She was far from dogmatic about this, however. Looking through the Scripture Index to the writings of Ellen White, I was startled by the fact that she almost never directly used the verses of Revelation dealing with the Seals and Trumpets. If she had wanted to drive home the Historicist viewpoint, she had plenty of opportunity. But instead, she almost completely skipped these verses, even though she frequently used texts from the rest of Revelation.

The end-time visions of Ellen White

In spite of her known, and stated, Historicist views, the visions of Ellen White often revealed glimpses of a different perspective. I believe that Ellen White saw many things that she struggled to place into the paradigm of end-time events that she held. Other times she just gave the information, even though the then-accepted view of Revelation had no place for the information that she imparted. I imagine that Uriah Smith cringed when Ellen White talked about the Early Time of Trouble, for he couldn't find evidence of it in his view of Revelation. Likewise, I'm sure he had difficulty when she stated:

"Solemn events before us are yet to transpire. Trumpet after trumpet is to be sounded, vial after vial poured out one after another upon the inhabitants of the earth. Scenes of stupendous interest are right upon us." Letter 112, 1890

He was, after all, certain that the Trumpets had already taken place; and that they had no end-time meaning.

In short, even though Ellen White believed one thing, the information given her in vision often pointed in a different direction. I frequently find that this information fits very nicely into the Eschatological view that we are developing, and I believe it appropriate to present such information.

In Summary

So what do we do if our study of the Seals and Trumpets advances a position other than the one that Ellen White held? Is Ellen Whites' view on any topic to be cited as the ultimate referee?

It seems clear that if Ellen White were alive today that she would strongly resist any effort to use her writings as a textbook when studying Revelation. Rather, she would insist that we turn to Gods' Word - the Bible - for this kind of original research. I have no doubt that the kind of study that we are doing is exactly what she would have us do.

If God blesses our research into Revelation with new understandings of these ancient texts, we need not look to what Ellen White believed to see if our understanding is correct. Unfortunately, since her death, she has not been able to change her views! We can only assume that if she were alive today that she would continue to advance in truth as it was revealed. That is precisely what we, too, must do.

I will not doubt Ellen Whites' role as a prophet just because our Bible study suggests to us a position other than what she held. Truth advances. I truly am glad that God didn't tell Ellen White everything. By holding back information He allows each generation a part in searching out His end-time messages.