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“Circumstances Change the Relations of Things”

Ellen White’s Attitude toward Theological Continuity and Change
and its Implication for, and Application to, Issues of
Church Authority, Policy and Structure

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Abstract

An analysis of Ellen White’s attitude on doctrinal development leads to a better understanding of her volatile relationship toward the structure, authority and policies of the Adventist church. Her view on organizational readjustment, situational reevaluation and conscientious nonconformity may help the church find adequate solutions to the current impasse between certain church entities.

Introduction

How would the pioneers of Seventh-day Adventism deal with the present crisis hurting the church? How would they handle the disagreement between General Conference leadership and a number of Union Conferences on such wide-ranging issues as church structure and authority, unity and diversity, ethics and policy, justice and equality, conscience and coercion? The plain answer is: No one can know for sure. Changing times and circumstances call for, and bring forth, different responses and do not allow us to predict with certainty what the former leaders of the church would do if they were facing our challenges today. Still, we can learn a lot from the past by looking at the principles, values and convictions that had guided the pioneers and by drawing lessons for our time from their accomplishments and failures.

What would Jesus do? In the 1990s, this question became a popular motto of young Christians who regarded Jesus as definitive role model for everyday life. But it is easier to wear a bracelet or wristband with the engraved acronym “WWJD” than to know what Jesus would actually do if he was living among us as a human being. Didn’t he often enough surprise, and even shock, his disciples by his words and deeds? What makes us sure that we wouldn’t also be stunned or disappointed by him today? Again, the spiritual and ethical principles he taught and lived transcended his times and culture and serve as guide posts for all later generations.

This applies equally to Ellen White whose prophetically inspired guidance helped steer the Adventist movement through rough waters for seven decades. What would Ellen White say and do if she was alive today? How would she position herself with regard to the current stalemate? Whoever tries to answer this question should be aware that by doing so he may reveal more about his own view than about the prophet’s position. Often enough, our surmising about the past is more like a look in the mirror than an accurate lesson about history. The attempt to settle controversial issues by pointing to the prophet entails the risk of cementing one’s own prejudice rather than accurately speaking in her name. Still, the attempt may, and should, be made to gain insights from her life and teaching for overcoming the current impasse between the various duly elected and responsible entities in the Adventist church.

By studying Ellen White's life and legacy, we need to recognize that her views are not all timeless truths, that her actions are not all prescriptive, and that quotations from her writings are not all directly applicable today. She was, after all, just as much a child of her time as were prophets and apostles in biblical times. While the literary bequest of other Adventist pioneers quite obviously reflects their limited contemporary understanding, it is tempting to use Ellen White's legacy as if it was unaffected by its historical and cultural context. However, before we may use her writings and example as authoritative in a 1:1 manner, we must make sure that the specific situations and concerns of the past are truly comparable to those of today. In drawing lessons from history, it is therefore mandatory to take into consideration the actual context that prompted a particular response. As the prophet once said: "Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relations of things."¹

In this paper, we will take a close look at Ellen White's attitude toward theological and doctrinal continuity and change and its impact on her view on church authority, policy and structure. By implication, this may also contribute to a better understanding of the options for dealing with the current challenges and tensions in the Adventist church.

Part I

Ellen White on Theological Continuity and Change²

Ellen White held a surprisingly dynamic view on "present truth." "In every age there is a new development of truth, a message of God to the people of that generation."³ In the context of the Minneapolis conference of 1888 she wrote: "What would not have been truth twenty years ago, may well be present truth now."⁴ Thus, she could declare that the message of justification by faith as presented by E. J. Waggoner and A. T. Jones was "the third angel's message in verity."⁵ Prior to that, "present truth" had been regarded essentially as prophetically announced truth, found in the apocalyptic books and passages of the Bible and presently being fulfilled.

In the 1880s and beyond, Ellen White was repeatedly called upon to resolve doctrinal controversies which tended to divide the church on specific theological issues. Those holding traditional views – apparently sanctioned by the prophet herself – pleaded with her to confirm the historic faith of the church and to reject the new views that seemed to threaten the doctrinal landmarks of Adventism. Ellen White, however, consistently refused to do so, calling upon the church to seriously restudy the controverted points and to remain open to new interpretations of Bible texts, additional doctrinal insights, and possible revisions of erroneous views.⁶

In order to prevent these new views from being taught at Battle Creek College – where A. T. Jones was slated to teach in 1889 –, a resolution was proposed which recommended "that persons holding views different from those commonly taught by us as a denomination" should first present them to various committees for approval.⁷ Ellen White, however, strongly

¹ Ellen G. White, Report of an Interview / Counsel on Age of School Entrance (St. Helena, CA, 1904), Manuscript 7, 1904, EGWE; White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 3 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1980), 217; idem, *Manuscript Releases*, 21 vols. (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1981, 1987, 1990, 1993), 6:354.

² The following is based on the chapter "Prophetic Authority and Doctrinal Change: An Analysis" in my dissertation, published in *Continuity and Change in Adventist Teaching: A Case Study in Doctrinal Development* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000), 225-244.

³ Ellen White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1900/1941), 127.

⁴ Manuscript 15, 1888, EGWRC, AU, Berrien Springs, MI.

⁵ Ellen White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946/1970), 190.

⁶ The debate on the law in Galatians and on "the daily" are illustrations of this.

⁷ "S. D. Adventist General Conference [Proceedings]," *Review and Herald*, 13 November 1888, 714. A similar resolution had been adopted already by the 1886 General Conference saying that "doctrinal views not held by a fair majority" of Adventists should not be taught or published until they had been "examined and approved by the leading brethren of experience" ("General Conference Proceedings," *Review and Herald*, 14 December 1886, 779).

opposed such a restrictive decree because, in her judgment, it would only serve to hinder the progress and advance of truth.⁸

White's role in the development of Adventist theology may be described as "formative, not normative."⁹ While she contributed significantly to the development, acceptance, preservation, and revision of doctrines, she was not regarded or used by the church – though, sometimes, by some of her ardent followers – as the final criterion and arbiter of truth. Neither did she ever want to be regarded as such. Support for this comes from an analysis of her personal involvement in doctrinal development.

As Alden Thompson has suggested in 1981, Ellen White experienced "significant changes" during her lifetime in her "theological development" by which "her theological understanding grew" with regard to several basic Christian teachings. The general direction of this process seems to have led her from a rather discouraging, law-centered position ("Sinai") to a more encouraging, love-centered attitude ("Golgotha"). In Thompson's view, "the transition from fear to love in her experience resulted in a remarkable shift of emphasis."¹⁰ The reactions to these articles indicated that the church did not readily accept the idea that Ellen White's theological understanding evolved significantly over the years. Still, the underlying assumption that Ellen White's perception of truth developed in time seemed to accord well with her own view. "For sixty years I have been in communication with heavenly messengers, and I have been constantly learning in reference to divine things."¹¹

George R. Knight has noted "three distinct types" of change in Ellen White's writings related to matters of doctrine and lifestyle. The first involved the "clarification" of vaguely or, perhaps, implicitly held views; in other words, "a change from ambiguity to clarity." The second type refers to the "progressive development" of new positions or changing emphases on doctrinal and other questions. Such change was progressive, not contradictory, in nature and happened "against the background of the ongoing development of present truth." Some changes even came by "contradiction, or reversal, of her earlier position." This happened, for example, with "Ellen White's changing belief in the shut door" which also involved certain "contradictory aspects," for "her later understanding contradicted that of her earliest years in the post-1844 period." In other words, "Ellen White was capable of both believing error and growing in her understanding" of truth.¹²

More than any other of the Adventist pioneers, Ellen White directly addressed the issue of doctrinal continuity and change. Her remarks were scattered through the years but partly collected in the books compiled from her writings.¹³ The following brief overview

⁸ "When the resolution was urged upon the conference that nothing should be taught in the college contrary to that which has been taught, I felt deeply, for I knew whoever framed that resolution was not aware of what he was doing" (Ellen White, Manuscript 16, 1889, EGWRC, AU, Berrien Springs, MI). "Instructors in our schools should never be bound about by being told that they are to teach only what has been taught hitherto. Away with these restrictions. There is a God to give the message His people shall speak. Let not any minister feel under bonds or be gauged by men's measurements. The gospel must be fulfilled in accordance with the messages God sends. That which God gives His servants to speak today would not perhaps have been present truth twenty years ago, but it is God's message for this time" (Manuscript 8a, 1888, EGWRC, AU, Berrien Springs, MI). In 1896, White wrote: "The God of heaven sometimes commissions men to teach that which is regarded as contrary to the established doctrines" (*Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1923/1962], 69).

⁹ Richard Hammill, „Spiritual Gifts in the Church Today,“ *Ministry*, July 1982, 17.

¹⁰ Alden Thompson, „From Sinai to Golgotha—Nos. 1-5,“ *Adventist Review*, 3-31 December 1981, 4-6, 8-10, 7-10, 7-9, 12-13.

¹¹ Ellen G. White, *This Day with God* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1979), 76. Cf. *idem*, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 686.

¹² George R. Knight, „Adventists and Change,“ *Ministry*, October 1993, 12-13 (10-15).

¹³ See esp. *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Nashville: Southern Publishing, 1946), 28-54; *Early Writings* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1945), 258-261; *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 1, *The Great Controversy ...* (Battle Creek, MI: James White, 1858), 168-173; *Selected Messages*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), 160-162, 185-191, 201-208, 383-388, 401-405, 406-416; *ibid.*, vol. 2, 387-391; *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, 24-32, 105-111; *Gospel Workers* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1948), 297-310; *Christ's Object Lessons*, 124-134; and *Testimonies*, vol. 5, 698-711. The following summary outline is based mainly on her published writings; all references can be found in Pöhler, *Continuity and Change in Adventist Teaching*, 236ff.

should be undergirded by a detailed historical analysis that interprets the different, and partly conflicting, statements in their respective historical and literary setting in order to determine their proper meaning and point of reference. Such a study cannot be presented here. Still, the following summarizes what appears to be White's basic approach to the issue of doctrinal development.

1. The Twofold Nature of Truth

In Ellen White's view, divine truth is eternal, changeless and immovable. At the same time, it is infinite and inexhaustible, capable of unlimited expansion, ever developing and unfolding in its meaning. Because of the progressive and advancing nature of truth, the church should see a continual advancement in the knowledge of truth. While the church is to teach the fundamental truths of the Scriptures, it must also proclaim present truth, i.e., doctrines fit for the times and embracing the whole gospel.

2. The Dialectic between Continuity and Change

According to White, Seventh-day Adventists must ever remain open and receptive to new light. Such increasing insight into truth usually will be in addition to previous beliefs, providing a clearer understanding of the word of God. At times, however, new light will be in conflict with our expositions of Scripture, with long-cherished opinions and long-established traditions. In other words, though new light does not contradict old light, it does collide with erroneous doctrines and misinterpretations of the word of God.

"We must not for a moment think that there is no more light, no more truth, to be given us ... While we must hold fast to the truths which we have already received, we must not look with suspicion upon any new light that God may send."¹⁴

"The God of heaven sometimes commissions men to teach that which is regarded as contrary to the established doctrines ... Seventh-day Adventists are in danger of closing their eyes to truth as it is in Jesus, because it contradicts something which they have taken for granted as truth but which the Holy Spirit teaches is not truth."¹⁵

"If ideas are presented that differ in some points from our former doctrines, we must not condemn them without diligent search of the Bible to see if they are true."¹⁶

"There are errors in the church, and the Lord points them out by His own ordained agencies, not always through the testimonies."¹⁷

"In closely investigating ... established truth ... we may discover errors in our interpretation of Scripture."¹⁸

Therefore, we need to carefully examine, candidly investigate, critically test, and constantly review our doctrines in the light of the Scriptures and discard everything that is not clearly sustained by the Bible. On the other hand, satisfaction with the church's present understanding of truth, opposition to a critical and persevering examination of its teachings, avoidance of controversial doctrinal discussions, prejudice against those who present new doctrinal insights, refusal to accept newly discovered truths, and general resistance to theo-

¹⁴ *Gospel Workers*, 310.

¹⁵ *Testimony to Ministers*, 70-71.

¹⁶ Ellen White, „Candid Investigation Necessary to an Understanding of the Truth,“ *Signs of the Times*, 26 May 1890, 307 (305-307).

¹⁷ *Selected Messages*, 2:81.

¹⁸ Ellen G. White, „Treasure Hidden,“ *Review and Herald*, 12 July 1898, 438.

logical change betray a "conservative"¹⁹ mind-set which results from spiritual lethargy. Those would-be guardians of the doctrine who prevent the much-needed reexamination for fear of removing the old landmarks are, in reality, hampering the cause of truth.

At the same time, the pioneers of Seventh-day Adventism have laid well the doctrinal foundation of the church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. These fundamental principles were firmly established in the early years through careful and prayerful Bible study; they were confirmed by divine revelation; they are based upon unquestionable authority; they have withstood test and trial and are unmovable, indispensable, unchangeable and irreplaceable. No interpretations or applications of the Scriptures must be entertained that would undermine or weaken these distinctive doctrines, contradict the special points of our faith, unsettle faith in the old landmarks, remove the pillars from their foundation, or move a block or stir a pin from the three angels' messages. Instead, Seventh-day Adventists are to preserve the waymarks which have made us what we are, hold firmly to the fundamental principles of our faith, and stand firm on the platform of eternal and immovable truth.

At first glance, Ellen White's statements on doctrinal continuity and change appear somewhat contradictory. The seeming discrepancies are largely due, however, to the different contexts in which she was expressing herself throughout the years. During and after the 1888 General Conference, she called for openness to theological change in order to counter the reluctance of the church to accept the new light which Waggoner and Jones were presenting on the subject of righteousness by faith. But when the church seemed to be threatened by heresy and apostasy – particularly in the 1850s, 1880s, and 1900s –, White particularly emphasized the doctrinal continuity and identity of the Adventist faith. Thus, her seemingly conflicting statements on doctrinal continuity and change may be seen as actually complementary when interpreted in their respective historical setting.

There is still another, related reason that may help explain the seeming contradiction in White's statements on theological development. To her, the landmark doctrines of Seventh-day Adventism were central to the message, mission and self-understanding of the church. Any change with regard to these foundational truths tended, therefore, to jeopardize the very *raison d'être* of the church. Other teachings, however, not directly belonging to the unchangeable platform of Adventist truths were of secondary importance. Their revision would not constitute a threat to the identity and mission of the church. Thus, they could be freely reinvestigated and possibly be modified significantly.

It should be kept in mind that when such minor doctrinal matters were debated among Adventists, they were often regarded as being closely tied to the old landmarks, making their readjustment look like an attack on the fundamentals themselves. In order to be true to Ellen White's intention, it seems therefore important to distinguish the core doctrines of the Adventist faith from other teachings and practices that are related but not foundational to it.

However, any authentic doctrinal development may and will somehow affect either the fundamental or the distinctive truths of Seventh-day Adventism in some, albeit positive, way. Otherwise, the deepening insight into truth would, in the final analysis, be irrelevant and not worth arguing or even talking about. Ellen White, on her part, held no low view of theological growth. To her, doctrinal progress was of crucial significance for the church. "Much has been lost because our ministers and people have concluded that we have had all the truth essential for us as a people; but such a conclusion is erroneous and in harmony with the deceptions of Satan, for truth will be constantly unfolding."²⁰

As only those theological insights which, in some real sense, are related to the central beliefs of the church can be regarded as essential, it follows that – for Ellen White – doctrinal

¹⁹ "Although the words *conservative* and *conservatism* occur in Ellen White's published writings some 30 times, they are always used in a negative sense" (David Thiele, "Is Conservatism a Heresy?" *Spectrum* 23:4 [1994]: 12-15.

²⁰ Ellen White, "Candid Investigation Necessary to an Understanding of the Truth," *Signs of the Times*, 26 May 1890, 305-306.

development was not a superfluous or even dangerous process but rather an indispensable aspect of the spiritual growth and theological maturation of the church.

3. The Twofold Process of Theological Development

An analysis of Ellen White's view on theological development reveals two major aspects which, to her, were involved in this process. They reflect the balance she sought between the need for substantial doctrinal continuity and the demands for authentic doctrinal change. On the one hand, truth develops through restoration and rediscovery; on the other hand, it involves reinterpretation and recontextualization.

a. Restoration and Rediscovery

For Ellen White, doctrinal development was first and foremost a process in which old truths were rediscovered and restored to the church. "There are old, yet new truths still to be added to the treasures of our knowledge."²¹ What appears to be new light is, in reality, "precious [old] light that has for a time been lost sight of by the people."²² After all, no doctrine must be taught in the church which cannot be shown to be contained in the word of God. But there are many "precious rays of light yet to shine forth from the word of God. Many gems are yet scattered that are to be gathered together to become the property of the remnant people of God."²³

Gems of thought are to be gathered up and redeemed from their companionship with error ... Truths of divine origin, are to be carefully searched out and placed in their proper setting, to shine with heavenly brilliancy amid the moral darkness of the world ... Let the gems of divine light be reset in the framework of the gospel. Let nothing be lost of the precious light that comes from the throne of God. It has been misapplied, and cast aside as worthless; but it is heaven-sent, and each gem is to become the property of God's people and find its true position in the framework of truth. Precious jewels of light are to be collected, and by the aid of the Holy Spirit they are to be fitted into the gospel system.²⁴

b. Reinterpretation and Recontextualization

Obviously, then, there is something really new about new light. While truth itself is eternal and unchangeable, the understanding of its meaning and the realization of its full significance may grow constantly in the church. Taking Christ as the model and norm of theological progress and doctrinal advance, White repeatedly pointed out that his work consisted in recontextualizing and reinterpreting divine revelation. New meanings resulted from placing old truths in different and proper settings. The true significance of Bible teachings can, at times, only be seen when they are related to new scriptural contexts or changing situations which make old truths appear in a different, new light. Correcting misinterpretations of the Bible and properly reinterpreting old truths, new doctrinal insights reveal new facets and the true import of divine revelation.

“Great truths which have been neglected and unappreciated for ages will be revealed by the Spirit of God and new meaning will flash out of familiar texts.

²¹ Ellen G. White, "Need of Earnestness in the Cause of God," *Review and Herald*, 25 February 1890, 113.

²² *Selected Messages* 1:384; cf. *ibid.*, 401.

²³ *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, 35.

²⁴ Ellen G. White, "Truth to Be Rescued from Error," *Review and Herald*, 23 October 1894, 657. See also *idem*, "Be Zealous and Repent," *Review and Herald Extra*, 23 December 1890, 1-2.

Every page will be illuminated by the Spirit of truth.”²⁵ – “When the mind is kept open and is constantly searching the field of revelation, we shall find rich deposits of truth. Old truths will be revealed in new aspects, and truths will appear which have been overlooked in the search.”²⁶ – “Some things must be torn down. Some things must be built up. The old treasures must be reset in the framework of truth ... Jesus will reveal to us precious old truths in a new light, if we are ready to receive them.”²⁷

Summary

Ellen White exerted a significant influence on the development of Adventist doctrines, being involved in the formation, preservation and revision of the teachings of the church. She actively participated in various types of change, encompassing not only theological maturation and doctrinal growth but, at times, even doctrinal readjustments and revisions. To a considerable degree, she shared in and even fostered the process of theological growth and doctrinal development which the Seventh-day Adventist Church experienced in her lifetime.

At the same time, Ellen White's concept of doctrinal development appears to have surpassed that of her fellow believers not only in depth of understanding but also in striking a delicate balance between the need for theological continuity and substantial identity, on the one hand, and the possibility of theological revision and doctrinal change, on the other. Tirelessly she warned her church against both the careless rejection of precious old light and the stubborn resistance to much-needed new light.

This concept may still provide guidance to the church faced by the twin dangers of theological immobilism and doctrinal revisionism. Seventh-day Adventists may do well to emulate the example of their prophet who served both as a strong factor of doctrinal continuity and a constant catalyst of doctrinal change. Her concept of theological development is perhaps best expressed in the following quotation which is worth pondering for its rich implications.

[Christ] promised that the Holy Spirit should enlighten the disciples, that the word of God should be ever unfolding to them ... The truths of redemption are capable of constant development and expansion. Though old, they are ever new, constantly revealing to the seeker for truth a greater glory and a mightier power. – In every age there is a new development of truth, a message of God to the people of that generation. The old truths are all essential; new truth is not independent of the old, but an unfolding of it. It is only as the old truths are understood that we can comprehend the new ... But it is the light which shines in the fresh unfolding of truth that glorifies the old. He who rejects or neglects the new does not really possess the old. To him it loses its vital power and becomes but a lifeless form ... Truth in Christ and through Christ is measureless. The student of Scripture looks, as it were, into a fountain that deepens and broadens as he gazes into its depths.²⁸

Part II Ellen White on Church Authority, Policy and Structure

²⁵ *Counsels on Sabbath School Work* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1938), 35.

²⁶ Manuscript 75, 1897, EGWRC, AU, Berrien Springs, MI.

²⁷ Ellen G. White, „Minneapolis Talks,“ 88-89; see also *Selected Messages*, 1:355, 409.

²⁸ *Christ's Object Lessons*, 127-128.

What can we learn from Ellen White's view on theological continuity and change for church leadership, authority, organization, structure and policy? What insights can we derive from her position on doctrinal development, which are applicable to the issues currently engaging the church? How did she herself apply these principles in different situations? What implications may we draw, what applications may we make from both her teaching and her actions? While the answers cannot claim to be comprehensive or exhaustive by any measure, they should be informative, representative and significant. I see, in the main, three aspects that have a direct bearing on the ongoing struggle about "unity in mission" in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

1. Organizational Readjustment

According to Ellen White, divine truth is eternal and unchanging, but the understanding of truth is subject to development and change. Moreover, there is truth particularly relevant at a certain point in history – "present truth" or truth for today. What pertains to church teachings will – by implication – also hold true for church policies and organizational structures. They, too, may be changing and in need of readjustment. Just as ecclesial traditions are not dependable guides to "present truth," so traditional policies or structures may become outdated and obstructive – even when sanctioned by an authority in the past. Therefore, the church should be amenable to changes regarding its policies and structures, just as it should remain open to new doctrinal insights. In many cases, the new is a deepening and unfolding of the old. At times, however, it stands in contrast to previous church teaching, policy or practice. Learning and understanding is progressive, making a conservative stance a possible hindrance to the advance of the church.

This does not mean that everything is subject to change or revision. To the contrary, the foundational truths of faith remain, while secondary teachings are more easily reconsidered. In a similar manner, the basic three-tier (local, regional, global), threefold (pastor, elder, deacon) and representative structure of the church has stood the test of time and proved highly effective in protecting unity and fostering mission. At the same time, structures and policies should be treated dynamically and not be regarded as unchangeable. As there is a kind of hierarchy with regard to truth – with core beliefs being distinguished from, and superior to, peripheral views –, so we must also admit to a certain hierarchy of policies and procedures, where the application of foundational principles is dependent on tangible needs and particular circumstances.

This inference from Ellen White's view on theological continuity and change is supported by the following statement from the prophet's pen: "The place, the circumstances, the interest, the moral sentiment of the people, will have to decide in many cases the course of action to be pursued."²⁹ This calls for openness and flexibility on the part of the worldwide Adventist church with regard to its rules and regulations, policies and practices, organization and structure. They must not be treated like a "Codex Iuris Canonici" and invested with quasi-divine authority. The following statement bears repeating: "Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relations of things."³⁰ In a multicultural world and community, this insight is essential for the unity of purpose and the accomplishment of the mission of the church. Organizational structures and policies should serve the church, not vice versa, as the following underlines.

2. Situational Reevaluation

²⁹ "To Ministers of the Australian Conference," 11 November 1894; GC Bulletin, 1901, 70.

³⁰ Ellen G. White, Report of an Interview / Counsel on Age of School Entrance (St. Helena, CA, 1904), Manuscript 7, 1904, EGWE; idem, *Selected Messages*, vol. 3 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1980), 217; idem, *Manuscript Releases*, 21 vols. (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1981, 1987, 1990, 1993), 6:354.

In 1875, Ellen White wrote a testimony to a strong-willed brother who was inclined to act independently of the church. “God has invested His church with special authority and power which no one can be justified in disregarding and despising, for in so doing he despises the voice of God.”³¹ Later in the same year, she wrote: “I have been shown that no man’s judgment should be surrendered to any one man. But when the judgment of the General Conference, which is the highest authority that God has upon earth, is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be maintained, but be surrendered.”³²

What may primarily have pertained to the General Conference in session³³ was, in the years following, applied to the General Conference administration. About the latter, President G. I. Butler claimed: “It is the highest authority of an earthly character among Seventh-day Adventists.”³⁴ Likewise, President O. A. Olsen regarded the General Conference as “the highest organized authority under God on the earth.”³⁵ Ellen White, however, became increasingly concerned about the centralization of power in the hands of a few administrators. In the 1890s, she began to criticize the “kingly power” usurped by the leaders in Battle Creek, fearing that it would ultimately lead to “a state of insubordination.”³⁶ She denied that the General Conference was the legitimate voice of God.³⁷ “We hear that the voice of the [General] Conference is the voice of God. Every time I have heard this, I have thought it was almost blasphemy. The voice of the Conference should be the voice of God, but it is not.”³⁸

After the far-reaching and decentralizing reorganization of 1901 had put a kind of stop to leadership by “dictation,” Ellen White again expressed confidence in the General Conference by reiterating, in 1909, the view she had expressed back in 1875. However, she continued to warn leaders of exercising “kingly power.”

“I have often been instructed by the Lord that no man’s judgment should be surrendered to the judgment of any other one man. Never should the mind of one man or the minds of a few men be regarded as sufficient in wisdom and power to control the work and to say what plans shall be followed. But when in a General Conference the judgment of the brethren assembled from all parts of the field is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be stubbornly maintained, but surrendered. Never should a laborer regard as a virtue the persistent maintenance of his position of independence contrary to the decision of the general body.”³⁹

³¹ *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 417.

³² *Ibid.*, 492.

³³ “It is not clear in the 1875 statement ... whether Ellen White is speaking of the General Conference in session, or whether she is referring to the daily and weekly decisions that were necessary for the advancement of the work” (George E. Rice, “The church: voice of God? *Ministry*, December 1987, 5).

³⁴ *Seventh-day Adventist Year Book* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1888), 50.

³⁵ Minutes of the General Conference Committee, 25 January 1893.

³⁶ Ellen White, *Special Testimonies: Series A* (Payson, AZ: Leaves-of-Autumn, n.d.), 299f.

³⁷ Ellen G White, “Board and Council meetings,” n.d., MS 33, 1891; “Relation of the G. C. Committee to Business Interests,” n.d., MS 33, 1895; “Concerning the Review and Herald Publishing Association,” 12 October, 1895, MS 57, 1895; To Men Who Occupy Responsible Positions, 1 July 1896; To Brother and Sister Waggoner, 26 August 1898, Letter 77, 1898; comments in the 1901 GC Session, in “General Conference Proceedings,” General Conference Bulletin 4, extra, no. 1 (3 April 1901): 25; “Consumers, but not Producers,” 25 April 1901, MS 35 and “Talk by Mrs. E. G. White in College Library, 1 April 1901,” MS 43, 1901.

³⁸ MS 37, April 1901; cf. MS 35, 1901, Manuscript Releases, vol. 17, 250

³⁹ *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 260. “God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority. The error that some are in danger of committing is in giving to the mind and judgment of one man, or of a small group of men, the full measure of authority and influence that God has vested in His church in the judgment and voice of the General Conference assembled to plan for the prosperity and advancement of His work” (*ibid.*, 260ff.).

In each case, Ellen White expressed herself clearly and forcefully, though in a seemingly contradictory and antithetic manner. But new situations and developments were calling for a different response. When people acted independently of the church or relied too much on individual leaders, she emphasized the importance of the collective will of the church as expressed by the General Conference in session. But when the leadership of the church abused their authority by acting in a dominant manner, White would stand up against them, calling them to refrain from exercising dictatorial power. Her statements, made in a particular setting, would become misleading or even wrong when applied indiscriminately to other situation.⁴⁰

It may be argued that the apparent tension between Ellen White's various statements on the role of the "General Conference" is due, not to a change of mind on her part, but rather to two different meanings of the term "General Conference". In 1875 and 1909 she referred to the General Conference in session, while the negative statements about "kingly power" etc. from the 1890s were directed towards the General Conference administration, consisting of only a few men. Granted that there is truth in this observation, it still remains quite difficult to separate the two and treat them as independent entities. After all, what happens at a General Conference in session is strongly influenced by the top leadership of the General Conference. Decisions made by the assembled delegates usually are in concurrence with the will of the administration. Thus, Ellen White's critical remarks about "kingly power" exerted by some top leaders may still apply, even when decisions are reached in a General Conference Session.

Which of the contrasting statements of the prophet are, then, applicable today? That depends on which of them corresponds more closely to the current situation in the SDA church. What would Ellen White possibly write to those Union Conferences who resist what they see as a misuse of power by General Conference leadership? What, on the other hand, would she most likely tell those leaders who reject the appeal to conscience and the fundamental beliefs of the church? No one can know for sure, for we all are tempted to use, if no abuse, the prophet as a spokesperson for our own views. The church will be wise not to quote Ellen White one-sidedly or out of context in order to bolster up a particular view against other legitimate perspectives. Insights drawn from a particular setting need to be balanced by those gained under different circumstances. Together they form a treasure trove of experience that can be a continual blessing to the church.

3. Conscientious Nonconformity

Shortly after the General Conference was founded in 1863, Ellen White wrote to a discontented church member: "You should have submitted to the judgment of the church. If they decided wrong, God could take hold of this matter in His own time and vindicate the right."⁴¹ There are two important insights contained in this statement. Firstly, decisions made by a majority should be accepted even when one personally disagrees with them. Never should a minority impose its will on the church at large. Secondly, majority decisions may be wrong and may, therefore, need to be corrected. While even God himself bears with unwise and erroneous decisions, he may also work toward correcting them when he sees fit. Such revisions do not come by heavenly fiat but in the same manner as the initial vote, namely, by proposal, debate, and voting.

This calls for a mature attitude that respects the result of a vote and, at the same time, remains open to possibly correct it later on. While the "losers" need to submit to the majority

⁴⁰ While written with regard to health reform, James White's description of the difficulty his wife was facing in leading the church to a balanced position may apply here: "She makes strong appeals to the people, which a few feel deeply, and take strong positions, and go to extremes ... What she may say to urge the tardy, is taken by the prompt to urge them over the mark. And what she may say to caution the prompt, zealous, incautious ones, is taken by the tardy as an excuse to remain too far behind" ("To a Brother at Monroe, Wisc.," *Review and Herald*, 17 March 1868, 220).

⁴¹ Ellen White to Brother and Sister Scott, 6 July 1863, Letter 5, 1863.

opinion – a humbling experience, at times –, the “winners” must not regard the outcome as sacrosanct. They too need humility by recognizing that they may have been wrong after all and need to submit their personal conviction when the Spirit leads the church into new directions. “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21 NIV), Paul wrote. What pertained to husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves in Ephesus equally applies to superiors and inferiors or to “higher” and “lower” entities in the church today. The summons to submission and Christ-like humility is not a one-way road of communication.

But what about a situation in which more is at stake than personal opinions and preferences, divergent views on church policies, or disagreements about the filling of leadership posts? What if contentious points become a matter of conscience and of faithfulness to biblical principles and the fundamental beliefs of the church? Are there times when it becomes a right or even a duty to voice dissent against church councils and decisions? This question is not new to Adventists. In 1877, the General Conference in session voted that its “decisions should be submitted [to] by all without exception unless they can be shown to conflict with the word of God and the rights of individual conscience.”⁴²

Ellen White concurred that no doctrine must be taught in the church which cannot be shown to be contained in the word of God. She also believed that God sometimes commissions people to go against what seems to be the established position of the church.⁴³ To her, following one’s conscience was the epitome of faithfulness toward God. “The greatest want of the world is the want of men – men who will not be bought or sold, men who in their inmost souls are true and honest, men who do not fear to call sin by its right name, men whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole, men who will stand for the right though the heavens fall.”⁴⁴ Describing Martin Luther’s appearance before the Diet of Worms, Ellen White spoke in high terms about his “unwavering firmness and fidelity” in view of state and church authorities that expected him to submit his conscience to church traditions, councils and decrees.⁴⁵

But it was not only in theory and in view of an apostate church that Ellen White allowed for dissent in matters of conscience involving established church rules and practices. While she fully supported the idea that the tithe should be given to the church and not be spent according to one’s own liking, at times, she withheld tithe money and used it for causes she felt were unduly neglected by the church. Her counsel was unequivocal:

“Let none feel at liberty to retain their tithe, to use according to their own judgment. They are not to use it ... as they see fit, even in what they may regard as the Lord’s work ... The minister should, by precept and example, teach the people to regard the tithe as sacred.”⁴⁶ – “Cannot you see that it is not best under any circumstances to withhold your tithes and offerings because you are not in harmony with everything your brethren do? ... I pay my tithe gladly and freely ...”⁴⁷

Although Ellen White “normally ‘paid her tithes in the regular way into the conference treasury’ ... at times when there was inadequate funding for ordained ministers working among African-Americans she paid some of her own tithe directly to their employer, the Southern Missionary Society ... And apparently Ellen White agreed to pay a partial salary for some literature evangelists in different territories ... These exceptions were not, however, her

⁴² “Sixteenth Annual Session of the General Conference of S. D. Adventists,” *Review and Herald*, 4 October 1877, 106.

⁴³ See above, fn 8 and 15.

⁴⁴ *Education* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1903/1942), 57.

⁴⁵ *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1950), 166.

⁴⁶ *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, 247.

⁴⁷ *Special Testimonies*, Series A, No. 1: “An Appeal to Our Ministers and Conference Committees,” 27 (10 August 1890).

regular practice.”⁴⁸ Neither did she justify her behavior by referring to her prophetic authority. Rather, it was the suffering of the workers and the injustice being done to them that caused her to deviate from the principle she herself had laid down.

This example serves to illustrate what may be called “conscientious nonconformity.” While accepting and following the rules, there may be exceptions due to special circumstances and needs that justify variant actions grounded in a moral necessity that overrules the normal practice. This does not imply a lack of loyalty or a rebellious spirit refusing to act in harmony with church policy and practice. To the contrary, it is exactly out of loyalty to biblically grounded beliefs and values that such dissent, at times, is legitimate and even called for. Exceptions are not questioning the rules but confirm their basic validity. However, when policy and authority is used in a way that conflicts with the mandates of a conscience grounded in the word of God, submission to the latter takes priority over against compliance with the former.

Ellen White’s course of action with regard to tithing marks off the legitimate parameters of nonconformist behavior in the church: It is not an act of defiance, but one of loyalty; it is not an expression of individualism, but one of solidarity; it is not a matter of self-exaltation, but of conscience. Such behavior is justified only when conformity to the rules conflicts with the core teachings and principles of the word of God. “The Lord has shown you what is good. He has told you what he requires of you. You must treat people fairly. You must love others faithfully. And you must be very careful to live the way your God wants you to” (Micah 6:8 NIRV).

Conclusion

When being criticized by some for having changed her mind on certain issues, Ellen White referred to the many lessons she had learned in the years and decades of her life-long ministry. “For sixty years,” she wrote, “I have been constantly learning in reference to divine things.”⁴⁹ To change one’s mind may therefore not be a sign of weakening faith, but rather an evidence of personal and spiritual growth. What applies to divine messengers also holds true for dedicated leaders. The longer they serve, the more teachable they become under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. “To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often” (J. H. Newman). The following quote pertains, therefore, not only to matters of doctrine and theology, structure and policy, but equally to each of us personally. “Some things must be torn down. Some things must be built up.”⁵⁰

Rolf J. Pöhler, ThD

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(7733 words)

Questions for Discussion

⁴⁸ *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, ed. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013), 1226 (s. v. “Tithe”). See also Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Elmshaven Years, 1900-1905* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1981), 389-397.

⁴⁹ Ellen G. White, *This Day with God* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1979), 76. Cf. *idem*, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 686.

⁵⁰ Ellen G. White, „Minneapolis Talks,“ 88-89; see also *Selected Messages*, 1:355, 409.

1. What light does the teaching and example of Ellen White shed on the current impasse between the General Conference and the Union Conferences that are out of line with respect to ordination?
2. What role should Biblical precedents, established church structures and sociocultural conditions play in deliberations about *organizational readjustment*?
3. What – if anything – could justify a *situational reevaluation* of the authority of the General Conference – comprising the Executive Management, Committee and Session – in your judgment?
4. What criteria need to be fulfilled before acts of *conscientious nonconformity* should be considered by any church member or entity?