

ELLEN G. WHITE ESTATE

BASIC RULES OF
INTERPRETATION—
INTERNAL AND
EXTERNAL

HERBERT E. DOUGLASS

**Basic Rules of
Interpretation—Internal
and External**

Ellen G. White

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About the Author

Ellen G. White (1827-1915) is considered the most widely translated American author, her works having been published in more than 160 languages. She wrote more than 100,000 pages on a wide variety of spiritual and practical topics. Guided by the Holy Spirit, she exalted Jesus and pointed to the Scriptures as the basis of one's faith.

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By Herbert E. Douglass

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Rules of Interpretation—Internal

*“The work of explaining the Bible by the Bible itself is the work that should be done by all our ministers who are fully awake to the times in which we live.”*¹

In her personally written introduction to *The Great Controversy*, Ellen White recorded how “the scenes of the long-continued conflict between good and evil” had been revealed to her: “From time to time I have been permitted to behold the working, in different ages, of the great controversy between Christ ... and Satan.”²

How Prophets View History

How did she “behold” these mighty scenes? She continued: “As the Spirit of God has opened to my mind the great truths of His word, and the scenes of the past and the future, I have been bidden to make known to others that which has thus been revealed.”³

How much detail did she see? The evidence is that she saw the great “scenes” but that the details involving dates, perhaps even geographical sites, she did not always “see.” The same was true for Isaiah as he struggled for words to describe the throne of God ([Isaiah 6](#)) and for Daniel as he tried to describe the awesome visions of beasts and horns, etc. Ellen White saw the big picture, the basic concepts, the overall sweep of the forces of good and evil played out in human history. Her task was to “fill in” this big picture through research in the Biblical story and in common sources of historical information.

Just as God did not give Daniel words to describe the beasts of [Daniel 7](#), so He did not give Ellen White the historical dates and events to fill in the great controversy story. Even as Luke searched out the best sources to complete his Life of Christ ([Luke 1:1-4](#)),

¹Letter 276, 1907, cited in [Lift Him Up](#), 115.

²[The Great Controversy](#), x.

³[The Great Controversy](#), xi.

so Mrs. White did what all prophets do when they had a message that had to be conveyed in human words and comprehended by historically oriented men and women. Thus, we look to Luke, not necessarily for historical accuracy for all statements made, but for his contribution to the big picture, the message about the ministry of Jesus. ⁴

Possible Discrepancies

Would there be instances of possible errors? Probably. Henry Alford, the highly respected author of *New Testament for English Readers*, wrote: “Two men may be equally led by the Holy Spirit to record the events of our Lord’s life for our edification, though one may believe, and record, that the visit to the Gadarenes took place before the calling of Matthew, while the other places it after that event; though one in narrating it speaks of two demoniacs—the other, only of one....

“And not only of the *arrangement* of the Evangelic history are these remarks to be understood. There are certain minor points of accuracy or inaccuracy, of which human research suffices to inform men, and on which, from want of that research, it is often the practice to speak vaguely and inexactly. Such are sometimes the conventionally received distances from place to place; such are the common accounts of phenomena in natural history, etc. Now in matters of this kind, the Evangelists and Apostles were not supernaturally informed, but left, in common with others, to the guidance of their natural faculties.... The treasure is ours, in all its richness: but it is ours as only it can be ours—in the imperfections of human speech, in the limitations of human thought, in the variety incident first to individual character, and then to manifold transcription and the lapse of ages.” ⁵

[2]

In other words, the human phase of the divine-human communication system will be beset with occasional discrepancies—simply

⁴For a study of various differences between Luke’s story of Christ’s ministry and those of Matthew and Mark, see George Rice, *Luke, a Plagiarist?* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1983.)

⁵Henry Alford, *The New Testament for English Readers* (London: Rivingtons, 1863, vol. 1), pp. 23-27.

because of human finiteness. Stephen's eloquent sermon ([Acts 7](#)) contains an incidental reference to the number (75) of Jacob's family who went into Egypt to live with Joseph. However, the Genesis reference (46:27) states that 70 of Jacob's family went into Egypt. What shall we make of this difference? If we believe that Genesis is the only historical source that Jews in the first century had for this information, then we simply understand that the Holy Spirit (the Spirit of Prophecy) guided Stephen in reciting the big picture, but did not intervene on details. Prophets do not necessarily become "authorities" on historical data. Their inspirational value lies in their messages, not in some of the details that are incidental to the big picture.

W. C. White's 1911 Statement

Addressing a General Conference Council in 1911, W. C. White gave a "statement regarding the latest English edition of 'Great Controversy.'" ⁶ If this 1911 statement had been more fully studied and more broadly published, it might have prevented much misunderstanding through the years regarding how prophets work with historical materials.

This statement not only explains the changes in the 1911 edition of *The Great Controversy*, it also reveals the mind of Ellen White as to how she, and other prophets, did their work.

W. C. White said: "Mother has never claimed to be authority on history. The things which she has written out, are descriptions of flashlight pictures and other representations given her regarding the actions of men, and the influence of these actions upon the work of God for the salvation of men, with views of past, present, and future history in its relation to this work. In connection with the writing out of these views, she has made use of good and clear historical statements to help make plain to the reader the things which she is endeavoring to present. When I was a mere boy, I heard her read D'Aubigné's 'History of the Reformation' to my father.... She has

⁶This lengthy statement is found as Appendix A of [Selected Messages 3:433-440](#). The statement was approved by Ellen White as presenting "the matter correctly and well."—Letter to F. M. Wilcox, July 25, 1911, cited in Wilcox, *The Testimony of Jesus*, p. 115.

read other histories of the Reformation. This has helped her to locate and describe many of the events and the movements presented to her in vision. This is somewhat similar to the way in which the study of the Bible helps her to locate and describe the many figurative representations given to her regarding the development of the great controversy in our day between truth and error.

No Claim to Verbal Inspiration

“Mother has never laid claim to verbal inspiration, and I do not find that my father, or Elder Bates, Andrews, Smith, or Waggoner put forth this claim. If there were verbal inspiration in writing her manuscripts, why should there be on her part the work of addition or adaptation? It is a fact that Mother often takes one of her manuscripts, and goes over it thoughtfully, making additions that develop the thought still further....

“Mother’s contact with European people had brought to her mind scores of things that had been presented to her in vision during past years, some of them two or three times, and other scenes many times. Her seeing of historic places and her contact with the people refreshed her memory with reference to these things, and so she desired to add much material to the book [*The Great Controversy*].”

[3]

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A few months later, W. C. White wrote to S. N. Haskell, a stalwart pioneer who leaned dangerously toward a verbal-inspiration viewpoint at that time: “Regarding Mother’s writings, she has never wished our brethren to treat them as authority on the dates or details of history. When ‘Great Controversy’ was written, she oftentimes gave a partial description of some scene presented to her, and when Sister Davis made inquiry regarding time and place, Mother referred to what was already written in the books of [Uriah] Smith and in secular histories. When ‘Controversy’ was written, Mother never thought that the readers would take it as authority on historical dates and use it to settle controversies, and she does not now feel that it ought to be used in that way

⁷Selected Messages 3:437, 438.

Chronology

“It seems to me that there is a danger of placing altogether too much stress upon chronology. If it had been essential to the salvation of men that he [human beings] should have a clear and harmonious understanding of the chronology of the world, the Lord would not have permitted the disagreements and discrepancies which we find in the writings of the Bible historians, and it seems to me that in these last days there ought not to be so much controversy regarding dates.... I believe, Brother Haskell, that there is danger of our injuring Mother’s work by claiming for it more than she claims for it, more than Father ever claimed for it, more than Elder [J. N.] Andrews, [J. H.] Waggoner, or [Uriah] Smith ever claimed for it.”⁸

That same day, W. C. White wrote a virtually identical letter to W. W. Eastman, publishing director at the Southern Publishing Association. But in closing the letter, he added: “I have overwhelming evidence and conviction that they are the descriptions and delineation of what God has revealed to her in vision, and where she has followed the description[s] of historians or the expositions of Adventist writers, I believe that God has given her discernment to use that which is correct and in harmony with truth regarding all matters essential to salvation. If it should be found by faithful study that she has followed some exposition of prophecy which in some detail regarding dates we cannot harmonize with our understanding of secular history, it does not influence my confidence in her writings as a whole any more than my confidence in the Bible is influenced by the fact that I cannot harmonize many of the [Biblical] statements regarding chronology.”⁹

⁸Jerry Allen Moon, W. C. White and Ellen G. White, *The Relationship Between the Prophet and Her Son* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1993), pp. 431, 432. At the end of this letter Ellen White penned in her own handwriting, “I approve of the remarks made in this letter.”

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 433. In a 1915 letter to F. M. Wilcox, editor of the church paper, White clarified the issue regarding his mother’s being a historian or theologian: “Sister White, as a teacher of sacred truth, has not been led to a technical treatment of theological questions, but has [been] given such views of the love of God and the plan of salvation, and of man’s duty to God and to his fellow men, that when presented to the people, arouse the conscience, and impress upon the hearer the saving truths of the Word of God. She says, ‘The written testimonies are not to give new light, but to impress vividly upon the heart the

In summary, for verbal inspirationists Ellen White’s writings, unfortunately, have become an authority on historical dates and places. For thought inspirationists, that would be an unwarranted use of a prophet’s work. Thought inspirationists focus on the big picture, the message; possible discrepancies in historical detail are considered incidental to the message, and of minor importance.

Basic Rules of Interpretation

Everyone wants to be understood. Often misunderstandings arise when a statement has been lifted out of context. Thus, everyone who has been misunderstood appeals to fairness and asks that the context be considered. Context includes both internal and external clues that will establish the truth about any statement under consideration.

Internally, we usually get a clear picture of “what” an author meant by reading the words, sentences, paragraphs, even chapters, surrounding a puzzling statement. Externally, we ask further questions that may help us to understand, such as when? where? why? and perhaps how? “Time,” “place,” and “circumstances” apply to the external context as we shall soon see.

[4]

Internal evidence:

• **Rule One:** *Recognize that the Bible and the writings of Ellen White are the product of thought inspiration, not verbal inspiration—as described in the previous chapter.*

• **Rule Two:** *Recognize that some word-definitions may change as time passes.* For example, hundreds of words in the King James Version (1611) of the Bible have changed in meaning or have acquired such new meanings that they no longer convey the meaning that the

truths of inspiration already revealed.’ “In the technical sense of the word, Sister White is not a historian. She has not been a systematic student of history and chronology, and she has never intended that her works should be used to settle controversies over historical dates. But as one who relates history, one ‘in whose work the character and spirit of an age is exhibited in miniature’ [Macauley’s Essays], she is a historian whose works teach valuable lessons from the past for the present and the future.”—Ibid., p. 434.

King James translators intended to convey. Casual readers would surely misunderstand certain Bible texts if they were not aware of these serious changes in word meanings. ¹⁰

Word-change definitions have already occurred in the writings of Ellen White. How often have readers been confused with: “It is the nicest work ever assumed by men and women to deal with youthful minds”? ¹¹ When Mrs. White used these words later in another setting, she saw the problem and elaborated: “This work is the nicest, the most difficult, ever committed to human beings.” ¹² What was going on? In the nineteenth century, “nice” was often used, as the dictionary indicates, to mean “exacting in requirements or standards ... marked by, or demanding great or excessive precision and delicacy.” ¹³

Another word that has assumed a definition today that was not primary in the nineteenth century is “intercourse.” For hundreds of years “intercourse” meant “dealings between people,” or “the exchange of thoughts and feelings.” Today it is most frequently used in reference to sexual contact, a use that was never meant in the hundreds of occasions Ellen White employed this word. ¹⁴

¹⁰Examples comparing KJV with NKJV include: abroad—outside ([Deuteronomy 24:11](#)), allege—demonstrate ([Acts 17:3](#)), anon—immediately or at once ([Mark 1:30](#)), bowels—heart ([Genesis 43:40](#)), by and by—immediately ([Mark 6:25](#)), charity—love ([1 Corinthians 13](#)), communicate—share ([Galatians 6:6](#)), conversation—conduct ([1 Peter 3:1, 2](#)), feeble-minded—fainthearted ([1 Thessalonians 5:14](#)), forwardness—willingness ([2 Corinthians 9:2](#)), let—hindered ([Romans 1:13](#)), meat—food ([Matthew 6:25](#)), nephew—grandsons ([Judges 12:14](#)), outlandish women—pagan women ([Nehemiah 13:26](#)), peculiar—special ([Titus 2:14](#)), reins—hearts ([Psalm 7:9](#)), suffer—let ([Matthew 19:14](#)), vain—worthless ([Judges 9:4](#)), virtue—power ([Luke 6:19](#)), witty inventions—discretion ([Proverbs 8:12](#)).

¹¹[Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students](#), 73, emphasis added.

¹²[Education](#), 292.

¹³Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Inc., Publishers, 1983).

¹⁴“The disciples prayed with intense earnestness for a fitness to meet men and in their daily intercourse to speak words that would lead sinners to Christ.”—[The Acts of the Apostles](#), 37. “By social intercourse acquaintances are formed and friendships contracted which result in a unity of heart and an atmosphere of love which is pleasing in the sight of heaven.”—[Messages to Young People](#), 405.

• **Rule Three:** *Understand the use of hyperbole.* Hyperbole is the use of obvious exaggeration to make a point. John used hyperbole when he said that if all the acts of Jesus were written, “the world itself could not contain the books” ([John 21:25](#)). Hyperbole is a literary device used throughout the Bible. ¹⁵

Ellen White used the ratio 1 in 20 at least five times, and 1 in 100 at least twenty-one times. She did not say 1 in 13 or 1 in 99, etc. She may have used hyperbole when she wrote: “It is a solemn statement that I make to the church, that not one in twenty whose names are registered upon the church books are prepared to close their earthly history, and would be as verily without God and without hope in the world as the common sinner.” ¹⁶

• **Rule Four:** *Understand the meaning of the phrase in which a word is used.* In 1862 Ellen White wrote that Satan works through the channels of phrenology, psychology, and mesmerism. ¹⁷ But does this mean that all psychology is evil? Obviously not, because in 1897 she pointed out that “the true principles of psychology are found in the Holy Scriptures.” ¹⁸ Similarly, we might note that television can be a channel through which Satan works, but Satan’s use of television does not make television evil. Psychology, the study of the human mind and how it matures, is a proper study for Christians—if the presuppositions are Biblical and not humanistic.

• **Rule Five:** *Recognize the possibility of imprecise expressions.* In 1861 Ellen White penned a thought that seems inconsistent with later statements on the same subject: “Phrenology and mesmerism are very much exalted. They are good in their place, but they are

¹⁵Compare [Exodus 9:6](#) with [Isaiah 9:19](#). The frequent use of “all” is often an example of Hebrew hyperbole.

¹⁶[Christian Service](#), 41 (1893).

¹⁷[The Review and Herald](#), February 18, 1862.

¹⁸[My Life Today](#), 176.

seized upon by Satan as his most powerful agents to deceive and destroy souls.”¹⁹ In an 1884 Signs article, she wrote: “The sciences which treat of the human mind are very much exalted. They are good in their place; but they are seized upon by Satan as his powerful agents to deceive and destroy souls.”²⁰

- [5] Obviously, in this 1884 statement we have an editorial correction in the thought that Ellen White wanted conveyed regarding “the sciences which treat of the human mind.” Possibly the 1861 statement referring to phrenology and mesmerism was a printer’s error. More probably it was a general statement, corrected later, that reflected the commonly used terms for psychology in the mid-nineteenth century. Many books dealing with physical and mental health included chapters devoted to phrenology, psychology, and mesmerism, or advertised other works that focused on these modalities.

• **Rule Six:** *Look carefully at the immediate context* (that is, the same paragraph or page) for clarification of a statement that seems, at first glance, to be troublesome. For example, some people are confused about Ellen White’s admonition that we “should never be taught to say, or feel, that they are saved.”²¹ This caution was meant to warn of the erroneous doctrine of “once saved, always saved” that was, and is, prevalent among most evangelical Christians.

But this warning was given within the larger context of explaining Peter’s self-confidence that led to His tragic denial of his Lord on that Thursday night. She wrote: “Never can we safely put confidence in self, or feel, this side of heaven, that we are secure against temptation. [Then comes the often misunderstood statement] This is misleading. Everyone should be taught to cherish hope and faith; but even when we give ourselves to Christ and know that He accepts

¹⁹Testimonies for the Church 1:296.

²⁰The Signs of the Times, November 6, 1884.

²¹Christ’s Object Lessons, 155.

us, we are not beyond the reach of temptation.... Our only safety is in constant distrust of self, and dependence on Christ.”²²

Another example of the importance of context is found in Ellen White’s assertion that “God’s servants today could not work by means of miracles, because spurious works of healing, claiming to be divine, will be wrought.”²³ This statement seems at variance with the Adventist position that “all” of the spiritual gifts given to the Christian church (1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4) will continue to the end of time (1 Corinthians 1:7). Further, this statement seems to contradict Ellen White’s own comments that in the last days “miracles will be wrought, the sick will be healed, and signs and wonders will follow the believers.”²⁴ How do we understand all this?

The seeming contradiction arises when one does not read the whole page carefully.²⁵ Ellen White made two points: First, she spoke to present conditions specifically: In referring to “miraculous works of healing,” she said that “we cannot now work in this way” (emphasis supplied). Further, “God’s servants today could not work by means of miracles” (emphasis supplied).

Secondly, she was setting forth the Lord’s instruction *for the present time*: The “work of physical healing, combined with the teaching of the word” would be best done in the establishment of “sanitariums” where “workers ... will carry forward genuine medical missionary work.... This is the provision the Lord has made whereby gospel medical missionary work is to be done for many souls.”²⁶ In other words, *at the present time*, distinguished by many instances of false miracles of healing, God’s work of healing can best be done within the sanitarium program of intelligent teaching regarding the cause and cure of disease.

Another “misquote” asserts that it is a “sin to laugh,” using the quotation, “Christ often wept but never was known to laugh.... Imitate the divine, unerring Pattern.” From what we know of Jesus

²²Ibid. See also [Selected Messages 1:314](#).

²³Medical Ministry, 14.

²⁴The Great Controversy, 612; see also [Early Writings, 278](#); [Testimonies for the Church 9:126](#).

²⁵Medical Ministry, 14.

²⁶Ibid.

in the Bible, that statement sounds strange. After all, why would children surround Him enthusiastically! Then we notice the ellipsis. Something is missing.

[6] We check the passage and the context. Here Ellen White is counseling a church member who “has not seen the necessity of educating herself in carefulness of words and acts.... My sister, you talk too much.... your tongue has done much mischief.... Your tongue has kindled a fire, and you have enjoyed the conflagration.... You sport and joke and enter into hilarity and glee.... Christ is our example.... Christ often wept but never was known to laugh. I do not say it is a sin to laugh on any occasion, but we cannot go astray if we imitate the divine, unerring Pattern.... As we view the world bound in darkness and trammled by Satan, how can we engage in levity, glee, careless, reckless words, speaking at random, laughing, jesting, and joking? ... Christian cheerfulness is not condemned by the Scriptures, but reckless talking is censured.”²⁷

Here we note that the context puts a new cast on the misquote. “Laugh” in this context meant inappropriate recklessness of speech and behavior, a jesting and joking that had “shown a lack of wisdom in using the truth in a manner to raise opposition, arouse combativeness, and make war instead of possessing a spirit of peace and true humbleness of mind.”²⁸ Ellen White was not condemning appropriate laughter, as she clearly noted, but she put her counsel in a balanced perspective.

• **Rule Seven:** *Recognize that the meaning of a word can change when it is used in a new context.* The term “shut door” meant several things to ex-Millerite Adventists. To Ellen White it meant something different. James White and Joseph Bates redefined their use of the term between 1844 and 1852.²⁹

Other words that Ellen White used may seem obsolete today, such as “office,” which most often referred to the administrative

²⁷Ms 11, 1868, cited in [Manuscript Releases 18:368-370](#).

²⁸[Manuscript Releases 18:369](#).

²⁹See pp. 554-565 for a study of the “shut door” issue.

offices of the publishing house, but sometimes to the General Conference headquarters.³⁰

• **Rule Eight:** *Recognize that the challenge of semantics resides in all communication.* Words mean different things to different people, because of personal differences such as education, age level, spiritual experiences, geographic location, and gender. Ellen White spoke to this problem: “There are many who interpret that which I write in the light of their own preconceived opinions.... A division in understanding and diverse opinions is the sure result. How to write in a way to be understood by those to whom I address important matter is a problem I cannot solve. When I see that I am misunderstood by my brethren who know me best, I am assured that I must take more time in carefully expressing my thoughts upon paper, for the Lord gives me light which I dare not do otherwise than communicate; and a great burden is upon me.”³¹ For a writer, the task of avoiding misunderstanding is more difficult than merely trying to be understood, because the writer must consciously be aware of semantic problems.

³⁰See Volume 3 of the Comprehensive Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White, pp. 3185-3188, for “Glossary of Obsolete and Little Used Words and Terms with Altered Meanings.”

³¹Selected Messages 3:79.

[7]

Rules of Interpretation—External

[8]

*“Many men take the testimonies the Lord has given, and apply them as they suppose they should be applied, picking out a sentence here and there, taking it from its proper connection, and applying it according to their idea. Thus poor souls become bewildered, when could they read in order all that has been given, they would see the true application, and would not become confused.”*¹

Eight basic rules of interpretation that embrace a document’s wider context would include:

- **Rule One:** *Include **all** that the prophet has said on the subject under discussion before coming to a conclusion.*

²

This rule seems obvious; yet, it probably is the first reason why confusion reigns when people disagree. The reason: most people see only what they want to see. This simple fact influences most all research, whether in astrophysics, medicine, politics, or theology. Unfortunately, few people will admit it. We call this phenomenon, the paradigm fixation or the problem of presuppositions.³ Especially in studying the Bible, nothing seems more difficult for most people

¹Selected Messages 1:44.

²See T. Housel Jemison, *A Prophet Among You* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1955), pp. 438-450.

³Note the kind of scientific thinking that prevailed before Copernicus changed the worldview of astronomers (and everyone else) with his paradigm shift, placing the sun instead of the earth at the center of the solar system. Consider the physicians who bled George Washington, America’s first president, to death because their medical paradigm did not understand the germ theory nor even the strong possibility that hydrotherapy treatments might have reversed his chest infection. One of the chief responsibilities of those searching for truth is to examine the lens through which the researcher searches for truth. The lens (the paradigm or worldview) by which we look at information determines how we evaluate so-called “facts.” Alfred North Whitehead said it well: “When you are criticizing [or, one may add, interpreting] the philosophy of an epoch, do not chiefly direct your attention to those intellectual positions which its exponents feel it necessary explicitly to defend. There will be some fundamental assumptions which adherents of

than to look at all the facts! This difficulty is not because a person's capability to think is deficient. The difficulty that separates thinkers looking at the same information is that their presuppositions are different, presuppositions not only of the head but of the heart.

Presuppositions most often steer students only to "see" what they want to see, thus they overlook the total range of what a writer has written on a particular subject. These paradigms control the mind in what it wants to see, and the heart in what it wants to believe. Earlier ⁴ we called this phenomenon "attitude." These deep, often un verbalized, attitudes most often determine one's conclusions. ⁵

After recognizing this hovering cloud of presuppositions (paradigms or world-views) that every student should recognize, the next challenge is to examine all that a person has said or written on the subject under discussion. Only in this way can the writer (or speaker) be treated fairly.

Many Biblical scholars through the centuries have accepted Isaiah's principle: "But the word of the Lord was to them, 'Precept upon precept, precept upon precept, Line upon line, line upon line, Here a little, there a little'" (28:13). Accepting this principle assumes that the Bible contains a unified, harmonious unfolding of God's messages to human beings. But this principle does not teach that all texts are equally clear, or that the meaning of a verse can be understood apart from that verse's context. The over-arching message of the Bible (or any other book or author) provides the final context for the meaning of any particular "precept" or "line."

all the variant systems within the epoch unconsciously presuppose. Such assumptions appear so obvious that people do not know what they are assuming because no other way of putting things has ever occurred to them. With these assumptions a certain limited number of types of philosophic systems are possible."—*Science and the Modern World* (New York: Mentor Editions, 1952), pp. 49, 50.

⁴See p. 373.

⁵Attitude determined how first-century Jews looked at Jesus as recorded in [Matthew 16](#): If this young Galilean teacher did not fit their paradigm of what they thought the Messiah should be, they would look elsewhere—and they did. If one does not believe in miracles because of some kind of scientific paradigm, the Biblical story becomes folklore. If one does not believe that God speaks through men and women through visions, he/she then searches for reasons to explain away the vision phenomenon. And on it goes.

The same principle applies to the writings of Ellen White. She wrote often: “The testimonies themselves will be the key that will explain the messages given, as scripture is explained by scripture.”⁶

[9] She believed her writings to be consistent and harmonious from beginning to end, revealing “one straight line of truth, without one heretical sentence.”⁷ That is a remarkable statement for any author to make, especially one who had been writing for more than sixty years.⁸

On some subjects that many consider important today, Mrs. White wrote nothing. Movies, television and radio programs, abortion, cremation, organ transplants, etc., were not current topics in her day.

Little Said on Some Subjects

On some subjects she said very little. We have relatively few statements on life insurance,⁹ and only one on the wedding ring.¹⁰ Her comments on two “special resurrections” are brief—she mentions a special resurrection of some on Christ’s resurrection morning¹¹ and another immediately prior to Christ’s second coming.¹²

On some subjects she wrote abundantly—topics such as Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, faith, and divine-human cooperation.

Certain subjects have frequently caused unnecessary disagreements within the church because students did not apply this first rule of hermeneutics. For example, statements such as “eggs should not be placed upon your table” should be balanced, according to other statements Ellen White has written concerning eggs and her

⁶Selected Messages 1:42.

⁷Selected Messages 3:52.

⁸“The light that I have received, I have written out, and much of it is now shining forth from the printed page. There is, throughout my printed works, a harmony with my present teaching.”—*The Review and Herald*, June 14, 1906.

⁹Testimonies for the Church 1:549-551 (1867). To understand this statement we must also employ “hermeneutic rule number two.”

¹⁰Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers, 180, 181 (1892).

¹¹The Desire of Ages, 785-787, 833, 834; Early Writings, 184, 185, 208; The Great Controversy, 18, 667; Selected Messages 1:304-308.

¹²Early Writings, 285; The Great Controversy, 637.

principle of “step-by-step” understanding of truth (see pp. 282, 310, 311).¹³

Other subjects in the writings of Ellen White that profit from a fair use of this first hermeneutical rule include appropriate clothing, Sabbath observance, and counseling. Theologically, one is wise to follow this first rule when studying such topics as the atonement, the nature of Christ, the nature of sin, how sin is punished, and the relation of the “latter rain” to the Second Coming. Several of these subjects have polarized Adventists because some put more weight on expressions in a private letter than on the general instruction of a book, or on a paragraph lifted out of context that seems to fly in the face of full chapters in a published book.¹⁴

• Rule Two: *Every statement must be understood within its historical context. Time, place, and circumstances under which that statement was made must be studied in order to understand its meaning.*

Although this rule seems obvious, it lies at the root of many deep disagreements. In the day of selective media bites, most anyone in the public eye has been misunderstood by having his/her statements taken out of context. How often a misquoted person is heard saying, “But that is not what I meant!” Or, “I said that, but they didn’t include everything I said!”

If living today, Ellen White could often say, “But that is not what I meant!” “Yes, I said that, but they didn’t include everything I said!” Let us note three times that she emphasized the importance of this second rule of hermeneutics.

In 1875 she pointed out that that “which may be said in truth of individuals at one time may not correctly be said of them at another time.”¹⁵ Why did she say this? Because she was being criticized for her endorsement of certain leaders who later fell from grace or apostatized.

¹³Testimonies for the Church 2:362, 400. Note some helpful statements in Testimonies for the Church 7:135; Testimonies for the Church 9:162; The Ministry of Healing, 320.

¹⁴“If you desire to know what the Lord has revealed through her, read her published works.”—Testimonies for the Church 5:696. See George Knight, Reading Ellen White, pp. 121-123.

¹⁵Testimonies for the Church 3:471.

In 1904 she appealed to the fact that God “wants us to reason from common sense. Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relation of things.” ¹⁶

In 1911 she emphasized that “regarding the testimonies, nothing is ignored; nothing is cast aside; but time and place must be considered.” ¹⁷

Here we have three fundamental categories: time, place, and circumstances—all of which must be considered when one seeks to understand the meaning of any statement. These categories are not synonymous.

[10] *Time.* Some Ellen White statements need to be understood in terms of *when* she made them. For instance, on January 16, 1898, she wrote: “We are still in probationary time.” ¹⁸ Will these words always be true? Obviously not. The time will come when probation will cease ([Daniel 12:1](#); [Revelation 22:11](#)). At present we know that certain events still lie in the future, e.g., creation of the image to the beast ([Revelation 13](#)), Sunday-law enforcement, the great final earthquake, etc. Thus, at the moment, “we are still in probationary time.”

What about the following statements? “The voice from Battle Creek, which has been regarded as authority in counseling how the work should be done, is no longer the voice of God.” ¹⁹ “It has been some years since I have considered the General Conference as the voice of God.” ²⁰

But in 1875 Ellen White wrote concerning the General Conference in session: “When the judgment of the General Conference, which is the highest authority that God has upon the earth, is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be maintained, but be surrendered.” ²¹

Why the difference in her position? During the late 1880s and 1890s, as the record shows in her letters and sermons, some of the policies of the General Conference officers were not ones that Ellen

¹⁶Selected Messages 3:217. See p. 345.

¹⁷Selected Messages 1:57.

¹⁸The Upward Look, 30.

¹⁹Letter 4, 1896, cited in [Manuscript Releases 17:185, 186](#) (1896).

²⁰Letter 77, 1898, cited in [Manuscript Releases 17:216](#) (1898).

²¹Testimonies for the Church 3:492.

White could endorse. On April 1, 1901, the day before the General Conference session opened, she spoke these words: “It is working upon wrong principles that has brought the cause of God into its present embarrassment. The people have lost confidence in those who have the management of the work. Yet we hear that the voice of the conference is the voice of God. Every time I have heard this, I have thought that it was almost blasphemy. The voice of the conference ought to be the voice of God, but it is not.”²² Obviously, times had changed and her observations changed accordingly.

But that 1901 General Conference session made significant changes in policies and personnel. Ellen White was pleased. Only two months after the changes, she became aware that her son Edson was quoting some of her pre-1901-session statements and applying them in the new, post-1901-session period. Times had changed—the statements of the 1890s no longer applied. She wrote to Edson: “Your course would have been the course to be pursued, if no changes had been made in the General Conference [1901]. But a change has been made, and many more changes will be made [in 1903, many more were made] and great developments will [yet] be seen. No issues are to be forced.... It hurts me to think that you are using words which I wrote prior to the Conference.”²³

In 1909 Ellen White was clearly in the post-1901 mode when she wrote: “God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference [session], shall have authority.”²⁴ In summary, when we speak of the authority of the General Conference and Ellen White’s several statements, we should immediately determine *when* the statements were made, and under what conditions.

Place. Some statements may be true for one person or group while at the same time they may not be true for another person or group. James White spoke to this difficulty when two groups, in different places, would read his wife’s admonitions: “She works to this disadvantage ... she makes strong appeals to the people, which a few feel deeply, and take strong positions, and go to extremes. Then

²²Ms 37, 1901, cited in [Sermons and Talks](#), 159, 160. See also George E. Rice, “The Church: Voice of God?” *Ministry*, Dec., 1987, pp. 4-6.

²³[Letter 54, 1901](#), cited in MR, vol. 19, pp. 146-148.

²⁴[Testimonies for the Church 9:261](#).

[11] to save the cause from ruin in consequence of these extremes, she is obliged to come out with reproofs for extremists in a public manner. This is better than to have things go to pieces; but the influence of both the extremes and the reproofs are terrible on the cause, and brings upon Mrs. W. a threefold burden. Here is the difficulty: 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.”²⁵

The “place” consideration will help those who have been confused about whether Ellen White’s writings should be quoted in public. On one occasion Mrs. White wrote that “the words of the Bible, and the Bible alone should be heard from the pulpit.”²⁶ The next two quotations speak to Seventh-day Adventist evangelists: “In public labor do not make prominent, and quote that which Sister White has written.”²⁷ “The testimonies of Sister White should not be carried to the front. God’s word is the unerring standard.”²⁸

Do these statements prohibit ministers from quoting the writings of Ellen White publicly, especially in a church service? The first quotation speaks to the Christian world generally, comparing “an imaginary religion, a religion of words and forms,” with the “words of the Bible and the Bible alone [which] should be heard from the pulpit.” The whole page (context) is emphasizing that “those who have heard only tradition and human theories and maxims [should] hear the voice of Him who can renew the soul unto eternal life.”

Adventist evangelists should prove their doctrines from the Bible, not from the writings of Mrs. White. The second reason for this caution is obvious: those who are not acquainted with the authority of Ellen White would not be persuaded by her statements, and might react negatively.²⁹ In summary, Mrs. White never said that her

²⁵The Review and Herald, March 17, 1868.

²⁶Prophets and Kings, 626.

²⁷Selected Messages 3:29.

²⁸Evangelism, 256.

²⁹In Ellen White’s first testimony to the church, she wrote: “Some have taken an injudicious course; when they have talked their faith to unbelievers, and the proof has been asked for, they have read a vision, instead of going to the Bible for proof. I saw that this course was inconsistent, and prejudiced unbelievers against the truth. The visions can have no weight with those who have never seen them and know nothing of their spirit.

writings should not be quoted in the Seventh-day Adventist church pulpit.

The *place* test is especially important when compilations are made of Ellen White's thoughts on selected subjects. An incident in the early 1890s demonstrates the problem of misapplying testimonies given to one person for a particular purpose. Mrs. White, writing from Australia, addressed a letter to A. W. Stanton in Battle Creek, a man who had taken the position that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is Babylon. She included that letter in articles printed in the church paper.³⁰

In his fifty-page pamphlet, "The Loud Cry of the Third Angel's Message," Stanton quoted freely from Ellen White's reproofs to the church, concluding that these testimonies constituted God's rejection of the organized church. He stated that those who finish up God's work on earth must separate from the Adventist Church which had become Babylon. He made his case by stringing together misapplied Ellen White comments and by including a letter to a private party that was used out of context.

Mrs. White replied that Stanton had "misapplied [a private letter sent to another for a particular purpose], as many do the Scriptures, to the injury of his own soul and the souls of others.... In the use of a private letter sent to another, Brother S. has abused the kindly efforts of one who desired to help him."

Further, she acknowledged that her misapplied statements might "appear" to support Stanton's conclusions. However, "those who take them in parts, simply to support some theory or idea of their own, to vindicate themselves in a course of error, will not be blessed and benefited by what they teach."³¹

This Stanton incident and Ellen White's response (which settled the matter for church members) provides us with a historical example of how damaging and deceptive a compilation of worthy writings can be when time and place are not considered.³²

They should not be referred to in such cases."—[Testimonies for the Church 1:119, 120](#). See also [Testimonies for the Church 5:669](#).

³⁰[The Review and Herald, August 22 to September 12, 1893](#). See p. 231.

³¹[Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers, 32-62](#).

³²"I know that many men take the testimonies the Lord has given, and apply them as they suppose they should be applied, picking out a sentence here and there, taking

• **Rule Three:** *The principle underlying each statement of counsel or instruction must be recognized in order to understand its relevance for those in different times or places.*

Whenever prophets speak they are either conveying truth as a principle or as a policy. Principles are universal, in the sense that they apply to men and women everywhere; they are eternal, in the sense that they are always relevant, always applicable.

[12] Policies, however, are the timely applications of eternal, universal principles. Principles never change but policies do, depending on circumstances. Thus policies may apply a principle in a way that the prophet never envisioned. ³³

Ellen White was well aware of the difference between universal principles and policies that are determined by changing circumstances: “That which can be said of men under certain circumstances, cannot be said of them under other circumstances.” ³⁴ Her contemporaries recognized that Mrs. White appealed to the intelligence of her readers more often by citing principles than by spelling out the answers to local issues. ³⁵

it from its proper connection, and applying it according to their idea. Thus poor souls become bewildered, when could they read in order all that has been given, they would see the true application, and would not become confused.... Reports fly from one to another regarding what Sister White has said. Each time the report is repeated, it grows larger. If Sister White has anything to say, leave her to say it. No one is called upon to be a mouthpiece for Sister White.... Please let Sister White bear her own message.”—[Selected Messages 1:44, 45](#). “Those who are not walking in the light of the message, may gather up statements from my writings that happen to please them, and that agree with their human judgment, and, by separating these statements from their connection, and placing them beside human reasonings, make it appear that my writings uphold that which they condemn.”—[Letter 208, 1906](#), cited in Arthur White, *Messenger to the Remnant*, p. 86.

³³See p. 34.

³⁴[Testimonies for the Church 3:470](#).

³⁵In a private letter W. C. White reported to A. O. Tait on a union committee meeting to which his mother was invited. White noted how they hurried the discussion along in order to listen to Ellen White: “As you are well aware, Mother seldom answers such questions directly; but she endeavors to lay down principles and bring forward facts which have been presented to her that will aid us in giving intelligent study to the subject, and in arriving at a correct conclusion.”—Cited in Arthur White, *The Ellen G. White Writings*, pp. 165, 166.

Understanding the basic difference between principles and policies will help one avoid misusing either the Bible or the writings of Ellen White. The following topics illustrate the need to place Mrs. White's counsel in the context of time, place, and circumstances.

Teaching girls to harness and drive horses. In outlining a school curriculum, Ellen White wrote that “if girls ... could learn to harness and drive a horse, and to use the saw and the hammer, as well as the rake and the hoe, they would be better fitted to meet the emergencies of life.”³⁶ Is this a principle or a policy? Obviously, the principle is clear: girls should be “fitted to meet the emergencies of life.”

When this counsel was given in the early years of the twentieth century, most Americans still lived on farms. For many practical reasons, including safety, this principle could be best applied by girls learning how to “harness and drive a horse” and not leave such things for boys only. Today, the principle would be best served in high school or college with courses in auto mechanics and driver's education.

School-entrance age. In 1872 Ellen White wrote her first major treatise on Christian education.³⁷ Regarding the age when students should begin school, she said: “Parents should be the only teachers of their children until they have reached eight or ten years of age.... The only schoolroom for children from eight to ten years of age should be in the open air amidst the opening flowers and nature's beautiful scenery.”³⁸

For thirty years this counsel was the rule for Adventist elementary schools generally. In 1904 the local school board of the St. Helena, California, church met, with Ellen White present, to discuss the issue of school-entrance age.³⁹ The principles quickly emerged: (1) children differ in their development; (2) ideally, parents should be their children's teachers for the early years, until they are 8-10 years old (thus recognizing differences in child development); (3) if parents are not able to teach and control their children properly, it would be better for the children to learn under a teacher who would

³⁶Education, 216, 217.

³⁷Testimonies for the Church 3:131-160; Fundamentals of Christian Education, 15-46.

³⁸Testimonies for the Church 3:137.

³⁹A verbatim report of Ellen White's participation in the school board discussion is found in Selected Messages 3:214-226.

teach discipline as well as the appropriate studies; (4) if both parents are employed outside the home, it would be better for their children to be placed in the controlled environment of the classroom rather than left in an empty house; (5) for the sake of the St. Helena Sanitarium's reputation, it would be beneficial to all if children were not observed throughout the day "wandering about, with nothing to do, getting into mischief, and all these things."

So, on the basis of principle, from the standpoint of what is best for children and for their influence on the reputation of the sanitarium, policy was changed and arrangements were made to accept younger students at the St. Helena church school.

[13] *The bicycle craze.* At the beginning of the twentieth century, "the American people were swept with a consuming passion which left them with little time or money for anything else.... What was this big, new distraction? For an answer the merchants had only to look out the window and watch their erstwhile customers go whizzing by. America had discovered the bicycle, and everybody was making the most of the new freedom it brought.... The bicycle began as a rich man's toy.... The best early bicycle cost \$150, an investment comparable to the cost of an automobile today.... Every member of the family wanted a 'wheel,' and entire family savings often were used up in supplying the demand."⁴⁰

With that background we may be better able to understand Ellen White's counsel *at that time* when she wrote that "money expended in bicycles and dress and other needless things must be accounted for."⁴¹ She went further than the principle of exorbitant cost; she cautioned regarding the spirit of "bewitching" competition and the desire to "be the greatest."⁴²

Thus, her policy on bicycles (which, if placed within today's context, may seem odd, even ridiculous) was based on clear-cut Biblical principles. The wise and balanced expenditure of funds and the avoidance of the competitive spirit are principles that should impact on decisions in all ages. If Mrs. White were alive today, she might apply the principle of accountability to the way people spend

⁴⁰Reader's Digest, Dec. 1951. See George Knight, *Reading Ellen White*, pp. 100-102.

⁴¹*Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, 398.

⁴²*Testimonies for the Church* 8:51, 52.

money on luxury items, automobiles, sports equipment, electronic gadgets, or clothing.

Sports. Unfortunately some have excerpted some of Ellen White's statements on sports without maintaining her sense of balance. In 1895 she warned students that in "plunging into amusements, match games, pugilistic performances," they were declaring "to the world that Christ was not their leader. All this called forth the warning from God." However, the next sentence, often not quoted, reveals her common sense: "Now that which burdens me is the danger of going into extremes on the other side."⁴³

For example, to rule out sports altogether would be missing Mrs. White's point. In the early 1870s she counseled parents and teachers that they should come close to their children and pupils and if they would "manifest an interest in all their efforts, and even in their sports, sometimes even being a child among children, they would make the children very happy, and would gain their love and win their confidence."⁴⁴

On another occasion Ellen White wrote that she did not "condemn the simple exercise of playing ball." What did concern her was that ball-playing, and sports in general, "may be overdone." She followed this statement by explaining what she meant by being overdone.⁴⁵

The lesson to be learned here, as in other subjects that often polarize readers of Ellen White's writings, is that the full range of her thoughts on a particular subject should be read in order to get her perspective.

Flesh food. Earlier we studied Ellen White's health principles and her application of these principles.⁴⁶ Here we will emphasize again how she, a dying consumptive at 17, went on to outlive her contemporaries after a remarkably rigorous life. One of her open secrets was to distinguish between principle and policy.

Out of the many examples available, let us note again how she related to flesh foods—the part of her diet in her younger years that

⁴³Fundamentals of Christian Education, 378.

⁴⁴Fundamentals of Christian Education, 18. See also Testimonies for the Church 3:134, 135.

⁴⁵The Adventist Home, 498, 499.

⁴⁶See pp. 310, 311.

she enjoyed most! In chapter 27 we saw how she embraced the health message as it came to her in 1863, some of which cut straight across her personal habits and delights. We also noted how she occasionally departed from her habitual practice of abstaining from flesh food. Yet, in 1870 she claimed that she had acted according to principle ever since receiving the health vision in 1863: “I have not changed my course a particle since I adopted the health reform. I have not taken one step back since the light from heaven upon this subject first shone upon my pathway.... I left off these things from principle. And since that time, brethren, you have not heard me advance an extreme view of health reform that I had to take back. I have advocated nothing but what I stand to today.”⁴⁷

[14] What were the basic principles of health reform that Ellen White believed she had faithfully followed? (1) Do the best one can under circumstances that may be beyond one’s control; (2) Avoid everything hurtful, such as alcohol, tobacco, and drugs; (3) Use judiciously that which is healthful—use self-control; (4) Do not mark out any precise line in diet that everyone must follow, because not everyone has the same physical needs or opportunities to find the best food; (5) Follow health practices to improve one’s mind for spiritual purposes, not to earn God’s acceptance (legalism); and (6) Reason from cause to effect.

Health reform policies are choices that flow from those principles. If vegetarianism were a principle, then we would have a problem with God’s command for the Israelites to eat the Passover lamb. We also would wonder why He distinguished between clean and unclean meats. And what would we do with our Lord’s practice of eating the Passover lamb, as well as fresh fish, with His disciples?

⁴⁷[Testimonies for the Church 2:371, 372](#). “I present these matters before the people, dwelling upon general principles.”—[Counsels on Diet and Foods, 493](#) (1897). In 1904, at the age of 76, she said that she was healthier than “in my younger days,” attributing her improvement to the “principles of health reform.”—[Counsels on Diet and Foods, 482](#). In 1908 she reacted to those who were stating that she had not been following the principles of health reform as she had “advocated them with my pen.” Forthrightly she wrote: “As far as my knowledge goes, I have not departed from those principles.”—[Counsels on Diet and Foods, 491, 492, 494](#). See [The Review and Herald, March 17, 1868](#), for an editorial by James White where he addressed those who were more rigid than they should have been with health principles. One of the problems that called forth the editorial was the virtual verbal-inspiration paradigm that drove some readers to their supercritical positions.

Vegetarianism is a policy, a wise policy, that is being reaffirmed constantly in the scientific laboratories of the world, as well as in the epidemiological studies showing the awesome difference in the incidence of disease between vegetarians and consumers of flesh foods. ⁴⁸ The Christian's duty is to "eat that food which is most nourishing," leaving each person to apply this principle by making choices on the basis of "known duty." ⁴⁹ Sometimes emergency situations arise and one is forced to choose the good rather than the best, or even a lesser evil to avoid a greater evil. Although the principle remains, the policy or application may change with circumstances.

Courting in school. Some people misunderstand Ellen White's counsel regarding dating or courting during the school years. They fail to note the age of the students involved. Part of the instruction was given especially for the Avondale campus where many of the students were still in high school: "We have labored hard to keep in check everything in the school like favoritism, attachment, and courting. We have told the students that we would not allow the first thread of this to be interwoven with their school work. On this point we are as firm as a rock." ⁵⁰

Some of her concern was directed to students at Battle Creek College, where also there was a mix of high-school and college students: "Students are not sent here to form attachments, to indulge in flirtation or courting, but to obtain an education. Should they be allowed to follow their own inclinations in this respect, the college would soon become demoralized. Several have used their precious school days in slyly flirting and courting, notwithstanding the vigilance of professors and teachers." ⁵¹

Would Ellen White have given the same counsel regarding older, more mature students? Where would Christian young people find their life mates if not in the environment of a Christian campus committed to Adventist goals? On several occasions she set forth the principles that should guide young people and the school program in the area of Christian courtship. For example: "In all our dealings

⁴⁸See pp. 322-324.

⁴⁹[Testimonies for the Church 9:163](#); [Selected Messages 1:396](#).

⁵⁰MR, vol. 8, p. 256.

⁵¹[Testimonies for the Church 4:432](#); see also [Testimonies for the Church 5:109](#).

with students, age and character must be taken into account. We cannot treat the young and old just alike. There are circumstances under which men and women of sound experience and good standing may be granted some privileges not given to younger students. The age, the conditions, and the turn of mind must be taken into consideration. We must be wisely considerate in all our work. But we must not lessen our firmness and vigilance in dealing with students of all ages, nor our strictness in forbidding the unprofitable and unwise association of young and immature students.”⁵²

• **Rule Four:** *We must use common sense and sanctified reason as we analyze the difference between principles and policies.*

[15] During Ellen White’s comments at the St. Helena school board meeting in 1904, she again emphasized a principle of hermeneutics that would help them and others when trying to apply principle to policy. She noted that church members were taking her words legalistically, unthinkingly: “Why, Sister White has said so and so, and Sister White has said so and so; and therefore we are going right up to it.”

Her response: “God wants us all to have common sense, and He wants us to reason from common sense. Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relation of things.”⁵³

Christianity is a reasonable religion. God implanted within men and women not only the ability to respond to His grace (and the ability not to respond) but also the capacity to reason from cause to effect. On many occasions Ellen White said, “God has given us powers to be used, to be developed and strengthened by education. We should reason and reflect, carefully marking the relation between cause and effect. When this is practiced ... they may fully answer the purpose of God in their creation.”⁵⁴

She did not make reason the final arbiter of right and wrong. Reason, for her, is the capacity to understand the reasonableness of

⁵²[Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students, 101](#). See Moon, W. C. White and Ellen G. White, p. 359.

⁵³[Selected Messages 3:217](#). See p. 395.

⁵⁴[Mind, Character, and Personality 2:436](#).

God's counsel and the ability to reflect on the results of obeying or disobeying that counsel. She described this relationship between God's will and human reasoning powers: "We are to be guided by true theology and common sense."⁵⁵ For her, sanctified reason and common sense are virtually synonymous.

Reason and extremes. Every subject, whether it be in theology, law, ethics, music, graphic art, or constitutional law, is beset with those who tend to go to extremes. We call those groups Pharisees or Sadducees, conservatives or liberals, literalists or symbolists, indifferent (cool) or fanatics (hot), etc. In philosophy and religion, we call the one group objectivists, the other, subjectivists.⁵⁶

Truth (as principle) is not some kind of balance between two errors. Truth transcends errors of both extremes by recognizing the truths that each extreme wants to guard.⁵⁷ But truth does not incorporate the spirit or the errors that each extreme holds to. When people recognize the element of truth in their opposition, a remarkable event happens—peace prevails, conciliation happens, and real unity develops. Real unity is not the result of administrative appeal or a committee vote; unity rests on commonly accepted principles of interpretation.

At the same time, matters dealing with policy (not principle) require a different approach. For example, dealing with dress Ellen White wrote: "There is a medium position in these things. Oh, that we all might wisely find that position and keep it." Speaking of diet, she counseled: "Take the middle path, avoiding all extremes."⁵⁸

But avoiding extremes is more than an intellectual matter. Some people may understand intellectually the correct linkage between principle and policy, but emotionally they tend to extremes. Even when they promote correct policy, they may be either extremely hot or cold. Ellen White put her finger on their problem, even when their policy is correct: "We have found in our experience that if Satan

⁵⁵Mind, Character, and Personality 1:148.

⁵⁶Testimonies for the Church 1:425.

⁵⁷See pp. 260, 261.

⁵⁸Counsels on Diet and Foods, 211. The ancient Greeks often spoke of moderation ("nothing in excess") as the search for the "golden mean."

cannot keep souls bound in the ice of indifference, he will try to push them into the fire of fanaticism.”⁵⁹

A respected Adventist theologian of an earlier generation recalls how he unintentionally exercised “the fire of fanaticism” in applying one of Ellen White’s health principles. While selling religious books in his youth, M. L. Andreasen lived on granola. He carried it with him, mixed it with water, and ate it twice daily.

[16] Then someone read from one of Ellen White’s books that people “eat too much.” He looked around and found sufficient verification of that statement. So, to be faithful to new light, he cut his daily ration in half. Some time later he read the statement himself in *Testimonies*, volume 2, page 374: “You eat too much.” That caused him to think again. “Should he cut his daily ration in half again?”

Then it dawned on him. He was honest and wanted to do right but he now thanked God for “a little good sense.”⁶⁰

Because Ellen White said on several occasions that “two meals [daily] are better than three,”⁶¹ some families made it a rule for everyone, including those in the sanitariums. In reference to sanitariums she showed how to link principle with policy and circumstances: “If, after dispensing with the third meal in the sanitarium, you see by the results that this is keeping people away from the institution, your duty is plain. We must remember that while there are some who are better for eating only two meals, there are others who eat lightly at each meal, and who feel that they need something in the evening.... [Eliminating the third meal may] do more harm than good.”⁶²

In 1867 Mrs. White answered some prevalent questions regarding health reform. One of the questions was: “Is there not danger of brethren and sisters taking extreme views of the health reform?” She answered: “This may be expected in all stirring reforms.... It is God’s plan that persons who are suited to the work should prudently and earnestly set forth the health reform, then leave the people to

⁵⁹[Testimonies for the Church 5:644.](#)

⁶⁰Virginia Steinweg, *Without Fear or Favor* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1979), pp. 53, 54.

⁶¹[Counsels on Diet and Foods, 141, 173; Testimonies for the Church 4:416, 417.](#)

⁶²[Counsels on Diet and Foods, 283.](#) “The practice of eating but two meals a day is generally found a benefit to health; yet under some circumstances persons may require a third meal. This should, however, if taken at all, be very light, and of food most easily digested.”—[The Ministry of Healing, 321.](#)

settle the matter with God and their own souls. It is the duty of those every way qualified to teach it to make people believe and obey, and all others should be silent and be taught.”⁶³

In summary, this fourth principle of hermeneutics appeals to common sense in linking principle with policy. This requires both soundness in thought and emotional evenness. Ellen White well said: “There is a class of people who are always ready to go off on some tangent, who want to catch up something strange and wonderful and new; but God would have all move calmly, considerately, choosing our words in harmony with the solid truth for this time, which requires to be presented to the mind as free from that which is emotional as possible, while still bearing the intensity and solemnity that it is proper it should bear. We must guard against creating extremes, guard against encouraging those who would either be in the fire or in the water.”⁶⁴

• **Rule Five:** *We must be certain that supposed quotations are indeed written by the author to whom they are attributed.*

Every public figure has had the problem of facing people who were adamant about what they “know” the speaker or author had said. The “belief” may be as wild as one’s imagination, but still the speaker or author must try to defend himself against the error or distortion. Obviously, the contending person does not have the reference for what he is “quoting.” Most of the time he/she got his information from a third or fourth party. We often call these distorted memories and flat errors “apocryphal statements.”

This problem plagued Ellen White from the beginning of her early ministry, and even today. Included in statements that have been incorrectly attributed to her are topics such as: (1) Inhabitants of other planets are now gathering fruit for a Sabbath stopover of the redeemed on the way to heaven; (2) She saw an angel standing by Uriah Smith inspiring him as he wrote *Thoughts on Daniel and the Revelation*; (3) the Holy Spirit is, or was, Melchizedek; (4) She designated certain mountain spots as safe hideouts in the time of

⁶³The Review and Herald, October 8, 1867.

⁶⁴Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers, 227, 228.

[17] trouble; (5) She named specific cities, etc., that would be destroyed by coming earthquakes, fires, floods, etc.; (6) Christ will return at midnight; (7) Eggs should never be eaten (forgetting the immediate context and many other statements regarding varying circumstances); (8) She would be a member of the 144,000; (9) Literal darkness will cover the earth as a signal that probation has closed; (10) Christ's last mediatorial work before probation closes will be for children who have wandered away from the church; (11) We should live as though we had 1,000 years to live, and as we would if we were to die tomorrow; (12) Entire churches and conferences will apostatize, etc. ⁶⁵

• **Rule Six:** *Though not contradicting themselves, we must allow for the maturing experience of authors, even prophets, in that truth is unfolded to them only as fast as they are able to understand it.*

This rule helps students who are concerned about certain portions of a prophet's life or writings that fall into a category other than "time, place, and circumstances," addressed in Rule Three above.

Ellen White clearly taught that God leads His people along as fast as they are able to receive further truth. The history of Israel is a splendid example of how He works with people *where they are*, not where they will be in the future. ⁶⁶ The prophets were also part of this divine plan to unfold truth as fast as people are ready for it. They themselves experienced the process. Paul not only knew more about the plan of salvation than did Joel or David, he experienced the "unfolding" in his own life. ⁶⁷

Some call this process "progressive truth." The term is helpful if it is describing a person's progressive awareness of spiritual truths. But it misses the mark if it is used in the context of an evolutionary development that proceeds out of the evolving of human

⁶⁵For further study of these and other illustrations of the Ellen White "apocrypha," see *Comprehensive Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White*, vol. 3, pp. 3189-3192.

⁶⁶For further study of the principle of accommodation, see pp. 34, 282, 304, 311, 422.

⁶⁷"The fact needs to be emphasized, and often repeated, that the mysteries of the Bible are not such because God has sought to conceal truth, but because our own weakness or ignorance makes us incapable of comprehending or appropriating truth. The limitation is not in its purpose, but in our capacity."—*The Signs of the Times*, April 25, 1906.

understanding through trial and error, through thesis and antithesis into synthesis. God’s method of teaching the human race involves both the recovery of lost truth and the unfolding of further truth, as fast as people are ready to receive it. Evolutionary progression is understood as humanity’s growth from ignorance to knowledge, without any absolutes that would put universal value on knowledge.⁶⁸

This process happens to individuals as well as to groups of people. Most people know how this process has been working in their own lives. If we have been growing in grace, what we knew about God’s will for us individually ten years ago was much less than what each of us knows today. No doubt all of us wish we could adjust what we said to others ten years ago, even though we thought it wise at the time!⁶⁹

But some may say, “A prophet should be different. What prophets said when they were twenty years old should not need ‘clarification’ or ‘expansion’ when they are fifty-five!” This view arises out of a verbal-inspiration framework. We must not forget that God speaks to men and women who “differ widely in rank and occupation, and in mental and spiritual endowments.”⁷⁰ This “wide” spread of individual differences includes the “wide” spread of a person’s grasp of truth between his/her youth and the mature years.

Though the core of truth remains the same, one’s insights are enlarged. Maturing skills of insight and communicating skills may express the core message differently in later years. In 1906 Ellen White reflected on her learning experience: “For sixty years I have been in communication with heavenly messengers, and I have been constantly learning in reference to divine things, and in reference to the way in which God is constantly working to bring souls from

⁶⁸“In all ages, through the medium of communion with heaven, God has worked out His purpose for His children, by unfolding gradually to their minds the doctrines of grace.... He who places himself where God can enlighten him, advances, as it were, from the partial obscurity of dawn to the full radiance of noonday.”—*The Acts of the Apostles*, 564.

⁶⁹“God intends that to the earnest seeker the truths of His Word shall be ever unfolding.”—*The Signs of the Times*, April 25, 1906; “He [Christ] promised that the Holy Spirit should enlighten the disciples, that the word of God should be ever unfolding to them. They would be able to present its truths in new beauty.”—*Christ’s Object Lessons*, 127.

⁷⁰The Great Controversy, p. vi.

the error of their ways to the light in God's light."⁷¹ Prophets are humble people who have seen, to some degree, the glory of the Lord. Humble prophets easily recognize indebtedness to God for their fresh perspective, "like the shining sun, that shines ever brighter unto the perfect day" ([Proverbs 4:18](#)).⁷²

[18] The growth principle pervades all creation. It explains Paul's appeal to the Corinthians: "We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" ([2 Corinthians 3:18](#)). This text lies behind the rule: "It is a law of the human mind that by beholding we become changed."⁷³ Thus, the more young Ellen Harmon studied her Bible and prayed for divine guidance as she faced life's choices, she became "transformed," and "changed"—she grew in knowledge of God's character and His ways.⁷⁴

Consequently, letting the growth principle inform our study of Ellen White (or the Bible) we should expect deepening insights as she conveys God's messages to others. We can see the growth of her ability to convey deeper insights, especially when we compare her earliest descriptions of the origin of the great controversy in heaven with that in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.⁷⁵

Thus, when readers sense a broader perspective in *Patriarchs and Prophets* (1890) than is found in *Spiritual Gifts* (1858), they are recognizing the hermeneutical rule that a prophet will grow, as anyone else, in spiritual perception. This increase in spiritual perception will help the prophet to state more clearly the message

⁷¹[This Day With God](#), 76.

⁷²"Whoever examines her written words—going from the childlike composition of her girlhood writings through the strenuous period of her young maturity to the gracious, eloquent, and deeply moving works of her later years—will perceive the steady progress in vision and expression, and may remember that she gained these abilities, under God's hand, not by supinely waiting for the outpouring of the Spirit, but by moving under the impulse of that Spirit in the exercise of every power of her being."—A. W. Spalding, *Origin and History*, vol. 1, p. 76.

⁷³[Patriarchs and Prophets](#), 91.

⁷⁴"Looking unto Jesus we obtain brighter and more distinct views of God, and by beholding we become changed. Goodness, love for our fellow men, becomes our natural instinct."—[Christ's Object Lessons](#), 355.

⁷⁵See Alden Thompson, "The Theology of Ellen White: The Great Controversy Story," *Adventist Review*, Dec. 31, 1981.

that God wants conveyed. This is the principle that best describes the experience of Jesus on earth. Luke described His growth and maturing ability to share spiritual things with others: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men” (Luke 2:52). ⁷⁶

- **Rule Seven:** *In some instances, a person must understand the experience of an event, either directly or vicariously, before understanding the truth of the event.*

This rule may sound contrary to sound reasoning. But such was the situation when the apostles faced the unbelieving world after Christ’s resurrection. Who would believe them unless the apostles had seen the empty tomb or had seen Jesus during the next forty days before His ascension? In a similar sense, early Adventists in the late 1840s and early 1850s “experienced” the growing connection between the supernatural visions of Ellen Harmon-White and the voice of authority for their growing community. ⁷⁷

In late 1896 while in Australia, Mrs. White had to respond to John Bell who was promoting a divisive message regarding the time when the three angels’ messages of [Revelation 14](#) would be fulfilled. In essence, he was placing it in the future. She wrote insightfully, in terms of this seventh rule of interpretation: “The peculiar views

⁷⁶Ellen White spoke reverently about the development of Christ’s spiritual and mental endowments: “The powers of mind and body developed gradually, in keeping with the laws of childhood.... Since He gained knowledge as we may do, His intimate acquaintance with the Scriptures shows how diligently His early years were given to the study of God’s word.... Thus to Jesus the significance of the word and the works of God was unfolded, as He was trying to understand the reason of things.... From the first dawning of intelligence He was constantly growing in spiritual grace and knowledge of truth.... Communion with God through prayer develops the mental and moral faculties, and the spiritual powers strengthen as we cultivate thoughts upon spiritual things.”—[The Desire of Ages](#), 69-71.

⁷⁷“Thus the process by which the mystical proclivities of a teenage girl were recognized as the revelations of an authoritative prophet was aided at every step by the underlying philosophical assumptions of the Adventist community. Unlike the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, Ellen White did not proclaim her revelation and gather a following; rather, she had a particular kind of religious experience that came to be accepted as authoritative within an existing group. The prophetic ministry of Ellen White was an aspect of Adventist social experience, not just the psychological experience of a single individual.”—Bull and Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary*, p. 25.

he holds are a mixture of truth and error. If he had passed through the experience of God's people as He has led them for the last forty years, he would be better prepared to make the correct application of Scripture. The great waymarks of truth, showing us our bearings in prophetic history, are to be carefully guarded, lest they be torn down, and replaced with theories that would bring confusion rather than genuine light."

She ended her five-page response by noting this seventh rule: "Many theories were advanced, bearing a semblance of truth, but so mingled with Scriptures misinterpreted and misapplied that they led to dangerous errors. Very well do we know how every point of truth was established, and the seal set upon it by the Holy Spirit of God.... The leadings of the Lord were marked, and most wonderful were His revelations of what is truth. Point after point was established by the Lord God of heaven. That which was truth *then*, is truth today."⁷⁸

Later Ellen White wrote out a more extended response on this "futurism" that was being taught in Australia. Again she emphasized the role of experience that should be respected by Adventists: "The Lord will not lead minds now to set aside the truth that the Holy Spirit has moved upon His servants in the past to proclaim.... The Lord does not lay upon those who have not had an experience in His work the burden of making a new exposition of those prophecies which He has, by His Holy Spirit, moved upon His chosen servants to explain."⁷⁹

Living through the experience when truth is revealed becomes a rock-solid foundation not only for those who first experience it but also for those who later want to "re-experience" it in their own truth system. Truth, whenever found, "fits" previous truth as a tree limb "fits" its trunk. Truth is coherent.

[19]

• **Rule Eight:** *Not everything in the Bible or in the writings of Ellen White can be understood at first glance, or even after years of study.*

⁷⁸Selected Messages 2:101-104.

⁷⁹Selected Messages 2:110, 112; see Selected Messages 1:161.

This thought may sound strange to the inquiring mind. But think of astronomers and neurosurgeons (or genetic-code researchers, microchip specialists, etc.) who spend their entire lives expanding their knowledge—but feeling increasingly awed at what opens before them.

True Christians practice the principle of suspended judgment⁸⁰ when they and their colleagues reach the limit of understanding. Especially when they ponder the Biblical story (and Ellen White’s writings) on such subjects as the nature of God (not His character, of which much has been revealed), why sin developed, how Christ could become a human being, how regeneration works—they acknowledge that these “are mysteries too deep for the human mind.” They remember that we are not “to doubt His Word because we cannot understand all the mysteries of His providence.”⁸¹

To *force* an interpretation because one feels everything *must* be understood is surely to lead to a misinterpretation. Or to dismiss or disregard any portion of the Bible or the writings of Ellen White simply because some passages are not easily understood also damages one’s understanding of truth.

⁸⁰See George Reid, Ministry, Nov. 1991.

⁸¹[Testimonies for the Church 5:699](#). “The Bible is but dimly understood. A lifelong, prayerful study of its sacred revealings will leave much unexplained.”—Counsels to Writers, p. 82; “Both in divine revelation and in nature, God has given to men mysteries to command their faith. This must be so. We may be ever searching, ever inquiring, ever learning, and yet there is an infinity beyond.”—[Testimonies for the Church 8:261](#); “We can understand as much of His purposes as it is for our good to know; and beyond this we must still trust the might of the Omnipotent, the love and wisdom of the Father and Sovereign of all.”—[Testimonies for the Church 5:699](#).