

ELLEN G. WHITE ESTATE

DOCTRINAL  
DEVELOPMENT,  
AUTHORITY, AND  
ELLEN WHITE

PAUL A. GORDON



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# **Doctrinal Development, Authority, and Ellen White**

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**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 Paul A. Gordon

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## Introduction

“The very last deception of Satan will be *to make of none effect* the testimony of the Spirit of God. ‘Where there is no vision, the people perish’ ([Proverbs 29:18](#)). Satan will work ingeniously, in different ways and through different agencies, *to unsettle the confidence* of God’s remnant people in the true testimony.”—[Letter 12, 1890](#) ([Selected Messages 1:48](#)). (Emphasis supplied.)

The two marked phrases above clearly predict that the last deception will be to challenge the authority of Ellen White. Two further points: (1) The opposition will be Satan-inspired, and (2) it will occur among God’s remnant people.

This study will consider the authority of Ellen White, with special emphasis on her role in the development of doctrine among Seventh-day Adventists.

# Chapter 1—The Matter of Authority

## A. Definitions of Authority

“A right to command or to act; power exercised by a person in virtue of his office of trust.”—Webster.

“That right or power to command action or compliance, or to determine belief or custom, expecting obedience from those under authority, and in turn, giving responsible account for the claim or right to power.”—Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern of Religious Authority*, p. 10.

## B. Types of Authority

1. *Imperial*: “That power possessed by persons or ruling bodies by reason of superior position such as that of a king, the general of an army, the president of a firm, or the principal of a school.”—Ramm, p. 10.

Such authority may be gotten by inheritance, election, force, or custom. God supersedes all *human* imperial authority because He is Creator and Sustainer of all.

2. *Delegated*: “The authority of act, to compel, to have access to, in virtue of right granted by imperial authority.”—Ramm, p. 11.

Such authority must prove its origin from imperial authority. This might be a document, credentials, signature, etc. The prophet was such. The Bible offers tests by which we are to determine whether one claiming to be a genuine prophet is really authentic.

3. *Veracious*: “Authority possessed by men, books, or principles which either possess truth or aid in the determination of truth.”—Ramm, p. 12.

[2] A book may be authoritative because it is recognized as containing reliable or truthful information. A genuine prophet must meet this criteria. The Bible substantiates its claim to be veracious or truthful.

How does authority become such? There must be a recognition of it.

Martyrs died because they refused to recognize in traditions what they perceived as false authority.

The wicked will finally perish for not recognizing God and His message as true and authoritative.

“If the Scriptures are the truth of God, they are authoritative whether they are personally accepted or not, but the Scriptures function as an authority only to the believer.”—Ramm, p. 14.

### **C. Authority Under Attack**

Sacred history, especially, provides a long record of resistance and opposition to authority, beginning with Lucifer in heaven. It was such an important consideration there that he was cast out of heaven as a rebel with his angels. Similar opposition to authority has been carried on by sinners on earth. Prophets were opposed. So was Jesus. his disciples, too. Ellen White has been under the same attacks. These include claims that the messages or work are of the devil, only human, or part human and part divine.

### **D. The Prophet’s Attitude on Authority**

In the Old Testament, Jeremiah perhaps best illustrates such authority. Repeatedly he states that his message is “the word of the Lord.” He speaks, by contrast, of false prophets as giving “a vision of their own hearts, and not out of the mouth of the Lord” ([Jeremiah 23:16](#)).

The prophet’s attitude may be stated thus: He is modest about himself, but not his message.

#### *Paul*

(1) Himself ([1 Corinthians 9:16](#); [5:9](#); [2 Corinthians 12:7](#); [1 Timothy 1:15](#)).

(2) His message ([Acts 26:29](#); [1 Corinthians 2:4](#); [Galatians 1:1](#)).

#### *Ellen White*

(1) Herself: “I have no special wisdom in myself; I am only an instrument in the Lord’s hands to do the work He has set for me to do.”—[Selected Messages 3:46](#). (See also pp. 48, 49.)

(2) Her message: “Others have called me a prophetess, but I have never assumed that title.... My work includes much more than this name signifies. I regard myself as a messenger, entrusted by the Lord with messages from His people.”—[Selected Messages 1:36](#). (See also [Testimonies for the Church 5:661](#).)

In vision she was told: “In all your communications, speak as one to whom the Lord has spoken. He is your authority.”—[Letter 186, 1902](#).

[3] **E. Ellen White on Authority (The Great Controversy Introduction)**

“The Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His [God’s] will. They are the standard of character, the revealer of doctrines, and the test of experience.... Yet the fact that God has revealed His will to men through His Word, has not rendered needless the continued presence and guiding of the Holy Spirit.”—p. ix.

“During the ages while the Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testament were being given, the Holy Spirit did not cease to communicate light to individual minds, apart from the revelations to be embodied in the Sacred Canon.”—p. x.

“Through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the scenes of the long-continued conflict between good and evil have been opened to the writer of these pages.”—p. xii.

*C. S. Lewis on Christ*

“People often say about Him: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God,

or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”—*Mere Christianity*, p. 56.

*Ellen White on Ellen White*

“This work is of God, or it is not. God does nothing in partnership with Satan. My work ... bears the stamp of God or the stamp of the enemy. There is no halfway work in the matter. The *Testimonies* are of the Spirit of God, or of the devil.”—[Testimonies for the Church 4:230](#).

## **Chapter 2—Ellen White’s Role in the Church**

This role might be illustrated in several areas. It was not the same in all of them. Sometimes she took a leading part, while at other times she was supporting, confirming, or corrective. We will focus primarily on doctrinal development, with only a brief summary of three other major roles first.

### **A. Church Development and Organization**

[4] Ellen White was very active in church development and in organization, definitely taking a leading role from the beginning. Her counsels led directly to church order and discipline, a publishing business, health care institutions, a complete educational system, including a fully recognized medical training school, and a world-wide mission program.

With her husband, she promoted organization in general terms, as well as specific, even participating in choosing our church name. Later reorganization in 1901 was effected as her personal counsel was followed. Systematic giving, a developing tithing system, and even retirement provision for ministers can be traced to her counsel.

### **B. Last-Day Reforms**

The Scriptures provide basis principles of reform, but Ellen White was asked by God to institute last-day reforms in a broad spectrum including diet, dress, recreation, health habits, education, and many other areas. These reforms, especially in diet and health habits, have made Seventh-day Adventists a people ahead of their time. Confirmation for this counsel continues to come in regularly from secular sources even today.

### **C. Personal Counsel, Correction, and Encouragement**

In hundreds of letters, by public presentation, and in face-to-face contact, Ellen White gave counsel directly from vision and based on a vast store of experience as a messenger of the Lord. Scores of testimonies from those thus counseled have verified the authenticity and accuracy of the counsel thus received.

### **D. Doctrinal Development**

We will place our major emphasis on her role in this area. The Scriptures often speak of the significance of doctrine. These statements clearly show it to be important what we believe. (See [Ephesians 4:4](#); [Hebrews 13:9](#); [2 Timothy 4:3, 4](#); [1 Timothy 4:1](#); [Acts 20:29, 30](#).)

Especially in the earliest years of the Advent Movement, the Lord called upon Ellen White to issue cautions and correctives that helped believers to avoid extremes and fanaticism. But in later years as well, she opposed such teachings as pantheism from Doctor J. H. Kellogg, and heresies regarding the sanctuary advanced by A. F. Ballenger.

Before church organization the pioneers met, especially in 1847 and 1848, to study doctrine. The Whites were present. In these meetings, however, Ellen White was not an active participant, at least at their beginnings. She spoke of a “locked” mind. She could not understand their discussions. The meetings would continue sometimes for many days.

Then, when the group had done all they could from Bible study, Ellen would be given vision to confirm, correct, or help in the study in which they had been engaged. The visions were accepted as from God. The Adventist pioneers knew that when not in vision she was largely a bystander to their study. She has written several accounts of these meetings. (See [Spiritual Gifts 2:47-49](#); [Testimonies for the Church 1:75-87](#); Ms 135, 1903; [Selected Messages 1:206, 207](#); Ms 46, 1904; [Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers, 24-26, 1902](#).)

[5]

*i. The Sanctuary*

As with many other doctrines, understanding of the sanctuary was gradual. William Miller had preached that the earth was the sanctuary, and that it was to be cleansed by fire at Christ's second advent in fulfillment of [Daniel 8:14](#).

The day after the expected advent, Hiram Edson was given understanding that Christ has begun a new phase of His ministry in heaven's sanctuary on October 22, 1844. With two friends he went back to the Bible for study. One of the friends, O. R. L. Crosier, wrote two articles to explain this study—one was published in the *Day Dawn* in 1845, and the other in *The Day-Star, February, 1846*. Ellen White endorsed Crosier's presentation as correct (see [A Word to the Little Flock, 12](#)).

The sanctuary was further explained in the writings of Uriah Smith, J. N. Andrews, and James White through the pages of the church paper and in books growing out of these articles.

What was Ellen White's role? The pioneer presentations were all based on Scripture, not on her writings. Her role was a supportive one, pointing also to the Scripture for proof. A series of visions in which she was privileged to visit heaven's sanctuary further reinforced the Bible foundation for it. She also led in opposition to heretical teachings on it throughout her lifetime. And, of course, she wrote in some detail in articles and books supporting this doctrine as scriptural.

*ii. The Sabbath*

The Sabbath first came to the attention of Adventists in Washington, New Hampshire, through Rachel Oakes, a Seventh-day Baptist. Frederick Wheeler, the pastor, and two brothers, Cyrus and William Farnsworth, accepted it early. Others later joined them.

Joseph Bates in Fairhaven, Massachusetts, heard of Sabbath-keeping in Washington and traveled there in 1845 to examine it for himself. He returned home a Sabbathkeeper. He became the apostle of the Sabbath, writing articles and tracts. At the time of their marriage in August, 1846, the Whites accepted the Sabbath from one of Bates's tracts.



Bates's presentation, however, had a flaw. He believed that the Sabbath began at 6:00 p.m. on Friday. Some Adventists believe that it began at sunrise, midnight, or sunset. This variety of practice continued for about ten years.

In 1855, James White asked J. N. Andrews to study the subject and to present his finding to the others. His conclusion from Bible study was that the Sabbath begins at sunset. Bates and Ellen White still doubted. A vision was *then* given to Ellen White supporting the sunset time. Unity resulted among Adventists. (See [Testimonies for the Church 1:116](#).)

Writing a few years later about this experience, James White stated: "It does not appear to be the desire of the Lord to teach His people by the gifts of the Spirit on Bible questions until His servants have diligently searched the Word."—Editorial, [The Review and Herald, February 25, 1868](#). (See Appendix, [Testimonies for the Church 1:713, 714](#) for the more complete statement.)

### E. The Bible and the Bible Only

[6]

The Protestant position is that the Bible is the only rule of faith and practice. Adventists from the beginning have been challenged that they are not true Protestants because of their acceptance of a modern prophetic messenger. Following are several statements from the early leaders giving their reasons for belief.

*Uriah Smith.*

"The Protestant principle of 'the Bible and the Bible alone,' is of itself good and true; and we stand upon it as firmly as anyone can; but when reiterated in connection with outspoken denunciations of the visions, it has specious appearance for evil. So used it contains a covert insinuation, most effectually calculated to warp the judgment of the unguarded, that to believe the visions is to leave the Bible, and to cling to the Bible is to discard the visions....

"When we claim to stand on the Bible and the Bible alone, we bind ourselves to receive, unequivocally and fully, all that the Bible teaches."—"Do We Discard the Bible by Endorsing the Visions?" [The Review and Herald, January 13, 1863](#).

*J. N. Andrews.*

“The work of the Holy Spirit may be divided into two parts: First, that which is designed simply to convert and to sanctify the persons affected by it. Second, that which is for the purpose of opening the truth of God, and of correcting error, and of reproof and rebuking secret sins. This part of the work is wrought by what the Scriptures term spiritual gifts....

“Now it is plain that those who reject the work of the Spirit of God under the plea that the Scriptures are sufficient, do deny and reject all that part of the Bible which reveals the office and work of the Holy Spirit.”—“Our Use of the Visions of Sister White,” [The Review and Herald, February 15, 1870.](#)

*G. I. Butler.*

“If all Scripture is profitable, we suppose those portions are which teach the perpetuity of spiritual gifts, and that tell us they will be in the church in the last days, and tell us how to distinguish between the false and the genuine. These prove the visions under consideration to be of the right stamp.”—“Visions and Prophecy—Have They Been Manifested Among Seventh-day Adventists?” [The Review and Herald, January 9, 1874.](#)

*James White.*

[7] “We exhort you to shun the counsel of those who profess to take the Bible as the rule of faith and practice, but slight or reject that part of it which teaches us to seek and expect the power and gifts of the Spirit.”—“Conference Address,” [The Review and Herald, January 24, 1874.](#)

“The Bible is a perfect and complete revelation. It is our only rule of faith and practice, and future fulfillment of His Word, in these last days, by dreams and visions; according to Peter’s testimony. True visions are given to lead us to God and His written word; but those that are given for a new rule of faith and practice, separate from the Bible, cannot be from God and should be rejected.”—[A Word to the Little Flock, 13.](#)

*Ellen White.*

“I recommend to you, dear reader, the Word of God as the rule of our faith and practice. By that Word we are to be judged. God has, in that Word, promised to give visions in the ‘last days;’ not for a new rule of faith, but for the comfort of His people, and to correct those who err from Bible truth.”—[Early Writings, 78](#).

## Chapter 3—A Final Thought on Authority

Doing what is right is fundamental to Christian living. How to determine such does not come naturally. The answer is directly related to authority. As sinners, we cannot save ourselves, nor can we solely trust our own judgment. As Israel traveled to the promised land, they were instructed that if they “did what was right in God’s sight” they would prosper. (See [Exodus 15:26](#).) They did not always do this. Later, during the time of the judges, the Bible record says “every man did what was right in his own eyes.” (See [Judges 17:6; 21:25](#).) This was one of the lowest points in their history.

How did this happen? Earlier in the time of the judges we find an answer. While Joshua and the early elders lived, the record says, “The people served the Lord.” But when those died who “had seen all the great works of the Lord,” the people “forsook the Lord God” ([Judges 2:7, 10-12](#)).

Modern spiritual Israel faces the same kind of situation. The pioneers are dead. If we forget our past, we can predict our future in that of ancient Israel. But their experience does not need to be ours. From the pen of Ellen White we have the following encouraging word:

“In reviewing our past history, having traveled over every step of advance to our present standing, I can say, Praise God! As I see what the Lord has wrought, I am filled with astonishment, and with confidence in Christ as Leader. We have nothing to fear for the future except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history.”—[Life Sketches of Ellen G. White, 196](#).

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