

ELLEN G. WHITE ESTATE

ELLEN WHITE AND VEGETARIANISM



ROGER W. COON

Ellen White and Vegetarianism

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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Did She Practice What She Preached?

by Roger W. Coon Edited by Donald E. Mansell

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Chapter 1—Three Typical Charges

One hundred years ago ex-Adventist preacher, Dudley M. Canright, wrote that Mrs. White “forbade the eating of meat, ...yet secretly she herself ate meat more or less most of her life.”¹ He also is reported to have claimed that he saw James and Ellen White eat ham right in the dining room of their own home.

In 1914 Frances (“Fannie”) Bolton, a former “on-again, off-again” literary assistant of Ellen White, wrote of two incidents which purported to show Ellen White’s inconsistency with respect to meat eating. In the first example Fannie and others were traveling by train with Ellen White to California. Fannie stated;

“That at the railway depot Sr. White was not with her party, so Eld. [George B.] Starr [a member of the party] hunted around till he found her behind a screen in the restaurant very gratified in eating big white raw oysters with vinegar, pepper and salt. I was overwhelmed with this inconsistency and dumb with horror. Elder Starr hurried me out and made all sorts of excuses and justifications of Sr. White’s action; yet I kept thinking in my heart, ‘What does it mean? What has God said? How does she dare eat these abominations?’”²

The second example occurred on the same trip to California. Fannie continues:

[6] W. C. White came into the train with a great thick piece of bloody beef-steak spread out on a brown paper and he bore it through the tourist car on his two hands.

¹Endnotes D. M. Canright, *Life of Mrs. E. G. White* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Company, 1919), 289.

²Letter of Frances E. Bolton to Mrs. E. C. Slauson, Dec. 30, 1914; cited in *The Fannie Bolton Story: A Collection of Source Documents* (EGW Estate, April 1982), 109. (Hereunder cited as “Fanny Bolton Story.”)

Sarah McEnterfer who is now with Sr. White as her attendant, cooked it on a small oil stove and everyone ate of it except myself and Marian Davis.³

Can these shocking charges be explained?

In the case of Canright, the matter is resolved quite simply. By his own admission, Canright “first met” James White “and embraced the Sabbath from his preaching” in 1859.⁴ He claimed to have been a guest in the White home, and it is altogether possible that he saw pork on their table in the earliest years of their friendship, for Ellen did not receive her first vision contraindicating the eating of meat in general and pork in particular until June 6, 1863—four full years after Canright and the Whites first became acquainted!

What about the Fannie Bolton accusations?

When W. C. White learned of the 1914 letter of Fannie Bolton, he secured a copy of it and sent it to Elder Starr for comment. Starr replied:

I can only say that I regard it as the most absurdly, untruthful lot of rubbish that I have ever seen or read regarding our dear Sister White.

The event simply never occurred. I never saw your mother eat oysters or meat of any kind either in a restaurant or at her own table. Fannie Bolton’s statement ...is a lie of the first order. I never had such an experience and it is too absurd for anyone who ever knew your mother to believe....

I think this entire letter was written by Fannie Bolton in one of her most insane moments. [Fannie spent thirteen months as a mental patient in the Kalamazoo State Hospital 1911-1912 and another three and a half months in the same institution in 1924-25; she died in 1926]

When we visited Florida in 1928, Mrs. Starr and I were told that at a camp meeting, Fannie Bolton made a

³*Ibid.*, 109, 110.

⁴D. M. Canright, “My Remembrance of Elder White,” [The Review and Herald](#), August 30, 1881, p. 153. (Hereunder cited as RH.)

public statement that she had lied about Sr. White, and that she repented of it.⁵

[7] So much for the oysters story. As for the “bloody beefsteak” episode, W. C. White gives us the details of what happened:

There were about 35 of us going from Battle Creek to Oakland in 1884 in two skeleton sleeping cars....

As we approached to the border line between Nevada and California it was found that our provisions were running low. Some of us were able to make good meals out of the dried things that were left in our lunch boxes, but Sister White’s appetite failed.

We were in a country where fresh fruit was very expensive and so one morning at a station where our train had stopped for half an hour, I went out and purchased two or three pounds of beefsteak and this was cooked by Sister McEnterfer on an alcohol stove, and most of the members that composed Sister White’s party partook of it.⁶

At this point W. C. White provides a very helpful and illuminating sidelight into his mother’s dietary practices, as well as the White family at large:

When I bought the beefsteak, I reasoned that freshly killed ox from this cattle country, would probably be a healthy animal and that the risk of acquiring disease would be very small. This was eight or nine years before Sister White decided at the time of the Melbourne camp-meeting [1894] to be a teetotaler as regards the eating of flesh foods....

You will find in Sister White’s writings several instances where she says flesh meats do not appear on our table, and this was true. During a number of years

⁵Letter of George B. Starr to W. C. White, Aug. 30, 1933; cited in “Fannie Bolton Story,” 118, 119.

⁶Letter of W. C. White to George B. Starr, Aug. 24, 1933; cited in *Ibid.*, 119.

when on rare occasions a little meat was used, [it] was considered to be an emergency.⁷

The distinction between the eating of meat as a regular article of the dietary and its occasional emergency use, mentioned here by W. C. White, is one to which we will have occasion to return later on.

The credibility of a witness is a legitimate and relevant consideration in any evidentiary hearing, including this one. It may be worth [8] noting that both D. M. Canright⁸ and Fannie Bolton⁹ were known by their contemporaries for instability of character and personality. Both had an “in-and-out, in-and-out” experience in denominational employment before finally remaining out.

⁷*Ibid.*, 119, 120

⁸Cf. “D. M. Canright,” *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, revised ed. (1976), 230, 231 (hereunder cited as SDAE); and Carrie Johnson, *I Was Canright’s Secretary* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1971).

⁹Cf. “Fannie Bolton Story” and “Fannie Bolton and Her Witness—True and False,” in Arthur L. White, *The Australian Years* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1983), 237-50.

Chapter 2—A Chronology: Teaching and Practice

It is well to remember that the prophetic gift was given to a seventeen-year-old meat-eating Sunday keeper on an unrecorded day in December of 1844, and that that first vision was totally silent concerning the advantages of a vegetarian diet. Her first vision dealing with healthful living was given in the autumn of 1848, when the use of tea, coffee, and tobacco were forbidden to Sabbath keepers. ¹ Her first comprehensive health-reform vision, contraindicating the use of flesh foods, was given still later on June 6, 1863. ²

When she received her first vision, Ellen Harmon had just passed her seventeenth birthday (November 26). She was in poor health and weighed but eighty pounds. The man who would become her husband twenty-one months later described her condition at that time:

When she had her first vision, she was an emaciated invalid, given up by her friends and physicians to die of consumption.... Her nervous condition was such that she could not write, and was dependent on one sitting near her at the table to even pour her drink from the cup to the saucer. ³

At the time the health-reform message first came to her, she characterized herself as “weak and feeble, subject to frequent fainting spells.” ⁴

Concerning this condition she wrote at a later time:

¹James White, “Western Tour,” *The Review and Herald*, November 8, 1870, 165; cf. also Dores Robinson, *The Story of our Health Message* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Association, 1965), 65-70.

²*The Review and Herald*, October 8, 1867; cited in *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, 481, #1

³James White, *Life Incidents in Connection With the Great Advent 29 Movement as Illustrated by the Three Angels of Revelation XIV* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1868), 273.

⁴*Testimonies for the Church* 9:158. (Hereunder cited as 1T, 2T, etc.)

I have thought for years that I was dependent upon a meat diet for strength.... It has been very difficult for me to go from one meal to another without suffering from faintness at the stomach, and dizziness of the head.... I ...frequently

fainted.... I therefore decided that meat was indispensable in my case.... I have been troubled every spring with loss of appetite.⁵

[9]

To remedy these physical weaknesses, Ellen ate substantial quantities of meat daily. She subsequently referred to herself as “a great meat eater” in those early days.⁶ “Flesh meat ...was ...my principal article of diet.”⁷

The resulting alleviation of faintness was, however, temporary—“for the time,”⁸ as she put it—and “instead of gaining strength, I grew weaker and weaker. I often fainted from exhaustion.”⁹

Ellen White’s vision of October 21, 1858, on which she based her rebuke of “Brother and Sister A” for unduly urging abstinence from pork as a test of church fellowship, was, as far as can be ascertained, the only vision dealing with flesh foods prior to 1863. It should be noted, however, that this vision offered no clue that abstinence from flesh food would result in improved health.

As regards the rightness or wrongness of the eating of pork, Ellen White neither condoned (as is sometimes alleged) nor condemned. She did say that if this position were the mind of God, He would, in His own time, “teach His *church* their duty.”¹⁰

In His own good time and through His chosen channel of communication God did teach His people. In the first major health-reform vision of June 6, 1863, for the first time, God’s people were urged to abstain from flesh food in general, and from swine’s flesh in particular.

⁵Spiritual Gifts 4:153, 154 [1864]. (Hereunder cited as 1SG, 2SG, etc.)

⁶Testimonies for the Church 2:371, 372.

⁷Letter 83, 1901 (July 15); cited in *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, 487, #10.

⁸4SG:153.

⁹Letter 83, 1901 (July 15); cited in *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, 487, #10.

¹⁰Testimonies for the Church 1:206, 207.

Ellen White characterized this first comprehensive health-reform vision as “great light from the Lord,” adding, “I did not seek this light; I did not study to obtain it; it was given to me by the Lord to give to others.”¹¹ Expanding on this theme on another occasion, she added:

[10] The Lord presented a general plan before me. I was shown that God would give to His commandment-keeping people a reform diet, and that as they received this, their disease and suffering would be greatly lessened. I was shown that this work would progress.¹²

Mrs. White’s personal response was prompt and positive: “I accepted the light on health reform as it came to me.”¹³ “I at once cut meat out of my bill of fare;”¹⁴ indeed, she says, “I broke away from everything at once,—from meat and butter, and from [eating] three meals [a day].”¹⁵ And the result? “My former faint and dizzy feelings have left me,” as well as the problem of loss of appetite in the springtime.¹⁶ And at the age of eighty-two years she could declare, “I have better health today, notwithstanding my age, than I had in my younger days.”¹⁷

But all of this did not come without a struggle. In 1870 in recounting this struggle, she said:

I suffered keen hunger, I was a great meat eater. But when faint, I placed my arms across my stomach, and said: “I will not taste a morsel. I will eat simple food, or I will not eat at all.” ...When I made these changes I had a special battle to fight.¹⁸

¹¹Manuscript 29, 1897; cited in *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, 493, #24.

¹²The General Conference Bulletin, April 12, 1901; cited in *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, 481, 482, #2.

¹³Manuscript 50, 1904; cited in *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, 482, #3.

¹⁴Letter 83, 1901 (July 15); cited in *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, 487, #10.

¹⁵Testimonies for the Church 2:371.

¹⁶4SG:154

¹⁷Testimonies for the Church 9:159; cf. also Ms. 50, 1904, cited in *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, 482, #3.

¹⁸Testimonies for the Church 2:371, 372.

A struggle, yes, but the point is that she struggled and won. The very next year, after the 1863 health-reform vision, she could report, “I have left [off] the use of meat.”¹⁹ And five years later, in a letter to her son, Edson, in which she urged him and his family to “show true principle” in faithfulness in health reform, she assured him that she was also practicing what she preached:

We have in diet been strict to follow the light the Lord has given us.... We have advised you not to eat butter or meat. We have not had it on our [own] table.²⁰

The next year, 1870, the Whites continued to progress in the same direction. Said she:

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 broke away from everything at once.²¹

[11]

Does this mean that Ellen White never again ate a piece of meat? No, not at all. And furthermore, she did not attempt to hide this fact. There were occasional exceptions to a habitual pattern of vegetarianism. In 1890 she stated: “When I could not obtain the food I needed, I have sometimes eaten a little meat,” but even here “I am becoming more and more afraid of it.”²² And eleven years later (1901) she openly admitted that “I was at times ...compelled to eat a little meat.”²³

As we examine more specifically now the particular nature of these “times,” we discover three principal categories in which Mrs. White felt obligated to depart, temporarily, from her habitual practice of vegetarianism.

¹⁹4SG:153.

²⁰Letter 5, 1896 (May 25).

²¹Testimonies for the Church 2:371.

²²Christian Temperance and Bible Hygiene, 117, 118 (1890; hereunder cited as CTBH); cited in Counsels on Diet and Foods, 394, #699.

²³Letter 83, 1901 (July 15); cited in Counsels on Diet and Foods, 487, #10.

Chapter 3—Encountering Difficulties and Resulting Compromise

1. Travel

James and Ellen White were married on August 30, 1846. Their marriage united dual careers as itinerant preachers in a new and growing “advent movement.” Their combined ministry kept them continually on the move in a heavy travel schedule that would not let up for Ellen even after her husband’s death in 1881.

Travel in the latter half of the nineteenth century lacked the comforts and conveniences which we take for granted today—comfortable hotels/motels, restaurants or fast-food outlets with a wide choice of menus, etc. But even if these things had been available, the Whites couldn’t have afforded them. The advent movement was poor, and strict economy and continual sacrifice were a necessary way of life for church leaders as well as members. Under such circumstances it was difficult, and sometimes impossible, to follow a strictly vegetarian diet, particularly when two related types of situations are taken into account:

[12] (a) When the Whites traveled they were largely dependent upon the hospitality of fellow church members. These people were usually poor, their diet consisting almost entirely of flesh food. Fruits and vegetables, even when available, could be had only seasonally.

(b) There were also times when one or both of the Whites spent time in isolated and remote geographical regions, such as the mountains of Colorado, where one had to “live off the land.” In other words, they had to learn to hunt and fish, or else go hungry.

Some excerpts from Ellen White’s diary for September and October of 1873 illustrate this latter point. During this time she and James were virtually marooned, awaiting the return of their host, Mr. Walling, to restock their dwindling store of provisions:

September 22: Willie started over the Range today to either get supplies or get the axletree of the wagon

Walling is making. We cannot either move on or return to our home at the Mills without our wagon is repaired. There is very poor feed for the horses. Their grain is being used up. The nights are cold. Our stock of provisions is fast decreasing.

September 28: Brother Glover left the camp today to go for supplies. We are getting short of provisions.... A young man from Nova Scotia had come in from hunting. He had a quarter of deer. He had traveled twenty miles with this deer upon his back.... He gave us a small piece of the meat, which we made into broth. Willie shot a duck which came in a time of need, for our supplies were rapidly diminishing. ¹

October 5: The sun shines so pleasantly, but no relief comes to us. Our provisions have been very low for some days. Many of our supplies have gone—no butter, no sauce of any kind, no corn meal or graham flour. We have a little fine flour and that is all. We expected supplies three days ago certainly, but none has come. Willie went to the lake for water. We heard his gun and found he had shot two ducks. This is really a blessing, for we need something to live on. ²

As previously indicated, poverty made vegetarianism difficult, if not impossible for many Seventh-day Adventists in the nineteenth century. For instance, on Christmas Day, 1878, the Whites, then living in Denison, Texas, invited a destitute Adventist family to join them for Christmas breakfast. The meal included “a quarter of venison cooked, and stuffing. It was as tender as chicken. We all enjoyed it very much. There is plenty of venison in the market.” Mrs. White then wrote, “I have not seen in years so much poverty as I have seen since I have come to Texas.” ³ [13]

Ellen White served as a “missionary” to Australia from 1891 to 1900. In 1895 she wrote to Elder A. O. Tait concerning local conditions. The letter reveals her broad humanitarian spirit:

¹Manuscript 11, 1873.

²Manuscript 12, 1873.

³Letter 63, 1878 (Dec. 26).

I have been passing through an experience in this country that is similar to the experience I had in new fields in America [in the earlier decades of the nineteenth century]. I have seen families whose circumstances would not permit them to furnish their table with healthful food. Unbelieving neighbors have sent them in portions of meat from animals recently killed. They have made soup of the meat, and supplied their large families of children with meals of bread and soup. It was not my duty, nor did I think it was the duty of anyone else, to lecture them upon the evils of meat eating. I feel sincere pity for families who have newly come to the faith, and who are so pressed with poverty that they know not from whence their next meal is coming. ⁴

2. Transition with a new cook

Another exigency in Ellen White's household, which might require a temporary departure from her normally vegetarian dietary, was the hiring of a new cook who did not know how to prepare vegetarian meals. Until the new cook could be trained to prepare such dishes, diners at Ellen White's table had to eat what the new cook knew how to prepare, and this probably included meat.

[14] From the earliest days of her public ministry, which included a great deal of writing, Mrs. White found it impossible to perform the tasks she normally would have undertaken as homemaker, and she had to place the responsibilities of the domestic work in her home largely upon housekeepers and cooks. From her midtwenties (1852-55) at Rochester, New York, (when "there were twenty-two who every day gathered round our family board" ⁵), until her closing "Elmshaven years," several dozen persons might be expected to dine at Ellen White's table at any given meal.

In 1870, she wrote rather whimsically,

I prize my seamstress, I value my copyist; but my cook, who knows well how to prepare the food to sustain

⁴Letter 76, 1895 (June 6).

⁵Letter 29, 1904 (Jan. 17).

life and nourish brain, bone, and muscle, fills the most important place among the helpers in my family. ⁶

In this connection, a letter by W. C. White, written in 1935, is illuminating. Said he:

Sister White was not a cook, nor was she a food expert in the technical ways which come from study and experimentation. Often she had serious arguments with her cook. She was not always able to keep the cook which she had carefully indoctrinated into the vegetarian ideas.

Those she employed were always intelligent young people. As they would marry and leave her, she was obliged to get new cooks who were untrained in vegetarian cookery. In those days we had no schools as we have now, where our young ladies could learn the system of vegetarian cookery. Therefore, mother was obliged with all her other cares and duties to spend considerable effort in persuading her cooks that they could do without meat, or soda, and baking powder and other things condemned in her testimonies. Often times our table showed some compromises between the standard which Sister White was aiming at and the knowledge and experience and standard of the new cook. ⁷

In 1892, Mrs. White wrote to General Conference President O. A. Olsen concerning her need for a new cook and expressing the earnest hope that she might soon obtain the services of “experienced help which I so greatly needed.” [15]

Amplifying on this problem, she wrote:

I am suffering more now for want of some one who is experienced in the cooking lines, to prepare things I can eat. The cooking here in this country is in every way deficient. Take out the meat, which we seldom

⁶[Testimonies for the Church 2:370](#)

⁷Cited by Arthur L. White in a letter to Anna Frazier, Dec. 18, 1935.

use,—and I dare not use it here at all,—and sit at their tables, and if you can sustain your strength, you have an excellent constitution. Food is prepared in such a way that it is not appetizing, but is having the tendency to dry up the desire for food. I would pay a higher price for a cook than for any other part of my work.... I am really perplexed over this matter. Were I to act over the preparation in coming to this place, I would say, Give me an experienced cook, who has some inventive powers, to prepare simple dishes healthfully, and that will not disgust the appetite. I am in earnest in this matter. ⁸

3. Therapeutic Use in Medical Emergencies

A third category of situation in which Ellen White might depart from a vegetarian pattern of eating was in cases of medical emergency, in which meat might temporarily serve therapeutic purposes. In 1874, in a letter to her son, W. C. White, Mrs. White made mention of an interesting (and singular) exception to the vegetarian regimen then in vogue in the White household:

Your father and I have dropped milk, cream, butter, sugar and meat entirely since we came to California.... Your father bought meat once for May [Walling, a grand-niece of Ellen's] while she was sick, but not one penny have we expended on meat since. ⁹

Ellen White was not a fanatic on the meat-eating question. In a *Youth's Instructor* article published in 1894, she declared:

[16] A meat diet is not the most wholesome of diets, and yet I would [not] take the position that meat should be discarded by every one. Those who have feeble digestive organs can often use meat when they cannot eat vegetables, fruit, or porridge. ¹⁰

⁸Letter 19c, 1892 (Jan.).

⁹Letter 12, 1874 (Feb. 15).

¹⁰The *Youth's Instructor*, May 31, 1894; cited in *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, 394, 395, #700. (Hereunder cited as YI.)

Due to a typographical error the second not in the first sentence of the foregoing excerpt was omitted. This omission was rectified, when Elder O. A. Tait wrote to ask Mrs. White to clarify what she meant. She then went on to amplify her position on the meat question, saying:

I have never felt that it was my duty to say that no one should taste of meat under any circumstances. To say this when the people have been educated to live on flesh to so great an extent [in Australia, in 1894] would be carrying matters to extremes. I have never felt that it was my duty to make sweeping assertions. What I have said I have said under a sense of duty, but I have been guarded in my statements, because I did not want to give occasion for any one to be a conscience for another.

¹¹

In dealing with certain illnesses, and in particular terminal cases, Mrs. White took a sensible position. She said:

In certain cases of illness or exhaustion it may be thought best to use some meat, but great care should be taken to secure the flesh of healthy animals. It has become a very serious question whether it is safe to use flesh food at all in this age of the world. It would be better never to eat meat than to use the flesh of animals that are not healthy. ¹²

To physicians at Adventist sanitariums in 1896 Ellen White cautioned,

You are to make no prescriptions that flesh meats shall never be used, but you are to educate the mind, and let the light shine in. Let the individual conscience be awakened in regard to self-preservation and self-purity from every perverted appetite....

¹¹Letter 76, 1895 (June 6).

¹²*Christian Temperance and Bible Hygiene*, 117, 118 (1890); cited in *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, 394, #699.

The change should not be urged to be made abruptly, especially for those who are taxed with continuous labor. Let the conscience be educated, the will energized, and the change can be made much more readily and willingly.¹³

[17] Mrs. White then pointed out that “consumptives who are going steadily down to the grave” and “persons with tumors running their life away” should not be burdened about the meat question; and physicians should “be careful to make no stringent resolution in regard to this matter.”¹⁴

Responding to an inquiry from a physician about whether chicken broth might be appropriate for one suffering from acute nausea and unable to keep anything on the stomach, Mrs. White wrote: “There are persons dying of consumption [tuberculosis] who, if they ask for chicken broth, should have it. But I would be very careful.”¹⁵

4. In addition to the three foregoing categories of exceptions to a vegetarian diet, there is a fourth to be considered. Were there instances when the family grew a bit careless, or when Ellen White was struggling against a craving for meat (she admitted to loving the taste of meat), when she actually slipped, and lost—if only temporarily—the battle?

The White Estate is not aware of any definitive, documented evidence of such a short-coming. Should such evidence be forthcoming, it would simply show the humanness of prophets. So far as this researcher is aware, the nearest thing to such a slip is an oblique reference to “conscience” in a letter Ellen White wrote February 19, 1884, to “Harriet [Smith],” wife of Review editor, Uriah Smith. Said she:

“I am happy to report I am in excellent health. I have proscribed [i.e., banned] all meat, all butter. None appears on my table. My head is clearer, my strength firmer, and my conscience more free, for I know I am following the light which God has given us.”¹⁶

¹³Letter 54, 1896 (July 10); cited in *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, 291, 292, #434

¹⁴Ibid

¹⁵Letter 231, 1905 (July 11); cited in *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, 292, #435.

¹⁶Letter 11a, 1884 (Feb. 19).

Does this mean that Ellen White had been falling into temptation to satisfy a craving for flesh foods, but had now gained the victory, and that as a result her conscience was now more free from guilt feelings? Perhaps, but it seems impossible from the letter itself to arrive at a conclusive determination. [18]

The Scriptures were written, not only by those properly categorized as “holy men of God [who] spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Peter 1:21), but also by men who occasionally lapsed into sin.

Chapter 4—The Brighton Camp Meeting: A Transition

While Ellen White was attending the camp meeting at Brighton, near Melbourne, in January 1894, her mind was exercised on the subject of meat-eating, and the overwhelming conviction came to her that from now on meat should find no place in her dietary under any circumstance. So, with characteristic forthrightness, she “absolutely banished meat from my table. It is an understanding that [from now on] whether I am at home or abroad, nothing of this kind is to be used in my family, or come upon my table.” Furthermore, Mrs. White went to the unusual expedient of drawing up and signing a “pledge to my heavenly Father,” in which she “discarded meat as an article of diet.” Said she: “I will not eat flesh myself, or set it before any of my household. I gave orders that the fowls should be sold, and that the money which they brought in should be expended in buying fruit for the table.”¹

Subsequent evidence will show that she kept this pledge. Thus in 1908, just seven years before her death at eighty-seven, Mrs. White declared, “It is many years since I have had meat on my table at home.”²

¹Letter 76, 1895 (June 6) (a portion of this letter is published in [Counsels on Diet and Foods](#), 488, #12).

²Letter 50, 1908 (Feb. 5); cited in [Counsels on Diet and Foods](#), 492, #23.

Chapter 5—The Question of Fish and Shellfish

While Mrs. White gave up meat-eating in 1894, she did not at the same time give up the eating of fish, although the evidence seems fairly clear that she discontinued even the use of this article of diet before the end of the 1890s, as we shall show. But before we examine this seeming “inconsistency,” let us briefly inquire into Ellen White’s position relative to what today the church considers to be “unclean” shellfish. [19]

In 1882 Ellen White wrote a letter to her daughter-in-law, Mary Kelsey White (Willie’s first wife), who was living with her husband in Oakland, California. In this letter she included a “shopping list” of things to bring on their next visit to her home. Concerning certain items on this list, she said:

“If you can get a good box of herrings—fresh ones—please do so. The last ones that Willie got are bitter and old.... If you can get a few cans of good oysters, get them.”¹

If such a purchase order seems strange to us today, it must be remembered that the question of whether or not shellfish was permissible under the Levitical code was still a moot question among Adventists in the 1880s. Evidence that this was true is seen in an interesting exchange in the columns of the *Review* the very next year (1883).

W. H. Littlejohn, pastor of the Battle Creek Tabernacle, pamphleteer, and soon to be elected president of Battle Creek College,² was conducting a question-and-answer column in the general church paper. In the August 14, 1883 issue he dealt with the question: “Are oysters included among the unclean animals of [Leviticus 11](#), and do you think it is wrong to eat them?”

¹Letter 16, 1882 (May 31).

²“Littlejohn, Wolcott Hackley,” SDAE (rev. ed.), 794. 30

Littlejohn's response clearly illustrates the slow, tentative process by which Adventists worked their way through the question of permissible versus impermissible kinds of flesh food as they proceeded to their present rather decided position. ³ Littlejohn replied: "It is difficult to decide with certainty whether oysters would properly come under the prohibition of [Leviticus 11:9-12](#)." He then went on to opine, "It would, however, seem from the language, as if they might [be unclean]." ⁴

[20] As regards the Levitical distinction between "clean" and "unclean," there is evidence that Ellen White drew a distinction between "clean" animal flesh food, which she calls "meat," and "clean" fish. This is a common distinction made in many parts of the world, even today. So, when Ellen White took the no-meat pledge, she did not mean she had given up the eating of fish. The distinction she made respecting meat and fish is made abundantly clear in her correspondence.

In 1876, for instance, Mrs. White wrote her husband who was traveling, "We have not had a particle of meat in the house since you left and long before you left. We have had salmon a few times. It has been rather high." ⁵ (She is here referring to the price, of course.)

When Ellen White signed the no-meat pledge at the Brighton camp meeting, she obviously did not include "clean" fish, for the next year, in a letter to A. O. Tait, she remarked that "we seldom have any fish upon our table," and she went on to give in detail her reason for decreasing consumption of this article of food:

In many localities even fish is unwholesome, and ought not be used. This is especially so where fish come in contact with sewerage of large cities.... These fish that partake of the filthy sewerage of the drains may pass into waters far distant from the sewerage, and be caught in localities where the water is pure and fresh;

³"Littlejohn, Wolcott Hackley," SDAE (rev. ed.), 794.

⁴"Scripture Questions. Answered by W. H. Littlejohn," [The Review and Herald](#), August 14, 1883, 522.

⁵Letter 13, 1876 (Apr. 24).

but because of the unwholesome drainage in which they have been feeding, they are not safe to eat.⁶

In spite of this possible danger, there were circumstances in Australia, in the mid-1890s when Mrs. White recognized that it was proper, even necessary, to include fish in the daily menu. Thus in a letter to her son, W. C. White, in 1895, she wrote concerning the problems in feeding the workmen then building Avondale College. Said she:

We cannot feed them all, but will you please get us dried codfish and dried fish of any description,—nothing canned? This will give a good relish to the food.⁷

[21]

In 1896, Mrs. White wrote to a non-Adventist niece, Mrs. Mary Watson (nee Clough), who at one time served her as a literary assistant, and said, referring to her Brighton “pledge”:

Two years ago I came to the conclusion that there was danger in using the flesh of dead animals, and since then I have not used meat at all. It is never placed on my table. I use fish when I can get it. We get beautiful fish from the salt water lake near here. I use neither tea nor coffee. As I labor against these things, I cannot but practice that which I know to be best for my health, and my family are all in perfect harmony with me. You see, my dear niece, that I am telling you matters just as they are.⁸

But by 1898 Ellen White had concluded that the flesh of fish as well as the flesh of animals was no longer safe to eat and hence should not be served at the new Adventist sanitarium in Sydney. Taking issue with three sanitarium physicians who were prescribing a meat diet for their patients, Mrs. White surveyed the history of the question in a letter to Dr. John Harvey Kellogg:

⁶Letter 76, 1895 (June 6).

⁷Letter 149, 1895 (Aug. 6).

⁸Letter 128, 1896 (July 9).

Years ago the light was given me that the position [at that time] should not be taken positively to discard all meat.... [But] I present the word of the Lord God of Israel ...[that] meat eating [now] should not come into prescriptions for any invalids from any physician [in our institutions] ...[because] disease in cattle is making meat eating a dangerous matter. The Lord's curse is upon the earth, upon man, upon beast, *upon the fish in the sea*, and as transgression becomes almost universal the curse will be permitted to become as broad and as deep as the transgression. Disease is contracted by the use of meat....

[22]

The Lord would bring His people into a position where they will not touch or taste the flesh of dead animals. Then let not these things be prescribed by any physician who has a knowledge of the truth for this time. There is no safety in eating of the flesh of dead animals, and in a short time the milk of the cows will also be excluded from the diet of God's commandment-keeping people. In a short time it will not be safe to use *anything that comes from the animal creation*....

We cannot now do as we have ventured to do in the past in regard to meat-eating.... The disease upon animals is becoming more and more common, and our only safety is in leaving meat entirely alone.⁹ Emphasis supplied.

Here Ellen White indicates that fish as well as meat should not be prescribed in Adventist health institutions. And by 1905 it appears she was as afraid of fish as earlier she had been of meat; for in writing the chapter on "Flesh as Food" for *Ministry of Healing*, she stated:

In many places fish become so contaminated by the filth on which they feed as to be a cause of disease. This is especially the case where the fish come in contact with the sewage of large cities.... Thus when used as

⁹Letter 59, 1898 (July 26).

food they bring disease and death on those who do not suspect the danger. ¹⁰

¹⁰[The Ministry of Healing, 314, 315](#). (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1905) (Hereunder cited as MH.)

Chapter 6—The Allegation of Hypocrisy

Was Ellen White a “hypocrite” for urging Seventh-day Adventists to follow vegetarianism, beginning in 1863, while on the other hand she “secretly” ate flesh foods for the next three decades and more? Let us begin by letting Ellen White define the terms: *vegetarian*, and *principle*.

As we have already noted, from W. C. White’s letter to George B. Starr in 1933, “For years the White family had been vegetarians, but not ‘teetotalers.’”¹ An interesting, and even more illuminating distinction is revealed in a letter Mrs. White wrote in 1894 to Mrs. M. M. J. O’Kavanagh, a non-Adventist active in the cause of temperance in Australia, who had inquired about the position of Adventists as “total abstainers”:

[23]

I am happy to assure you that as a denomination we are in the fullest sense total abstainers from the use of spiritous liquors, wine, beer, [fermented] cider, and also tobacco and all other narcotics.... All are vegetarians, many abstaining wholly from the use of flesh food, while others use it in only the most moderate degree.²

This statement makes it clear that for Ellen White the term *vegetarian* applied to those who habitually abstained from eating flesh food, yet were not necessarily total abstainers. As for the term *principle*, Ellen White frequently used it in her writings in connection with health reform. In 1904, at the age of seventy-six, she reported that she was experiencing better health than “I had in my younger days,” and she attributed this improvement in health to “the principles of health reform.”³

¹By “teetotalers” W. C. White was obviously referring to total abstinence from flesh foods, not total abstinence from alcohol.

²Letter 99, 1894 (Jan. 8).

³Manuscript 50, 1904; cited in *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, 482, #3.

Here now are some further examples of her use of the term *principle*. In 1897, she wrote, “I present these matters [health reform] before the people, dwelling upon general principles.”⁴ In 1870, speaking of her response to the health reform vision of 1863, she said,

I left off these things from principle. I took my stand on health reform from principle.... I moved out from principle, not from impulse.

[And] I have advanced nothing but what I stand to today.⁵

In 1908 she added:

It is reported by some that I have not lived up to the principles of health reform, as I have advocated them with my pen. But I can say that so far as my knowledge goes, I have not departed from those principles.⁶

And the next year (1909), with criticism still persisting, she again defended herself:

It is reported by some that I have not followed the principles of health reform as I have advocated them with my pen; but I can say that I have been a faithful health reformer. Those who have been members of my family know that this is true.⁷

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The accusation by the critics—of her time as well as ours—is apparently based on the facile assumption that Mrs. White considered vegetarianism a “principle.” That she did not will now be made clear.

In his book *A Prophet Among You*, T. Housel Jemison offers three principles of hermeneutics for the interpretation of inspired writings. In the third one, he says, in effect: Every prophet, speaking in his

⁴Manuscript 29, 1897; cited in *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, 493, #24.

⁵Testimonies for the Church 2:372.

⁶Letter 50, 1908 (Feb. 5); cited in *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, 491, 492, #23.

⁷Testimonies for the Church 9:159

or her professional capacity as a prophet, in the giving of counsel, is doing one of two things; either he or she is (1) enunciating a principle, or (2) applying a principle in a policy statement. Therefore he concludes, “One should try to discover the principle involved in any specific counsel.”⁸

A principle is generally defined as “a basic truth or a general law or doctrine that is used as a basis of reasoning or a guide to action or behavior.”⁹ Principles, therefore, are unchanging, unvarying rules of human conduct. Principles never change. A policy, on the other hand, is the application of a principle to some immediate, contextual situation. Policies may (and do) change, as the circumstances which call them forth may change.

That vegetarianism was not a principle with Ellen White is clear from her statement that:

I have never felt that it was my duty to say that no one should taste meat under any circumstance. To say this ...would be carrying matters to extremes. I have never felt that it was my duty to make sweeping assertions.¹⁰

This was doubtless one of the main reasons Mrs. White refused to go along with the idea of making vegetarianism a test of church “fellowship” promoted by some of her brethren.¹¹ On the contrary, while recognizing that

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“swine’s flesh was prohibited by Jesus Christ enshrouded in the billowy cloud” during the Exodus, Ellen White stated emphatically in 1889 that even the eating of pork “is not a test question.”¹²

⁸T. Housel Jemison, *A Prophet Among You* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1955), 445.

⁹Oxford American Dictionary, 1980 edition.

¹⁰[Letter 76, 1895](#) (June 6).

¹¹[Testimonies for the Church 9:159](#)

¹²[Manuscript 15, 1889](#). For a further declaration against making either the raising of swine or the eating of pork “in any sense a test of Christian fellowship,” cf. [Selected Messages 2:338](#)

Writing to Adventist colporteurs in the same manuscript, she said: “I advise every Sabbathkeeping canvasser to avoid meat eating, not because it is regarded as a sin to eat meat, but because it is not healthful.”

It is obvious that vegetarianism was not a principle with Christ or with the patriarchs or prophets of Scripture, for they all ate flesh-meats. The Passover required the eating of lamb—and this by divine direction. Christ and His disciples ate fish from Galilee more than once—and in so doing none of them violated principle, and none of them thereby committed sin.

Vegetarianism for Ellen White was a policy, based upon at least two principles: (1) “Preserve the best health,”¹³ and (2) “eat that food which is most nourishing,”¹⁴ doing the very best possible, under every immediate circumstance, to promote life, health, and strength.

Now Ellen White did apply those principles in an inspired policy statement governing “countries where there are fruits, grains, and nuts in abundance.” In such places, she said quite clearly, “Flesh food is not the right food for God’s people.”¹⁵

¹³The Youth’s Instructor, May 31, 1894; cited in *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, 395, #700.

¹⁴Testimonies for the Church 9:163.

¹⁵Testimonies for the Church 9:159.

Chapter 7—Ellen White Not Our Criterion

One of the most sensible things Ellen White ever wrote on the subject of health reform was the following:

Those who understand the laws of health and who are governed by principle, will shun the extremes, both of indulgence and of restrictions. Their diet is chosen, not for the mere gratification of appetite, but for the upbuilding of the body. They seek to preserve every power in the best condition for the highest service to God and man....

[26] There is real common sense in dietetic reform. The subject should be studied broadly and deeply, and no one should criticize others because their practice is not, in all things, in harmony with his own. It is impossible [in matters of diet] to make an unvarying rule to regulate everyone's habits, and no one should think himself a criterion for all. ¹

Not only did Ellen White not wish to be a criterion for church members, but neither did she wish to be a criterion for the members of her immediate family (“I do not hold myself up as a criterion for them”). ²

Just prior to the opening of the 1901 General Conference Session, Ellen White met with a handful of denominational leaders in the library of Battle Creek College, where she spoke concerning those who made her their criterion in their dietary practice. Here are her remarks as recorded by Clarence C. Crisler, her secretary:

How it has hurt me to have the [road] blocks thrown in the way in regard to myself.

¹The Ministry of Healing, 319, 320

²Letter 127, 1904 (Jan. 18); cited in *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, 491, #22.

They will tell [you],...“Sister White ate cheese, and therefore we are all at liberty to eat cheese.”

Well, who told them I ate cheese?...I never have cheese on my table.

There was but ...one or two times I have tasted cheese [since I gave it up]. That is a different thing from making it a diet, [an] entirely different thing....

But there was a special occasion in Minneapolis where ...I could get nothing, and there were some little bits of cheese cut up on the table, and the brethren were there, and one of them had told me, “If you eat a little of that cheese, it will change the condition [of your appetite?],” and I did. I took a bit of that cheese. I do not think that I touched it again the second time....

Sister White has not had meat in her house or cooked it in any line, or any dead flesh, for years and years.

And here is [what] the health reform [fanatic says:] “Now I have told you Sister White did not eat meat. Now I want you not to eat meat, because Sister White does not eat it.”

Well, I would ...not care a farthing, for anything like that. If you have not got any better conviction—you won’t eat meat because Sister White does not eat any—if I am the authority, I would not give a farthing for your health reform.

What I want [is] that every one of you should stand in your individual dignity before God, in your individual consecration to God, that the soul-temple shall be dedicated to God. “Whosoever defileth the temple of God, him will God destroy.” Now I want you to think of these things, and do not make any human being your criterion. ³

[27]

³Manuscript 43a, 1901; a verbatim transcript by Clarence C. Crisler, Mrs. White’s personal secretary. (For other transcripts with slight variations, cf. Mss. 43, 43bI, 43bII, and 43bIII.)

Chapter 8—The Importance of Historical Perspective

Ellen White needs to be considered against the backdrop of her times, not ours! Conditions in her times were quite different from those that obtain today.

Many household conveniences which we take for granted, such as refrigerators and food freezers for preserving fruits, vegetables, and other perishable foods, were virtually unknown in her time. In her day fruits and vegetables were available only in season. For much of the year fresh produce simply was not available, so that one either ate meat, or he didn't eat at all. Meat eating was, therefore, more common (and generally more necessary) in Ellen White's time than in ours—at least in today's more developed countries.

Something else worth remembering is that Ellen White never took away flesh food as an article of diet from anyone until there first was an adequate nutritional substitute available to take its place. ¹ The dry-cereal breakfast foods were not developed and marketed until the mid-1890s. Peanut butter, another excellent source of protein, also was not invented until the mid-1890s. ² So there was often more reason—because of greater need—for people in her day to eat meat than there is for most of us in our day.

¹The Ministry of Healing, 316, 317.

²Richard William Schwarz, John Harvey Kellogg: American Health Reformer (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1964), p. 283.

Chapter 9—Conclusion

Ellen White had to face accusations against her integrity in her own lifetime. Similar charges against her today are neither new nor startling, when one examines the facts. Shortly after the turn of the century she was accused of hypocrisy (if not duplicity) in publicly advocating vegetarianism to her fellow church members while she continued (allegedly) secretly to follow a flesh diet. Such charges are, as we have demonstrated, unjustified and without foundation. [28]

To gain a proper understanding of the charges leveled against Ellen White's integrity, one must view them from the broader perspective of Satan's latter day objectives and methodology as revealed to Ellen White in 1890. She declared that Satan's "very last deception" would be to destroy her credibility, and create a "satanic" hatred against her writings. ¹

The case against Ellen White's integrity, as far as research has revealed to date, is still as unfounded and unproven as it was during the lifetime of the prophet.

¹Selected Messages 1:48.

About The Author

Dr. Roger W. Coon is an associate secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate. During the past thirty-eight years he has served the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a preacher, pastor, evangelist, hospital chaplain, college and seminary professor, public relations director, radio broadcaster, foreign missionary, writer, and administrator. His wife, the former Irene Strom, is a certified public accountant. The Coons have two children, Donald, an electronics technician, and Susan, a registered nurse.

About The Book

It is said that "to err is human," and this certainly is true of the judgments certain critics of Ellen White have made, claiming that, on the one hand, she urged vegetarianism on Seventh-day Adventists, while on the other, she "secretly" ate meat. This little booklet brings out all the relevant facts and offers a reasonable explanation for these charges.

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