

ELLEN G. WHITE ESTATE

THE VOICE OF THE SPIRIT

JUAN CARLOS VIERA

A silhouette of a person with their arms raised in a gesture of praise or prayer, set against a background of a golden, cloudy sky. The person is positioned in the lower right corner, with their arms reaching upwards towards the center of the frame. The overall color palette is warm, dominated by shades of gold and brown.

The Voice of The Spirit

Ellen G. White

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Overview

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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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How God Has Led His People Through the Gift of Prophecy
BY JUAN CARLOS VIERA

Prologue

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“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” ([Hebrews 1:1, 2](#)). This biblical declaration introduces us to the marvelous world of divine communication; a communication that is simple and complex; well known and mysterious; divine and human. The purpose of this book is to analyze that which we can understand with our human finite minds about how God speaks to humanity.

The starting point for our study is a firm belief in the existence of God, a personal God who speaks and communicates, and who is interested in intervening in human affairs— “Because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists” ([Hebrews 11:6](#)). This simple concept, developed within the context of a definition of faith, establishes the basic way in which the believer approaches the theme of divine communication: “God exists. He is a personal Being and wishes to have communication with me.” This starting point may seem too simple, even naive. The secular viewpoint that affects the world in general may also affect the Christian who struggles to maintain his beliefs in the midst of an incredulous world.

Jesus Christ, The Epitome Of Divine Communication

Our analysis will begin with Jesus, our Saviour, because He represents the epitome of revelation and of God’s communication. Even before His incarnation, the “Word” had communicated divine truth to the prophets of the Old Testament. In coming to this world, His person, His message, and His ministry demonstrated for all to see that Divinity wished to communicate with humanity. The relationship of Christ with human beings did not end, however, with His ascension to the right hand of the Father. His plan was to continue in communion with His people, to continue speaking to them and showing His love for them. And “the testimony of Jesus”

fulfills this purpose. The work and the message of the prophets is not something separate from Christ and the plan of salvation; it is an integral part of the divine program for humanity.

It was Christ Himself who informed His followers that the Holy Spirit would be the One in charge of communicating the divine message to the human race. The Comforter, the Holy Spirit, Jesus said, “will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” “he will guide you into all truth” ([John 14:26; 16:13](#)). The church of Christ would advance confidently, guided by the indispensable help of the Spirit.

One of the presuppositions of this analysis is that the Holy Spirit fulfills His teaching ministry and leadership of the church mostly through the prophetic gift. It is true that we cannot limit the work of the Holy Spirit, since He assigns and uses spiritual gifts “as he determines” ([1 Corinthians 12:11](#)). The history of God’s people, nevertheless, in biblical times and in contemporary times, shows that the Spirit guided the church through the function and message of the prophets.

The Human Instrument

God did not choose supernatural beings to communicate His message, nor did He choose “grand superhuman language.” He chose human messengers who, utilizing human language, would communicate the divine message. This relationship between a divine message and human messengers makes the divine communication unique in itself. Furthermore, this divine-human relationship is not only unique, it is also mysterious and sometimes seems incomprehensible to our finite understanding. To try to understand this relationship between a divine message, perfect and infallible, and a human messenger, imperfect and fallible, is one of the important goals of this book.

Furthermore, it is not only the instrument selected by God to communicate His message, the prophet who is human. Those who receive the message are also human. The divine communication, as the term itself indicates, originates with God. It is truly the testimony of Jesus and the voice of the Spirit. It is, however, destined for human beings who, since the entrance of sin, have limited, and often

completely contrary, perceptions of the great facts of life. The way that we human beings perceive, interpret, and ultimately handle, the message of God is of absolute importance to the accomplishment of the divine objectives in communicating that message. Ultimately, this is the fundamental step through which the divine-human communication is made effective. If the human receptor is not willing to receive a communication, or perceives it incorrectly, or rejects it because it does not meet his expectations or because it confronts him with changes in his traditional way of living or acting, then God's purpose is not fulfilled, and this human being is left to his own fate, a major tragedy for anyone's life.

It is for these reasons that the ultimate purpose of this book is to confirm the believer in the assurance that God does speak to us, and that He does it with the sole purpose that each of us, in a personal way, may be "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" ([2 Timothy 3:15](#)).

Juan Carlos Viera

Chapter 1— The Divine Instrument

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Jesus Christ is God’s ultimate revelation to the human race. “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy” ([Colossians 1:15-18](#)).

In this hymn of praise, the apostle, inspired by the Spirit, describes the exalted position of Christ our Saviour. Jesus Christ is not only a visible revelation of the invisible God, He is also the Lord of the universe and of the church. As Creator, He directs the entire universe. As head of the church, He directs His representatives on the earth.

Christ, Head Of The Church

This illustration of Christ as the head of the church ¹ is precisely accurate in describing His relationship with the church. The church is sometimes referred to as the “mystic body of Christ.” For the sake of comparison, Christ might also be referred to as the “mystic head of the church.” The idea of a “mystic” relationship between Christ and His church could cause confusion, however. Even if the expression “mystic” is used in the sense of “symbolic,” Christ’s relationship to His church is really much more than that: it is practical and real. As head, Christ originates, sets the agenda, and plans the objectives and purposes for the church. He hears and listens to its needs. He is moved by its victories and suffers with its defeats. Mainly, however, He desires to communicate regularly with it to guide and direct it.

[10]

¹In addition to the reference in Colossians, Paul uses the illustration of Christ as the head of the church in other epistles. See, for instance, [Ephesians 1:20-23](#); [4:13-16](#).

To accept Christ as head of the church means to accept His plans and purposes for it. It also means to accept the way He has chosen to direct it. In His capacity as leader and head of the church, Jesus Christ is sovereign. This sovereignty is manifested both in the selection of the human instruments He uses to communicate with His people and in the form in which He communicates. We may sometimes be tempted to question the Lord regarding His selection of “messengers,” who are all too similar to ourselves: human, imperfect, weak, and even sinful, as we ourselves are. Had we been doing the selecting, we would have probably chosen the angels to communicate God’s message. We would undoubtedly have felt their authority to be superior to that of those human beings who speak to us in God’s name as His representatives. Nevertheless, the election of human instruments is an act of divine sovereignty. “But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him” (1 [Corinthians 1:27-29](#)).

Divine sovereignty is also shown in the selection of the way in which the message is communicated. God did not choose a “grand superhuman language”² but common language in which men can communicate and understand each other. In reading and analyzing the text of the divine message, we may again be tempted to question the Lord for having chosen a means of communication as commonplace as human language, instead of a thunderous voice from heaven, or through a miraculous intervention, directly to our minds. A literary critic may find the divine message so similar to human communication that he refuses to believe it to be divinely inspired. But divine Sovereignty has made the selection, and it remains for human beings to accept it or reject it, but not to change it, modify it, or try to improve on it. Again the Scriptures remind us: “We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 [Corinthians 4:7](#)).

²This expression is part of a description that Ellen White makes about the type of language that God uses to communicate His message, a human language, therefore limited and imperfect. See [Selected Messages 1:20](#).

The Holy Spirit: The Person Of The Divinity In Charge Of Communication

The choice of the Holy Spirit as the person of the Divinity in charge of communicating the message to humanity is also an act of divine sovereignty. In the Old Testament, the work of the Spirit as the communicator of divine truth can already be seen. David, king, prophet, and author of most of the psalms, declares: “The Spirit of the Lord spoke through me; his word was on my tongue” (2 Samuel 23:2). Ezekiel states: “Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon me” (Ezekiel 11:5).

It is in the New Testament, however, that the work of the Holy Spirit as the communicator of the divine message is most clearly seen. Jesus Himself was responsible for announcing the important work of the Spirit and His relationship to the church. This ministry would be fulfilled, Jesus promised, through three specific functions: (1) The Spirit would act as a “witness” of Christ, giving testimony about Him; (2) The Spirit would act as “teacher” of the church, teaching His followers “all things”: (3) The Spirit would act as “leader” of the church to guide it “into all truth.” We will briefly analyze each of these functions of the Holy Spirit in the church. [12]

“He Will Testify About Me”

The expression “the testimony of Jesus,” appears in the book of Revelation with specific application to the gift of prophecy and the work of the prophets (Revelation 1:2, 9; 12:17; 19:10). However, this and other similar designations such as “the testimony of God,” or “the revelation of Jesus Christ,” were apparently popular usages in referring to the messages coming from the Holy Spirit through the New Testament prophets.³ Christ used this expression to refer to the work of the Spirit. “He,” the Lord declared, “will testify about me” (John 15:26). Here, Jesus describes the work of the Spirit specifically in terms of giving “testimony.” His task would be to give testimony about God’s great acts in the person of Christ. His

³The apostle Paul uses the expression “the testimony of God” to refer to the messages he received from the Spirit and that he shared with the believers and leaders of the church. See Acts 20:20-27; 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. The apostle John uses the expression “the revelation of Jesus” at the beginning of the book of Revelation 1:1.

function would be that of a divine communicator—to make known the mysteries of salvation that have as their central figure the Man of Calvary.

[13] When speaking about the work of the Holy Spirit, many believers describe Him in subjective terms: a force, a power, or a special gift used to carry out a certain task. Christ, however, describes the work of the Spirit as an objective function. The Spirit speaks, communicates, and enters into contact with humanity to give testimony about Jesus. Clearly it is an activity in which the voice of the Spirit becomes audible. How does He do it? With whom does He communicate? These are the basic questions that this book will attempt to answer.

“The Testimony Of Jesus” In The Last Days

For those of us who live in the last days, it is of real comfort to know that the testimony of the Spirit did not cease with the closing of the canon of Holy Scripture. The same Lord who promised His disciples that the Holy Spirit would give testimony about Him, also revealed to His servant John ([Revelation 1:1, 2](#)) that “the testimony of Jesus,” in other words, the voice of the Spirit ([Revelation 12:17](#)), would again be manifested in the remnant church at the time of the end. Fortunately, the Lord has not left His church in these difficult days without information and communication. If anyone may entertain doubts about being part of God’s church, all he needs to do is to recall the characteristics of the true church enunciated by the Lord to His servant John in the book of Revelation. These words reaffirm assurance that God’s church at the time of the end sustains and defends the faith of Jesus (14:12), keeps the commandments of God, and has the testimony of Jesus Christ. As a result, it suffers the hatred of the forces of evil (12:17). It is imperfect and faulty. The faithful and true Witness, however, offers a remedy for its situation (3:14-19). Christ’s testimony, the voice of the Spirit, always has as its objective to remedy the imperfections of His church.

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“He Will Teach You All Things”

The Holy Spirit was also designated as the divine instrument in charge of the teaching ministry of the church, assigned to teach everything necessary for the instruction and correction of the church. “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you,” Jesus promised ([John 14:26](#)). The teaching ministry of the Spirit is absolutely indispensable for the instruction of the church, because the church is made up of human beings limited by human frailties. As members of God’s church, we may be sincere and honest in our search for answers to the big questions of life, of the universe, and of salvation, but this is not enough to give us the assurance that we have actually encountered the truth. In these matters it is indispensable to accept that a supernatural source of knowledge is required. The Holy Spirit was promised precisely as that special source of instruction for the church.

Whom Does The Spirit Teach?

In view of the importance of the instruction of the Holy Spirit to the church, we need to elaborate on some aspects related to the topic. First of all, we need to define the receivers of these instructions. Second, what type of authority do these instructions or teachings have? Some well-intentioned Christians, after having prayed for the illumination of the Spirit as they study, then teach and preach convinced that every thought that comes to their minds—any interpretation or teaching—is true because they have asked for the illumination of the Holy Spirit. It may be well to ask ourselves at this point what the Lord’s original intention was in promising the teaching and instruction of the Spirit. [15]

One of the basic principles of biblical interpretation is to analyze the historical context in which a declaration was made. In this case, when the Lord said: “He [the Holy Spirit] will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you,” His audience at that historical moment was specific and limited. The message was given in the upper room, and Jesus’ promises were given after having taken part with His disciples in the Last Supper.

The apostle John records Christ's presentation in the greatest detail ([John 13-17](#)). His words were directed primarily to His disciples, the future apostles and prophets of His church. The Lord took this opportunity to give instructions and specific promises to His future leaders. It is true, of course, that a large proportion of His marvelous declarations and promises given on that occasion may be applied in a general way to all followers of the Lord. For example, as members of God's church, we accept and follow the instructions of the Lord relating to the ordinance of humility ([John 13:3-16](#)); we all rejoice in His promise to return to take us home ([John 14:13](#)); we all know that communion with Him is vital for our spiritual experience, just as it is vital for the branch to remain connected to the vine ([John 15:15](#)). Nevertheless, we must be careful not to make indiscriminate generalizations. Amid those marvelous promises directed to all His followers, there are specific declarations directed particularly to the disciples, who would be the future leaders and prophets of the church. For example, Christ promised His disciples regarding the Spirit; "he will tell you what is yet to come" ([John 16:13](#)). This is a specific reference to the prophetic gift and the ability of the Holy Spirit to predict events before they happen and to communicate them to His followers. It is not difficult to see that this declaration refers to the future function of the apostles as prophets and not to the entire church in general.

The statement we are analyzing, "he will teach you all things," may be classified in the same category as the previous one, "he will tell you what is yet to come." At least the apostles understood it that way, especially the apostle Paul, who relates the teaching of the Spirit to the prophetic office and the inspired writings.⁴

Whom Does The Spirit Illuminate?

Of course, the Scripture also promises the illumination, or enlightenment, of the Spirit to all those who wish to know the mysteries of God ([Ephesians 1:17-19](#)). But that illumination always has as its point of reference the prophetic word ([2 Peter 1:19-21](#)). In other words, the illumination of the Spirit in our minds manifests itself when we open the Scriptures, not separate from them. The Spirit

⁴See [1 Corinthians 2:10-13](#); [Ephesians 3:3-6](#); [2 Timothy 3:16, 17](#).

directs believers in general through the Word, illuminating their minds to understand it. It is the prophets whom the Spirit instructs and teaches in a specific way so that they in turn may communicate the instruction received to the church as a whole. The following inspired declarations help us understand the relationship between the divine Teacher, the prophet, and the members of the church:

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. On the contrary, the Spirit was promised by our Saviour, to open the word to His servants, to illuminate and apply its teachings....

[17]

The ministry of the divine Spirit in enlightening the understanding and opening to the mind the deep things of God's holy word, was the blessing which Paul thus besought for the Ephesian church. ⁵

The Holy Spirit always leads to the written Word, and calls the attention to the great moral standard of righteousness.... Some souls who claim to be believers have slighted, and turned from, the Word of God. They have neglected the Bible, the wonderful Guidebook, the true Tester of all ideas, and claim that they have the Spirit to teach them, that this renders searching the Scriptures unnecessary. All such are heeding the sophistry of Satan, for the Spirit and the Word agree. ⁶

Great reproach has been cast upon the work of the Holy Spirit by the errors of a class that, claiming its enlightenment, profess to have no further need of guidance from the word of God. They are governed by impressions which they regard as the voice of God in the soul. But the spirit that controls them is not the Spirit of God. This following of impressions, to the neglect of the Scriptures, can lead only to confusion, to

⁵The Great Controversy, vii, ix.

⁶Manuscript Releases 14:71.

deception and ruin. It serves only to further the designs of the evil one.⁷

[18] The process by which the Lord chooses to train us, teach us, and, on occasion, to correct us is clearly specified. The Holy Spirit communicates with the prophets whom He instructs and teaches. The prophets communicate the message, oral or written, to the church. When God's people listen or read the prophetic message, the Spirit illuminates their minds to understand it. Any intent to "perceive" the divine message based on mental impressions or other elements of interior or "immanent"⁸ communication without going through the prophetic word only leads to confusion and deviation from divine truth.

The Authority Of The Spirit

The concept of authority is, without doubt, one of the most important elements in considering the topic of divine-human communication. To be guided by what other human beings may say about an important topic is a very different thing than to have the assurance that God has already expressed Himself about that topic by means of the prophetic word. The acceptance of the Holy Spirit as the author of the prophetic message is the initial step necessary toward recognizing divine authority in these messages and, as a result, accepting their supremacy over any human opinion, including our own.

[19] The most explicit of the New Testament writers on the supremacy of the teaching of the Spirit over human opinion is the apostle Paul. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul bases the authority of his message on the fact that it is the result of the teachings of the Spirit: "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.... My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith

⁷The Great Controversy, vii, viii.

⁸The idea of "immanence" is used extensively among charismatic Christians who consider that God communicates to them internally, without using an element "transcendent" or exterior to themselves, such as a written revelation.

might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power... This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words" (1 [Corinthians 2:1, 4, 5, 13](#)).

This authority and superiority of the Spirit over human opinions and traditions is especially evident in controversial matters. One of the more controversial issues in apostolic times was the participation of non-Jews, or "Gentiles," in the church, and their acceptance as part of God's people. The apostle Paul appeals to the revelations of the Spirit as his source of authority to resolve the matter: "Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly ... the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets ... the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" ([Ephesians 3:26](#)).

The apostle Peter is another of the writers of the New Testament who establishes the authority of the Spirit as the source of teaching and guidance for the church. Peter earlier had an experience similar to Paul's concerning foreigners or "Gentiles." It was a revelation from God in the form of a vision that prepared him for his first visit to the home of a non-Jewish family ([Acts 10](#)). When some Jewish members criticized him for having visited an uncircumcised person, Peter appealed to his vision as the source of authority for his actions ([Acts 11:1-18](#)). He repeated the identical argument at the time of the first congress of the church in Jerusalem, where these same matters were discussed ([Acts 15:7-11](#)). [20]

Circumstances such as these taught the apostle Peter to trust the messages of the Spirit more and more and to think less of his own opinions. It is his voice of experience that declares: "And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place ... for prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 [Peter 1:19, 21](#)).

“He Will Guide You Into All Truth”

Without a doubt, the apostles were aware of the promise that Christ had made: “But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth” ([John 16:13](#)). It was the activity of the Holy Spirit through the prophets and apostles that gave the apostolic church a clearer and firmer perception, both of its doctrines and the mission of the church. It was also the Spirit who, with His teaching and guidance, warded off heresies from taking root and flourishing in the church during the apostolic era, in spite of the intention of many “teachers” to produce disciples after themselves ([Ephesians 3:11-14](#); [2 Peter 2:1, 2](#)).

The history of God’s people in these last days is not very different from that of apostolic times. It was also the Holy Spirit who guided the church to an ever clearer perception of divine truth for this time. Our pioneers were not exempt from the danger of heresies and doctrinal errors. Nevertheless, each time the church took a wrong turn, the Holy Spirit, through the prophetic message, guided the believers toward the truth. The following are some confirming testimonies:

[21] At this time there was fanaticism among some of those who had been believers in the first message. Serious errors in doctrine and practice were cherished, and some were ready to condemn all who would not accept their views. God revealed these errors to me in vision and sent me to His erring children to declare them.⁹

We are to be established in the faith, in the light of the truth given us in our early experience. At that time one error after another pressed in upon us; ministers and doctors brought in new doctrines. We would search the Scriptures with much prayer, and the Holy Spirit would bring the truth to our minds. Sometimes whole nights would be devoted to searching the Scriptures, and earnestly asking God for guidance. Companies of

⁹[Testimonies for the Church 5:655, 656.](#)

devoted men and women assembled for this purpose. The power of God would come upon me, and I was enabled clearly to define what is truth and what is error.

As the points of our faith were thus established, our feet were placed upon a solid foundation. We accepted the truth point by point, under the demonstration of the Holy Spirit. ¹⁰

In the early days of the message, when our numbers were few, we studied diligently to understand the meaning of many Scriptures. At times it seemed as if no explanation could be given. My mind seemed to be locked to an understanding of the Word; but when our brethren who had assembled for study came to a point where they could go no farther, and had recourse to earnest prayer, the Spirit of God would rest upon me, and I would be taken off in vision, and be instructed in regard to the relation of Scripture to Scripture. These experiences were repeated over and over and over again. Thus many truths of the third angel's message were established, point by point. ¹¹

[22]

From these historical witnesses, it is clear that the Holy Spirit continued fulfilling His sacred function of being the divine instrument to guide the church into the whole truth by means of the prophetic gift. The development of the doctrines of the church was based on a diligent study of the Scriptures, but when the danger existed of accepting a heretical doctrine or a misinterpretation of the Word, the Spirit used the prophetic gift to give light and guidance to the infant church.

Conclusion

We may conclude, then, by reaffirming our assurance that the Lord speaks and communicates with His church, which He loves and desires to save. In His wisdom and sovereignty, the Godhead

¹⁰Gospel Workers, 302.

¹¹Selected Messages 3:38.

chose the Holy Spirit as the divine Being in charge of communication with His people. This transforms the prophetic word into a sovereign and “more certain” message than human opinions, giving it authority over the latter. Choosing the prophets, human beings like ourselves, as the bearers of the divine message, was also an act of divine sovereignty. In the following chapter, we will analyze the relationship between the perfect and foolproof message of God and the human messenger, subject to the frailties of humanity and therefore imperfect and fallible.

Chapter 2— The Human Instrument

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[25]

The divine-human communication, as the term itself implies, requires a combination of divine and human characteristics that make the prophetic message unique unto itself. To be able to be understood by human beings, even our Lord Jesus had to combine both characteristics. “The Bible, with its God-given truths expressed in the language of men, represents a union of the divine and the human. Such a union existed in the nature of Christ, who was the Son of God and the Son of man.”¹

The relationship between the divine message (perfect, infallible, eternal) and the human messenger (imperfect, fallible, mortal) is not always perceived in proper perspective. To recognize and to accept the differences is an important step in our understanding of the divine-human communication system.

When communicating His message, God not only chose human beings but human language as well. Both human beings and human languages share characteristics that are often far from perfect. How do these imperfect instruments affect the perfect message of God? The primary purpose of the current chapter is to answer this question, a question basic to our understanding of the divine message.

[26]

First, a word of explanation; to look for human weaknesses in the life, work, and language of the prophets may seem irreverent and disrespectful. However, if we want to understand the divine dynamics of inspiration, we have to take a look at the instruments that God chose to communicate His message.

An Imperfect Messenger

The fact that the prophets were called “holy men of God” (2 Peter 1:21) does not mean that they were incapable of sinning, nor that it is disrespectful to recognize their human weaknesses. Any attempt to make the biblical prophets perfect or “saints” is contrary to the

¹The Great Controversy, vi.

biblical record itself. The Scriptures, with characteristic honesty, describe the weaknesses and sins of the prophets as well as their virtues.

One of the most surprising illustrations of an imperfect messenger is found in the history of King David. Although he is called “the anointed of the God of Jacob,” and though he himself recognized: “The Spirit of the Lord spoke through me” (2 Samuel 23:1, 2), the biblical record also describes his grievous sins. When his relationship with God was broken by sin, the Lord sent another prophet to correct his servant (2 Samuel 12:1-13). Once David repented and admitted his sin, the way for divine-human communication was again opened, and the psalmist was inspired to write the beautiful psalm of confession (Psalm 51). Does the fact that David was a guilty, and then repentant, sinner change in any way the inspiration of Psalm 51? Of course not.

[27] We cannot establish our trust in the prophetic word of Scripture based on the prophet’s perfect behavior. Neither we can we do so with a modern prophet. The authority of the prophetic message is not based on the messenger’s perfect life or behavior. Ellen White never claimed perfection or infallibility for herself. “We have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn. God and heaven alone are infallible.... In regard to infallibility, I never claimed it.”² It is true that Ellen White was a mother concerned about her children, a consecrated missionary; an eloquent preacher, a good neighbor, and a loving and dedicated Christian. Nevertheless, through her diaries and personal letters we know that she was sometimes discouraged and depressed, that on occasion she had disagreements with her husband, that she made mistakes, and that many times she had to ask for forgiveness.

Mistaken Prophets?

For those believers who apply the characteristics of the divine message (perfect, infallible) to the human messenger (under the supposition that he or she should be perfect and infallible), the concept of a prophet who makes mistakes is almost incomprehensible. As previously mentioned, the idea of looking for errors or mistakes in

²Selected Messages 1:37.

the servants of God who wrote the Bible or the Testimonies seems disrespectful and irreverent. However, in trying to understand the dynamics of inspiration we must analyze the profound differences that exist between the message and the messenger, and understand how God dealt with prophets who did not perceive truth correctly. We will analyze three different circumstances in which a prophet needed correction: (1) when the prophet had preconceived ideas; (2) when the prophet ran ahead of

God's plans; (3) when the prophet believed that the plans of God could be completed more swiftly. [28]

Preconceived Ideas In The Prophet's Mind

In the biblical record we find some examples of prophets who had to be corrected due to preconceived ideas. One of the best illustrations is found in the way the Holy Spirit solved a problem that was limiting the capacity of the apostolic church to complete the great commission given by Christ to His disciples: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" ([Mark 16:15, 16](#)). It was a common belief among the apostles that only Jews could be part of the chosen people. The Holy Spirit had to correct this error so that the gospel could be taken to the entire world. As we saw in the previous chapter, in the case of the apostle Peter, a vision ([Acts 10, 11](#)), and, in the case of the apostle Paul, special revelations ([Ephesians 3:3-6](#)), corrected this idea in the minds of the apostles, and, through them, in the entire church.

In the Adventist movement we also find some occasions when the messenger of the Lord needed to be corrected due to some preconceived ideas. Once again, the best illustration is related to the fulfillment of the mission of the church. The Adventist movement, as well as the apostolic church, was commissioned to reach the entire world with the everlasting gospel ([Revelation 10:11; 14:6](#)). Nevertheless, our pioneers were limited in their understanding of that task, due to a theological error passed down from the Millerite movement. Today we call it the doctrine of the "shut door." For a while even Ellen White accepted this idea: "For a time after the disappointment in 1844, I did hold, in common with the advent body, that the door of [29]

mercy was then forever closed to the world.”³ Some believers feel embarrassed or confused that the messenger of the Lord sustained such an idea. But in reality, it is an extraordinary illustration of how God deals with the case of a mistaken prophet. In subsequent visions, the Spirit corrected the error, first in the messenger’s mind and, through her, for all the believers.

The first question that comes to mind when dealing with the case of a prophet with erroneous ideas is: How can I be sure that the inspired writings do not contain errors coming from preconceived ideas in the prophet’s mind? The fact that the Holy Spirit corrected Peter, Paul, and Ellen White regarding the mission of the church gives us the assurance that the Spirit is in control of the message. The Holy Spirit corrects any idea that could take the church in a wrong direction.

Prophets Who Run Ahead Of God’s Plans

Another example of a prophet needing correction is when the messenger gives advice or suggestions that do not have the Lord’s backing. The Bible records the illustration of Nathan the prophet who enthusiastically approved David’s plan of building a temple for God ([1 Chronicles 17:1-4](#)). The same night, God revealed to the prophet that His plans were different. David would not be the builder of the temple. Nathan then went back to the king with a corrected message.

[30] In the history of the Advent movement we also find instances when the messenger of the Lord was corrected in a similar fashion. In 1902, the Southern Publishing Association was facing financial problems. The leaders of the church sought inspired advice. After due deliberation, Ellen White agreed with the leadership that the publishing house should be closed. The following night, the Lord corrected her, and she had to record a different message: “To My Brethren in Positions of Responsibility:—During the night following our interview in my house and out on the lawn under the trees, October 19, 1902, in regard to the work in the Southern field, the Lord instructed me that I had taken a wrong position.”⁴

³Selected Messages 1:63.

⁴Letter 208, 1902.

Prophets Anxious For The Return Of The Lord

The theological concept that the coming of the Messiah initiated the “eschatological era” or “end time” may well have been understood and accepted by the apostles. Nevertheless, we must recognize that none of them imagined that the end time would extend for centuries. Nearly all shared the conviction that Christ’s coming was imminent. Although we don’t know exactly the way in which the Holy Spirit handled this matter, at least we know that the apostles received additional information. For example, in his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul appears to express his conviction that he will live to see the coming of the Lord ([1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17](#)). However, additional information received between the two letters allowed him to suggest to the brethren not expect Christ’s return immediately ([2 Thessalonians 2:14](#)).

The apostle John seemed to be convinced he was living in the “end time” ([1 John 2:18](#)). We know, however, that subsequent visions given to the seer of Patmos caused him to realize that many things would happen, including intense persecutions, before the coming of the Lord. Undoubtedly, the book of Revelation was the Spirit’s answer to the various expectations that may have arisen in the beloved disciple’s mind. [31]

Something similar happened in the early Adventist movement. Practically all the believers, including the messenger of the Lord, shared the conviction of the imminence of the second coming of Christ. We need not be embarrassed by the fact that Ellen White expressed her expectations. So did Paul, Peter, and John in biblical times. Again, however, the Holy Spirit had to correct some ideas and give additional information to guide the church in the right direction. In 1856, Ellen White stated that some believers attending a certain meeting would live until the coming of the Lord, creating certain expectations about this particular group.⁵ Two years later, in 1858, the messenger of the Lord had the vision about the great controversy between Christ and Satan and received additional information about the journey that still lay ahead. Later it was revealed: “We may have

⁵See [Testimonies for the Church 1:131, 132](#).

to remain here in this world because of insubordination many more years, as did the children of Israel.”⁶

These statements referring to the expectations of the prophets about the coming of the Lord fall within the category of “conditional prophecies.” In a concise statement, Ellen White gives us at least three reasons why the concept of imminence was always in her mind: (1) the time was always revealed to her as being very brief, (2) she herself longed for Christ’s soon return, (3) the prophecies in which human beings are involved are conditional.

[32]

The angels of God in their messages to men represent time as very short. Thus it has always been presented to me. It is true that time has continued longer than we expected in the early days of this message. Our Saviour did not appear as soon as we hoped. But has the Word of the Lord failed? Never! It should be remembered that the promises and the threatenings of God are alike conditional.⁷

It is amazing to see how God solves the problem of working with human, and therefore imperfect, messengers. If the prophet has a preconceived idea that may distort the way he perceives truth, the Spirit will take charge of clarifying that idea in the prophet’s mind so that he/she can correctly transmit the divine message. If the problem is a certain anticipation on behalf of the prophet to see the prophecies he himself has communicated to the people of God fulfilled, the Spirit will take charge of offering additional information to the prophet to protect the church from false expectations. The work of the divine instrument in guiding the human instrument and leading him into all truth is what gives us the assurance that the divine message is free from errors or mistakes that could confuse the understanding of the believers.

An Imperfect Language

Although Adventists do not believe in verbal inspiration (when understood to mean that God dictates the exact words to the prophet),

⁶Evangelism, 696.

⁷Evangelism, 695.

some are reluctant to accept that the prophet is allowed to use his or her own language. With the exception of a few biblical statements (for example, the Ten Commandments), all the inspired writings are the result of a divine-human combination. The Holy Spirit inspires the prophet with a vision, an impression, or a thought. [33] The messenger then begins to search for the words, expressions, and literary figures that will correctly communicate that message. Although the Spirit also guides in the selection of the words and expressions, as we will see, the prophet nevertheless uses his own form of language. This is the basic reason for the differences in the literary styles of the various biblical writers. It is also the reason why the language of the inspired writers is described as imperfect and human.

The Bible is not given us in grand superhuman language. Jesus, in order to reach man where he is, took humanity. The Bible must be given in the language of the men. Everything that is human is imperfect....

The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented....

It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man's words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. ⁸

How do you personally react to this statement: "*It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired*"? It is true that expressions such as "the pen of inspiration" are commonly used to refer to the inspired messages. However, it seems that God wants us to learn that it is not the "pen" that is inspired. Rather, it is the prophet's mind. In practice, this means at least two things: (1) The prophet uses his own language. It is everyday language, learned from childhood and improved through study, reading, travel, and learning. The language used is not supernatural or divine, but human. (2) The prophet may include spelling or grammatical [34]

⁸Selected Messages 1:20, 21.

mistakes, as well as other language defects such as imperfect style or lapses in memory. These imperfections need to be corrected by an editor before the text is ready for publication. The editor is not correcting the inspired “message” but the non-inspired “language.” Consider one prophet’s own testimony:

While my husband lived, he acted as a helper and counselor in the sending out of the messages that were given to me.... The instruction I received in vision was faithfully written out by me, as I had time and strength for the work. Afterward we examined the matter together, my husband correcting grammatical errors and eliminating needless repetition. Then it was carefully copied for the persons addressed, or for the printer.⁹

This morning I take into candid consideration my writings. My husband is too feeble to help me prepare them for the printer, therefore I shall do no more with them at present. I am not a scholar. I cannot prepare my own writings for the press....

I am thinking I must lay aside my writing I have taken so much pleasure in, and see if I cannot become a scholar. I am not a grammarian. I will try, if the Lord will help me, at forty-five years old to become a scholar in the science. God will help me. I believe He will.¹⁰

[35]

For some believers, the idea of an editor or a secretary “correcting” the inspired writings may be new, and even bewildering. The idea that the prophet uses human language and that the language is “imperfect” may raise questions. The idea of looking for “imperfections” in the Bible or in the writings of Ellen White may seem completely out of line. However, it must be done because it is to our advantage to understand that, indeed, just as in the case of the biblical prophets, Ellen White used imperfect language. Are you ready, dear reader, for this challenge?

⁹[Selected Messages 3:89](#).

¹⁰From Ellen White’s personal diary, Jan. 10, 11, 1873. Published in [Selected Messages 3:89, 90](#).

In the biblical record there seems to be a *lapsus linguae* in the Gospel of Matthew, where the apostle cites Zechariah, but actually quotes Jeremiah, in connection with the thirty pieces of silver ([Matthew 27:9, 10](#); [Zechariah 11:12](#); [Jeremiah 32:6-9](#)). For one who believes in verbal inspiration, this situation could give rise to serious doubts. However for those who accept that “the Lord speaks to human beings in imperfect speech,”¹¹ this is simply an appropriate illustration helping us understand that the divine message arrives through imperfect human language.

The following statement of Ellen White also seems to be a *lapsus linguae*. She quotes Paul, but credits Peter: “ ‘The love of Christ constraineth us,’ the apostle Peter declared. This was the motive that impelled the zealous disciple in his arduous labors in the cause of the gospel.”¹² Without a doubt, she was thinking of Paul, but wrote Peter. Does this inspired statement with its mistaken name upset or confuse you? Why didn’t the Holy Spirit “correct” this error before it was published? Fortunately, we have enough evidences in the Bible, as well as in the history of Adventism, to demonstrate that the Spirit always corrected His messengers in matters of importance for the knowledge of the truth. Why, then, did not the Spirit correct His servants in the imperfections of language use? Undoubtedly because He allowed the prophets to use their own language, an imperfect and human language that, nonetheless, communicates the perfect and divine message of God. [36]

Help In The Selection Of The Words And Expressions

What has been said up to now does not mean that the Holy Spirit abandons the prophet once He has communicated the message to him, or leaves him totally to himself in the selection of words and resources used to communicate the divine message. Although the prophet uses his own language, the Spirit still guides him in the selection of the words and expressions. Here are some statements that confirm this point:

¹¹Selected Messages 1:22.

¹²The Review and Herald, October 30, 1913. See Paul’s (not Peter’s) statement in 2 Corinthians 5:14.

The goodness of the Lord to me is very great. I praise His name that my mind is clear on Bible subjects. The Spirit of God works upon my mind and gives me appropriate words with which to express the truth.... I am trying to catch the very words and expressions that were made in reference to this matter, and as my pen hesitates a moment, the appropriate words come to my mind.

[37] When writing these precious books, if I hesitated, the very word I wanted to express the idea was given me.... I am exceedingly anxious to use words that will not give anyone a chance to sustain erroneous sentiments. I must use words that will not be misconstrued and made to mean the opposite of that which they were designed to mean. ¹³

In this way, inspiring the prophet with the message and guiding him in selecting the right words and appropriate expressions, the Holy Spirit makes sure that the divine message arrives under ideal conditions to be understood correctly.

Conclusion

Often the Lord surprises us with His marvelous, and sometimes strange, ways of doing things. To communicate with His people, God has selected human beings, dedicated but imperfect, and has decided to employ imperfect human languages. We should be grateful to our Heavenly Father for not having chosen a “*grand superhuman language*,” understood by only a few, but rather our own languages, the ones that all of us can understand. On the other hand, when accepting His ways, we must be careful not to confuse the “vessel” with the “content” or to discard the “treasure” because the “vessel” seems to be imperfect. As Ellen White herself states:

God has been pleased to communicate His truth to the world by human agencies, and He Himself, by His Holy Spirit, qualified men and enabled them to

¹³Selected Messages 3:51, 52.

do His work. He guided the mind in the selection of what to speak and what to write. The treasure was entrusted to earthen vessels, yet it is, none the less, from Heaven. The testimony is conveyed through the imperfect expression of human language, yet it is the testimony of God. ¹⁴

[38]

¹⁴Selected Messages 1:26.

[39]

Chapter 3— The Divine Presence

“Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5). We approach the topic of this chapter with the full reverence it deserves. The divine Presence, whether experienced as reality or in a vision, always produces the same reaction; a sensation of unworthiness and spiritual insufficiency when facing such a sublime privilege. Isaiah recounts his experience: “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted.... ‘Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty’” (Isaiah 6:1, 5).

The divine Presence shows itself in different ways. In this chapter we will analyze three of them: (1) theophanies, or the real and visible presence of a divine Being; (2) visions and prophetic dreams, that due to their supernatural character, indicate a superhuman presence, either real or in the prophet’s mind; (3) the divine Presence that manifests itself in the message shared by the prophet with the people.

[40]

Theophanies, The Real And Visible Presence Of A Divine Being

On occasion, God decides to communicate a message personally. He then manifests Himself directly to a human being. In these cases, it seems that the message is extremely important, the circumstances are urgent, or the human messenger needs a direct divine corroboration of a call or a challenge put before him. God, then, condescends to reveal Himself visibly and personally among humans. This was the case of Adam and Eve both before and after the Fall. ¹ God manifested Himself to Abraham to inform him of the imminent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. ² He did so to

¹See Genesis, chapters 1-3.

²See Genesis 18:1-3.

Moses to communicate the plan to liberate the chosen people and later to deliver the holy law. ³ God spoke directly with Joshua to confirm the entrance of Israel into the Promised Land. ⁴ The same thing happened to Paul when he was called to a special ministry. ⁵

By manifesting Himself to the prophet or leader of His people, God validates the heavenly origin of the communication received both to the prophet and to the recipients of the message. No one would dare question the validity of a message personally delivered. In these cases, the real presence goes beyond the visionary experience.

Although Ellen White does not specifically mention direct and visible encounters with a divine Being, on several occasions she did experience a divine presence in her room. Here are some of her personal testimonies:

Friday, March 20, I arose early, about half past three o'clock in the morning. While writing upon the fifteenth chapter of John suddenly a wonderful peace came upon me. The whole room seemed to be filled with the atmosphere of heaven. A holy, sacred presence seemed to be in my room. I laid down my pen and was in a waiting attitude to see what the Spirit would say unto me. I saw no person. I heard no audible voice, but a heavenly watcher seemed close beside me; I felt that I was in the presence of Jesus. ⁶

[41]

All through my long affliction I have been most signally blessed of God. In the most severe conflicts with intense pain, I realized the assurance, "My grace is sufficient for you." At times when it seemed that I could not endure the pain, when unable to sleep, I looked to Jesus by faith, and His presence was with me, every shade of darkness rolled away, a hallowed light enshrouded me, the very room was filled with the light of His divine presence. ⁷

³See Exodus, chapters 3, 4, 24, 34.

⁴See Joshua 5:13-15.

⁵See Acts 9:1-7.

⁶Selected Messages 3:35.

⁷Life Sketches of Ellen G. White, 338.

[42]

The room was filled with light, a most beautiful, soft, azure light, and I seemed to be in the arms of heavenly beings. This peculiar light I have experienced in the past in times of special blessing, but this time it was more distinct, more impressive, and I felt such peace, peace so full and abundant no words can express it. I raised myself into a sitting posture, and I saw that I was surrounded by a bright cloud, white as snow, the edges of which were tinged with a deep pink. The softest, sweetest music was filling the air, and I recognized the music as the singing of the angels. Then a Voice spoke to me, saying: “Fear not; I am your Saviour. Holy angels are all about you.”⁸

The language used by the prophets to describe these encounters leads us to conclude that it is not always possible for the prophet to know if what he is experiencing is a real presence or a vision. The apostle Paul’s experience was similar: “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to Paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell” ([2 Corinthians 12:24](#)). Whether the prophet experienced a real presence or perceived that presence as part of a vision, the important thing is that either way the divine presence leaves an indelible mark on the prophetic experience.

The Angels As Representatives Of Divinity

Although the angels are not divine beings, on many occasions they have been sent by God with messages for humanity. Humans, faced with such holy and majestic beings, exhibit similar symptoms of astonishment, reverence, and feelings of unworthiness.

The Bible describes numerous visits of angels to earth. At the moment, however, we are particularly interested in analyzing the

⁸[Testimonies for the Church 9:66.](#)

presence of angels sent with messages from God to His servants, the prophets.

Daniel's experience in the Old Testament and the apostle John's in the New Testament are particularly illustrative. Daniel never got over his astonishment at seeing the angel Gabriel at his side. From the prophet's description, it seems that this encounter was not part of a vision, but a real presence: "And I heard a man's voice from the Ulai calling, 'Gabriel, tell this man the meaning of the vision.' As he came near the place where I was standing, I was terrified and fell prostrate. 'Son of man,' he said to me, 'understand that the vision concerns the time of the end.' While he was speaking to me, I was in a deep sleep, with my face to the ground. Then he touched me and raised me to my feet.... While I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me in swift flight about the time of the evening sacrifice. He instructed me and said to me, 'Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding'" ([Daniel 8:16-18](#); [9:21, 22](#)). [43]

The astonishment and subsequent reaction of the prophet Daniel are easily understood. The presence of a celestial being is not common. The arrival of an angelic being flying in the heavens and materializing at the side of God's servant, even when appearing in human form, produces an emotional impact difficult for even the prophet himself to explain. Daniel apparently faints when faced with the angelic presence ([Daniel 8:18](#); [10:8-20](#)).

The case of the apostle John is similar. When recording his visions, the apostle seems to behave calmly in telling us that they are "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him.... And he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John" ([Revelation 1:1](#)). In reality, however, when the encounter took place with the angel, the servant of God experienced such an emotional shock that his natural reaction was to prostrate himself to worship the celestial messenger by his side ([Revelation 19:10](#); [22:8, 9](#)). [44]

Ellen White also experienced the presence of angels in her prophetic ministry. On several occasions she referred to the celestial representative who visited her, calling him "my Instructor." Here are some of her testimonies:

I have received your letter, in which you inquire what is meant by the words “I,” “We,” and so on, in my testimonies. In my work, I am connected with my helpers, and I am also connected and in close touch with my Instructor and other heavenly intelligences. Those who are called of God should be in touch with him through the operation of his Holy Spirit, that they may be taught by him. ⁹

[While sailing from Australia to the United States] I was visited by the angel of the Lord on the boat, and instruction was given me, which I do not yet dare to speak. I will sometime give the whole history of my experience on the boat. It is so solemn, so sacred a matter that I do not feel like talking about it. ¹⁰

[45]

Terrible as was the representation that passed before me, that which impressed itself most vividly upon my mind was the instruction given me in connection with it. The angel that stood by my side declared that God’s supreme rulership, and the sacredness of His law, must be revealed to those who persistently refuse to render obedience to the King of kings. Those who choose to remain disloyal, must be visited in mercy with judgments, in order that, if possible, they may be aroused to a realization of the sinfulness of their course. ¹¹

The presence of an angelic being with an important, solemn, or urgent message, reconfirms the faith of God’s servants of the heavenly origin of that message, and it offers the individuals to whom it is directed additional proof of its importance.

The Divine Presence In Visions And Prophetic Dreams

Although not as spectacular as a real and visible visit by a divine or angelic Being, the divine Presence is also manifested in the prophet’s life through visions. Although we do not fully understand

⁹Spalding and Magan Collection, 462.

¹⁰Manuscript Releases 1:306.

¹¹Life Sketches of Ellen G. White, 408.

the exact process by which the Spirit communicates a message, the prophetic experience helps us, at least partially, to comprehend the process. Apparently, the five senses with which human beings perceive images, sounds, smells, tastes, or sensations in real life, are also used by the prophet to perceive the various aspects of a divine communication. Hearing and sight seem to be the main media. The prophet sees and hears images and sounds. However, comparing his perceptions with our own leads us to conclude that the visions are apparently more like a dream than reality. In a dream we see and hear not with real sight or hearing but through the subconscious. In the case of the prophet, although he may be awake and conscious at the moment of receiving a vision, he immediately loses the sense of his actual real surroundings. He is given access to systems of information and perception apparently unknown to human beings in general. If God uses the conscious, unconscious, or subconscious mind, we do not know. What we do know is that when the prophet returns to the real world, he is totally aware of having experienced the divine presence.

[46]

It would be foolish on our behalf to deny the reality of this communication solely on the basis of not fully understanding it. At the moment of writing these lines, I am flying on a transcontinental trip. I am using a portable computer to take advantage of the several hours of flight time. This same computer, with the right connections and in the right place, gives me access to world-wide systems of communication such as the Internet that allow me to send, in seconds, a message to the other side of the world. I would be the first to admit that I do not fully understand the process. However, when I receive the answer to my message in minutes, I have to accept that, although I do not fully understand the process, the communication system works in surprising ways, almost magically for me, since I am not an expert in electronic systems.

To tell the truth, at this precise moment I am surrounded by systems of communication that I cannot explain. A cellular telephone is located in the back of the seat in front of me on the airplane. By simply passing a magnetic card through a slot, that small apparatus allows me to hear a familiar voice. I don't know exactly how it gets here, but I am happy it works the way it does. The television on the plane offers news, earphones allow me to hear the voices of

[47] those appearing on the screen, and I can even hear the pilot's voice in contact with the air controllers in the tower. All these systems of information and communication are apt illustrations of the divine communication systems. I do not fully understand them, but that does not deprive me from accepting them and recognizing the benefits they offer me.

Something similar happens in divine communication to the prophet. Although not even the servant of God is able to explain fully the experience in which he is involved, and consequently we are even less able to comprehend it, the conviction that the divine presence has been manifested; that His voice has spoken, is fully certain in his mind.

Supernatural Phenomena That Accompany A Vision

Sometimes the Lord sees fit to manifest His presence through events of a supernatural order that accompany the prophet when in vision. Probably, the most spectacular of these phenomena is the absence of breathing in the prophet's physical activity. We all know that a human body cannot survive without oxygen for more than a few minutes. The organs of the body, especially the brain, require the presence of this vital element. Without it, the brain will suffer irreversible damage within a short time. Nevertheless, in the prophetic experience of Ellen White, believers as well as nonbelievers had more than one opportunity to observe that in some of her public visions, she did not breathe. There was no indication of breath, no inhalation or exhalation, no movement of her chest. No vapor clouded a mirror held in front of her mouth, and a burning candle placed next to her lips did not flicker.

[48] J. N. Loughborough, a pioneer of the Adventist movement, gathered a significant number of testimonies, among them confirmation by several doctors, that attest to this phenomenon.¹² Another pioneer, D. T. Bordeau, who originally doubted the origin of the visions, declared that when he witnessed this phenomenon personally and noted the total absence of breathing, it was enough proof

¹²J. N. Loughborough, *The Great Second Advent Movement* (1992 edition), pp. 204-211.

to confirm the divine origin of the messages. Here is his personal testimony:

June 28, 1857, I saw Sister Ellen G. White in vision for the first time. I was an unbeliever in the visions; but one circumstance among others that I might mention convinced me that her visions were of God. To satisfy my mind as to whether she breathed or not, I first put my hand on her chest sufficiently long to know that there was no more heaving of the lungs than there would have been had she been a corpse. I then took my hand and placed it over her mouth, pinching her nostrils between by thumb and forefinger, so that it was impossible for her to exhale or inhale air, even if she had desired to do so. I held her thus with my hand about ten minutes, long enough for her to suffocate under ordinary circumstances; she was not in the least affected by this ordeal. Since witnessing this wonderful phenomenon, I have not once been inclined to doubt the divine origin of her visions.”¹³

Supernatural phenomena such as those just mentioned and others, such as total loss of physical strength, or the momentary acquisition of exceptional strength, do not represent the most important elements of the prophetic experience, but they are additional evidences that a superior Being or superhuman element is behind the event. The prophet herself offers in her personal testimony the reasons for this type of manifestation of the divine presence:

[49]

Some of the instruction found in these pages was given under circumstances so remarkable as to evidence the wonderworking power of God in behalf of His truth. Sometimes while I was in vision, my friends would approach me, and exclaim, “Why, she does not breathe!” Placing a mirror before my lips, they found that no moisture gathered on the glass. It was while there was

¹³Quoted in J. N. Loughborough, *The Great Second Advent Movement* (1992 edition), p. 210.

no sign of any breathing that I kept talking of the things that were being presented before me. These messages were thus given to substantiate the faith of all, that in these last days we might have confidence in the Spirit of Prophecy. ¹⁴

Some believers do not need to depend on events like this to accept a message coming from God. Others, however, may need much more than a supernatural phenomenon to believe. In this case, peculiar to the Adventist movement, God considered it opportune to surround the prophetic experience with events of special characteristics that confirmed the faith of the believers of the time. Those of us who live several decades after the time of these events can depend on the personal testimonies of these believers. They were surely as sincere and honest as we ourselves when they built and confirmed their faith in the prophetic gift step by step, and accepted these signs as evidence of the divine Presence with His people.

The Divine Presence In The Prophetic Message

[50] However, on many occasions the prophetic visions and dreams are not accompanied by visible or audible signs of the divine Presence. In these cases, the only sign or identity of the divine origin of the communication is found in the message itself. In other words, the divine Presence is manifested in the very characteristics of the message the prophet is communicating.

As if placed in a “time machine,” prophets are taken to the remote past, or transported to the distant future. With relationship to the past, they obtain information never seen by archaeologists, geologists, or paleontologists. With relationship to the future, they offer information that the years or the centuries will eventually prove to be accurate. They have access to places and beings in the universe that are totally unknown, even to modern space scientists. As far as human history is concerned, they are witnesses to events that historians have not recorded. In relation to the secret lives of individuals, they have access to situations and circumstances known only to the people involved.

¹⁴[Selected Messages 3:38, 39.](#)

The last point mentioned in the previous paragraph, the communication to the prophet of events and circumstances that individuals keep secret, contains the essence of the divine Presence that makes that particular message something superhuman or supernatural. Hundreds of letters sent by Ellen White during seventy years of prophetic ministry contained this component that always caused astonishment and surprise to those involved. It is this ingredient that produced changes and reformation in the honest and sincere of heart, and that even the most rebellious had to accept as of divine origin because of the accuracy and truthfulness of the declarations referring to the deepest secrets of their lives.

Imagine for a moment the emotion—and probably the anxiety—of receiving a letter from a prophet that began like this: [51]

In the last vision given me your case was presented before me. I have been waiting to see if you had a tender, sensitive, or a seared, conscience. I have had the following written out for a long time but have thought I would wait till you made some move yourself. I was shown that you have not lived up to the light. You have departed far from the light. The Lord has been following you with reproofs and counsel to preserve you from ruining your own soul and bringing a reproach upon His cause. I was shown that you have been retrograding rather than advancing and growing in grace and the knowledge of truth. ¹⁵

In many cases, the messages were more specific. Secret sins were revealed by God and communicated by the prophet to the person or persons involved. Undoubtedly, God's purpose in revealing these circumstances was to give the individuals an opportunity to repent, to change their ways, and through the grace of God, begin a new spiritual life.

But there was an additional reason for revealing and communicating the secret problems of individuals—to serve as advice and admonition to others involved in the same circumstances. Paul declares that many of these revelations are “for our admonition” (1

¹⁵[Testimonies on Sexual Behavior, Adultery, and Divorce, 168.](#)

[Corinthians 10:11](#)). Ellen White corroborates the biblical exhortation, stating:

[52] If one is reproved for a special wrong, brethren and sisters should carefully examine themselves to see wherein they have failed and wherein they have been guilty of the same sin.... Many are dealing falsely with their own souls and are in a great deception in regard to their true condition before God. He employs ways and means to best serve His purpose and to prove what is in the hearts of His professed followers. He makes plain the wrongs of some that others may thus be warned and fear and shun those errors....

In a view given me about twenty years ago, I was then directed to bring out general principles, in speaking and in writing, and at the same time specify the dangers, errors, and sins of some individuals, that all might be warned, reproved, and counseled. I saw that all should search their own hearts and lives closely to see if they had not made the same mistakes for which others were corrected and if the warnings given for others did not apply to their own cases. If so, they should feel that the counsel and reproofs were given especially for them and should make as practical an application of them as though they were especially addressed to themselves. ¹⁶

[53] As the apostle declares, the messages of divine origin are given “for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” ([2 Timothy 3:16](#)). Although accepting that correction is not an easy decision, those who do accept it receive the blessing of being guided directly by the Lord by means of His prophetic word. What an extraordinary reason to be grateful! Just think: the Lord is so concerned for a single soul that He takes the time to send special revelations to His servants to liberate them from going down the road toward perdition! To think that He has done it to prevent me from going down that road and to admonish me, personally!

¹⁶[Testimonies for the Church 5:659, 660.](#)

Conclusion

[54]

The divine Presence with the prophet is manifested not only when the visions are accompanied by extraordinary or supernatural phenomena. Neither is an angelic or divine appearance necessary to confirm the origin of the messages. The sincere and humble believer will accept the messages themselves as the strongest evidence of divine love for the human race and of the extraordinary effort that God makes so that all men may be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth ([1 Timothy 2:4](#)).

Chapter 4— Human History

In the previous chapter we analyzed the special circumstances that surround the prophet when visited by a divine or angelic presence. Visions, prophetic dreams, or the real presence of a celestial being, as happens in theophanies, surround the prophet with an almost supernatural halo. For the sincere believer, the visionary experience is sufficient evidence, especially when accompanied by phenomena inexplicable to the human mind, such as foreseeing the future or revealing secret conditions. He is more than ready to accept these messages as coming from God.

But in the inspired writings there are also narratives, biographies, and literary segments that are not the direct result of a vision or prophetic dream. Even the most classic examples of visionary activity, such as those reported in the books of Ezekiel or Daniel, contain historical or narrative portions for which the prophet did not depend for information on a vision or an angelic encounter. Are these records less inspired than the visions? Are there degrees of inspiration in the Scriptures? Our answer to these questions, based on the biblical record itself, is categorically No. “All Scripture is inspired by God,” Paul says, referring to the inspired writings (2 Timothy 3:16). Peter says “but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). None of these servants of God ever suggest that some parts of the sacred writings are less inspired than others, or that the prophet, when speaking on God’s behalf, on some occasions could make the message less inspired than on others. Both apostles assert that all that the prophets speak on behalf of God is inspired.

There are no degrees or levels of inspiration or revelation in the prophetic writings. Rather, when we examine the prophetic writings we see various “models” or ways that Divinity uses to inspire the prophet. The apostle expresses it well, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Hebrews 1:1,

2). To understand the dynamics of inspiration and divine revelation, we must try to discover these “various ways” that God has spoken to the prophets.

In this chapter we will analyze two modes or systems of inspiration and revelation found in the Scriptures and the writings of Ellen White: (1) the eyewitness model, in which the prophet acts as an eyewitness of the events being related, and (2) the historical model, in which the prophet acts as an historian.

The Story Of An Eyewitness

Sometimes God inspires the prophets to describe events or circumstances that they themselves have witnessed. The classic example in the Scriptures is the experience of the apostle John. His first epistle to the churches begins by saying: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.... We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard” (1 John 1:1-3). [57]

John, along with the other disciples, participated in the events of Christ’s ministry, His death on the cross, and His resurrection and ascension. He had the opportunity to witness gleams of glory at the transfiguration and to be astonished by the miracles, healings, and resurrections from the dead. He saw the angels sustaining his beloved Lord in the garden of Gethsemane and guarding the empty sepulcher. As far as these events are concerned, the apostle had no need of a vision to know their history, because he himself had been part of that history.

However, the apostle John, as well as Matthew—the two disciples of the Lord who wrote Gospels—did need divine revelation to *interpret* the events they witnessed. It would not have been possible for the apostle John to perceive, behind the Teacher they followed, the eternal Son of God “Through (whom) all things were made” (John 1:13), if it had not been for a divine revelation. The same is true of Peter. He could not have recognized in Jesus “the Christ, the Son of the living God” if it had not been for the fact that, as Jesus told him: “this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven” (Matthew 16:16, 17).

As in the rest of the Scriptures, the personal testimony of the prophet or of the apostle is guided by the divine presence in his mind, not only to help him remember accurately what he saw as an eyewitness but to help him interpret the events correctly.

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Witness To The Great Acts Of God

The Scriptures are a kind of a heroic epic poem, in which the great acts of God related to the plan of salvation are intermingled with human history. In describing those events, the divine and human instruments are combined. God inspires the prophet to participate in the history of the plan of redemption, and then supplies, through visions and dreams, the information the prophet lacks. When the chosen messenger is part of the historical events, the Spirit inspires and encourages him to relate his eyewitness testimony.

Moses is a classic Old Testament example. For the most part, the books of the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible—describe human history. Nevertheless, it is history that relates the great acts of God. Moses, of course, needed special revelation to write the first chapters of Genesis dealing with the creation of the earth and of humanity. Those who attempt to find a human explanation for divine inspiration conclude that the biblical authors depended on other sources such as oral traditions, legends, or theories popular in their times. If, however, Moses depended on the common traditions or theories of his day about these origins, then the story of Creation would have been very different. It is true that the leader of Israel could have received certain oral traditions passed down from generation to generation from his Hebrew ancestors, starting with Adam himself. On the other hand, the attention and dedication to detail that the Lord revealed to His servant in matters such as the construction of the tabernacle, or the dietary and sanitary laws, assure us that God must have wanted the history of Creation recorded in the most perfect and detailed way. It is possible that some day modern science will verify and accept the biblical account and discard evolutionary theories. But even if that does not happen, we may be assured that the redeemed will be able to affirm the truthfulness of the first chapters of Genesis. That story is a prophetic revelation, and the prophetic word is “more certain” (2 Peter 1:19) than any

other source of human knowledge, simply because it originates from divine knowledge.

The book of Exodus is a different matter. There the inspirational “model” is different. Moses did not need visions and dreams to relate the history of the Exodus. He himself was part of it. In this case, God inspired the prophet and leader of Israel to relate his own eyewitness account. Nevertheless, this personal testimony is also unique, because the description of historical events is consistently intertwined with divine intervention. That intervention is sometimes a direct presence, sometimes a voice that directs and commands, at other times a symbolic presence, such as the cloud by day or the pillar of fire by night. Moses’ eyewitness account combines with divine intervention to make this a unique type of history, because it is the history of the saving acts of God.

The books of Moses are not an exception in the Old Testament. Several others, such as Joshua, Ezra, and Nehemiah, come down to us as result of the personal testimony of their authors. Other prophets, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Daniel, combine their personal experiences with the visions revealed to them by the Spirit.

Eyewitness To The Birth Of The Last Church

The eyewitness pattern was also used by Ellen White to describe historical events related to the Adventist movement. In some of her biographical works,¹ her emotions and feelings about personally participating in the events and circumstances that form the history of this religious movement, come through clearly. You can feel the excitement of the imminence of the date of the anticipated appearance of the Lord in her story; the immense discouragement suffered as a result of the Great Disappointment; the anxiety to discover the truth in the Word of God, and the joy of receiving answers to questions through the visions. In a manner similar to the history of God’s people in the past, this epic poem also combines human and divine elements. The prophet’s testimony mingles with the intervention of the Spirit. It is human history, but a history incorporated into the great acts of God.

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¹See, for instance, *Early Writings and Life Sketches of Ellen G. White*.

For that reason, the Lord surely inspired His messenger to give her personal testimony. Just as biblical history reaffirms us in the faith and conviction of divine guidance, the history of the Adventist movement, recounted by an eyewitness to the events, reaffirms the conviction that God was guiding this group of believers. He had a purpose for them—the mission of transforming them into a vast world movement to announce the truths of the three angel’s message to every nation, tribe, language, and people. The certainty of divine guidance in our past history is so strong that this eyewitness can assert:

[61] 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. ²

Prophets As Historians

The second mode or model of revelation and inspiration we will analyze in this chapter is the historical model. In this case, God inspires prophets to search for historical records, oral or written, and guides them in making the correct selection. The prime example in the Scriptures is the Gospel of Luke, often designated the “Lucan model” of inspiration.

Luke clearly states that his writings are not the result of visions or prophetic dreams, but of an investigation:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,

²[Life Sketches of Ellen G. White, 196.](#)

so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. ([Luke 1:1-4](#)).

Luke's Gospel is not the only example of the historical model of inspiration found in the Bible. In the Old Testament there are several historical books, Kings and Chronicles for example, that also claim that their information came from historical documents and records. In the New Testament, the book of Acts is a combination of the historical and eyewitness models. The first part of the book is a historical summary by Luke dealing with the beginnings of the apostolic church. The second part of the book is the same author's eyewitness reports as part of Paul's evangelistic team. [62]

Ellen White was also inspired by the Spirit to use the historical model in some of her books. She used various historical references from non-religious authors, especially in her works targeted to the general public. How should we understand these references from non-inspired historians when they form part of the text of an inspired book?

Noninspired References In Inspired Writings

It is difficult for some believers to understand why a prophet who receives a message from God needs to quote other authors to communicate that message. In the latter section of chapter two, we made reference to the fact that the prophets use their own human language to communicate the divine message. "It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired."³ The prophet appeals to all types of expressions, documents, indexes, and even the reminiscences of other witnesses, to communicate the message received. On occasion, the servants of God look for historical references to corroborate or to ratify what has been shown them in vision. On other occasions, they do so to document dates or circumstances related to the history being described. In every case, however, the messenger is impressed by the Spirit and inspired to seek the correct information. The important difference between a general historian and a prophetic historian is that the Holy Spirit guides the prophets' [63]

³[Selected Messages 1:21](#).

procedures by helping them to select the material that allows them to describe exactly what God wishes to communicate.

Let us look at the personal testimony of a prophet who experienced these very circumstances, including the need to find the appropriate words and historical references, the need to accurately transmit what she saw and the message that had been communicated:

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—to trace the history of the controversy in past ages, and especially so to present it as to shed a light on the fast-approaching struggle of the future. In pursuance of this purpose, I have endeavored to select and group together events in the history of the church in such a manner as to trace the unfolding of the great testing truths....

The great events which have marked the progress of reform in past ages are matters of history, well known and universally acknowledged.... In some cases where a historian has so grouped together events as to afford, in brief, a comprehensive view of the subject, or has summarized details in a convenient manner, his words have been quoted; but in some instances no specific credit has been given, since the quotations are not given for the purpose of citing that writer as authority, but because his statement affords a ready and forcible presentation of the subject. ⁴

[64]

However, in spite of the explanations and reasons given by the prophet herself for using historical references, some believers still ask: “Does that mean that the quotations from the secular historians become inspired when they are used by a prophet?” The truth of the matter is that the statements of a secular historian do not pass through some “alchemistic” process, nor do phrases written by a non-inspired author become inspired as if by magic. Remember that the words used by the prophets themselves do not go through such a

⁴[The Great Controversy, xi, xii.](#)

transformation process. We repeat: “It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired.” The words are still human words. What actually happens is that God inspires the prophet to look for and select the historical references. Then these statements, together with the prophets’ own words, communicate an inspired or revealed message by God to His servant. That message, notwithstanding, is communicated in human words, paragraphs, and phraseology.

In fact, this is one of the most important points in understanding the entire process of divine-human communication. It may also be the most difficult to comprehend and accept. This combination of divine and human elements seems to exceed our capacity for understanding. However, unless we keep in mind the fact that the *message is divine*, but the *language* used by the prophet *is human*, it will always be difficult to understand and accept that a prophet may use different sources, or literary and historical materials, to give final form to the message received from God.

Conclusion

[65]

Ultimately, acceptance of the divine message is a matter of faith and trust; trust in the fact that God has spoken through the prophets; trust in the fact that the Spirit has guided His servants to correctly select the words and references used; trust in the fact that He has directed their memory, or the memory of other witnesses, to relate the facts as they happened, and, ultimately, trust to accept the fact that these writings, with their human language and characteristics, are the message of God for us.

[66]

Chapter 5— Divine Counsel

The Scriptures clearly indicate God’s objective in sending prophetic messages: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16, 17). Of all these worthy divine purposes, it seems that the most difficult for human beings to accept is correction. It is, nevertheless, one of the most necessary. Since the entrance of sin, the human mind has been limited in its ability to perfectly discern between good and evil, truth and error; between what is correct and what is not. Even after experiencing the new birth, believers still need the divine Corrector for each step on the road to eternal life.

[67]

Correction And Counsel In The Old Testament

In Old Testament times, prophets generally transmitted the divine message directly. God’s servants were instructed to confront erring persons, whether kings or common citizens, the high priest or a member of the congregation. On occasion, the correction encompassed all of God’s people, or at least a majority who were on the road toward apostasy.

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On other occasions, the recipient of God’s message was a pagan nation or an impenitent city. The message to Nineveh, transmitted by the wandering and elusive prophet Jonah, is a good illustration of the mercy of God toward sinners. Jonah criss-crossed the entire city on foot to proclaim a warning message that, hearkened to and accepted by its inhabitants, saved the city from sure destruction.

Oral And Written Messages

Although we may not understand precisely the process and circumstances that influenced the preparation of the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, it seems that in most cases oral transmission preceded written communication. The illustration we have just used is a good example. Jonah transmitted the divine message orally to

the city of Nineveh. At a later date it was written down and included in the prophetic writings. The same thing happened in the case of Moses. When this great prophet and leader was called to act as God's messenger, he personally transmitted God's orders to Pharaoh to free His people in the Egyptian ruler's palace itself. Later they were recorded in the narrative of the Exodus. When Jehovah invited His servant to ascend Mt. Sinai to receive the laws and counsel for the people, all the instructions, except for the Ten Commandments, were first shared orally with the people, then later in written form. The biblical record states that "When Moses went and told the people all the Lord's words and laws ... Moses then wrote down everything the Lord had said ... Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people" ([Exodus 24:3, 4, 7](#)).

God's reason for requiring His servants to write the messages is also recorded in the prophetic writings:

So Moses wrote down this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel. Then Moses commanded them: 'At the end of every seven years, in the year for canceling debts, during the Feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place he will choose, you shall read this law before them in their hearing... so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God' ([Deuteronomy 31:9-13](#)).

[69]

Future generations should hear the divine counsel, without waiting for a repetition of the powerful and supernatural manifestations that accompanied the initial communication on Mt. Sinai. The written counsel fulfilled the function of conveying the will of God to the people in general and to individuals in particular. The written message was just as much the message of God as was His initial oral communication.

Human beings, however, are prone to give less importance to a written message than to a dynamic manifestation of divine presence.

[70] With the passage of time, the written message—the book of the law—lost its importance for both leaders and followers. Eventually it was lost, and no one knew what happened to it. The discovery of the book of the law in Josiah’s time produced a major revival and reformation. ¹ This event demonstrated that written communication, when accorded its rightful place by faithful leaders and accepted by those willing to recognize their errors, produces the same results as a direct manifestation of the divine presence, or the personal intervention of a prophet.

However, when the leaders, or the people, are not willing to listen to divine correction, God’s message will be rejected, whether transmitted personally by the prophet or through written communication. During the time of Jehoiakim, the wicked son of the faithful king Josiah who had produced the great revival, the prophet Jeremiah communicated God’s messages until he was prohibited from speaking. When that happened, God ordered him to write the reprimands in a scroll and read them before the people. Using the services of a scribe, Jeremiah obeyed the order, but the wicked king burned the book. Even a second roll containing the divine counsel was rejected. ²

Divine Counsel In The New Testament

[71] The first prophet of New Testament times is John the Baptist, the servant chosen by Heaven to prepare the way for the Lord. John arrived with his message of repentance and shared it with the people in oral form. There is no evidence that he ever wrote out his messages. Then, “when the time had fully come,” Jesus, the maximum revelation of God, arrived. His message surprised and shook the society of His day. Thousands met to listen to His sermons. Hundreds followed Him wherever He went. Like John the Baptist, Jesus left no written record of His miracles, sermons, or instructions. Nevertheless, divine wisdom inspired the evangelists to record the history of the birth of Jesus and the events of Calvary, of His perfect life and undeserved death, of His teachings and actions. Every new

¹See 2 Kings, [chapters 22, 23](#); 2 Chronicles, [chapter 34](#).

²See Jeremiah, [chapter 36](#).

generation should know the facts about redemption, so they may surrender their lives to the Saviour and receive His pardoning grace.

Heaven uses both means to communicate the message, orally for the generation privileged to experience the presence of God's messenger and in written form for those who will appear later. Both forms are inspired; both fulfill the divine purpose of "teaching ... reproving ... correcting ... instructing" (2 Timothy 3:16).

The Apostolic Letters

With the growth of the church and its expansion to regions and territories outside Palestine, it was necessary for the apostles to choose a means of communication that allowed them to transmit the instruction, counsel—and often correction—to the churches and their leaders. The apostolic letters fulfilled that function. Like any other letter, these epistles contain names, addresses, greetings, farewells, and even common requests that, of course, required no special revelation from God.³ Nevertheless, in contrast to ordinary letters, these missives contain divine instruction because they are produced by minds inspired by the Spirit of God.

The apostolic letters allow us to analyze yet another form or model the Holy Spirit uses to deliver the divine counsel. We might call it the "epistolary" model of inspiration. The apostles, as messengers of God and leaders of the church, were inspired and impressed by the Holy Spirit to write epistles that, besides greetings and requests, contained divine counsel for the church in general or for congregations or for individuals in particular.

This analysis of the apostolic letters can also help us understand the purpose and place of thousands of letters written by a modern prophet. The letters of Ellen White arrived in the hands of hundreds of believers and leaders of the church who were facing particular situations and needed counsel and instruction. Can these letters also offer counsel and correction to those of us who are not their initial recipients? Are the letters of a prophet just as inspired as his visions?

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³See, for example, Paul's requests to Timothy regarding his clothing and books (2 Timothy 4:13).

The First Letter To The Corinthians: A Case Study

The first letter to the Corinthians, written by the apostle Paul, contains almost all the necessary elements to understand how the epistolary model of inspiration works. First of all, this letter is a reflection of the feelings of a pastor concerned about his flock. The church in Corinth, founded by Paul, was passing through difficult times. There were problems of divisions among the believers. There were serious moral sins being tolerated in the church. There was the use and indiscriminate abuse of spiritual gifts and, in short, problems similar to those that other communities of believers have faced in the past and continue to confront today.

Although the apostle might have received special revelations informing him about the problems in Corinth, in this specific circumstance it was a family of believers, members of the church itself, who brought the information: “My brothers, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you” ([1 Corinthians 1:11](#)). In this case, the information arrived by “natural,” rather than supernatural means. As we stated in a previous chapter, when a secret circumstance, known only to those involved, is revealed to the prophet, the message immediately takes on a kind of mysterious supernatural “halo.” It is not always like that, however. The prophet may receive information from various sources without that fact weakening in any way the importance of the message that may arrive as a result of that information. In the time of Ellen White, some recipients of counsel or correction accused the messenger of having obtained the information from her husband, her son, or from some other leader and not directly from heaven. They apparently felt that if the message was not surrounded by that supernatural “halo,” the prophet was not dependent on God for an inspired message. They confused the source of the information with the Source of the message. ⁴ The first letter to the Corinthians shows us clearly that the information does not have come to the prophet through supernatural means to make it important. What is important is the message that results from the information received and the capacity of the recipients to accept and acknowledge the counsel.

⁴See [Selected Messages 1:26, 27](#).

The Authority Of A Letter

A second aspect that stands out in the epistle to the Corinthians is the issue of the authority of a prophetic letter. There is a definite emphasis on the part of the apostle to confirm that the counsel contained in the letter is the result of the teaching and orientation of the Spirit, and not his own wisdom. In fact, any argument that could be used to weaken or to destroy the importance of the letter's contents is analyzed by the apostle and discarded as anathema. If anyone would question Paul's capacity to give counsel, the answer of the Lord's servant was: "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him" (1:27-29). There is no doubt, therefore, that the importance of the letter was not based on the human instrument that wrote it, but on the message it contained.

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If yet another believer was to doubt Paul's authority to give counsel, Paul's answer was: "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.... This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words" (2:4, 5, 13). Clearly, the opinions expressed in the letter, although they were communicated by Paul in his characteristic language, cannot be considered his opinions but those of the Spirit.

"Only A Letter"

In our day believers have also appeared expressing similar objections regarding the modern prophet. "Can Ellen White express theological opinions if she was not trained in theology?" some ask. "Her opinions regarding health must have depended on the specialists of her time, since she had no medical training," others say. These objections may be discarded out of hand if the believer accepts the postulate that the prophet has another Source of information—the Holy Spirit. In fact, this contemporary prophet does not need to be a

[75] theologian to transmit true theological information. Nor does she need to be a doctor to communicate correct health counsel. She does not need to be a teacher to offer correct counsel regarding teaching methods or orientation. The prophet has access to a different source of information that we describe as the “testimony of Jesus” or the gift of prophecy and therefore does not need any of these things.

In her own day, Ellen White received objections to the authority of her writings, especially her letters. The comment, “it’s only a letter,” was often heard. The answer was not long in coming:

When I went to Colorado I was so burdened for you that, in my weakness, I wrote many pages to be read at your camp meeting. Weak and trembling, I arose at three o’clock in the morning to write to you. God was speaking through clay. You might say that this communication was only a letter. Yes, it was a letter, but prompted by the Spirit of God, to bring before your minds things that had been shown me. In these letters which I write, in the testimonies I bear, I am presenting to you that which the Lord has presented to me. ⁵

This epistolary model of inspiration and revelation may seem to resemble the letters that we ourselves write regularly; but it is different. The notable difference is that the letters written by a prophet come from a mind inspired by the Spirit of God. Their counsel and orientation may well be blended with greetings, requests, and even the common matters that usually appear in a letter. The counsel in the letter, however, is not commonplace. It is divine counsel received through a unique model of inspiration—the epistolary model.

[76]

Divine Counsel

The first letter to the Corinthians also allows us to analyze the form in which we receive the divine counsel. Chapter seven of 1 Corinthians is an excellent example. The apostle analyzes various aspects of family relationships and answers some written questions he had received (v. 1). What stands out in this chapter with reference

⁵Selected Messages 1:27.

to the topic we are analyzing is that the Lord's servant has two means or ways of getting God's counsel to the churches. The first is when the apostle has a definite revelation or command from the Lord. The second is when the Spirit inspires him to give his own counsel. Both forms intermingle as the various topics unfold. At the beginning of the chapter, speaking of the marital relationships between spouses, Paul asserts that he is giving counsel that is not the result of a direct revelation: "I say this as a concession, not as a command" (v. 6).

Next, the apostle talks about divorce and separation. In this case, he clarifies that it is not he, but the Lord, who gives the command of staying together (v. 10). Nevertheless, a few lines further on, the servant of the Lord again expresses an apparently personal counsel in referring to husbands who have nonbelieving wives (v. 12). This combination of apparently personal and special revelation counsel continues throughout the chapter. Do both orientations have the same importance? Can both forms be defined as inspired counsel?

The apostle himself was aware of the possibility that the believers might make a difference between that which was the result of a revelation from God and what seemed to be personal counsel. Paul clearly indicates with no hesitation that both forms are the result of the work of the Spirit. One is the result of a revelation or vision. The other form of divine revelation is when the Spirit impresses and inspires His servant to give counsel that comes from a mind inspired by the Spirit of God. At least twice the apostle specifies that, although the counsel did not come through a vision or divine command, it nevertheless comes from someone used by the Spirit to communicate His will to the church. Referring to young unmarried members, Paul says: "I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy" (v. 25). Speaking to widows, the servant of God again gives his view with the conviction that "I too have the Spirit of God" (v. 40).

The counsels coming from the apostle himself are just as much "divine counsel" as those received through a vision or a prophetic dream. The only difference is that the Spirit is using different modes of revelation and inspiration. In this case, the prophet is inspired to act as a counselor to the people of God, and his mind is impressed and touched by the Spirit so that he can give the appropriate and opportune counsel.

“I Was Shown”

[78] The expression, “I was shown” or similar phrases such as “I saw” or “it was presented to me” were used by Ellen White to refer to statements or counsel communicated through a vision or a prophetic dream. We find a variety of these declarations in her writings. The overwhelming majority of her letters, manuscripts, and even entire chapters of her books, however, do not contain any of these expressions. Should we consider these portions less inspired than those that contain the expression “I was shown”? Of course not. That would be the same as limiting the Holy Spirit to the use of a single model of inspiration. It is true that it is more fascinating, more spectacular, when the prophet receives a vision, especially when this takes place in public. But the Spirit can also inspire the prophet to use his own judgment—judgment illuminated and moved by the Spirit who controls the mind of God’s servant.

In this inspired model of prophetic guidance, the prophet acts as an instrument of the Spirit, offering direction and orientation to the church in various matters related to behavior, human relationships, lifestyle standards, church discipline, or anything else that the Lord considers important for the well-being of the members and the final victory of the church.

Conclusion

Divine counsel comes to believers in various ways. Sometimes a supernatural revelation uncovers the deeply hidden secrets of someone’s life, making them known to the prophet. God’s purpose in this is to give the person going down the wrong road a second chance. In other cases, a simple letter transmits the necessary counsel to avoid an error, or to correct one that has already been made. The letter does not even have to be directly addressed to us personally to have a beneficial effect on our behavior. Here is how it was explained by Ellen White: “I was directed to bring out general principles, in speaking and in writing, and at the same time specify the dangers, errors, and sins of some individuals, that all might be warned, reproved, and counseled.”⁶

⁶[Testimonies for the Church 2:687](#).

Reading an inspired book; or sometimes only a verse read during a quiet hour of meditation, may well wake us up in the desire to follow more closely the counsel, admonishment, or correction that we receive from heaven through the words of the prophet. [79]

[80]

Chapter 6— Human Writings

[81]

In previous chapters we have made reference to the extraordinary combination of divine and human elements that takes place in communicating God’s message. Divinity uses human messengers who, though fully consecrated to God’s service, continue showing signs of the imperfections and weaknesses that are common to all human beings. These servants of the Lord communicate the divine message in the only language they know, their own—a language learned in childhood and cultivated by means of study, culture, travel, and reading.

An expression we analyzed previously may still be resonating in the mind of the reader: “It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man’s words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts.”¹

[82]

Taken with all the seriousness that this declaration deserves, it means that expressions such as “the pen of inspiration,” and “the inspired writings” are only symbolic expressions that refer to the message the writings communicate and not to the text itself of the prophetic declarations. Expressions such as these will continue to be used—and there is nothing wrong with that—because we all understand what they mean: that what we may be reading at the moment comes from a mind inspired by the Spirit of God. Therefore, we speak of “inspired paragraphs” or “inspired books” or “inspired letters.” Nevertheless, those expressions, taken literally, would contradict the prophetic thought that tells us that it is not the text, the words, or the language of a declaration that is inspired, but the message these communicate—and that message comes from heaven.

At this point in our study, some church members may ask: “But, how is it possible to separate the divine message from the text that communicates it? Is not the communication vehicle—the language—an integral and inseparable part of the message itself? How did Ellen

¹Selected Messages 1:21.

White come to the understanding that the message she communicated was inspired, but the words used were not?" This chapter allows the messenger of the Lord herself to answer these questions. We will do so by analyzing one of her books.

The Great Controversy : A Case Study

In the previous chapter, we analyzed an apostolic letter that allowed us to study a special model of inspiration, the epistolary model. Now we will analyze a book that is an excellent illustration of what we might call the historical model of prophetic inspiration. In this book, *The Great Controversy*, we find an inspired message about the history of the Christian church, a summary of the final events in human history, and we also find a series of elements that allow us to study the dynamics of divine communication—the elements that God and the prophet use to communicate a message.

The Great Controversy was one of Ellen White's favorite books. In 1905 she declared: "I am more anxious to see a wide circulation for this book than for any others I have written."² Some years later she again commented: I appreciate it above silver or gold, and I greatly desire that it shall come before the people."³

[83]

Origin Of The Book: Revelations And Visions

This book is the final product of a series of publications related to the topic of the great controversy between good and evil; between Christ and Satan. Their origin is nothing less than special revelations that Ellen White received, the most important of which took place on March 14, 1858, while she was attending a funeral in the state of Ohio, United States. For nearly two hours, the funeral guests had the unique and surprising opportunity of seeing a prophet in vision. On that occasion, events were revealed to her that covered the history of the universe, from the dismal appearance of sin until its final eradication and the final victory of God's love. Ten years previously she had had a similar revelation. On this occasion, however, she was

²Colporteur Ministry, 127.

³Colporteur Ministry, 128.

told, for the first time, to write out the vision. In the introduction of the book, the author very appropriately states:

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.... 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. ⁴

[84] This book must undoubtedly be classified as an example of the visionary model of inspiration. In the Bible, books such as Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation fit this category. The authors, clearly and with conviction, tell us that those things were revealed to them directly by the Lord through visions and prophetic dreams.

First Surprise: The Book Grows From 200 To 3500 Pages

In 1858, in spite of Satan's attempts to stop the writing of the book, the manuscript was ready in five months and published before the end of the year. ⁵ This first version had only about two hundred pages. ⁶ By the year 1884, the material had been enlarged to four volumes and more than seventeen hundred pages. A person believing in verbal inspiration (the idea that God dictates the text, word for word, to the prophet), would be completely confused trying to figure out how it is possible for a prophet to enlarge the material in this way. Still more astonishing for that same believer would be the knowledge that over the next few years the author revised the book several times, adding dozens of statements about the events she described from well-known historians of her time. Since these revisions were made during the last years of the nineteenth century, when copyright laws were different from the current ones and authors quoted freely from one another without giving credit, the author did not document the

⁴[The Great Controversy](#), x, xi.

⁵Ellen White was shown that a sudden attack of paralysis was designed by Satan to take her life so she could not finish the manuscript of the book. See [Selected Messages 3:100](#).

⁶This first version makes up the section in Early Writings titled "Spiritual Gifts."

references used nor the names of the authors cited. All that was done was to add a statement in the introduction of the book that said:

In some cases where a historian has so grouped together events as to afford, in brief, a comprehensive view of the subject, or has summarized details in a convenient manner, his words have been quoted; but in some instances no specific credit has been given, since the quotations are not given for the purpose of citing that writer as authority, but because his statement affords a ready and forcible presentation of the subject. ⁷

[85]

As the decades passed, however, the need for giving proper credit to authors quoted was considered important. Therefore, a new and important revision took place in the year 1911, when the historical references in the current editions were included.

By the year 1916, one year after the author's death, the series called "The Conflict of the Ages," that began in 1858 with a small book of 200 pages, had been enlarged to a collection of five books with 3500 pages. ⁸

Second Surprise: The Prophet's Uses Of Other Author's Statements

It is possible that the reader has heard the word *plagiarism* with reference to the writings of Ellen White. During recent decades, this second "surprise" has caused frustration and incredulity in some believers. How is it possible, some wonder, that a prophet who receives the message of heaven needs to appeal to the expressions of other authors to communicate that message?

Some believers, in their frustration, have ended up accusing Ellen White of plagiarism; of using, covertly, the statements of other authors without giving due credit. Why did Ellen White use the language of others? The answer, in fact, is uncomplicated.

⁷The Great Controversy, xi.

⁸The series titled "The Conflict of the Ages" is made up of Patriarchs and Prophets, Prophets and Kings, The Desire of Ages, The Acts of the Apostles, and The Great Controversy.

[86] Ellen White did not use the statements of other authors covertly. Proof of this fact is the statement mentioned above, where she informs her readers that, on occasion, she has used the statements of respected historians. Studies done by professional specialists in literary property laws, have reached the conclusion that, taking into account the time and circumstances, Ellen White can not be accused of plagiarism for the use of other author's expressions.⁹ However, the question may still persist: Why did she use the words of others?

The messenger of the Lord was fully aware that God did not give her the exact words to use. In most cases, she was presented with graphic scenes—like those we would see today as movie films—without comprehensive statements or comments. On occasion she heard words and expressions, but even these had to be integrated within a more comprehensive description. Ellen White was aware of her limitations as a writer,¹⁰ but she was also aware of the limitless possibilities of enriching her language, her vocabulary, and her literary culture through reading. As is the case with any self-educated person, what she read immediately became an integral part of her fund of knowledge and her culture. That was her language, enriched by hundreds of pages read. Ellen White was a great reader. Her library—about fourteen hundred volumes at the time of her death—would give pause to more than one scholar of her time, and even today.

When the messenger arose at two or three in the morning to write—she regularly used these first hours of the day to do so—certain expressions, literary figures, and well-formed sentences, came to mind from her reading. In fact, it seems that she did not go back to her library to check a statement word for word, but rather quoted it as she remembered it, or because it was already integrated into her language. Studies carried out in recent years show that the quotations cited word for word constitute only a small percentage.

¹¹

⁹See the conclusions of a law firm that specializes on literary property laws in the document titled: "Was Ellen G. White a Plagiarist?" Available from the White Estate, Silver Spring, Md., 1988.

¹⁰See the references in the latter part of chapter 2.

¹¹See the study done by Fred Veltman on *The Desire of Ages*. Available for White Estate.

Why did she do it? Simply because prophets are allowed to use their own language. That language includes all that they may have memorized throughout a lifetime, including passages from their reading. Just as the apostle Paul mentioned a Cretan poet without mentioning his name (Titus 1:12) and other biblical authors referred to well-known writings in their times,¹² modern prophets are allowed to use the expressions, literary figures, or phrases they have learned or read, in order to communicate the divine message that they have received. [87]

Third Surprise: There Are Several Versions Of The Great Controversy

Although believers in general accept the fact that there are various versions of the Bible, some have difficulty in accepting that various versions of a book by Ellen White also exist. They feel that changing certain words or expressions is somehow tampering with the sacred and profaning something inspired. The starting point for an answer to this third surprise is to accept without reservations her own statement: “It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired.” Once this statement is accepted, it is easier to understand why, on occasion, some words or sentences have been modified.

We are not speaking here of editorial changes or corrections. We have already dealt with that point in chapter two. It is clear that the prophet, as is the case with any writer, requires editors who verify the spelling and grammar of their writings. Also, with the passing of years, some expressions become archaic terms or are no longer used, and it is necessary to change them because contemporary generations no longer understand their meaning.

We are talking here about modifications or changes due to special circumstances. One of those circumstances refers to our relationship with other religious persuasions in various countries or regions of the world. [88]

¹²See, for example, the study done by Robert Olson regarding the quotations cited in the book of Revelation. *One Hundred and One Questions on the Sanctuary and on Ellen White*, White Estate, 1981.

Offensive Expressions About Other Religions

This story begins around the year 1913, when the leaders of the church in Europe consulted Ellen White about certain expressions in the book *The Great Controversy* that might be offensive to members or the leaders of the Catholic faith. Elder William White responded on his mother's behalf:

Regarding the anticatholic character of "Great Controversy," we must admit that our critics are correct in an intimation that the anti-Catholic character of the book is not to be found in a few places only, but that the spirit permeates a large portion of the book.... But we could modify, with the author's consent, several of those passages which are most objectionable to our Roman Catholic critics. ¹³

This statement by Elder White, the prophet's son and her main assistant at the time, is very important because Ellen White was still alive, and still capable of making her own decisions about authorizing changes that would avoid offending other religious groups. This decision was consistent with a line of thought that she herself had suggested in regard to the way in which we should treat other religious denominations:

Over and over the message has been given to me that we are not to say one word, not to publish one sentence, especially by way of personalities, unless positively essential in vindicating the truth, that will stir up our enemies against us, and arouse their passions to a white heat....

[89]

It is true that we are commanded to "cry aloud, spare not, lift up the voice like a trumpet, and show My people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins." [Isaiah 58:1](#). This message must be given, but while it must be given, we should be careful not to thrust and crowd and condemn those who have not the light that

¹³Letter from William White to L. R. Conradi, White Estate, Document File (DF 86).

we have. We should not go out of our way to make hard thrusts at the Catholics. Among the Catholics there are many who are most conscientious Christians, and who walk in all the light that shines upon them, and God will work in their behalf. ¹⁴

Following this recommendation, there are today two Spanish versions of *The Great Controversy* in existence. The original version, left without modifications, is published for countries where the majority of the population is not Roman Catholic. The other version, published in Catholic countries, has been revised, taking into consideration the suggestions made by the author herself in 1913, changing expressions and phrases that could unnecessarily offend not only the members of other religions but also the governments of those countries.

The Church And Governmental Rulings

There are times when the church is confronted with the laws of certain countries that limit freedom of speech, or antidefamation laws that prohibit any expression that tends to discredit the government, its official institutions, or the religious bodies of the country. It is in these circumstances that some expressions of *The Great Controversy* could place the church in legal difficulties. The concern of the leaders of the church in those areas, and the advice of the trustees of the Ellen White Estate of what to do under those circumstances, may be illustrated by two experiences, one in Europe, and the other in South America. [90]

During the 1950s, the German Penal Code was modified and an antidefamation law added that declared the following:

A person who gives offense by blasphemy in publicly pronouncing insulting utterances against God, or who publicly makes insulting remarks against any one of the Christian churches or any other religious denomination enjoying corporation rights in the German Bundesrepublik, or their institutions, or their rites, or

¹⁴Evangelism, 547, 548.

who commits some insulting mischief in a church building or any other place destined for religious gatherings will be punished with imprisonment up to three years.

¹⁵

The leaders of the then Central European Division immediately requested authorization to change or to remove some twenty-five sentences from *The Great Controversy* that could be considered offensive against Catholics. As a result, the trustees of the White Estate took the following action:

That in the matter of *The Great Controversy* to be published in Hamburg, we approve the deletions that have been proposed by the Central European Division, and that in so doing the Trustees wish it explicitly understood that these deletions do not involve in any instance any editing of the remaining material or any changes in the E. G. White writings. ¹⁶

[91]

A similar situation presented itself in South America during the 1970s. The editor-in-chief of the publishing house there expressed his deep concern about the problem in the following letter directed to the Trustees:

The government of [the country] where our publishing house is located, has issued a law that establishes heavy punishments to every one, religious or not, that offends any other religious organization. The fact is that *The Great Controversy*, as it is in Spanish right now, has a lot of words and phrases that easily can be interpreted as insults to the Catholic Church, with which the government is united. ¹⁷

The trustees of the Ellen White writings, knowing that similar experiences existed in other places, had already made a recommendation in 1949 based on the suggestion from the author herself in 1913:

¹⁵German Penal Code, code 166 (1950). See White Estate document (DF 86).

¹⁶Meeting of the Board of Trustees of the White Estate, May 27, 1959.

¹⁷Letter from Gaston Clouzet, May 30, 1979. White Estate document (DF 87b).

VOTED: That we leave the matter of the use of the terms designating the Catholic Church to the individual fields. In those places where it is deemed that the present terminology of Great Controversy on this point would be offensive, the Trustees are agreed to the substitution of terms which do not in any way change the meaning. In those fields where present wording is not offensive, it is recommended that we abide by the original wording.

¹⁸

This may not be the end of the story. The church may yet face new and difficult situations in the near future. We have already been warned that this will be the case. Meanwhile, when it is within the church's province to do so, it follows the recommendation of Ellen White herself that we must not "publish one sentence, especially by way of personalities ... that will stir up our enemies against us."¹⁹ [92]

Fourth Surprise: An Additional Chapter Exists In The Spanish Editions

How many surprises are there yet to come? someone may ask. I guarantee you that this is the last one that we will analyze in this chapter. As the reader will understand, the author's only objective is to reconfirm the faith of the believers as to the way in which the Lord has lead His church through the prophetic gift. The author is conscious that some of these "surprises" have disillusioned some believers. That is why an attempt is made to try to respond to these surprises with all the sincerity and honesty that they deserve, with the goal of preventing further disillusionment.

It is true that the chapter titled "The Awakening of Spain" is an addition in the Spanish version of *The Great Controversy*. It is not in the original version produced by the author. How is it possible, some believers will wonder, that a complete chapter has been added when it was not written by Ellen White? Is that chapter inspired? In the Spanish version a footnote refers to the chapter as "a contribution... included with the approval of the author." The fact that Ellen White

¹⁸Board of Trustees action, Sept. 28, 1949.

¹⁹Evangelism, 548.

selected and approved its insertion makes that material part of a book with an inspired message. And the inclusion of this chapter is one of the best illustrations that can be used to understand the freedom [93] God gives to prophets to choose the material that will be included in their writings.

This particular story begins around the year 1911, when the Spanish translation of *The Great Controversy* was being done. Eduardo Forga, a Peruvian writer who was affiliated with the publishing work in England, was in charge of the translation. This task brought him into contact, not only with Ellen White but with William White and Clarence Crisler, the author's assistants. Apparently, it was the latter who suggested the idea of including some material on the Reformation in Spain. At least, this is the implication of one of his letters to Mrs. White:

I came down unexpectedly a few days ago, to help gather some material together for a story of the Reformation in Spain. This is the material that should be included in the Spanish "Great Controversy," for the encouragement of our Spanish-speaking brothers and sisters in Spain, in the West Indies, in the Philippine Islands, in Old Mexico, and in all South America. ²⁰

It seems certain that Ellen White agreed with the suggestion, since a few months later, both Elder Crisler ²¹ and Elder White ²² requested that Eduardo Forga complete as quickly as possible the translation of the material on the Reformation in Spain because the publication of the book was in progress in the editorial office.

The inclusion of a complete chapter within the text of a book affords us an important illustration about the use of other authors by inspired writers. The prophet receives from God a message to share with His people or with the world in general. When writing [94] the message the prophets use either their own words or any other

²⁰Letter from Clarence Crisler to Ellen White, White Estate document file (DF 87b).

²¹Letter from Clarence Crisler to Eduardo Forga, Dec. 13, 1912. White Estate document file (87b).

²²Letter from William White to Eduardo Forga, Dec. 19, 1912. White Estate document file (DF 87b).

material they consider capable of expressing the divine message. In this specific case, the material on the Reformation in Spain prepared by Ellen White's assistants was considered by the messenger of the Lord as an excellent contribution, and it ended up being part of the text (not inspired) of a book that contains the message (inspired) of God.

Conclusion

[95]

The Great Controversy has been, and continues to be, one of the most important instruments to alert sincere souls about the last events in human history. In the very near future, when many of the events predicted in the book happen in rapid succession, multitudes will have to make their final decision; a decision that will carry eternal consequences. This book will place in the hands of many the materials necessary to make the correct decision and have the privilege of participating forever in the destiny of the redeemed. We conclude this chapter with the final and inspiring words of *The Great Controversy* on the final victory of the love of God:

The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation. From Him who created all, flow life and light and gladness, throughout the realms of illimitable space. From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love. ²³

²³The Great Controversy, 678.

[96]

Chapter 7— Human Interpretation

The final step in the process of divine-human communication is very important. It deals with the reception of the message by the person or persons to whom it is directed. As stated in the preface, the way in which human beings perceive, interpret, and finally handle God’s message, is of vital importance for the fulfillment of the divine objectives.

Hermeneutics is the word scholars use to refer to the procedures for interpreting writings of the past. It comes from a term that means “to translate” or “to interpret.” Actually, any time a person gets up to speak from the pulpit, to a class of theology students, or even to a Bible study group in Sabbath School, he or she becomes an interpreter of the inspired writings, with all the responsibility and seriousness that implies. Consequently, how the prophetic writings are perceived, interpreted, and handled have both individual and collective consequences, to the point that the unity of the faith in the church of God comes into the picture.

[97]

Jesus Christ: The Model Of Interpretation

[98]

Jesus is our model in all things. Following in his foot-steps, we have no fear of making mistakes. The topic under discussion is no exception. In the matter of the interpretation of inspired writings, the Lord put in place, through His actions and words, certain fundamental principles. We will analyze one of them—His conduct and counsel regarding doctrine.

At the end of His public ministry, Jesus produced both amazement and surprise. The evangelist Matthew reminds us that the amazement of the people had to do with the teachings that Christ presented: “When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching” ([Matthew 7:28, 29](#)). The apostle John declares that “the Jews were amazed” ([John 7:15](#)). Christ’s answer to these comments—that would be very flattering to more than one

preacher—was awe inspiring: “My teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me. If anyone chooses to do God’s will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own. He who speaks on his own does so to gain honor for himself, but he who works for the honor of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him” ([John 7:16-18](#)).

The first principle of interpretation Jesus applied was that He did not allow Himself to become the sole “proprietor” of doctrine. He could have done so, since He Himself was the author of the teachings of Scripture. Nevertheless, during His life on this earth, He decided not to do so in order to leave us an example of conformity to the Father. In fact, doctrine does not belong to pastors, theologians, church leaders, or to the members of the church. Doctrine belongs to God, and in His sovereign will He reveals it, teaches it, and oversees it through the voice of the Spirit.

A second concept made clear in Christ’s words above, is the risk of speaking “on our own.” The idea of private or personal interpretation has no place in Christ’s thinking. Quite often believers appear with private interpretations of the Scriptures or the Testimonies. In particular the prophecies relative to the end time seem to have, for some, a certain mystique that tempts them to formulate new interpretations. In these circumstances we need to take into account Christ’s words, also reaffirmed by other messengers of God. The apostle Peter confirms this fundamental principle of interpretation of the teachings of Scripture when he says: “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” ([2 Peter 1:20, 21](#)). Peter’s argument is clear: no prophecy should be privately interpreted or personalized by a believer, because it is the voice of the Spirit that has priority.

[99]

The Place Of The “Body Of Christ” In Interpretation

Ellen White also reaffirms the principle that Christ established. No one person should consider himself the owner of truth, or become a private interpreter of the prophecies:

God has not passed His people by and chosen one solitary man here and another there as the only ones worthy to be entrusted with His truth. He does not give one man new light contrary to the established faith of the body... Let none be self-confident, as though God had given them special light above their brethren. ¹

[100] A new ingredient is added in this statement: the people of God, or Christ's body. In the thought expressed, priority for corporate interpretation is given to the people of God, not the private interpretation of solitary individuals here and there. What role does the church, as the body of Christ, play in the interpretation of doctrine?

From the first chapter of this book, the church has been referred to as the body of Christ. The acceptance of this biblical concept carries with it the responsibility of accepting the analogous concept that Christ is the head of the church. This divine-human relationship makes the church, in spite of being made up of imperfect and feeble individuals, a tower of truth and a rampart against error. It is not the church that makes itself into a bulwark. It is the Head who makes it worthy.

The prophetic Scriptures use virtually sublime terms in speaking of the church of God. "The church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth" ([1 Timothy 3:15](#)). Referring to the church as Christ's body, the apostle uses even more sublime expressions: "which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way" ([Ephesians 1:20-23](#)).

Those of us who are members of God's church know ourselves very well, and we recognize our weaknesses and imperfections. As a result, we tend to use less sublime terms to refer to the church. Some even spend their time criticizing and reviling it, probably without realizing that they are reviling and criticizing themselves because they are part of the church of God. Nevertheless, the biblical concept

¹[Testimonies for the Church 5:291](#).

is clear—the church is Christ’s body. It is the human expression of “the fullness of him who fills everything in every way,” and is, in addition, the object of God’s supreme regard: [101]

I testify to my brethren and sisters that the church of Christ, enfeebled and defective as it may be, is the only object on earth on which He bestows His supreme regard. While He extends to all the world His invitation to come to Him and be saved, He commissions His angels to render divine help to every soul that cometh to Him in repentance and contrition, and He comes personally by His Holy Spirit into the midst of His church. ²

Toward The Unity Of The Faith

The church, because it is made up of the entire community of believers, contains a great diversity of cultures, races, social levels and, of course, theological knowledge. In spite of all these differences that could tend more toward division than toward unity, the inspired counsel states that believers reach two kinds of unity: “the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace,” and, “unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God” ([Ephesians 4:3, 13](#)). To reach the latter, each believer must subject his or her private judgment and personal interpretations about doctrine to the consideration of the believers in general. This is why the church revises its beliefs or its interpretation only when believers from all regions, cultures, and levels of theological knowledge are represented. This usually happens in a meeting where delegates from the entire world church represent the believers.

This was the way the apostolic church resolved its conflicts about the interpretation of its beliefs. When deep differences of opinion regarding some rites carried over from Judaism threatened to break up the unity of the faith and, as a consequence, the unity of the believers, the apostles called a meeting in Jerusalem. It seems that the Holy Spirit accepted this system of solving differences, since the same Spirit participated in the final decision: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us,” the apostles declared at the end ([Acts 15:28](#)). [102]

²[Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers, 15.](#)

Threats To The Unity Of The Faith

It is within the context of this counsel on the unity of the faith that the apostle Paul presents a negative aspect of this issue, individuals who try to impose new “winds of teaching” ([Ephesians 4:13-15](#)). The apostle is not recommending that believers become doctrinal policemen, distrusting every sermon presented or showing skepticism about every new book written. However, he does appeal to the believers to be watchful of any intent to destroy unity or to block growth that moves the church in the right direction—toward Christ.

Other writers of the New Testament concur in alerting believers about these designs. Jude appeals to us to be guardians of the faith ([Jude 3, 4](#)). Peter reminds us of the sad truth that in every era “teachers” have and will continue to appear, who, whether honestly motivated or not, will want to move the church off course ([2 Peter 2:1, 2](#)). Our only security rests in continually listening to the voice of the Spirit, and in remaining united as a body. This is giving to the community of believers—the church—priority over any private or personal interpretation.

Basic Principles Of Interpretation

[103] To benefit the unity of the faith in a positive way, believers must take into consideration some basic principles of interpretation. All honest interpreters will attempt to answer at least three questions before delivering an opinion: (1) What was the original intention of the author in making a certain statement? (2) What were the context and the circumstances? (3) How can statements from the past be applied to the present without violating the original intent?

Before analyzing and illustrating these hermeneutical principles, we must state that the vast majority of the prophetic Scriptures do not require any special interpretation. They can be understood and applied directly. However, when we come across a baffling statement, some counsel that seems outdated, or a thought that may be understood in various ways, then we should put into practice the principles of interpretations to which we are referring. The apostle Peter was right when he said that, faced with some of Paul’s

statements that are difficult to understand, some believers took a wrong turn, affecting their progress toward salvation ([2 Peter 3:15-18](#)). It would be tragic if anyone was lost because of mistaken interpretations of messages whose very purpose is to enlighten us so that no one will be lost!

The Original Meaning And The Author's Intentions

This is a basic principle, not only of interpretation but also of literary ethics. Morally speaking, the only meaning that should be given to a statement is what the author had in mind when he or she made it. One of the best examples in the Scriptures is Christ's parables. The Lord used them as extraordinary illustrations of the truths He was attempting to teach. That was their purpose and intention. To try to establish a doctrine based on a parable, or to base an entire interpretation on the details of the story, is to go beyond the Lord's original intention in using the parable. Take, for instance, [104] the parable of the ten virgins. In this parable, Christ's undoubted intention was to illustrate the necessity of being prepared for His coming. To try to reach other conclusions, based on incidental details of the parable itself, for example, on the number, the identity, or the gender of the people involved, is ridiculous. To believe or to teach that only ten people will be waiting for the Lord (the ten virgins) or to deduce that they will only be single women (virgins) is to totally miss the intent of the parable, and to distort its meaning. Of course, we are using a simple, obvious illustration—so obvious that the reader will be tempted to smile. However, conclusions have been reached about this same parable that are not so conspicuous. More than once the idea has been put forth that “half” the members of the church are unprepared for the coming of the Lord, based on the fact that half of the virgins were unprepared.

During the early days of the Advent movement there was a case of misinterpretation of this parable that required the intervention of the Holy Spirit through visions to correct. We referred to this story in a previous chapter. After the Lord did not appear in the fall of 1844, some of our pioneers took the statement in [Matthew 25:10](#) that is part of the story narrated in the parable “And the door was shut,” to develop an important doctrine referring to the time of the

cessation of God’s grace for the salvation of sinners. The sentence was given such importance that most of those forming the group that remained after the disappointment of 1844 believed there was no longer any possibility of salvation for humanity in general. Ellen White herself originally believed this idea. ³ It was necessary for the Holy Spirit to correct this point in the messenger’s mind so that she would be in a position to correct the brethren.

[105] **The “6000 Year” Age Of The Earth And The Author’s
Intention**

Another excellent illustration of how the original meaning of a sentence may be misinterpreted or “twisted,” using the apostle Peter’s expression, is the statement that Ellen White used on various occasions in referring to the history of this earth. ⁴ Looking carefully at all the statements that contain the expression “6000 years” makes it immediately apparent that the author used the number as a relative figure, just as we might say that Christ’s death happened 2000 years ago, although that is not the exact number of years. Her intention was to affirm her belief in a short chronology—that the creation of the earth took place about 6000 years ago and that divine intervention to change the world order will soon take place. Some believers, however, have taken it upon themselves to develop a new interpretation of the sentence—that with this statement the messenger of the Lord set the precise year for Jesus’ coming. Based on simple mathematical calculations, these believers have fixed dates or specific years for Christ’s coming. One of those years, 1996, already passed into history without anything happening. ⁵ The year 2000 is the next one. The end of the current millennium has an “aura” that tempts some believers to give it a special meaning.

This interpretation, however, does violence to the original meaning that the author gave to the sentence. How do we know this? Because she declared emphatically on various occasions that those

³See the references in chapter 2, and [Selected Messages 1:63](#).

⁴Ellen White quotes more than thirty times the expression “6000 years.” Not one of them gives room to think in a specific date for the Second Coming.

⁵These calculations about the year 1996 were based on a chronology generally accepted by Christians that Creation took place in 4004 B.C. In this case, the 6000 years would have been up in 1996 A.D.

who establish dates for Christ's coming do not have a true message.⁶ As we have seen previously, Ellen White expected the Second Coming to take place any time. At the same time, she discouraged any attempt to set specific dates. While we also wait with longing for the coming of the Lord in our time, we must take seriously Christ's words: "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority" ([Matthew 24:36](#); [Acts 1:7](#)).

[106]

The Historical Context And Circumstances

Another important aspect in arriving at a correct interpretation is to take into account the time and the circumstances that surrounded a certain statement. On occasion, certain norms or behaviors have been imposed without taking into account the historical context for interpreting them correctly.

For example, in the biblical record we find a statement that decrees: "A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing, for the Lord your God detests anyone who does this" ([Deuteronomy 22:5](#)). Some believers consider that this statement is enough evidence to prohibit a Christian woman from wearing pants. However, the historical context of the statement shows that no one, neither men nor women, dressed in pants at that time in those regions of the world. What was the original meaning and God's intention for conveying that prohibition? It was much wider and much more serious than the use of pants. The key to understanding the concept is that the exchange of clothes between men and women was "detestable." It involved a moral problem.

The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* says in reference to this text: "This probably refers to the heathen custom—quite common in some lands today—of a simulated change of sex for immoral purposes, men wearing women's clothing, aping their manners, and

⁶See, for example, the following statement: "No one has a true message fixing the time when Christ is to come or not to come. Be assured that God gives no one authority to say that Christ delays His coming five years, ten years, or twenty years" ([Selected Messages 2:113, 114](#)).

offering their bodies for immoral purposes.”⁷ Today we call these people “transvestites.”

[107] By giving this text a limited interpretation, as is the case in applying it only to the use of pants by Christian women, the more important principles involved, maintaining a clear distinction among the sexes, and avoiding immoral practices such as transvestitism, are lost from view. The knowledge of the historical context that tells us that no one used pants at the time prevents us from arriving at a limited or incorrect interpretation.

Time And Circumstances In The Days Of Ellen White

A century of difference is a very important passage of time! Does this mean that the counsel given is not valid at the present time? If this were the case, it would be much more difficult for us to accept biblical counsel that was written some nineteen centuries ago! As previously stated, the vast majority of the prophetic Scriptures do not require any special interpretation based on the time in which they were written. Most of the counsel and teaching, both in the Bible and in the Testimonies, are pertinent at any time. However, there is a small proportion of the prophetic Scriptures that require that time and circumstances be taken into account in order to understand them. A modern prophet, therefore, advises us: “Regarding the testimonies, nothing is ignored; nothing is cast aside; but time and place must be considered. Nothing must be done untimely.”⁸

[108] Some examples will help explain the concept. In 1903 Ellen White directed this counsel to parents regarding the preparation of their children for life: “Boys as well as girls should gain a knowledge of household duties.... And if girls, in turn, 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.”⁹ It is obvious that this counsel requires a study of the time and the circumstances in which it was given. Learning to harness and drive a horse does not have the same value today that it had when the counsel was first written. Nevertheless, the principles on

⁷Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, vol 1, p. 1030.

⁸Selected Messages 1:57.

⁹Child Guidance, 351.

which this counsel is based have permanent value—parents should prepare their children for the duties of life.

In 1902, when the manager of a sanatorium asked for counsel about the purchase of an automobile for the institution, the answer he received was: “Study economy in the furnishing of the Sanitarium. I received your letter in regard to the purchase of an automobile in which to carry patients to and from the station. My brother, do not make such a purchase. If you should get an automobile, it would be a temptation to others to do the same thing.”¹⁰

A few years later, the automobile was in common use; but at the moment the counsel was given, it was considered too ostentatious a luxury for a Christian institution. Nevertheless, the underlying principles are, we repeat again, of permanent value—economy should be practiced in the institutions of the church, and ostentatious patterns that may be copied by others should not be indulged.

Even more intriguing is the counsel given in 1894 in relationship to the purchase of bicycles, a newly invented means of transportation. The counsel was thought so important that it was even published in an article in the official journal of the church. It read thus: “You should not be purchasing bicycles, ... Instead of investing one hundred dollars in a bicycle, you should consider the matter well, lest it might be at the price of souls for whom Christ died.”¹¹ Today, bicycles are so common that it seems impossible that the messenger of the Lord was against their use. Nevertheless, if we take into account [109] “the time and the place,” we immediately recognize how appropriate the counsel was. The price of a hundred dollars represented several months of a worker’s salary at that time. A bicycle was a luxury that the believers could not give themselves without putting at risk their generosity in relation to the outreach work of the church. Although the circumstances have changed, the basic principles of this counsel are still valid—do not pursue luxury or ostentation; do not desire every “new” thing without consideration of the price; do not put at risk generosity to God and the cause in order to acquire the latest novelty that comes along.

¹⁰Manuscript Releases 1:394.

¹¹The Review and Herald, August 21, 1894.

How To Apply The Writings Of The Past To Today

The three illustrations above have something in common. Even though the specific counsel may no longer have the same importance it did at the moment it was given, the fundamental principles upon which it was based continue to have permanent validity. This clearly demonstrates that discovering the principles involved in a particular story is the most important thing when attempting to apply writings from the past to present situations. General principles, in contrast to the specific circumstances that may be localized or transitory, are of a permanent nature. Behind each counsel of the Scriptures or the Testimonies, although given for a particular situation, lies a basic principle that must be discovered to make it possible to apply the story, teaching, or counsel to contemporary situations. This is the instruction we have been given:

[110]

The word of God abounds in general principles for the formation of correct habits of living, and the testimonies, general and personal, have been calculated to call their attention more especially to these principles.
¹²

These general principles to which Ellen White refers may be classified as permanent values of universal application. In other words, they are counsels or teachings that do not wear out, nor do they become old with the passage of time. These are the principles or permanent values behind each story in the Scriptures, behind each teaching and parable of Christ, behind, ultimately, every inspired message.

Warnings For The Future

We could have concluded our study of the principles and rules of interpretation with the previous paragraph, but the analysis would not be complete. There are certain elements about the interpretation and application of beliefs that will be particularly important in the near future. The unity of the church will be at stake, and we are advised

¹²*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, [In Heavenly Places](#), 323.

to be watchful. The messenger of the Lord shares her concerns as follows:

There will be those once united with us in the faith who will search for new, strange doctrines, for something odd and sensational to present to the people....

Any man could misinterpret and misapply God's Word, denouncing people and things, and then take the position that those who refused to receive his message had rejected the message of God....

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 it from its proper connection, and applying it according to their idea....

[111]

The very last deception of Satan will be to make of none effect the testimony of the Spirit of God.... Satan will work ingeniously, in different ways and through different agencies, to unsettle the confidence of God's remnant people in the true testimony. ¹³

When the shaking comes, by the introduction of false theories, these surface readers, anchored nowhere, are like shifting sand. They slide into any position to suit the tenor of their feelings of bitterness....

The enemy will bring in false theories, such as the doctrine that there is no sanctuary. This is one of the points on which there will be a departing from the faith. ¹⁴

It is certain that in the coming crisis the interpretation and application of doctrines will play an important role— “new, strange doctrines,” “something odd and sensational,” “the introduction of false theories.” The internal crisis in the church disclosed in these statements will revolve around doctrine. Are you, dear reader, pre-

¹³Statements from the chapter “Attitudes Toward the Testimonies,” [Selected Messages](#) 1:40-48.

¹⁴[Last Day Events](#), 177.

pared for these events? How can we stand against the impact of the forces of evil working inside and outside the church?

Christ's Counsel

[112] We began this book with Christ and we want to end it with Him. Jesus speaks specifically about how to get ready for the crises related to the Word and to doctrine. Some of His illustrations and parables have influenced us since we were children. Who doesn't remember the song that our Sabbath School teachers taught us about the wise man and the foolish man? That parable's purpose was to remind us that the only ones who have assurance are those who build on the Rock ([Matthew 7:24-27](#)). The Rock, of course, in both the Old and the New Testaments represents Christ.¹⁵ In the particular case of this parable, it also represents Christ's words ([v. 24](#)). Christ's words, the testimony of Jesus, are a firm rock on which we can anchor ourselves with security.

Another parable in which Jesus speaks specifically about preparation for the crisis revolving around the Bible and its doctrines is the parable of the sower ([Matthew 13:1-9](#)). The Lord Himself interpreted this parable for His disciples, so we have no doubts about the original meaning and Jesus' intentions when He narrated it ([Matthew 13:18-23](#)). The security of the "plant" in time of crisis depends on the depth of its roots. If someone does not understand the Word, the Lord says, that believer is a likely victim of the deceits and stratagems of Satan and his cohorts ([v. 19](#)). If someone does not dig deep into the Word, he or she is likely to be pulled up by the roots when affliction comes ([vss. 20, 21](#)). If a person is so preoccupied with the "worries of this life" that he does not have time to devote to the Word, his situation is extremely dangerous ([v. 21](#)). The only security is in understanding the Word and allowing it to produce fruit ([v. 23](#)).

It is important to note that the Lord specifically places emphasis on understanding or not understanding the Word. Those who are perfectly happy to listen to it, but who are not concerned with understanding it, become easy prey for those who come with "new,

¹⁵See [1 Corinthians 10:4](#); [1 Peter 2:4-8](#).

strange doctrines,” or for those who present something extraordinary and sensational that attracts attention. For these reasons, it is extremely important that we are sure we understand the doctrines of the church, made up of biblical teachings based on the testimony of Jesus. [113]

While it is true that there is a crisis just ahead that will revolve around the interpretation of doctrine, we need not fear. Christ assures us the victory if we take His hand and accept His counsel. The voice of the Spirit has no other purpose than to make us victors in Christ. Let us listen, then, to “what the Spirit says to the churches.” Let us accept the voice of the “faithful and true witness” and His promise of victory. “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne” ([Revelation 3:13, 14, 21](#)).

Conclusion

[114]

We have titled this chapter “Human Interpretation” because it truly is a task that must be undertaken by the recipient of the divine message. The form in which the person perceives, interprets, and ultimately applies the message is fundamental to the process of divine-human communication. However, there are risks to this function of interpreting divine counsel. To avoid them, we must trust the same prophetic word and its ability to present enough evidence to correctly understand its meaning. And we should have confidence in “the body of Christ,” His church. It is the head of the church Himself who gives it that type of superhuman wisdom and understanding that makes it worthy of confidence—and more trustworthy than personal or private interpretations.

Epilogue

“The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever” ([Isaiah 40:8](#)). The prophet’s words, repeated by the apostle Peter,¹ remind us of an important truth—the only sure and permanent thing in this world is the Word of the Lord.

The Bible was written over a period of more than 1500 years. The great prophet Moses, whom God inspired to initiate the writing of the Bible, was a man of two worlds—the Egyptian Empire, the most sophisticated and civilized of its time, and the people of Israel, a rather primitive group who came out of slavery. No one at the time could have imagined the final destiny of those two worlds in which Moses lived. The Egyptian Empire has passed into history, but Moses is in heaven,² and the writings that God directed to His people through him have challenged millions throughout the centuries.

What made the difference?

The answer is: the prophetic word.

[116] Our Lord Jesus Christ arrived on this earth as a defenseless baby born in a manger, and seemingly finished His life on a cross. The all-powerful Roman Empire tried to crush His followers, but they were willing to suffer and even give their lives for the word of God and the “testimony of Jesus.”³ No one could have imagined the final outcome. The Roman Empire has passed into history. Christ is in heaven, at the right hand of the Father, and is about to return to earth seeking His followers who gave their lives for the Word. What made the difference? The sure promises of Christ and the dependability of His Word that “lives and remains forever.”

The Advent movement began with a disappointment—a theological disillusionment—and became an object of derision by contemporaries. The small group of believers was discouraged and divided

¹ [1 Peter 1:24, 25](#).

² [Matthew 17:3](#); [Luke 9:29-31](#); [Jude 9](#).

³ [Revelation 1:9](#).

by diverse interpretations and theories. A fragile young girl with no formal education began to assert that she had received messages from God. Very few believed her. It seemed impossible to human eyes that this religious movement could gather strength and become the final church prophesied in Scripture. God, however, had other plans, and these were revealed through the gift of prophecy. That small initial movement has become a world church. More than ten million members await the return of the Lord with assurance and joy. What made the difference? The prophetic word. The voice of the Spirit has also made a difference in many lives. Those who rejected it or rise up against it have harvested only bitterness and incredulity. Others have doubted her and have left without at least looking for answers to their questions. On the other hand, those who accept her have received countless blessings that have come to them in the form of trust, faith, security, peace of mind, and transformed lives. The difference is immense, deep, and of eternal consequence.

A Personal Testimony

[117]

In concluding this book, that indeed has been a journey the author and the reader have taken together, I would like to share my personal testimony. For almost forty years, it has been my privilege to serve the church as a pastor, evangelist, and administrator. During all those years, the Word has been my working “tool” and source of inspiration. The testimonies have also been invaluable in their function of explaining, confirming, and leading toward the Word.

During the last ten years I have had an additional privilege: serving the church in a ministry directly related to the publications of Ellen G. White. Every day I have the opportunity of reviewing original manuscripts, reading through the pages of her early books, and going back in imagination to the early years of the Advent movement and watching its development and growth.

In my daily work, I have not found any so-called “secrets” under lock and key in the White Estate vaults, nor have I seen any undiscovered, unrevealed “prophecies.” I have not found any attempt to hide data or to deny facts. Just the opposite. I have seen a group of ministers and their associates willing to respond to all questions, to investigate, and to share the results if they don’t know the answers.

This privilege has reaffirmed my faith and confirmed my assurance that God has directed this Adventist movement through the gift of prophecy. In reviewing the way in which God led our pioneers to the knowledge of biblical truths, in analyzing the way in which the Lord resolved crises in the church in the past, and in examining the wonderful way He has guided the church's growth and development, I can do no less than share Ellen White's astonishment and admiration at the results:

[118]

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. ⁴

This volume of short, descriptive essays attempts to provide the essential historical background for understanding Ellen White's writings. Although a general history of the United States during Mrs. White's lifetime would have provided some of this information, we have chosen to explore selected elements of the past that were either of significance to this shaper of Adventism or place her concerns within the context of the larger society. Thus the writers respectively address such subjects as eating and drinking habits, travel conditions, and entertainment, among other things. One chapter looks at Australia during the period that Ellen White lived there.

It is hoped that the themes of her work will take on increased meaning as this social background is sketched in. For those who are interested, the authors have suggested readings in both Ellen White's writings and standard historical accounts.

Finally, a word about what this volume is not. First, Ellen White is not the subject of this volume; hence, she appears only occasionally in these pages. Second, these essays do not address the critical interpretive questions regarding Ellen White's relationship to her milieu. Instead, they have the more limited task of simply establishing the nature of the milieu itself.

⁴[Life Sketches of Ellen G. White, 196.](#)

Third, with some notable exceptions—the chapters on Portland, the Sunday law movement, Michigan during the Civil War, and, to a lesser extent, the overland railroad—the authors do not provide information new to the scholarly world. Rather, they attempt to synthesize present historical scholarship for a more general audience.

It is the belief of the writers of these essays that historical knowledge is essential to understanding the present. Thus, awareness of our denomination's history is necessary to anyone seeking to understand its current situation. The church and Ellen White did not develop in a vacuum. In the next several pages you will discover what the world of early Seventh-day Adventism, particularly that of its prophet Ellen G. White, was like.

—From the Preface

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