

HERMENEUTICS

**BASIC
PRINCIPLES
FOR
INTERPRETING
INSPIRED
WRITINGS**

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B Y M I C H A E L W . C A M P B E L L

HERMENEUTICS:

BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING INSPIRED WRITINGS

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Instructional Objectives

After studying this course, you should be able to do the following:

1. Recognize that while a “private interpretation” of inspired writings may seem to satisfy personal needs, the prophetic writer’s ultimate purpose (see 2 Peter 1:20) is not accomplished until the reader understands the principles that underlie the inspired message.
2. Realize that what an inspired writer *means* may be even more important in arriving at truth than what the writer *says*. (The words of the message are the symbols; understanding their meaning is the goal.)
3. Recognize that the use of rational, objective rules/tools of hermeneutics (the science and art of deriving meaning) is not only legitimate and valid, but also necessary in order to discern correctly the message that the inspired writer sought to convey.
4. Identify and employ the appropriate rule/tool to resolve various hermeneutical problems, thus correctly handle the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15, NIV).²

Introduction

Hermeneutics is the science of interpreting literary documents.³ Webster’s Dictionary defines *hermeneutics* as “the study of methodological principles of interpretation and explanation.”⁴ Hermeneutical rules help readers understand a wide range of documents by diverse authors—ranging from secular writers such

as Homer, Plato, and Shakespeare to inspired writers such as Moses, Paul, and Ellen White—a person whom Seventh-day Adventists consider to have been inspired by God.

Born in 1827, Ellen Gould Harmon White grew up in Portland, Maine. When she was nine years old, a serious accident left her unconscious for three weeks. When she regained consciousness, she began to ask existential questions: Did God love her? Why did God allow this bad thing to happen to her? She was encouraged by her mother to give her heart to Jesus Christ. After hearing the revivalist William Miller preach, Ellen joined his followers, who believed that Jesus would come in 1844. Shortly after the Millerites’ “Great Disappointment” because Jesus had not appeared as predicted, as Ellen was worshipping with a group of women, she received her first vision. Over the next seven decades, she would share the revelations she received from God in more than an estimated 2,000 prophetic visions and dreams.⁵

The question is increasingly raised within Adventist circles, “How do you interpret a horse-and-buggy-era prophet in an age of iPads, interplanetary probes, and genetic engineering?” This question deserves a good answer. Life was very different in Ellen White’s day. Automobiles, electricity, and the pasteurization of dairy products did not become commonplace until the end of her lifetime. The first Hollywood feature motion picture did not flash upon the screens of theaters until 1915, the year she died. The first commercial radio station did not begin to broadcast until five years later. And the first commercial television station did not go on the air until 1939. Medical care was still very primitive, and most people had only a limited education.⁶

Of course, if a person defines relevance as inversely proportional to distance in time, then the Bible would become increasingly irrelevant, for the New Testament was written nearly two millennia ago, and portions of the Old Testament were penned hundreds of years before that.

The same principles of interpretation can be applied to both the Bible and Ellen White’s writings. As with Moses, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Paul, so with Ellen White: It is often necessary to apply generally accepted principles of hermeneutics in order to determine what the prophet *meant*, rather than simply what the prophet *said*.

Many Christians, including some Seventh-day Adventists, view attempts to “interpret” the Bible as dangerous. Such people feel sincere concern (if not fear) that

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“liberals” will exploit this device in order to “water down,” if not totally nullify, the Word of God by cleverly “spiritualizing away” the clear intent of inspired statements. Nor are such concerns unfounded. In the days of Jesus, the religious teachers did that by using what they called the “Corban doctrine.” The Hebrew leaders declared that once the term *Corban* was invoked, anything to which it was applied was irrevocably dedicated to the Temple and became available for their selfish purposes. They could thus avoid helping parents in distress, thereby nullifying the fifth commandment.⁷ Jesus declared: “Thus have ye made the commandments of God of none effect” (Matthew 15:6, KJV). In-

to send an angel from heaven down to tell Sr. [Sister] White that cheese was wholly unfit for food, I am going to believe it.”

The woman then wrote back to Coon. She concluded her letter as follows: “I have always wondered why it is so hard for us to read English. To me, when Sr. White wrote in [*The*] *Ministry of Healing*, ‘Cheese . . . is wholly unfit for food,’ I accepted it, and we never used . . . cheese.”

As Dr. Coon told the story, he resisted the temptation to respond to the letter writer and the physicians (both of whom were often seen on the platforms of their respective churches), as follows: “If God took all the trouble to send an angel to tell the Apostle Paul that ‘[t]he women are

physicians). Mrs. White later made earnest appeals for Seventh-day Adventists to maintain only the highest standards in training physicians, participated actively in the establishment of the denomination’s health-care system, and underwent modern medical treatments herself. Thus, a misunderstanding of Ellen White’s writings that insists on a narrow interpretation of what she *said* rather than investigating what she *meant* could result in deadly consequences.

Hermeneutics, rightly employed, could have come to the rescue in both these situations. The goal of hermeneutics is to “correctly [handle] the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). Hermeneutics seeks to achieve balance and to avoid distortion. The earliest preaching (as we define it today) took place in the postexilic synagogues of Palestine. It involved hermeneutics: “They read in the book in the law of God distinctly [margin: ‘with an interpretation’], and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading” (Nehemiah 8:8, KJV). The New International Version translates it this way: “They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.”

The Need for Hermeneutics

There are four basic reasons why a clear hermeneutical method is necessary:

1. **The Possibility for Misinterpretation.** The existence of hundreds of Christian denominations, with widely varying doctrines, illustrates the fact that the Scriptures can be interpreted in vastly different ways. Achieving agreement on a set of valid hermeneutical rules diminishes the likelihood of misinterpretation.

2. **Distance.** The greater the chronological, historical, theological, or linguistic distance from the original context, the greater the need for a hermeneutical method that pays close attention to each of these areas.

3. **Truth.** In order for Christians to discern the will of God as accurately as possible, they need a Bible-based hermeneutical method.

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deed, “explaining” must never be allowed to degenerate into “explaining away.”

However, those who insist that no rules of interpretation should be used must contend with an unintended irony: the “no-hermeneutics” position is, itself, a hermeneutical position. A woman once wrote to the late Roger Coon at the Ellen G. White Estate about Mrs. White’s strong statements regarding cheese. In response, Coon made a compilation of the various statements and admonitions penned by the prophet, and provided some contextual background regarding the times in which she gave that counsel—lack of pasteurization, unhygienic conditions in 19th-century dairies, etc.

Upon receiving Coon’s letter, the woman consulted with two female physicians. One rebuked Coon for his stance, the other said: “If God took all the trouble

to keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak’ [1 Corinthians 14:34, NASB], shouldn’t you believe that as well?”

So, is cheese—all cheese—“*unconditionally*” condemned for food? Are women *never* to speak publicly in church? This is what God’s prophets have *seemed* to say. But is that what the prophets really *meant*?

A pastoral friend wrote me a letter expressing concern about a parishioner who was dying of cancer. She had refused medical intervention, citing Ellen White’s statements about the dangers of drugs, which she interpreted as referring to all forms of medical treatment. It was clear that she had failed to investigate the historical context in which such statements were made (when Ellen White wrote those counsels, a person could obtain a mail diploma to practice medicine, and many dangerous chemicals such as arsenic and opium were prescribed by

4. **Unity of the Church.** In order to promote unity in Christ, the church needs to adopt a hermeneutical method that can be agreed upon by members and thus does not divide the members into warring factions.⁸

Together, these four reasons reveal the need for every Christian who takes inspired writings seriously to carefully reflect on how he or she interprets these documents and to develop a reliable set of guidelines for resolving disagreements about how they should be interpreted. Just as nourishment of the body is provided by ingestion of physical food, so is the growth of spiritual life ensured by the spiritual food received through the partaking (Jeremiah 15:16) of God's inspired counsel and promises.⁹

Failure to rightly interpret prophetic counsel can result in serious errors that affect the Christian's physical and spiritual life.

Six Rules of Hermeneutics

Because it is a scientific discipline, hermeneutics uses some basic methodological tools. In the case of prophetic writings, I have distilled six methods based upon biblical scholarship from academics who adhere to a "high view" of Scripture—in essence, they regard the Bible as the divinely inspired and authoritative Word of God, capable of being understood by human beings with guidance from the Holy Spirit. Obviously, among biblical scholars there is quite a bit of debate over how to apply the methods, but I have tried to summarize them into a basic six-step hermeneutical outline.¹⁰ The rules are based upon Scripture and are elucidated in Ellen White's writings.

Hermeneutical Principle No. 1: Seek Divine Guidance

Seventh-day Adventist Church historian and philosopher George R. Knight makes three suggestions about how to study inspired writings: First, "begin your study with a prayer for guidance and understanding."¹¹ The same Holy Spirit who inspired the writers is able to help believ-

ers understand the meaning of their documents. Such an attitude has the effect of softening people's minds, hearts, and lives, and will enable the sincere believer to grasp God's truth for his or her life. An attitude of faith rather than doubt is an essential starting point for hermeneutics. Spiritual things are spiritually discerned. As Ellen White commented about her own writings: "some who are not willing to receive the light, but who prefer to walk in ways of their own choosing, will search the testimonies to find something in them to encourage the spirit of unbelief and disobedience."¹²

Hermeneutical Principle No. 2: Begin With a Healthy Outlook

Every person has a unique mindset, often described as a "worldview," whose scope and influence are far-reaching. The philosophical values that inform one's worldview impact the person's attitudes and decision-making and profoundly influence his or her outlook on life. Worldview is also influenced by a person's attitude and temperament. Some people tend to be naturally positive about life, while others are consistently negative. In order to develop a "healthy" outlook, each person needs to recognize what presuppositions and biases have helped to shape his or her unique worldview. Thus, developing a "healthy" outlook means identifying anything that might prevent one from having an open mind about inspired writings. It is easy to read something into the text rather than letting the text remain authoritative, an inspired piece of writing that can be interpreted by careful study and comparison with other texts.

An important aspect of a "healthy outlook" includes being willing to change one's opinion when confronted with solid evidence—in other words, keeping an "open mind." We must recognize our biases (both for and against) and not allow them to control our thinking. These biases come from our worldview, which is influenced by race, culture, gender, tradition, upbringing, training, and beliefs, which can lead to preconceptions and assumptions about inspired writings. While it is impossible to completely overcome

human bias, by recognizing it we can ask the Holy Spirit to help us keep our minds open and balanced. Ellen White described this process when she wrote: "If you search the Scriptures to vindicate your own opinions, you will never reach the truth. Search in order to learn what the Lord says."¹³

Hermeneutical Principle No. 3: Consider All Available Data

Remember the story of six blind men who found an elephant. The first thought it was a wall, the second a spear, the third a snake, the fourth a tree, the fifth a fan, and the last a rope.¹⁴ Because they all correctly described various anatomical features of the elephant, each one was partially right, but also totally wrong. They missed the "big picture," which considers *each portion* of the anatomy as part of a unified whole! In a similar way, it is easy to make incomplete and inaccurate assumptions when dealing with a large quantity of material, whether the 66 books of the Bible or the voluminous literary output of Ellen White. Before drawing a conclusion, the reader should take the time to examine *all* that the writer has to say on a topic. Jesus exemplified this principle in His teaching: "And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27, KJV). The prophet Isaiah similarly understood this principle when he wrote: "precept upon precept; line upon line; here a little, and there a little" (Isaiah 28:10, KJV).

When studying everything that Ellen White or the Bible has to say on a topic, the modern reader will quickly recognize that there are:

- topics that Ellen White (and the biblical authors) did not write about because they had not been discovered or were not widely known during their lifetimes (i.e., genetic treatments for disease, birth control, electronic media, and organ transplants);
- topics upon which Ellen White wrote very little (gardening, astronomy, homo-

sexuality, life insurance, the wedding band); and topics upon which Ellen White wrote a great deal (salvation in Jesus Christ and end-time events).

• In the case of some topics, such as Ellen White's use of the word *amalgamation*, insufficient data is available to be able to determine conclusively what she meant by the term.¹⁵

Arthur White, Ellen White's grandson, discussed the necessity of examining *all* the information available when studying her writings. He stated: "many have erred in interpreting the meaning of the testimonies by taking isolated statements . . . out of their context as a basis for belief. Some do this even though there are other passages, which, if carefully considered, would show the position taken on the basis of the isolated statement to be untenable. . . . It is not difficult to find individual sentences or paragraphs in either the Bible or the Ellen G. White writings, which may be used to support one's own ideas rather than to set forth the thought of the author."¹⁶ Ellen White also embraced this principle when she wrote: "The testimonies themselves will be the key that will explain the messages given, as scripture is explained by scripture."¹⁷

As a case study, let's look at Ellen White's counsel about the use of eggs. In a letter written in 1869, she wrote: "Eggs should not be placed on your table. They are an injury to your children."¹⁸ Proper hermeneutics prompts us to ask whether this was *all* she wrote about the topic.

In 1901, Ellen White wrote a letter of counsel to Daniel H. Kress, a medical missionary to Australia. She told him that he had become a health reform "extremist." "You must not deprive yourself of that class of food which makes good blood," she added. "It is your duty to . . . get eggs of healthy fowls. Use these eggs cooked or raw. Drop them uncooked into the best unfermented wine you can find. This will supply that which is necessary to your system. Do not for a moment suppose that it will not be right to do this."¹⁹

Forty-three years later, Dr. Kress testified that Ellen White's counsels had saved

his life at a time when he was almost at the point of death. "After receiving this message," he wrote, "I at once began making reforms by using eggs as directed, and milk, and with God's blessing I made a full *recovery*. . . . For the health so graciously granted me, I am indebted to the messages that came to me at a time when a recovery seemed hopeless from a human standpoint. I still follow the instruction by using milk and eggs."²⁰

Did Ellen White contradict herself? In the case of her earlier counsel, she was concerned about the health of a young man, but she knew some people whose "blood-making organs were feeble" and needed eggs for a well-balanced diet. Ellen White's counsel about eggs underscores the importance of reading every-

would show the meaning to be quite the opposite. With the cunning of the serpent they entrench themselves behind disconnected utterances construed to suit their carnal desires. Thus do many willfully pervert the word of God."²¹

B. Historical Context. The historical context includes the time, place, and circumstances that led to the creation of the original document. Today, Seventh-day Adventists keep the Sabbath from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. How early Adventists decided when the Sabbath began is an instructive example about the importance of historical context. On Friday, November 16, 1855, the group, meeting in a formal session, designated the Sabbath as beginning at 6:00 P.M. (despite the fact that the sun had set

ARTHUR WHITE, ELLEN WHITE'S GRANDSON, DISCUSSED THE NECESSITY OF EXAMINING ALL THE INFORMATION AVAILABLE WHEN STUDYING HER WRITINGS.

thing she wrote about a topic before forming a conclusion.

Hermeneutical Principle No. 4: Consider the Context

The context of a statement is extremely important in understanding an author's meaning. Three primary types of context affect meaning: literary, historical, and theological:

A. Literary Context. The goal is to get as close to the original language as possible. Use a historical dictionary, and compare the language of the author in the original context, as well as the way the author uses the word in other places. "In order to sustain erroneous doctrines or unchristian practices," noted Ellen White, "some will seize upon passages of Scripture separated from the context, perhaps quoting half a single verse as proving their point, when the remaining portion

an hour earlier) largely based upon the practice at that time. The foremost advocate of this position was Captain Joseph Bates, who reasoned that the most uniform way to keep the Sabbath was to have it begin when the Sun set at the equator (6:00 P.M.). But others at that General Conference session pointed to Leviticus 23:32, which said: "from even unto even, shall you keep your sabbath" (KJV). The young scholar J. N. Andrews was asked to present his research that Sabbath morning. After examining all the biblical evidence, Andrews concluded that the Sabbath should be kept from sunset to sunset. Without the historical context of knowing how, when, and why the church's thinking on this topic changed, the modern reader would likely be confused and conclude that early Adventists contradicted one another. A few days

later, on November 20, Ellen White had a vision that validated J. N. Andrews's presentation.²²

Another example of historical development involves the Adventist understanding of clean and unclean meats. As early as 1858, Mrs. White admonished S. N. Haskell about his persistence in agitating for Christians to avoid unclean foods as defined in the Old Testament, especially pork. "I saw," she wrote, "that your views concerning swine's flesh would prove no injury if you have them to yourselves; but in your judgment and opinion you have made this question a test . . . If God requires His people to abstain from swine's flesh, He will convict them on the matter."²³ Although many early Sabbatarian Adventists were reformers, there was among them no widespread interest in health principles until after Ellen White's June 5, 1863, health-reform vision. The following year, Mrs. White began to write about what she had seen. *Spiritual Gifts*, volume 4, makes it clear

that her emphasis had changed: "God never designed the swine to be eaten under any circumstances."²⁴

The culture (e.g., time and place) is similarly an important component of historical context. An instructive example is Ellen White's counsel on courtship. In 1897, while she was in Australia, Mrs. White wrote regarding the students at the newly formed Avondale School: "We would not, could not, allow any courting or forming attachments at the school, girls with young men and young men with girls."²⁵ In 1913, a former principal of the Avondale School, C. W. Irwin, was asked to read a manuscript being prepared by Mrs. White on the subject of education. This document did not include her strongly worded 1897 statement! In its place was a far milder statement: "In all our dealings with students, age and character must be taken into account. We cannot treat the young and the old just alike. There are circumstances under which men and women of sound experience and good standing may

be granted some privileges not given to the younger students. The age, the conditions, and the turn of mind must be taken into consideration. We must be wisely considerate in all our work. But we must not lessen our firmness and vigilance in dealing with students of all ages, nor our strictness in forbidding the unprofitable and unwise association of young and immature students."²⁶

Irwin responded that he was "at a loss to know how to make it [this later statement] agree with matter which Sister White had written on other occasions."²⁷ Church historian George Knight explains the reason for the disparity: "What Irwin had not taken into account was the difference in circumstances in which Ellen White had given the seemingly divergent counsel. Her counsel to the Avondale School in 1897 focused on a situation in which nearly half the students were under 16 years of age. But in 1913 the majority of students in the denomination's colleges were older, more experienced, and more mature."²⁸

Ellen White recognized the importance of time and place in interpreting her counsel. She wrote: "Regarding the testimonies, nothing is ignored; nothing is cast aside; but time and place must be considered. Nothing must be done untimely. Some matters must be withheld because some persons would make an improper use of the light given."²⁹

C. Theological Context: Obscure passages need to be understood in the light of major theological themes. For Ellen White, some of these major themes include the primacy of Scripture, the Great Controversy theme, and her devotion to Jesus Christ.

Ellen White never intended for her books to be used as a substitute for Scripture. She described her writings as a "lesser light" to lead people to the "greater light"—the Scriptures.³⁰ Even within her own lifetime she saw her writings being misused. However, as she herself observed, a balanced understanding should lead people back to the Bible and encourage them to focus on its dominant themes. For this reason, in everything she wrote, Ellen White emphasized the "redemption plan, the restoration in the human soul of the



image of God.”³¹ She wrote that “The Bible student should learn to view the work [the Bible] as a whole, and to see the relation of its parts. He should gain a knowledge of its grand central theme, of God’s original purpose for the world, of the rise of the great controversy, and of the work of redemption.”³²

Another major theme in the writings of Ellen White was her devotion to Jesus Christ. This devotion stemmed from her own three-step conversion process during which her relationship with Jesus deepened from respect for a God who would save her from the torments of hell, to assurance of salvation with a God who loved her unconditionally, to finally understanding righteousness by faith as the need to depend completely upon the merits of Jesus Christ for salvation. Her relationship with Jesus deepened throughout her lifetime. Hence, toward at the end of her life, she wrote some of her most Christ-centered works, books like *Steps to Christ* (1892), *The Desire of Ages* (1898), *Christ’s Object Lessons* (1900), and *The Ministry of Healing* (1905), which demonstrate the depth of her spiritual experience.

One of the challenges of ascertaining theological context in the writings of Ellen White was created inadvertently when the church began to assemble compilations—books or pamphlets taken from her original writings, which are usually grouped topically. While there are some advantages in having a convenient form to access her writings on a given topic, compilations can also obscure the original literary and theological context. The danger of intensely scrutinizing a single topic is that it may cause the reader to miss the larger themes on which Ellen White was focusing.

Hermeneutical Principle No. 5: The Difference Between Principles and Particulars

At the risk of oversimplification, it is possible to argue that when prophets are giving counsel and instruction, they are doing one of two things: (a) declaring a *principle* (an unchanging rule of human

conduct that is timeless and universal), or (b) making an application to an immediate situation. This application could be called a *particular*. Ascertaining the difference between principles and particulars forms a recurring theme throughout the writings of Ellen White. “The Bible is the guidebook that is to decide the many difficult problems that rise in minds that are selfishly inclined. It is a reflection of the wisdom of God, and not only furnishes *great and important principles*, but supplies *practical lessons* for the life and conduct of man toward his fellow man. It gives *minute particulars* that decide our relation to God and to each other.”³³

In 1903, Ellen White wrote that girls who “could learn to harness and drive a

serve a broad spectrum of students, schools would need to be built in urban areas.”³⁸

Another case study involves the proper physical posture for prayer. In 1897, while Ellen White was on the platform of the Battle Creek Tabernacle, she whispered to the minister who intended to remain standing, “Get down upon your knees!” In reporting this experience, she added: “This is the proper position always.”³⁹ So, does this mean that in all circumstances, the only proper position for prayer is kneeling? Based on these counsels, a friend of mine has suggested that when Ellen White said “always,” that’s what she meant, and so she kneels every time she prays, no matter where that might be. Is that what Ellen White really intended?

ONE OF THE CHALLENGES OF ASCERTAINING THEOLOGICAL CON- TEXT IN THE WRITINGS OF ELLEN WHITE WAS CREATED INADVERTENTLY WHEN THE CHURCH BEGAN TO ASSEMBLE COMPILATIONS. . . .

horse . . . would be better fitted to meet the emergencies of life.”³⁴ Similarly, Ellen White wrote that every Adventist school should teach agriculture, and schools should be built only in rural locations.³⁵ Does this mean that all Adventist institutions must be built in rural locations and all young women must learn horsemanship? If so, then this counsel is now frequently ignored, and some even refer to statements such as these as evidence that the Adventist educational system has “abandoned the Blueprint.”³⁶ However, Ellen White’s writings in other places make it clear that she was concerned that both boys and girls learn practical life skills—so that they could be self-reliant enough to drive a car and prepared for emergencies such as changing a tire.³⁷ And Ellen White was a pragmatist who recognized that although the ideal was for Adventist institutions to be in rural settings, in order to

An examination of *all* of her teaching on the topic quickly reveals a balancing statement: “it is *not always necessary to bow upon your knees* in order to pray. Cultivate the habit of talking with the Saviour when you are alone, when you are walking, and when you are busy with your daily labor.”⁴⁰ Furthermore, in discussing her own practices, she reported that “Sometimes I pray for hours while lying in my bed” and publicly made altar calls urging people to stand for the closing benediction.⁴¹ Her action at the Battle Creek Tabernacle seems to have been directed to a specific minister who did not show proper respect during the church service, which Ellen White viewed as emblematic of a growing trend at that specific time toward a lack of reverence within Adventist churches. The principle

she emphasized was the need to show reverence to God while worshiping.

Ellen White recognized the possibility that some people would confuse principles and particulars. During her own lifetime, she was troubled by “those who,” she said, “select from the testimonies the strongest expressions and, without bringing in or making any account of the circumstances under which the cautions and warnings are given, make them of force in every case. . . . Picking out some things in the testimonies they drive them upon every one, and disgust rather than win souls.”⁴² This suggests that she wrote some of her counsels more forcibly than others because of specific circumstances,

Bible dictionaries and commentaries. The Seventh-day Adventist Church during the 1950s prepared *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (revised in 1980),⁴⁴ which is still an excellent resource. A more in-depth study of the original languages can be obtained by using Young’s reference numbers in conjunction with a Greek or Hebrew lexicon. Many libraries have current bibliographies that can guide you to current biblical research.

Similarly, there are some standard reference works for the study of Adventist history and Ellen White’s writings. *The Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996)⁴⁵ contains detailed information on the history of the denomination. Other

can also be purchased on a DVD. Another helpful Website for exploring issues related to Ellen White is Jud Lake’s Website: <http://www.ellenwhiteanswers.org>.

The Importance of Common Sense

Sometimes when confronted with some strongly worded counsels written by Ellen White, people are tempted to apply them rigidly without exercising common sense.⁴⁷ One example is this counsel: “Parents should be the *only* teachers of their children until they have reached eight or ten years of age,”⁴⁸ which was first published in 1872 and reissued in 1882 and 1913. I have sat through board meetings where church members asserted that this statement was an inflexible rule that should be applied in every situation.

In order to understand this statement, it is necessary to apply the six hermeneutical principles listed earlier in this article, along with some common sense. George Knight has suggested that the struggle over how to apply this statement “has provided us with perhaps the very best record we possess of how Mrs. White interpreted her own writings.”⁴⁹

A church school was built in 1902 near Ellen White’s “Elmshaven” home in St. Helena, California. The school board had no trouble finding older children to enroll, but they regarded some of the families as careless because they were allowing their young children to roam free instead of enrolling them in school. When the board received a recommendation to build a second classroom for the younger children, some board members objected, basing their viewpoint on Ellen White’s statement that “parents should be the *only* teachers of their children” until age 8 or 10. The school board was now split.

In order to achieve a consensus, they proposed to discuss this quotation directly with Ellen White. Fortunately, the entire interview was transcribed for posterity.⁵⁰ Ellen White reaffirmed her earlier position. “The home,” she told them, “is both a family church and a family school.” That was the principle, the ideal that she strove to place before Adventists.

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so it is essential to understand the underlying *principle* at stake before one examines how she applied it to a *particular* situation. Ellen White frequently chose some of her strongest language to describe the ideal, while making it clear that she also understood the challenges of applying principles to real-life situations.⁴³

Hermeneutical Principle No. 6: Obtain Specialized Help

Given the huge amount of inspired writings, whether in the Bible or the published and unpublished writings of Ellen White, it may be difficult at times to make sense of a specific counsel. One of the best ways to resolve this problem is to acquaint oneself with a variety of reference works (both print and electronic) and know how to find additional help when necessary.

Helpful biblical reference works include

current reference works include *Light Bearers, A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* by Richard W. Schwarz (1979), revised and updated by Floyd L. Greenleaf (2000); *In Passion for the World: A History of Seventh-day Adventist Education* (2005) by Floyd L. Greenleaf; and *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, edited by Jerry Moon and Denis Fortin.⁴⁶ The *Encyclopedia* contains research on Ellen White’s life and ministry, written by more than a hundred Adventist scholars. This peer-reviewed volume will probably become the benchmark reference on Ellen White’s life and thought for many years to come. If you still have questions, a helpful resource is the Ellen G. White Estate, Inc., which has many helpful studies about problematic statements on its Website: <http://www.whiteestate.org>. In addition, the Website contains a mechanism that allows visitors to search *all* of Ellen White’s published counsels. This material

But she recognized that the ideal is not always possible. “Mothers should be able to instruct their little ones wisely during the earlier years of childhood. If every mother were capable of doing this, and would take time to teach her children the lessons they should learn in early life, then all children could be kept in the home school until they are eight, or nine, or ten years old.”⁵¹ Thus, Ellen White sought to adjust the ideal “with a reality that modifies the categorical and unconditional nature of her statement on parents being the only teachers of their children until 8 or 10 years of age.”⁵²

Before the interview ended, she told the board: “God desires us to deal with these problems sensibly.” She was quite concerned about individuals who took an inflexible approach to her writings. “My mind has been greatly stirred in regard to the idea, ‘Why, Sister White has said so and so, and Sister White has said so and so; and therefore we are going right up to it.’” She added: “God wants us all to have common sense, and He wants us to reason from common sense. Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relation of things.”⁵³ It was obvious to everyone present that when she had made the original statement about the age at which children should enter school (1872) that there were no church schools, but by 1913, many church schools were accessible for Adventist parents. Circumstances indeed had changed.⁵⁴

In 1886, Ellen White lamented the way some people mistreated her writings as well as the Bible: “This is the way my writings are treated by those who wish to misunderstand and pervert them. . . . In the very same way that they treat the writings in my published articles and in my books, so do skeptics and infidels treat the Bible. They read it according to their desire to pervert, to misapply, to willfully wrest the utterances from their true meaning.”⁵⁵

Adventist theologian Herbert E. Douglass offers six suggestions that will prevent distortions and misunderstanding of inspired writing: (1) invite the Holy Spirit to help you study; (2) be willing to obey the truth; (3) be open-minded, even prepared to give up previously held opinions;

(4) expect to discover new truths; (5) ensure that “new” light is in harmony with old truth; and (6) be aware that an interpretation may be wrong if it is accompanied by an un-Christlike spirit.⁵⁶ These six suggestions along with a healthy dose of “common sense” will help the modern student of inspired writings to avoid extreme interpretations.

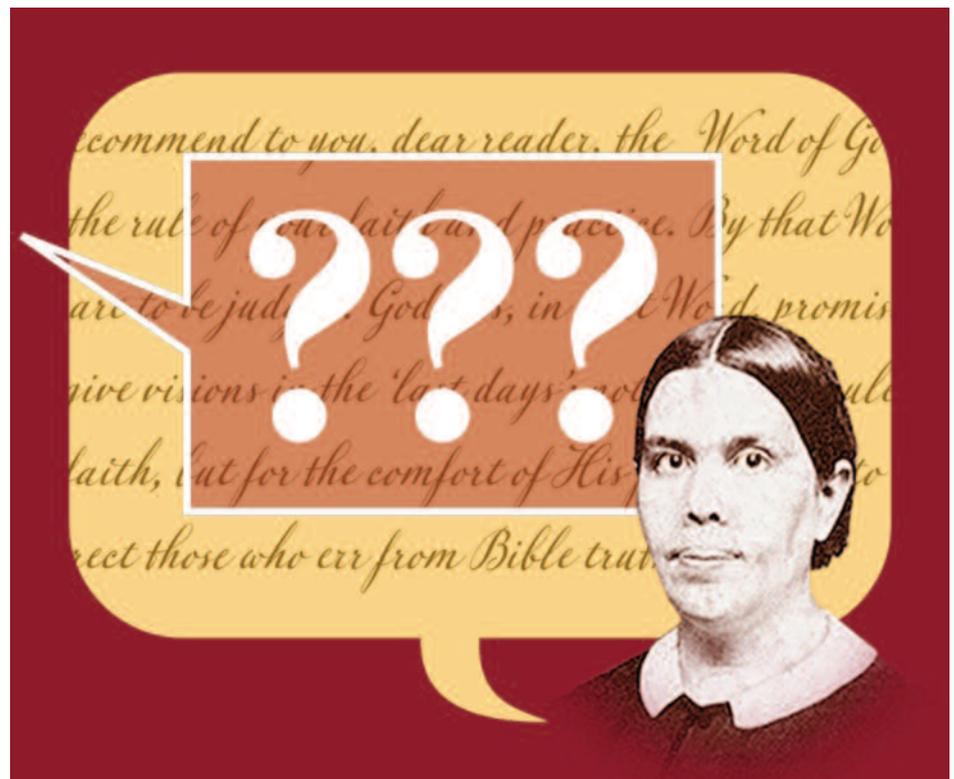
Did Ellen White Really Say That?

At the age of 12, I was asked to lead the song service in our church. I was terrified, as it was my first time standing at the front of a congregation. Fortunately, I made it through the hymns. After I finished, I was so relieved that I quickly exited to the back of the congregation, where I was accosted by a well-intentioned woman who rebuked me in the name of Ellen White for not having the congregation sing every stanza of every hymn. “Don’t you know,” she told me, “that the Ellen White writings say that?” I replied that I did not. Immediately, I began to search for the statement. After more than two decades, I still have not found it, even though I have worked at the White Estate and consulted several other

experts on Ellen White’s writings. It is an “apocryphal” statement attributed to Ellen White but which she herself never made.

Indeed, it is common for public figures and famous authors to have statements falsely attributed to them. In fact, the best apocryphal statements are created when the person is no longer alive to refute them! While Ellen White was alive, she recognized this problem: Beware, she said, “how you give credence to such reports. . . . To all who have a desire for truth I would say: Do not give credence to unauthenticated reports as to what Sister White has done or said or written. If you desire to know what the Lord has revealed through her, read her published works. . . . Do not eagerly catch up and report rumors as to what she has said.”⁵⁷

Some examples of favorite apocryphal “Ellen White said” statements that are still circulated today include: (1) inhabitants of other planets are gathering fruit for a celestial Sabbath stopover on the way to heaven; (2) she saw an angel standing by Uriah Smith inspiring him as he wrote *Thoughts on Daniel and the Revelation*; (3) the Holy Spirit is or was Melchizedek;



(4) she designated certain spots as hide-outs for the time of trouble; (5) specific cities would be destroyed by coming earthquakes, fires, floods, etc.; (6) Christ will return at midnight; (7) eggs should never be eaten; (8) Ellen White will be among the 144,000; (9) darkness will cover the Earth as the close of probation occurs; (10) Christ's last mediatorial work before probation closes will be for children who have wandered away from the church; (11) we should live as though we had 100 years to live but may die tomorrow; (12) entire churches and conferences will apostatize.⁵⁸

The 1919 Bible Conference and the Application of Hermeneutics

In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the first major test of how to apply herme-

during "roundtable" discussions about Ellen White's writings that occurred on July 30 and August 1, 1919. The first group of questions centered on the "exegetical" use of Ellen White's writings. A. G. Daniells, the leader of the discussion and president of the General Conference at that time, asserted "the Bible explains itself and must be understood through itself without resorting to the Testimonies [Ellen White's writings] to prove it."⁵⁹ Daniells spoke "very frankly" to the 18 individuals present about the importance of hermeneutical principles. "If we had always taught the truth on this question [hermeneutics]," he added, "we would not have any trouble or shock in the denomination now. But the shock is because we have not taught the truth, and have put the Testimonies on a plane where she says

conferees instead sought to arrive at a preconceived conclusion rather than to be open to where their study would take them. At that historic gathering, conferees disregarded basic hermeneutical principles, holding on to preconceived ideas. They pushed each other further apart, creating polarized theological camps. For the first (but not the last) time in Adventist history, "traditionalists" waged war against "progressives." In the end, the 1919 Bible Conference set the stage for later hermeneutical struggles that continued through the rest of the 20th century and into the 21st.⁶¹

Conclusion

Hermeneutics is the science of deriving meaning. It is the method used to discover exactly what an author meant to say when he or she wrote a specific statement or chapter. The Bible describes this as "rightly dividing the word of truth."⁶² To arrive at a credible conclusion, one must achieve the twin tasks of achieving balance and avoiding distortion.

The six hermeneutical principles outlined in this mini-course are critical for a balanced understanding of Ellen White's writings and the Bible. First, the reader must ask the Holy Spirit to guide his or her search for truth and approach the process with a genuine openness. Otherwise, hermeneutical principles, no matter how valid, are unlikely to help. Next, consider all of the data available. Third, consider the historical, literary, and theological context. Fourth, differentiate between principles and particulars. A particular is *a specific application of the principle*. Last but not least, if a statement still does not make sense to you, obtain specialized help from a reference work, or contact the Ellen G. White Estate or the Biblical Research Institute at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.⁶³

Ultimately, hermeneutics is a "tool" to assist in the search for truth. Common sense is important. Make sure that before you try to follow all of the hermeneutical steps that the Scripture verse or passage by Ellen White actually exists!

"THE BIBLE EXPLAINS ITSELF AND MUST BE UNDERSTOOD THROUGH ITSELF WITHOUT RESORTING TO THE TESTIMONIES [ELLEN WHITE'S WRITINGS] TO PROVE IT." A. G. Daniells

neutical principles occurred at the pivotal 1919 Bible Conference, four years after Ellen White's death. The planning committee intended for this conference to focus on how to interpret inspired writings.

At first, the writings of Ellen White weren't even on the list of topics to be discussed, but as delegates debated a variety of issues, they kept returning to the underlying problem of how to interpret (to apply hermeneutics to) Ellen White's writings. Two different schools of thought had developed on this subject, and both were represented at the conference. One group, who called themselves the "progressives," emphasized the importance of change; others, calling themselves "traditionalists," emphasized a literal interpretation. The two sides polarized the conference as they debated how to interpret the Bible and Ellen White's writings.

The crucial conversation occurred

they do not stand. We have claimed more for them than she did."⁶⁰

One of Daniells' primary concerns was the importance of educating young people, and church members in general, about the proper way to interpret the Bible and Ellen White's writings. He described a trip he took up to the Arctic Circle to visit a young pioneer missionary. There he found the young man as pale as a ghost due to his attempts to follow a few statements that Ellen White made about health reform without exercising common sense in applying the principles to his particular situation. According to Daniells, this was an abuse of Ellen White's writings.

The 1919 Bible Conference illustrates that there is more than one way to interpret Ellen White's writings, and that when there is disagreement about how to interpret inspired writings, the most productive approach is to agree on solid hermeneutical principles. However, the

Last but not least, keep in mind the lesson from the 1919 Bible Conference: Within a short time after Ellen White's death, at least two different hermeneutical camps existed within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. A. G. Daniells recognized this problem and tried to do something about it by gathering thought leaders in his day to discuss the problem. Unfortunately, the issues have never been fully resolved, which explains why, even now, Adventists continue to disagree about what the Bible writers and Ellen White said and what they meant. Even though differences of opinion are likely to persist, such discussions within Adventism will be far more fruitful if they establish *how* to approach inspired writings. The basic hermeneutical principles outlined here are well-established principles grounded in Scripture and the writings of Ellen White and can serve as a starting point for every sincere student who searches for truth. ✍

This article has been peer reviewed.



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