

THE BIBLE CONFERENCE OF 1919

Introduction

by Molleurus Couperus

Nearly all Protestant churches have had at least one outstanding leader whose dedication to what he considered his divinely ordained work and message was apparent to all. In spite of the fact that these men made mistakes and erred, their grateful and admiring followers awarded them a place of unusual authority in their church, particularly in matters of Biblical interpretation and doctrine. This was especially true of Luther and Calvin. Martin Luther, for instance, was called "an instrument of God," "a prophet of the Almighty" and an "apostle of freedom." Luther also applied the title of prophet to himself occasionally. His prophecies were

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gathered together by Johannes Lapäus and published by him in 1578 under the title *True Prophecies of the Dear Prophet and Holy Man of God Dr. Martini Luther*. This book was republished in 1846. Hans Preuss in 1933 wrote a scholarly volume entitled *Martin Luther the Prophet*, in which he lists the prominent theologians who called Luther a prophet, both before and after the Enlightenment. During the last century, Luther was more often called apostle or reformer. As time went on after Luther's death and scholars were able to study and compare the astounding size of Luther's writings (his published works fill more than 60 volumes), a critical evaluation was possible of the nature and extent of his contribution to the Christian church. In all this, he has remained the Reformer, the great Man of God.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has

been blessed by the great devotion and leadership of many individuals, both during its early history and its later development. Among these none has had a greater influence on this church than Ellen G. White, from shortly after the Disappointment of 1844 until the present, long after her death on July 16, 1915.

In spite of her limited formal education, Ellen (Harmon) White developed into a person of profound insight and spiritual stature, a wise counselor and leader, a deep Bible student and commentator. All of these characteristics are reflected in the voluminous written material that came from her pen, which has continued to extend her influence and authority in her church until the present.

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As early as December 1844, when she was only 17 years of age, she had a vision in which she saw the Advent people on their journey to the Holy City. This was the first of many visions, dreams and messages which she communicated to the church, nearly all of which were related to the beliefs, work and organization of her church, while others were for counsel to individual members. As Ellen White matured, she saw herself increasingly active in preaching, and traveled widely, including to Australia and Europe, to aid in the development of her church. She also became more involved in writing articles for various church periodicals and in publishing large books, even sets of books such as the five-volume *Conflict of the Ages* series. To aid her in this demanding part of her work, she was able to secure the help of a number of very capable literary assistants and secretaries, one of whom, Marian Davis, worked with her for some 25 years.

Soon after her visions first appeared and were publicized, questions naturally arose concerning the nature of these visions, their authority, and a little later, their relationship to the Bible. This latter question has remained a subject for discussion and even controversy in the church ever since. Ellen's husband, James, became fully aware of this problem soon after her first visions, and discussed it at some length as early as April 21, 1851, in the *Review and Herald*. He stated:

Every Christian is, therefore, in duty bound to take the Bible as a perfect rule of faith and duty. He should pray fervently to be aided by the Holy Spirit in searching the Scriptures for the whole truth, and for his whole duty. He is not at liberty to turn from them to learn his duty through any of the gifts. We say that the very moment he does, he places the gifts in a wrong place, and takes an extremely dangerous position. The Word should be in front, and the eye of the church should be placed upon it, as the rule to walk by, and the fountain of wisdom, from which to learn duty in “all good works.” But if a portion of the church err from the truths of the Bible, and become weak, and sickly, and the flock become scattered, so that it seems necessary for God to employ the gifts of the Spirit to correct, revive and heal the erring, we should let him work.

In a second article in the same issue, James White wrote: “God's Word is an everlasting rock. On that we can stand with confidence at all times. Though the Lord gives dreams, designed generally for the individuals who have them, to comfort, correct, or to instruct in extreme trials or dangers, yet to suppose that he designs to guide in general duties by dreams, is unscriptural, and very dangerous. The Word and Spirit are given to guide us.” Four years later, on Oct. 16, 1855, he wrote again in the *Review and Herald* on the same subject:

There is a class of persons who are determined to have it that the *Review* and its conductors make the view of Mrs. White a Test of doctrine and Christian fellowship. — What has the *Review* to do with Mrs. W.'s views? The sentiments published in its columns are all drawn from the Holy

Scriptures. No writer of the *Review* has ever referred to them as authority on any point. The *Review* for five years has not published one of them. Its motto has been, "The Bible and the Bible alone, the only rule of faith and duty."

As the years passed by, some in the church claimed verbal inspiration for the writings of Ellen White, a position rejected by James White and officially by the church. Others claimed infallibility, and many called her a prophet. Both of these she denied, but felt that her work was more than that of a prophet, calling herself a messenger. On infallibility, she stated: "In regard to infallibility, I never claimed it; God alone is infallible" (*Selected Messages I*: p. 37). In spite of these statements, from time to time some authors in the church have claimed various degrees of infallibility for her writings. Roderick Owen, in a reprint article in the *Review and Herald* of June 3, 1971, assigned *infallible interpretation of Scripture* to her. The official position of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has always been that our beliefs are solely based on Scripture, and that by Scripture all claims for religious truth must ultimately be tested. Believing that Ellen White was used by God to help guide the infant church as a spiritual leader does not imply that one can ascribe to her infallibility in her work, words or writings. Her son, W. C. White, who worked closely with his mother for many years, and for the Ellen G. White Estate after her death, wrote regarding her statements on history: "Mother has never claimed to be authority on history" (W. C. White, in *The Great Controversy*, 1911 Edition, p. 4; quoted by Arthur L. White in *The Ellen G. White Writings*, 1973). "Regarding Mother's writings and their use as an authority on points of history and chronology Mother has never wished our brethren to treat them as authority regarding details of history or historical dates. . . . When *Controversy* was written, Mother never thought that the readers would take it as authority on historical dates or use it to settle controversy regarding details of history, and she does not now feel that it should be used in that way" (Letter from W. C.

White to W. W. Eastman, Nov. 4, 1912; quoted in *The Ellen G. White Writings*, by Arthur L. White, p. 33, 34).

By what standards then should the writings of Ellen G. White be judged? First of all, according to her own words and those of James White: by Scripture. All other statements, historical, medical, scientific, like the statements of any other mortal, must be able to pass historical or scientific research — the test of truth, as I believe Ellen White would have it. Then her message, so greatly confined to her own church by the unwarranted attitude of those who advocated infallibility for her writings, would become acceptable also for devotional and Biblical study outside her own church, which has been accused for so many years of having "an addition to or above Scripture."

The struggle that has been present in the Seventh-day Adventist Church to come to an acceptable and honest decision about the place which the writings of Ellen White should have for our church and those in other churches is illustrated by the discussions which took place at the Bible Conference in Takoma Park, from July 1-21, 1919, and which was followed immediately by a three-weeks long meeting of the Bible and History Teachers Council. In the *Review and Herald* of Aug. 14, 1919, W. E. Howell lists 22 delegates from our colleges attending the Bible and History Teachers Council, and other evidence indicates that the total number attending the Bible Conference was over 50. The president of the General Conference at that time, Arthur G. Daniells, reported on the Bible Conference in the *Review and Herald* of Aug. 21, 1919, and informs us that the meeting was attended "by editors, Bible and history teachers from our colleges and seminaries, and members of the General Conference Committee." Among those present at the Bible Conference, besides A. G. Daniells, were G. B. Thompson, field secretary of the General Conference; F. M. Wilcox, editor of the *Review and Herald*; M. E. Kern, formerly president of the Foreign Mission Seminary (now Columbia Union College); W. W. Prescott, formerly editor of the *Review and Herald* and then a field secretary of the General Conference (who had a

major part in the revision of the book *The Great Controversy* in 1911); H. C. Lacey, religion teacher at the Foreign Mission Seminary; W. E. Howell, editor of the *Christian Educator*; W. G. Wirth, a religion teacher at Pacific Union College, and later at the College of Medical Evangelists; M. C. Wilcox, book editor for the Pacific Press; A. O. Tait, editor of the *Signs of the Times*; C. M. Sorenson, history teacher at Emmanuel Missionary College; C. S. Longacre, secretary of the Religious Liberty Association; W. H. Wakeham, Bible teacher at Emmanuel Missionary College; J. N. Anderson, Bible teacher at the Washington Foreign Mission Seminary; C. L. Taylor, head of the Bible Department, Canadian Junior College; L. L. Caviness, associate editor of the *Review and Herald*; and T. M. French, head of the school of theology at Emmanuel Missionary College.

In his report of the Bible Conference, Elder Daniells emphasized the importance of continued and deeper study of the Scriptures by our church. He stated, "The one great object of this conference is to unite in a definite, practical, spiritual study of the Word of God." He then quotes at length from Ellen G. White where she counsels the church to a diligent study of the Scriptures, and includes the following: "The fact that there is no controversy or agitation among God's people, should not be regarded as conclusive evidence that they are holding fast to sound doctrine. There is reason to fear that they may not be clearly discriminating between truth and error. When no new questions are started by investigation of the Scriptures, when no difference of opinion arises which will set men to searching the Bible for themselves, to make sure that they have the truth, there will be many now, as in ancient times, who will hold to tradition, and worship they know not what" (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. V, pp. 706, 707).

Elder Daniells also reported the actions that were taken at the conference, and from

this we quote: "We therefore express our appreciation of the following definite features which have marked the sessions of this Bible Conference:

5. For the incentive to more earnest Bible Study which the conference has aroused. . . . We recognise, however, that there are still many mines of truth in the Holy Scriptures, and that these will yield their treasure to the earnest, prayerful, humble seeker after right. . . .

6. We believe that the blessings and benefits which result from Bible conferences such as we have enjoyed, should be perpetuated in the future. . . . We therefore earnestly request the General Conference Committee to arrange for another conference of this character in 1920. . . .

Such a conference, however, was not held.

The record of the 1919 Bible Conference was lost until December 1974, when Dr. F. Donald Yost found two packages wrapped in paper at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in Takoma Park. The packages contained some 2,400 pages of typewritten material, transcribed from stenographic notes taken at the Conference. It seems a tragedy that this material was not made available to Adventist teachers and ministers after the Bible Conference, and that the message which the participants in that Conference wanted to share with the church membership never was transmitted.

Following, we present the transcribed record of the meetings of the Bible Conference of 1919 on July 30 and Aug. 1, which dealt especially with the Spirit of Prophecy. The discussions were open and frank, but reflect great sensitivity. There were other meetings in which this subject was discussed, but the meetings here reported were the longest and most comprehensive. In them, a number of individuals participated who had worked personally with Ellen White for many years. Because of their great historical significance, the transcripts are published complete and unedited, so that the participants of the two meetings may speak for themselves.