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## ELLEN WHITE OR SOLA SCRIPTURA?

### 1. INTRODUCTION

- A. Critics have claimed for well over a century that the Adventist belief in Ellen White as an authoritative prophet is a violation of the great Protestant Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*, sometimes referred to as “The Bible and the Bible Only.”
  - i. In an article that appeared in Proclamation magazine, author Dennis Palmer said that Adventists have “Dual authorities” – Ellen White and the Bible. And that while her statements on the relationship of her writings to the Bible may “give the appearance of orthodoxy,” she really “takes away the Reformation teaching of sola scriptura by asserting her writings as authoritative.” Jud Lake, *Ellen White Under Fire*, p. 149
  - ii. “Ellen White as a source of truth is perhaps the underlying error of the SDA church.... While the Adventist church claims to be a Bible based church, the leaders know very well that Bible study without Ellen White interpretation will lead members out of the church. Her writings serve as a prism through which Adventists interpret Scripture.” Dale Ratzlaff, *the Truth About Adventist “Truth”*, p. 6, 8
- B. Is belief in Ellen White’s prophetic authority really a violation of the Protestant principle of sola scriptura? Should a prophet’s communications affect/alter (“color”) a believer’s understanding or interpretation of Scripture?
  - i. It should be kept in mind that nobody living today was present when the canon of Scripture was closed, and none were personally acquainted with the authors of Scripture, everything we read in the Bible becomes a matter of some kind of interpretation.
  - ii. In addition, there is no such thing as an “unbiased” or uninfluenced person when it comes to interpreting the Bible, because every human being has been influenced by some worldview since birth! Everybody is influenced by somebody’s thinking.

- iii. The key question is this: If I'm going to be influenced in my interpretations of Scripture anyway, would it be better to be influenced by a prophet or by someone else?
- C. Did God *expect* His people to allow their interpretations of Scripture to be influenced by His prophets?
- i. This can best be understood by traveling back to the time of some other literary, non-canonical prophet, like Jeremiah, Isaiah or Paul. None of them were a part of the Bible in their day. They were "modern" prophets. Did God expect His followers to allow their interpretations of the writings of Moses to be influenced by the prophetic utterances of Jeremiah, Isaiah or Paul? Of course He did! Why else would He have sent them with their messages?
  - ii. Furthermore, what these "modern prophets" said radically affected how people viewed what was formerly written, *even though their messages said nothing to contradict that which God has said before*. They simply magnified the Scriptures.
- D. Incidentally, the very same argument was at work in Christ's day as an excuse to reject His ministry under pretense of following the Bible (Jn. 9:28-9; Jn. 5:44-7).

## 2. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF A PROPHET IN RELATION TO SCRIPTURE?

- A. **Isa. 8:20.** To point to the Bible as the rule of faith and practice for the Christian.
- i. The word "law" comes from the Hebrew word "torah," which means "instruction," and is understood by Jews to refer to the first five books of the Bible written by Moses. The "testimony" refers to the "testimony of Jesus" – the gift of prophecy. Sometimes the Bible uses the alternate expression "the law and the prophets" (see Mt. 7:12; Jn. 1:45). The main function of the prophets – the "testimony" – has always been to point God's people back to His "instruction" as given in the Scriptures.
    - a. Brother J would confuse the mind by seeking to make it appear that the light God has given through the *Testimonies* is **an addition to the Word of God**, but in this he presents the matter in a **false light**. God has seen fit in this manner to **bring the minds of his people to his Word**, to give them a clearer understanding of it. The Word of God is sufficient to enlighten the most beclouded mind, and may be understood by those who have any desire to understand it. But notwithstanding all this, some who profess to make the Word of God their study are found living **in direct opposition to its plainest teachings**. Then, to leave men and women **without excuse**,

God gives plain and pointed testimonies, **bringing them back to the Word** that they have neglected to follow. <sup>5T 663</sup>

B. **Eph. 4:11-14.** To preserve unity and prevent doctrinal confusion.

- i. In the midst of conflicting and competing opinions, what is the only way to come to true unity (not tolerance)? Only by the universal acceptance of an acknowledged authority can unity be achieved. For the Christian, that authority is the Bible, but

### 3. WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE BIBLE FAILS TO BRING UNITY?

A. **Ac. 15: 1f.** In this early church experience, a division arose regarding the *interpretation* of Scripture. God brought clarity and unity to the church through the prophetic gift as it had been manifested in the ministry of Peter.

- i. In Acts chapter 10, Peter received a vision of unclean beasts, couldn't understand what it meant, and immediately after was visited by a group of Gentiles, after which it became clear to him "that I should not call any man common or unclean" (Ac. 10:28). It was this experience – the vision from God – that he is referring to in the Jerusalem Council.
  - a. "I recommend to you, dear reader, the Word of God as the rule of your faith and practice. By that Word we are to be judged. God has, **in that Word**, promised to give **visions** in the "last days"; **not for a new rule of faith**, but for the comfort of His people, and to correct those who err from Bible truth. **Thus God dealt with Peter** when He was about to send him to preach to the Gentiles (Acts 10)." <sup>EW 78</sup>

### 4. DO WE FIND A SIMILAR FUNCTION OF THE GIFT OF PROPHECY IN THE FORMATION OF ADVENTIST DOCTRINE?

A. Ellen White, in accordance with Ephesians 4:13-14, was given clear understanding in Scriptural things to aid in the formation of doctrine, not as the basis for the doctrine, but as an expositor of the Scriptures upon which the doctrines were founded for the purpose of correcting erroneous interpretations of Scripture and bringing our people into "unity of the faith."

- a. Again and again these brethren came together to study **the Bible**, in order that they might know its meaning, and be prepared to teach it with power. When they came to the point in their study where they said, "We can do nothing more," the Spirit of the Lord would come upon me, I would be taken off in vision, and a clear explanation of **the passages we had been**

**studying** would be given me, with instruction as to how we were to labor and teach effectively. Thus light was given that **helped us to understand the scriptures**... 1SM 206.4

- b. Our first [Sabbath] Conference in New York was held at Volney, in a brother's barn. About thirty-five were present—all that could be collected in that part of the state. But of this number, **hardly two were agreed**. Some were holding **serious errors**, and each **strenuously** urged his own views, declaring that they were **according to the Scriptures**.... The light of heaven rested upon me, and I was soon lost to earthly things. My accompanying angel presented before me some of the errors of those present, and also **the truth in contrast with their errors**. These discordant views which they claimed to be according to the Bible were only according to **their opinion of the Bible**, and they must **yield their errors and unite** upon the third angel's message. Our meeting closed triumphantly. Truth gained the victory. 1T 86
- c. “[The spiritual gifts] constitute the means whereby God preserves His people from confusion by pointing out errors, by **correcting false interpretations of the Scriptures**, and causing light to shine out upon that which is in danger of being wrongly understood and therefore of being the cause of evil and division to the people of God. In short, their work is to unite the people of God in the same mind and in the same judgment upon the meaning of the Scriptures. Mere human judgment, with no direct instruction from heaven, can never search out hidden iniquity, nor adjust dark and complicated church difficulties, nor **prevent different and conflicting interpretations of the Scriptures**. It would be sad indeed if God could not still converse with His people.” -RH, 2/15/1870.

## 5. DID ELLEN WHITE EVER EXPECT HER WRITINGS TO BE USED TO SETTLE DOCTRINAL ISSUES?

- A. In his new book *Ellen White's Afterlife*, Dr. Knight states
  - i. “From Her Perspective, her writings had their purposes, but one of them was not to take a superordinate position to the Bible by providing an infallible commentary.” Knight, p. 22
- B. Then, as his proof that Ellen White was “explicit” about this, he quotes
  - i. “I entreat of Elders Haskell, Loughborough, Smith, and others of our leading brethren, that they make no reference to my writings to sustain their views of

“the daily.”... I cannot consent that any of my writings shall be taken as settling this matter.” 1SM 164.2

- C. There were certainly clear instances when Ellen White discouraged the use of her writings to settle doctrinal issues without first going to the Scripture.
- i. One of these – the one just referenced – was regarding the controversy over the meaning of the “Daily” in the book of Daniel.
  - ii. Another, the controversy over the law in Galatians that reached its height at the 1888 GC Session. It is of interest to note Ellen White’s own reasoning for not wanting her writings used to settle the above matter. In the paragraph following the one quoted above by Dr. Knight, she says
    - a. I now ask that my ministering brethren shall not make use of my writings in their arguments regarding this question [“the daily”]; **for I have had no instruction on the point under discussion**, and I see no need for the controversy.” 1SM 164.3
  - ii. We find similar reasoning when we come to the law in Galatians controversy. On October 14, 1888, days before the opening of the General Conference Session, she responded to a request by Elder G. I. Butler, General Conference President, to clarify our position on the law in Galatians.
    - a. I have not with me the light God had given me on this subject, and which had been written, and **I dared not make any rash statement** in relation to it till I could see what I had written upon it.... 1888 93
  - iii. She then addresses her greater concern over our people not knowing their Bibles for themselves.
    - a. There are hundreds that know not why they believe the doctrines they do. **Let all search the Scriptures diligently for themselves, and not be satisfied to have the leaders do it for them**, else we shall be as a people in a position similar to that of the Jews in Christ's time – having plenty of machinery, forms, and customs, but bearing little fruit to God's glory. 1888 93
- B. But while she never expected her writings to take the place of serious Bible study., there were very clear instances where she expected her writings to bring doctrinal uniformity.

- i. In a letter to Bro. J.M. Garmire, Aug. 6, 1890, she wrote
  - a. You say that Anna's visions place the forming of the image of the beast after probation closes. This is not so. **You claim to believe the testimonies; let them set you right on this point.** The Lord has **shown me clearly** that the image of the beast will be formed before probation closes; for it is to be the great test for the people of God, by which their eternal destiny will be decided. 2SM 80
- ii. In a letter written to A. T. Jones dated January 14, 1894, she wrote
  - a. Elder Waggoner... has brought before some of the people ideas in regard to organization that ought never to have had expression. I supposed that the question of organization was **settled forever with those who believed the testimonies given through Sister White.** Now, if they **believe** the testimonies why do they **work contrary** to them? Why should not my brethren be prudent enough to **place these matters before me**, or at least to **inquire if I had any light** upon these subjects? Why is it that these things start up at this time when we have canvassed the matter in our previous history, and **God has spoken** upon these subjects? Should not that be enough? 14MR 202
- iii. And in the classic statement we've already looked at, she explains that God promised to given visions in the last days,
  - a. ... [N]ot for a new rule of faith, but for the comfort of His people, and **to correct those who err from Bible truth.** EW 78

## 6. SHOULD ELLEN WHITE BE BANNED FROM THE PULPIT?

- A. The Biblical Precedent: Jeremiah instructs Baruch to quote his writings in church (Jer. 36:5-6), and it didn't fare any better for him then than it does now (38:4).
  - i. I've had many people throughout the years reprove me for using Ellen White quotations in my sermons, thinking they were basing it on her counsel. No doubt many of these "reproofs" have arisen from confused ideas on this subject being promoted and perpetuated.
  - ii. Yesterday I had passed on this quote someone shared with me, and told you we would look at it further today.
    - a. The words of **the Bible and the Bible alone**, should be heard from the pulpit. PK 626

- iii. On page 26 of his book, Dr. Knight claims that “Ellen White was consistent that her works were not to be made prominent in sermons and other public formats.” He then quotes
  - a. “In **public labor** do not make prominent, and quote that which Sister White has written, as authority to sustain your positions.... **[To do this will not increase faith in the testimonies]**. Bring your evidences, clear and plain, from the Word of God.... Let none be educated to look to Sister White, but to the mighty God, who gives instruction to Sister White.” 3SM 29
- iv. He then says “More work needs to be done on the use of Ellen White as an authority in sermons and other presentations during her lifetime, but my impression is that use of her works in even theological argumentation was not practiced much until the early 1880s.... and after elaborating, concludes, “What we do know is that by the 1888 General Conference Session the transition had begun, even though Ellen White herself objected to it.... [B]y the early 1890s, A. T. Jones, among other leaders, was using some of her statements as “texts” for his messages to Adventist groups, although he claimed that her writings should not be used that way in presentations to non-Adventists.” Knight, pp. 26-7.
- v. This is strangely ironic, for it was A. T. Jones that Ellen White actually encouraged in his using her writings in his sermons. It was in the wake of the Kellogg controversy and Jones’ growing unbelief in the gift of prophecy as he refused to be corrected by it that Ellen White wrote
  - a. It has been presented to me that I must speak to you [A. T. Jones], for you need help in order to break the spell that has been upon you. If you would humble your heart before the Lord, and accept the light that He has given you, you would have help from God. I have been instructed to use those **discourses** of yours printed in the General Conference Bulletins of 1893 and 1897, **which contain strong arguments regarding the validity of the Testimonies, and which substantiate the gift of prophecy among us.** I was shown that many would be helped by these articles, and especially those **newly come to the faith** who have not been made acquainted with our history as a people. It will be a blessing to you to read again these arguments, which were **of the Holy Spirit's framing**.... 9MR 278
- vi. In the earliest days of our denomination experience, there were some newly come to the faith who, instead of taking their position on the side of the Testimonies, began to get agitated whenever she was spoken of in the church

services. Ellen White, seeking to give guidance and encouragement to church members, wrote

- a. "...[I]f they carry their opposition so far as to oppose that in which they have had no experience, and **feel annoyed** when those who believe that the visions are of God **speak of them in meeting**, and comfort themselves with the instruction given through vision, **the church may know that they are not right**. God's people should not **cringe** and **yield**, and **give up their liberty** to such disaffected ones. God has placed the gifts **in the church** that the church may be benefited by them; and when **professed believers** in the truth oppose these gifts, and fight against the visions, **souls are in danger through their influence**, and **it is time then to labor with them**, that the weak may not be **led astray by their influence**. 1T 328-29

## 7. A NEVER-TO-BE-FORGOTTEN LESSON

- A. Criticisms against Ellen White and her ministry have been circulating since the beginning of our movement before we even had a denominational name. Those who opposed our faith consistently charged Adventists with getting all their beliefs from Ellen White's visions and not the Bible. In order to show the falsehood of these claims, our church papers took an action to leave Ellen White's visions out of publications. Arthur White writes
  - i. "Pursuant to this announced policy, the *Review* for four years was very nearly silent on the visions. And although the church continued to validate their belief in the perpetuity of the spiritual gifts, yet Ellen White's gift was given a back seat..." (p. 116).
  - ii. At a General Conference held in Battle Creek beginning Nov. 16, 1855, it was recognized that something was not right. Realization of this led to
    - a. "[C]onfessions relative to the evident departure of the remnant from the spirit of the message, and the humble, straightforward course taken by those who first embraced it." The Review and Herald, Dec. 4, 1855, p. 75
  - iii. In addition, it began to become apparent that there was a partial withdrawal of the prophetic gift from the believers. Ellen White expressed
    - a. "The visions have been of late less and less frequent, and my testimony for God's children had been gone. I have thought that my work in God's cause was done, and that I had no further duty to do, but to save my own soul, and carefully attend to my little family; have a good influence over my



children, pray with them, and for them, that they may be saved.” RH January 10, 1856

- iv. Recognizing that the right attitude had not been taken by the church toward the Spirit of Prophecy, the brethren, assembled in conference at Battle Creek, passed the following formal action at the business session of the General Conference: "That Joseph Bates, J. H. Waggoner, and M. E. Cornell be appointed to address the saints in behalf of the Conference, on the gifts of the church."- RH Dec. 4, 1855, p. 76. In harmony with this action a comprehensive address was prepared, which expressed the convictions of the conference. Some key parts are cited –

- a. “In view of the present low state of the precious cause of our blessed Master, we feel to humble ourselves before God, and confess our unfaithfulness and departure from the way of the Lord, whereby the spirit of holiness has been grieved, our own souls burdened, and an occasion given to the enemy of all righteousness to rejoice over the decline of faith and spirituality amongst the scattered flock.... “While we hold these views as emanating from the divine Mind, we would confess the inconsistency (which we believe has been displeasing to God) of professedly regarding them as messages from God, and really putting them on a level with the inventions of men. We fear that this has resulted from an unwillingness to bear the reproach of Christ, (which is indeed greater riches than the treasures of earth,) and a desire to conciliate the feelings of our opponents; but the Word and our own experience have taught us that God is not honored, nor his cause advanced, by such a course. While we regard them as coming from God, and entirely harmonizing with his written word, we must acknowledge ourselves under obligation to abide by their teachings, and be corrected by their admonitions. To say that they are of God, and yet we will not be tested by them, is to say that God’s will is not a test or rule for Christians, which is inconsistent and absurd.” Review and Herald, December 4, 1855, pp. 78, 79

- v. At the close of the conference Ellen White was given a revelation –
  - a. “November 20, 1855, while in prayer, the Spirit of the Lord came suddenly and powerfully upon me, and I was taken off in vision. I saw that the Spirit of the Lord has been dying away from the church.” 1T 113
- vi. Then, a few weeks later, a reassuring message from Ellen White appeared in the Review –

- a. “At our late Conference at Battle Creek, in November, God wrought for us. The minds of the servants of God were exercised as to the gifts of the Church, and if God’s frown had been brought upon his people because the gifts had been slighted and neglected, there was a pleasing prospect that his smiles would again be upon us, and he would graciously and mercifully revive the gifts again, and they would live in the Church, to encourage the desponding and fainting soul, and to correct and reprove the erring.” Review and Herald, January 10, 1856, p. 118
  
- b. Acknowledge the gift that has been placed in the church for the guidance of God's people in the closing days of earth's history. From the beginning the church of God has had the gift of prophecy in her midst as a living voice to counsel, admonish, and instruct. We have now come to the last days of the work of the third angel's message, when Satan will work with increasing power because he knows that his time is short. At the same time there will come to us through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, diversities of operations in the outpouring of the Spirit. This is the time of the latter rain.  
9MR 278 (conclusion of earlier counsel to Jones)