

Ellen White's Interpretation and Use of the Seven Letters of Revelation

Denis Fortin

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary
Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventists hold to a historicist interpretation of biblical apocalyptic prophecies as found in the books of Daniel and Revelation. Historicism is a hermeneutical approach to apocalyptic writings that affirms that the original intent of these writings was to predict future events through symbolic descriptions and that these events can be connected to historical events as the history of the conflict between good and evil unfolds from the time of the author until the time of the end. Historicism affirms also that parts of these prophecies had relevance and partial application for the audiences that first received them, that parts of these prophecies have been fulfilled since the time of the biblical writers, while other parts are yet to be fulfilled in the future. It also affirms that spiritual insights in these writings can be relevant for any generation.

While most biblical scholars of former centuries were historicist in their interpretation of the book of Revelation, modern biblical scholarship adheres for the most part to three other approaches: (1) preterism, that the events referred to in apocalyptic writings describe symbolically the struggles between good and evil Christians were experiencing at the time of the writing of Revelation, and as such the book offers no detailed predictions of the future; (2) futurism, that the events referred to have yet to be fulfilled in the time of the last generation; or (3) idealism, that the events and struggles referred to in Revelation, while representing symbolic descriptions of what happened to God's people at the time of the

FORTIN: ELLEN WHITE'S INTERPRETATION AND USE

writing of Revelation (same as preterism), offer also timeless truths and principles in symbolic forms to guide Christians anywhere.¹

The interpretation of the letters to the seven churches of Revelation (chapters 1-3) has been at the center of many interesting discussions in regard to these various schools of interpretation. Traditionally, among Adventists, the historicist interpretation of these letters has argued that each letter is prophetically and symbolically representing the spiritual condition found in the Christian church during a particular era since the time of the author until the second coming of Christ. In this time line the message to Ephesus represents the period of the early Christian church in the first century, the message to Smyrna the period of Roman persecution in the second and third centuries, and so on until the message to Laodicea, which represents God's people at the time of the end just prior to the Second Advent.²

Some Adventist scholars, however, have argued that these seven messages are not primarily prophetic representations of future periods of Christian history; rather, each church represents a type of the spiritual experience of the Christian church through the centuries, not a prophecy of a particular period of church history. It is argued that the book of Revelation was first intended as a message to the seven churches of Asia Minor and that the messages to each individual church depicted symbolically their true spiritual condition at the time the Book of Revelation was

¹ For more information on these four approaches to biblical prophecies, see Jon Paulien, *The Deep Things of God: An Insider's Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2004), 28-30; Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 2002), 9-11; or Craig S. Keener, *Revelation*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 28-29. An example of a preterist approach to the seven churches is David E. Aune, *Revelation*, 3 vols. Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1997-1998). An idealist approach to the seven churches is John R. W. Stott's *What Christ Thinks of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958). For a futurist perspective, see C. C. Ryrie, *Revelation* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), and J. F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ: A Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1966). An eclectic (mixed) approach also exists. "Most commentators who seek to apply Revelation will opt for some eclectic approach, usually combining some futurist, preterist, and idealist elements" (Keener, 29).

² Exponents of the traditional Adventist prophetic historicist interpretation include Uriah Smith, *Daniel and the Revelation* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1907) and Stephen Haskell, *The Story of the Seer of Patmos* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1905). More recent Adventist scholars who promote this approach include Roy Allan Anderson, *Unfolding the Revelation*, rev. ed. (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1974) and Clinton Wahlen, "Letter to the Seven Churches: Historical or Prophetic?" *Ministry*, November 2007: 12-15.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

written. Furthermore, in a way similar to Paul's epistles to specific churches, the messages to the seven churches can also have valuable insights for Christians today who find themselves in similar situations and spiritual conditions. This view combines a preterist interpretation and an idealist application.³

Given this discussion on the interpretation of the seven letters of Revelation, the purpose of this article is to explore what Ellen White said about the seven churches and how she used these messages in her writings. Being a pioneer and founder of the Seventh-day Adventist church and also regarded as possessing the prophetic gift, her insights will not only help us to understand how Adventist pioneers interpreted this section of the book of Revelation, but will also enlighten our overall discussion and current interpretation of the book of Revelation.

Ellen White's Historicist Approach to the Book of Revelation

Ellen White believed in a historicist interpretation of the book of Revelation and of the messages to the seven churches. She viewed the messages to these churches as prophetic descriptions of the spiritual struggles Christians would face through the centuries. Yet, at the same time, she understood that these symbolic messages were relevant to the spiritual needs of the local churches in John's day to whom this book was addressed and offered timeless truths and spiritual principles relevant to Christians throughout history and particularly to those living in her day. Ellen White's understanding of historicism allowed for the prophetic nature of the book and its spiritual relevance to contemporary first-century Christians and to all Christians throughout history.

In 1906, to a group of Adventist workers in California, Ellen White affirmed the prophetic historicist intent of the whole book of Revelation. She stated that Jesus sent a mighty angel to explain to the apostle John, "by the use of symbols, the things that were to come to pass until the

³ This is the interpretation preferred by both Paulien and Stefanovic, although both allow the possibility of a prophetic interpretation through various periods of church history. At the end of his commentary on each of the messages to the seven churches, Stefanovic adds, almost as an appendix, a short comment on the prophetic application of that church's message. See, 117, 121, 127, 132-133, 138, 143, and 151. See also Paulien's article "The End of Historicism?: Reflections on the Adventist Approach to Biblical Apocalyptic," in the *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 14/2 (Autumn 2003), 14-43, in which he argues that the messages to the seven churches should be seen as similar to classical prophecies (like the books of Isaiah and Micah), instead of apocalyptic prophecies (like the last chapters of Daniel or Revelation 12-14).

FORTIN: ELLEN WHITE'S INTERPRETATION AND USE

coming of Christ.” John “was bidden to write the instruction in a book for the benefit of the seven churches. This writing we now have preserved in the book of Revelation, but this book is understood by only a few. It contains the message for the last days, and we are to dwell much upon these prophecies.”⁴ “In the Revelation are portrayed the deep things of God,” she wrote in *Acts of the Apostles*.

Its truths are addressed to those living in the last days of this earth's history, as well as those living in the days of John. Some of the scenes depicted in this prophecy are in the past, some are now taking place; some bring to view the close of the great conflict between the powers of darkness and the Prince of heaven, and some reveal the triumphs and joys of the redeemed in the earth made new.⁵

More specifically, in regard to the messages to the seven churches, she affirmed the prophetic nature of these messages and their symbolic representations of different periods of Christian history.

The names of the seven churches are symbolic of the church in different periods of the Christian Era. The number 7 indicates completeness, and is symbolic of the fact that the messages extend to the end of time, while the symbols used reveal the condition of the church at different periods in the history of the world.⁶

While affirming the symbolic, prophetic, and historicist nature and intent of the letters to the seven churches, Ellen White also believed that these messages were relevant to the spiritual needs of the original churches to which the book of Revelation was addressed and to all

⁴ “The work in Oakland and San Francisco,” Manuscript 105, 1906, published in the *Paulson Collection*, 140. This article refers to many statements from the writings of Ellen White. Her unpublished letters and manuscripts are available through the Ellen G. White Estate or one of its branch offices or research centers.

⁵ *Acts of the Apostles* (Nampa: Pacific Press, 1911), 584.

⁶ *Acts of the Apostles*, 585. In a variant of this passage written a few years earlier, Ellen White said the following: “The messages given to the churches in Asia, portray the state of things existing in the churches of the religious world *today*. The names of the churches are symbolic of the Christian church in different periods of the Christian era; the number of the churches—seven—indicates completeness and is symbolic of the fact that the messages extend to the end of time, and are enforced *today*” (Manuscript 81, 1900, published in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* [Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1957, 1980], 7:959, emphasis added).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

churches during Christian history and in her day. In using this approach to the book of Revelation, she endorsed a spiritual interpretation of the letters, stating that the seven churches also represent types of churches in their struggles with good and evil, temptations and victories. “The words uttered were not alone for John on the Isle of Patmos; they were not for the [seven] churches alone,” she wrote in her diary on December 27, 1890, “but through these churches was to come the inspired message for the people, to have its powerful impression in every age to the close of this earth’s history.”⁷ A few years later, in 1902, she wrote to David Paulson, physician and founder of Hinsdale Sanitarium near Chicago, “I wish to emphasize the fact, that the churches to which John was told to send the instruction given him represent all the churches in our world, and that this revelation to him is to be studied and believed and preached by the Seventh-day Adventist Church today. Christ came personally to John to tell him ‘the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter’ (Revelation 1:19).”⁸ And again the same year, in a sermon on the study of the book of Revelation, she stated, “This testimony that Christ commanded John to write to all the churches was light that God designed should be immortalized and remain present truth until all the events foretold should come to pass.”⁹

In summary, Ellen White affirmed the symbolic nature of the book of Revelation and its prophetic description of events from the time of John until the second advent of Christ. She also affirmed the prophetic and symbolic nature and intent of the messages to the seven churches as representing different periods of Christian history from the time of John to the second advent, but also understood that these seven messages contain spiritual principles relevant to all churches through the centuries and especially in her day. Even while the letters represented prophetic descriptions of the Christian Church during its history, Ellen White also perceived the need of an appropriate contemporary use of the letters. But never did Ellen White limit the seven messages only to these seven churches in the time of John, nor did she believe that the content of the messages was to be interpreted literally. Her approach to these seven churches was never preterist. While today most interpreters of the seven

⁷ Diary entry for December 27, 1890 in Manuscript 53, 1890, published in *1888 Materials* (1987), 779.

⁸ Letter 110, 1902.

⁹ Manuscript 155, 1902, published in *Sermons and Talks* (Silver Spring: Ellen G. White Estate, 1994), volume 2, 215.

FORTIN: ELLEN WHITE'S INTERPRETATION AND USE

letters combine preterism and idealism, Ellen White combined prophetic historicism with contemporary spiritual insights. However, for the most part, her numerous references to the seven churches highlight the spiritual insights found in these letters.

In order to better understand and to get a better feel for Ellen White's interpretation and use of the seven letters of Revelation, I will devote the rest of this article to illustrating how she used and interpreted the messages to Ephesus and Sardis.

Turbulent Years

The first five years of the twentieth century were difficult ones for Adventists. In 1901 the church revamped its whole administrative organization, a decision that created and exacerbated some personality conflicts between church leaders. The following year fire destroyed two flagship institutions of the denomination in Battle Creek, Michigan, the Sanitarium and the Review and Herald publishing house. In 1903 the church headquarters were moved from Battle Creek to Washington, D.C., and then two prominent church leaders began to promote doctrines that challenged the Christian and Adventist core beliefs of the church. During all these turbulent years Ellen White dispatched letters to influential church leaders, counseling them on how to respond to these events and teachings. In these letters and in sermons she preached during this period, she often referred to the letters to the seven churches, particularly those of Ephesus, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

At the end of 1902, during this period of intense crisis in Adventism, she penned the following thought, "The message that God gave to the churches in Ephesus and Sardis are applicable to those who in this age have had great light but have not opened the door of the heart to the knock of Christ. . . . The Spirit of God is withdrawing from the world because the warnings of heaven have not been heeded. We need to beware, for a similar condition of things is coming in amongst us as a people."¹⁰ And again, a few weeks later, in January 1903, she wrote, "The messages to the church of Ephesus and to the church in Sardis have been often repeated to me by the One who gives me instruction for His people. . . . We are seeing the fulfillment of these warnings [to Ephesus and

¹⁰ Manuscript 18, 1903, written November 2, 1902 but filed in 1903, published in *Manuscript Releases* (Silver Spring: E. G. White Estate, 1990), 4:321.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Sardis]. Never have scriptures been more strictly fulfilled than these have been.”¹¹

The Letter to the Church at Ephesus

[1] To the angel of the church of Ephesus write: ‘These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: [2] ‘I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; [3] and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name’s sake and have not become weary. [4] Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. [5] Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent. [6] But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. [7] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.’ Revelation 2:1-7 NKJV

In the message to Ephesus, the symbolic representation of Jesus walking among the seven golden lampstands reminded Ellen White of the ever-vigilant Christ who has an accurate knowledge of what is happening in his churches.

He [Jesus] is represented as walking up and down among the golden candlesticks. He is in communion with his people. He knows their true state. He observes their order, their vigilance, their piety, and their devotion; and he takes pleasure in them if he sees these fruits manifest. Although Christ is mediator in the heavenly Sanctuary, yet he walks up and down in the midst of the churches on earth. He goes about from church to church, from congregation to congregation, from soul to soul. He observes their true condition,— that which is neglected, that which is in disorder, and that which needs to be done. He is represented as walking, which signifies unrest, wakefulness, and unremitting vigilance. He is observing whether the light of

¹¹ *Testimonies for the Church* (Nampa: Pacific Press, 1948), 8:98, 99. It is interesting to note that in this comment Ellen White claimed that spiritual insights found in the letters to Ephesus and Sardis predicted and were applicable to situations the Adventist Church faced in her day.

FORTIN: ELLEN WHITE'S INTERPRETATION AND USE

any of his sentinels, or candlesticks, is burning dim or going out.¹²

Ellen White interpreted and used this message to the church at Ephesus in three different ways. First, she understood the message to be an exhortation to that local church founded by the apostle Paul in Asia Minor. "In view of the many virtues enumerated [in the letter]," she wrote in 1906,

how striking is the charge brought against the church at Ephesus: "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love." This church had been highly favored. It was planted by the apostle Paul. In the same city was the temple of Diana, which, in point of grandeur, was one of the marvels of the world. The Ephesian church met with great opposition, and some of the early Christians suffered persecution; and yet some of these very ones turned from the truths that had united them with Christ's followers, and adopted, in their stead, the specious errors devised by Satan.

This change is represented as a spiritual fall. "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works"—as outlined in the preceding verses. The believers did not sense their spiritual fall. They knew not that a change had taken place in their hearts, and that they would have to repent because of the noncontinuance of their first works. But God in His mercy called for repentance, for a return to their first love and to the works that are always the result of true, Christlike love.¹³

Second, while Ellen White understood the message of this letter to apply to the church at Ephesus at the end of the first century, she also understood this message to symbolize all of first-century Christianity.

In the days of the apostles the Christian believers were filled with earnestness and enthusiasm. So untiringly did they labor for their Master that in a comparatively short time, notwithstanding fierce opposition, the gospel of the kingdom was sounded to all the inhabited parts of the earth. The zeal manifested at this time by the followers of Jesus has been recorded by the pen of inspiration for the encouragement of believers in every age. Of the church at Ephesus, which the Lord Jesus

¹² *Review and Herald*, May 31, 1887.

¹³ Manuscript 11, 1906, published in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7:957. See also *Testimonies for the Church*, 6:421-422.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

used as a symbol of the entire Christian church in the apostolic age, the faithful and true Witness declared:

“I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: and hast borne, and hast patience, and for My name’s sake hast labored, and hast not fainted.’ Revelation 2:2, 3.”¹⁴

This last reference clearly interprets the letter to Ephesus within a historicist hermeneutic. Although she believed this message was first intended for the church at Ephesus, the letter had a broader intent and purpose far beyond the confines of this Mediterranean metropolis, and it symbolically described the spiritual experience of early Christianity.

But, third, Ellen White also understood this message to be relevant to Christians in her day who also needed “to heed these words of warning, and repent of our sins.”¹⁵

Repeatedly in her writings, Ellen White used the reference to the Ephesians losing their “first love” as an exhortation to complacent and halfhearted Adventist Christians to return to their first love experience and walk with God. She understood this first love experience as Christ’s call to his people “to believe and practice His word,” to “receive and assimilate this word, making it a part of every action, of every attribute of character.”¹⁶ She saw this exhortation as a sincere invitation to demonstrate in one’s life a “broad, extended love for one another, that love which is now so sadly wanting.” A lack of such love, she said, “leads to the lack of respect for one another and the neglect of true courtesy” and manifests itself in “criticising, fault-finding, reporting words spoken in confidence, and using these to second the accusations of Satan, who is very busy in sowing distrust, jealousy, and bitterness.”¹⁷ She also saw this reference to mean that “God calls for immediate repentance and reformation. It is time for a great change to take place among the people who are looking for the second appearing of their Lord.”¹⁸

Ellen White used the letter to Ephesus very broadly and used it often, particularly in her sermons and periodical articles, to encourage church

¹⁴ *Acts of the Apostles*, 578, emphasis added.

¹⁵ *The Home Missionary*, November 1, 1897.

¹⁶ *Counsels for the Church* (Nampa: Pacific Press, 1991), 327.

¹⁷ *Bible Echo*, March 1, 1892.

¹⁸ Manuscript 136, 1902, published in *Medical Ministry* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1963), 37-38.

FORTIN: ELLEN WHITE'S INTERPRETATION AND USE

members to live a sincere and dedicated Christian life. She interpreted the message to Ephesus within a historicist perspective combined with spiritual insights relevant to the church in her day. She also interpreted the letter to Sardis in a similar manner.¹⁹

The Letter to the Church at Sardis

[1] “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: ‘I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. [2] Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die; for I have not found your works perfect before God. [3] Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. [4] You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. [5] He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. [6] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’” Revelation 3:1-6 NKJV

The prophetic historicist interpretation of the book of Revelation applies the message to Sardis to a period of about 200 years beginning with the Protestant Reformation, and includes the period of Protestant Scholasticism and the Enlightenment that followed. In the 1890s and early 1900s Ellen White referred more than 80 times to the letter to Sardis in her private letters and manuscripts with most of the references occurring between 1903 and 1905. She seldom quoted the entire letter in her writings, but rather emphasized verses 2 and 3, particularly the phrase at the beginning of verse 3: “Remember therefore how you have received and heard, and hold fast, and repent.” Many of her references to this message come in the middle of exhortations to faithfulness and often simply as a quote without any commentary.²⁰ Some references to Sardis, particularly

¹⁹ Ellen White’s use of the letter to Laodicea is similar to her use of the letter to Ephesus. She understood Laodicea to be a real church in the time of John, founded by Paul and his associates, to which the message of Revelation 3:14-22 had been first addressed (*Manuscript Releases* [Silver Spring: E. G. White Estate, 1990], 16:12). At the same time she understood this letter to be a symbolic description of the warnings given to the last church before the second advent of Christ (*Testimonies for the Church*, 6:77).

²⁰ See, for example, Letter 24, 1890; Letter 70, 1895; Letter 50a, 1897; Manuscript 35, 1901.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

in some of her sermons, are given along with references to other letters of Revelation 2 and 3: Ephesus, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.²¹

In all her references to Sardis, Ellen White gave the distinct impression that she believed this message was spiritually relevant to church leaders in her day; the letter to Sardis was not a message to be relegated to some long ago era with no contemporary significance. In a section of her diary in 1900, after referring to the letter to Sardis, she wrote, “The messages given to the churches in Asia, portray the state of things existing in the churches of the religious world today.”²²

Ellen White’s use of the message to Sardis is the best illustration of how she applied spiritual insights to contemporary Adventist issues. She applied the spiritual insights of the message to Sardis to three different situations. First, to urge church leaders to remain true to their Christian experience; second, to exhort them to remain genuinely committed to the mission of the church; and third, to ask them to stand steadfastly by the doctrines of the church.

1. Character Development and Sanctification. In her earliest use of the letter to Sardis to contemporary Adventist issues, Ellen White exhorted Adventist leaders regarding the importance of character development, that within the context of the grace of God and salvation by faith in Christ, one’s standing before God must also be a concern of all Christians. What particularly appealed to her in the letter is the passage that says that in Sardis there are some who have a reputation of being Christians but are in fact dead. The angel exhorts these people to be watchful and to strengthen the things that remain in their spiritual lives and church, the last things that are ready to die if nothing is done to prevent spiritual death.

In 1886, in a letter to General Conference president George I. Butler, Ellen White discussed the improprieties of another pastor and commented on the urgency of being ready to stand before the judgment of God. In this situation, the letter to Sardis pointed to the need for repentance and being a genuine Christian, to not only bear the name of Christ but also to live by that name.²³ Similarly, she wrote to the employees of

²¹ See, for example, Letter 2, 1894; Manuscript 21, 1899; Letter 31, 1903; Manuscript 161, 1904.

²² Manuscript 81, 1900, published in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7:959, and *Manuscript Releases* (Washington: E. G. White Estate, 1981), 1:372.

²³ Letter 51, 1886, published in *Manuscript Releases* (Washington: E. G. White Estate, 1990), 10:266-267; cf. *Testimonies on Sexual Behavior* (Silver Spring: E. G. White Estate, 1989), 185-193.

FORTIN: ELLEN WHITE'S INTERPRETATION AND USE

the Review and Herald in January 1894 and emphasized the need for consistency in the lives of all those who claimed to be Christians. After quoting from the letter to Sardis, she went on to say, "The grand truths of the Bible are for us individually, to rule, to guide, to control our life; for this is the only way in which Christ can be properly represented to our world in grace and loveliness in the characters of all who profess to be His disciples. Nothing less than heart service will be acceptable with God. God requires the sanctification of the entire man, body, soul, and spirit."²⁴ And later that same year, to the manager of the Review and Herald office, Clement Eldridge, she pointed out that

The cause of God must be represented by men whose hearts are as tender, pure, true and compassionate as is the heart of Christ. Those who handle the sacred work in Christ's stead must have a pure heart and clean hands. They must adopt Christ's maxims; for if they fail to do so, they will be deceived, betray Christ and dishonor the truth of God.

For Ellen White, the message of the letter to Sardis urged these men to repent of their weak spiritual condition before it is too late.²⁵

2. Commitment to the Mission of the Church. Ellen White also used the letter to Sardis to exhort church leaders to be genuinely committed to the mission of the church, the gospel and the Adventist message; where she sensed a neglect of duty in the work of the gospel she urged her readers to repent. In these situations she appealed to verse 2—"I have not found your works perfect before God"—and the warning in verse 3—"Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you." In an article published in the *Review and Herald* in November 1886, she commented that

The sin especially charged against this church [Sardis] is that they have not strengthened the things that remain that are ready to die. Does this warning apply to us? God has done his part of the work for the salvation of men, and now he calls for the co-operation of the church. . . . Every follower of Christ has a part to act to bring men to accept the blessings Heaven has provided. Let us closely examine ourselves, and see if we

²⁴ Letter 70, 1894, published in *Manuscript Releases* (Washington: E. G. White Estate, 1987), 2:12-13.

²⁵ Letter 22, 1894; cf. Letter 70, 1894; Letter 36, 1895; Letter 160, 1903.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

have done this work. Let us question the motives, the actions of the life.²⁶

In a letter to Elder I. H. Evans in 1898, Mrs. White emphasized the same concept of negligence on the part of ministers and church members. “What was the sin of the Sardis church?” she asked,

It was want of love and interest to strengthen the things which remained. . . . Their works could not be perfect before God until they had done this work. They were to keep fresh in their memory the things they had heard and received, and were to communicate the same to others. They were themselves to hold fast, and repent, that they had made so little use of the truth in helping the souls that were ready to die. This work had been neglected, and they were revealing to the world that their works did not correspond with their faith. The things they had received and heard, they were to hold fast in their memory, and in love for souls, they were to communicate it. God called for repentance, because of this neglect of duty, which made their work imperfect before him. . . . There is a work to be done, not only for the churches who know the reasons of our faith, but for the souls that are ready to die outside the church.²⁷

3. Steadfastness to Adventist Teachings. Ellen White’s third way of applying the letter to Sardis to Adventist life and issues is her most direct and forceful application. Between 1903 and 1905 she confronted new teachings brought in by Dr. John Harvey Kellogg and Elder A. F. Ballenger. And in confronting Kellogg’s pantheistic teachings on the nature of God and Ballenger’s views on Christ’s ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, she repeatedly used the message of the letter to Sardis to exhort church leaders to unyieldingly hold on to Adventist doctrines and to not discard long-held beliefs in favor of new “fables,” “theories,” or “fallacies.” The angel’s words to Sardis were clear: “Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent.” Ellen White understood these words as referring directly to Adventist beliefs: in the midst of these doctrinal controversies, church leaders were to remember how the remnant people of God had received their distinctive beliefs and how the Holy Spirit had guided them to hear about these beliefs for the

²⁶ *Review and Herald*, November 30, 1886.

²⁷ Letter 44, 1898; see also, Letter 22, 1901; Letter 153, 1902.

FORTIN: ELLEN WHITE'S INTERPRETATION AND USE

first time.²⁸ For her, Adventist pioneers had “received” from God these distinctive beliefs; through intense Bible study, prayer, and fasting, and the witness of the Holy Spirit through the gift of prophecy, God had “given” these doctrines to the remnant church. For Ellen White, the Seventh-day Adventist message is not a human concoction or fabrication; it is a gift from heaven. Therefore church leaders were to hold fast to this message, and those who were thinking of accepting strange theories or were teaching fallacies or anything contrary to this message were called upon to repent.

Her analysis of these two men and their views is at times trenchant and blistering, but always done in order to redeem and save. In her opinion, Kellogg and Ballenger began to expound their new teachings because they had neglected character development and humility. This weakness imperceptibly led them to disregard the pure principles of truth and to be open to other theological influences. Ellen White understood that as one disregards the importance of spiritual growth and character sanctification, one may be led also to disregard the truths of the Word of God. She is convinced that those who refuse or neglect to perfect their Christian characters are more apt at accepting strange and false views. And this she saw to be the case for both Kellogg and Ballenger.

Her conflicts with Kellogg started years earlier after he repeatedly refused to accept counsels and advice from church leaders regarding his administration of the church's medical missionary work and ever-expanding network of sanitariums. His desire for unchallenged authority and preeminence had therefore alienated many church leaders. Ellen White frequently warned him of his spiritual danger and urged him to “receive the messages of warning” sent to him to save him from trials.²⁹

²⁸ In this context, Ellen White urged publishing houses to reprint articles of earlier pioneers demonstrating the biblical foundation of Adventist beliefs. “Men will arise with interpretations of Scripture which are to them truth, but which are not truth. The truth for this time, God has given us as a foundation for our faith. He Himself has taught us what is truth. One will arise, and still another with new light, which contradicts the light that God has given under the demonstration of His Holy Spirit. A few are still alive who passed through the experience gained in the establishment of this truth. God has graciously spared their lives to repeat and repeat, till the close of their lives, the experience through which they passed, even as did John the apostle till the very close of his life. And the standard-bearers who have fallen in death are to speak through the re-printing of their writings. I am instructed that thus their voices are to be heard. They are to bear their testimony as to what constitutes the truth for this time” (Letter 329, 1905, published in *Manuscript Release* 760, 19).

²⁹ *Testimonies for the Church*, 8:191; cf. Letter 215b, 1899.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Following the destruction of the Battle Creek Sanitarium in February 1902, Kellogg published a small and controversial book on human physiology, *The Living Temple*, dedicating the benefits of its sale to the reconstruction of the sanitarium. In this little book Kellogg advocated some pantheistic views that undermined the personhood of God and the reality of heaven.

At first Ellen White did not wish to get involved in any discussion of Kellogg's book; she relied on the scholars of the church to respond to the false doctrines. But when Kellogg argued in his defense that the book advocated views held by Ellen White, she decided to respond. In a letter to teachers at Emmanuel Missionary College in September 1903, she stated,

I have some things to say to our teachers in reference to the new book, "The Living Temple". Be careful how you sustain the sentiments of this book regarding the personality of God. As the Lord represents matters to me, these sentiments do not bear the endorsement of God. They are a snare that the enemy has prepared for these last days. I thought that this would surely be discerned, and that it would not be necessary for me to say anything about it. But since the claim has been made that the teachings of this book can be sustained by statements from my writings, I am compelled to speak in denial of this claim.³⁰

She went on to say that

Those who entertain these sophistries will soon find themselves in a position where the enemy can talk with them, and lead them away from God. It is represented to me that the writer of this book is on a false track. He has lost sight of the distinguishing truths for this time. He knows not whither his steps are tending.³¹

And, in conclusion, after quoting the letter to Sardis, she stated,

The sophistries regarding God and nature that are flooding the world with skepticism, are the inspiration of the fallen foe, who is himself a Bible student, who knows the truth that it is essential for the people to receive, and whose study it is to divert minds from these great truths relating to the things that

³⁰ Letter 211, 1903, published in *Spalding-Magan Collection*, 320-323.

³¹ *Ibid.*

FORTIN: ELLEN WHITE'S INTERPRETATION AND USE

are soon coming upon the world. Let our teachers beware lest they echo the soothsaying of the enemy of God and man.³²

A little later that same autumn, in a letter to Dr. David Paulson, a close associate of Kellogg, Ellen White reiterated her views of Kellogg's teachings. She qualified these teachings as "falsehoods," "Satan's snare," and "Satanic theories." "The theories that Dr. Kellogg is now advocating are similar to the theories that Satan presented to the holy pair in Eden."³³

Ellen White's clearest explanation of the message to Sardis and its relevance to Kellogg's teachings were done in a letter she wrote to George I. Butler in January 1905. Quoting from the letter to Sardis and interspersing her comments between the verses she urged Butler and those who would read her letter:

Do not yield one iota of your faith for spiritualistic ideas which will set you adrift in the mazes of uncertainty. Hold fast your past experience in the things that you have received and heard, and repent. This is a time when the truth that is received, unless put into practice, will be disregarded, and its place will be taken by that which is false, and which causes spiritual weakness and unbelief. Forgeries will be presented by Satan, and will be received as a great blessing, but they bring spiritual death. The call to repent and hold fast is made to those who have loosened their grasp on the truth that they have heard and received. God calls upon them to repent because of their unbelief in the truth in which they once rejoiced. They have become infatuated by Satan's theories, which they have received.³⁴

"Study these statements [in the letter to Sardis]," she continued.

Teach the church that the enemy will bring before them every phase of deception. Those who have not held fast with the grip of faith to the experience given them by God in the past will fail to watch now. They are in danger of listening to and heeding the sophistries of Satan. Those who have admitted the enemy to their companionship need to be watchful and repent, lest in the day of God they be found with the workers of evil, who call falsehood truth.³⁵

³² Ibid.

³³ Letter 220, 1903.

³⁴ Letter 37, 1905.

³⁵ Ibid.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

In a similar way to Kellogg's search for new truths, Elder A. F. Ballenger began to promote an interpretation of the doctrine of the sanctuary that conflicted with the core Adventist teaching on the subject. Ballenger was a minister in Great Britain in 1905 when he began to advance the idea that Christ entered the most holy place of the heavenly sanctuary at his ascension and that since then, not starting in 1844, Christ has been conducting his high priestly ministry of atonement and cleansing. His teaching created quite a stir in the church and Ellen White wrote a number of letters and manuscripts regarding Ballenger's views.³⁶ In these letters, even more than in Kellogg's case, she referred to the letter to Sardis as divine instructions on how to relate to this situation.

"Our message does not need that which Brother Ballenger is trying to draw into the web," she wrote plainly to church leaders assembled at the General Conference session of 1905.

Brother Ballenger does not discern what he is doing any more than Dr. Kellogg discerned that the book *Living Temple* contained some of the most dangerous errors that could be presented to the people of God. The most specious errors lie concealed in these theories and suppositions, which, if received, would leave the people of God in a labyrinth of error.³⁷

In all her remarks about Ballenger, Ellen White highlighted two major problems. In her diary entry for October 31, 1905, in which she discussed at length the impact of Ballenger's views on the doctrine of the sanctuary, she made a clear connection between the development of one's Christian character and a tendency to disregard Adventist beliefs. Lack of humility was at the root of Ballenger's problem, she believed.

Elder Ballenger does not see what he is trying to bring to pass.
The message that Christ came to give to John on the Isle of

³⁶ See also, Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Elmshaven Years, 1900-1905* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1981), 5:404-412.

³⁷ Manuscript 62, 1905, published in *Manuscript Release 760*. A few months later, to Elder J. A. Burden in southern California, she stated, "Elder Ballenger's proofs are not reliable. If received, they would destroy the faith of God's people in the truth that has made us what we are. We must be decided on this subject, for the points that he is trying to prove by Scripture are not sound" (Letter 329, 1905, published in *Manuscript Release 760*, 19). And to Elder C. B. Hughes, in the letter referred to at the beginning of this paper, "The theories that Elder Ballenger advocated, which remove the sanctuary truth, are just such as the enemy would bring in as matters of the utmost importance, to shake us from our foundation of faith" (Letter 40, 1906, published in *Manuscript Release 760*, 26).

FORTIN: ELLEN WHITE'S INTERPRETATION AND USE

Patmos needs now to be carefully studied by Elder Ballenger, for these words of warning tell us that men will arise claiming to have new light, whose theories, if received, would destroy our faith in the truths that have stood the test for half a century. We need to study and understand the message given in the third chapter of Revelation.³⁸

Then Ellen White quoted the first half of the letter to Sardis in Revelation 3:1-3. She understood this message to be relevant to Ballenger's experience and views. "This is a work to be done," she continued.

There is need for Elder Ballenger to humble his soul before God and to refuse to receive new interpretations of the Scriptures. We have had to meet many men who have come with just such interpretations, seeking to establish false theories and unsettling the minds of many by their readiness to talk, and by their great array of texts which they have misapplied to suit their own ideas. . . .

The warning is, 'Remember therefore how thou hast received, and heard, and hold fast, and repent' (Revelation 3:3). This is the message that I bear to Elder Ballenger. The Lord says to him, I have spared your life that you may remember how you have received and heard.

There are many who have not perfected a Christian character: their lives have not been made pure and undefiled through the sanctification of the truth, and they will bring their imperfections into the church and deny their faith, picking up strange theories which they will advance as truth.³⁹

A second problem Ellen White saw in Ballenger's life and character is one that touches the core of any intellectual person's life, including church leaders and theologians. This problem is the intellectual temptation to strive for originality and to seek something new and fascinating to impress one's listeners, a temptation from the enemy of our souls to "[lead] minds off on sidetracks."⁴⁰

To church leaders assembled to discuss Ballenger's views at the General Conference session in May 1905, she wrote,

In clear, plain language I am to say to those in attendance at this conference that Brother Ballenger has been allowing his mind to receive and believe specious error. He has been misin-

³⁸ Manuscript 145, 1905, published in *Manuscript Release 760*, 15-17.

³⁹ Manuscript 145, 1905, published in *Manuscript Release 760*, 15-17.

⁴⁰ Letter 50, 1906, to W. W. Simpson, published in *Manuscript Release 760*, 23.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

terpreting and misapplying the Scriptures upon which he has fastened his mind. He is building up theories that are not founded in truth. A warning is now to come to him and to the people, for God has not indited the message that he is bearing. This message, if accepted, would undermine the pillars of our faith.

He who claims that his teachings are sound, while at the same time he is working away from the Lord's truth, has come to the place where he needs to be converted.

A rich and inexhaustible storehouse of truth is open to all who walk humbly with God. The ideas of those whose hearts are fully in the work of God are clearly and plainly expressed, and they have no lack of variety, for there is ever before them a rich cabinet of jewels. Those who are striving for originality will overlook the precious jewels in God's cabinet in an effort to get something new.

Let not any man enter upon the work of tearing down the foundations of the truth that have made us what we are. God has led His people forward step by step though there were pitfalls of error on every side. Under the wonderful guidance of a plain, 'Thus saith the Lord,' a truth has been established that has stood the test of trial. When men arise and attempt to draw away disciples after them, meet them with the truths that have been tried as by fire.⁴¹

After quoting Revelation 3:1-3, Mrs. White concluded,

Those who seek to remove the old landmarks are not holding fast; they are not remembering how they have received and heard. Those who try to bring in theories that would remove the pillars of our faith concerning the sanctuary or concerning the personality of God or of Christ, are working as blind men. They are seeking to bring in uncertainties and to set the people of God adrift without an anchor. . . . Those who receive your interpretation of Scripture regarding the sanctuary service are receiving error and following in false paths. The enemy will work the minds of those who are eager for something new, preparing them to receive false theories and false expositions of the Scripture.⁴²

And in her diary in October 1905, she zeroed in on the real problem,

⁴¹ Manuscript 62, 1905, published in *Manuscript Release* 760, 8-9.

⁴² Manuscript 62, 1905, published in *Manuscript Release* 760, 9-10.

FORTIN: ELLEN WHITE'S INTERPRETATION AND USE

The warning comes down along the line, 'Remember therefore how thou hast received, and heard, and hold fast, and repent' (Revelation 3:3). Repent of the inclination to distinguish yourself as a man who has great light. Your supposed light is shown to me to be darkness which will lead into strange paths.⁴³

Conclusion

So what can we gain from a study of Ellen White's interpretation and use of the seven letters of Revelation? First, Ellen White believed the seven churches of Revelation were real churches to which the book of Revelation was first addressed to encourage early Christians in their spiritual journey. Second, she held a historicist interpretation of the book of Revelation and that the seven letters represent seven periods of Christian history, symbolically portraying the spiritual struggles, weaknesses, and victories of Christians through the centuries.

But, third, she also believed that the spiritual principles and timeless truths found in these letters were relevant to people in her own day. Those who faced the same struggles and weaknesses needed to hear the same messages, exhortations, and warnings. Although similar to the idealist approach to the seven churches, Ellen White did not use biblical exegesis to arrive at the timeless principles she saw as applicable to contemporary situations in Adventism. Thus, her spiritual, homiletical approach to the seven churches is to be nuanced from the idealist approach which is based on a preterist reading of the book of Revelation. She saw some parallels between the spiritual experience of the seven churches and Adventism in her day and thus applied the spiritual lessons to be gained from these messages. She understood contemporary spiritual applications of these messages as complementary to the prophetic historicist interpretation of the messages to the seven churches.

For the most part Ellen White's references to the seven letters appear mainly in her letters, manuscripts, sermons, and periodical articles, and seldom in a book she published during her lifetime. She was more pastoral and homiletical than exegetical or theological in her use of these letters. Yet, she nonetheless used the messages of these letters within a clear historicist interpretive framework. For her, the word of God is ever living and relevant to any situation: although addressed to men and women of long ago, other men and women who need to be exhorted and reminded of the importance of their relationship and walk with God can

⁴³ Manuscript 145, 1905, published in *Manuscript Release* 760, 16.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

also benefit from the same messages. Ellen White's interpretation and use of the seven letters of Revelation is a reflection of her strong belief in the relevance of the timeless truths and principles of the word of God.

Denis Fortin is Dean and Professor of Theology at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University. fortind@andrews.edu