

MARC COLEMAN

Ellen White on Confrontation with Evil Spiritual Powers

The writings of Ellen White substantiate the reality of the spiritual struggle waged by human beings against devils and demons. This paper will demonstrate that Ellen White viewed the battle against sin and unrighteousness in life as not just a mere inward struggle, but as a very real battle described by her as the Great Controversy between Christ and Satan that also involved very real battles between people and Satan and evil spirits. What is less well understood by modern readers is her understanding of the dimensions of this conflict in the everyday lives of believers and how to confront these spirits when such conflicts spill into the realm of the tangible. Finally, it concludes with her counsels on how humans are to wage spiritual warfare against the agency of evil spirits. This brief survey of her writings, although not comprehensive, seeks in a few words to elucidate the major lines of thought in Ellen White's comprehension of these aspects of spiritual warfare.

Spiritual Warfare, the Context

A consistent and persistent theme in her writings is the overarching idea of the Great Controversy. This is the backdrop, the framework for the problem of sin and people's life and death battle against Satan and his angels. In *The Story of Redemption* she spends considerable time developing Satan's deeply laid plot to overthrow the purity and innocence of the human race and gain control of the planet over which they had dominion. For a thorough treatment of Satan's fall from heaven, his purposes in planning for the fall of humanity, and the tragic effects of Adam and Eve's sin and rebellion against God, see chapters one through four in the *The Story of Redemption*. Approximately twenty years after writing the first chapters of that book, White wrote the following:

There are many who do not understand the conflict that is going on between Christ and Satan over the souls of men. They do not realize that if they would stand under the blood-stained banner of Prince Emmanuel, they must be willing to be partakers of his conflicts, and wage a determined war against the powers of darkness. (1908:8)

In fact, the warfare to be carried on against the powers of darkness is such a fundamental principle to human existence that White reminds her readers that it is one of Satan's goals to blind human minds to this fact.

While Satan is seeking to blind their minds to the fact, let Christians never forget that they "wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against wicked spirits in high places." The inspired warning is sounding down the centuries to our time: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour." (1911a:510)

In *The Great Controversy* chapter entitled The Agency of Evil Spirits (chap. 31), Ellen White explains in great detail the origin of evil spirits, their malice toward humans, their desire to distract and annoy, and finally the power that Christ has to drive them out of people they control (1911a:511-517). She makes an interesting, almost startling comment in which she describes Satan's anger at the realization that his kingdom and power had limits and that Christ desires to win back all of Satan's captives who would turn to him.

Jesus was stretching out His arms of love, inviting all who would to find pardon and peace in Him. The hosts of darkness saw that they did not possess unlimited control, and they understood that if Christ's mission should be successful, their rule was soon to end. Satan raged like a chained lion and defiantly exhibited his power over the bodies as well as the souls of men. (514)

However, it was not only in the time of Christ that Satan raged. Since the beginning of the Hebrew nation Satan was angry that there was a people that would not worship him and would resist his power. In commenting on the visit by King Saul to the Witch of Endor, White underlines once again that the purpose of the adversary was to first destroy, if possible Saul and through him the nation (for a full explanation of sorcery, its allegiance to the dead, and Satan's desire to use sorcery to destroy God's people see 1958:683-689).

The demon's message to Saul, although it was a denunciation of sin and a prophecy of retribution, was not meant to reform him, but to goad him to despair and ruin. (White 1958:688)

By the prediction of Saul's doom, given through the woman of Endor, Satan planned to ensnare the people of Israel. He hoped that they would be inspired with confidence in the sorceress, and would be led to consult her. Thus they would turn from God as their counselor and would place themselves under the guidance of Satan. The lure by which spiritualism attracts the multitudes is its pretended power to draw aside the veil from the future and reveal to men what God has hidden. (686)

Satan's hatred against God's people was personally experienced by Ellen White. When she first began to write out what would eventually be *Spiritual Gifts* Volume 1, which would later be the foundation of the Conflict of the Ages Series, she had this to say about a sudden shock that struck her.

As I was conversing with Sister Palmer, my tongue refused to utter what I wished to say, and seemed large and numb. A strange, cold sensation struck my heart, passed over my head, and down my right side. For a time I was insensible, but was aroused by the voice of earnest prayer. I tried to use my left limbs, but they were perfectly useless. (1915:162)

Later on God revealed to her what had happened: "I was shown in vision that in the sudden attack at Jackson, Satan intended to take my life, in order to hinder the work I was about to write; but angels of God were sent to my rescue" (162).

It is clear that Ellen White recognized that evil spirits were real, could at times, if permitted, attack and trouble God's people, could and do possess humans, are much more powerful than the people they control, are bent on the distraction and destruction of all humans, and must be fought or warred against with all of the tools at the Christian's disposal for waging spiritual warfare

I am instructed to say that in the future great watchfulness will be needed. There is to be among God's people no spiritual stupidity. Evil spirits are actively engaged in seeking to control the minds of human beings. Men are binding up in bundles, ready to be consumed by the fires of the last days. Those who discard Christ and His righteousness will accept the sophistry that is flooding the world. Christians are to be sober and vigilant, steadfastly resisting their adversary the devil, who is going about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Men under the influence of evil spirits will work miracles. They will make people sick by casting their spell upon

them, and will then remove the spell, leading others to say that those who were sick have been miraculously healed. This Satan has done again and again. (1903a: letter 259, para. 19)

When the Supernatural Invades the Human Realm

There are a number of very interesting statements made by Ellen White referring to evil angels taking human form and mingling with people, especially at meetings where truth is being proclaimed. The purpose of such encounters is to misinterpret and misconstrue the words of God's servants, to oppose the building up of the kingdom of God, to bring in a strong spirit of unbelief, to counterwork the influences of the Spirit of God, to seduce people from their allegiance to God, to deceive human beings, to lead people away from God, to try to make the truth of God of none effect, and finally, to criticize, misapply, and misinterpret the words of the Savior (1903:8).

It is obvious that the separation between the spiritual world and the physical world has been breached in the past and will be breached more and more often as this earth approaches the end of time. Notice what White says concerning fallen angels mingling with people in Christ's day. "Thus men came to Christ. And mingling with his hearers were angels in the form of men, making their suggestions, criticizing, misapplying, and misinterpreting the Saviour's words" (8)

In another reference regarding the interaction of evil spirits with human beings, White describes how leading generals in the northern army were led into defeat in the Civil War because they were not interested in the just cause the North should have been pursuing—stamping out slavery, but were only interested in making sure the Union remained intact. She states explicitly that these generals received communications and directions from evil spirits impersonating dead generals whom they thought to be in heaven. She also states that most often this counsel led to defeat for the northern armies (1948:1:364, 365).

Not only did Ellen White recognize spirit communication with humans but she talks about possession quite extensively. In her most comprehensive treatment of the subject she makes quite a profound assertion in suggesting that while most people who are captives of evil spirits suffer greatly, there are those that willingly receive the power promised by those spirits and are thus not in conflict with the enemy (1911a:516).

Those possessed with devils are usually represented as being in a condition of great suffering; yet there were exceptions to this rule. For the sake of obtaining supernatural power, some welcomed the satanic influence. These of course had no conflict with the demons. Of this class were those who

possessed the spirit of divination—Simon Magus, Elymas the sorcerer, and the damsel who followed Paul and Silas at Philippi. (1911a:517)

While it is true that some individuals are specially possessed by Satan, Ellen White makes an important, albeit implicit, distinction in her writings, one that is not often made by those who practice deliverance ministry. She distinguishes between those individuals who are harassed by Satan and those who are possessed by him. Those who are possessed are controlled, often against their will. This control may have both physical and emotional aspects (see 1940:257). She points out that all who are striving for righteousness may at times be severely harassed by the enemy as was Jesus in his temptations in the wilderness. This harassment by the enemy does not mean that a person is possessed or controlled by the enemy (1940:125).

Satan will go to the extent of his power to harass, tempt, and mislead God's people. He who dared to face, and tempt, and taunt our Lord, and who had power to take Him in his arms and carry Him to a pinnacle of the temple, and up into an exceedingly high mountain will exercise his power to a wonderful degree upon the present generation, who are far inferior in wisdom to their Lord, and who are almost wholly ignorant of Satan's subtlety and strength. (1948:1:341)

Open Conflict with the Powers of Darkness

Satan is exercising greater power over the human race as the end of time approaches and God's servants will at times be called upon to confront the enemy in his manifestations and possession of people under his control.

The condition of things in the world shows that troublous times are right upon us. The daily papers are full of indications of a terrible conflict in the near future. Bold robberies are of frequent occurrence. Strikes are common. Thefts and murders are committed on every hand. Men possessed of demons are taking the lives of men, women, and little children. Men have become infatuated with vice, and every species of evil prevails. (1948:9:11)

The next section of the article deals with Ellen White's counsel as it relates to opposing the force and power of Satan when people are in open conflict with him.

Areas of Counsel and Warning

There is not an extensive amount of material directly dealing with how pastors or other individuals should confront the occult or demonic activity.

One principle emphasized is that Ellen White strongly discouraged people from seeking a ministry of deliverance and heading into battle with evil presumptuously. In *Selected Messages* Book 3 there is a well documented story of a couple that sought an interview with Mrs. White feeling that among other things the Holy Spirit had given them the ability to cast out demons (1980:363 ff.).

Her counsels to this young couple, the Mackins, provide several insights for those who believe that they possess this same gift and aggressively pursue it. First, it was their undue and unhealthy influence over minds that caused people to believe that they were possessed. If the Mackins really had this calling they would walk with humility and would not conduct such sessions as a spectacle. The implication was that they were not taking a humble attitude about their "gift." Although they were appealing to the Bible in support of this ministry, it was scripture misapplied, and was an indication of fanaticism. Her counsel to them was to cease at once their supposed work of casting out of demons that they believed had been possessing people. Ellen White told them in no uncertain terms that "this application of Scripture to their peculiar exercise is Scripture misapplied. The work of declaring persons possessed of the devil, and then praying with them and pretending to cast out evil spirits is fanaticism which will bring into disrepute any church which sanctions such work" (1980:378).

One of the most instructive episodes in Adventist History as it pertains to confronting those under the power and control of Satan and evil spirits is the life of Moses Hull. Moses Hull was a minister who was an able speaker and excellent debater. He readily and confidently entered into debates with people not of the faith and was often considered the winner. In *Testimonies for the Church*, Ellen white reveals the inherent dangers of encountering those under the control of demons and those involved in occultist activity without careful prayer and preparation. Following is a synopsis of the counsel given to Elder Hull, all of which later proved to be correct. Implicit in this counsel are principles applicable for any who confront Satan in open conflict (1948:1:426-439).

1. Hull participated in a series of debates in 1863 and 1864 with spiritualists who said that they could communicate with the dead. Ellen White wrote a letter to Hull telling him that he was too confident in his ability as a debater and had rushed into battle without careful thought as to whether it was even necessary. Hull then entered another debate with spiritualists during this time. He entered as an Adventist minister; when he left the debate he was converted to spiritualism. For the rest of his life he would at different times advocate spiritualism, debate for it, exalt its principles, serve as president of a spiritualist educational institution, and live a life fully consistent with the principles of spiritualism.

2. According to Ellen White Hull was not a devotional man in the pulpit or out of it. If he had been he would have been a very powerful biblical preacher.

3. Hull should not have rushed to engage in encounters with spiritualists and if he did so it should have been done with great humility, modesty, and in the company of other ministers who could support and pray with and for him as he combatted not only men but demons speaking through these men.

4. He entered into conflict with the powers of darkness when he himself was troubled with doubts and then made things worse by repeating these doubts to others—even to the very spiritualists that he was seeking to overthrow.

5. Hull made his final decision to leave the church in 1864. He became a leading spiritualist and for nearly fifty years he distinguished himself with the following endeavors: he was the first person in modern times to try to prove that spiritualism was correct from the Bible, he left his wife and lived in an “open” relationship with a spiritualist medium, and he became the president of a spiritualist educational institution.

The experience of the Mackins and Hull and Ellen White’s responses to them underline the fact that Ellen White did not, as a general rule, encourage ministers or others to aggressively search for opportunities to confront demonic powers. If in the course of their work in freeing souls from Satan they were confronted by demons seeking to hold their pray then they could trust that they were well equipped through faith to deal with this. Humility was strongly enjoined by her in echo of Christ’s word in Luke 10:17.

The Saviour had followed the disciples in their work. He rejoiced at the success that attended their efforts put forth in faith. The disciples did not complain of the hardship, fatigue, or opposition they had encountered. They rejoiced as they reported to their Master, “Lord, even the devils are subject unto us through Thy name.” Jesus assured them that He had beheld their success. “I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven,” He said. Satan was once an angel of light in the heavenly courts. He was entrusted with an important position. But he coveted more power and sought to be even as God. As a result of his unholy apostasy, he and his followers were cast out of heaven and became angels of darkness. As Satan was cast out of heaven, so also he will be dispossessed of his dominion in the hearts and minds of those who will glorify God. (1905a: Letter 19)

How to Confront Evil Spirits

Outside of the Holy Scriptures, the writings of Ellen White provide one of the most comprehensive delineations of the agency of evil spirits and

their interactions with human beings. For her the battle against them is real, fundamental to the Christian experience, and should never be taken lightly, as unimportant, or trivial. She warns against carelessly entering into battle against evil spirits and says that when evil spirits are confronted they should never be confronted alone. From her writings we are able to clearly tease out several vital principles to be remembered when in open warfare against Satan and his evil angels.

1. As mentioned above, in one of the few comments she made directly about the casting out of demons she strongly discouraged those who claim to have the gift of setting people free as their unique ministry to do it. She further says that such manifestations in themselves can be a deception of the enemy. Her silence elsewhere on the need for highly ritualistic and formal exorcism services is instructive. Some would deduce from this that not everyone who has been a tool of the enemy needs an exorcism to be free from the influence of Satan.

2. The Scriptures are the primary element to be used in breaking Satan's chains. The battle is chiefly a battle for the control of the mind and Ellen White says that it is truth that frees the mind from Satan's lies.

Through the preaching of the gospel, Satan and his angels are cast out from people's minds. Through faith in the preached Word people are enabled to gain the victory, and the devil loses his hold upon them. Satan will eventually lose his power over all who continue to believe and trust in God. Satan's kingdom totters and falls before the presentation of sanctified truth (1905b: Letter 119, para. 29).

3. When God's people confront evil spirits they should never work alone. Christ is greater and Satan is a defeated foe but Christians are not Christ and are liable to make mistakes and to become proud.

4. Evil spirits should be confronted openly only when necessary and this should be done with much humility, faith in Christ, and in the company of others who can pray with and for the servant of God.

5. For some it is possible that the ability to cast out devils is viewed as a magically formula to use as a replacement for the preaching of the Gospel (see Ellen White's comments in *The Acts of the Apostles* concerning the Sons of Sceva (1911b:287, 288).

6. The ultimate goal in *delivering* those who are under the control of demons is to get the individual to grasp by faith the power of Jesus and therefore be delivered; no demon or the devil himself can hold anyone in their cruel grip when that soul clings in faith to Jesus, the Savior of all who come to him in faith. In one case Ellen White said that a demonized man was possessed but the moment he would turn to Christ in faith and surrender to him he would be free. In her personal experience when dealing with a demon possessed man she encouraged him to look to Christ and be free of the evil spirits that were troubling him.

I cannot forbear writing to you. I knew your countenance as you were seated in the tent at my right hand on the Sabbath [Sept. 13, 1891] at Colorado Springs. The Lord has presented your case before me as one who was in need of that help which God alone could give you. I heard words of hopelessness and despair coming from your lips. I heard wicked words, blasphemous words. Said Jesus, as He looked upon you piteously, "These are not the words of the man, but the words of the spirit that has possessed him. God will heal him. He has gone far in resisting the Spirit of God, but Jesus is drawing him by the tender cords of His love. He has separated from God, but God has not separated from him. Through a train of circumstances he has lost confidence in himself, in his best friends, and turned from light to darkness, from truth to error, and has been left to feel his own weakness."

You were the very one I was shown who was under the power of demons. "When this young man gives himself to Christ, the victory is gained." Said the heavenly voice, "Break with the deceiver. He is deluding your soul to your ruin. He will not let you go; only the power of the Mighty Deliverer can save you." Charge not my precious loving Saviour with your unhappiness and your ruin. The storm of temptation has swayed you like a reed in the wind, and through these bitter and almost overwhelming storms you have clung to your mantle of pride, hugging it closer about you. Prostrated in the dust, you are apparently devoid of willpower, without strength to rise. No earthly friend is powerful enough to raise you. You still cling to your pride; you utter the words of Satan abiding in your heart. Said Christ, "It is not he but a demon that speaks. I will save him if he will trust in me as a little child trusts in his father, his mother." (1990:148-152)

Conclusion

The writings of Ellen White provide a rich tableau that outlines the origins, actions, interactions with humans, and purposes of Satan and the fallen angels. She also gives clear warnings to those who would undertake a ministry to set people free to not have too great a confidence in self or to enter into it haphazardly. Her recognition of the conflict, its dimensions in the lives of individuals and the ability of Christ to overcome the powers of the enemy should give every sincere worker for God great courage.

Works Cited

- 1903a. Letter 259. Accessed 15 July 2015. <https://egwwritings.org/>.
 1903b. *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 80, no. 32 (August 11): 8, 9.
 1905a. Letter 19. Accessed 15 July 2015. <https://egwwritings.org/>.
 1905b. Letter 119. Accessed 15 July 2015. <https://egwwritings.org/>.
 1908. *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 85, no. 51 (December 17): 8, 9.
 1911a. *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press.

- 1911b. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press
1915. *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press.
1947. *The Story of Redemption*. Washington, DC: Review and Herald.
1948. *Testimonies for the Church*. Vol. 1. Mountain view, CA: Pacific Press.
1990. Manuscript Releases, Vol. 13, Manuscript #1020. Accessed 20 July 2015.
<https://egwwritings.org/>.



Marc Coleman is a missiologist, missions practitioner, and ordained minister. He earned his PhD in Missiology from the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa in 2008. He currently serves as International Field Director for Adventist Frontier Missions.