

DENIS FORTIN

---

## Growing Up in Christ: Ellen G. White's Concept of Discipleship

The concept of discipleship was not a concept discussed in nineteenth-century Evangelical denominations. However, if we understand discipleship as the concept of how the church community mentors and helps a new convert to become a committed disciple of Jesus Christ, then we can find substantial material to discuss this subject.

*Steps to Christ* holds a special place in Adventist history and theology and is one of the most translated books of all times by any author. Its publication occurred at the beginning of a period of Ellen White's ministry, from about 1890 to the early 1900s, when she published a number of books on the life of Christ. Shortly after the experience of the 1888 General Conference session in Minneapolis, Minnesota, when Adventist pastors and leaders passionately debated the concepts of righteousness by faith and how one is to live a life of faith and obedience, White felt convicted that Seventh-day Adventists needed to learn more about the meaning of salvation in Christ—not only to gain a better knowledge of salvation, but also to experience its renewing power, something she felt was immensely deficient in a young denomination that had become too legalistic (White 1984:433; White 1983:11).

In a little over a decade she and her editorial assistants worked on the manuscripts of five major books on the life of Christ: *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessings* (White 1896), a brief commentary on major sections of the Sermon on the Mount; *The Desire of Ages* (White 1898), White's most popular work on the life and ministry of Christ; *Christ's Object Lessons* (White 1900), on the parables of Jesus; and the first one hundred pages of *Ministry of Healing* (White 1905) in which she extols the compassionate healing ministry of Christ. Published in 1892, *Steps to Christ* was the first in this series of books and marked the beginning of White's contribution to reshape the understanding of the Adventist experience of salvation in Christ.

Ellen White's son and assistant, W. C. White, recalled that in the summer of 1890 some Adventist pastors asked her to prepare a small book on the themes of salvation to be used in their evangelistic efforts and sold by colporteurs. Over the years she had preached many sermons and exhortations on these themes, which were then published as articles in the *Review and Herald* and *Signs of the Times*. Pastors and evangelists felt that these precious thoughts could be helpful to those who sought the way of salvation and what it means to be a follower of Christ (White 1892; White 1933; Ellen G. White Estate 1935:1, 2; Poirier 1992:14-15). The little book could become a personal instruction manual on what we call discipleship.

Ellen White liked the idea and began to work on the project. Her assistant, Marian Davis, whom she called her "book maker" (White 1980 book 3:91; Olson in Fortin and Moon 2013:362-363), searched White's books and articles in the denomination's papers for suitable materials. The following summer (1891), White shared the manuscript with church leaders during a convention in Harbor Springs, Michigan, and Davis explained how the manuscript had been organized and compiled. "The brethren who read the manuscript were deeply impressed regarding its powerful appeal," recalled W. C. White, "They were enthusiastic regarding its value and predicted great things regarding its sale" (Ellen G. White Estate 1935:1). Ellen White received suggestions for a title and *Steps to Christ* was adopted.

It is likely that the title of the book alludes to the story of Jacob's dream in Gen 28 in which he saw a ladder reaching down from heaven to earth, with angels ascending and descending. The ladder allegory can be understood in different ways. In one sense, it can be seen as a representation of Christ as the Mediator—the only way to connect God and humanity by his life and death. Ellen White understood this ladder to be a metaphor for Christ who connects heaven and earth. Another way of thinking of the ladder is to consider it as symbolic of the journey through the life of faith—each step of the ladder representing an aspect of the process of salvation and of one's relationship with Christ on the way to heaven.<sup>1</sup> Katrina Blue in her recent dissertation describes how this theme of the mystic ladder was an important idea in Ellen White's discussion of the believer's union with Christ in the 1870s and 1880s, prior to the publication of *Steps to Christ*. The steps function as a metaphor for union with Christ in the process of sanctification and spiritual growth. The titles of the chapters do not represent an exact chronological or even logical order of steps in this relationship; but rather explain various aspects of the experience of salvation and spiritual growth and their interrelationship (Blue 2015:162-163).

Rather than an academic treatise on the doctrine of salvation, this little book reads as a pastoral exhortation and invitation to experience the

grace of salvation and a personal relationship with Christ. Given that so many sections of *Steps to Christ* came from personal letters to believers and churches and from sermons published in the church's magazines, it is understandable why the tone of the book is so personal and conversational. *Steps to Christ* is similar to a pastor's refashioned series of sermons: Ellen White makes very personal appeals to her readers about their experience of salvation in Christ. In this little book, her thoughts on salvation are practical and framed in the experience of a simple evangelical faith, and the second half of the book is truly a personal instruction manual on discipleship. Thus, I think it is a good place to start a reflection on Ellen White's thought on the meaning of discipleship.

## The Theological Context of Salvation and Discipleship<sup>2</sup>

For many readers the title of *Steps to Christ* discloses immediately its heritage within a particular strand of Protestant Christianity—the Wesleyan Methodist tradition. Methodist theologians have described John Wesley's orderly and methodical doctrine of salvation as an *ordo salutis*, the order or steps to salvation. Many of White's thoughts in *Steps to Christ* are similar to some of John Wesley's most famous sermons on his understanding of salvation (Collins 1989:12). The Methodist roots and affinities of Ellen White's theology of salvation grew naturally from her Methodist upbringing but also matured in a nineteenth-century American context that favored a Wesleyan Arminian approach to conversion, salvation, and discipleship. The context is also highly personal and individualistic: the concerns of evangelists is primarily about the personal conversion of people and their personal relationship with Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Much could be said about Ellen White's thought on discipleship, but I will limit my comments to the theological context of her thought in *Steps to Christ* and hope this is most helpful. Her thought on discipleship is set within the theological setting of her theology of salvation and how one grows spiritually in Christ as a result of one's experience of salvation. The outcome of this spiritual growth leads one to be a faithful witness of the grace of God in one's life and for the benefit of one's community.

The primary theological context of her thought on discipleship begins with the love of God—a concept that “is uplifted first, last, and all through” her writings, according to George Knight (1996:111). The first chapter of *Steps to Christ* is titled “God's Love for Man,” a clear indication that God's primary disposition in Christ is to save humanity, and all who believe will be saved by grace.

God's work of grace is universal, as a result of Christ's death on the cross, and prepares human beings to receive his offer of salvation. This

work of the Holy Spirit is universal, but God does not dictate or determine any particular response of the newly graced sinner. God's prevenient grace is possible only because Christ's sacrifice is for all humankind. Ellen White explains that the sinner does not need to do any work of repentance of his or her own before coming to Christ. In fact, it is Christ who is the source of every right impulse and who draws sinners to him. Therefore, "An influence of which they are unconscious works upon the soul, and the conscience is quickened, and the outward life is amended" (White 1892:27). "The heart of God yearns over His earthly children with a love stronger than death," White further explains. "In giving up His Son, He has poured out to us all heaven in one gift. The Savior's life and death and intercession, the ministry of angels, the pleading of the Spirit, the Father working above and through all, the unceasing interest of heavenly beings—all are enlisted in behalf of man's redemption" (21; White 1979:64).

John Wesley emphasized that salvation is received in a person's life through faith. The blessing of salvation is first of all a gift of God's grace. At the beginning of his sermon "Salvation by Faith," Wesley states, "Grace is the source, faith the condition, of salvation." One is saved by a disposition of the heart inclined toward Christ. To be saved, one must acknowledge "the necessity and merit of his death, and the power of his resurrection" (Wesley in Outler and Heitzenrather 1991a:40, 42). With Wesley, White understood humankind's response to God's offer of salvation and to the influence of the Holy Spirit as a crucial step in one's journey with Christ. In order to be saved, humankind must respond by faith to God's offer. "Christ is ready to set us free from sin," she states, "but He does not force the will; and if by persistent transgression the will itself is wholly bent on evil, and we do not *desire* to be set free, if we *will* not accept His grace, what more can He do?" (White 1892:34). "The very first step to Christ is taken through the drawing of the Spirit of God; as man responds to this drawing, he advances toward Christ in order that he may repent" (White 1980:390).

For Ellen White repentance and confession are the appropriate human responses to God's offer of salvation, and are closely connected to spiritual growth and discipleship. Once the Holy Spirit awakens one's conscience and draws it to the cross of Christ by God's love, a person can then respond with repentance and confession. Repentance, hence, is not a prerequisite in order to be loved by God. In fact, "repentance is no less the gift of God than are pardon and justification, and it cannot be experienced except as it is given to the soul by Christ" (391). It is the work of God's prevenient grace, an outflow of his love that leads one to repent. It is not a work that we initiate or do.

Confession of sins, as a result of genuine repentance, is another step

toward Christ and a prerequisite for spiritual growth. God's promise in Prov 28:13 is for all people; it is also a condition of salvation. "The conditions of obtaining mercy of God are simple and just and reasonable. The Lord does not require us to do some grievous thing in order that we may have the forgiveness of sin. We need not make long and wearisome pilgrimages, or perform painful penances, to commend our souls to the God of heaven or to expiate our transgression; but he that confesseth and forsaketh his sin shall have mercy" (White 1892:37). Hence, confession is part of the human response to God's offer of salvation. Without confession of sins and one's faith response there is no salvation. In 1890, she had already expressed, "Salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ alone" (White 1979:19). "When the sinner believes that Christ is his personal Savior, then according to his unfailing promises, God pardons his sin and justifies him freely" (101).

Faith is therefore a crucial element of salvation. In his sermon "Salvation by Faith," Wesley defined faith as "not only an assent to the whole gospel of Christ, but also a full reliance on the blood of Christ, a trust in the merits of his life, death, and resurrection" (Outler and Heitzenrath 1991:42). In a similar fashion, for White "faith is trusting God—believing that He loves us and knows best what is for our good" (White 1903:253).

White's understanding of God's work of prevenient grace on all human beings, his offer of salvation to all, and the need of humankind's response to God's offer is that of an integrated synergism. She believes God created human beings with free will, that prevenient grace restores the power of choice lost as a result of the Fall, and that God will not force anyone to serve him. Her understanding of this synergism between God's prevenient grace and human response is Wesleyan Arminian. "In the work of redemption there is no compulsion," she states in *The Desires of Ages*. "No external force is employed. Under the influence of the Spirit of God, man is left free to choose whom he will serve" (White 1898:466).

Repeatedly, and in different settings, she affirmed the prevenient work of God's grace on the heart. "We can no more repent without the Spirit of Christ to awaken the conscience than we can be pardoned without Christ. Christ is the source of every right impulse. He is the only one that can implant in the heart enmity against sin. Every desire for truth and purity, every conviction of our own sinfulness, is an evidence that His Spirit is moving upon our hearts" (White 1892:26; White 1958:391). But at the same time, she valued the importance of free will and the human response to God's gracious offer of salvation—keeping in mind that this response is possible only because of God's work of prevenient grace. "In the change that takes place when the soul surrenders to Christ, there is the highest sense of freedom," she stated in *The Desire of Ages*. "The expulsion of sin

is the act of the soul itself. True, we have no power to free ourselves from Satan's control; but when we desire to be set free from sin, and in our great need cry out for a power out of and above ourselves, the powers of the soul are imbued with the divine energy of the Holy Spirit, and they obey the dictates of the will in fulfilling the will of God" (White 1898:466; see also White 1892:43, 44, 47).

White's thought on salvation also reflects her Wesleyan Arminian roots when it comes to justification and sanctification in the experience of salvation that immediately leads to spiritual growth and discipleship, but in some aspects she goes beyond Wesley's thought. Categorically she affirmed in 1890, "justification is wholly of grace and not procured by any works that fallen man can do" (White 1979:20). Further, she added, "As the penitent sinner, contrite before God, discerns Christ's atonement in his behalf and accepts this atonement as his only hope in this life and the future life, his sins are pardoned. This is justification by faith" (White 1979:103). Justification is therefore God forgiving the penalty for sins because Christ's death paid this penalty on the cross, and the sinner's status is changed from sinner to righteous on account of Christ's righteousness being imputed to the forgiven sinner.

In the sermon "The Scripture Way of Salvation," John Wesley states, "justification is another word for pardon. It is forgiveness of all our sins, and (what is necessarily implied therein) our acceptance with God" (Wesley in Outler and Heitzenrather 1991b:373). Writing in her diary in 1891, and with words reminiscent of Wesley's thought, White also declared, "pardon and justification are one and the same thing. Through faith, the believer passes from the position of a rebel, a child of sin and Satan, to the position of a loyal subject of Christ Jesus, not because of an inherent goodness, but because Christ receives him as His child by adoption. The sinner receives the forgiveness of his sins, because these sins are borne by his Substitute and Surety. . . . Thus man, pardoned, and clothed with the beautiful garments of Christ's righteousness, stands faultless before God" (White 1979:103). For her, "justification is the opposite of condemnation" (104) and "however sinful has been his life, if he [the sinner] believes in Jesus as his personal Savior, he stands before God in the spotless robes of Christ's imputed righteousness" (106; see also White 1958:389).

## Sanctification and Discipleship

While for Ellen White justification is a divine declaration of forgiveness graciously given to repentant sinners, sanctification is the work of God's grace in sinners to restore in them the image of God (1896:114). This work of sanctification is not instantaneous, but is "the work of a lifetime" (White 1900:65). In *Acts of the Apostles*, White also stated,

<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jams/vol12/iss2/7>

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.32597/jams/vol12/iss2/7>

Sanctification is not the work of a moment, an hour, a day, but of a lifetime. It is not gained by a happy flight of feeling, but is the result of constantly dying to sin, and constantly living for Christ. Wrongs cannot be righted nor reformations wrought in the character by feeble, intermittent efforts. It is only by long, persevering effort, sore discipline, and stern conflict, that we shall overcome. We know not one day how strong will be our conflict the next. So long as Satan reigns, we shall have self to subdue, besetting sins to overcome; so long as life shall last, there will be no stopping place, no point which we can reach and say, I have fully attained. Sanctification is the result of lifelong obedience. (1911:560-561)

This distinction and link between justification and sanctification are also found in Wesley's sermons: one is either justified or not, while one is being progressively sanctified. Wesley explains that at the time a person is justified, "in that very moment, sanctification begins. . . . From the time of our being 'born again' the gradual work of sanctification takes place" (Outler and Heitzenrath 1991:373-374). For both Wesley and White justification and sanctification are also considered in relation to the righteousness of Christ and one's readiness for heaven. Justification is imputed righteousness and entitles one to heaven, while sanctification is imparted righteousness and qualifies, or prepares, one for heaven (562; White 1895).

And this is where the concept of discipleship connects with Ellen White's theology of salvation. While the use of the word discipleship was not a common occurrence in her time, the concept of discipleship certainly was. For Ellen White and other evangelical writers of the nineteenth century, discipleship was referred to under the synonyms of "follower of Christ" or "disciple of Jesus." The concepts of discipleship, spiritual nurture, and faith development were subsumed under conversations about spiritual growth, sanctification, obedience, and character development. A true follower of Christ is one who daily grows in faith and obedience, who abides in Christ, whose character is sanctified by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

In chapter 8 of *Steps to Christ*, "Growing Up into Christ," White presents her understanding of sanctification and how one grows in Christ after being justified. Christian growth and sanctification are comparable to the life of a plant. As God first gives life to a plant when the seed germinates, it is also God who continues to give life to the plant as it grows. Never is the plant capable of making itself grow. So it is only through the life God gives that spiritual life is formed in our lives, and thus growth results (White 1892:67). "The plants and flowers grow not by their own care or anxiety or effort, but by receiving that which God has furnished to minister to their life. The child cannot, by any anxiety or power of its own, add to its

stature. No more can you, by anxiety or effort of yourself, secure spiritual growth" (White 1892:68). In order to grow, we are invited to "abide in Christ" for it is only as one is dependent on Christ that one receives power to resist temptation or to grow in grace. "You are just as dependent upon Christ, in order to live a holy life, as is the branch upon the parent stock for growth and fruitfulness. Apart from Him you have no life" (69).

To those who misunderstand that justification is by faith but sanctification is through human efforts, White states categorically that such an approach to spiritual growth will invariably fail. "Many have an idea that they must do some part of the work alone. They have trusted in Christ for the forgiveness of sin, but now they seek by their own efforts to live aright. But every such effort must fail" (1892:69). Once we remind ourselves of Jesus' words, "Without Me ye can do nothing," all aspects of Christian growth are dependent on our union with Christ. "It is by communion with Him, daily, hourly—by abiding in Him—that we are to grow in grace. He is not only the Author, but the Finisher of our faith. It is Christ first and last and always. He is to be with us, not only at the beginning and the end of our course, but at every step of the way" (69). Such a moment-by-moment dependence on Christ for continued spiritual growth excludes the value of human effort. In fact, in harmony with her view of the depravity of human nature, which still remains a hindrance to spiritual growth even after conversion, she remarks, "The religious services, the prayers, the praise, the penitent confession of sin ascend from true believers as incense to the heavenly sanctuary, but passing through the corrupt channels of humanity, they are so defiled that unless purified by blood, they can never be of value with God" (White 1958:344).

Ellen White's doctrine of sanctification also addresses the presence of inherited sin in human life, sin as a condition and a power in the self. Regeneration, or the new birth, is the salvific strength of God made available to all who believe. It is the empowerment by the Holy Spirit to obey. This spiritual empowerment undoes partially the total inability we are born with; it provides enough spiritual vigor to allow us to overcome the most besetting human tendencies. The inclination to sin we have inherited (the man of Rom 7), with which we struggle, remains in the hearts of believers in Christ, but its power is no longer controlling their lives. As this statement in *Steps to Christ* highlights, a new power is given in the new birth.

If the heart has been renewed by the Spirit of God, the life will bear witness to the fact. While we cannot do anything to change our hearts or to bring ourselves into harmony with God; while we must not trust at all to ourselves or our good works, our lives will reveal whether the grace of God is dwelling within us. A change will be seen in the character, the habits, the pursuits. The contrast will be clear and decided between what they have been and what they are. (White 1892:57)



One of White's best expressions of this spiritual regeneration to new life is from an article she wrote in 1901, shortly after arriving back in the United States after living for nine years in Australia:

There are those who listen to the truth, . . . and they repent of their transgressions. Relying upon the merits of Christ, exercising true faith in Him, they receive pardon for sin. As they cease to do evil and learn to do well, they grow in grace and in the knowledge of God. . . . The warfare is before them, . . . fighting against their natural inclinations and selfish desires, bringing the will into subjection to the will of Christ. Daily they seek the Lord for grace to obey Him, and they are strengthened and helped. This is true conversion. In humble, grateful dependence he who has been given a new heart relies upon the help of Christ. He reveals in his life the fruit of righteousness. He once loved himself. Worldly pleasure was his delight. Now his idol is dethroned, and God reigns supreme. The sins he once loved he now hates. Firmly and resolutely he follows in the path of holiness. (White 1930:73-74)

Another crucial step in growth is to daily surrender to Christ's will and to keep our eyes fixed upon Christ (White 1892:70-72). In other words, we are to live daily in the presence of Christ, by the power of His Holy Spirit. Such a life brings about transformation of character and obedience. White is careful to balance the work of God's grace in justification and sanctification and the role of human effort in the process of growth. As a result of the work of God's grace in our lives, characters are transformed into the likeness of Christ's character, and obedience to God's law and to the gospel become part of our inner redeemed nature. "While the work of the Spirit is silent and imperceptible, its effects are manifest. If the heart has been renewed by the Spirit of God, the life will bear witness to the fact" (57). One's character reflects this transformation: "The character is revealed, not by occasional good deeds and occasional misdeeds, but by the tendency of the habitual words and acts" (57, 58).

As one's character is developed in likeness to Christ's character, obedience becomes a natural part of growth and of one's faithful response to the gift of the grace of God. "Instead of releasing man from obedience, it is faith, and faith only, that makes us partakers of the grace of Christ, which enables us to render obedience. We do not earn salvation by our obedience; for salvation is the free gift of God, to be received by faith. But obedience is the fruit of faith" (White 1892:60-61; see also White 1958:398; White 1979:85-87). White stated to believers in Sweden in 1886, "true sanctification will be evidenced by a conscientious regard for all the commandments of God" and "a careful improvement of every talent, by a circumpect conversation, by revealing in every act the meekness of Christ"

(53). "While we are to be in harmony with God's law," she wrote a few years later, "we are not saved by the works of the law, yet we cannot be saved without obedience. The law is the standard by which character is measured. But we cannot possibly keep the commandments of God without the regenerating grace of Christ" (95; see also White 1892:62).

This process of sanctification and spiritual growth is often invisible and imperceptible in one's life; it is therefore misguided to speak of perfectionism or of the possibility to attain a self-exalted, sinless life on this earth. In fact, White gave a caution to those who preach perfectionism: "The closer you come to Jesus, the more faulty you will appear in your own eyes" (1892:64). "So we have nothing in ourselves of which to boast. We have no ground for self-exaltation. Our only ground of hope is in the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and in that wrought by His Spirit working in and through us" (63). She clearly declared, "We cannot say, 'I am sinless,' till this vile body is changed and fashioned like unto His glorious body" (White 1888).

While it is clear in Scripture that works, even righteous works, do not merit salvation to anyone, there is still a valid biblical teaching about good works in the life of a disciple of Christ. It is faith in the merits of Christ's sacrifice that leads to justification, and justification must and will invariably produce works in the life of the regenerated person. Ellen White affirmed this Protestant understanding of the relationship between faith and obedience.

White stated in a sermon in Switzerland in 1885 that "faith and works go hand in hand; they act harmoniously in the work of overcoming. Works without faith are dead, and faith without works is dead. Works will never save us; it is the merit of Christ that will avail in our behalf. Through faith in Him, Christ will make all our imperfect efforts acceptable to God. The faith we are required to have is not a do-nothing faith; saving faith is that which works by love and purifies the soul" (1979:48-49).

In *Steps to Christ*, White addressed two common errors regarding the relationship between faith and works. A first error encountered in some people's experience "is that of looking to their own works, trusting to anything they can do, to bring themselves into harmony with God." Such an approach to spiritual life, she concluded, "is attempting an impossibility. All that man can do without Christ is polluted with selfishness and sin. It is the grace of Christ alone, through faith, that can make us holy" (1892:59-60).

A second error, that she qualifies as "no less dangerous," is to believe that "Christ releases men from keeping the law of God; that since by faith alone we become partakers of the grace of Christ, our works have nothing to do with our redemption" (60). Those two extremes are refuted many times in her writings. "We do not earn salvation by our obedience; for

salvation is the free gift of God, to be received by faith. But obedience is the fruit of faith" (61).

In his sermon "The Scripture Way of Salvation," Wesley defines *perfection* as "perfect love." "It is love excluding sin; love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul" (Outler and Heitzenrath 1991:373). In another echo of Wesley's thought, Ellen White spoke of the possibility of character perfection in one's life.<sup>4</sup> Commenting on the parable of the talents in Matt 25, she wrote, "A character formed according to the divine likeness is the only treasure that we can take from this world to the next. . . . The heavenly intelligences will work with the human agent who seeks with determined faith that perfection of character which will reach out to perfection in action" (1900:332). In fact, that perfection of character is a reflection of the loving character of God. As servants of God become more and more like Christ, they receive "the Spirit of Christ—the Spirit of unselfish love and labor for others." As a result, she concluded, "Your love [will] be made perfect. More and more you will reflect the likeness of Christ in all that is pure, noble, and lovely" (68). George Knight comments that Ellen White thus "ties her discussion of Christian perfection to the internalization of God's loving character in daily life" (1996:126; see also Knight 2008:156-169). As mentioned above, no one can claim freedom from temptation and sin in this life since this is what sinful human nature entails, yet the goal of the Christian life, of a disciple of Christ, remains the same: to reflect Christ's character. Russell Staples recognized the similarities between Wesley's and White's thoughts on perfection and holiness, but he adds that White's thoughts in *Steps to Christ* fit into the genre of the Methodist Holiness tradition, while avoiding the distortion and excesses of that tradition. White frequently mentioned "holiness" and "purity" in *Steps to Christ* as the standard for Christians (Staples 1991:23).

## Practical Counsels

Chapter 9 begins the second part of *Steps to Christ* with a series of practical counsels on five aspects of spiritual growth and personal discipleship: service, growth in the knowledge of God, prayer, what to do with doubts, and, finally, praise. In chapter 9, Ellen White presents a simple, yet straightforward, invitation to Christians. As Jesus lived His life on earth to bless and minister to others, never to satisfy his own needs, so the Christian's life should be witnessing to the work of God's grace in one's life.

Service becomes an outflow of the love of God in one's life as Christians participate also in the lifelong work of sanctification. Many unnoticeable and often unexpected blessings will be the outcome of a life of witnessing for Jesus. The effort to bless others will result in blessings upon

oneself and “every act of self-sacrifice for the good of others strengthens the spirit of beneficence in the giver’s heart” (White 1892:79). In the end, such selfless service draws the believer ever “more closely to the Redeemer of the world” (79). In one of the strongest possible connection with the concept of discipleship she states, “The spirit of unselfish labor for others gives depth, stability, and Christlike loveliness to the character, and brings peace and happiness to its possessor” (80).

In chapter 10, Ellen White offers some practical advice to Christians on their spiritual journey through life. Still in the context of the spiritual growth of the believer, and as part of explaining the lifelong work of sanctification, White speaks of how one is to receive a better appreciation of God’s faithfulness and presence. The major part of the chapter is dedicated to the knowledge of God we gain from a study of the Bible. “God speaks to us in His word. Here we have in clearer lines the revelation of His character, of His dealings with men, and the great work of redemption” (1892:87). Through its stories and narratives of the lives of patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and disciples, the Bible provides invaluable lessons that give God’s people instructions and courage for our lives on earth.

In order to spiritually grow and advance in sanctification, White recommends also a number of practical devotional practices. She invites her readers to dwell and meditate upon the life and ministry of Jesus, and to contemplate heavenly themes. Such practices will provide the believer with growth in the reflection of Christ’s character. “There will be a hungering and thirsting of soul to become like Him whom we adore. The more our thoughts are upon Christ, the more we shall speak of Him to others and represent Him to the world” (1892:89).

Chapter 11 on the privilege of prayer is one of the better known chapters of Ellen White’s writings in which she gives this classic definition: “Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend” (1892:93). In the preceding chapter, White explored how the Christian can acquire a better knowledge of God “through nature and revelation, through His providence, and by the influence of His Spirit, God speaks to us” (93). In this chapter, she continues this theme by exploring the role of prayer in one’s spiritual life. Prayer is an essential element of God’s plan for the spiritual growth of the believer. It is a crucial devotional habit, and not a mere optional practice. Her practical counsels are also simple. She invites Christians to pray in community, to benefit from the prayers of others, to pray in the family home, and in private. There is no time or place when it is inappropriate to pray. Prayer is to be part of life. But what stands out most in this chapter is the picture of God’s character that White presents. God is a friend, a loving Father, intent on listening to the prayers of His children, whatever they may wish to share.

As in the nineteenth century, Christians today still have doubts, questions, and skepticism when it comes to many ideas expressed in the Bible. While for Ellen White, Christianity is a revealed and reasonable religion, she also understood that at times faith must precede reason and that not all occasions for doubts can be removed from one's religious experience. "Those who wish to doubt will have opportunity; while those who really desire to know the truth will find plenty of evidence on which to rest their faith" (1892:105). She assumes that doubt is destructive to one's faith in God and in the church. For her, doubt is a spiritual issue in the great controversy between good and evil. Chapter 12 is filled with pastoral advice for new Christians, and for those who have questions. White did not encourage a blind faith, or a faith where no questions could be asked. She knew that life is sometimes difficult, particularly when troubling questions are not answered. It is from her own experience that she speaks and offers these counsels. Her response is an invitation to personal faith and trust.

For the most part, chapter 13 on praise and rejoicing is a pastoral exhortation on the benefits of positive thinking. Jesus is again set as the example for the Christian. As Christ did not dwell on His difficulties and temptations, so is the Christian to live consciously in the presence of God and refrain from unnecessary conversation about negative feelings and circumstances. Focusing on such darkness "is harming your own soul" and will inevitably stifle one's relationship with Christ (White 1892:119). "If you choose to open the door to his [Satan's] suggestions, your mind will be filled with distrust and rebellious questionings" (119).

On the other hand, positive thinking, dwelling on and rejoicing in the blessings of God, will have a powerful influence on one's own religious and spiritual experience. And even more so on the lives of others who witness the believer's response to life (117). This approach to life is also part of the process of character sanctification and preparation for eternal life. We can look beyond life's perplexities and difficulties, to what is to come, and dwell on the promise of a new heaven and new earth in the company of God and holy angels, and all the redeemed (126).

## Conclusion

This little book *Steps to Christ*, published 125 years ago, is a brief summary of some aspects of Ellen White's theology of salvation and understanding of discipleship. In her discussion of the personal and intimate spiritual growth of a Christian, she reveals many similarities to John Wesley and Methodism and hers is also a religion of the heart as one experiences a spiritual transformation in union with Christ. According to

Staples, White articulates in her writings “a Wesleyan synthesis of divine sovereignty and human responsibility” (1991:64). Many other aspects of Ellen White’s thought on discipleship should be explored, in particular, the role of the church community in one’s spiritual growth. Just as crucial are the role and influence of parents, of the family, of schools and teachers, of pastors, of a faithful devotional life, and of an active life of witnessing of the grace of God in one’s life. All these aspects of a Christian’s life environment are crucial elements of her thoughts on discipleship and how one becomes a true follower of Christ.

For further exploration of her ideas on discipleship and spiritual growth, I recommend her book on the New Testament parables of Jesus, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, and the compilation of a series of articles from 1881, *The Sanctified Life*, a little book in which she sets out the examples of the prophet Daniel and the apostle John as illustrations of true disciples of God. But before that I would invite you to reread *Steps to Christ*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The ladder represents Jesus, the appointed medium of communication. Had He not with His own merits bridged the gulf that sin had made, the ministering angels could have held no communion with fallen man. Christ connects man in his weakness and helplessness with the source of infinite power.” (White 1890:184). In 1884, she wrote that the dream of the ladder is the gospel given to Jacob. White, “The Vision at Bethel,” (White 1884). Strictly speaking the comparison between Christ and Jacob’s ladder is an allegory.

<sup>2</sup>This section is adapted from my article on Ellen White’s theology in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, 248–258 and the historical introduction in the forthcoming special edition of *Steps to Christ* (Andrews University Press, 2017).

<sup>3</sup>Only a few brief studies have been done comparing both authors’ views on salvation, and a thorough study of the two authors still remains to be done. See (Whidden 1995), Michael Davey Pearson mentions a few similarities between Wesleyan Arminianism and Ellen White in his dissertation, “The Sin Against the Holy Spirit in the Writings of G. C. Berkouwer and Ellen G. White: A Comparative Study and Ethical Implications” (Pearson 2014); Ronell Ike Mamarimbing, “A Comparative Study on the Understanding of Christian Perfection in John Wesley and Ellen G. White” (Mamarimbing 2008); Alberto Ronald Timm, “A Short Analysis of the Book ‘Steps to Christ’ in the Light of John Wesley’s Theology” (Timm 1991); Russell Staples, “The Wesleyan Roots of Adventist Spirituality” (Staples 1988). In this paper Staples posits that White’s theology in *Steps to Christ* is closer to the American Methodist Arminian and Holiness tradition, with some currents of thoughts drawn from the nineteenth-century revivalist movements.

<sup>4</sup>For a more extensive summary of Ellen White’s thought on perfection, see Whidden 1995:119-156.

## Works Cited

- Blue, Katrina. 2015. Union with Christ in the Writings of Ellen G. White. PhD diss. Andrews University.
- Collins, Kenneth J. 1989. *Wesley on Salvation: A Study in the Standard Sermons*. Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury Press.
- Dayton, Donald W., and Robert K. Johnston, eds. 1991. *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Ellen G. White Estate. 1935. The Story of 'Steps to Christ.' *The Elmshaven Leaflets*, 2, no. 1, 1-2.
- Fortin, Denis and Jerry Moon, eds. *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald.
- Knight, George R. 1996. *Meeting Ellen White: A Fresh Look at Her Life, Writings, and Major Themes*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008. *Sin and Salvation: God's Work for and in Us*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald.
- Mamarimbing, Ronell Ike. 2008. A Comparative Study on the Understanding of Christian Perfection in John Wesley and Ellen G. White. MA thesis, Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies.
- Olson, Robert. 2013. Davis, Mary Ann 'Marian.' In *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, eds. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, 362-363. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald.
- Outler, Albert C., and Richard P. Heitzenrather, eds. 1991. *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Pearson, Michael Davey. 2014. The Sin against the Holy Spirit in the Writings of G.C. Berkouwer and Ellen G. White: A Comparative Study and Ethical Implications. PhD diss. Andrews University.
- Poirier, Tim. 1992. A Century of Steps. *Adventist Review*, May 14, 14-15.
- Staples, Russell L. 1991. Adventism. In *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, eds. Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnston. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1988. The Wesleyan Roots of Adventist Spirituality. Unpublished paper presented at the Andrews Society for Religious Studies, Chicago, IL, November 19.
- Timm, Alberto Ronald. 1991. A Short Analysis of the Book 'Steps to Christ' in the Light of John Wesley's Theology. Unpublished paper, Andrews University.
- Wesley, John. 1991. Salvation by Faith. In *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, eds. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrather, 39-48. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1991. The Scripture Way of Salvation. In *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, eds. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrather, 371-380. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Whidden, Woodrow W. 1995. *Ellen White on Salvation*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald.
- White, Arthur L. 1984. *Ellen G. White: The Lonely Years, 1876-1891*, vol. 3. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1983. *Ellen G. White: The Australian Years, 1891-1900*, vol. 4. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald.

- White, Ellen G. 1881. *The Sanctified Life*. Battle creek, MI: Review and Herald.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1884. The Vision at Bethel. *The Signs of the Times*. July 31, 449-450.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1888. Abide in Me. *The Signs of the Times*. March 23, 177-178.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1890. *Patriarchs and Prophets*. Washington D.C.: Review and Herald.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1892. *Steps to Christ*. Chicago, IL: Fleming H. Revell.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1895. Qualifications for the Workers. *Review and Herald* June 4, 353-354.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1896. *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessings*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1898. *The Desire of Ages*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1900. *Christ's Object Lessons*. Washington D.C.: Review and Herald.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1905. *Ministry of Healing*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1911. *Acts of the Apostles*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1930. *Messages to Young People*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1958. *Selected Messages* book 1. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1979. *Faith and Works*. Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1980. *Selected Messages* book 3. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald.
- White, W. C. 1933. *The Story of a Popular Book "Steps to Christ" and the Authorship of "Steps to Christ."* St. Helena, CA: Elmshaven Office no. 3.



Denis Fortin, Ph.D., is professor of historical theology, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University. He has written numerous articles and chapters on Adventist theology and Ellen G. White studies. He is co-editor of *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (Review and Herald, 2013) and editor of a special 125th anniversary of Ellen White's book *Steps to Christ* (Andrews University Press, 2017).