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Ellen G. White

By MERLIN D. BURT

AND Adventist Fundamental

Her role in finalizing doctrine

Seventh-day Adventists believe that God called Ellen G. White to a prophetic ministry that played a vital role in the beginning and establishment of the church. Her visions and prophetic dreams spanned a period of a little more than 70 years, from 1844 to 1915. These special revelations were a correcting voice that kept the church and individuals close to a biblical faith. They did not originate any Adventist fundamental belief, but rather unified believers and enriched their biblical understanding. This role is clear in the history of Seventh-day Adventist doctrinal development.

In looking at the most important distinctive doctrines of the Seventh-day Adventist Church—the sanctuary and the Sabbath and their integration in the three angels’ messages—we see this demonstrated. As a further illustration, we will see Ellen White’s role in the teaching of tithing.

Heavenly Sanctuary

In March 1845 O. R. L. Crosier published his first article in the *Day-Dawn* suggesting that Jesus began His ministry in the Most Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary on October 22, 1844. He further developed the idea of the antitypical day of atonement in a lengthy article titled “The Law of Moses” in the February 7, 1846, *Day-Star Extra*.¹

Ellen White confirmed his presentation when she wrote in 1847: “The Lord [showed] me in vision, more than one year ago, that Brother Crosier had the true light, on the cleansing of the sanctuary.”² While Ellen White enriched an understanding of the heavenly sanctuary by identifying Jesus as our great high priest, it was Crosier’s biblical expositions that built the foundation.

Sabbath

The seventh-day Sabbath came to Adventists through the influence of Seventh Day Baptists. Rachel Oakes, a Seventh Day Baptist in Washington, New Hampshire, shared the Sabbath with Frederick Wheeler. Wheeler likely influenced T. M. Preble, who in turn wrote an article and tract in February and March 1845 that brought Joseph Bates to

the Sabbath.³ Bates wrote his important Sabbath tract, *Seventh Day Sabbath a Perpetual Sign*, in August 1846.⁴

Newly married, James and Ellen White studied this tract with their Bibles and became Sabbathkeepers. Ellen White did not receive a vision on the Sabbath until the next year. She had heard Bates speak of the Sabbath prior to reading his tract but “did not feel its importance.”⁵ God did not give her a vision to point her mind toward the Sabbath. Rather, He waited for her to study the Bible to settle her faith on this important doctrinal issue.

Sabbath and Sanctuary Unite

The most important theological development for Seventh-day Adventists was not the Sabbath or the heavenly sanctuary as individual doctrines, but rather the integration of the two into a final message for the world. The January 1847 second edition of Joseph Bates’s tract on the Sabbath presented the idea that the Sabbath had “present truth,” or end-time importance, based on Revelation 11:19 and 14:12.

Revelation 11:19 describes the temple opened in heaven with a view of the ark of the covenant in the Most Holy Place. In the ark are the Ten Commandments. The three angels’ messages call us to worship God as Creator and describe the saints as those who “keep the commandments of God and have the faith of Jesus.” For Bates, the Sabbath had end-time importance because of its link to Jesus’ Most Holy Place ministry.

Ellen White read Bates’s revised tract. In April 1847 her “Sabbath halo vision” gave a visual demonstration of Revelation 11:19 and confirmed what Bates had already published. In vision she saw Jesus, in the Most Holy Place, open the ark of the covenant and pick up the Ten Commandments. As He opened the two stone tablets, she looked and saw a “halo of glory” all around the fourth commandment.⁶ Her vision added an important application for their Bible understanding. She saw that Adventists “went forth and proclaimed the Sabbath more fully.”

This confirming vision helped anchor the eschatological importance of the Sabbath and provided an impetus for a

THOMAS PREBLE



JOSEPH BATES



FREDERICK WHEELER



RACHEL OAKES



O.R.L. CROSIER



Beliefs

new evangelistic proclamation of the gospel within the context of the Sabbath. This doctrine is integral to the three angels' messages and is the core theological foundation for the evangelistic mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Thus we see that the core foundational doctrines of the Seventh-day Adventist Church—the sanctuary, Sabbath, and the integration of the two for evangelistic mission—are not based on Ellen White's visions, but rather on careful Bible study. The visions played a complementary role in confirming, correcting, and enriching. Ellen White was always clear that Adventist faith and practice are based on the Bible, not on her visions. In her first tract in 1851 she wrote: "I recommend to you, dear reader, the Word of God as the rule of your faith and practice. By that Word we are to be judged. God has, in that Word, promised to give visions in the 'last days'; not for a new rule of faith, but for the comfort of His people, and to correct those who err from Bible truth."⁷

Tithing

All the fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church came through Bible study and were not originated through Ellen White's visions. One further example is tithing.

In April 1858 J. N. Andrews conducted a Bible class in Battle Creek, Michigan, United States, to learn how the gospel ministry should be supported.⁸ This led to the adoption in 1859 of a giving plan called Systematic Benevolence, called for systematic giving.

The first guideline was that "brothers" should set aside from 5 to 25 cents a week and "sisters" from 2 to 10 cents a week. Additionally, those who had property were asked to set aside from 1 to 5 cents a week per \$100 of value. Tithing was not mentioned.

Ellen White supported Systematic Benevolence with these words: "God is leading His people in the plan of systematic benevolence."⁹ But God did not correct the plan to reflect the Bible teaching of the tithe through her visions.

Not until 1876- to 1879 was the Bible plan of tithing now practiced by Seventh-day Adventists implemented.¹⁰ Then God used the prophetic gift to give guidance on how best to apply the tithe to support the gospel ministry and the mission of the church.

Again the visions confirmed, corrected, and enriched; they did not originate. God waited until His church studied the matter from the Bible. It is more important for Adventists to build their faith on a Bible foundation than to come quickly to a right view through prophetic visions.

We can be grateful for the way the prophetic ministry of Ellen White interacted with Adventist doctrinal development. One of the signs that she is a true prophet is her orientation toward Scripture. God used the prophetic gift to encourage, confirm, correct, and enrich Seventh-day Adventist fundamental beliefs. The Bible remains the source of all doctrine. It was through careful study and not through visions that God brought Seventh-day Adventists to the fundamental beliefs we now cherish and share with the world. ■

¹ O.R.L. Crosier and F. B. Hahn, *Day-Dawn* published on last page of *Ontario Messenger*, Mar. 26, 1845; O.R.L. Crosier, "The Law of Moses," *Day-Star Extra*, Feb. 7, 1846.

² Ellen G. White to Eli Curtis, Apr. 21, 1847, in [James White], *A Word to the "Little Flock"* (Brunswick, Maine: James White, 1847), p. 12.

³ Thomas M. Preble, "The Sabbath," *Review and Herald*, Aug. 23, 1870, reprinted from the *Hope of Israel*, Feb. 28, 1845; *Tract, Showing That the Seventh Day Should be Observed as the Sabbath, Instead of the First Day; "According to the Commandment"* (Nashua, N.H.: Murray and Kimball, 1845).

⁴ Joseph Bates, *The Seventh Day Sabbath, A Perpetual Sign, From the Beginning to the Entering Into the Gates of the Holy City, According to the Commandment* (New Bedford, Mass.: Benjamin Lindsey, 1846).

⁵ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1948), vol. 1, pp. 75, 76.

⁶ Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1882), p. 33.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁸ John N. Loughborough, *The Church, Its Order, Organization, and Discipline*, p. 107.

⁹ E. G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 19.

¹⁰ D. M. Canright, "Systematic Benevolence, or the Bible Plan of Supporting the Ministry," *Review and Herald*, Feb. 17, 1876; "Systematic Benevolence," *Review and Herald*, Dec. 12, 1878.



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