

# **Spirit of Prophecy Sermon, October 22, 2005**

## **CAN ELLEN WHITE OPEN OUR EYES IN THE 21ST CENTURY?**

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The chief of military operations was angry. Several times his top-secret strategies to ambush the enemy had been foiled, and the irate commander was determined to ferret out the spy.

Let's pick up the story in 2 Kings 6, starting with verse 11 (New Living Translation): "The king of Aram became very upset over this. He called in his officers and demanded, 'Which of you is the traitor? Who has been informing the king of Israel of my plans?' 'It's not us, my lord,' one of the officers replied. 'Elisha, the prophet in Israel, tells the king of Israel even the words you speak in the privacy of your bedroom!' The king commanded, 'Go and find out where Elisha is, and we'll send troops to seize him.' And the report came back: 'Elisha is at Dothan.' So one night the king of Aram sent a great army with many chariots and horses to surround the city. When the servant of the man of God got up early the next morning and went outside, there were troops, horses, and chariots everywhere. 'Ah, my lord, what will we do now?' he cried out to Elisha. 'Don't be afraid!' Elisha told him. 'For there are more on our side than on theirs!' Then Elisha prayed, 'O Lord, open his eyes and let him see!' The Lord opened his servant's eyes, and when he looked up, he saw that the hillside around Elisha was filled with horses and chariots of fire."

### **A Prophet's Work**

Prophets see things that others don't see. Their work is to help open our eyes so that we can see what God is doing. Most of all, we need to get clearer glimpses of Jesus. As you have read the writings of Ellen White, have your eyes been opened to see Jesus, to see His wonderful love, the holiness of His character, His plans for your life?

Perhaps you have never heard the name of Ellen White and have had no experience with her writings. Perhaps you were raised in an atmosphere where she was primarily used as a sledgehammer to pound all the "fun" out of your life. Or perhaps she has been an agent to help you understand that God loves you, not in some distant, abstract way, but is personally concerned with the details of your life.

Her writings may even have been the catalyst that led you to accept Jesus as your Savior and Lord!

One Wednesday night a young woman named Cindy felt a special need to experience God, to sense His presence. Though she had often gone to prayer meeting as

a child with her parents, for the first time in her adult life she decided to attend prayer meeting as her own choice. A little group of older persons was studying the book *Steps to Christ*. Though she was somewhat acquainted with the book from family worship, class assignments, and Sabbath school, she had never read it through. During the following week, Cindy read *Steps to Christ* cover to cover. It opened her eyes and let her see the love and grace of Jesus as she had not seen them before. Somewhere in the course of reading that book, she invited Jesus to be her companion and Lord. Since that day Jesus has remained the central joy of her life. She has nurtured that relationship with Him by reading from the Scriptures and the writings of Ellen White virtually every day for more than thirty years!

Who, then, was Ellen White? How could one book of hers so impact not only Cindy's spiritual life, but that of millions around the world? Let's consider a brief biographical sketch of her.

### **Ellen White's Life**

Ellen Harmon was born in Gorham, Maine, U.S.A., on November 26, 1827. From an early age, she had a strong interest in spiritual things. She gave her heart to Jesus at age twelve after hearing William Miller lecture on the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. At age fourteen, she was baptized by immersion and became a member of the Methodist church, which disfellowshipped her and her family the next year for believing in the literal and imminent return of Jesus.

Because they initially misunderstood the location of the "sanctuary" of Daniel 8:14, early Adventists believed Jesus' literal second coming would occur on October 22, 1844. Two months after the Great Disappointment, when Jesus did not return on the appointed day, seventeen-year-old Ellen, frail and ill from the effects of a childhood accident, went by wheelchair to a prayer group at the home of a friend. As the young women were praying, the Holy Spirit came close with a special sense of assurance, and Ellen received her first vision. She saw a path elevated above the earth, and Jesus leading the people of God on it toward the New Jerusalem. A light shone at the beginning of the path, which the angel commentator told her was the Midnight Cry. Those who rejected that message fell off the path to heaven, into the dark world below.

A week after that first vision, God sent Ellen another vision, in which He called her to be His messenger. Shy and sensitive, she was at first very reluctant to speak or pray publicly, and especially to deliver messages which expressed God's disappointment and disapproval of people's attitudes or actions. As she came to a better understanding of the purposes of the messages—that God desires people to change their lives so they can enjoy His presence for eternity—she didn't try to alter the messages for "easy listening."

Ellen Harmon married a young minister, James White, in 1846. The couple had four boys, two of whom lived to adulthood and became Adventist ministers. Together with Joseph Bates, Ellen and James founded the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Her husband died in 1881.

During Ellen White's 70 years of public ministry, she received about 2000 visions, which she incorporated into more than 100,000 manuscript pages, the basis of more than 135 books. Her last recorded vision concerned God's great love for the youth. According to research done at the Library of Congress by Dr. Roger Coon, who at the time was an Associate Director of the Ellen G. White Estate, Ellen White is the world's most translated woman author and the most translated American author of either sex. Her writings on salvation, wellness, education, relationships, parenting, evangelism, social justice, and the authority of Scripture have unified the Seventh-day Adventist Church amid the diversity of culture, understanding, and religious practice of its 14 million members.

Ellen White loved youth and was a frequent devotional speaker at Adventist schools. She also enjoyed hiking, sailing, gardening, baby animals, and sewing. She was a "real" person: she sometimes had her feelings hurt by her friends, struggled with her weight, and occasionally had misunderstandings in her marriage. She loved her children and sent them many letters (sometimes even enclosing a piece of candy) when she was traveling to spread the gospel. Most of all, Ellen White loved Jesus. She wrote and preached more about Him than on any other subject.

During her long career, Mrs. White opened our eyes to possibilities God wanted us to see. Through her writings and her speaking, and with her personal efforts and influence, she helped establish schools, colleges, hospitals, and publishing plants in North America, Europe, and Australia. The church experienced phenomenal growth as it responded to God's leading through His messenger.

Ellen White also addressed social concerns in her writings, especially urging Christians to respond to the needs of the poor and suffering. She practiced continual acts of compassion and mercy in her personal life, and she encouraged reforms that opposed social injustice. She was a bold and fearless herald of the law of God and its claims on humanity, particularly of the seventh-day Sabbath and its observance as a response to Christ's work of grace upon the heart. She urged children and youth to become an army of workers to carry the Good News of the gospel to their friends, family, and communities.

Ellen White died at age 87 at her home in northern California. Her last words were, "I know in Whom I have believed."

While it is evident that Ellen White lived an exemplary Christian life as a passionate proclaimer of Jesus, a helpful and kind neighbor, a caring mother and grandmother, and a bold, visionary reformer, does she still speak to our needs in the 21st century? Can she touch people in *our* generation? Can she help to open *our* eyes to God's plans for *us*?

### **Changing Worldview**

Our era is moving from reason to mystery. People are changing from a naturalistic, scientific worldview to one that accepts the supernatural and spiritual.

Maybe the timing is perfect to introduce one of God's best-kept spiritual mysteries: the gift of the Spirit in a post-biblical prophet!

Here are some specific examples of how books written by Ellen White a hundred years ago continue to speak to a changing worldview.

In the *Testimonies*, Ellen White gives real people honest counsel about real circumstances. Many today in some Western countries are intrigued by reality-TV programming—where cameras are placed in people's homes, revealing the secrets of their everyday lives. In the *Testimonies*, however, the Spirit Himself reveals secrets about real people's everyday lives, but not for mere entertainment or voyeurism. Here God gives redemptive counsel through His messenger to get these people *out* of the human sin predicament, not to wallow *in* it! We find the same authenticity in *Patriarchs and Prophets* and *Prophets and Kings*—real and transparent stories of biblical figures, not just slick “success” stories.

We find diversity and inclusiveness in *The Ministry of Healing* and *Evangelism*—books where Ellen White promotes outreach opportunities for and to all—inclusive of every age, gender, and race. And of course, where could we better find Christ's story intersecting with our story than in *The Desire of Ages* and *Christ's Object Lessons*?

In *Steps to Christ*, a devotional book now translated into about 150 languages, Ellen White addresses loneliness, abandonment, and guilt. Consider this passage from the chapter titled “The Privilege of Prayer” that gives us glimpses into the heart of our heavenly Father:

“Keep your wants, your joys, your sorrows, your cares, and your fears before God. You cannot burden Him; you cannot weary Him. He who numbers the hairs of your head is not indifferent to the wants of His children. ‘The Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.’ James 5:11. His heart of love is touched by our sorrows and even by our utterances of them. Take to Him everything that perplexes the mind. Nothing is too great for Him to bear, for He holds up worlds, He rules over all the affairs of the universe. Nothing that in any way concerns our peace is too small for Him to notice. There is no chapter in our experience too dark for Him to read; there is no perplexity too difficult for Him to unravel. No calamity can befall the least of His children, no anxiety harass the soul, no joy cheer, no sincere prayer escape the lips, of which our heavenly Father is unobservant, or in which He takes no immediate interest. ‘He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds.’ Psalm 147:3. The relations between God and each soul are as distinct and full as though there were not another soul to share His watchcare, not another soul for whom He gave His beloved Son.” (Page 100.)

Or consider the visionary action stories from *The Acts of the Apostles*—narratives urging the church community to band together for the common good, particularly in times of crisis. Far from ignoring the claims of the gospel, Ellen White integrated evangelical piety and progressive social concern in her teachings and her life, opening our eyes to what God wants us to be. One can only wonder: if Ellen White lived today,

would she have something to say about the dismal fact that every year Americans spend as much money on chewing gum as they give to missions?

### **Concern for the Poor**

In *Gospel Workers* and *Welfare Ministry*, Ellen White opens our eyes to the principles for engaging the world. Here she unequivocally promotes participation in acts of mercy and promoting justice in society while stressing the need to offer hope through conversion to Jesus Christ. Throughout her life, Ellen White continually urged the importance of uplifting the poor, by her own example and by writing extensively about the Christian's obligation to serve those who have the least in society. She did not hold up the wealthy and powerful as role models of the faith nor attribute their prosperity necessarily to the favor of God, as did many of her contemporaries, and as the "prosperity gospel" continues to do today.

Unlike many of her contemporaries, Ellen White did not exclude any class. She once wrote, "Everywhere there is a work to be done for all classes of society. We are to come close to the poor and the depraved, those who have fallen through intemperance. And, at the same time, we are not to forget the higher classes—the lawyers, ministers, senators, and judges . . . . We are to leave no effort untried to show them that their souls are worth saving, that eternal life is worth striving for" (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, p. 58).

Sanctification, the restoration of the image of God in the person, is the ultimate purpose of welfare ministry in Ellen White's view. Tying one's social obligations to the gospel was a priority in her life. Through both her life and her writings, she clearly proclaimed that the purpose of redemption is service. (See *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 326.)

### **Search for Meaning**

Many people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are looking for meaning, for an antidote for restlessness and anxiety. They want to know how to be free from guilt and fear of the future. Ellen White opens our eyes to God's way of meeting those needs—working together to save both the bodies and souls of humanity. Ellen White constantly promoted whole-person evangelism and service to the needy. And not just in her writings! In spite of her prolific literary output and intense schedule of travel and speaking, Ellen White continually served the poor and oppressed. She organized sewing bees for the less fortunate, she opposed the Fugitive Slave Law, she took orphans into her home for months and sometimes years, her home had so many guests for meals that she once referred to it as "The Hotel," and she often delivered food to her neighbors. But she combined her actions with the gospel. Leading men and women, boys and girls, to Jesus was the central theme of both her writings and her long life of service to others.

With the political uncertainties and unrest in our world today, people of all economic strata and political persuasions are seeking freedom from fear. In the United States, personal freedoms are being significantly reduced in the name of providing safety

in a time of heightened terrorism alert. Other places have also been affected. *National Geographic* reported in December of 2003 that if you spend a day in London, you can expect hidden surveillance cameras to take your picture at least 300 times.

This is just the beginning! If you want the Lord to open your eyes to see how the story ends, get out your Bible and study Revelation 13 in combination with the last few chapters of *The Great Controversy*. Begin with Chapter 35, the insightful, up-to-the-minute, could-have-been-written-in-2005 chapter titled “Liberty of Conscience Threatened,” continue with the thrilling account of “God’s People Delivered,” and let heaven fill your thoughts through every sentence of the last chapter, “The Controversy Ended.”

## **Good Fruits**

One of the Bible’s tests of a prophet is found in Matthew 7:20: “By their fruits you shall know them.” Does Ellen White open my eyes to help me see Jesus as my Friend, my Savior? Oh, yes. Do her writings continue to point me toward holiness, as a response to grace? Oh, yes. Does she advocate principles that are sometimes difficult for me to practice in my personal life? Oh, yes! But letting us know what we’re doing wrong and how we can better reflect the character of God is another test of a true prophet. According to Jeremiah 23:16 and 17, a false prophet says, “All is well. I’m O.K., you’re O.K. God is not particular, and we’re all going to heaven anyway.” False prophets blind people’s eyes to their real condition. A true prophet opens their eyes and turns people from their evil ways (verse 22).

Unlike the despair, futility, self-centeredness, and anger expressed in much of today’s media entertainment—from television to music to DVDs—the messages from God entrusted to an uneducated, unbeautiful, unlikely messenger brim with hope! Best of all, Ellen White’s writings point unflinchingly to Jesus as the solution to all of life’s perplexities and conflicting claims.

Two years before Ellen White died, she was invited to give the devotional for a picnic at a school near Pacific Union College. She frequently spoke to youth and was often invited to address student assemblies. That morning a stenographer took down her entire message, but I just want to share with you two paragraphs. Somehow I think these words may be as warm, relevant, and important to you as they were to those California students many years ago:

“I am glad to have the privilege of meeting with those who have gathered here today. I feel an earnest desire that every one of you shall be victorious in the struggle against evil. For many years I have been laboring for the salvation of souls. I began this work at a very early age, and all through my life the Lord has sustained me in telling old and young of the hope that we have in Christ.

“I have always had a special interest in the youth. I see before me today those whom I know God can use if they will put their dependence in Him. If you will be earnest in serving God, you will be a help to all with whom you associate. There is

nothing to be ashamed of in being a Christian. It is an honor to follow the Savior.” (See *The Youth’s Instructor*, June 9, 1914 [Manuscript 16, 1913].) She wanted to open their eyes to the joy and opportunities that could be theirs in following Jesus.

We return to our title question: *Can Ellen White Open Our Eyes in the 21st Century?* Is Ellen White still a means of connecting the seeker to Christ? Can she cut through the fog of safe, politically-correct, neutral terms and state that we are sinners—all of us—but that we can be redeemed, saved, and secure at last? Does she speak to the issues you face?

I answer, “Yes, oh yes!” But if you haven’t, or won’t, read her, your answers to those questions would likely be “No.” And God allows that freedom of choice, even though we wound the heart of God when we leave His gift, sent from love to us, on the shelf. God has sent us a unique message, a special message, an eye-opening message, but many times we reject His gift because we want the popular best-sellers of the world, so we can be like everyone else.

No, God will never force us to open those books. He still loves us if we don’t. But we miss an opportunity to see the unseen, to understand better how He feels about us, what He did so that we could live together, and His plans for our future life.

But don’t take my word for it. In the words of 1 Thessalonians 5:21, “Test all things.” I challenge you to choose a book authored by Ellen White and read it this week, cover to cover. Ask God for the Holy Spirit to guide your understanding. And if you want to be really courageous, ask Him to make you a willing hearer *and* a willing doer.

In Acts 17:11, we find Paul commending the Bereans for testing his teachings with those of Scripture. I invite you to be a Berean this week! Read Ellen White for yourself. Does she open your eyes so that you can see Jesus?

Taste, and see!

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Pastors: for your information—

The Ellen G. White Estate has prepared a paraphrase of selections from the writings of Ellen White. It is the first Ellen White book prepared especially for twenty-first-century young adults and is available from Adventist Book Centers. *A Call to Stand Apart* focuses on issues that youth are facing today, drawn from a variety of previously-published material of enduring relevance that has been transformed by modern-language paraphrase. Though sentences and paragraphs have been condensed and language modernized, every effort has been made to be faithful to the content, ideas, and principles that Ellen White set forth.

Each section starts with the testimony of a young adult who has been positively influenced by Ellen White and would like to pass that inspiration on to others. At the end of each thematic chapter are questions suitable for small group discussion.

This book grew out of the conviction that the principles penned more than 100 years ago under divine inspiration are more relevant than ever. Our hope is that young adult readers will find *A Call to Stand Apart* so compelling and inspiring that they will go on to explore the deep spiritual riches found in Ellen White's standard writings.