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## ELLEN WHITE SAYS, PART 1

*“Too often Ellen White has been presented as having two passions —rebuking sinners and giving rules.” Dr. Merlin Burt, Understanding Ellen White, p. 5.*

### 1. OUR VIEW OF INSPIRATION PROFOUNDLY AFFECTS OUR METHOD OF INTERPRETATION.

- A. A higher-critical view of Scripture leads the reader to ask **the doubter’s question** – “Is it true?” or “Is it inspired?”
- B. A belief in the full inspiration of Scripture leads the reader to ask **the faith question** – “What does it mean?”
  - i. While Seventh-day Adventists for the most part dismiss the idea of higher criticism when it comes to the Bible, they regularly employ it in the writings of Ellen White. The doubter’s question removes ability of inspired writings to transform the readers, because when they come to passages that challenge their thinking, it gives them an “out” to avoid making any personal change.
  - ii. Once full inspiration is accepted and embraced, it begets the need to understand rules of interpretation that will lead us to correct understanding.

### 2. HOW SHOULD WE STUDY INSPIRED WRITINGS?

- A. **2 Tim. 2:15.** “Rightly dividing” refers to correct principles of interpretation, a process referred to in theology as “hermeneutics.”
  - i. Incidentally, it is inspiration that creates the need for hermeneutics. The chief concern of hermeneutics is to discover the author’s intended message of the passage in question so that proper application of that message can be made by the church corporately and the believer individually.
- B. **2 Pet. 3:15-16.** This would be an example of “wrongly dividing” the Word.

### 3. RULES OF INTERPRETATION

#### A. Consider the *internal* context.

- i. The internal context includes that which is within the immediate context of what is read, such as word meanings, phrases, expressions (hyperbole, for example), surrounding paragraphs, and overall grammatical structure. Word meanings can change over time, as can certain sayings.
- ii. Word definitions, phrases, and expressions can change meaning over time.
  - a. Psychology, Phrenology and Mesmerism

“**Phrenology and mesmerism** are very much exalted. They are good in their place, but they are seized upon by Satan as his most powerful agents to deceive and destroy souls... Satan uses these very things to destroy virtue and lay the foundation of spiritualism (1861).” 1T 296.1

“The **sciences of phrenology, psychology, and mesmerism** have been the channel through which Satan has come more directly to this generation, and wrought with that power which was to characterize his work near the close of probation...” (1862) MYP 57

“The **sciences which treat of the human mind** are very much exalted. They are good in their place, but they are seized upon by Satan as his powerful agents to deceive and destroy souls (1884).” 2SM 352

- b. “Obviously, in this 1884 statement we have an editorial correction in the thought that Ellen White wanted conveyed regarding ‘the sciences which treat of the human mind...’ Many books dealing with physical and mental health included chapters devoted to phrenology, psychology, and mesmerism, or advertised other works that focused on these modalities.”

Douglass, Messenger of the Lord, pp. 389-90

- iii. Phrases or sentences taken out of context can be made to say something very different than the author intended.

- a. Assurance of Salvation

“Those who accept the Savior, however sincere their conversion, should never be taught to say or feel that they are saved.” COL 155

- b. The next sentence reads –

“This is misleading. Every one should be taught to cherish hope and faith; but even when we give ourselves to Christ and know that He accepts us, we are not beyond the reach of temptation.” <sup>IBID</sup>

- c. Ellen White was clearly was addressing a “once saved, always saved” attitude of overconfidence in self rather than an assurance of salvation for those who trust in Christ.
- iv. Ellen White recognized that church members were taking her writings out of context even in her day, and counseled –

“I know that many men take the testimonies the Lord has given, and apply them as they suppose they should be applied, picking out a sentence here and there, taking it from its proper connection, and applying it according to their idea. Thus poor souls become bewildered, when could they read in order all that has been given, they would see the true application, and would not become confused. Much that purports to be a message from Sister White, serves the purpose of misrepresenting Sister White...” <sup>1SM 44</sup>

## **B. Consider the *external* context.**

- i. External context includes factors outside of the passage that affect the passage, such as other inspired writings on the same subject, historical and cultural settings, geographical locations and other circumstances that may alter the meaning or application.
  - a. Be sure to consider “...all that the prophets have spoken” (Lk. 24:25). It is important to consider other passages dealing with the same subject, “Line upon line” (Is. 28:13); “Comparing spiritual things with spiritual” (1 Co. 2:13).

The testimonies themselves will be the key that will explain the messages given, as scripture is explained by scripture. <sup>1SM 42</sup>

- b. Going back to our previous example, we find a statement elsewhere in Ellen White’s writings that was written two years earlier than the *Christ’s Object Lessons* statement where she is crystal clear that the believer can have the assurance now of everlasting life.

“Those who see Christ in His true character, and receive Him into the heart, have everlasting life.” <sup>DA 88</sup>

- ii. The time, place and circumstances under which the statement was made must also be taken into consideration in order to gain a clear understanding.

“Regarding the testimonies, nothing is ignored; nothing is cast aside; but time and place must be considered.” 1SM 57

- a. Let’s first consider an example from Scripture. God had forbidden His people to kindle fires on the Sabbath as a violation of the fourth commandment (Ex. 35:3). This may appear at face value to be a universal prohibition. However, when we consider the geographical setting of the text, we gain a clearer understanding of its purpose. Ellen White explains that the climate made it an unnecessary task, and therefore it was included with all other “customary work.”

“During the sojourn in the wilderness the kindling of fires upon the seventh day had been strictly prohibited. The prohibition was not to extend to the land of Canaan, where the severity of the climate would often render fires a necessity; but in the wilderness, fire was not needed for warmth.” PP 408

- b. Now consider an example from our Adventist history. A new church school had just been built in St. Helena, near the sanitarium, and the discussion came up as to whether or not there should be a kindergarten. Concern was expressed at the school board that Sr. White had clearly counseled against it, having written

“Parents should be the only teachers of their children until they have reached eight or ten years of age.” 3T 137

- c. Ellen White was present at that school board meeting, (which was held at her home in Elmshaven), and took the initiative in directing the board to a better understanding of her counsel and how it applied. She later wrote

“When I heard what the objections were, that the children could not go to school till they were ten years old, I wanted to tell you that there was not a Sabbathkeeping school when the light was given to me... My mind has been greatly stirred in regard to the idea, "Why, Sister White has said so and so, and Sister White has said so and so; and therefore we are going right up to it." God wants us all to have common sense, and He wants us to reason from common sense. Circumstances alter conditions.

Circumstances change the relation of things. Here is a Sanitarium, and that sanitarium must carry the highest possible influence inside and out. Then, if they see children who come there – sharp-eyed, lynx-eyed, wandering about, with nothing to do, getting into mischief, and all these things – it is painful to the senses of those that want to keep the reputation of the school. Therefore, I, from the light that God has given me, [declare that] if there is a family that has not the capabilities of educating, nor discipline

and government over their children, requiring obedience, the very best thing is to put them in some place where they will obey. Put them in some place where they will be required to obey, because obedience is better than sacrifice.” 3SM 217

- d. In the *Review* of March 17, 1868, James White commented on the potential disaster of misapplied testimonies, saying “What she may say to urge the tardy is taken by the prompt to urge them over the mark. And what she may say to caution the prompt, zealous, incautious ones is taken by the tardy as an excuse to remain too far behind.”

### C. Know the difference between *policy* and *principle*

- i. Another rule that often accompanies the consideration of external context is that of learning to discover the principle(s) behind a given statement, instead of just seeing the policy of the statement itself. A **principle** is an unerring, unchanging rule of human conduct or behavior; a **policy** is the application of principle to a particular situation. Think of it this way – a policy is a *rule*, and a principle is *the reason behind it*. When the policy changes due to times or circumstances, the principle must be *reapplied* in the new context.

- a. Consider the following statement and see if you can determine the policy and the principle –

“If girls... could learn to harness and drive a horse, and to use the saw and the hammer, as well as the rake and the hoe, they would be better fitted to meet the emergencies of life.” Ed 216-17

- b. It should be fairly evident that the principle at play is that of fitting young women for the “emergencies of life”. Here’s a similar one from the sixth volume of the *Testimonies* –

“Many young people will come to school who desire a training in industrial lines. The industrial instruction should include the keeping of accounts, carpentry, and everything that is comprehended in farming. Preparation should also be made for teaching blacksmithing, painting, shoemaking, cooking, baking, laundering, mending, typewriting, and printing. Every power at our command is to be brought into this training work, that students may go out equipped for the duties of practical life.” 6T 182

- c. What is the principle (which by the way is clearly stated in the context itself)? It is equipping the youth for “the duties of practical life.”

- d. Now notice that a failure to properly consider time, place and circumstances will lead one to feel that it is still and always essential to teach young people blacksmithing and shoemaking, skills that not even used as they were in Ellen White's day. Furthermore, this would actually UNFIT the youth for the duties of practical life in our day, and thus be a means of going contrary to the very counsel we would be thinking to uphold.
- e. And a failure to identify the principle at work may lead dismissing the statement as no longer relevant. However, this would in effect end up robbing our youth of the training in the practical duties that would help them succeed today, like computer skills and auto mechanics, etc.

**D. Be willing to *follow* the truth**

- i. God will not reveal His truth to us if we are not willing to put it into practice in our daily lives (see Jn. 7:17). Ellen White wrote –

“It seems impossible for me to be understood by those who have had the light but have not walked in it...” 3SM 82

“...[T]ruth is not truth to those who do not practice it. Truth is only truth to you when you live it in the daily life...” GADB 4.03.1901

- ii. Subduing the carnal heart

God would have His people disciplined and brought into harmony of action, that they may see eye to eye and be of the same mind and of the same judgment.... The carnal heart must be subdued and transformed. God designs that there shall ever be a living testimony in the church. It will be necessary to reprove and exhort, and some will need to be rebuked sharply, as the case demands. We hear the plea: ‘Oh, I am so sensitive, I cannot bear the least [self-] reflection!’ If these persons would state the case correctly, they would say: ‘I am so self-willed, so self-sufficient, so proud-spirited, that I will not be dictated to; I will not be reproved. I claim the right of individual judgment; I have a right to believe and talk as I please.’” 3T 360

In the human heart there is natural selfishness and corruption, which can only be overcome by most thorough discipline and severe restraint; and even then it will require years of patient effort and earnest resistance. God permits us to experience the ills of poverty, and places us in difficult positions, that the defects in our characters may be revealed and their

asperities be smoothed away. But after privileges and opportunities have been given of God, after light and truth have been brought home to the understanding, if persons still make excuses for their deformity of character, and continue in their selfishness and jealousy, their hearts become as granite, making it impossible for them to be reformed, except by the chisel, the hammer, and the polishing of the Spirit of God. 4T 496.1