

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

SDA Source of Authority

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The first question we take up as we begin to study the doctrinal teachings of Seventh-day Adventism is that of their source of authority. The main teachings of Seventh-day Adventists are summarized in a set of twenty-two statements entitled “Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists.”¹ Article 1 of these *Fundamental Beliefs* reads as follows:

That the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were given by inspiration of God, contain an all-sufficient revelation of His will to men, and are the only unerring rule of faith and practice (2 Tim. 3:15–17).

Seventh-Day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine is a recent exposition of the teachings of this church, prepared by “a representative group of Seventh-day Adventist leaders, Bible teachers, and editors.” The authors explain that the book contains answers to questions which have been raised about Seventh-day Adventist teachings and that these answers are given within the framework of the *Fundamental Beliefs* to which reference has just been made. They add, “In view of this fact, these answers represent the position of our denomination in the area of church doctrine and prophetic interpretation” (p. 8). It is further stated that the officers of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists have endorsed this volume, and have recommended it for general use (p. 10). Hence we shall consider this book to be an authentic and reliable source of information about Seventh-day Adventist teachings. Let us now note what the authors have to say about the matter of the source of authority:

Seventh-day Adventists hold the Protestant position that the Bible and the Bible only is the sole rule of faith and practice for Christians. We believe that all theological beliefs must be measured by the living Word, judged by its truth, and whatsoever is unable to pass this test, or is found to be out of harmony with its message, is to be rejected.²

So far, therefore, it would appear that Seventh-day Adventists agree with all conservative Protestants in accepting the Bible as the sole rule of faith and life, and as the ultimate source of authority.

¹ These can be found in the *Church Manual*, the *Yearbook*, and also in *Questions on Doctrine*.

² *Questions on Doctrine*, p. 28.

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When the question is asked, “Do Seventh-day Adventists regard the writings of Ellen G. White as on an equal plane with the writings of the Bible?”, the answer given begins as follows:

1. That we do not regard the writings of Ellen G. White as an addition to the sacred canon of Scripture.
2. That we do not think of them as of universal application, as is the Bible, but particularly for the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
3. That we do not regard them in the same sense as the Holy Scriptures, which stand alone and unique as the standard by which all other writings must be judged.³

In further explication of this point, the authors of *Questions on Doctrine*⁴ go on to say:

Seventh-day Adventists uniformly believe that the canon of Scripture closed with the book of Revelation. We hold that all other writings and teachings, from whatever source, are to be judged by, and are subject to, the Bible, which is the spring and norm of the Christian faith. We test the writings of Ellen G. White by the Bible, but in no sense do we test the Bible by her writings.⁵

In fact, these authors support their contention by quoting statements from Mrs. White herself, such as the following:

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.⁶

Little heed is given to the Bible, and the Lord has given a lesser light to lead men and women to the greater light.⁷

As we have previously noted, however, Seventh-day Adventists do claim that Mrs. White had the gift of prophecy, and that this gift of prophecy is one of the identifying marks of the remnant church.⁸ From Revelation 12:17 (in the King James Version) they gather that this remnant church has “the testimony of Jesus Christ”; and from Revelation 19:10 they

³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁴ *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine*

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 89–90. To the same effect are statements by Francis D. Nichol, leading Seventh-day Adventist apologist, in *Ellen G. White and her Critics*, pp. 87–90.

⁶ *Early Writings*, p. 78; quoted in *Questions on Doctrine*, p. 90.

⁷ *Review and Herald*, Jan. 20, 1903; quoted in *Questions on Doctrine*, p. 93. The implication is that Mrs. White herself is the “lesser light.”

⁸ See above, p. 98.

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learn that “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” Since, now, the Spirit of prophecy (at this point, contrary to the King James Version, they capitalize the word *spirit*) manifests Himself in the gift of prophecy, and since, as they believe, Mrs. White had this gift of prophecy, they conclude that the Seventh-day Adventist denomination must be the remnant church of which Revelation 12:17 speaks.⁹ Though not placing Mrs. White into the same category as the writers of the canon of Scripture, the authors of *Questions on Doctrine* compare her to the “prophets or messengers who lived contemporaneously with the writers of the two Testaments, but whose utterances were never a part of Scripture canon.”¹⁰ The Seventh-day Adventist evaluation of Mrs. White is summed up in the following words:

While Adventists hold the writings of Ellen G. White in highest esteem, yet these are not the source of our expositions. We base our teachings on the Scriptures, the only foundation of all true Christian doctrine. However, it is our belief that the Holy Spirit opened to her mind important events and called her to give certain instructions for these last days. And inasmuch as these instructions, in our understanding, are in harmony with the Word of God, which Word alone is able to make us wise unto salvation, we as a denomination accept them as inspired counsels from the Lord.¹¹

We are thankful to note that Seventh-day Adventists *claim* that they do not add any writings to the Sacred Scriptures, and that in this way, theoretically at least, they distinguish themselves from a group like the Mormons. It must be said, however, that their use of Mrs. White’s writings and their avowed acceptance of her “prophetic gift” are not consistent with this claim. In substantiation of this judgment I offer the following considerations:

1. Though Seventh-day Adventists claim that they test Mrs. White’s writings by the Bible,¹² they assert, on another page of the same volume, that the instructions which she gave the church are in harmony with the Word of God.¹³ The latter statement is not qualified in any way; they do not say that *most* of her instructions were in harmony with the Bible, or that her instructions were *generally* in harmony with God’s Word—they simply state: “these instructions, in our understanding, are in harmony with the Word of God...” This latter assertion, however, actually

⁹ *Questions on Doctrine*, pp. 95–96.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 90–91. Among the examples given of this type of person is John the Baptist. It will be recalled, however, that some of his utterances did become a part of the canonical Scriptures: e.g., Mt. 3:2, 7–12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

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nullifies the former. How can one honestly claim to test the writings of a person by the Word of God when one already assumes, as a foregone conclusion, that these writings are in harmony with that Word?

2. Though Seventh-day Adventists claim to test Mrs. White's writings by the Bible, they call her writings "inspired counsels from the Lord," and say that "the Holy Spirit opened to her mind important events and called her to give certain instructions for these last days."¹⁴ If this is so, however, who may criticize her writings? If they are inspired, they must be true. If her instructions come from the Holy Spirit, they must be true. How, then, could anyone dare to suggest that any of her instructions might be contrary to Scripture? Could messages come from the Holy Spirit which would be contrary to the Word which that same Spirit inspired? Could "inspired counsels from the Lord" be in contradiction to the Lord's Scriptures? Again we must conclude that by describing Mrs. White's instructions as they do, Seventh-day Adventists negate their assertion that they test her writings by the Bible.
3. Though Seventh-day Adventists claim to test Mrs. White's writings by the Bible, they insist that the gift of prophecy which she possessed, and with which she therefore enriched their group, is a mark of the "remnant church."¹⁵ This means that this gift sets the Seventh-day Adventists apart from all other groups. But other Christian groups also have the Bible. What, therefore, sets the Seventh-day Adventists apart is what they have in addition to the Bible, namely, the gift of prophecy as manifested in Mrs. White. But if they test Mrs. White's writings by the Bible, as they say, and if the Bible is really their final authority, what do they really have which sets them apart from other groups? It is quite clear at this point that Seventh-day Adventists do not really test Mrs. White's writings by Scripture, but use them alongside of Scripture, and find in their use a mark of distinction which sets them apart from other groups.
4. Though Seventh-day Adventists claim to test Mrs. White's writings by the Bible, they maintain that these writings "are not of universal application, as is the Bible, but [are] particularly for the Seventh-day Adventist Church."¹⁶ But, we ask, why are they not of universal application? If her writings are tested by Scripture, there should be nothing in them which is contrary to Scripture; if this is so, why should not all her writings be of universal application? Why should not all Christians be

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 95–96. The question of what they understand by this "remnant church" will be taken up in greater detail when we examine their doctrine of the church.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

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bound to accept them, as all Christians are bound to accept the Bible? If her instructions were from the Holy Spirit, why were they not for everyone? Does the Holy Spirit ordinarily work this way? Does He give instructions and counsels for one body of believers only, which are not binding on others? Putting the question another way, if these instructions are not of universal application, are they really from the Holy Spirit? Are they really in perfect agreement with Scripture?

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At this point Seventh-day Adventists really claim to have a special source of divine guidance which is not shared by other groups of believers. Is this really much different from the claims of the Mormons?

5. Though Seventh-day Adventists claim to test Mrs. White's writings by the Bible, their actual usage of her writings nullifies this claim. Instead of testing her writings by the Bible, they use statements from her writings to substantiate their interpretation of Scripture. Typical of their method, for example, is their treatment of the Investigative Judgment, one of the key doctrines of their faith. Under the heading, "Investigative Judgment as Part of the Program of God," the necessity for this investigative judgment (made by Christ before the end of the world) is "proved" by a reference to two passages of Scripture which are ordinarily taken to refer to the final judgment at the end of time (Dan. 7:10, and Rev. 20:12). No attempt is made to explain these passages; they are, in fact, not even quoted—a simple reference is considered sufficient. Soon, however, a passage from Mrs. White is quoted in full, to prove that there must be an "investigative judgment" prior to the final judgment:

There must be an examination of the books of record to determine who, through repentance of sin and faith in Christ, are entitled to the benefits of His atonement. The cleansing of the sanctuary therefore involves a work of investigation—a work of judgment. This work must be performed prior to the coming of Christ to redeem His people; for when He comes, His reward is with Him to give to every man according to his works.¹⁷

Is this, now, testing Mrs. White's writings by the Bible? Or is this interpreting the Bible by the writings of Mrs. White?

As a matter of fact, Seventh-day Adventists quote more from Mrs. White than from any other author. *Questions on Doctrine* is virtually studded with quotations from Mrs. White. To give an example, Chapter 6 of *Questions on Doctrine*, dealing with "The Incarnation and the 'Son of Man,'" contains the following number of quotations from Mrs. White:

¹⁷ *The Great Controversy*, p. 422. The above discussion will be found on pp. 420–422 of *Questions on Doctrine*.

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one on page 51, one on page 53, two on page 54, five on page 55, one on page 56, four on page 57, one on page 58, three on page 59, ten on page 60, eight on page 61, two on page 62, one on page 63, and two on page 65! The same practice characterizes other Seventh-day Adventist writings. Walter Martin quotes a statement from Wilbur M. Smith which reads in part as follows:

I do not know any other denomination in all of Christendom today that has given such recognition, so slavishly and exclusively, to its founder or principal theologian as has this commentary [the new Seventh-day Adventist commentary] to the writings of Ellen White. At the conclusion of every chapter in this work is a section headed, "Ellen G. White Comments."¹⁸

As a further illustration of the actual usage of Mrs. White's writings made by Seventh-day Adventists, I instance their recent publication entitled *Principles of Life from the Word of God*.¹⁹ This is a textbook on Seventh-day Adventist doctrinal teachings, intended for classroom use. The method used is that of questions and answers. Usually the question is answered by a reference to a passage from the Bible, followed by a quotation from one of Mrs. White's writings. Frequently, however, no Scripture passage is given in answer to a question; there is only a quotation from Mrs. White. One can hardly turn a page of this book without finding several quotations from Mrs. White; she is virtually the only authority quoted, alongside of the Bible. Quite in agreement with the plan of the book, a paragraph from the introductory statement to the student reads as follows:

This new book, "Principles of Life From the Word of God," has been written for the express purpose of giving you the facts upon which to make your everyday decisions and to solve life's complex problems. It is written for you. The greater part of the evidences cited are from the Bible or the spirit of prophecy—our two main sources of divine wisdom.

The expression, "the spirit of prophecy," in the last sentence above is intended to designate the writings of Mrs. White. When these writings are thus described as one of their "two main sources of divine wisdom," are not Seventh-day Adventists actually recognizing Mrs. White's teachings as a second source of authority alongside of Scripture?

¹⁸ From a letter to Martin, quoted in the latter's *Truth About Seventh-Day Adventism*, pp. 95–96. At this writing, Mr. Smith is Professor of English Bible at Fuller Theological Seminary.

¹⁹ Prepared by the Department of Education of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, and published by the Pacific Press Publishing Association of Mountain View, Calif., in 1952. It was reprinted as recently as 1960.

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It is also significant to note that nowhere in Adventist literature do we read the admission that Mrs. White may have been in error on any point of doctrine. Francis D. Nichol, in *Ellen G. White and her Critics*, goes to great lengths to defend Mrs. White from various types of charges made against her, but nowhere in his 703 pages admits that Mrs. White could have been in error on a doctrinal matter. He does grant in one instance that she was wrong, but this was not a doctrinal matter; it was, so Nichol explains, an exercise of private judgment.²⁰ Does it seem reasonable to hold that a woman who wrote as many volumes of Scriptural exposition and doctrinal comment as Mrs. White did could never be wrong?

In further substantiation of the point which is being made, I quote from D. M. Canright, who was a Seventh-day Adventist for twenty-eight years, but left the movement because he became convinced that it was in error. Mr. Canright, who was personally acquainted with both Mr. and Mrs. White, and who therefore had first-hand knowledge of the movement, has set forth his objections to Seventh-day Adventism in a volume entitled *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced*.²¹ In this book he quotes a statement by Mrs. White in which she equated her writings with those of the prophets and apostles: "In ancient times God spoke to men by the mouth of prophets and apostles. In these days he speaks to them by the Testimonies of his spirit."²² Canright further quotes a statement from the *Advent Review* of July 2, 1889, to this effect: "We [Seventh-day Adventists] will not neglect the study of the Bible and the *Testimonies*." He adds the following comment:

This illustrates the place they assign her [Mrs. White's] writings, viz., an appendix to the Bible. She occupies the same relation to her people that Mrs. Southcott did to hers, Ann Lee to the Shakers, and Joe Smith to the Mormons.⁶⁷

Mr. Canright goes on to say that anyone in the Advent movement who rejects or opposes the "testimonies" of Mrs. White is branded as a rebel fighting against God.⁶⁸ He observes:

²⁰ In the matter of advising the construction of the Battle Creek Health Reform Institute (pp. 495–504). Martin attacks the assertion that this was merely a matter of "private judgment," since, so he contends, the point on which she admitted she was wrong had been introduced with the formula "I was shown" — the customary way of indicating something which came to her through the "Spirit of prophecy" (*op. cit.*, pp. 105–107).

²¹ Originally published in 1889 by Fleming H. Revell, later published by B. C. Goodpasture, and reprinted in 1961 from the 1914 edition by Baker Book House of Grand Rapids.

²² Testimony No. 33, p. 189; quoted by Canright on p. 135. "Testimonies" was the name commonly given to Mrs. White's specific instructions for the church.

⁶⁷ *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced* (1961 printing), p. 135.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

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There is not a doctrine nor a practice of the church, from the observance of the Sabbath to the washing of feet, upon which she has not written. That settles it. No further investigation can be made on any of these matters, only to gather evidence and construe everything to sustain it. How, then, can their ministers or people be free to think and investigate for themselves? They can not, dare not, and do not.²³

On a previous page he says:

Among themselves they [the Seventh-day Adventists] quote her [Mrs. White] as we do Paul. A text from her writings is an end of all controversy in doctrine and discipline. It is common to hear them say that when they give up her visions they will give up the Bible too, and they often do.²⁴

Is it any wonder, then, that Canright feels compelled to assert: "Thus they [the Seventh-day Adventists] have another Bible, just the same as the Mormons have. They have to read our old Bible in the light of this new Bible."²⁵

One can understand, of course, that Mr. Canright would be very critical of a movement which he himself had left. Even if we allow for some overstatement in his utterances, however, the statements made by Seventh-day Adventists in their recent doctrinal volume, and the actual use they make of Mrs. White's writings, are sufficient to establish the conclusion that Seventh-day Adventists do actually place Mrs. White's writings above the Bible, even while claiming that they do not. What is really determinative for their theological position is not careful, objective, scholarly searching of the Scriptures, but the teachings and visions of Ellen G. White, which are, for them, the court of final appeal. On the question of their source of authority, therefore, we must reluctantly insist that Seventh-day Adventists do not bow before the Scriptures as their ultimate authority in matters of faith and life.²⁶

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 136–37.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

²⁶ Needless to say, the relationship of this group to Mrs. White has crucial bearing on the question, much discussed of late, of whether Seventh-day Adventism is to be considered a cult, or whether it is to be classed with the historic Christian churches. The inclusion of Seventh-day Adventism in this volume already indicates the author's judgment on this matter. This question will be taken up in detail, however, in Chapter 6. Hoekema, A. A. (1963). *The Four Major Cults: Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, Seventh-Day Adventism* (pp. 100–108). Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.