

Spirit of Prophecy Sabbath Sermon, October 16, 2004

The Spirit Still Speaks

“He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.”

Rev. 3:22.

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Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther and his fellow reformers exalted the Holy Scriptures and challenged the people to obey the Word. Many heeded this call, but some claimed that they were directly instructed by the Holy Spirit and did not need to submit to the authority of ancient writings. They countered Luther’s challenge by raising the cry, “The Spirit! The Spirit!” “The letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.” In chapter 10 of *The Great Controversy*, Ellen G. White describes how the reformers used God’s Word as a mighty weapon to overcome this opposition.

Today, an opposite heresy has gained a foothold in Christendom, with echoes heard even among some Seventh-day Adventists. In correctly extolling the Scriptures as the all-sufficient rule of faith and practice, there are some who cry, “The Bible, the Bible only,” denying the continuing prophetic voice of the Holy Spirit in post-New Testament times. The argument seems logical. If the Scriptures are all-sufficient, what need is there for extrabiblical revelations by a modern-day messenger? If all truths are found in the Word of God, what possible reasons are there for listening to one who claims to have received instruction from the Holy Spirit?

Seventh-day Adventists have stated as one of our fundamental beliefs that the Holy Spirit was at work in the ministry of Ellen G. White, providing “comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction” for the church. We have pointed to the teaching of the

Scriptures that the gift of prophecy did not cease with the apostles, but that it would be present in the “last days,” as prophesied by Joel (Joel 2:28, 29). Furthermore, in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul stated that the gifts of the Spirit were to bless the church until “we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” Ephesians 4:13. And John tells us that God’s people at the very end of time will possess the testimony of Jesus Himself, which the angel identifies as the Spirit of prophecy. Revelation 12:17, 19:10.

Seventh-day Adventists reject the position of the cessationists—those who believe that the gifts of the Spirit ceased with the death of the Apostles. Rather, we maintain that to subscribe to the motto “The Bible and the Bible only” means to accept all that the Bible teaches, and that this includes the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit through the gifts—especially in the last days. Yet, at a time when prominent theologians who are not Seventh-day Adventists are recognizing cessationist views as unbiblical, there are some voices within Adventism that, if heeded, would leave no room for a modern-day messenger. If one interprets *sola Scriptura*—“The Bible and the Bible only”—to mean that everything the Christian needs to pay attention to spiritually was already written 2,000 years ago—to the exclusion of what the Spirit says to the church today—then one is holding a position having no practical difference from the belief that the prophetic gift ceased with the apostles.

We must be clear. The Scriptures stand unique as God’s infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, and the revealer of doctrines. If this is true, then why the writings of Ellen White? We might ask the same

question another way: If the Bible is all-sufficient, what need is there for the continuing special guidance of the Holy Spirit?

Jesus Himself presents the answer, as recorded in John 16:12, 13: “I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: . . . and he will shew you things to come.” We can see how this promise was fulfilled in the life and writings of the apostles, but we have also seen how the Scriptures teach that this testimony of the Spirit did not end with the last of the apostles. Not according to Paul’s testimony, or to John’s.

The pages of Scripture record how God instructed His people through special messengers to rebuke sin, to warn of coming dangers, to unmask Satan’s plans, and to reveal the results of misdirected choices—timely instruction from the Holy Spirit that was distinct from the light ultimately embodied in the canon, yet just as needful for the current crisis. In the days of the kings of Israel, we read of messengers like Ahijah, Shemaiah, Huldah, Nathan, and even unnamed “men of God” who saved the nation from defeat and brought conviction to erring rulers. In the New Testament church, we learn that the apostles were directed by the prophecies of Agabus, among others (see Acts 11:27-30).

Seventh-day Adventists believe that God has not left His end-time church without the special guidance of the Holy Spirit, and that this has been remarkably demonstrated in the life and writings of Ellen White. But the question is still asked: If God’s people have the Scriptures, what need is there for a modern messenger? Hasn’t God given us all that we need to know in the Bible?

It is because of His great love for His people that God continues to speak. He sees our need, even when we are blind to our true spiritual condition. He seeks to preserve us from self-inflicted calamities and from the wiles of the devil—our invisible but ever-watchful foe. He wants us to recognize His sovereign hand in the affairs of this world and how His church can most effectively fulfill its mission of carrying the gospel to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people.

On a practical level, let's look at five areas in which the writings of Ellen White accomplish God's purposes for us individually and as a church—purposes that are outlined in Scripture but are further illuminated through the prophetic gift today.

1. They reveal the enemy's plans.

In the days of Elisha, the king of Syria was convinced that his army had been infiltrated by Israelite spies because the enemy seemed to know in advance when and where he would attack. The king was told, however, that it wasn't human intelligence, it was Israel's prophet—Elisha—to whom the Lord was giving “inside” information. 2 Kings 6:8-12.

In the writings of Ellen G. White there is perhaps no greater theme than that of the great controversy between Christ and Satan. The “Conflict of the Ages” series is unlike any other writing on the Bible story in that it shows how the conflict that began in heaven continues on our planet and in each person's heart. We are given “behind the scenes” views of the issues at stake in this cosmic battle.

Bringing the instruction even closer, we are given insights into Satan's strategies for his war against the remnant—the war described by John in Revelation 12:17. While we know from Peter that the devil is as a roaring lion seeking to devour his prey (1 Peter

5:8), the modern-day voice of the Spirit of prophecy unmask his deceptions and traps so that we can be more fully equipped to follow the apostle's admonition to "resist" the enemy and "be vigilant" (vss. 8, 9).

2. They show God's hand in human history.

The prophets of old interpreted events of their day in the light of God's dealings with His people and the surrounding nations. Daniel revealed God's sovereignty in the succession of kingdoms that were to follow from Babylon to the breaking-up of the Roman Empire. And in the cases of individuals, it often required the prophetic voice to explain sudden sicknesses or unexpected blessings. In similar fashion, we find in Ellen White's writings descriptions of events where God was directly involved. The sudden retreat of the superior Union army in the first Battle of Manassas (of the U. S. Civil War) was shown to Ellen White in vision, and what was inexplicable in human terms was revealed to be the work of angelic intervention. See *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, pp. 266, 267. Such knowledge could come only from prophetic insight.

In 1906, after San Francisco, California, suffered a devastating earthquake, Ellen White was instructed that the city had forfeited the protection of God's restraining hand because of its wickedness, and that what happened in San Francisco would be repeated in other cities as we near the end of time. Hence her call to carry the gospel message to the large cities while there was still opportunity. While we know from the Scriptures that God holds cities and nations to account, it is only when He speaks through His special messengers that we can know with certainty the divine purposes behind human events. Amos 3:7 says, "Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets."

3. They set forth the results of choices.

When Jerusalem was surrounded by the Babylonian army, King Zedekiah called the prophet Jeremiah from the prison court where he had been banished and promised to spare his life if only he would tell him the truth about the future of his kingdom.

Jeremiah laid out two options: Surrender to the king of Babylon and live, or fight and the city would be destroyed and his own life ruined. Jeremiah 38:14-23. A call to surrender was not what Zedekiah wanted to hear from Jeremiah. He hoped the prophet would predict deliverance, announcing that God would fight for the protection of His people as He had done in the days of Joshua and the judges. Ultimately, Zedekiah made the wrong choice and Jeremiah's unpopular words were proven true—words that were counter to all the king's advisers and military officials.

In our own day, while the will of God is broadly revealed in His Word, there are occasions when God's people need supernatural guidance to lead them toward a better course. Ellen White's instruction on healthful living illustrates this in a practical way. Study after study has confirmed the positive results of choosing to live according to the principles of health outlined in her writings. These results are widely recognized today. Yet, if left to our own devices, we might choose a different lifestyle. Even though Scripture describes the diet of Eden and refers to our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit, would we as a people have taken such passages seriously? Probably not. But the Spirit of prophecy elaborated on the principles in them, spelling them out in practical terms in the writings of Ellen G. White. Similarly, we would not likely have seen the close relationship between physical health and spiritual health apart from the attention that Mrs. White drew to it.

4. They rebuke sin.

There is perhaps no greater illustration of the Spirit's work in bringing conviction to the human heart than the prophetic word that Nathan spoke to David. David was familiar with the seventh commandment, and the sixth—he had the Torah, the writings of Moses. Yet in His mercy, God sent His messenger to reveal the sin that David had been trying to conceal and to bring home to his heart the truth that he had been trying to ignore. Who knows whether David would have repented on his own, had it not been for the prophetic word communicated through Nathan?

Similarly, in the Scriptures we have God's standard for character and His truth-detector, just as David had the instruction of the Torah. But God goes the second mile when He appeals to His modern-day people through the Spirit of prophecy. Knowing that we are experts at rationalizing our behaviors and that we can so easily fail to see where we are missing the mark (Revelation 3:19 depicts us as “blind” and ignorant of our true spiritual conditions), God did not abandon us to our self-delusions. Through the writings of Ellen White, our lives are held up before us as in a mirror, and in the light of the principles of God's Word we are led to feel our deficiencies, to recognize our sinfulness, and to accept prayerfully the forgiveness and righteousness that Christ offers us.

5. They apply Scripture.

In presenting the righteousness of faith in contrast to the works of the law, Paul was led by the Spirit to describe the experience of Abraham and Hagar as an allegory. Galatians 4:21-31. This is one of many examples we find in the New Testament where the apostles drew attention to specific passages of Scripture that had special significance

for their readers. The early Christians had the writings of the Old Testament which they could study for themselves, yet this did not preclude the working of the Spirit to draw their minds to a further application of particular passages, just as when Jesus announced that the words of Isaiah 61—setting free the captives—were being fulfilled that very day in their presence.

Today, while the Scriptures remain the believer's source of truth and the test of experience, it is part of the work of the Holy Spirit to point out and apply particular themes and passages from the Word that have special significance for God's people. In its broadest sense, Ellen White's "Conflict of the Ages" series selects and applies Bible narratives that illustrate the great controversy theme. Mrs. White directs our attention to those scenes because they instruct us about the future as well as the past. But she was also led by the Spirit to highlight specific passages that are especially relevant to the last-day church. For example, speaking of Isaiah 58, she wrote, "The whole chapter is applicable to those who are living in this period of earth's history. Consider this chapter attentively; for it will be fulfilled" (*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 1149).

Believing that the Holy Spirit enlightened Ellen White through the gift of prophecy, we are led to give greater study to such passages, fulfilling God's purpose in continuing to speak to His people through His Word.

In summary, we have considered how the Scriptures—God's supreme revelation of His will—teach that the gifts of the Spirit will continue to guide God's people till the end of time. While the canon of God's Word is closed, He has not closed off communication with His church through the prophetic gift, particularly as the church

faces the deceptions of the last days. And Seventh-day Adventists recognize Ellen G. White as one called by God to bear divine messages to His people.

We have seen how the sufficiency of Scripture does not preclude the Holy Spirit's special direction and instruction in at least five ways:

1. By unmasking Satan's strategies for deception
2. By opening to our view the cosmic conflict and God's hand in history
3. By helping us choose the right course of action when our human sight is deficient
4. By bringing conviction where we are blind to our sinfulness
5. By directing us to Scriptural teachings that have special application to our experience and times.

Despite all that he had been through from fanatics claiming the Spirit, Martin Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress," still included the line which affirms, "The Spirit and the gifts are ours, through Him who with us sideth." Let us heed the counsel of the apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:19, 20: "Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings." Above all, let us remember Christ's message to the Laodicean church, our church: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" (Revelation 3:22).