The Time of Crisis and Prophetic Imagination

Adventist Society for Religious Studies
San Antonio, Texas
November 17-19, 2016

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1. Introduction

This paper explores the correlation between Ellen White's, *The Great Controversy* vision (Lovett Grove, 1858) and Health Vision (Otsego, 1863) in the context of the Civil War (1861-1865). It argues that the prevailing social, political and religious conditions of American society and the spiritual demise among the Sabbatarian Adventists prepared the ground for the injection of a new prophetic vision at a time of paradoxical crisis.

Douglass refers to the 19th century as a "transitional era from centuries of traditional thinking" and a "time of ferment."[1] This ferment touched every "area of American life – including theology, philosophy, medicine, industrialization and education."[2] In contrast, one observes a human longing for justice, emancipation from oppression and freedom to nurture human value, uniqueness and potential in an environment of liberty. The tension between progress and coercion formed a springboard for God's visionary involvement in the complexity of the changing world which aimed to reenergize the growing movement with of a new spiritual purpose for life in the eschatological time of waiting for the Second Advent. Ellen White's literary contribution between 1888 and 1911 provided an inspirational and visionary pathway that augmented human value, uniqueness and potential for God's designed missional purpose. Moreover, the inspired prophetic imagination offered a relationally oriented point of reference secured in an implicit trust and confidence in God.

2. The Time of Crisis

The Industrial Revolution, with the advances in technology, scientific inventions, and medical discoveries, raised an aura of hopeful prospects. Hand in hand with this vision of progress, the millennial expectations motivated religious revivals and missionary work in preparation for the inauguration of God's kingdom on earth. Tracing the roots of the Messianic consciousness, so deeply ingrained in the American psyche,

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[1] Herbert E. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen White* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1998), 344.

[2] *Ibid.*

Handy suggests that by 1860 "an important arch in the bridge from biblical concepts of election to a socio-religious affirmation of national destiny had been erected."[3]

The Civil War (1861-1865) ushered a time of complex crisis. Identified as a religious war,[4] it preserved in the minds of the opposing camps a conviction that "their cause was God's and that the true national destiny lay with them" and they "utilized the rhetoric of election and destiny in interpreting the struggle."[5] Matthisen asserts, "Religious rhetoric claimed divine support for the direction each side took before, during and for decades after the war."[6] More tragic were the actions generated by such self-focused convictions. "From politicians to soldiers and chaplains, a "divine logic" convinced many Americans that God would make their path straight."[7] In that sense, God's involvement in human life fell under the scrutiny of human perceptions and tragically it was used to inflict and to justify life-damaging actions. Ironically, the hub of the conflict was a concern for the value of human life and a longing for justice. The issue of slavery immersed America "in the greatest crisis it faced since the assuming nationhood."[8] This crisis was a consequence of social practices that devalued human life, and the religious and secular idealism of postmillennial expectations.

Further, the conflict accentuated a spiritual crisis, namely a disorientation regarding God's involvement in human life and history. Handy argues, "When the fighting was over, Christian leaders on both sides sought to discern what the destiny of

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[3] Robert T. Handy, "The American Messianic Consciousness: The Concept of the Chosen People and Manifest Destiny." *Review & Expositor* 73, no 1 (Winter 1976): 52. See also, Malcolm Bull, "The Seventh-day Adventists: Heretics of American Civil Religion." *Sociological Analysis* 50:2 (1989): 180.

[4] Mark A. Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World: The History of North American Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 109-112. Charles H. Lippy, *Introducing American Religion* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009(, 127-130). Edwin S. Gaustad and Mark A. Noll eds., *A Documentary History of Religion in America to 1877* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 517-519. Mitchel Snay, "Religion, the Origins of Southern Nationalism and the Coming of the Civil War" in Robert R Mathisen, ed. *Critical Issues in American Religious History* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2006), 345-350.

[5] Handy, "The American Messianic Consciousness," 52. See also, Alan Johnson, "The Bible and War in America: An Historical Survey." *JETS* 28/2 (June 1985): 174-75.

[6] Robert R. Mathisen, ed. "Religion and America's Civil War: How did religion impact the Civil War?" in Robert R Mathisen, ed. *Critical Issues in American Religious History* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2006), 332.

[7] *Ibid*.

[8] Richard, W Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Nampa ID: Pacific Press, 1995), 95.

the reunited nation was to be in the sight of God."[9] As observed by Foner emancipation "meant more than end of the [slave] labour system."[10] Rather, it initiated a time of reconstruction to redefine the life of the underprivileged in society and the "meaning of freedom in the American republic."[11] As suggested by Noll, the search for new understanding faced the following challenges: firstly, since both sides were so convincingly devoted to God's supportive presence, the aftermath of the war led to spiritual "let down," and "may have done grave damage to the hereditary confidence in the Bible." Secondly, the growth of "large scale industrialization" and "bureaucracies" in the northern states changed the social dynamics, transforming rural to urban communities. In consequence, people's attention was diverted to material interests as a focus of wellbeing.[12]

The Civil War positioned the Sabbatarian Adventists at the crossroad of a moral and ethical dilemma over slavery. As argued by Morgan, the Adventists interpreted both the war and the issue of slavery "in the light of apocalyptic judgment and redemption." In Ellen White's view, the Second Coming would liberate the oppressed from slavery.[13] However, the apparent delay focused her attention on the spiritual condition of the church.[14] As early as 1855 she began to identify specific spiritual problems. Her calls were sharp and clear. She pointed out that the truth was not internalized and in consequence, there was a lack of faith. "A form of godliness will not save any…all must have a deep and living experience" with God.[15] She also addressed a number of other problems. She pointed out that "the Sabbath has not been kept. Some of the work of the

[9] Handy, "The American Messianic Consciousness," 52.

[10] Eric Foner, *America's Unfinished Revolution 1862-1877* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2014), 2-3.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World*, 110.

[13] Douglas Morgan, "Civil War," in Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, eds., *The Ellen White Encyclopedia* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald, 2013), 718.

[14] Gulley observes that in references to the Second Coming Ellen White said, "it is very near." Norman R. Gulley, "Second Coming of Christ" in Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, eds., *The Ellen White Encyclopedia* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald, 2013), 1140. Also see, Herbert Douglass, "Second Coming delay of" in Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, eds., *The Ellen White Encyclopedia* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald, 2013), 11441-43.

[15] Ellen White, *Testimonies for the Church,* Vol.1 (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press, 1948), 125. See also, page 119, 120.

six days has been carried into the seventh."[16] She further observed that "withering spirituality" redirected the believers' attention to fault finding. They watched how to keep their fellow believers straight.[17]

These conditions generated a time of crisis requiring an injection of new inspirational motivation. In other words, the prevailing turmoil spawned the necessity for a new future-oriented understanding of life seen from God's perspective. It also positioned the founders of the movement at the threshold of major changes in theology, philosophy, medicine, industrialization and education, a time of ideological ferment in the human search for meaning.[18]

3. Time of Crisis and the Prophetic Imagination

A time of crisis ignites an uncomfortable dissonance in "life and faith"[19] for it shatters dreams and hopeful expectations. The Civil War dispersed the utopian dream of a perfect world, demonstrating that the human mind was not only capable of creating visions of hope but was also capable of inflicting destruction both spiritual and physical. The paradoxes of this crisis constituted a crucible for the relinquishment of hopes based on human dreams, and expectations for a clearer understanding of God's purposes. As argued by Bruggemann, it was a space where "God's powerful governance is displacing the present idolatrous order of public life and is generating a new order that befits God's will in the world."[20] This space provided the opportunity for God, "who is a powerful source of hope," to inject into human life a new vision and understanding. This vision provided a challenge for the community of faith both to relinquish old views and to receive an inspirational framework for a new, future-oriented perspective of life. Such visionary understanding is never detached from the existing social and cultural challenges; rather it takes shape as an incremental process or a gradual metamorphosis within the fabrics of existing social structures.

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[16] *Ibid*.,150.

[17] *Ibid*.,145.

[18] Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord*, 344.

[19] Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 4.

[20] *Ibid.*

With this background, this paper proceeds to explore the gradual emergence of the *Great Controversy* theme and the holistic awareness of health as the hub of the inspired prophetic imagination that injected a spiritual reorientation revealing God's purpose for life's journey in the eschatological time of waiting for the Second Advent. It also argues that Ellen White's prophetic voice played a significant role in preparing the movement for the reception of the new but complex world.

4. The Great Controversy Motif and the Holistic Awareness of Health

In mid-March 1858, prior to the commencement of the Civil War, Ellen White received the *Great Controversy* vision with clear instruction to write it down.[21] The heart of the vision unfolded the reality of the conflict between good and evil, God and Satan, from its inception to the end of time. Rather than penning it down as a one-off description, she developed a broad perspective on this theme between 1858 and 1888.[22]

While the Civil War precipitated a crisis regarding the authenticity of God's involvement in human life, the *Great Controversy* theme prepared the early Sabbatarian Adventists to view human struggles and conflicts from an inspirational panorama of the victorious outcome of God's final triumph.[23] In contrast to spiritual and physical slavery, it highlighted the value of God-given freedom of choice and the view of a new world.[24] It inspired the believers to confront life's challenges with a sense of new identity in a spiritual environment that nurtured human value, uniqueness, and potential.

Reviewing the significance of the *Great Controversy* motif, Ellen White stressed its quintessential focus: "There is one central truth to be kept before the mind in

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[21] Ellen White, *Life Sketches* (Mountain View, CL: Pacific Press, 1943), 162.

[22] Even though Ellen White received the Great Controversy vision March 1858, she declared "In this vision at Lovett's Grove, most of the matter of the great controversy which I had seen ten years before was repeated, and I was shown that I must write it down." Ellen White, *Life Sketches*, 162. It suggests that she was acquainted with the reality of the conflict between good and evil as early as 1848. However, in 1858, prior to the commencement of the Civil War, she was instructed to write it down. Ellen White develop the Great Controversy Theme in the following books; First volume of the *Spiritual Gifts* Volume 1 (1858); *Spiritual Gifts* Volumes 3 and 4 (1864); *The Spirit of Prophecy,* Volumes 1-4 (1870-1884); *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan* (1888).

[23] Douglass points out "Many scholars have identified Ellen White's unifying principle as the Great Controversy theme. This provided a coherent framework for her theological thoughts as well as her principles in education, health, missiology, social issue and environmental topics." Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord*, 256.

[24] Ellen White, *Patriarch and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958), 48. "God made them free moral agents, capable of appreciating the wisdom and benevolence of His character and justice of His requirements, and with full liberty to yield or to withhold obedience.

searching of the Scripture: - Christ and Him crucified."[25] In the light of this emphasis, she explored its visionary application. "When Christ in His work of redemption is seen as the central truth of the system of truth, a new light is shed upon all the events of the past and the future. They are seen in new relation, and possess a new and deeper significance."[26] In Ellen White's understanding, the overarching theme of the grand metanarrative found its locus in God's saving act – Jesus Christ. The unfolding story of the Great Controversy motif highlighted a reassuring motivation that God, the Creator, is an active agent in the world, One who challenges the community of faith both to relinquish old views and to receive a visionary framework of a new future-oriented perspective of life.

The new future-oriented view of life was further enhanced by the Otsego health vision received on Friday evening, June 5 1863, during the opening Sabbath prayer. This vision unfolded a practical application of what Ellen White later referred to as the "one central truth – Christ and Him crucified." On June 6 she penned the following reflection: "I was shown some things in regard to my husband and myself."[27] The heart of the vision took her attention away from frantic activities, heartaches, relational frustrations and disappointments drawing her attention to what God cares about namely, the value and uniqueness of human life.[28] The Sabbath-focused vision moved beyond the emphasis on the cure of the body to the heart of the matter, the relevance of spiritual nourishment – a place for the healing of the heart, mind and human attitudes – a motivational and inspirational framework for God's visionary pathway for life.[29]

The divinely crafted pathway of the Great Controversy and health visions aimed to re-energize the growing movement with a new spiritual purpose for life in the eschatological time of waiting. As suggested by Bruggemann, "These poets [prophets] not only discerned the new actions of God that others did not discern, but they wrought the new actions of God by the power and imagination, their tongues, their words."[30]

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[25] Ellen White, Ms. 31,1890. "Circulation of *The Great Controversy*."

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] Ellen White, Ms. 1, 1863.

[28] John Skrzypaszek, "The heart of the Seventh-day Adventist health message." *Ministry: International Journal for Pastors,* 86(12, 2014), 6-8.

[29] *Ibid*., 8.

[30] Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile*, 2.

Such utterances were always relevant to their time and place, but at the same time they inspired the reception of a new world given by God through these prophets.[31] In the context of the crisis emerging from the Civil War, the Great Controversy and health visions shared a correlated purpose in shaping a pathway of inspirational motivation for a new mode of public existence.

5. The Pathway of Creative Visioning

The period of post-war reconstruction (1865-1877) embroiled the nation in political and social conflicts. The long sought after emancipation from the bondage of slavery led to a slow grinding process of integrating the ideals of freedom, equality, and value for all into the fabric of the social and political life of the nation. During this time, the newly organized Seventh-day Adventist church confronted the challenge of stepping into the realm of a progressively changing world.

This study argues that Ellen White's progressive understanding of the Great Controversy theme contributed to her in-depth understanding of God's heart and His purpose for life in the broken world. While the period of reconstruction in the American society aimed to integrate the lost vision of the intrinsic value of human life and its purpose, Ellen White underwent a period of spiritual reconstruction applying the principles of the Great Controversy and health to a life the believers failed to discern.

The year 1888 saw the publication of the book *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan*, the culmination of a thirty-year literary journey that had expanded the theme through eight volumes. The book was republished in 1911 under the current title *The Great Controversy*. However, it needs to be noted that during the twenty-three years from 1888-1911 Ellen White published all of her most significant works.[32] During the later part of her spiritual journey, she recaptured the quintessential elements, of God's purpose for the ongoing journey of faith. During this period of creative visioning (1888-1911), her reflections on God's communicative presence inspired her with insights of new realities, a reception of a new world given by God.

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[31] *Ibid.*

[32] Ellen White's literary major literary publications between 1888-1911 were as follow: *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan during the Christian Dispensation* (1888); *Christian Temperance* (1890); *Patriarch and Prophets* (1890); *Steps to Christ* (1892); *Gospel Workers* (1892); *Christian Education* (1893); *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing* (1896); *Healthful Living* (1897); *The Desire of Ages* (1898); *Christ's Object Lessons* (1900); *Education* (1903); *The Ministry of Healing* (1905); *The Acts of the Apostles* (1911).

Time and space do not permit a comprehensive analysis of all her works published during this period. However, in the context of the Great Controversy theme and the holistic view of wellbeing, this paper suggests the overarching presence of the following four motifs: spiritual authenticity, genuine relationships, professional development and personal identity. These motifs shaped an inspirational framework highlighting human value and potential for God's designed purpose. For Ellen White, these four listed characteristics stemmed from the source of all wisdom – God. Her lifelong emphasis particularly during the later part of her journey, accentuated the significance of spiritual life springing from a personal relationship with God. She wrote, "Everyone needs to have a personal experience in obtaining a knowledge of the will of God. We must individually hear Him speaking to the heart." She maintained that a personal relationship with God enhances the depth of spiritual authenticity, and in turn, its influence stimulates a revitalized refreshment and peace for "the strain of life's intense activities.[33]

Furthermore, she held that authentic spirituality contributes to the development of genuine relationships. "The life will breathe out fragrance, and will reveal a divine power that will reach men's heart."[34] Ellen White argued, "It is impossible to be in union with Christ and yet be unkind to others and forgetful of their rights" for "many long intensely for friendly sympathy."[35] In her understanding, spiritual focus was not an end in itself but rather a preparation of a fertile ground for the prosperous development of God-given talents and abilities.[36] For this purpose, spiritual authenticity, genuine relationship and a healthy sense of personal identity comprised the heart and distinctiveness of Ellen White's visionary motivation. In this respect, her views stood in vast contrast to the devalued perspective of human life during and after the crisis of the Civil War. She saw that while the destructive forces of evil diminish the value of human life, God's presence inspires and restores its value. In this context, she encouraged

[33] Ellen White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 363.

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] *Ibid.*

[36] *Ibid.*

believers to shape a point of references not in time-oriented speculations but in implicit trust and confidence in Jesus in the progressively changing world.[37]

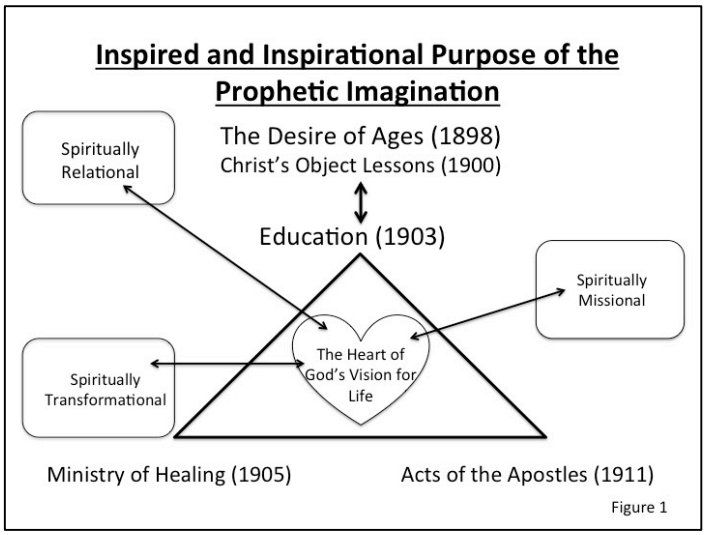
During her period of creative visioning, her reflections on God's communicative presence inspired her mind with a new focus, a contextualized meaning of faith-oriented experience with Jesus in relation to life's journey. In this space, her reflections assumed a motivational mode. Halas suggests that such reflective memory "cannot be reduced only to set ideas about the past because it is linked with action and thus orientation towards the future."[38] The reflective process "determines the transmission of meaning which will be formative for the future."[39] Rather than shaping a rigid, prescriptive and authoritarian formula of religiosity, the visions inspired Ellen White to reenergize the church with a new spiritual purpose for life and mission. Figure 1 illustrates the focal objective of Ellen White's prophetic visualization of God's purpose for the church: a) a spiritually relational life anchored in the teachings of Jesus; b) a spiritually transformational holistic view of life; c) a spiritually missional purpose of life. In this context, the thrust of her visionary impetus moved beyond recollection of memories, both biblical and experiential. She immersed them in the depth of the transformational nature of God's love. "Marvelous will be the transformation wrought in him who by faith opens the door of the heart to the Saviour."[40] The voice of the prophetic imagination called for actions formative towards the future, namely the injection of God's love into a spiritually oriented approach to mission.

[37] John Skrzypaszek, "God's Messenger - Australian Writings Motivate Worldwide: A Look at Ellen White's life and Legacy," *Adventist World* (October, 2015): 23.

[38] Elzbieta, Halas, "Time and Memory: A Cultural Perspective". *TRAMES*, 14(64/59, 2010): 314.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ellen White, *Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1942), 93.



The relational, transformational and missional quality of Christian life found their locus in her visionary masterpiece, *Education* (1903). This work gave practical application to God's visionary pathway for life in the context of the Great Controversy theme.[41] Ellen White argued, "True education means more than the perusal of a certain course of study."[42] Rather, in the milieu of the conflict between good and evil true education has two aims, "preparation for life that is now" in terms of "the joy of the service in this world" and preparation "for the higher joy of service in the world to come."[43] The two-dimensional view of education was centered in "the knowledge of God," space in which, "all true knowledge and real development have their source."[44]

The faith-oriented hub of the Christian life provided for "the harmonious development of the physical, the mental and the spiritual powers"[45] with a God-designed purpose of "unselfish service,"[46] based on principles that "will make students a

[41] Ellen White commenced the preparation of the book *Education* in 1897 during her residence in Australia. Prior to its publication in 1903, Ellen White's son, Willy White, mailed the manuscript to Professor Southerland at Emmanuel College asking for comments. The context of the letter is quite revealing. "You will notice that since you saw the manuscript last a wide range has been taken out. More of the plan of redemption has been worked in by drawing from Mother's published works, such as *Patriarch and Prophets, Great Controversy, Desire of Ages, Mount of Blessings and Christ's Object Lessons.* This requires much labor but we hope this book is sufficiently strengthened to compensate both for labor and delay." Arthur White, *The Early Elmshaven Years 1900-1905* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1981), 181.

[42] Ellen White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: 1952), 13.

[43] *Ibid.*

[44] *Ibid.*

[45] *Ibid.*

[46] *Ibid*., 16.

positive force for the stability and uplifting of the society."[47] In that realm, she did not support mediocrity but rather encouraged the development of professional skills to the highest degree.[48] However, she encouraged a view of life through the lens of eternity, in other words, through the lens of God's incomprehensible principle of love that opens an understanding of what matters to Him most. She expressed this point so tactfully in *The Ministry of Healing* (1905).

> The life of Christ established a religion in which there is no caste, a religion by which Jew and Gentile, free and bond, are linked in a common brotherhood, equal before God. No questions of policy influenced His movements. He made no difference between neighbors and strangers, friends and enemies. That which appealed to His heart was a soul thirsting for the waters of life. He passed no human being as worthless, but sought to apply the healing remedy to every soul.[49]

The new future-oriented perspective challenged the church to break through the barriers set by human traditions to provide, regardless of race and gender, spiritual nutrition that restores human value, dignity, and potential. In this vision, Ellen White moved beyond the functions and activities of organizational structures. In her sight, a vision of the equality of all was to reenergize the growing movement with a new spiritual purpose for life. As pointed out by Brueggemann, "It is the task of the prophet to bring to expression the new realities against the more visible ones of the old order. We are energized not by that which we already possess but by that which is promised to be given."[50] Outlining the all-inclusive nature of God's missional purpose, she wrote,

> Every church member should be a channel through which God can communicate to the world the treasures of His grace, the unsearchable riches of Christ. There is nothing that the Saviour desires so much as agents who will represent to the world His Spirit and His character. There is nothing that the world needs so much as the manifestation through humanity of the Saviour's love.[51]

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[47] *Ibid*., 29.

[48] *Ibid*., 17.

[49] Ellen White, *The Ministry of Healing*, 25.

[50] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press), 14.

[51] Ellen White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 600.

Her visualization of a new world given by God combined with an even more profound, vertically anchored, motivational perspective. "All heaven is waiting for men and women through whom God can reveal the power of Christianity."[52] The experience of sharing the power of God's grace in the complexity of the changing world prepared the church for the higher joy of service in the world to come - service that will flow through eternity from more complete "revelations of God and Christ."[53]

This paper concludes that in the context of the outlined crisis, the Great Controversy and the health visions shared a correlated purpose in shaping a visionary and inspirational pathway for a new mode of existence in the changing world. The paper also suggests that Ellen White's literary contribution between 1888 and 1911 enriched the church with a motivational pathway augmenting human value, uniqueness, and potential for God's designed purpose. Importantly, her inspired prophetic imagination directed attention to a relational point of reference secured in an implicit trust and confidence in God. It also provided a reassuring conviction in God's presence and a challenge to follow His vision for public existence in a changing world.

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[52] *Ibid*.
[53] Ellen White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1950), 678.

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