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The time of crisis and prophetic visioning[1]

In 1886, these words were written: "The Lord brings his erring children over the same ground again and again; but if they continually fail to heed the admonitions of his Spirit, if they fail to reform on every point where they have erred, he will finally leave them to their own weakness."[2] The context of this quote was a time like no other. It was a time of decay in the prevailing social, political, and religious conditions of mid-nineteenth-century American society, and it was a time of spiritual demise among the Sabbatarian Adventists. These conditions prepared the ground for the injection of new prophetic visions—the great controversy vision (Lovett's Grove, Ohio, 1858) and the health vision (Otsego, Michigan, 1863), in the context of the American Civil War (1861–1865). Lessons from this time of crisis must be heeded by today's church, lest we be brought over the same ground again or, worse—be left to our own weakness.

The time of crisis

The Civil War ushered in a time of complex crisis in the United States. Often seen as a religious war,[3] the American Civil War preserved in the minds of the opposing camps a conviction that God supported their cause, and both sides "utilized the rhetoric of election and destiny in interpreting the struggle."[4] Robert Mathisen asserts, "Religious rhetoric claimed divine support for the direction each side took before, during, and for decades after the war."[5] More tragic were the agonizing outcomes of the bloody battles and the loss of many lives. But surprisingly, "from politician to soldiers to chaplain, a 'divine logic' convinced many Americans that God would 'make their paths straight.' "[6]

In consequence, the existing dichotomy accentuated a spiritual crisis, namely, disorientation regarding God's involvement in human life. Robert Handy argues, "When the fighting was over, Christian leaders on both sides sought to discern what the destiny of the reunited nation was to be in the sight of God."[7] Nevertheless, the search for new understanding progressed on the pathway of consequential challenges. First, since both sides were so compellingly convinced about God's presence, the aftermath of the war led to spiritual disillusionment and damage to the "hereditary confidence in the Bible."[8] Second, the growth of "large scale industrialization" and "bureaucracies" in the northern states changed the social dynamics, forever affecting small-town, rural ways of life. Attention was now diverted to material interests as a focus of well-being.[9]

The Civil War positioned the Sabbatarian Adventists at the crossroads of a moral and ethical dilemma over slavery and heightened the existing spiritual lethargy caused by the apparent delay of the Second Coming. As early as 1855, Ellen White focused attention on the spiritual condition of the Sabbatarian Adventists.[10] 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.[11] The named environment generated a time of external and internal 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.

The prophetic visioning

The Civil War dispersed the utopian dream of a perfect world, demonstrating that the human mind was not only capable of creating visions of the postmillennial hope but also capable of inflicting both spiritual and physical destruction. The paradoxes of this crisis shaped a crucible for the relinquishment of hopes based on human dreams and of expectations for a clearer understanding of God's purposes. Walter Brueggemann argues that in such crucial moments, "God's powerful governance is displacing the present idolatrous order of public life and is generating a new order that befits God's will for the world."[12] This

space provided the opportunity for God to inject into human life a new vision. It also challenged the community of faith both to relinquish old views and to receive an inspirational framework for a new, future-oriented perspective of life. It needs to be pointed out that such visionary understanding is never detached from the existing social and cultural challenges; rather, it takes shape as an incremental process or gradual metamorphosis within the fabrics of existing social structures.

The great controversy and health visions shared a correlated purpose in shaping a pathway of inspirational motivation for a new mode of public existence.

With this background, we may explore the gradual emergence of the great controversy theme. We may also examine the wholistic awareness of health as the hub of the inspired prophetic vision that injected a spiritual reorientation for life's journey in the eschatological time of waiting for the Second Advent. We will also argue that Ellen White's voice played a significant role in preparing the movement for the reception of the new but complex world.

The great controversy motif and the wholistic awareness of health

In mid-March 1858, before the commencement of the Civil War, Ellen White received the great controversy vision with clear instruction to write it down.[13] The heart of the vision unfolded the reality of the conflict between God and Satan, good and evil, from its inception to the end of time. Rather than penning it as a one-off description, she developed a broad perspective on this theme between 1858 and 1888.[14]

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.[15] In contrast to physical and spiritual slavery, it highlighted the value of God-given freedom of choice and the view of a new world.[16] It inspired the believers to confront life's challenges with a sense of new identity and a spiritual environment that nurtured human value, uniqueness, and potential.

Reviewing the significance of the great controversy theme, Ellen White stressed its quintessential focus: "There is one great central truth to be kept ever before the mind in the searching of the Scriptures: Christ and Him crucified."[17] In the light of this emphasis, she explored its visionary application. "When Christ in His work of redemption is seen to be the great 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 a new relation, and possess a new and deeper significance."[18] In her understanding, the overarching theme of the grand metanarrative found its focus in God's saving act—Jesus Christ. The unfolding story 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.

This view was further enhanced by the Otsego health vision received 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 great 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."[19] 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, potential, and uniqueness of human life.[20] 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.[21]

The divinely crafted pathway of the great controversy and health visions aimed to reenergize the growing movement with a new spiritual purpose for life in the eschatological time of waiting. Brueggemann argues, "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 of their imagination, their tongues, their words."[22] 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.[23] In the context of the described crisis, the great controversy and health visions shared a correlated purpose in shaping a pathway of inspirational motivation for a new mode of public existence.

The pathway of creative visioning

The period of postwar 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.

The great controversy theme contributed to Ellen White's in-depth understanding of God's 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 affirmed the value of human life and disseminated a spiritual reconstruction, undiscerned by the believers as yet, by applying the principles of the great controversy and health to life.

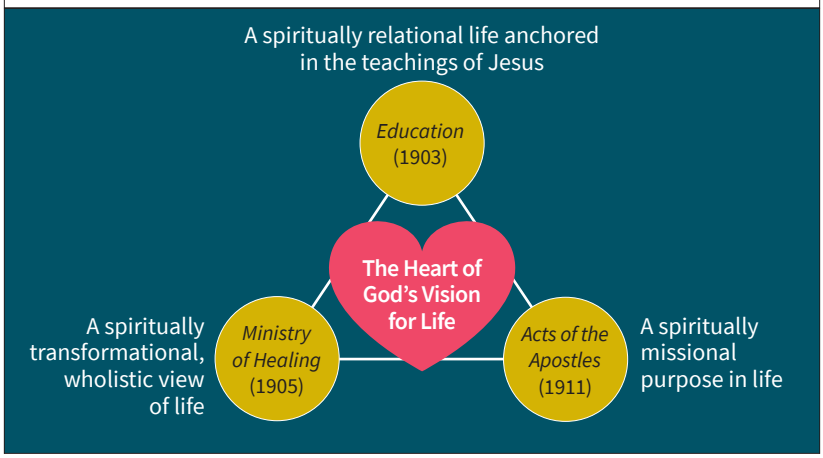
It needs to be noted that it was during the 23 years from 1888 to 1911 that Ellen White published her most significant works.[24] During this period of creative visioning, she recaptured the quintessential elements of God's purpose for the ongoing journey of faith. Her reflections on God's communicative presence inspired her with insights of new realities, a reception and vision of a new world seen through the lenses of God's passion for the lost.

While space does not permit a comprehensive analysis of all her works published during this period, in the context of the great controversy theme and the wholistic view of well-being, we may discern the overarching presence of four overlapping motifs:

1. *Spiritual authenticity*. Ellen White's lifelong emphasis 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."[25]
2. *Genuine relationships*. 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."[26]
3. *Professional development*. In her understanding, the spiritual focus was not an end in itself but rather a preparation of fertile ground for the prosperous development of God-given talents and abilities.[27]
4. *Personal identity*. She saw that while the destructive forces of evil diminish the value of human life, God's presence inspires and restores it.

Figure 1: Inspired and Inspirational Purpose of the Prophetic Visioning

The Desire of Ages (1898) • *Christ's Object Lessons* (1900)



The listed motifs stemmed from the source of all wisdom, a God-shaped inspirational framework of His designed purpose for Christian living. For this purpose, spiritual authenticity, genuine relationships, and a healthy sense of personal identity composed 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. In this context, she encouraged believers to shape a point of reference, not in time-oriented speculations but with implicit trust and confidence in Jesus, in the progressively changing and complex world.[28]

During the period of creative visioning, her reflections on God's communicative presence inspired her with a new focus, a contextualized meaning of faith-oriented experience with Jesus. Rather than shaping a rigid, prescriptive, and authoritarian formula of religiosity, the visions reenergized the church with a new 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 spiritually relational life anchored in the teachings of Jesus
- A spiritually transformational, wholistic view of life
- A spiritually missional purpose of life

Her prophetic voice called for the injection of God's love into a spiritually oriented approach to mission. "Marvelous will be the transformation wrought in him who by faith opens the door of the heart to the Saviour."[29]

Five leadership applications

This brief historical overview, delineating the purpose and influence of prophetic visioning in the time of crisis, serves to highlight the value and significance of visionary and inspirational leadership. Inspirational and visionary leadership

- shapes the framework of implicit trust and confidence in God's involvement in human life and history;
- provides space for a life-transforming experience of God's love that, in turn, generates a passion for sharing Christlike attitudes in the brokenness of human life;
- encourages people to recapture the essence of God's vision for the

church, namely, a spiritually, missional service, a space in which individuals rediscover their uniqueness, value, and potential and use personal talents to communicate Jesus wherever they are;
- imparts boldness to relinquish old status-quo methodologies, to provide a contextualized and refreshed but biblically grounded meaning of faith in Jesus; and
- transforms pastoral leadership influence from a prescriptively authoritarian and informative mode to an inspirational voice calling people to visualize the incomprehensible benefits of God's kingdom of grace.

Five leadership challenges

The context of the outlined crisis suggests that the great controversy and the health visions, along with Ellen White's literary contribution between 1888 and 1911, share a correlated purpose that

- *shaped* a visionary and inspirational pathway for a new mode of existence in the complexity of life;
- *enriched* the church with a motivational pathway augmenting human value, uniqueness, and the potential for God's designed purpose;
- *directed* attention to a relational point of reference secured in an implicit trust and confidence in God;
- *provided* a reassuring conviction in God's presence and a challenge to follow His vision for public existence in a changing world; and
- *challenged* the global church family to become Christ's extended hands in their respective communities and cultures.

In the context of the Civil War, this new orientation inspired the church to break through race and gender barriers set by human traditions and to provide restitution and restoration, in harmony with the heartbeat of the Christian ethos. In this respect, Ellen White moved beyond the constraints of organizational structures. Her visualization was 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."[30] In her mind, the experience of sharing the power of God's grace in the complexity of the changing world prepares the church for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come—service that will flow through eternity from more complete "revelations of God and Christ."[31]

1 Adapted from J. Skrzypaszek, "The Time of Crisis and Prophetic Imagination" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies, San Antonio, TX, November 2016). https://research.avondale.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=theo_conferences
2 Ellen G. White, *Historical Sketches of the Foreign Missions of the Seventh-day Adventists* (Basle, Switzerland: Imprimerie Polyglotte, 1886), 137.
3 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: 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. Mitchell Snay, "Religion, the Origins of Southern Nationalism, and the Coming of the Civil War," in *Critical Issues in American Religious History*, ed. Robert R. Mathisen, 2nd rev. ed. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 345–350. Jud Lake, *A Nation in God's Hands: Ellen White and the Civil War* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 2017).
4 Robert T. Handy, "The American Messianic Consciousness: The Concept of the Chosen People and Manifest Destiny," *Review and Expositor* 73, no. 1 (1976): 52. See also Alan Johnson, "The Bible and War in America: An Historical Survey," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28, no. 2 (June 1985): 174, 175.
5 Robert R. Mathisen, ed., "Religion and America's Civil War: How Did Religion Impact the Civil War?" in *Critical Issues in American Religious History*, 332.
6 Mathisen, "Religion and America's Civil War," 332.
7 Handy, "The American Messianic Consciousness," 52.
8 Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World*, 110.
9 Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World*, 110.
10 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), 1:125. See also pages 119, 120.
11 White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 1:125.
12 Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986), 4.
13 Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1943), 162.
14 Ellen White developed the great controversy theme in the following books: *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 1 (1858); *Spiritual Gifts*, vols. 3 and 4 (1864); *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vols. 1–4 (1870–1884); *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (1888).
15 Herbert E. 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 thought as well as her principles in education, health, missiology, social issues, and environmental topics." *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1998), 256.
16 Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958), 48, 49.
17 Ellen G. White, "Circulation of *The Great Controversy*," Ms. 31, 1890.
18 White, "Circulation of *The Great Controversy*," Ms. 31, 1890.
19 Ellen G. White, "Testimony Regarding James and Ellen White," Ms. 1, 1863.
20 John Skrzypaszek, "The Heart of the Seventh-day Adventist Health Message," *Ministry*, December 2014, 6–8.
21 Skrzypaszek, "Heart of the Seventh-day Adventist Health Message," 8.
22 Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, 2; emphasis original.
23 Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, 2.
24 Ellen White's major literary publications between 1888 and 1911 were as follows: *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan During the Christian Dispensation* (1888), *Christian Temperance and Bible Hygiene* (1890), *Patriarchs 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), and *The Acts of the Apostles* (1911).
25 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1940), 363.
26 White, *Desire of Ages*, 363.
27 White, *Desire of Ages*, 363.
28 John Skrzypaszek, "God's Messenger: Australian Writings Motivate Worldwide: A Look at Ellen White's Life and Legacy," *Adventist World*, October 2015, 23.
29 Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1942), 93.
30 Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), 93.
31 Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1907), 678.

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