# Lifestyle And Hermeneutics: A Hermeneutic for the Writings of Ellen White and Contemporary Adventist Lifestyle Issues

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## Introduction

How do Adventists who live in the twenty-first century understand the observations of Ellen White with respect to lifestyle? Most of her instructions were written over one hundred years ago in a very specific cultural and historical context. What does Adventists' practical application of her instructions tell us about the way in which they are interpreting her writings? And why do some say that her writings are no longer relevant? These are fascinating questions that should be addressed candidly and openly by Seventh-day Adventists who are committed to fulfilling the gospel commission of Jesus and take seriously the mandate that they believe has been given to this Church.

The purpose of the essay is to derive from a discussion of some of Ellen White's counsel on lifestyle issues some guidelines with respect to the manner in which we interpret and apply the Bible and the writings of Ellen White. Because of the volatile nature of the topic, any conclusions reached or suggestions made in this essay are to be regarded as tentative. The intention is that this discussion should encourage ongoing dialogue and research by responsible, committed, Seventh-day Adventists.[1]

The conclusions will be sought using an inductive methodology. That is, the conclusions will be derived from the data presented rather than presented to support a preconceived hypothesis. Further, the research does not follow a strictly conventional historical method. Rather, the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is engaged only in terms of a dialogue with the present. This method of approach has been followed because:

1. No effort is made to discuss any particular lifestyle issue in depth. The purpose of this essay is to emphasise the necessity of an adequate meth-

1. The perspective is unashamedly Seventh-day Adventist. This unique perspective on theology and history is presuppositional to the discussion and is not to be compromised.

od of interpretation or hermeneutic. It is not intended to be a detailed apology for specific viewpoints on specific lifestyle issues;

2. The challenges exist in the present, the twenty-first century. These challenges need solutions that are applicable now. Historical reflection is intended to be a useful tool which may assist in the formulation of present solutions

Why is this essay important? First, it provides foundational principles that will assist Adventists to articulate a hermeneutic for the Bible and the writings of Ellen White. Second, it provides the foundation whereby proper hermeneutical principles can assist in understanding and applying the principles of authentic Adventist lifestyle.

## The Context of this Discussion

The results of the Valuegenesis studies conducted in the early nineties in the North American and South Pacific Divisions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church have demonstrated it is becoming increasingly challenging to describe contemporary authentic Adventist lifestyle. While earlier last century it may have been possible to articulate Adventist lifestyle in a specific way, the perceptions of the young adults surveyed in the Valuegenesis studies did not reflect that traditional position of the church in a number of key aspects. The results demonstrated that if the church is to remain a viable relevant presence in their lives it needs to recognise it must take very seriously the task of describing the principles that undergird Adventist lifestyle.

In the studies conducted in each of these Divisions, the respondents made it clear that there was a sharp distinction in their minds between lifestyle issues which reflected core Adventist values and lifestyle issues that did not reflect essential values. Abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, illegal drugs, and premarital sex; and proper observance of the Sabbath were widely regarded as reflecting core values. On the other hand, items that were not considered so essential included not watching movies in movie theatres, not dancing, not watching adult-only movies, and not using caffeinated drinks.[2]

This practice of assigning a different place on a scale of values for different behaviours has posed a new challenge for Adventist theology and practice. Historically, the church has not followed the practice of arranging lifestyle behaviours on a priority scale, as these youth suggested. The church has tended to list lifestyle behaviours as a set of standards, all of which appeared, at least in the eyes of the

2. *Valuegenesis Study 1—Core Report: A Study of Faith Development and Value Formation in Seventh-day Adventist Adolescents and Youth Aged 12–18 Years* (Wahroonga, NSW: South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists, 1993), 79.

youth, to have equal value. However, those studies pointed out the inadequacy of that position. They pointed to the need for a rethinking of the manner in which we determine which are and which are not essential and appropriate lifestyle behaviours.[3]

Additionally the studies pointed to a number of perceptions which impinge on lifestyle behaviours and which need addressing:

1. Adventist youth perceive a lack of warmth in the church;
2. Adventist youth perceive a lack of acceptance in the church;
3. Adventist youth perceive that church standards are overemphasised;
4. Adventist youth perceive that the church wants unquestioning loyalty;
5. Adventist youth perceive that the church is irrelevant to the needs of its youth; and
6. Adventist youth perceive that the church lacks a grace orientation.

These perceptions do not stand in isolation from each other. If the church is to maintain its commitment to its authentic lifestyle, it must do so in the context of addressing each of these concerns of the youth of the church.

## Ellen White and Adventist Lifestyle

The counsel of Ellen G White has contributed strongly to the formation of the Adventist lifestyle. While it is impossible to consider the whole body of her discussion of Adventist lifestyle in one essay, several examples of her counsel will be given and the reader invited to consider how that counsel has been applied in his/her life. It is imperative that the church adopt a hermeneutic for the writings of Ellen White that enables it to practice a lifestyle that communicates viable and authentic Christian values both within the community of faith, and in the context of the missionary endeavor of the church.

Such a task involves considerable risk. Some readers may well protest that Seventh-day Adventists do not base their lifestyle or doctrines on the writings of Ellen White. On that basis alone they may wish to dismiss everything that is said in this essay as if any reference to her writings were an appeal to an antiquated irrelevancy. For those so inclined, may I suggest that you persevere and see the line of reasoning through to its conclusion, and then make your value judgment.

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3. In the North American study, the perceptions of young Adventists were directly compared with those of young people from six other Protestant denominations. The denominations were: Southern Baptist, United Church of Christ, United Methodist, Presbyterian Church of the USA, Evangelical Lutheran, and Disciples of Christ. This material, based on the North American study unless stated otherwise, is summarised from Steven G. Daily, *Seventh-day Adventism for a New Generation* (Portland, OR: Better Living Publishers, 1992), 7–16.

Other readers will begin to work through the argument. However, they have an absolute and unwavering commitment to the veracity of the writings of Ellen White, so they will be tempted to dispute the way in which this essay deals with the material from her work. I also urge you to persevere and form your conclusions from the perspective of all that is being said, and not from any preconceived opinions.

The problem that we face as Adventists is to remain true to our heritage, including a correct understanding of the role of the gift of prophecy, and yet live and articulate an Adventist Christianity which is authentic and relevant in the modern world. We cannot retreat into the supposed safety of a nineteenth-century, mid-western cocoon and expect to fulfill the global mission that we believe has been specifically given to this church. Nor can we betray that authentic Adventist heritage and our Christian principles. We are talking here about the viability and vitality of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the twenty-first century.

Notice some brief statements from the pen of Ellen White in which she gives specific counsel with respect to the suitability of some behaviors.

> *1. Tennis and cricket*
> 'A view of things was presented before me in which the students were playing games of tennis and cricket. Then I was given instruction regarding the character of these amusements. They were presented to me as a species of idolatry, like the idols of the nations.'[4]

> *2. Wedding rings*
> 'Some have a burden in regard to the wearing of a marriage ring, feeling that the wives of our minister should conform to this custom. All this is unnecessary . . . We need not wear the sign, for we are not untrue to our marriage vow . . . Not one penny should be spent for a circlet of gold to testify we are married. In countries where the custom is imperative, we have no burden to condemn . . . let them wear it if they can do so conscientiously.'[5]

4. Ellen G White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers and Students* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific, 1913), 350. Of particular interest to readers in the South Pacific Division is the fact that these words were addressed to students and staff at the Avondale School for Christian Workers.

5 White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific, 1923), 180–181. Note well the reference to the wearing of wedding rings by people of other cultures. Ellen White wrote this article in 1895 while she was in Australia. Clearly, her exposure to cultures other than her own helped her to become aware that **despite some very strong language**, her advice on specific aspects of Christian lifestyle and appropriate behaviours were not necessarily to be regarded as absolute.

*3. Chess and checkers*

'Such mental exercise as . . . chess, and checkers excites and wearies the brain and hinders recovery.'[6]

'There are amusements, such as . . . chess, checkers etc., which we cannot approve, because Heaven condemns them. These amusements open the door for great evil. They are not beneficial in their tendency, but have an exciting influence, producing in some minds a passion for those plays which lead to gambling and dissipation. All such plays should be condemned by Christians, and something perfectly harmless should be substituted in their place.'[7]

*4. The circus*

'There is no influence in our land more powerful to poison the imagination, to destroy religious impressions, and to blunt the relish for the tranquil pleasures and sober realities of life than theatrical amusements . . . The only safe course is to shun . . . the circus, and every other questionable place of amusement.'[8]

*5. Croquet*

'In the place of getting exercise by jumping and playing ball or croquet, let their exercise be to some purpose.'[9]

*6. Women Voting*

'I do not recommend that women should seek to become a voter or an office holder.'[10]

*7. Bicycles*

'The exhibitions in the bicycle craze are an offence to God. His wrath is kindled against those who do such things.'[11]

'I was shown things among our people that were not in accordance with their faith. There seemed to be a bicycle craze . . . "Look ye, and behold the idolatry of My people, to whom I have been speaking, rising up early, and presenting to them their dangers. I looked that they should bring forth fruit." There were some who were striving for the

6. White, *Testimonies For the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific, 1948), 1:555.
7. *Ibid*, 514.
8. White, *Testimonies, op cit*, 4:653.
9. White, *Child Guidance* (Nashville, TN: Southern, 1954), 352.
10. White, *Christian Service* (Washington DC: Home Missionary Department of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1947), 28.
11. White, *Testimonies, op cit*, 8:66.

> mastery, each trying to excel the other in the swift running of their bicycles . . . These things are an offence to God.[12]

In each of these examples Ellen White has worded her condemnation of the specific behaviour very strongly indeed. Yet all the Seventh-day Adventists I know choose to disregard much of her specific counsel with regard to these issues.

Please look carefully at this list of lifestyle issues. Ellen White discussed each one of these issues on a number of occasions.

*Dancing*
*Drinking Alcohol*
*Drinking Tea*
*Attending Opera*
*Wearing Fancy Ribbons*
*Gambling*
*Boxing*
*Entering Lotteries*
*Using Tobacco*
*Playing Tennis*
*Homosexuality*
*Using Cosmetics*
*Attending the Circus*
*Bowling*
*Wearing Jewelry*
*Feminism*
*Unchaperoned Dating*
*Playing Chess*
*Reading Novels*
*Drinking Coffee*
*Taking Morphine*
*Pornography*
*Wearing Collars*
*Horse Racing*
*Playing Cards*
*Theatre Attendance*
*Wearing a Wedding Ring*
*Playing Cricket*
*Riding Bicycles*
*Playing Checkers*
*Playing Croquet*
*Living in Big Cities*
*Joining Labor Unions*
*Attending Fairs*
*Watching/Playing Football*
*Listening to Worldly Music*

Most of us would agree that there are some items on the list of which Seventh-day Adventists could not approve. On the other hand, there are some items that would generally receive their approval. Finally, there are some items that many would not be too sure about. They may not be able to determine whether we approve or disapprove of these particular behaviours.

But our difficulties do not end there. Anecdotal evidence suggests that no two Seventh-day Adventists would place all of these items in identical categories! For example, while some may disapprove of theatre attendance, others may approve. Others may approve of it in some circumstances but not in other circumstances. Still others may be making up their minds. The same could be said of a number of items on the list. We may all see them somewhat differently.

12. *Ibid*, 51, 52.

Why is that so? How can we say 'no', 'yes', or 'maybe?' And why is it that we each respond by saying 'no', 'yes', and 'maybe' at different points on the list? Why, for example, is there a tennis court at the back of the South Pacific Division offices? And why have I personally observed people employed by the church organisation actually playing tennis on the tennis court? Believe it or not, I have played cricket on the same cricket team as a past Division President. I have played checkers and chess (and Scrabble, Monopoly and Pictionary) in the homes of many good, loyal Seventh-day Adventists. Most Adventist ladies that I know regard it as their rightful prerogative to vote along with their male counterparts and many of them have accompanied their husbands and children to the circus, or seen the circus on TV. The vast majority of Seventh-day Adventists have ridden a bicycle at some time or other. While I was a lecturer at Avondale College I used to ride a bike to work just about every day and I observed a number of my colleagues doing likewise. In fact, I dare say that we felt most virtuous for doing so because we knew it was good for our health!

But Ellen White spoke strongly against **ALL** of these lifestyle behaviours.[13]

## A Hermeneutic For Authentic Adventist Lifestyle

The nature of our dilemma must surely tell us that first, great care and mutual trust is needed when we discuss this topic. Second, it tells us that we need some healthy flexibility and respect for the mature viewpoint of each other. Third, the fact that we each regard some of these behaviours as acceptable today, means we must be using a method of interpretation that is modifying some very direct counsel that was given to the Church by Ellen White at the end of the nineteenth century.

It is apparent that each of us is consciously or unconsciously using some principles of interpretation when it comes to our acceptance of appropriate lifestyle guidelines in the writings of Ellen White. Our hermeneutic tells us that certain things she wrote approximately one hundred years ago no longer apply in the twenty-first century. On the other hand, it tells us that many things she wrote regarding lifestyle are still entirely applicable. Some may wish that it were possible to maintain a hermeneutic that insists her repeated, decisive counsel against any particular lifestyle behaviour closes all discussion of the issue for Seventh-day Adventists. However, it is apparent such is just not the case, particularly for younger members of the Church.

On the basis of this discussion we can suggest some fundamental principles of interpretation for the writings of Ellen White:

13 Reference to the *Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White* will quickly yield a number of statements under each of these headings. Some are quoted above in this essay.

### *The importance of literary context*

To adequately understand the counsel given by Ellen White it is essential to consider the literary context of her particular statements. The original context of each statement must be considered, rather than each statement being accepted as if it had been written in a vacuum, or as it has been condensed in a compilation. When Ellen White wrote on a lifestyle issue, she was often addressing a specific need or question. Proper research will always consider the incoming correspondence to which she was replying, as well as her written response.

### *The importance of priorities*

When the Seventh-day Adventist Church was emerging in the late nineteenth century, it was interested in some of the big issues that were being discussed in the society of which it was a part. The issues included the abolition of slavery, temperance and prohibition, a focus on preventative medicine and public health, the role of labor unions, the separation of church and state, and a commitment to a global perspective on mission. There is no doubt that these issues were much more a driving force in Adventism in late nineteenth century than were issues of individual lifestyle. Individual lifestyle was important, but careful investigation of the climate of Adventism in the 1890s and early twentieth century indicates that larger issues set the tone and framework of Adventism and gave it its priorities.

The counsels of Ellen White must be read in the light of this larger context and applied in the larger context of the twenty-first century. Today, a whole generation is saying that it is imperative that the church follows the lead of its own history and look carefully at those contemporary issues that are priorities. In order to be true to itself, its commission, and its Lord, the church of today cannot consume its time and energy focusing on relatively unimportant matters. Our global mission is at stake.

Please do not misunderstand what is being said here. We are not saying that 'anything goes' We would certainly betray our God-given responsibility if we went down that road. But we will just as surely betray that responsibility if we do not carefully consider the manner in which we communicate our response to the saving grace of Jesus Christ in an authentic Christian lifestyle. In a disintegrating world God calls the church to be a prophetic voice. The prophets always made the big issues their priority.

## The Importance of Understanding Cultural Shift

For the emerging Adventist Church, the meaning of lifestyle behaviours articulated by Ellen White was connected to a specific time and place.[14] Lifestyle behav-

14. Gary Land has shown that Adventist practice in the late nineteenth century was largely derived

iours send a certain message in their context. But as the context changes, so may the message. Two specific examples will serve to illustrate the point:

### *A. The wedding ring*

This is a good example for the South Pacific Division because it has not been a matter of polarised discussion here. For North American Adventists, taking off the wedding ring came to symbolise the establishment of a meaningful separation between believers and non-believers who were perceived as rejecting the Lordship of Christ. It symbolised the rejection of a worldly lifestyle and the acceptance of a deep loyalty to Christ and his church.

However, in this day and age when loyalties such as a marriage are treated so casually by many, **a wedding ring is probably a most appropriate symbol of loyalty to Christ and his church.** For example, have you ever noticed how many married Protestant ministers wear a wedding ring? It would seem that a person who is continuously giving counsel for troubled marriages would be very wise indeed to send an unequivocal message that he/she is happily married. Changing contexts demand changing lifestyle priorities.

### *B. Health issues and Victorian attitudes toward sex*

Another example relates to the way in which society regards human sexuality. Bull and Lockhart have well demonstrated that the Victorian predisposition for having a negative attitude towards human sexuality had considerable impact on Adventist thinking and lifestyle in that era. Notice, for example, a summary statement in their book:

> Sex was deemed particularly injurious to the human constitution. Excess, resulting either from masturbation, fornication, or marital lust, was likely to result in general debilitation and premature death. The sexual impulse, unless firmly repressed, was liable to undermine the entire Adventist program for human betterment. It was redundant in the divine realm. The angels did not marry and bear children, nor would the saints in heaven. Sexual activity was, from the perspective of eternity, dysfunctional; it devoted valuable time to a practice that would soon be disregarded; it precipitated emotional outbursts of the kind that angels shunned; it reduced the possibility of remaining alive until the Second Advent; and it caused physiolog-

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from what was considered appropriate in the conservative Christian cultures of which the Adventists themselves had been part. See Gary Land, 'Adventists in Plain Dress', in *Spectrum* 20 (December 1989): 42–48.

> ical malfunction, which, as there was no disjunction between body and soul, could also result in spiritual debilitation.
>
> To avoid any excitement that might release the sexual impulse, Adventists were instructed to abjure the use of alcohol, tobacco, meat, tea, and coffee. Dancing and novel reading were also prone to stimulate unholy passions and fell under similar disapproval . . . The range of Adventist taboos prompted the creation of carefully monitored social environments. The benefits of the Adventist lifestyle could be maximised within a closed situation. In a sanitarium or college, individuals could be freed from the distractions of the world, denied access to harmful substances and practices, and encouraged to develop a perfectly balanced way of life.[15]

As an example of the way Ellen White herself was influenced by the prevailing societal attitudes note the following address to Christian mothers in the *Health Reformer* of October 1871:

> The artificial hair and pads covering the base of the brain, heat and excite the spinal nerves centering in the brain. The head should ever be kept cool. The heat caused by these induces the blood to the brain. The action of the blood upon the lower or animal organs of the brain, causes unnatural activity, tends to recklessness in morals, and the mind and the heart is in danger of being corrupted. As the animal organs are excited and strengthened, the morals are enfeebled. The moral and intellectual powers of the mind become servants to the animal . . . Many have lost their reason and become hopelessly insane, by following this deforming fashion.[16]

Christian principles cannot necessarily endorse contemporary societal attitudes to human sexuality, then or now. Nevertheless, it should be obvious to the reader that even if a relationship between insanity and sexual perversion exists, it would not be stated in the same way today.

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15. Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 169.
16. Ellen G White, 'Words to Christian Mothers on the Subject of Life, Health, and Happiness', in *Health Reformer*, October 1871, 121. For additional relevant discussion on the subject of changing priorities over time see Delmer I Davis's treatment of the theatre in Ellen White's day in his 'Hotbed of Immorality: Seventh-day Adventists and the Battle Creek Theatre in the 1880's', in *Adventist Heritage* 7 (Spring 1982): 20–23.

## The Importance of Cultural Symbolism

Despite assertions to the contrary, it is not possible to interpret any counsel without reference to the characteristics of the culture in which it was given. The most obvious characteristic of any culture is its language. It is the most persuasive and powerful symbol system in every culture. If I cannot understand this symbol system, I cannot understand any counsel, Ellen White's or anyone else's. Apart from language there are hundreds of other symbol systems in each culture. These symbol systems are continually being modified. The meaning which is derived from those systems is also being modified. The meaning derived from a particular symbol at one specific time and place will not be the same as the meaning derived from the same symbolic form in a different cultural context.

Most of our Seventh-day Adventist lifestyle behaviours are symbolic. We attach certain specific meanings to them, meanings that indicate the values or principles at the core of our being. Some of them are such important indicators we regard them as non-negotiable. The Ten Commandments are an example of such a set of behaviours, so important that God himself prescribed them verbally. They are non-negotiable. There are other lifestyle behaviors that are clearly less essential. Some of those we have referred to above.

In our zeal and commitment to the Lord and his message, Seventh-day Adventists must be very careful not to 'absolutist' a set of lifestyle imperatives which gave specific identity to believers at a particular developmental stage of their movement. However, they now place us in a situation where we are incapable of moving on and interfacing with the world we are commissioned to reach with the gospel. Jesus had the highest set of ethical values ever lived on this earth, but His values did not prevent Him from reaching the people who needed him. A symbolic form or behaviour can never assume more importance than the principle on which it is based. Meaning is derived as several principles are arranged on a scale of priority, and the specific behaviours that arise from them are accepted or rejected according to this set of values. The Christian recognises that conversion occurs when there is a radical change in worldview. This change in worldview turn brings about change in the priority of specific values.

## Foundational Principles Applied to Specific Contexts

In order to avoid narrow, ethnocentric behaviour prescriptions, a church that stands for stability and continuity and has a worldwide, diverse constituency must describe its lifestyle priorities as principles. Because Ellen White's counsel was contextual, it is vital that a hermeneutic for her writings emphasise the need to understand the enduring principles that she applied to her own specific context. An example of a statement that speaks in broad principles is the following:

> There are many who try to correct the life of others by attacking whatthey consider are wrong habits. They go to those whom they think are in error, and point out their defects. They say, 'You don't dress as you should'. They try to pick off the ornaments, or whatever seems offensive, but they do not try to fasten the mind to the truth. Those who seek to correct others should present the attractions of Jesus. They should talk of his love and compassion, present his example and sacrifice, reveal his Spirit and they need not touch the subject of dress at all. There is no need to make the dress question the main point of your religion. There is something richer to speak of. Talk of Christ, and when the heart is converted, everything that is out of harmony with the Word of God will drop off.[17]

Lifestyle priorities should not be derived from the manner in which Ellen White has applied the principles to her own context, but from the principles themselves. Adventists often seem to have uncritically adopted a specific application without first distilling the principle. If they had first distilled the principle they would be in a better position to critically contextualise those lifestyle principles that are Christian and uniquely Adventist.

Of course, specific applications articulated by Ellen White may still be appropriate in the twenty-first century. Many are directly applicable. What has changed is the manner in which many lifestyle imperatives should now be articulated and, in some cases, the meaning that is attached to them. Methodological and lifestyle issues must be set in context. The work of the prophet has always been to call for radical discipleship within a specific context.

## Appropriate Dynamic Equivalence

It is not the intention of this essay to enter into a detailed exegesis of relevant biblical passages. That task remains for other writers.[18] However, in order to help us understand how to approach the writings of Ellen White it is helpful for us to consider how we approach Scripture. Just as we have unconsciously applied a particular hermeneutic to the writings of the biblical authors, we have unconsciously applied a particular hermeneutic to the writings of Ellen White.[19] As the context changes, so does the way in which we apply a given principle to the new

17. Ellen G White in *Signs of the Times*, July 1, 1889, quoted in Ellen G White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946), 272.
18. See, for example, Madelyn Jones-Haldeman, 'Adorning the Temple of God', in *Spectrum* 20 (December 1989): 49–55; Charles Scriven, 'I Didn't Recognise You With Your Ring On', in *Spectrum* 20 (December 1989): 56–59.
19. For a most enlightening discussion, see Alden Thompson, *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988).

context. In Bible translation this is known as dynamic equivalence. Bible translators use this principle in order to successfully make the word of God accessible in a new language or culture. However, great wisdom and care must be exercised. It is entirely possible to lose the meaning altogether. What remains may well be syncretistic at best and satanic at worst.

A biblical example of the way in which we apply an interpretative approach to Scripture is found in the epistles of Paul and Peter.[20] Notice the following:[21]

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|---|---|
| 1 Corinthians 16:20: | All the brothers here send you greetings. *Greet one another with a holy kiss.*[22] |
| 2 Corinthians 13:12: | *Greet one another with a holy kiss.* All the saints send their greetings. |
| Romans 16:16: | *Greet one another with a holy kiss.* All the churches of Christ send greetings. |
| 1 Thessalonians 5:26: | *Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.* I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. |
| 1 Peter 5:14: | *Greet one another with a kiss of love.* Peace to all of you who are in Christ.[23] |

It will be immediately apparent that despite the imperative mood in which the writers speak, the same imperative to 'greet all the brothers with a holy kiss' is not generally regarded as binding on Seventh-day Adventists today. How can that be, especially when there are Seventh-day Adventists in many parts of the world who see the command to greet the brothers with a kiss in exactly the way it was written, as an imperative?

It should be apparent that we are using the same hermeneutical approach to these passages of Scripture as we used when we earlier considered some examples from the writings of Ellen White. This method of interpretation takes into account the context in which we apply the undergirding biblical principles. God's

20. The point being made will be easily understood by persons living in some Anglo-American cultures, where the handshake is the standard greeting form. It will not be so easily understood in some other cultures, which may use variations on the kiss as the standard form.
21. I am indebted to Dr Gottfried Oosterwal for making me aware of these passages and for clarifying the meaning we derive from them.
22. All biblical references are quoted from the New International Version unless stated otherwise.
23. Other examples of the same kind are found in: Exodus 3:5 (taking off shoes on holy ground); Genesis 38; Deuteronomy 25:5–10 (levirate marriage); 1 Corinthians 11:1–16 (women covering their heads at prayer); Genesis 29:15ff (compensating the bride's family when she marries); Acts 15:29 (prohibition against eating food offered to idols); Psalm 149:3 and 150:3–5, 1 Sam 18:6 and 2 Samuel 6:12–14 (praising God with loud clashing music and dance). One example which is still the subject of much discussion is found in 1 Corinthians 14:33–35 (women keeping silence in church).

people have always found it necessary to do that. Look at the considerably different way in which New Testament authors applied some eternal principles and compare that with the manner in which Old Testament authors did. God calls us to maturity and responsibility in the way we live in the context where He has placed us.

This call is not a call to 'lower the standards.' Rather, it is a call to a more principled, self-disciplined life, filled with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. God has given us the power of choice so that we may choose the best good as a matter of principle, not as a matter of arbitrary compliance. We make such a choice when we show we are able to apply the principles of the Bible writers and Ellen White to a context considerably different to theirs. To fail to do so is to consign our Christianity to the realm of antiquated irrelevancy, and ultimately, to fail in the mission that God has given to this church. Remember that Christ accused the religious leaders of his day of doing exactly that.

## The Overriding Emphasis on Mission

No one can read the writings of Ellen White without being confronted with her overriding emphasis on the mission of the church and on the mission of each person who comprises it. It follows that any hermeneutic for her writings can only do justice to her if it reflects this priority. It also follows that unless we are prepared to grapple with the issues raised in this essay, we will be confronted by an insurmountable dilemma: How can the Seventh-day Adventist Church maintain a high commitment to win the world for Christ, when theologically and methodologically its lifestyle priorities isolate it unnecessarily from the very world it is commissioned to win?

Despite Christ's instructions to the contrary, the church will be incapable of acting as salt and light in the world if it follows an unnecessarily isolationist lifestyle. The church will become a fortress, buttressed against the world.

But the fortress cannot be the predominant image of the church and its mission in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. As necessary as it may be as a place of safety from the world, the church has historically conceived of itself in terms of its global mission and ability to reach out to the world!

So much in the example and teaching of Christ and Paul has to do with the church incarnating itself in the world, in order to win the world for the kingdom. Notice the words of Christ:

John 17:15–18:
My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one . . . As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.

Consider likewise the words of Paul:
1 Corinthians 9:22–23: To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by any possible means I might save some. I do this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

I wonder how Ellen White would address the evangelistic challenges of today. How would she react to the issue of lifestyle flexibility in the evangelistic situation? We want to live and communicate the ideal, but do we realise people living in a secular, urbanised, pluralistic world may never hear the ideal, let alone accept it, unless we can communicate it in a real, hearable way?[24] To what extent are we ourselves still being discipled as we live in a world that is far from God's ideal? Can we convince our Adventist subculture to be more aware of basic principles and more willing to live those principles? Should we even try to do that? Or are we satisfied to descend into certain redundancy and irrelevancy?

> I have a hunch that there are a lot of thoughtful young people who in their souls would like to be challenged to stick with or even join a church that really was different from the rest of the culture as long as they thought the differences or 'standards' dealt with were important. For starters, what about Jesus' list: justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matt 23:23)? Maybe he knew that these are the 'standards' that stand out in our world because they are in such short supply. Maybe the Adventist church has asked too little of its members. Maybe the price tag for membership has been high enough to pinch but too low to make a real difference.[25]

## Conclusion

We have addressed some difficult questions in this essay. We have not found all the answers. Because we have not found all the answers some Adventist readers will feel dissatisfied. They will say that the essay did not specifically say that it was okay to wear jewelry, to go to the picture theatre, to drink caffeinated drinks occasionally, to play cricket or tennis or chess or croquet, or even to ride a bicycle!

Other readers will feel dissatisfied for an altogether different reason. They will feel that they do not like what is happening to Adventist standards; that the stan-

24. It is very easy to blame the hearer if he/she does not hear, but the fault may equally be that of the speaker. It is just as much the responsibility of the speaker (sender of the communication) to frame the message in a hearable medium, as it is for the hearer (receptor of the message) to attempt to hear and understand it. In fact, contemporary communication theory insists successful communication is more the responsibility of the sender than the receiver. If the sender does not adequately facilitate the communication process, there is no possibility that the receiver will receive the right message. Yet too often, Adventists have been content to bemoan the fact that 'they are not listening'. Maybe it is not all 'their' fault.

25. Ernest Bursey, 'Why be an Adventist?', in *Spectrum* 20 (September 1988): 12–13.

dards of the church are being eroded; that there is no longer any clear statement of lifestyle behaviours; and that Adventism is in danger of losing its essence and its identity.

If any reader is in either of these groups please reconsider very carefully what this essay has been saying. It has been saying that:

1. With respect to lifestyle behaviours, we need to become aware of the way in which we are reading the Bible so that we can follow a consistent hermeneutic. Such a hermeneutic meets the authors where they were, enables us to retain absolute integrity to the message of Scripture, and facilitates contextualisation of that message today.
2. Within the framework of a proper understanding of the role of Ellen White in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, we need to approach her writings with a similar hermeneutical method as that with which we approach the Bible. A systematic hermeneutic will be a vital ingredient enabling us to be consistent in our interpretation and practice.
3. Our hermeneutic extends beyond what is written to what is lived. Not only is exegesis required to understand scripture and the writings of Ellen White. It is also required to understand the world in which we live and the people to whom we are called to deliver the gospel of Jesus Christ in the framework of the three angel's messages. This task is cultural exegesis. It has to do with presenting the gospel so that it is hearable.

Fidelity to these basic methods will yield two further outcomes:

1. Lifestyle behaviours will be expressed in terms of principles Examples of how a principle is to be applied may be given, but the church must be careful it does not reduce the freedom to choose discipleship to mere compliance to a series of prescribed behaviours. On the other hand, each person must recognise the validity of overt behaviours as symbols of allegiance, and recognise that adherence to a set of principles will involve symbolic demonstration of that allegiance.
2. If the church and its members adopt the three broad guidelines outlined above, continuous prayer, study, and adaptation will be necessary as the church grows through time and space. As time passes, the symbolic meaning of some behaviors will change. Some behaviors once shunned may become acceptable, and some once acceptable will need to be shunned. As the church expands around the world, the demands of diversity will mean that behaviours in one place will not necessarily be acceptable in another place, and vice versa. The great principles and valuesof Christianity must be transportable across more than one symbol

> system or culture, and they must be able to travel through time. If those principles and values cannot do that, Christianity itself will not endure. While the great principles of the word of God stand above all cultures and challenge all cultures, we must remember that God has chosen to communicate those principles through the medium of culture.

All things considered, it may seem to some readers that it would be best to interpret Ellen White as if she were dogmatically presenting Adventist lifestyle as a set of prescriptive behaviours, expecting unquestioned compliance. This is an option some honest souls will take. But to journey back down this road would surely bring about the demise of the church in the coming generations. The gospel must be hearable. Our lifestyle must be livable. Its context must be recognised as a viable vehicle for the communication of the gospel in this world.