The Influence of Ellen White Towards an Adventist Understanding of Inspiration

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Ellen White Under Attack

Ellen White's credentials as a prophet within the Adventist Church are under attack. Any search engine on the internet will find scores of anti-Ellen White sites. The trouble with this material is that a significant amount of it is true. Basically Adventists have three choices:

1. They can resist and ignore the material and go on with business as usual. This option would cost them many honest members who will feel the Church has betrayed them.
2. They can carry on with an attitude that 'we don't care'. This option would produce social Adventists with no sense of mission.
3. They can go back to the Bible and see if they have understood the gift correctly. Maybe Adventists and their critics alike have failed to dig deeply enough into the Word of God.

A few years ago I received a letter from a woman who had been shaken by some of the material presented to her. Here is part of the letter I received.

> Dear Pastor Bradford,
> I have left the Adventist Church for good. I cannot be a participant in the deception that is going on in regard to the church doctrines and Ellen White . . . I have never heard the church talk about the problems with Ellen White's unfulfilled visions in all the time I have been in it—that's because the church doesn't give a balanced view of her . . . There is only one reason that the church doesn't teach the full truth of Ellen White. It knows that, when armed with the full truth, people will reject her as a prophet . . .

A century ago there were some leaders in Adventism, like JH Kellogg and AT Jones, who rigidly held that everything Ellen White wrote had to be believed as fixed truth. On the other hand, there were leaders like Willie White, AG Daniels,

and WW Prescott who had a more flexible approach to understanding her work. In their favor, they had worked with her in preparing her books for publication. Eventually Kellogg and Jones had to face the facts. The new information did not fit into their narrow views of her work. Instead of accommodating their views, they chose to leave Adventism. The other leaders stayed.[1]

Today we also have new information about how Ellen White worked. Some people go into a state of denial and become angry at any suggestion she could ever be wrong. Others find their faith in Adventism and even in Christ destroyed. A third way is to build upon the experientially based understanding of Willie White, AG Daniels and WW Prescott. This essay explores whether this understanding of the work of prophets is in harmony with that of Scripture itself.

In my search I feared being drawn more and more towards concepts on inspiration that were new to me. However, I remain a firm believer in the full inspiration of the Bible. I believe it has come to us in a trustworthy and reliable manner, and fulfils the claims for itself found in 2 Timothy 3:15–17. As such I believe in the inerrancy of its purpose. In the end what matters is what the Scriptures have to say on the subject, and not our own personal prejudices.

Steps to Understanding Biblical Inspiration

Biblical inspiration! How do you define it? Christianity has never done so in any of its creeds. Maybe the subject is best left in the too hard basket? We know God often puzzles us in the ways He works. He appears to be too hard on Uzzah and too kind to David. "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways", declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.'" (Isa 55:8–9).[2]

Could it be that God gives sufficient evidence to believe; but never removes all cause for doubt? Could it be that God has so weighed the evidence that the honest in heart will know He is there; but those who do not want to believe will find hooks on which to hang their doubts? Different people look at the same evidence regarding Christianity; some believe while others doubt.[3] Finding God is not so much an intellectual pursuit as it is a heart experience. 'You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart' (Jer 29:13). God respects human freedom.

1. Bert Haloviak and Gary Land, 'Ellen White and Doctrinal Conflict: Context of the 1919 Bible Conference', in *Spectrum* 12 (1982): 19–34.
2. All biblical quotations are from the NIV unless otherwise indicated.
3. An example of this is found in Acts 17: 16–34. Paul presented the claims of Christ only to be met with cynicism from some and belief from others.

There is need for a balanced view of the inspiration of the Bible. It is God's Word in human language. Just as Jesus is the Living Word of God and as such He is truly God and Man, so the Bible is truly divine and human. Liberals water down the miracles of the Bible and rob the Bible of the presence of God in its authorship. Fundamentalists virtually ignore some obviously human elements of the Bible.

Ellen White's contribution to an Adventist understanding of inspiration

A major reason I accept the inspiration of Ellen White is the harmony I find between her understanding of how inspiration worked through her ministry and the self-understandings of the Bible writers. Her ideas were not the prevailing views among her contemporaries. She herself wrote,

> The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God as a writer, is not represented . . .
>
> It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man's words or his expressions but on the man himself, who under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind (1 SM 21).

Borrowing by Bible writers[4]

Of the New Testament writers, only Paul and John are known to have had visions. But Paul still felt the need to refer to the writings of others (2 Tim 4:13). Paul's quotations from pagan scholars are well known. In Acts 17:28 he quotes two: Epimendes, 'For in him we live and move and have our being" and Aratas, 'For we are also his offspring'.[5] In 1 Corinthians 15:33 he quotes Menander, without indicating he is quoting, 'Evil communications corrupt good manners'.[6]

Even some of the statements made by Christ sound similar to some statements previously made by Jewish rabbis. For example, 'What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbours; that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof'.[7] This sounds much like the golden rule found in Matthew 7:12, yet it was said by Hillel, a famous Jewish teacher long before Jesus said it.[8] Ellen White's comment is significant:

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4. The subsequent material is taken from my forthcoming book.
5. See *SDA Bible Commentary*, edited by Francis D Nichol (Washington DC: Review & Herald), 6:354.
6. *Ibid*, 6:808.
7. *Ibid*, 5:356.
8. For more examples see Tim Crosby 'Does Inspired Mean Original?', *Ministry* (February 1986): 4–7.

> Some of the truths that Christ spoke were familiar to the people. They had heard them from the lips of priests and rulers, and from men of thought; but for all that, they were distinctively the thoughts of Christ.
>
> He had given them to men in trust, to be communicated to the world . . . The work of Christ was to take the truth of which the people were in want, separate it from error, and present it free from the superstitions of the world, that the people might accept it on its own intrinsic and eternal merit. [9]

How much of the Bible would we abandon if we deleted all the allusions to pagan literature?

> Figures of speech in the Song of Solomon show similarities to the religious literature of ancient Sumer, a civilisation in existence three thousand years before Christ . . . Shall we abandon the Book of Proverbs because in places it follows the literary pattern of Egyptian and other ancient near eastern wisdom tradition, on occasion almost word for word? Must we cut the Psalter out of our Bibles because many of the psalms draw from imagery also used in Canaanite Baal hymns?[10]

God uses many diverse ways to convey His revelations to His prophets. Sometimes it is by supernatural events such as visions. Often it is as the prophet consults the works of others, or observes events. It seems there is an economy of miracles at work in the way God reveals His will. He never does supernaturally what can be done naturally. Regardless of the methods used, God still oversees the end product to make sure it reliably conveys His message to His people.

Literary assistance for inspired writers

Many Bible writers had help in putting their literary works together. Romans begins with greetings from Paul (Rom 1:1–7), but towards the end his secretary inserts a salutation of his own, 'I Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord' (Rom 16:22). Leon Morris notes how Paul's literary style complicates study: 'He rushes on, often leaving out words he expected his readers to supply (and which they hope they are supplying correctly!). He is an original thinker, sometimes struggling with language to say things that no one had said before.'[11]

9. Ellen G White, *Review and Herald*, 7 January 1890, reprinted *Review and Herald*, 2 June 1983: 7.
10. Gerald Wheeler 'God Speaks with a Human Accent', in *Adventist Review*, 14 July 1983: 5.
11. Leon Morris, *New Testament Theology* (Academic Books, Zondervan, 1990), 21.

> In response to scholars who reject the Pauline authorship of parts of the pastoral epistles, Morris notes that differences in style may be due to the influence of literary assistants.[12] Evidence of literary assistance has also been seen in the stylistic differences between 1st and 2nd Peter;[13] and between the Gospel of John and Revelation.[14] As for the Old Testament, the Book of Jeremiah shows signs of literary assistance.[15] The polished poetry of the prophets and of the Book of Job seems to reflect the same phenomenon.

How much do prophets know?

There is no single passage in the Bible telling us all we wish to know about the gift of prophecy. In Romans chapter 12, Paul writes regarding the operation of spiritual gifts and, as he mentions prophecy, he makes a remark that could have significant bearing on our understanding of this gift: 'We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith' (Rom 12:6).

Commentators have pondered the meaning of what Paul means 'let him use it in *proportion* to his faith'. How can a prophet prophesy in proportion to his faith? The word translated *proportion* is the Greek word *analogia.* This is the only place this word appears in the New Testament. Many commentators have suggested that *faith*, as mentioned here, is to be taken in a subjective manner tied in with *measure* mentioned in verse three. Paul here is probably referring to how a person should function.[16] David Hill offers the observation that,

> the person who exercises the gift of prophecy should speak only when conscious of his words as inspired and presumably only as long as he is confident that God is speaking through him.[17]

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12. *Ibid.*
13. Michael Green, *The Second Epistle General of Peter and the General Epistle of Jude* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1987), 16: 'The Greek of 1 Peter is polished, cultured, dignified; it is among the best in the New Testament. The Greek of 2 Peter is grandiose; it is rather like baroque art.'
14. 'It is not difficult to account for the linguistic and literary differences that exist between the Revelation, written probably when John was alone on Patmos, and the Gospel, written with the help of one or more fellow believers at Ephesus.' *SDA Bible Commentary*, *op cit*, 7:720.
15. Jeremiah dictated his message to Baruch, who wrote the words on a scroll and read them to the people in the temple (Jer 36:4–6). Baruch is accused of having undue influence over Jeremiah (Jer 43:3). According to Jeremiah 51:64, 'The words of Jeremiah end here'. What, then, is to be made of Jeremiah 52? This chapter has been taken out of 2 Kings 24:18 to 25:30 to show the fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecies after his death. Perhaps it was put in by those we may well call 'The Jeremiah Estate'.
16. See CK Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New York, Harper and Row, 1957), 23. Also, AT Robertson, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Nashville, Broadman, 1931), Volume 9, IV, 403.
17. David Hill, *New Testament Prophecy* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1979), 119.

Hill's understanding of the text seems to be reflected in the New Living Translation, 'God has given each of us the ability to do certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out when you have faith that God is speaking through you' (Rom 12:6).

Cranfield offers the further insight that, 'It may be suggested that the simplest and most satisfactory interpretation . . . [is that prophets] are to be careful not to utter (under the impression that they are inspired) anything which is incompatible with their believing in Christ.'[18]

Recognising the fallibility of prophets

For those of us who have never received a revelation from God, it is difficult to understand what is taking place. What we do know is that there are three stages of the prophetic process:

1. The revelation,
2. The interpretation, and
3. The application.

Regarding the revelation, we would expect there would be no mistakes because God never offers anything imperfect or faulty. However, it is possible that mistakes could be made at stages 2 and 3, in the interpretation and application.[19]

Frederick Harder asks the following hard questions to help us gain some insights into the fallibility of prophets.

> How can personal prejudices and errors be distinguished from the divine word? How far were the prophet's natural faculties overruled or held in abeyance? On the other hand, to what extent were they heightened, sensitised, or strengthened in order to receive and understand the word revealed? How competent was the prophet to accurately communicate the message? Finally, and just as important,

18. CEB Cranfield, *The International Critical Commentary, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to Romans* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 620–621.

19. Perhaps an example of this is to be seen in the prophetic activity of Agabus in Acts chapter 21. In verses 10–11 he prophesies that Paul will be bind him and hand him over to the Gentiles. When the prophecy is fulfilled [verses 30–33] there are two small mistakes. (1) It wasn't the Jews who bound Paul. They were trying to kill him. It was the Romans who bound him. (2) The Jews did not hand him over to the Gentiles; the Gentiles took him off them and rescued Paul. The general idea of Agabus is correct; but some of the details are wrong. Agabus is an experienced prophet; yet he seems to have some details incorrect. Could it be that God revealed to him the trouble ahead and Agabus had to fill in some of the details? We will never know the answer to this question; however the important point for us to bear in mind is that the looseness here does not seem to worry Luke. He does not apologise for it, nor does he see the need to touch things up to make them look better.

> how competent am I to understand what he or she said? No simple, definitive answers exist. Certainly the prophet's mind did not become a typewriter or a recording tape used by the Spirit as an inanimate device. The prophet's personality was not absorbed in or merged with the Divine. Prophets sometimes even argued with God over the content of a message, as did Moses, Amos, and Habakkuk.[20]

That prophets do not always comprehend clearly what God is revealing is made clear by Peter's 'wondering about the meaning of the vision' (Acts 10:17). It was some time later that he understood that it meant Gentiles were to be accepted in the same way as the Jews (verses 34–35). Peter seems to indicate that this was a problem for Old Testament prophets as well as they pondered what God was revealing to them about Christ and His sufferings (1 Peter 1:10–11).

It seems that God corrects errors only when the prophet's mistake endangers the central message itself; that is, if the mistake would endanger spiritual welfare. Revelation 19:10 is such an example. John knelt before the angel. This is breaking the second commandment. Immediately the angel intervenes and corrects the error.

No doubt if you were a prophet it would take faith to believe that God had spoken, that you as a prophet had understood it correctly, and that you had delivered the message correctly to God's people. What a fearful responsibility! Think of the implications in the lives of the hearers if you got it wrong.[21]

Added to the statement Paul made in Romans is another statement that can be quite disturbing, particularly for those who always like to see things in black and white, and clear-cut. 'For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears . . . Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am known' (1 Cor 13:9–10, 12). Commenting on verse 9 the *SDA Bible Commentary* states, 'The gifts of knowledge and prophecy provide only partial glimpses of the inexhaustible treasures of divine knowledge. This limited knowledge will appear to be all but cancelled in the superior brightness of the eternal world, as the light of a candle loses its importance when placed in the bright light of the sun.'[22]

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20. See *Creation Reconsidered*, edited by James L Hayward (Roseville Calif: Association of Adventist Forums, 2000), *Prophets: Infallible or Authoritative* (Frederick Harder), 226.
21. One cannot help getting the impression from Jeremiah's writings in Lamentations of how easy it would be for a prophet to have some self-doubts about their work. In Jeremiah 20:7–9 he seems to express anger at God as he lamented how he has been treated by others because he gave God's message to them.
22. *SDA Bible Commentary, op cit*, 6:784.

Allowing for human and cultural elements

It is important to remember that God meets people where they are to give them His life-giving messages about Jesus. In the Bible are some cultural statements that we may not think are accurate for us today. In fairness to the Bible, we must keep in mind that the language used was the popular language of the Ancient East and not that of the scientific world of the twenty-first century. The Bible is written for common people using the language of the market place and social gatherings. The language within the culture of the times was the medium God used to get across the spiritual truth He wished His people to understand. If the Bible had been written in the language of science today, it would not have been understood by the millions who have read it prior to our age.

God never offers anything faulty or imperfect, however He has to work with the best material He can find: humanity with all its strengths and weaknesses. No wonder Paul wrote, 'But we have this treasure in jars of clay . . . (2 Cor 4:7).

As God unfolds the life-giving message of His Son He uses the people's cultural concepts in order to speak to them in a meaningful way. He uses a star to guide the magi to the baby Jesus. The magi were eastern astrologers.[23] In the ancient world it was believed that the stars were gods who lived in the heavens above the clouds. The magi accepted that this star-god could move through the sky and guide them as they sought a specific house in Bethlehem.

Just preceding the return of Jesus the Bible describes the stars falling from heaven upon the earth (Rev 6:13, Matt 24:29). Today we know that stars do not fall to the earth. If one did we would be consumed. What they thought were shooting stars we now know to be meteors. This shows us how the Bible uses the language of the culture of the times in which it was written.

On some occasions when Jesus healed He used spittle. He spat on a blind man's eyes and put spittle on the tongue of a deaf man (Mark 7:32–33; Mark 8:22–23; John 9:1–6). Pliny the Elder explains that it was believed in the time of Christ that spittle had healing properties. Jesus used this thought pattern as He demonstrated His healing power.[24]

How then do we determine what is cultural and what is trans-cultural in the Bible? Bernard Ramm offers the following advice:

'1. Whatever in Scripture is in direct reference to natural things is most likely in terms of the prevailing cultural concepts';

23. There seems to be a general consensus on this point; for example, *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Leicester: IVP, 1980), 2:930, article 'Magi', 'Both Daniel and Herodotus may contribute to the understanding of the Magi of Mt 2:1–12. Apparently the Magi were non-Jewish religious astrologers who, from astronomical observations, inferred the birth of a great Jewish King.'
24. Cited by William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible*, revised edition (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1975), on John 9:6–12.

'2. Whatever is directly theological or didactic is most likely trans-cultural.'[25]

In other words, Ramm is telling us that the Bible is a book dealing with salvation through Jesus Christ, but it will do so frequently through the cultural concepts of the age in which it was written. The Bible is perfect for the purpose that God intended it to function.

Prophets do not have all knowledge

Just in case we are inclined to think that prophets used by God possessed the gift of omniscience, consider John the Baptist. Did he have a correct understanding of the nature of the kingdom to be set up by the Messiah? He was the greatest of the prophets. He was God's special messengerto herald the coming of the Messiah and yet when he was put in prison he almost lost his faith. He, along with the other disciples, believed that Christ would set up a kingdom on earth. When Christ did not do this he sent some of his followers to ask Christ is He really was the Messiah (Matt 11:3).

John the Baptist had some things to learn and some things to unlearn. Remember when he was asked what was required for eternal life he did not outline salvation by grace but rather told his inquirers to reform their lives (Luke 3:11–14). Later his converts had to be re-baptised when they grew in their understanding beyond what he had imparted (Acts 19:1–5).

In fact prophets may not even understand what the message God has given to them in vision really means. For the first decade the Christian Church that felt their message was just for the Jews. Even though Christ said the message was to go the ends of the earth, they did not see the openness of the gospel invitation clearly. So God gave Peter a vision on the rooftop at Joppa (Acts 10). Some unclean animals were paraded before Peter and he was told to arise, kill and eat. Coming out of the vision it says, 'Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision . . . ' (verse 17). He was not sure what God was trying to reveal to him. Later he said, 'God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean' (verse 29). This is an excellent example of a prophet receiving a vision, not knowing what it was supposed to be teaching, but future experience helped him to understand.

Peter comments on the prophets of the Old Testament as having 'searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow' (1 Peter 1:10–11). No doubt Isaiah was one such prophet who struggled to understand the sufferings of the faithful servant passages found in his book.

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25. Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1965), 53.

Some may wonder if the prophets always had an open line to God. That is, whether on all occasions they will have God's answer to the situation. The evidence indicates that this is not correct. When challenged by Hananiah, Jeremiah has no answer but walks away. Later he receives the answer (Jer 28:10–11). Again, Jeremiah talks of how on one occasion he meditated for ten days to receive an answer from God (Jer 42:7). Elijah declares he is not under inspiration regarding the problems facing the Shunamite woman when he declares '... the Lord has hidden it from me and has not told me why' (2 Kgs 4:27). There is even evidence of a need for a type of spiritual 'tuning-in'. On one occasion Elisha called for a harpist to help him tune in and prophesy. Walter Kaiser Jr adds that '[Music] had the effect of quieting the disturbed thoughts and attitudes of the prophets, and of setting theology in the context of doxology'.[26]

King David inquired of his court prophet Nathan regarding the building of a temple. Should he do this? Nathan responded, yes God is with you. It seems that the prophet gave advice that was not from God. That night God told Nathan to go back and tell David he was not to build the temple because he was a man of blood. Solomon his son was to build the temple (1 Chron 17:1–4).

How Shall We Test True Prophets From False?

Not by prophecies coming to pass in isolation from other factors

Jeremiah 28:9 is often quoted regarding the need for prophecies to come to pass in order to tell a true prophet from a false prophet. Is this the right passage of Scripture to use? It deserves close consideration: 'The prophet who prophesies peace will be recognised as one truly sent by the Lord only if his prediction comes true'.

The context of this passage is of a prophetic contest between Jeremiah and Hananiah. Hananiah says there will be peace for Jerusalem and Judah; while Jeremiah says the Babylonians will come and destroy the city of Jerusalem, and the Kingdom of Judah will fall. Jeremiah responds by saying that if Hananiah's prophesy of peace comes to pass then they will know that God has spoken through him. In other words, this is a specific situation being addressed. It ought not to be used as a blanket test for evaluating prophets solely on a basis of whether what they say comes to pass.

Deuteronomy 13: 1–5 shows why this can be dangerous, and gives a more complete picture regarding fulfillment of predictions as a test,

> If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or a wonder, and the sign or

26. Walter Kaiser, *Back Toward the Future: Hints for Interpreting Prophecy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 76.

> wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, 'Let us follow other gods' (gods you have not known) and 'let us worship them,' you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer . . . That prophet or dreamer must be put to death, because he preached rebellion against the Lord your God . . .

This passage warns that if a miraculous sign or wonder takes place as foretold by a prophet, this is not of itself sufficient to say that prophet is of God. False prophets, may, at times, predict events that come to pass. We see this through the powers operating within the occult. Evil angels can work through human agencies to foretell the future with greater accuracy than humans left to themselves. This passage tells us that the prophet must also teach us to worship the One True God and give obedience to Him. James Dunn comments that, 'The trouble was that sometimes the word of a false prophet did come true, and sometimes the word of a true prophet was not fulfilled; Yahweh could change his mind (2 Kgs 20:1–7)."[27] We must be careful in using fulfillment of prophecy to test a true prophet from a false prophet Do we consider Jonah to be a false prophet because Nineveh was not destroyed as he predicted? Obviously there are sometimes certain conditions to be met in the fulfillment of some prophecies even though the conditions may not be stated at the time the prophecy is given. Jonah did not state any conditions and yet in the mind of God there were conditions involved. When considering the fulfillment of prophecy for judging true and false prophets we must always keep in mind the following statement made through Jeremiah,

> If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it (Jer 18:7–10).

Sometimes when prophets predict the future they do so in order that something can be done about it, such as to bring about repentance and a right relationship with God, and so avoid the prophecy of judgment coming upon them. In Jeremiah 26:16–19 some of the elders argue that Jeremiah should not be put to death because Micah had also prophesied doom for Jerusalem and it did not happen because of a right response from Hezekiah.[28]

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27. James DG Dunn, *The Christ and The Spirit, Volume 2 Pneumatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 29–30.
28. The prophecy was made in Micah 3:12 and avoided by Hezekiah in 2 Kings 18:3–6.

Think of the returning exiles from Babylon. Ezekiel had prophesied of the building of a glorious temple in the last chapters of his book. When they built Zerubbabel's temple some of them wept that it was not as glorious as Solomon's. It certainly was nothing like the glorious temple Ezekiel had predicted. Did this make Ezekiel a false prophet? Certainly not. Their poor response led to a poorer temple than God had promised. God had also promised a glorious future for the nation that was never realised.

Another reason why fulfillment must be limited as a test of a true prophet is that sometimes there may be a delay in the fulfillment. A whole generation may live and die and not see the prophecy come to pass as predicted. An example of this would be Ezekiel's prediction that Tyre would be destroyed and cast into the sea. It was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar and then lay in ruins for many generations until Alexander the Great unwittingly fulfilled the prophecy. Think of all those who lived and died and never saw the complete fulfillment of what Ezekiel had prophesied.

Another reason why we must be careful in using fulfillment of prophecy as the means of judging true prophets from false is found in the nature of God. God is active and dynamic. If He chooses He may not limit Himself to fulfilling the prophecy the way in which it was originally given. It is possible that God may choose to exceed the original prediction and, because of this, the existing generation may fail to recognise that the prophecies are being fulfilled.

A good example of this is seen in how Jesus Christ fulfilled the prophecies concerning His coming as the long-awaited Messiah. The Jewish leaders made the point that He could not be the long-awaited one because He was a Galilean from Nazareth. They correctly pointed out that no prophet was predicted to come from Nazareth. They knew Bethlehem was predicted in Micah 5:2. However, the prophecy had been fulfilled when Christ was born in Bethlehem but later He went and lived in Galilee, and they did not expect this.

It is difficult for us to put ourselves in the mind-set of the Jews of Christ's day because we have the New Testament, which shows us the way in which Christ did fulfill the prophecies. But if we were able to put ourselves into the same situation as the Jews in Palestine in the 1st century with no New Testament to guide us would we have been any wiser?

Try this as an exercise some time: Can you find from the Old Testament prophecies alone the incarnation of Christ? That is, the fact that the Creator would Himself become a babe at Bethlehem. Can you find in the Old Testament the fact that He would die the death of crucifixion? Can you find from the Old Testament alone that the Messiah would be resurrected? Remember you are to do this without the help of the New Testament. At best, this is not an easy task, and yet these three events are pivotal in the ministry of Jesus. The fulfillment of prophecy can be full of surprises. God is not limited by what He has previously said. He is dynamic,

ever moving forward, expanding the scope of His purposes and our understanding of them, and often giving more than what He has promised.

How Then Shall We Judge Prophets?

Regarding true and false prophets in the Old Testament, Craig Evans has some helpful advice,

> The difference lay in their hermeneutics. The false prophets and other 'official theologians' [that is, the priests and wise men] maintained a hermeneutic of continuity. That is, after reviewing Israel's sacred traditions, they were convinced that the God of Israel who had bought His people out of the land of slavery and into the land of promise would surely preserve His people in that land . . . Thus the official theologians attempted to limit, localise, and domesticate God for the immediate and short range interests of Israel. Such a hermeneutic sought to manipulate God: 'if we do this then He must do that.' The false prophet's messages of reassurance which were sweet to the ears . . . failed to inform Israel prophetically.
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> The true prophet, likewise, appealed to these same Torah traditions. He agreed that Yahweh was indeed powerful enough to maintain His people in His land . . . but Yahweh was also powerful enough to take Israel out of the land and put her back into exile . . . The false prophet, by way of contrast was bound primarily with the interests of the people rather than with God.[29]

How could a king, sitting on his throne, with two sets of prophets speaking entirely different messages, determine who was speaking on behalf of God? The answer was to be found in the fact that the false prophets offered prosperity without repentance. They preached the gospel without the law. The writings of the true prophets are full of complaint against them.[30] True prophets stressed that God's people had to turn from their evil ways or face the consequences. They preached, 'repent or perish' (Ezek 14:6; 18:30). As such they were the guardians of the covenant God had made with Israel. They were there to remind Israel of the promised blessings that come from obedience and the curses that had been promised from disobedience. In New Testament times the classic test of a true prophet is the statement made by Jesus,

29. Craig A Evans, "ANIMADVERSIONES Paul and the Hermeneutics of 'True Prophecy': A Study of Romans 9-11", *Biblica* 65 (1984): 560-570.

30. For example, Jeremiah 6:13–14.

> Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognise them . . . Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evil-doers!' (Matt 7:15–23).

This passage of Scripture is of vital importance to testing prophets to identify the true from the false. Here Jesus Himself lays down clear criteria. It is not by claiming to working in the name of Jesus. It is not by miraculous manifestations whether they may be the physical manifestations accompanying the prophet's work. It is not by driving out demons.

The real test is that of obedience. Verse 23 says, literally, 'Depart from me the [ones] working lawlessness'. The word translated 'lawlessness' is *anomia. Nomia* means 'lawfulness' and an 'a' before a word in Greek means 'against'. It is the equivalent of 'un' in English and reverses the meaning of an adjective. So the word literally means 'against the law' or 'unlawfulness'.

True prophets will uphold obedience to God's law both in their lives and in the lives of others. Jesus illustrates this when He states in verses 24–27 that it was the wise man who built his house on the rock. He obeyed the words of Jesus. It was the foolish man who built his house on the sand and lost it. He was foolish because he did not obey the words of Christ.

When prophesying of the coming of the day of the Lord, Peter states another important work of prophets with the challenge to live holy lives, 'Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed it's coming' (2 Peter 3:11–12).

Paul provides some additional ideas on how to test true prophecy from false when he addressed the church in Corinth. First, he says that people cannot be true prophets if they cried out, 'Jesus be cursed!' (1 Cor 12:3). Second, true prophecy will edify and build up the community of believers (1 Cor 14:4, 31). For John the test was that the prophet must acknowledge that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh (1 John 4:1–3). For both Paul and John the important test for a prophet can vary according to the local situation and the issues being faced.

The great test to be applied to prophets, to determine if they are true or false is, do they call us to worship the true God and obey His laws by living a holy life? If we have erred from the faith they will call us to repent and give obedience to God's Word. They will call us away from false worship. This is a test that is within the understanding of the educated and the uneducated alike.

New Testament Prophecy

New Testament prophecy commences with the appearance of John the Baptist. In his dress and solitary style of ministry he would have appealed to the populace as being a prophet after the tradition of the Old Testament. In addition he denounced immorality and wickedness and demanded repentance in view of the fact that God was about to send His long awaited Messiah, who would punish the ungodly. In doing this he met the Old Testament expectations of prophetic activity. This, with the power seen to attend his work, caused many to accept him as a true prophet.

In John 16:12–15, Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would still speak to His followers after His departure. But when the followers of Christ say words caused by the prompting of the Holy Spirit it does not necessarily make them prophets. All the followers of Christ are able at times to say words prompted by the Spirit. (Perhaps we could label them 'prophetic statements'). This does not necessarily make a person a prophet. We will see that this term seems to be used in the biblical passages to describe those who are especially called and used by God for a prophetic ministry.

A useful way of defining prophecy in the New Testament context is by saying it is the Spirit of God revealing to believers what they need to know to meet specific situations. This is now a possibility for all believers, but there are some specially chosen individuals whom will receive the prophetic gift (1 Cor 12:29). As such they will be used more frequently and be recognised as having the prophetic gift.

In contrast to the Old Testament, the New Testament anticipates that the gift of prophecy will become more widespread. It will not be limited to the Hebrew race alone nor to a few select individuals as in the past. The opening of the Christian era was accompanied by a powerful manifestation of the Gift of Prophecy. Peter gave meaning to the outpouring of God's Spirit at Pentecost by saying,

> This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days and they will prophecy (Acts 2:17–18).

Peter is saying clearly that from now on God is going to pour out His Spirit upon all people regardless of race, gender, age or social standing. The Holy Spirit will now abide in every believer. The ministries of ancient prophets, priests and kings have now passed into the lives of ordinary people (Rev 1:6, 1 Peter 2:9–10, 1 Cor 14:1).

The Pentecost fulfillment indicates a wider number of people will now experience this gift. Paul in 1 Corinthians 14: 1 encourages all believers to 'eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy'. At the same time he states that not all will have this gift (1 Cor 12:29). Paul does, however, rank the gift of prophecy over all the other gifts of grace. In 1 Corinthians 14:1 he admonishes them to desire spiritual gifts, especially prophecy. When he mentions the gifts he repeatedly lists prophecy after the apostles (1 Cor 12:28, Eph 2:20; 3:5; 4:11). Evangelists, pastors and teachers are always listed behind prophets. In Ephesians 2:20 the prophets are listed with the apostles as part of the foundation of the church. Ben Witherington III adds that,

> NT prophets did not have the same status, standing, or unquestioned authority as some of the OT prophets. Rather, there is evidence from Paul suggesting that the utterances of Christian prophets needed to be weighed, since it was possible for their prophecy, in the enthusiasm of the moment of revelation, to exceed the proportion of their faith and understanding . . . The prophet, it seems, did not have the highest honor rating in Paul's communities. Yet Paul clearly rated prophets as very important to the early church, placing them behind only the apostles in his lists of church roles and functionaries.[31]

Paul also clearly "pulls rank" on local prophets in 1 Cor 14:36–38 where he says, 'Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored.' Paul sees himself as one who passes on the words of Christ and calls for the local prophets to acknowledge what he says; if not they will be ignored. It does appear that there are different levels of the gift of prophecy operating in the New Testament.

Various manifestations of the gift of prophecy

It is to these diverse manifestations of the gift of prophecy we need to turn to understand the different functions and manifestations of the gift in the New Testament. Some are given a revelation, yet there is no record of them receiving another and they are not called prophets; for instance, there is a prophetic utterance by Mary (Luke 1:46–55); Zechariah the father of John the Baptist makes a prophetic speech about Jesus (Luke 1:67–79); Simeon makes a prophetic speech also about Jesus (Luke 2:25–35). Even Caiaphas the apostate high priest unwittingly makes a prophecy about the significance of the death of Christ (John 11:49–52). Ananias

31. Ben Witherington III, *Jesus The Seer* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 316.

received a prophetic revelation regarding the life and work of Paul; yet he is not called a prophet. He is simply called 'a certain disciple' (Acts 9:10).

From these experiences we see that the gift of prophecy move upon a variety of individuals who may, consciously or unconsciously, make prophetic statements. This may or may not happen to them *again*. None of those mentioned here are ever called prophets. However, they gave prophetic messages.

All believers are encouraged by Paul to eagerly desire spiritual gifts especially the gift of prophecy (1 Cor 14:1). He also stated that not all will have this particular gift (1 Cor 12:29). According to the statement made by Peter at Pentecost (Acts 2:17–21) we can expect a widespread use of the gift now that we are in the age of the Spirit.

1 Corinthians 14 seems to be laying down the way in which the gift should operate at the local church level. Some would call this 'congregational prophecy'. The gift of prophecy is said to be for 'strengthening, encouragement, and comfort' (1 Cor 14:3). This gift includes a revelation (verse 30) and the prophet is in control of his/her mind (verse 32). They must also speak in harmony with what Paul has previously taught (verses 36–38). This form of prophecy operates when the congregation is assembled It may consists of personal encouragement or public testimonies;[32] however, it must be a revelation to be a prophecy, otherwise it simply a 'teaching.'[33] Chris Forbes comments on Christian prophecy and its relationship to preaching and teaching,

> Was Christian prophecy basically the same as preaching? Probably not. As far as I can tell it wasn't a matter of reading Scripture and expounding its meaning. The two examples in Acts certainly aren't exposition of Scripture and don't even quote it. In fact, you never find prophecy in the New Testament closely linked with expounding the Word of God. They were different things. Teachers and preachers expounded Scripture. Prophets passed on direct revelations from God . . . It was immediate, verbal, direct, about the congregational situation. It wasn't of long term relevance.[34]

Ephesians 5:19 admonishes local Christians to 'Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord . . .' Andrew Lincoln understands this as,

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32. Michael Green, *To Corinth with Love: the vital relevance today of Paul's advice to the Corinthian Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982), 75, speaks of this form of prophecy as follows, 'Prophecy is not the equivalent of Scripture. Prophecy is a particular word for a particular congregation (or person) at a particular time through a particular person. Scripture is for all Christians in all places at all times.'
33. 1 Corinthians 14:24, 30 seems to teach prophecy has to do with receiving revelations and making known secrets of people's hearts.
34. Chris Forbes, "Straight from God", in *On Being*, April (1991): 13.

> speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and songs inspired by the Spirit ... the songs which the believers sing to each other are spiritual because they are inspired by the Spirit . . . Phil 2:6–11; Col 1:15–20; Eph 5:14; 1 Tim 3:16 may provide some examples which have found their way into the NT, to snatches of song freshly created in the assembly . . . [35]

This singing would possibly be the same singing that Paul refers to when he says, 'So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind' (1 Cor 14:15). No doubt the singing brought spiritual encouragement to the congregation in harmony with what prophecy was meant to do as outlined in 1 Corinthians 14:3. Paul also encourages the Thessalonians to treat this form of prophecy with respect (1 Thess 5:20).[36] For those used by God to prophesy on a regular basis, it would seem they are actually called prophets. This could include some at the local church level as pictured in 1 Corinthians 14 or even an itinerant prophet like Agabus (Acts 11:27). It seems that the early church had a good supply of people who were recognised as prophets (Acts 13:1).

At the higher level there were the Apostles, who were also called prophets (Eph 2:20). Paul exercises an authority unlike any other New Testament prophet. For instance, he writes, 'Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit?' (1 Cor 4:21) and 'Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme' (1 Tim 1:20).

If we see the Apostles as the successors of the Old Testament prophets we should not expect to treat their messages with any less respect for they are the conveyers of Christ to us. They were instructed directly by Christ. Paul is conscious of this when he states, 'For I received from the Lord what I passed on to you . . .' (1 Cor 11:23).

Paul zealously defends his authority, not on the basis that he is a prophet, but an apostle, 'Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord . . .' (1 Cor 9:1). He writes, 'I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ' (Gal 1:11–12). Paul's authority as an apostle means his writings have become an important part of the

35. Andrew Lincoln, *Word Biblical Commentary, Ephesians*, No. 42 (Dallas, Tex: Word Books, 1990), 345–346.

36. John Stott, *The Message of Thessalonians* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), 128. 'This form of prophecy was not considered to be a message which brought the very words of God to the people. It was rather a timely word of instruction, encouragement or rebuke which brought the general thrust of God's guidance to the church in each particular situation.'

Bible. To argue against his teachings would be in defiance of the fact that the apostles were men taught directly by Christ and commissioned by Christ.[37]

Peter understands that the authority of the Old Testament prophets has been passed on to the New Testament Apostles. Accordingly Peter writes, 'I want you to recall the words spoken *in the past by the holy prophets* and the command given by our Lord and Saviour *through your apostles*'.[38] In New Testament times the status of the Old Testament prophet was given to the Apostles who had seen Christ in the flesh and been taught by Him. They had also been witnesses to His resurrection (Acts 1:21–22; 1 Cor 9:1).

It is a mistake to consider the word 'prophet' in Old Testament times and equate its function with the word 'prophet' as it appears in the New Testament. However, it is true that certain functions of Christian prophets do remind us of Old Testament prophets:

1. They predict the future (Acts 11:28, 20:23).
2. They declare divine judgments (Acts 13:11; 28:25–28).
3. They use symbolic actions when prophesying (Acts 21:11).
4. They exhort and encourage God's people (Acts 15:32).

John who wrote the book of Revelation is in many ways like an Old Testament prophet.

Yet to equate prophets in both testaments as being essentially the same is to miss the importance of Acts 2:17–21, which implies that since Pentecost, the gift of prophecy will become more widespread and diverse. The New Testament says all God's people are potentially prophets. Not all will exercise this gift, yet they are all encouraged to seek it (1 Cor 14:1). Various individuals may be used as the Spirit selects them (1 Cor 12:29). They may be used once or many times, or may be so used in a way which enables them to be called prophets. The real successors of the classical prophets of the Old Testament are the Apostles in that they were taught directly by Christ and were used by God to give us the sacred canon.

It is difficult to classify where Ellen White's prophetic ministry fits within this scheme, because at times she appears like a classical prophet, while there are other times when she appears to function like a local prophet. She does no appear to fit into any one category.

The need for discernment

In the New Testament we are told to evaluate prophecies. Apart from the authority given to prophets in the Old Testament and the apostles in the New Testament, we

37. Apostles were men taught directly by Christ. Paul argues this way to defend his apostleship in Galatians 1:1,11,12. In Acts 1:21–22 it was seen as a necessary in finding a replacement for Judas.
38. 2 Peter 3:2, emphasis added.

have seen that prophecy is sometimes given a lower status in the New Testament. For instance, we can see the Thessalonians were inclined to treat it disrespectfully (1 Thess 5:20) and that Paul tries to advance it over the gift of tongues in the thinking of the Corinthians (1 Cor 14:5).

The New Testament does not picture prophets as taking over from the apostles after they died nor does it picture them as the ones who are in particular to guard the church against false teaching. Jude admonishes all church members 'to contend for the faith that was once for entrusted to the saints' (Jude 3). This does not mean that the gift does not have some doctrinal authority; however the authority that is to be used to protect the faithful from doctrinal error does not belong to the gift of prophecy alone but is also given to apostles, evangelists, pastors and teachers. (Eph 4:11–14)

In contrast to the authority given to the Apostles in the New Testament, prophets are to have their prophecies evaluated. Carson has this observation to offer as he contrasts Old and New Testament prophets,

> If a prophet speaking in the name of God was shown to be in error, the official sanction was death. But once a prophet is acknowledged as true, there is no trace of repeated checks on the content of his oracles. By contrast, New Testament prophets are to have their oracles carefully weighed (1 Cor 14:29; so also 1 Thess 5:19–21). Moreover, there is no hint of excommunication as the threatened sanction if the prophet occasionally does not live up to the mark.[39]

In his footnote Carson agrees with Grudem that the verb used in 1 Cor 14:29 which is *diakrino* translated "weigh carefully" bears "the meaning of sifting, separating, evaluating: whereas the simple form *krino* is used for judgments where there are clear cut options (guilty or innocent, true or false, right or wrong) and never for evaluative distinction.'[40]

Scholarly consensus for evaluation

There is broad consensus among respected scholars for the need to evaluate Christian prophetic messages.[41] This is such an important point I will quote a few highly respected scholars. David Aune states,

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39. DA Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Homebush West, NSW: Anzea, 1988), 94–95.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Space forbids the inclusion of many of them; however a reader interested in this aspect of the subject should consult Thomas W Gillespie, *The First Theologians. A study in Early Christian Prophecy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 33–63.

> In several places within his letters Paul directly addresses the subject of evaluating Christian prophecy (1 Thess 5:19–22; 1 Cor 12:10; 14:29). These references are all-important since they constitute the earliest evidence that Christian prophecy was subject to some form of community control . . .[42]

Max Turner writes,

> Paul knows that congregational prophecy, by contrast, is sometimes so unprepossessing that prophecy as a whole is in danger of being despised (1 Thess 5:19, 20). Both at Thessalonica and at Corinth he demands that congregational prophecy be evaluated—not that it just be accepted totally as true prophecy or rejected totally as false prophecy (as in the Old Testament, according to Grudem).[43]

Turner then goes on to comment on the use of *diakrino* as being a word to imply evaluating and separating as opposed to *krino* being a word to say something is wholly true or false,

> It is a matter of deciding what is from God, and how it applies, and of separating this from what is merely human interference. Indeed the human element and human error appears to have been so apparent that in 1 Thessalonians 5:19, 20 Paul has to warn the congregation, 'Do not despise prophecies, but test everything hold fast to what is good'. Arguably, then, prophecy in the New Testament is thus a mixed phenomenon.[44]

Commenting on 1 Corinthians 14:29, Anthony Thiselton says,

> The authentic is to be *sifted* from the inauthentic or spurious, in the light of the OT scriptures, the gospel of Christ, the traditions of all the churches, and critical reflections. Nowhere does Paul hint that preaching or 'prophecy' achieves a privileged status which places them above critical reflection in the light of the gospel, the Spirit, and the scriptures. *It is never infallible.*[45]

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42. David E Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Near Eastern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 219.
43. Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts Then and Now* (Cumbria, CA: Paternoster 1996), 213–214.
44. *Ibid*, 214.
45. Anthony C Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*

The NEB translates 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22 in the following way, 'Do not stifle inspiration, and do not despise prophetic utterances, but bring them all to the test and then keep what is good in them and avoid the bad of whatever kind'. It is important to note that neither the passage in 1 Corinthians 14:29 nor 1 Thessalonians 5:19–21 are talking about testing true prophets from false prophets. Both statements are made in the context of worship services where regular, accepted prophets are operating. The evaluation is not of the prophet who has already been accepted by the congregation, but the message itself, which may be of mixed quality. There can be no doubt that 1 Corinthians 14 is dealing with a worship service.

Cranfield offers this helpful advice when commenting on Romans 12:6,

> While any Christian might from time to time be inspired to prophesy, there were some who were so frequently inspired that they were regarded as being prophets and forming a distinct group of persons . . . But Paul recognised the need for prophetic utterances to be received with discrimination. He gives instruction in 1 Cor 14:29 that, while the prophets are prophesying, the rest of the congregation is to 'discern' . . . And in 1 Cor 12:10 the gift of discerning of spirits . . . is significantly mentioned immediately after the gift of prophecy.[46]

Witherington comments on Romans 12:6 that:

> Grudem is likely right that Paul sees the prophecy of the Gentile churches as not having the same degree of inspiration or authority as either OT prophecy or his own teaching or, for that matter, Jesus' prophecy and teaching, none of which is said to need weighing or sifting (cf 1 Cor 12:10; 14:29).[47]

An important point coming out of Paul's counsel regarding prophecy is for us not to make the same mistake (as was made in Corinth) of overvaluing prophecy by thinking of prophecies as always being the very words of God. For Paul the test of prophecy was that it exalted Jesus (1 Cor 12:3), manifested love (1 Cor 13:4–7) and built up the body (1 Cor 14:3). Aune agrees with Cranfield on the intent of the gift 'discerning of spirits' being mentioned after the gift of prophecy.

> The close relationship between prophesying and the evaluation of prophetic utterances in 1 Cor 14:29 indicates that there is a connec-

(Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 1140.

46. Cranfield, *The International Critical Commentary, op cit,* 620.

47. Witherington, *Jesus the Seer, op cit,* 326. The following statement from Witherington is also worth noting: 'Although prophecy is alive and well in the Pauline churches . . . Texts in both 1 Corinthians 14 and Romans 12 suggest that Paul thought that it was possible to prophesy beyond the extent of one's inspiration and faith, and so such prophecy had to be sifted or weighed.' *Ibid,* 328.

> tion between the gift of prophecy and the gift of 'discerning of spirits,' just as there is between the gift of tongues and the gift of interpreting tongues (1 Cor 12:10) . . . This evaluative process or procedure may lie behind such enigmatical expressions as 'it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' (Acts 15:28).[48]

An evaluation of prophetic utterances

Aune's reference to Paul's decision to still head towards Jerusalem as recorded in Acts 21 is an excellent example of what Paul means when he states we are to evaluate prophesy. Acts 21 has New Testament prophecy operating at the different levels already referred to. First, Paul, an apostle who is also a prophet, feels 'compelled by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem' (Acts 20:22). On the way he is met by some disciples at Tyre who 'through the Spirit'[49] urge him not to go up to Jerusalem. It appears that Paul evaluates their message and still decides to press on. These disciples were not established prophets; they are called 'disciples'. Probably they are operating at the 1 Corinthians 14 level. It is possible they were given an insight, by the Spirit, of trouble ahead for Paul. They put their interpretation on it to warn him not to go. They probably had a wrong interpretation because Paul previously said he was being compelled by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. Paul therefore exercises his right to do some sifting of the message in harmony with 1 Cor 14:29.

Paul stays at the home of Phillip who has four daughters who prophesy (verse 8). We are not told the content of their prophecies, however they are probably once again operating at the 1 Corinthians 14 level. The present tense expressed by the word *propheteuousai* would seem to suggest that they exercised the gift regularly. While he is there, Agabus comes and warns of the dangers ahead (verses 10–14). It appears that the Holy Spirit has spoken to Agabus and given him an insight into the troubles Paul can expect. He states that the Jews will bind Paul and hand him over to the Gentiles.

Notice that Agabus does not put his own interpretation on the prophecy by saying Paul should not go. He merely states what will happen. It is those listening who put their interpretation on the matter and plead with him not to go. Paul overrides their interpretation as he did with the disciples from Tyre. Agabus is a man used so often by God through the gift of prophecy that he is called a 'prophet'; yet, even though he was an experienced prophet, his prediction did not quite work out exactly as he stated. Compare verse 11, where Agabus states that Paul will be taken by the Jews and handed over to the Gentiles; with the fulfillment in verses 30–33, which shows that what actually happens is that the Jews took Paul

48. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Near Eastern World, op cit,* 220–222.
49. A term usually considered to mean the gift of prophecy at work. Compare the expression as it is used when Agabus prophesies in Acts 11:28.

and tried to kill him. They did not hand him over to the Gentiles; rather, it was the Gentiles who rescued him and took him away from the Jews.

It did not work out exactly as Agabus had stated. Perhaps Agabus had a revelation of trouble ahead. Maybe he did a little filling in himself. All we know is that there is a lack of precise detail here in a true prophecy, made by an experienced prophet. Acts 21 is an important passage to study to understand more fully the nature of New Testament prophecy.[50]

Gillespie sees in 1 Corinthians 15 an example of what Paul has been stating about the need to evaluate prophecy in the previous chapter. It seems that some were saying that there was no resurrection of the dead, and Paul is using his prophetic revelation in verses 51–55 as a critique of what other prophets were saying. In other words when he states in 14:37 that the other prophets must acknowledge what he is saying as the Word of God or they will be ignored, he is demonstrating what he means in the next chapter.[51] Alistar Stewart-Sykes quotes Gillespie and supports him in this concept,

> In the description of Corinthian worship which precedes this chapter we are told that prophecies which are given are to be subjected to prophetic judgement [sic] and interpretation. In what follows we may have such a prophetic judgement [sic] of a prophecy . . . a transition from a prophecy to a judgement [sic] of a prophecy in the way that was normal in worship.[52]

Stewart-Sykes adds that the book of Revelation offers another example of a hierarchy of prophets.[53] He sees John as a 'visionary prophet'; in other words, that 'his means of inspiration are visions revived outside of the context of worship, the contents of which are subsequently reported to the community'.[54] He also sees John as a 'free prophet of the Old Testament type' in that, unlike the prophets described in 1 Corinthians, he is not subjected to evaluation,

50. Graeme S Bradford, *Was Paul resisting the Spirit of Prophecy on his way to Jerusalem?* (Unpublished MA paper, December 1993). In this paper I suggest that Paul was indeed following the procedure of evaluating prophecy when he still followed his own convictions that God wanted him to witness to his faith in Jerusalem. He still continued on his journey despite warnings given to him through Christian prophecy. Witherington expresses a similar view when he makes the following comment regarding Paul's attitude towards Agabus in Acts 21. Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, *op cit*, 342.
51. Gillespie, *The First Theologians*, *op cit*, 220–221.
52. Alistar Stewart-Sykes, *From Prophecy to Preaching: A Search For The Origins Of The Christian Homily* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 102–3.
53. *Ibid*, 118.
54. *Ibid*, 126.

> Aune picks up hints of opposition to John among the churches at 2:14 and 2:20–23, where other (presumably local) prophets are tarred with the brush of false prophecy under biblical pseudonyms. The fact that John needs to oppose prophecy with prophecy is an indication that only a prophetic message carried authority in these communities . . . Quite regardless of its date, the Johannine apocalypse thus enables us to see the church functioning at its most primitive level in terms of how the word of God was communicated to the community.[55]

Stewart-Sykes summarises his arguments as follows,

> Herein lies one of the origins of Christian preaching: for when prophecy was delivered it was necessary that the prophecy be judged, interpreted and expounded. Thus it is in this process, it is suggested, that the origins of the homily lie . . . The theological development of a growing respect paid to the written canon . . . [had] the eventual result that Scripture comes to dominate prophecy to such an extent that the prophetic voice disappears altogether.[56]

The evidence from the New Testament is that prophecy was being as much looked down upon and despised as it was being abused. The danger the church faced was that they would not hear the genuine messages coming from authentic prophets. Paul counseled the church not to despise prophecies, but to test them. However, even with the genuine prophet there appears to be an expectation at times of a mixture of 'wheat and chaff', as we see the human element surfacing. We should not therefore necessarily reject as false prophets those who at the lower level of prophecy do not demonstrate infallibility in conveying their messages. This judging of Christian prophets should not be confused with the Old Testament rules about judging false prophets. The New Testament passages deal with judging the prophecies being delivered, and not the prophet themselves.

Adventism After the Death of Ellen White

The 1919 Bible Conference

Little was known of the 1919 Bible Conference until December 6,1974, when Donald Yost, the senior archivist at the General Conference headquarters in Washington, DC was setting up the newly formed archives. He accidentally discovered two

55. *Ibid*,131.
56. *Ibid*, 270–271.

packets of papers containing some 2400 pages of typewritten material that were stenographic notes taken at the Bible Conference held in Takoma Park, Maryland, in July 1919. The subsequent publication of those minutes in *Spectrum* gave Adventists a unique opportunity to see how some of the contemporaries of Ellen White viewed her function and authority. This was a world of thought that few, if any, of even the best-informed Seventh-day Adventists knew existed.

We will not focus on the conference itself, but on a smaller after meeting called The Bible and History Teachers Council attended by twenty-two delegates, some of them prominent church leaders. In the after-meeting of the 1919 Bible Conference, AG Daniells[57] could speak with authority. He had on many occasions, along with WW Prescott, been part of the team that worked with her in the putting together of some of her books. During the course of the after-meeting he made this observation,

> Well, now, as I understand it, Sister White never claimed to be an authority on history, and never claimed to be a dogmatic teacher on theology. She never outlined a course of theology, like Mrs Eddy's book on teaching . . . She never claimed to be an authority on history . . . she was ready to correct in revision such statements as she thought should be corrected. I have never gone to her writings, and taken the history that I found in her writings, as the positive statement of history regarding the fulfilment of prophecy.[58]

It would seem that the leaders of the church, along with the Bible teachers present, did not feel quite comfortable in presenting what they knew to be the truth regarding the subject of the inspiration of Ellen White's writings to the laity of the church. Although most present at the conference were pleased with the open and frank discussion about some sensitive issues regarding inspiration, the subsequent reaction by some who were also present shows that not all were in agreement with presenters like Daniells, Prescott and Lacey. Serious trouble lay ahead, culminating in the dismissal of Daniells as General Conference President in the 1922 General Conference session.

The death of the founder of any movement is often of great significance. This was certainly true for the Seventh-day Adventist Church with the death of Ellen White in 1915. History shows that when this has happened to other movements

57. The 1919 after-meeting was held with church administrators and Bible teachers to try and sort out some of the wrong views that were coming to the fore regarding the use of Ellen White's writings. This meeting was held just four years after her death.

58. 1919 Bible Conference Minutes printed in 'The Bible Conference of 1919', in *Spectrum* 1 34. See similar statements in *ibid*, 34. AG Daniels; *ibid*, 38. HC Lacey to AG Daniels; *ibid*, 38. HC Lacey; *ibid*, 40. WG Wirth; *ibid*, 46. JN Anderson; *ibid*, 49. GB Thompson.

of the past the tendency is for the next generation to 'pull down the shutters' and strive towards conserving rather than exploring. Bull and Lockhart maintain that this also happened to the Seventh-day Adventist Church,

> [When] Ellen White died . . . the church was robbed of its chief means of authorising innovation. The liveliness and flexibility that had characterised the Adventist theological debate in the nineteenth century evaporated . . . The intellectually disciplined theological debates that had filled the pages of *The Review* now disappeared . . . The writings of Ellen White and the Bible now functioned not as a source of new ideas but as a compendium of truths to be expounded and memorised . . . Adventist theology has developed in parallel with that of the mainstream. It was at its most distinctive during a period of great diversity; *it became fundamentalist in the era of fundamentalism; and softened with the rise of evangelicalism*[59]

The history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church reflects many eras of change. Bull and Lockhart have correctly observed that after the death of Ellen White there were forces at work in society that pushed the movement into an unnatural fundamentalist stance. Later, the forces in society would also push it back toward what many would claim to be its more natural position. Mostly this was caused by Ellen White's legacy to the Church that it should pursue higher education. However, these same forces were also at work in the Protestant world and affected other denominations in a similar way.

It was only in 1958 that her material on inspiration was printed in *Selected Messages* volume one, and it was not until 1980 that more material was made available in *Selected Messages* volume three. If the material found in these volumes had been more readily available, and if it had been understood, it may have spared the Church many divisive problems.

For us today it is important to notice that those who associated with her, and who reflected on her ministry in the 1919 Conference, appear to have a firm understanding of what to expect from a prophet. They understood this not so much from the Bible as from their association with a genuine prophet. Today we can see the recent scholarship on prophecy has given us a clearer understanding from the Bible. We can get it from the Bible; they got it from their association with a prophet. Surely this must be seen as convincing evidence that they were associating with a genuine prophet who met every biblical expectation.

59. Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking A Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 88–89. Emphasis added.