

# ELLEN WHITE - HER PERSPECTIVE AND PRACTICE TOWARDS THOSE IN NEED<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Seventh-day Adventists have historically prioritized not only the dissemination of theological principles but also their practical application in daily life. Ellen White emerged as a steadfast proponent of the necessity for genuine and consistent social engagement throughout her life. She championed the cause of runaway slaves, endorsed the alcohol prohibition movement in the United States, advocated for the establishment of medical facilities, and personally attended to those in need, demonstrating that the value of humanity is best appreciated through a Christian lens. Additionally, the article offers a wider perspective on Ellen White's contributions, which are often viewed with considerable bias outside the Seventh-day Adventist community.

**Keywords:** Ellen White, Adventist Church, benevolence, poor, orphans, United States, 19th century, education, lifestyle, health, blacks,

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## Why Ellen White.

In November 2014, Smithsonian Magazine listed Ellen White, co-founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, as one of the 100 most significant American personalities of all time.

The Smithsonian's list was based on research by Steven Skiena and Charles B. Ward, who analyzed data from the English-language Wikipedia site and more than 15 million books scanned by Google. What's more, Cambridge University Press published their research in a paper entitled

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“Who’s Bigger: Where Historical Figures Really Rank?”<sup>2</sup>

Ellen White was a prominent figure among her contemporaries, often eliciting strong reactions, whether of support or opposition. She frequently raised her voice not only in defense of the tenets of faith and Adventist doctrines but also in support of pressing social issues of her time, including the struggles faced by African Americans, poverty, and alcoholism.

However, her critics often perceived her as being resistant to social initiatives, rather than as an advocate for the marginalized. This perception is underscored by her own statements in the book “Desire of Ages,” where she reflects on the corrupt and oppressive government during Jesus’ time. „The government under which Jesus lived was corrupt and oppressive; on every hand were crying abuses,—extortion, intolerance, and grinding cruelty. Yet the Saviour attempted no civil reforms. He attacked no national abuses, nor condemned the national enemies. He did not interfere with the authority or administration of those in power. He who was our example kept aloof from earthly governments. Not because He was indifferent to the woes of men, but because the remedy did not lie in merely human and external measures. To be efficient, the cure must reach men individually, and must regenerate the heart..<sup>3</sup>

It is essential to acknowledge that, when reflecting on the reality of Jesus’ ministry on earth, one can recognize that it primarily centered on assisting those in need. This assistance was rendered through direct engagement in the lives of individuals rather than through the promotion of laws or regulations governing moral conduct. Consequently, this assertion should be interpreted within that framework, rather than as a dismissal of participation in social causes. Furthermore, examining how Ellen White perceived her role in aiding her fellow human beings and addressing the significant social issues of her era can provide valuable insights into her perspective on this matter.

While she did not engage in political discourse, she advocated for active participation in causes she deemed aligned with Christian ethics and vital to her community. Thus, her contributions and viewpoints on these

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2 Amazon.com: Who’s Bigger?: *Where Historical Figures Really Rank*: 9781107041370: Skiena, Steven, Ward, Charles B.: Books

3 Ellen White, *Desire of Ages*, pag. 509

matters serve as a pertinent case study that can inform our own life philosophies regarding engagement with contemporary social issues.

Ellen White never separated theology from practice. For her, involvement in helping those in need was an outgrowth of understanding the value of being human in the perspective of the Christic sacrifice. "Whoever of the human family give themselves to Christ, whoever hear the truth and obey it, become children of one family. The ignorant and the wise, the rich and the poor, the heathen and the slave, white or black-Jesus paid the purchase money for their souls. The black man's name is written in the book of life beside the white man's. All are one in Christ. Birth, station, nationality, or color cannot elevate or degrade men. The character makes the man. If a red man, a Chinese, or an African gives his heart to God, in obedience and faith, Jesus loves him none the less for his color. He calls him His well-beloved brother."<sup>4</sup> We can consider this statement as a fundamental axiom of the way she understood how to relate to the underprivileged categories of her time: the blacks and the poor.

In 1861, at the onset of the War of Secession, Ellen White was 34 years old. Seventeen years had elapsed since the Great Disappointment of October 22, 1844, and among those who maintained their faith following that pivotal event, a new religious movement was emerging, which would formally establish itself as the Seventh-day Adventist Church two years later. Ellen White and her husband, James, were regarded as prominent authorities within this community. However, her declaration in 1859 was profoundly surprising to Adventist adherents. "The law of our land requiring us to deliver a slave to his master, we are not to obey; and we must abide the consequences of violating this law. The slave is not the property of any man. God is his rightful master, and man has no right to take God's workmanship into his hands and claim him as his own."<sup>5</sup>

Ellen White was clearly describing a deliberate intervention in defense of the oppressed, a choice of disobedience to civil law, with legal consequences, motivated by the need to defend the value of a despised human being.

After the end of the war and the abolition of slavery, Ellen White spoke increasingly about the "duty" that white Christians owed to people

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4 William Fagal, *101 Questions about Ellen White and Her Writings*, p. 212, at <https://egwwritings.org/read?panels=p13960.1161&index=0>

5 Ellen White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 201

of color. The words chosen show time and again that the responsibility for this population group was also a reparatory work for the injustice to which these children of God had been subjected. "The obligation to work for the colored people rests heavily upon us. Shall we not try to repair, as far as lies in our power, the injury that in the past has been done to these people?"<sup>6</sup> This repair included very concrete elements: the establishment of schools and medical institutions, the building of churches, the training of laymen and the support of colored pastors.<sup>7</sup>

It is difficult, while perusing these lines, to envision what a faith community that earnestly embraces this counsel might resemble, particularly in terms of engaging in the education of an underprivileged population, establishing healthcare facilities for this demographic, or creating spaces for communal worship. Ellen White's assertions were not merely idealistic; her son, Edson White, emerged as a trailblazer in ministry among African Americans, with his vessel, the *Morning Star*, navigating the Mississippi River for an extended period, providing assistance and education to black individuals seeking such support.

And where the prejudices and ambitions of some limited the possibilities for large-scale action, the power of example remained supreme. "We are one brotherhood. No matter what the gain or the loss, we must act nobly and courageously in the sight of God and our Savior. Let us as Christians who accept the principle that all men, white and black, are free and equal, adhere to this principle, and not be cowards in the face of the world, and in the face of the heavenly intelligences. We should treat the colored man just as respectfully as we would treat the white man. And we can now, by precept and example, win others to this course."<sup>8</sup> The return he notes to the idea of treating others with respect as an assumed gesture of courage reveals a model of Christianity to which we must still cling today.

To further emphasize her concern for the poor or underprivileged, Ellen White even goes so far as to say, "Christ took a position with the poor that through His poverty they might become rich in beauty of character, and be, as He was, a fragrance of life unto life. By becoming poor, He was able to understand the poor."<sup>9</sup>

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6 Ellen White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, p. 230

7 Ellen White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 207

8 Ellen White, *Selected Messages*, Book 2, p. 343

9 Ellen White, *Letter 150*, 1899

Jesus' association with the poor does not constitute a bias against the rich, nor does it overlook their requirements. In fact, Jesus was occasionally hosted by wealthy individuals, and some of his disciples possessed considerable economic advantages. The Christian theological perspective that Jesus chose to enter the world as a poor man, embracing the humblest social standing available at that time, elevates the dignity of humanity, demonstrating that even those deemed least significant by society are acknowledged by God.

That is why, "Christianity is the solace of the poor."<sup>10</sup> For "Christ has ever been the poor man's friend. He chose poverty and honored it by making it His lot. He has stripped from it forever the reproach of scorn by blessing the poor, the inheritors of God's kingdom. Such was His work. By consecrating Himself to a life of poverty He redeemed poverty from its humiliation. He took His position with the poor that He might lift from poverty the stigma that the world had attached to it."<sup>11</sup>

The ramifications of this assertion extend beyond a mere spiritual dimension. Ellen White did not intend to suggest that affluent individuals are excluded from the Gospel or that their financial means diminish the necessity of faith. The solace offered to the less fortunate arises not only from the manifestation of God's boundless love but also through the demonstration of that love by His followers. The essence of Christianity is sustained not solely by its doctrines, but primarily by the lives of those who embody them.

Ellen White not only spoke about helping the poor, but together with her husband they were always ready to help those in need. George R. Knight, a professor of church history at Andrews University Adventist Theological Seminary, says, "Ellen White was not only generous in providing food and clothing for those poorer than herself, but she usually had several poor people living under her roof."<sup>12</sup>

We might also mention here her special concern for orphaned children. In an age when illness often ended life unexpectedly and prematurely, it was no surprise that children sometimes buried their parents at ages

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10 Ellen White, *Welfare Ministry*, p. 172

11 Ibidem

12 George R. Knight, *Ellen White: femeia din spatele profetului*, Editura Viața și Sănătate, Pantelimon, 2016, p. 63

when they still needed their support and care. She calls caring for these children a “holy trust”<sup>13</sup> encouraging church members to be ready to welcome them into their homes and educate them in the Christian spirit their parents desired while they were still alive.

Ellen White presented this concern for the needs of the poor or underprivileged as a personal responsibility and not as a criticism of officials. From her perspective, no matter what and how much the political or administrative authorities do for the needy and disadvantaged, the community of faith has its own responsibility, first to those in its midst and then to the world around it.

There exists a matter in which she will engage, not merely by urging the church to take action, but by backing those who were advocating for the state to align with their position. This issue, which sparked significant debate in the past, continues to generate considerable controversy today—the prohibition, specifically the restriction on the sale of alcohol.

As is well known, Ellen White, along with Joseph Bates, were among the first to speak in the Adventist Church about abstinence and a healthy lifestyle. Believers would embrace this understanding of the Bible by resolutely avoiding the use, production and sale of alcoholic beverages in any form. So by the time the question of a law prohibiting any form of trade in alcoholic beverages arose in American society, Adventists found themselves already on the prohibition side.

Ellen White, however, not only recognized the justness of the cause, but became personally involved in its support. In an article published in the *Review and Herald* on February 10, 1885, she tells of an occasion when she was invited to address the inmates of the Martha Washington Home on the subject of temperance, explaining that ““Although its friends do not believe with us on many points of doctrine, yet we will unite with them when by so doing we can aid our fellow men. God would have us individually learn to work with tact and skill in the cause of temperance and other reforms and employ our talents wisely in benefiting and elevating humanity.”<sup>14</sup>

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13 Ellen White, *Adventist Home*, p. 170

14 Ellen White, *Review and Herald*, February 10, 1885, in *Ministry Magazine*, online edition <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1933/02/ellen-g.-white-on-prohibition> (25.11.19)

White would attend many meetings of temperance societies and would speak many times on these occasions as an excellent advocate for abstinence. From her perspective, abstinence was desirable to help reduce the number of those living in poverty and destitution, to improve the lives of many families, and to reduce crime.

The concept of “elevating humanity” within a faith community that proclaims the imminent return of Christ, particularly in light of the evident moral decline in the world, may appear contradictory. Why promote the elevation of humanity that is predicted to face imminent downfall, as suggested by biblical eschatology? Ellen White’s insights into Christian philosophy provide a crucial perspective on this matter.

Without reducing theology to charity, but also without making charity the whole universe of theology, she exalts the dignity of man, created in the image of God, as a sufficient argument for respect and care. Like Job who cries out to his friends: “He who suffers has a right to the pity of his friend, even if he forsakes the fear of the Almighty,” (Job 6:14) it exalts the intrinsic worth of man as an argument for love and involvement, because God chose to die for man.

The culmination of divine love challenges humanity to empathy and love, to sacrifice and dedication, to unity and concern, qualities that, even if they will not save our world from its prophesied end, can make human life better and more beautiful. Evil, ugliness, destruction, even if prophesied by God in his foreknowledge, are not an inevitable fact of our world, a reason for capitulation, but they can be an incentive to strive for something better even in this world.

Norman K. Miles, correctly observes that “The legacy Ellen White left us is this: our first and greatest responsibility is to prepare people for the coming of Christ. She believed that you can’t be prepared for His coming if you’re ignorant, so we have to lift up this mahram of ignorance. She believed that you cannot be pleasing to God as long as you do not understand that you have a responsibility to others.”<sup>15</sup> This ignorance of others and their needs is often one of the greatest temptations of those who, like the Pharisee in the parable, come down from the very place where they are supposed to have stood in the very presence of God.

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15 Norman K. Miles in *The Enduring Legacy of Ellen G. White and Social Justice*, Jonathan A. Thomson, Pacific Press, Napa, Idaho, 2017, p. 148



Ellen White's most significant legacy may very well be the imperative to avoid ignorance. The profound benefit of this enlightening experience, which we are urged to revisit each day, lies in the fact that by assisting others, we cultivate joy and fulfillment in our own lives. In her diary, Ellen White reflected on a day when she aided a friend who came to see her: "Oh, that everyone could experience the joy of aiding the less fortunate, of contributing to the welfare of others, and of fostering happiness. Lord, inspire me to do everything within my capacity to support those in my vicinity."<sup>16</sup>

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16 Knight, op. cit., 65