

The Prophetic Gift
The Authority of the Prophets

Lesson #8 for February 21, 2009

Scriptures: Exodus 4:10-16; 1 Samuel 12:1-14; 2 Kings 22:10-13; Jeremiah 36:22-31; Matthew 28:19,20; Mark 1:21-27; Acts 16:25-34.

1. The purpose of this lesson is to discuss the source of authority behind prophetic writings and teachings. Many people say they believe in God, but they certainly do not want to accept what His prophets say! Do the prophet's words have authority because of the political or spiritual position of the prophet himself/herself? Do/did their writings and messages have authority because they spoke for God? Is their ultimate authority because they spoke the truth?
2. To be given the responsibility of speaking on God's behalf is a frightful responsibility. Several prophets in the Bible, for example, Moses, Isaiah, and Jonah, as well as Ellen White in modern times, were reluctant to accept that responsibility. How would you feel about the message brought by a prophet who said, in effect, "Sure! I can speak on God's behalf. No problem!" Do those words sound more like the words of one of the modern self-proclaimed prophets? Can you think of any biblical prophets who accepted their role without any hesitation whatsoever? Samuel? (1 Samuel 3:10) Isaiah? (Isaiah 6:8)
3. Read Exodus 4:10-16. The passage seems to suggest that Aaron was to speak on behalf of Moses, just as Moses spoke on behalf of God. Moses requested the services of someone else because he thought that his speech was slow and perhaps his understanding of the Egyptian language had become "rusty." Certainly, that was not God's problem! Was that relationship just like having someone translate for Him?
4. Historically, we know that God approached two gentlemen to be His modern-day prophet before He spoke to Ellen White. What differences were there between the responses of Hazen Foss (See Ellen G. White, *The Early Years-Vol. 1, 1827-1862*, pp. 66,67) and William Foy (See Ellen G. White, *The Early Years-Vol. 1, 1827-1862*, pp. 488-490, Appendix B) versus the response of Ellen White? If we believe God has foreknowledge, certainly He knew that Ellen White would be His prophet. Why did He speak to those other gentlemen earlier?
5. What gives authority to the words of a prophet? If I could demonstrate somehow that my words right now are spoken on behalf of God, how would you respond? Do the words of Jesus in the Bible have greater authority than the words of other prophets? If a person claims to believe in God but rejects the messages of His prophets, does he think there is a problem in God's communication? Or does he just think that he knows better than God? Or does he just not think?
6. Does a prophet give up his personal autonomy when he becomes a prophet to speak for God? Is a prophet's authority nullified if his listeners ignore his instruction?
7. We sometimes say that a beautiful piece of music is "inspiring." At times, we may also say that a sermon is inspired or inspirational. If a Sabbath school teacher or a pastor teaches a "moving" biblical lesson or preaches a terrific biblical sermon, is that material "inspired"?
8. Should the writings of a modern prophet be considered equal to those of ancient prophets whose writings were included in Scripture? Why, or why not? If the messages come from the same God who changes not, (Malachi 3:6) shouldn't the authority be equal? Some modern

pastors or people in positions of authority speak with great personal power and influence, even charisma. How should those traits be compared with prophetic authority? Why should we always hold Scripture as our ultimate authority?

9. During His time on earth, Jesus demonstrated incredible authority. Simply by speaking He caused people to rise from the dead (John 11:43); healed people of their diseases or infirmities; controlled the forces of nature (Matthew 8:23-27; Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25); shared His authority with His disciples who in turn could perform miracles (Matthew 10:7-10; Mark 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-6); drove out demons (Mark 3:15); forgave sins (Mark 2:10); and claimed to be the source of eternal life (John 10:28). When His earthly ministry was finished, He said, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth." (Matthew 28:18-20, *GNB*) Does Jesus have more authority now in heaven functioning as God than He did while here on earth functioning as a human being? Was the authority of Jesus while He was here on earth derived from the Father? Or did He exercise His own power and authority? While here on earth, Jesus did everything that He did by calling on the power of His Father. He relied on the Father "by faith." "Jesus revealed no qualities, and exercised no powers, that men may not have through faith in Him. His perfect humanity is that which all His followers may possess, if they will be in subjection to God as He was. " {DA 664.4}
10. The final issue in authority will be seen when Jesus judges the whole world. (John 5:27) Atheists (like Richard Dawkins) and skeptics seem determined not to be judged by God. They are seeking to destroy any authority that prophets or other spokespersons for God may have or have had. A new series of bus signs in London says, "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." Is the Devil getting desperate?
11. In times past written material was regarded as being much more authoritative than simply the spoken material. In ancient Egypt material that was carved in stone in hieroglyphic form was regarded as the word of "god." Even today, when people read something, they naturally tend to think it must be true unless they find reason to question it. In the Bible we have examples of people who took the written Scriptures very seriously (2 Kings 22:8-13) and those who treated the written words of the prophet very casually, even disrespectfully. (Jeremiah 36:22-31) What gives authority to the words of a prophet? Are messages which are carefully written out more authoritative than messages given by prophets in spoken form? Is it correct to say that the ultimate authority of God's Word is because it is true?
12. The purpose of modern science is to determine—by experiment or in whatever way we can—what the truth is. **The problem with modern science is that like the Scriptures, the results must be interpreted by human beings.** If we received a prophetic message, for example, in the field of health through the writings of Ellen White and later that same information was discovered by science through careful experiment, which of those two sources do we consider more authoritative? If the two sources agree with each other, does that give each of them more authority? What if they seem to be contradictory? Is prophecy really different from preaching? A prophet is someone who speaks for God. A preacher is someone who gathers a group of people together so he can speak to them. So why don't we have more prophets now? Is it that we have not made good use of the prophets that we have had? In general, looking at the Bible, the more trouble God's people are in, the more prophets God uses to warn them of their danger! Maybe God intends for all of us to speak on His behalf.
13. Modern science has challenged just about everything in Scripture, particularly the events of

Genesis 1-11 which records the stories of creation and the flood. When considering such subjects, should we say, "God has said it, I believe that, and that is all there is to it"? How should we relate to "scientific evidence" that may appear to contradict Scripture? (See *Christ's Object Lessons*, pp. 39,40; *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 114)

14. Consider your own personal approach to Scripture and the writings of Ellen White. When you read something which you personally tend not to agree with, do you suddenly become skeptical? Do you try to find ways to rationalize away the counsel? Do you try to forget what you have read and ignore it?
15. The Seventh-day Adventist Church was guided and directed by the writings of Ellen White for many years. Often, she spoke out even in contradiction to the advice of other church leaders. What role should her writings take in the Seventh-day Adventist Church today?
16. Has modern science ever disproved a principle of health stated by Ellen White? In a modern book entitled *Acquired or Inspired?* by Don McMahon, the author looked at a number of the scientific statements made by Ellen White. Then he looked at the explanations given for those statements. He found that the statements were almost 100% correct based on scientific information available today. However, the explanations were given in terms that were understood in Ellen White's day and were only about 25% accurate. What should that teach us about the use of Ellen White's writings? She was ahead of her time!

Suppose, just for example, that God had miraculously explained to Moses all of the laws of physics and chemistry so that he could understand exactly how God created our world. Who would Moses be able to tell? No one else—unless he also was miraculously informed—would be able to understand virtually anything that God did because there was no human vocabulary to explain it! No wonder Genesis 1 and 2 are written in simple language. If Ellen White had given the full scientific explanation for each "scientific" statement that she made in her day, nobody would have understood what she was talking about. When we see that science has confirmed much of what Ellen White said, it should strengthen our faith in her as an inspired prophet.

In our day virtually no one denies the existence of nuclear bombs. We have seen the devastating power that they can unleash. But how many of us can clearly explain $E=MC^2$ and all of the other physics and chemistry that went into developing nuclear weapons? When we see that the bomb works, we naturally assume that Einstein and his followers were correct, and we accept their conclusions without even trying to evaluate their formulas, etc. This happens in other fields as well. The conclusions of "higher critics" are being taught as "gospel" today even though their original premises have been proven wrong!

17. Moses received the best education available in the world in his day. After 40 years he believed he was ready to lead the children of Israel. Then he was taken to the desert of Midian where he herded sheep and listened to God's guidance for another 40 years. At the end of that period, he was very reluctant to lead anything except sheep! Which of those two sources of education was more important in his final 40 years of guiding God's people?
18. There are many examples in Scripture of messages given by prophets directly to their intended "targets." The messages and their responses were only recorded later as historical information. Are messages that are given to individuals or groups, but initially not officially written down, of less authority than those which are written down directly or initially? Read 2 Samuel 12:1; 1 Kings 11:29; Jeremiah 38:1-4; Luke 7:24-27; John 3:1-10; 6:51-66; Acts

16:25-34. In some cases those messages were rejected, while in other cases they were heeded at a later date. Finally, they were recorded as historical events by the same individual or another individual.

19. Do messages from prophets like Nathan, Ahijah, or John the Baptist have less authority because they did not write any portion of Scripture themselves? Prophets who did not write any Scripture that we know of are sometimes referred to as “non-canonical prophets.” Should their teachings and messages be considered of equal weight with those who actually wrote a portion of Scripture?
20. There are 24 books mentioned in Scripture and apparently quoted as authoritative which are not included in our Bible as far as we can tell. (It is possible that portions of some of those books have been included in one or more of the books we have without our knowing it.) Does that mean that some inspired messages have been lost? If one of those books were to be found in our day or perhaps something written by one of the prophets mentioned in the Bible whose writings are not included in the “Sixty-six,” how should we handle that material? We know that Paul wrote letters which we seem to not have today. (1 Corinthians 5:9; Colossians 4:16)
21. Shouldn't the final test of all such material be the question, “Is this message from God?” Shouldn't that same question be asked about the writings of Ellen White? If we can be reasonably certain that the message comes from God, would we dare to disregard it?
22. Why is it so hard for selfish human beings to accept correction from God Himself?
23. The *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for February 20, 2009 says:

In 1982, an ad hoc committee of the General Conference prepared a statement on the relationship between the Bible and Ellen G. White. It reads in part,

“Affirmations:

- (1) We believe that Scripture is the divinely revealed Word of God and is inspired by the Holy Spirit.
- (2) We believe that the canon of Scripture is composed only of the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments.
- (3) We believe that Scripture is the foundation of faith and the final authority in all matters of doctrine and practice.
- (4) We believe that Scripture is the Word of God in human language.
- (5) We believe that Scripture teaches that the gift of prophecy will be manifest in the Christian church after New Testament times.
- (6) We believe that the ministry and writings of Ellen White were a manifestation of the gift of prophecy.
- (7) We believe that Ellen White was inspired by the Holy Spirit and that her writings, the product of that inspiration, are applicable and authoritative especially to Seventh-day Adventists.
- (8) We believe that the purposes of the Ellen White writings include guidance in understanding the teaching of Scripture and application of these teachings, with prophetic urgency, to the spiritual and moral life.

(9) We believe that the acceptance of the prophetic gift of Ellen White is important to the nurture and unity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

(10) We believe that Ellen White's use of literary sources and assistants finds parallels in some of the writings of the Bible.

Denials:

(1) We do not believe that the quality or degree of inspiration in the writings of Ellen White is different from that of Scripture.

(2) We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White are an addition to the canon of Sacred Scripture.

(3) We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White function as the foundation and final authority of Christian faith as does Scripture.

(4) We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White may be used as the basis of doctrine.

(5) We do not believe that the study of the writings of Ellen White may be used to replace the study of Scripture.

(6) We do not believe that Scripture can be understood only through the writings of Ellen White.

(7) We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White exhaust the meaning of Scripture.

(8) We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White are essential for the proclamation of the truths of Scripture to society at large.

(9) We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White are the product of mere Christian piety.

(10) We do not believe that Ellen White's use of literary sources and assistants negates the inspiration of her writings."—"The Inspiration and Authority of Ellen G. White Writings" in *Ministry*, August 1982, p. 21.

Ellen White gave us the "great controversy" perspective for understanding Scripture. It is her great contribution. It is so important in understanding many parts of the Bible. Where would we be without it?

Yet many people believe that Ellen White is an out-of-date, Victorian female who is really irrelevant today.

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