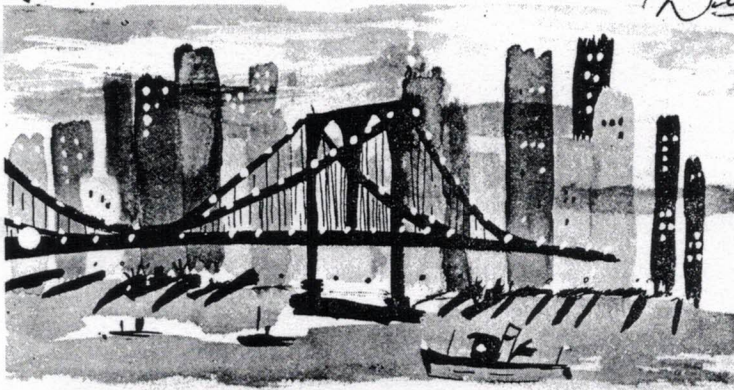


December/71.



"Watchman, what of the night?"

The watchman said, The morning cometh, and also the night: if ye will enquire, enquire ye: return, come. Isaiah 21:11-12

HOW SHALL WE INTERPRET THE TESTIMONIES? ✓✓

With increasing frequency the question is being raised in the church regarding the writings of Ellen G. White and how they are to be understood by the church today. As noted in two previous thought papers, it is the *primary issue* facing the church. Not only through the article appearing in Christianity Today has the question been underscored, but also in recent issues of Spectrum¹, an Adventist publication, articles pro and con have been published in regard to the question. To those who accept the validity of the prophetic gift as manifest in the writings of Ellen G. White, the question of interpretation becomes paramount. It is becoming increasingly evident as one reads the compilations made of her writings on given subjects both by the church leadership and private students that Sister White's writings are made to support whatever the church hierarchy wants them to support, or what a private student wishes to project from her writings. And often the end result of these compilations is the disturbing outcome where Sister White is made to appear to contradict Sister White. This ought not to be; and need not be, if we are willing to follow basic rules of interpretation.

How are we to interpret the Testimonies of the Spirit? The guideline reads that "the testimonies themselves will be the key that will explain the messages given, as scripture is explained by scripture."² The first simple rule is that as scripture is used to explain other scriptures so that a single unified and harmonious line of truth is revealed to the student of the Bible, so the testimonies when compared and harmonized will be found to set forth an unified system of

truth. By way of illustration, let us consider our fundamental teaching as set forth in the Bible in regard to the non-immortality of the wicked. No Adventist scholar lays the foundation for this doctrine by beginning with the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, or with Paul's statement to the church at Corinth.³ Rather the seeker for truth builds upon the clearly defined dictum that God "only hath immortality" and "He that hath the Son hath life."⁴ Then those texts which appear to be contradictory are studied and understandings are sought which harmonize them into the established framework of truth so that unity of thought is achieved. This same procedure needs to be followed in areas of question in regard to certain doctrinal teachings of the Testimonies.

In this thought paper, we shall cite in a brief analysis two doctrinal areas that are considered to be problems due to what appears to be contradictory statements found in the Spirit of Prophecy. A possible solution will be presented by applying the same method of interpretation that we have illustrated above when studying the Biblical doctrine of the non-immortality of the wicked.

Consider the statement - "When Christ was crucified, it was His human nature that died. Deity did not sink and die; that would have been impossible."⁵ Admittedly, this reference and others which give a similar concept present a problem. Was Calvary only a human sacrifice, even though a perfect human sacrifice? Or are we to conjecture that the union of the human and divine in the body of Jesus was such, that at Calvary there was a separation, and only the human remained on the Cross? Never in the light of the following: -

When He closed His eyes in death upon the cross, the soul of Christ did not go at once to heaven, as many believe, . . . The Spirit of Jesus slept in the tomb with His body, and did not wing its way to Heaven, there to maintain a separate existence. . . All that composed the life and intelligence of Jesus remained with His body in the sepulcher; and when He came forth it was as a whole being; He did not have to summon His spirit from Heaven. He had power to lay down His life and to take it again.⁶

Are these two statements in direct contradiction, or is the Spirit of inspiration seeking to challenge us to a deeper study of the incarnation? Keep in mind that the Cross was but the final step in the humiliation of the Son of God which began at Bethlehem. In becoming a Man, Jesus "took mortality upon Him. As a member of the human family, He was mortal; but as a God, He was the fountain of life to the world."⁷ "The man Christ Jesus was not the Lord God Almighty."⁸ By becoming mortal Jesus Christ laid aside that attribute of Deity we term immortality. Not until He came forth from Joseph's tomb did He again assume immortality;⁹ yet He "came forth from the grave to life that was in Himself."¹⁰ The basic questions now remain: - What was the fountain of life which He as a God brought to the world? What was the life that was in Himself which did not die, and yet was not that immortality which He had with the Father prior to Bethlehem?

Could it be that the fountain of life that was in Himself was actually "all the life giving energies that human beings will need and must receive"?¹¹ Have we become so absorbed in the "quantity" aspects of God that we are overlooking the "quality" essence that makes the quantity a reality? And if we do not seek to understand the essential nature of the incarnation as revealed in the light flowing from Calvary as suggested in the harmonizing of the two apparently contradictory statements above, how can we grasp the possibility as outlined in the following revelation:

Christ became one flesh with us in order that we might become one Spirit with Him. It is by virtue of this union that we are to come forth from the grave, - not merely as a manifestation of the power of Christ, but because through faith, His life has become ours,¹²

All believers who pass through the natural death, have, through eating the flesh, and drinking the blood of the Son of God, eternal life in them, which is the life of Jesus Christ.¹³

Thus by correlating the Spirit of Prophecy statements as we would the references of the Bible, that which appeared as contradictory opens before the student

a glorious potential. A mortal man may possess now the life eternal; a human being may become now a partaker of the divine nature. Therefore, "both He that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brethren."¹⁴

Another area that needs much more in-depth study than has yet been given to it, is the doctrine of the atonement as presented in the writings of Ellen G. White. The question simply stated is - Was the atonement completed on the Cross? In support of this contention the following quotation is used:

He [Christ] planted the cross between heaven and earth, and when the Father beheld the sacrifice of His Son, He bowed before it in recognition of its perfection. "It is enough," He said. "The atonement is complete."¹⁵

It must be pointed out that the word, "complete", cannot be interpreted as "completed", but rather the force of the word, "complete" could be expressed by such synonyms as, "perfect", "full", "exhaustive", and "ample". Nevertheless, the quotation does indicate an atonement from God's viewpoint at the cross. In other words, God Himself provided a Lamb which permitted Him to be just, yet a justifier.

One of the first statements from the pen of Sister White which involves the doctrine of the atonement is her comment regarding the position of Crosier on the sanctuary question. She wrote that "the Lord shew me in vision, more than a year ago, that Brother Crosier had the true light, on the cleansing of the sanctuary, &c."¹⁶ Crosier's position relative to the cross as the place or the act of the atonement is very concise. He stated - "Therefore, he [Christ] did not begin the work of making the atonement, whatever the nature of that work may be, till after His ascension, when by His own blood He entered His heavenly sanctuary for us."¹⁷

A half a century later, Sister White penned the following:

Still bearing humanity, He [Christ] ascended to heaven, triumphant and victorious. He has taken the blood of the atonement into the holiest of all, sprinkled it upon the mercy seat and His own garments, and blessed the people. Soon He will appear the second time to de-

clare that there is no more sacrifice for sin.¹⁸

In several places in the Spirit of Prophecy, the work of Christ in the Most Holy Place since 1844 is referred to as the "final atonement".¹⁹ If the words of our language have any meaning at all, the very use of the word, "final", indicates that the work accomplished on the cross could not be a completed atonement, or it would have been final at that point of time. On the other hand, the word, "final", also indicates a prior work. Thus the atoning work of Christ has a broad base and a wide range *in time* - from Bethlehem to the final eradication of sin from the universe. From the viewpoint of Heaven, a wider focus is demanded for Jesus is the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.²⁰

How then is the cross related to the atonement in the writings of the Spirit of Prophecy? Is it declared to be *the Act* of the Atonement? Note carefully these words - "Christ's sacrifice in behalf of man was full and complete. *The condition* of the atonement had been fulfilled."²¹ "By His death He *began* that work which after His resurrection, He ascended to *complete in heaven*. . . *There* the light from the cross of Calvary is reflected. *There* we may gain a clearer insight into the mysteries of redemption."²²

Could it be that God from His throne in the sanctuary looks down to man via the cross and finds in that cross His at-one-ment with man through the sacrifice made; while man looks via the cross to the sanctuary and finds there his at-one-ment with God through the intercession of the High Priest.

The two illustrations used are only suggestive of what could come from a detailed study of these areas of theology and other problem areas such as the incarnation and perfection. Through the application of the simple guideline of letting the Testimonies themselves be the key to explain the more difficult revelations of the Spirit, harmony prevails over seeming contradiction.

We need to lay the foundation for any investigation of truth from the Gift of Prophecy on the simple and clear statements made on a given subject, and then let the ones that appear contradictory and difficult of understanding find their rightful place in the super-structure of truth.

-
- ¹See Spectrum, Autumn, 1970, Spring, 1971
²Selected Messages, bk. i, p. 42
³II Cor. 5:1-10
⁴I Tim. 6:16; I John 5:12
⁵Letter 280, 1904 (5BC:1113)
⁶Spirit of Prophecy, Vol. 3, pp. 203-204
⁷Ellen G. White, "Christ, Man's Example", Review & Herald, Sept. 4, 1900.
⁸Ms. 140, 1903 (5BC:1129)
⁹Ms. 128, 1897
¹⁰Ms. 131, 1897 (5BC:1113)
¹¹White, loc cit, R & H, Sept 4, 1900
¹²Desire of Ages, p. 388
¹³Letter 97, 1898 (7BC:926)
¹⁴Hebrews 2:11
¹⁵Ellen G. White, "Without Excuse", Review & Herald, Sept. 24, 1901
¹⁶Ellen G. White, "A Word to the 'Little Flock'", p. 12
¹⁷O. R. L. Crosier, Day Star Extra, 1846
¹⁸Ellen G. White, Signs, April 19, 1905
¹⁹Patriarch & Prophets, p. 357; Early Writings, p. 253
²⁰Rev. 13:8
²¹Acts of the Apostles, p. 29
²²The Great Controversy, p. 489

++++

With this issue we complete four years of publication of these thought papers. Plans are underway to expand the outreach of these publications and research studies. If you have friends you believe would enjoy receiving these monthly issues, please send their names to the address below, and we shall enter them on our monthly mailing list.

Elder Wm. H. Grotheer
P. O. Box 237
Florence, Miss., 39073

IV-9 (Dec., 1971)

"Watchman, What of the Night?" is published by the Adventist Laymen's Foundation of Mississippi, Inc.