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Witness of God's Love

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My introduction to Ellen White (1827-1915) and her writings was certainly less than ideal when I was in my early teens I began attending church sporadically in Communist East Germany. While some people had strong objections to her prophetic ministry, others employed her writings to release tirades against the “sinners in the hands of an angry God.”¹ Maybe you can relate to my experience of getting to know her as an old woman who apparently enjoyed criticizing people with a wagging hand.

However, Ellen White herself felt uncomfortable transmitting messages of reproof that God had given her for specific people, because she thought these messages were too harsh.² When I began discovering her writings for myself, I saw that most of what she wrote does not belong in the category of rebuke and reproof but are aids for a better understanding of Scripture, growing closer to Jesus, making sense of the conflict between good and evil, living a healthy and fulfilled life in this world, and anticipating life on the new earth.

Even the nine volumes of *Testimonies for the Church* do not contain merely admonitions to specific people and churches with particular problems in distinct circumstances but also biographical material and helpful advice. However, even much of the rebuke in these volumes could be summarized as follows: Be more loving to your spouse, family, fellow believers, and neighbors.

Admittedly, we usually cannot stand reproof and rebuke. God’s prophets in biblical times frequently experienced persecution, even martyrdom (Luke 11:46-51; Acts 7:52; Rom.

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11:3). Yet blaming His prophets for the messages misses the mark, as they only function as God’s instrument communicating messages that originate with God.

Nature and Purpose of Prophetic Ministry

When I became more acquainted with the stories of biblical prophets and the life and person of Ellen White, I began to appreciate them as individuals who were not free from mistakes but who wanted to submit themselves to the Holy Spirit’s guidance and sanctifying influence. I discovered that besides foretelling future events and thundering messages of warning, biblical prophets reminded God’s people of His mighty, miraculous, and glorious actions in history.

They also emphasized the need to remember God’s past sayings and

teachings, and pointed His people to the Word of God already known (cf. Isa. 8:20). Their recounting of victories and failures illustrates that spiritual victories can only grow out of a close and living connection to God. Their messages were to awaken trust and confidence in God’s guidance, to bring about a closer and more faithful relationship to God, and to point to Jesus Christ as the promised substitute and divine-human Messiah.

Reciprocal Love

Such appeals make sense only if the intended audience has some freedom of choice. Unless we were created with a free will, we would be mere robots, unable to love and experience satisfaction and fulfillment. Only freedom of choice and God’s prevenient and sanctifying grace make possible reciprocal love between Him and His people.

Scripture tells us that God is the ultimate source of love (1 John 4:7, 8). Biblical prophets frequently proclaimed God's steadfast love for His people (Isa. 54:10; 63:7; Jer. 31:3; Lam. 3:22; Dan. 9:4; Micah 7:20), and called His people to develop the same love for God—beyond sacrifices and offerings (Hosea 6:6; 10:12; 12:6; Micah 6:8; Zech. 7:9). Sometimes we forget that forced compliance is both contrary to God's character of love and will not produce love in us.

Because God loves us He tries everything legitimately possible to win us back and save us. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross is obviously the greatest and most astounding expression of His love for us (John 3:16). Prophets were His instrument to reveal His character, His purposes, and His messages to us. Although at times these may be harsh, we must never forget that they originate with a loving God who longs for our salvation and our communion with Him. Even His fierce anger is an outflow of His holy love; He is concerned about the eternal well-being and destiny of His subjects (Isa. 54:8; Jer. 32:18; Lam. 3:32; Joel 2:13; Micah 7:18).

Prophets frequently described God's relationship to His people in terms of an

intimate love relationship, likening God to a husband who loves his wife (Jer. 3:20; 11:15; 31:32; Hosea 2:19) and a father who loves his children (Isa. 63:16; Jer. 3:19). Thus the messages of warning and reproof that God sends through His prophets are actually letters from a loving husband, from an affectionate parent who refuses to let us perish without trying every means to bring us back and save us, drawing us with His "bands of love" (Hosea 11:4).

A Passion for Jesus and Scripture

When I began to read Ellen White's writings, I realized that she was not drawing people to herself but was pointing them to Scripture. Early in her ministry she stated, "I recommend to you . . . the Word of God as the rule of your faith and practice."³ Late in her life, lifting up the Bible, she exclaimed to the assembled delegates of the 1909 General Conference session, "Brethren and sisters, I commend unto you this Book."⁴ Her writings focus upon Scripture and apply biblical principles to specific circumstances.

Further, I became fascinated with another key aspect of her writings—her description of "the matchless depths" and the "matchless charms" of

our Savior's love.⁵ The first chapter "God's Love for Man" of her book *Steps to Christ*, begins with "Nature and revelation alike testify of God's love."⁶ She introduced and concluded her greatest spiritual and literary masterpiece, the Conflict of the Ages Series, with the words "God is love."⁷ The central book of this series, *The Desire of Ages*, reveals the ultimate expression of God's love—Jesus Christ, our Savior and Friend, who is the fulfillment of all hopes, desires, and expectations.

The passion for Scripture and our loving Lord that I found in the writings of the biblical prophets were also clearly visible in Ellen White's writings. They have helped me to grow closer to Jesus and to become a witness to God's love. Somehow it's easier to accept counsel and reproof from someone who I know loves me and cares for me. ■

¹ The phrase is taken from the title of Jonathan Edward's famous sermon. See *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (Boston: Kneeland and Green, 1741).

² Ellen G. White, *A Sketch of the Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G. White* (Saratoga Springs, N.Y.: James White, 1851), pp. 63, 64.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁴ Quoted in W. A. Spicer, *The Spirit of Prophecy in the Advent Movement* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1937), p. 30.

⁵ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948), vol. 1, p. 162; *idem*, *Spiritual Gifts* (Battle Creek, Mich.: James White, 1858), vol. 1, pp. 210, 211; cf. Peter M. van Bemmelen, "The Matchless Charms of Christ: Theological Significance of This Phrase in Ellen White's Writings," in *Christ, Salvation, and the Eschaton: Essays in Honor of Hans K. LaRondelle*, ed. Daniel Heinz, Jifi Moskala, and Peter M. van Bemmelen (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Old Testament Department, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, 2010), pp. 231-240.

⁶ Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1956), p. 9.

⁷ Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1890), p. 33; *idem*, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1911), p. 678.

The Gift of Prophecy

One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church and was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White. As the Lord's messenger, her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction. They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested. (Joel 2:28, 29; Acts 2:14-21; Heb. 1:1-3; Rev. 12:17; 19:10.)



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