New Light in the Last Days

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Progressive revelation has played an important role in the development of the Seventh-day Adventist church. By “progressive revelation” I mean God’s continuous unfolding of previously-revealed truth which we often refer to as “new light.” Without God’s shedding new light on His revealed Word--the Bible--the Seventh-day Adventist church would not exist.

Throughout their history Seventh-day Adventists have looked forward to discovering additional truth. Ellen G. White, one of the church’s principal founders, kept this hope alive, stating, “Truth is an advancing truth.” She encouraged believers to search for additional light, for “there are mines of truth yet to be discovered by the earnest seeker.” In speaking of “truth” she always meant truth as given by God through His divine Word.

Some Current Claims.

During the discussions that culminated at the General Conference session in Utrecht, some voices heralded the ordination of women as elders and pastors as new light for God’s church in the last days. For example, a widely distributed document from a major North American Conference, in support of women’s ordination, presented new interpretations of “new light,” “present truth,” and “progressive revelation.”

The document said “that God is active throughout history, bringing new truths to light. Historically, Adventists have understood that God is active in our own time, using the term ‘present truth’ to denote truths which were not present in earlier times, but which God has led his people to discover. Further, there is the parallel idea of ‘progressive revelation,’ which suggests that God has not revealed all truth at some previous time, that
revelation is not confined to the thought and behavior patterns of the prophets and disciples of old, but that God lives and is active today and tomorrow. Most importantly, this dynamic character of truth is the undergirding theological rationale for the very existence of Seventh-day Adventism. Thus the notion of Scriptural literalism [accepting the Bible as it reads] is essentially un-Adventist” (italics mine). 4

Note that “present truth” in this statement represents “truths that were not present in earlier times”--i.e., “the prophets and disciples of old” were not privileged to have the “new light” that our twentieth-century progressive culture needs. Thus, it would seem, God by-passed Moses, Jeremiah, Peter, James, John, and Paul in order to reveal to us “present truths.” Further, “progressive revelation” is redefined to mean that “God has not revealed all truth at some previous time.” And does the reference to the “dynamic character of truth” imply that truth is ever-changing?

**Crucial Questions.**

In practical terms, if the “new light” was “not present in earlier times” and if God did not reveal our “present truths” to the “prophets and disciples of old,” by what criteria can today’s believers determine whether this “new light” is really light or darkness? Is the ordination of women as elders or pastors (which some are now calling a “moral imperative”) new light or no light? To name some other current examples the church faces, how can a Christian today know whether approval of homosexual practice is new light or no light? Is the assertion that our earth is millions of years old new light or no light? Is speaking in unintelligible ecstatic utterances new light or no light? Are suggestions that we eat unclean meats, drink alcohol, and wear adornment new light or no light?

Thus the reinterpretations raise fundamental questions about how we may know what is new light and about the very character of truth itself.

When any group or individual claims to have “new light,” we
must evaluate it. It is essential to study what divine inspiration has revealed about the nature of new light. What new light can we expect just before the second advent? Will it change the way we look at Scripture and how we interpret it? In what areas can we expect to see a development of new light? These questions will help us focus on some key aspects of this important topic.

Operating Principles of New Light

Ellen G. White’s comments on new light have exerted a strong influence in the church. Many have quoted her views, especially those who have advocated changing the church’s beliefs or practice. So it is important for us to review what the Lord has revealed to her on new or advanced light.

Its Nature and Relevance.

The light of truth advances constantly (Prov 4:18). Ellen White wrote that “we shall never reach a period when there is no increased light for us.”5 “In every age there is a new development of truth, a message of God to the people of that generation.”6 This development of truth, also designated as present truth, “is a test to the people of this generation,” who are accountable for truth that past generations were not accountable for.7

To say, then, that something is “present truth” should not imply that what is truth today was not truth in previous generations. Rather, truth that Scripture taught but which had been overlooked or forgotten now shines with new luster. When this happens, God does not condemn the previous generations. “The times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30).

Given to the Remnant.

Ellen White taught that the believers should not consult non-Adventists regarding new light for the time of the end, for God would reveal new light directly to His remnant church. She said: “If God has any new light to communicate, He will let His chosen and beloved understand it, without their going to have their minds
enlightened by hearing those who are in darkness and error.” 8

What does this statement mean for us today? It means, for one thing, that we don’t have to go to a charismatic church to discover new light about tongues or to seek for an experience of “laughing in the Spirit” or other exercises that take place at such meetings. When God wishes to communicate new light, He will reveal it to His people without the intermediation of those who lack the advanced light of truth we already have.

When we are seeking light on subjects of spiritual significance to God’s people, where shall we turn? Shall we search for new light on soul-winning in the seminaries of other denominations? Shall we seek God’s new light on such issues as homosexuality and the age of the earth from the scientists of this world? When we want to know how the Lord would have us manage our hospitals, shall we inquire of the health-care conglomerates? Will the universities of the world provide the models we need for our educational system in these last days?

Though we believe God will give new light to the remnant, we are not to glory in ignorance of what others may have learned or arrogantly claim to know all there is to know. But we are to recognize that on matters of spiritual import to God’s people, we must diligently search first the channels of light that He has already given us, for it is in this way that He has promised to reveal new light to meet our needs for this time. It may well be that truths overlooked or long forgotten will begin to glow with fresh meaning. We will know that God has given light to His remnant.

**Areas of Advancement.**

The areas of new light are associated in a special way with the practical dimensions of Christian life. They touch upon matters necessary for the perfection of the faith and of the faithful.9 New light is especially intended to lead God’s people “onward and upward to purity and holiness.” 10

One particular topic in which we may advance is the knowledge of God’s character. Ellen G. White wrote, “It is our privilege to reach higher and still higher for clearer revealings of the character
of God.” 11

Another area is the way we are to share the teachings of Scripture. Because Christ is the key to our understanding of God, it is important for us to present the truth “as it is in Jesus.” We must bring “Jesus before the churches and before the world.” 12 Here the advancement of truth seems to have no limits: “Truth in Christ and through Christ is measureless. The student of Scripture looks, as it were, into a fountain that deepens and broadens as he gazes into its depths. Not in this life shall we comprehend the mystery of God’s love in giving His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. The work of our Redeemer on this earth is and ever will be a subject that will put to the stretch our highest imagination. . . . The most diligent searcher will see before him a boundless, shoreless sea.” 13

Christ’s righteousness is another special subject for advancing light. 14 It is God’s desire, Mrs. White wrote, that finally “one interest will prevail, one subject will swallow up every other--Christ our righteousness.” 15 When this one interest does prevail, the brilliance of God’s final message of mercy will illuminate the entire world (see Rev 18:1).

We may expect additional light also on final events, 16 the book of Revelation, 17 and the antitypical significance of the Jewish ceremonial system. 18

Conditions for Reception.

New light is not given indiscriminately to everyone. Its bestowal relates closely to the level of individual spirituality. Recipients of advanced light, Ellen White said, have the following characteristics: They

- are persons involved in diligent and prayerful study of the Bible 19
- live a righteous life 20
- grow in grace 21
- have a vital connection with Christ 22
- walk obediently in the present light 23
- purge sin from the life 24
- have an attitude of humility 25
• follow the light of health reform 26
• accept and apply the old truths 27
• accept the Spirit of prophecy 28
• are chosen and illuminated by the Holy Spirit 29 and
• advance in proportion to the light. 30

**Relationship to Established Truth.**

New truth develops from the truth already revealed in the Word of God. Ellen G. White frequently stressed the close relationship between old truth and new truth. This is clear from the following characteristics of new truth.

1. **New Perspectives of Old Truth.** The long-established truths of redemption continue to offer new perspectives. “Though old, they are ever new, constantly revealing to the seeker for truth a greater glory and a mightier power.” 31

2. **An Unfolding of the Old.** “The old truths are all essential” Mrs. White said, and “new truth is not independent of the old, but an unfolding of it. . . . It is the light which shines in the fresh unfolding of truth that glorifies the old. He who rejects or neglects the new does not really possess the old. For him it loses its vital power and becomes but a lifeless form.” 32

3. **Harmony with the Foundations of Adventism.** New light in no way diminishes the relevancy of the truths upon which the Seventh-day Adventist church was founded. Ellen G. White cautioned: “Let not any man enter upon the work of tearing down the foundations of the truth that have made us what we are.” 33 “Not one pillar of our faith is to be removed. Not one line of truth is to be replaced by new and fanciful theories.” 34

“The truth for this time, God has given us as a foundation for our faith. He Himself has taught us what is truth. One will arise and still another, with new light which contradicts the light that God has given under the demonstration of His Holy Spirit. . . .

“We are not to receive the words of those who come with a message that contradicts the special points of our faith. They gather together a mass of Scripture, and pile it as proof around their asserted theories. . . . And while the Scriptures are God’s
word, and are to be respected, the application of them, if such application moves one pillar from the foundation that God has sustained these fifty years, is a great mistake.” 35

The pillars of our faith, the special points of our faith, are based upon a foundation of confidence in the totality of Scripture as “given by inspiration of God” and “profitable for doctrine” (2 Tim 3:16). New light, then, will not weaken this foundation by suggesting that the Bible writers were mistaken in their views or that their messages were culturally conditioned for a pre-scientific era. Such viewpoints are out of harmony with the historic Seventh-day Adventist teaching about the Bible itself, and they open the door to attacks on the distinctive teachings of our church.

4. Harmony with Miller’s Approach to Scripture. Ellen White had a high regard for the way William Miller, God’s chosen instrument in the Great Second Advent movement, interpreted the Bible. She called Miller’s rules of interpretation “simple but intelligent and important rules for Bible study and interpretation.” She pointed out that all involved in the mission of Adventism use the same approach to the Bible: “Those who are engaged in proclaiming the third angel’s message are searching the Scriptures upon the same plan that Father Miller adopted.”36

Ellen White especially highlighted these rules:

1. Every word must have its proper bearing on the subject presented in the Bible;
2. All Scripture is necessary, and may be understood by diligent application and study;
3. Nothing revealed in Scripture can or will be hid from those who ask in faith, not wavering;
4. To understand doctrine, bring all the scriptures together on the subject you wish to know, then let every word have its proper influence; and if you can form your theory without a contradiction, you cannot be in error;
5. Scripture must be its own expositor, since it is a rule of itself. If I depend on a teacher to expound to me, and he should guess at its meaning, or desire to have it so on account of his sectarian
creed, or to be thought wise, then his guessing, desire, creed, or wisdom is my rule, and not the Bible.”

Commenting on these principles from William Miller, Mrs. White said that “in our study of the Bible we shall all do well to heed the principles set forth.” 37 In evaluating today’s claims of “new light” on Bible interpretation—whether called “principle approach,” “contextual method,” “case-book approach,” “dynamic approach,” “developmental approach,” or some other name—we must test them against the historic Adventist methods of interpretation upheld by Miller, Ellen G. White, and our pioneers.

**The Church’s Responsibility**

Great care must be taken in introducing purportedly “new light.” In her concern for the church, Ellen G. White went to great lengths to establish sound practices to follow before accepting new light into the church.

**Openness.**

Ellen White called for the church to be open to new light. She strongly opposed the attitude that we have all the truth for our time.38 New light is not a private affair, however, for no one should claim that he or she has all the light.39 “God has not passed His people by, and chosen one solitary man here and another there as the only ones worthy to be entrusted with His truth. He does not give one man new light contrary to the established faith of the body. . . . Let none be self-confident, as though God had given them special light above their brethren.” 40

**The investigation of new ideas is important.**

Mrs. White stated: “Our brethren should be willing to investigate in a candid way every point of controversy. If a brother is teaching error, those who are in responsible positions ought to know it; and if he is teaching truth, they ought to take their stand at his side. We should all know what is being taught among us; for if it is truth, we need it. We are all under obligation to God to know what He sends us.” 41
Ellen White illustrated the correct attitude toward new light with a personal experience from 1844. “In 1844, when anything came to our attention that we did not understand, we kneeled down and asked God to help us take the right position; and then we were able to come to a right understanding and see eye to eye. There was no dissension, no enmity, no evil-surmising, no misjudging of our brethren.” 42

Since new light is not a private matter, the church can be open to it, seeking God and searching the Scriptures for the unity that can only be found in truth. In such a setting, the proponents of “new light” must not feel free to ignore the consensus of the worldwide church when they have presented their case to the body.

**Procedure for Discussion.**

The manner in which new light should be discussed is crucial. A matter frequently overlooked but absolutely necessary is that the Bible must be studied “with fasting and earnest prayer before God.” 43

The Bible is the “standard for every doctrine and practice. . . . It is the word of the living God that is to decide all controversies.” 44 “God’s Word is our foundation of all doctrine.” 45 The instrument, therefore, to determine whether any proposed “new light” is part of God’s plan for His people is Scripture—not feelings, opinions, surveys, petitions, referenda, or other means, as appropriate as these may be in other spheres. Our question must be, “What does the Bible say?”

Everyone involved in the investigation of new light should be free from the spirit of prejudice. Such freedom can be achieved only through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. “When the Spirit of God rests upon you, there will be no feeling of envy or jealousy in examining another’s position; there will be no spirit of accusation and criticism, such as Satan inspired in the hearts of the Jewish leaders against Christ.” 46

**Tests of New Light.**

Ellen White recommended the following specific ways to determine the genuineness of new light:
1. Is it Christ-Centered? “Does this light and knowledge that I have found, and which places me at variance with my brethren, draw me more closely to Christ? Does it make my Saviour more precious to me and make my character more closely resemble His?” 47

2. Does it Harmonize with All of Scripture? God “has given directions by which we may test every doctrine,—’To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them’ [Isa. 8:20]. If the light presented meets this test, we are not to refuse to accept it because it does not agree with our ideas.” 48

3. Does it Produce Fruits of Righteousness? “The most convincing testimony that we can bear to others that we have the truth is the spirit which attends our advocacy of that truth. If it sanctifies the heart of the receiver, if it makes him gentle, kind, forbearing, true and Christlike, then he will give some evidence of the fact that he has the genuine truth. But if he acts as did the Jews when their opinions and ideas were crossed, then we certainly cannot receive such testimony, for it does not produce the fruits of righteousness.” 49

Advancement in light should be accompanied by advancement in character. Does the “new light” lead its proponents to exhibit the loving character of Christ? Does it make them gentle and humble? Or does it result in self-confidence, arrogance, and defiance?

If Seventh-day Adventists had always used the above procedures and tests in dealing with new light and proposed changes in doctrine and practice, the atmosphere in the church might have been much different and we could have avoided much of the strife and controversy that continues to affect the church in some quarters. To redeem the situation we must make a commitment to follow the instructions the Lord has so graciously revealed to His people through the Spirit of Prophecy.

**Conclusion.**

We can be most thankful to the Lord that He has graciously
revealed clear instructions on how we should respond to “new light.” Ellen White gives us reasons why her counsels are vital in our era, when claims of “new light” seem to abound:

“I am instructed that the Lord, by His infinite power, has preserved the right hand of His messenger for more than half a century, in order that the truth may be written out as He bids me write it for publication, in periodicals and books. Why?--Because if it were not thus written out, when the pioneers in the faith shall die, there would be many, new in the faith, who would sometimes accept as messages of truth teachings that contain erroneous sentiments and dangerous fallacies. Sometimes that which men teach as ‘special light’ is in reality specious error, which, as tares sown among the wheat, will spring up and produce a baleful harvest. And errors of this sort will be entertained by some until the close of this earth’s history.”50

In the coming days, as the church continues to be bombarded with all kinds of “new light”--new methods of interpretation, new theologies, new lifestyle practices, new forms of worship, new suggestions for ecumenical alliances, etc.--let us “test all things; hold fast what is good” (1 Thess 5:21). It is high time that we study these issues together with prayer and fasting, calling for a fresh baptism of the Holy Spirit. Then we will be able to discard those teachings that do not measure up to Bible truth. May the Lord guide us in our struggle to preserve the truth as it is in Jesus so that we may experience a “revival of true godliness” which is “the greatest and most urgent need of all our needs.” 51

ENDNOTES


2Counsels to Writers and Editors, p. 33.

3Testimonies for the Church, 5:704.
4 In a letter dated June 1, 1995, given out to delegates at the 1995 General Conference session in Utrecht, the president of this influential Conference states: “With this letter we have attached several position papers that we have prepared. We trust that they will help clarify our perspective on ordination and the ministry of women.” The statement cited on “progressive revelation” and “present truth” comes from one of the position papers entitled, “An Attempt to Justify Gender Discrimination in Ministry,” p. 2. The above paper was subtitled “A Brief Response to Searching the Scriptures: Women’s Ordination and the Call to Biblical Fidelity.”

Readers may wish to evaluate the response against the content of the book it purports to review. For additional data to help in evaluating whether the re-statement of the Adventist understanding of “present truth” and “progressive revelation” represents the historic Adventist position, see P. Gerard Damsteegt, “Seventh-day Adventist Doctrines and Progressive Revelation,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 2/1 (Spring 1991):77-92.

5 *Selected Messages*, 1:404.
6 Christ’s Object Lessons, p. 127.
8 *Early Writings*, p. 124.
9 See *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, p. 48.
10 *Testimonies for the Church*, 5:534.
12 *Sons and Daughters of God*, p. 259.
13 Christ’s Object Lessons, pp. 128, 129.
15 *Sons and Daughters of God*, p. 259.
16 *Testimonies for the Church*, 2:692, 693.
17 Christ’s Object Lessons, p. 133.
18 Ibid.
19 *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, p. 27; *Sons and Daughters of God*, p. 259; *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, p. 35.
20 *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, pp. 34, 35.
21 *Testimonies for the Church*, 5:706.
22 *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, p. 35; *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 130, 131.
26 *Testimonies for the Church*, 2:67, 70.
27 *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 127; *Testimonies for the Church*, 5:369.
30 *Testimonies for the Church*, 5:534.
32 Ibid., pp. 127, 128.
33 Ellen G. White Manuscript 62, 1905, p. 5. This statement appears in Arthur L. White, Ellen G. White, 5:411. The entire manuscript is published as Manuscript Release #760 in “The Integrity of the Sanctuary Truth,” a document available from the Ellen G. White Estate; the quoted statement appears on p. 9.
34 *Medical Ministry*, p. 96.
36 “Notes of Travel,” *Review and Herald*, Nov. 25, 1884.
37 Ibid.
38 *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, p. 33.
39 *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 107; *The Great Controversy*, p. 343. For biblical support she referred to Job 11:7; Isa 55:8, 9; 46:9, 10.
40 *Testimonies for the Church*, 5:291.
41 *Gospel Workers*, pp. 300, 301.
42 Ibid., p. 302.
44 *1888 Materials*, 1:201.
45 *1888 Materials*, 1:46.
46 *Review and Herald*, Feb. 18, 1890.
47 *Testimonies for the Church*, 3:444.
48 *Gospel Workers*, p. 301.
50 *This Day with God*, p. 126, emphasis supplied.
51 *Selected Messages*, 1:121.