

Distinguishing Between the Sacred and the Common

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Prophets obviously mix common, everyday information with the divine message. When Paul referred to contemporaries with appreciation, that was not the divine message. When he asked Timothy to find the cloak and books that he had left at Troas and to “come before winter,” that was common, everyday talk (2 Tim. 4:9-21). When we read the genealogy of the families of Israel since Adam, we are reading common historical information, not a message given by revelation. (1 Chron. 1-8).

Ellen White recognized this distinction between ordinary information and the divine message: “There are times when common things must be stated, common thoughts must occupy the mind, common letters must be written and information given that has passed from one to another of the workers. Such words, such information, are not given under the special inspiration of the Spirit of God. Questions are asked at times that are not upon religious subjects at all, and these questions must be answered. We converse about houses and lands, trades to be made, and locations for our institutions, their advantages and disadvantages.”⁶¹

This distinction appeared in a 1909 letter where Ellen White was “troubled” about the former manager of the Paradise Valley Sanitarium, E. S. Ballenger. She wrote that Ballenger was “denying the testimonies as a whole because of what seems to him an inconsistency—a statement made by me in regard to the number of rooms in the Paradise Valley Sanitarium.” In an earlier letter she had commented that the sanitarium had forty rooms, when it had only thirty-eight.

She continued: “The information given concerning the number of rooms in the Paradise Valley Sanitarium was given, not as a revelation from the Lord, but simply as a human opinion. There has never been revealed to me the exact number of rooms in any of our sanitariums; and the knowledge I have obtained of such things I have gained by inquiring of those who were supposed to know. . . . For one to mix the sacred with the common is a great mistake. In a tendency to do this we may see the working of the enemy to destroy souls.”⁶²

Students of prophetic writings should know how to separate the sacred from the common. Sometimes the question is asked in terms of what is inspired and what is not. (Obviously the distinction should not be based on whether we agree with a particular portion of a prophet’s writings.) The 1909 incident regarding rooms at the Paradise Valley Sanitarium is one example of a “common” reference. Other examples are found in Mrs. White’s hundreds of letters wherein she spoke of the weather, shopping lists, the garden, or her grandchildren. But sooner or later she would direct the reader’s thought to his or her spiritual needs or some church activity. That shift would be a clear signal to readers that they were now listening to a message that went beyond “common” themes.

Only a small percentage of Ellen White’s published writings deal with “common” topics, as anyone may readily see. She could write: “‘In these letters which I write, in the testimonies I bear, I am presenting to you that which the Lord has presented to me. I do not write one article in the paper expressing merely my own ideas. They are what God has opened before me in vision—the precious rays of light shining from the throne.’ It is true concerning the articles in our papers and in the many volumes of my books.”⁶³

Mrs. White makes no distinction between the inspiration of her books, articles, or letters when they are giving spiritual counsel. This eliminates the position some have made that only her books are inspired. Those taking that position forget that much in her books was first written in article form.⁶⁴

Further, it is clearly the case that Bible writers “mixed” extraBiblical sources with their vision-based messages. One cannot then dismiss a prophet’s work simply because some portion of the book contains material from sources other than divine revelation. If prophets include the writings of others to better express truth, that material is not understood as merely “common” in the sense we have been using the term.

Taken from *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1998), chapter 32: “Hermeneutics: Basic Principles.” You can download/read the book here: <http://www.whiteestate.org/books/mol/motl.pdf> or <http://text.egwwritings.org/publication.php?pubtype=Book&bookCode=MOL>.

[61.](#) *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 39.

[62.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 38.

[63.](#) *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 29.

[64.](#) In 1897 Ellen White wrote from Australia to John Wessels in South Africa, suggesting that he come to Australia to help in establishing the sanitarium work. The letter included matters that she had been shown regarding his family, but some things she had not been shown, and she made this clear: “I have not been given the message ‘Send for Brother John Wessels to come to Australia.’ No; therefore I do not say, I know that this is the place for you. But it is my privilege to express my wishes, even though I say, I speak not by commandment. But I do not want you to come because of any persuasion of mine. I want you to seek the Lord most earnestly, and then follow where He shall lead you. I want you to come when God says Come, not one moment before. Nevertheless, it is my privilege to present the wants of the cause of God in Australia. . . . A work is to be done here, and if you are not the one to do it, I shall feel perfectly resigned to hear that you have gone to some other locality. I have been shown that it were better for you and the other members of your mother’s family to be in some other locality, because where they are, the companionship and associations are not the most favorable to their spiritual healthfulness.”—Letter 129, 1897, parts of which may be found in *Selected Messages*, book 3, pp. 58, 59. Here we have a good example where Ellen White clearly differentiated between her opinion and revealed information, similar to Paul’s experience as noted in 1 Cor. 7:6.