

# Ellen G. White and tithe

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## **An analysis of four controversial statements**



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**A**lthough the Seventh-day Adventist tithing system was in place by the end of the nineteenth century,<sup>1</sup> controversies have arisen recently about its practical application. Members who lose confidence in the church organization sometimes divert tithe to independent groups. They justify this by citing a few quotations from Ellen White describing her personal tithing practices.

Many of those criticisms are adequately addressed in "The History and Use of the Tithe,"<sup>2</sup> from the Ellen G. White Estate, Arthur L. White's *Ellen G. White: The Early Elmshaven Years*,<sup>3</sup> in Roger W. Coon's "Tithe: Ellen G. White Counsel and Practice."<sup>4</sup> It seems, however, that there is room for a direct analysis of four particular Ellen White statements.<sup>5</sup>

### **Humble places of worship**

The first comes from 1897. The churches of Oakland, California, and Battle Creek, Michigan, were facing serious problems meeting their "quite heavy" expenses.<sup>6</sup> Since some congregations had been using tithe to cover operating expenses,<sup>7</sup> members of these two churches wrote to Ellen White in Australia asking about the propriety of diverting some tithe to solve their situation. On March 14, 1897, Ellen White replied:

"From that which has been shown me, the tithe is not to be withdrawn

from the treasury. Every penny of this money is the Lord's own sacred treasure, to be appropriated for a special use.

"There was a time when there was very little missionary work done, and the tithe was accumulating. In some instances the tithe was used for similar purposes as is now proposed. When the Lord's people felt aroused to do missionary work in home and foreign missions, and to send missionaries to all parts of the world, those handling sacred interests should have had clear, sanctified discernment to understand how the means should be appropriated. . . .

"The light which the Lord has given me on this subject is that the means in the treasury for the support of the ministers in the different fields is not to be used for any other purpose."<sup>8</sup>

But on the next day she added: "*There are exceptional cases, where poverty is so deep that in order to secure the humblest place of worship, it may be necessary to appropriate the tithes.* But that place is not Battle Creek or Oakland."<sup>9</sup>

The first statement shows clearly that although tithe had been used previously for local church expenses, such a use should cease because of great missionary challenges,<sup>10</sup> and also increasing light regarding tithe. But the second statement speaks of "exceptional cases" to the rule, involving very poor places of worship.

A careful analysis suggests that

Ellen White is referring to a genuine missionary situation in which the church building is described as the "humblest place of worship." The issue is not the construction, renovation, improvement, or maintenance of a church in an established area (which in the same context she strongly disapproves),<sup>11</sup> but the danger of losing the "place of worship" itself, thus impairing the church's mission in that poverty-stricken place.

### Helping needy workers

A second relevant Ellen White comment regarding tithe is an undated oral statement she made to her son W. C. White:

"The Lord has shown me that the experience which your father [James White] and I have passed through in poverty and deprivation, in the early days of our work, has given to me a keen appreciation and sympathy for others who are passing through similar experiences of want and suffering. *And where I see workers in this cause that have been true and loyal to the work, who are left to suffer, it is my duty to speak in their behalf. If this does not move the brethren to help them, then I must help them, even if I am obliged to use a portion of my tithe in doing so.*"<sup>12</sup>

Although the specific date of this statement is not known, W. C. White explains that "these experiences relate mostly to the years we [he and his mother] were in Europe [1885-1887] and Australia [1891-1900], and to the years 1900 to 1906, in behalf of the work in the Southern states."<sup>13</sup> If we analyze the reality of Adventist work in Europe,<sup>14</sup> Australia,<sup>15</sup> and the Southern states<sup>16</sup> during these respective periods, we see that each of these places was at that time a missionary field without adequate financial provision. Members in established fields were not sufficiently concerned in helping the missions.

At the 1901 General Conference session, Ellen White confronted the issue: "I told the Lord that when I came to Battle Creek this time, I would

ask you why you have withheld means from the work in Australia."<sup>17</sup> Only with the reorganization of the General Conference in 1901 came "a formula" for better support of missions.<sup>18</sup> Since sometimes the organization itself did not provide adequate means for its missionaries, Ellen White felt she had a special duty regarding workers who, while "true and loyal to the work," "are left to suffer." Whenever she met workers in such circumstances, she first tried to solve the problem by speaking "in their behalf" to local administrators. If this did "not move the brethren to help them," then she considered it her own duty to help them, even if that meant using a portion of her own tithe.

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W. C. White, commenting on Ellen White's statement made to him (quoted above), makes a clear distinction between her normal and sporadic procedures. He explains that while "a full tithe" was "paid on her salary, to [the] church or conference treasurer," occasional appropriations from the tithe of "the increase from her books" went to meet the needs of those suffering workers. W. C. White argues that while his mother could make such special uses of tithe through the "special enlightenment" she received from the Lord as part of her prophetic authority, neither "church members" nor "ministers" are authorized to do likewise.<sup>19</sup>

It is significant that she began her statement with the expression "the Lord has shown me." To Ron Graybill,

such an expression means "that what was written was written under the inspiration of the Spirit of God."<sup>20</sup> So, by declaring that the Lord had shown her to make such special uses of her tithe, Ellen White is evidently stressing her singular prophetic authority to act in such a way.

Clearly, therefore, Ellen White recognizes in this second statement (1) that she made some special uses of her own tithe, (2) that such uses were only in relation to problems neglected by the organization, and (3) that she did it on the basis of her prophetic insight.

### Supporting the neglected South

A more detailed statement on special use of tithe is found in a letter Ellen White wrote on January 22, 1905, to G. F. Watson, president of the Colorado Conference. While reproving Watson's critical attitude against sending tithe to support the work in the South, she said:

"It has been presented to me for years that my tithe was to be appropriated by myself to aid the white and colored ministers who were neglected and did not receive sufficient properly to support their families. When my attention was called to aged ministers, white or black, it was my special duty to investigate into

their necessities and supply their needs. This was to be my special work, and I have done this in a number of cases. No man should give notoriety to the fact that in special cases the tithe is used in that way.

"In regard to the colored work in the South, that field has been and is still being robbed [in 1905] of the means that should come to the workers in that field. If there have been cases where our sisters have appropriated their tithe to the support of the ministers working for the colored people in the South, let every man, if he is wise, hold his peace.

*"I have myself appropriated my tithe to the most needy cases brought to my notice. I have been instructed to do this; and as the money is not withheld from the Lord's treasury, it is not*

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## Ellen White received and applied tithe only in special cases.

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a matter that should be commented upon, for it will necessitate my making known these matters, which I do not desire to do, because it is not best.

"Some cases have been kept before me for years, and *I have supplied their needs from the tithe, as God has instructed me to do. And if any person shall say to me, Sister White, will you appropriate my tithe where you know it is most needed, I shall say, Yes, I will*; and I have done so. I commend those sisters who have placed their tithe where it is most needed to help do a work that is being left undone, and if this matter is given publicity, it will create a knowledge which would better be left as it is. I do not care to give publicity to this work which the Lord has appointed me to do, and others to do.

"I send this matter to you so that you shall not make a mistake. Circumstances alter cases. I would not advise that anyone should make a practice of gathering up tithe money. But *for years there have now and then been persons who have lost confidence in the appropriation of the tithe who have placed their tithe in my hands, and said that if I did not take it they would themselves appropriate it to the families of the most needy ministers they could find. I have taken the money, given a receipt for it, and told them how it was appropriated.*"<sup>21</sup>

The reorganization of Adventist church structure in 1901, with some revisions in 1903,<sup>22</sup> opened new frontiers to the growth of missions in a worldwide dimension. However, the Southern field still remained "the most needy and the most discouraging field

in the world."<sup>23</sup> Additionally, not until 1910 did the church offer systematic sustentation "for the support of sick and aged laborers, and the widows and children of deceased laborers."<sup>24</sup>

In such a context, Ellen White explains that "for years" the Lord had placed upon her shoulders the "special duty" of investigating the needs of "the white and colored ministers who were neglected and did not receive sufficient properly to support their families." "Aged ministers, white or black," merited particular attention. And again she appeals to her prophetic authority by declaring that God "instructed" her to supply "their needs from the tithe."

Although there is a close relationship between the contents of the letter to Watson and the previous oral statement to W. C. White, this goes far beyond the previous statement. She explains that not only (1) did she appropriate her own tithe to the most needy cases but also (2) she had accepted tithe from others to be distributed at her discretion, and also (3) that in some cases members, instead of paying tithe in their own conferences, had sent it to ministers evangelizing the needy Southern field. She saw no reason to reprove them because the Southern "field has been and is still being robbed of the means that should come to the workers in that field."

The use of such expressions as "it has been presented to me for years," "my attention was called," "I have been instructed to do this," "some cases have been kept before me for years," and "as God has instructed me to do" seems to confirm Ellen White's singular prophetic authority, as in her oral statement to W. C. White on the same subject. But the phrase "this work which the Lord has appointed me to do, and others to do" is not as clear as the previous ones. The question naturally arises: Did the Lord reveal to these "others" the duty of helping poor workers in the same way He did to Ellen White?

In answering that question we must remember, first, that Ellen White mentioned "commend[ing] those sisters" who applied their tithe in such a

way. Though we have no basis to assume that all private tithe sent to the South came from Ellen White's direct advice, she obviously preferred to accept such tithe, give a receipt, and send it where she felt it was more needed rather than allowing individuals to apply it according to their personal judgment. While Ellen White said she personally accepted tithe from members who wanted "to help do a work that [was] left undone," she also warned against the practice "of gathering up tithe money." Since she received and applied tithe only in special cases and always in harmony with instructions received directly from God, it could not be considered as withholding tithe "from the Lord's treasury." But she also recognized that, although she was doing a "special work," some members would certainly misunderstand. So she added at the same time that it was "not a matter that should be commented upon" and "no man should give notoriety to" it, because "if this matter is given publicity, it [would] create a knowledge which would better be left as it is."

Then, finally, one of Ellen White's major dreams became reality through the establishment of the sustentation plan that became effective in 1911.<sup>25</sup> As a result, on March 7 of that year she wrote to E. R. Palmer, secretary of the Sustentation Fund Committee:<sup>26</sup>

"In the past I have many times spoken of our duty to sustain the needy ones among the Lord's laborer's [*sic*] who, because of age, or on account of weakness caused by exposure or hard labor in the Lord's work, can not longer bear the burdens they have once borne. . . . My brethren, it is right that sure plans be laid for the support of our aged workers, or the younger workers who are suffering because of overwork. It is right that a fund should be created to make comfortable these faithful soldiers who still long to put brain, bone, and muscle into the work of giving the last note of warning to the world."<sup>27</sup>

It can be assumed that once inadequate financial circumstances were remedied, Ellen White discontinued her special usage of tithe.

## Paying ministers' wives

A fourth instance in which Ellen White speaks about a special use of tithe is found in a letter to G. A. Irwin, I. H. Evans, U. Smith, and A. T. Jones on April 21, 1898, in which she discusses the matter of some ministers' wives who worked full-time without pay.<sup>28</sup> This was not a new issue. On March 22, 1898, while addressing the situation of women as workers in the cause of God, she explained that she had received "light upon this subject" even before she went to Australia in 1891:

"Some matters have been presented to me in regard to the laborers who are seeking to do all in their power to win souls to Jesus Christ. . . . The ministers are paid for their work, and this is well. And if the Lord gives the wife, as well as the husband, the burden of labor, and if she devotes her time and her strength to visiting from family to family, opening the Scriptures to them, although the hands of ordination have not been laid upon her, she is accomplishing a work that is in the line of ministry. Should her labors be counted as nought, and her husband's salary be no more than that of the servant of God whose wife does not give herself to the work, but remains at home to care for her family?

"I was instructed that there are matters that need to be considered. Injustice has been done to women who labor just as devotedly as their husbands, and who are recognized by God as being as necessary to the work of ministry as their husbands. The method of paying men laborers and not their wives is a plan not after the Lord's order. Injustice is thus done. A mistake is made. The Lord does not favor this plan. This arrangement, if carried out in our conferences, is liable to discourage our sisters from qualifying themselves for the work they should engage in."<sup>29</sup>

One month later (April 21, 1898), while addressing the same problem, she went a step further by mentioning some specific names:

"There are ministers' wives, Sisters Starr, Haskell, Wilson, and Robinson, who have been devoted, earnest, whole-souled workers, giv-

ing Bible readings and praying with families, helping along by personal efforts just as successfully as their husbands. These women give their whole time, and are told that they receive nothing for their labors because their husbands receive wages. I tell them to go forward and all such decisions will be revised. The Word says, 'The labourer is worthy of his hire' (Luke 10:7). When any such decision as this is made, *I will in the name of the Lord, protest. I will feel it my duty to create a fund from my tithe money to pay these women who are accomplishing just as essential work as the ministers are doing*, and this tithe I will reserve for work in the same line as that of the ministers, hunting for souls, fishing for souls."<sup>30</sup>

In analyzing these statements, remember that Ellen White is writing specifically about ministers' wives who had "the burden of labor," devoting all their time and their strength to "giving Bible readings and praying with families" and "educating" new believers. Although those women incurred personal expenses in devoting themselves full-time to ministry, they remained unpaid. Ellen White regarded this as a "mistake," an "injustice," "the Lord does not favor." Because "the labourer is worthy of his hire" (Luke 10:7), and those who "preach the gospel should live of the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:14), she considered it her "duty to create a fund" from her tithe "to pay these women."<sup>31</sup> Perhaps to rectify the situation, in 1900 the General Conference Committee established a "Committee on Woman's Work." Mrs. S. N. Haskell was one of its members.<sup>32</sup>

The question remaining now is whether those statements of Ellen White about paying wages to ministers' wives refer only to the particular instances mentioned here, or if they also provide a pattern to solve unjust cases today.<sup>33</sup> One might find some kind of endorsement of a special use of tithe in solving situations of dire financial injustice regarding those who work "in the line of ministry." But the problem is defining what is a real situation of injustice.

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## Nowhere does Ellen White advocate financial pressure to force a change in denominational policy.

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### Summary

By analyzing the four main statements of Ellen White about special use of tithe, we see that each one deals with a specific financial problem. While the first allows tithe use to avoid losing "the humblest place of worship" in a missionary context, it does not endorse the use of tithe for construction, renovation, improvement, or maintenance of a church in an established area (which, in the same context, Ellen White strongly disapproves). The other three statements deal with the unique financial burdens of suffering workers neglected by the organization and of some ministers' wives who worked as Bible instructors without pay. Whereas in the first three statements either the place of worship or the workers are seen in a clear missionary setting, the fourth does not necessarily refer to such circumstances.

All those four special uses of tithe show a perfect parallelism between the existence of a financial problem and a financial solution to it. Nowhere does Ellen White advocate financial pressure to force a change in denominational policy.

Although those statements provide some principles to a correct distribution of tithe, they should not be stressed beyond their original intent. While approving other people sending their tithe to extremely needy fields in some special situations, Ellen White didn't recommend this as a regular practice. On the contrary, she wrote in 1907:

(Continued on page 29)

## In His hands

From page 9

but He breaks the seals one after another, until the last seal is broken. When the seventh seal is removed, a deep hush comes over the throne room, indeed, over all creation. Now there will be full disclosure. The great book will be thrown open. The drama is over. In heaven's scheme of things there is prophecy, fulfillment, and consummation. There comes a day when all prophecies will cease. Jesus declared: "Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled" (Matt. 5:18). That is consummation.

Salvation history is not a continuing soap opera repeating itself forever. There can be no eternal coexistence between good and evil. The slain Lamb is Lord of time and history, Lord of the spheres. His arms are not short that He cannot save. His reach and His grasp are equal. He is strong enough to take hold of the throne and at the same time encircle the globe. Mission accomplished: He delivers the lost paradise back to the Father who commissioned Him. That is consummation.

The supreme victory of Christ, the slain Lamb, is the ultimate goal of history. No wonder that all heaven joins in songs of praise and adoration to "him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb" (Rev. 5:13).

Yes, God the Father has put all things in the strong hands of His Son. He has turned all things over to Him. Now here is the great question: Have you turned your life over to Him? Have you put your life, your all, in His hands? You can trust Him. Jesus is worthy. ■

<sup>1</sup> For fuller treatment of OTTO, see my book *Preaching to the Times* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1975).

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Pub. Assn., 1946), p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> ———, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1952), p. 210.

## Ellen G. White and tithes

From page 17

"Let none feel at liberty to retain their tithe, to use according to their own judgment. They are not to use it for themselves in an emergency, not to apply it as they see fit, even in what they may regard as the Lord's work. . . . Let the work no longer be hedged up because the tithe has been diverted into various channels other than the one to which the Lord has said it should go. Provision is to be made for these other lines of work. They are to be sustained, but not from the tithe. God has not changed; the tithe is still to be used for the support of the ministry."<sup>4</sup> ■

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Bert B. Haloviak and F. Donald Yost, "A Report on the Use of Tithe in the Seventh-day Adventist Church" (Washington, D.C.: Office of Archives and Statistics of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1976), pp. 19-22; Brian E. Strayer, "Adventist Tithing—The Untold Story," *Spectrum*, October 1986, pp. 46-48.

<sup>2</sup> See "The History and Use of the Tithe," Ellen G. White Estate shelf document, [1990].

<sup>3</sup> See Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Elmshaven Years* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1981), pp. 389-397.

<sup>4</sup> Roger W. Coon, "Tithe: Ellen G. White Counsel and Practice," in Supplement to the *Adventist Review*, November 7, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> It will be assumed throughout this article that where Ellen White discusses her use of tithe, she is generally referring to the first 10 percent of her earnings.

<sup>6</sup> Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases* (Washington, D.C.: E. G. White Estate, 1981), vol. 1, p. 182.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>8</sup> Ellen G. White, *Special Testimonies for Ministers and Workers* (Battle Creek, Mich.: 197), vol. 10, pp. 16-18.

<sup>9</sup> ———, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 1, p. 1897. (Italics supplied.)

<sup>10</sup> The main studies on the development of Seventh-day Adventist missionary thought are P. Gerard Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1977); and Borge Schantz, "The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Missionary Thought: Contemporary Appraisal" (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1983).

<sup>11</sup> See E. G. White, *Special Testimonies for Ministers and Workers*, vol. 10, pp. 16-18.

<sup>12</sup> Ellen G. White in Arthur L. White, p. 393. (Italics supplied.)

<sup>13</sup> W. C. White, in Arthur L. White, p. 393.

<sup>14</sup> See D. A. Delafield, *Ellen G. White in Europe: 1885-1887* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1975); Pierre Winandy, ed., *Ellen G. White and Europe* (Newbold College, England: Ellen G. White Research Centre, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> See Milton F. Krause, "The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia: 1885-1900" (M.A. thesis, University of Sydney, 1968).

<sup>16</sup> See Ronald D. Graybill, *Mission to Black America: The True Story of James Edson White and the Riverboat Morning Star* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1971), pp. 52-61; Louis B. Reynolds, *We Have Tomorrow: The Story of American Seventh-day Adventists With an African Heritage* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1984), pp. 85-95.

<sup>17</sup> Ellen G. White, "In the Regions Beyond," *General Conference Bulletin*, 1901, p. 84.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Arthur W. Spalding, *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1962), vol. 3, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> W. C. White, "Regarding the Use of the Tithe."

<sup>20</sup> Ron Graybill, "The 'I saw' Parallels in Ellen White's Writings," *Adventist Review*, July 29, 1982.

<sup>21</sup> Ellen G. White, in Arthur L. White, pp. 395, 396. (Italics supplied.)

<sup>22</sup> See Barry David Oliver, *SDA Organizational Structure: Past, Present and Future* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1989), pp. 162-204.

<sup>23</sup> Ellen G. White, in Arthur L. White, pp. 394, 395.

<sup>24</sup> See W. A. Spicer, "General Conference Committee Council," *Review and Herald*, Dec. 22, 1910, pp. 13, 15; A. G. Daniells, "The Sustentation Fund," pp. 14, 15; A. G. Daniells, *The Sustentation Fund* (Washington, D.C.: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists [1910]).

<sup>25</sup> See Spicer, "General Conference Committee Council," p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> Daniells, *The Sustentation Fund*, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> Ellen G. White *Manuscript Releases* (Silver Spring, Md.: E. G. White Estate, 1990-1993), vol. 3, p. 272.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 12, pp. 160, 161.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 323.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 12, pp. 160, 161. (Italics supplied.)

<sup>31</sup> In another place she writes: "God is a God of justice, and if the ministers receive a salary for their work, their wives, who devote themselves just as disinterestedly to the work, should be paid in addition to the wages their husbands receive, even though they may not ask for this" (Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1915], p. 453).

<sup>32</sup> See "Proceedings of the General Conference Committee," *General Conference Bulletin*, 1900, p. 123.

<sup>33</sup> Ellen White is not advocating here any position for or against women's ordination. Her concern was the financial injustice to ministers' wives who worked full-time without remuneration.

<sup>34</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), vol. 9, pp. 247-250.