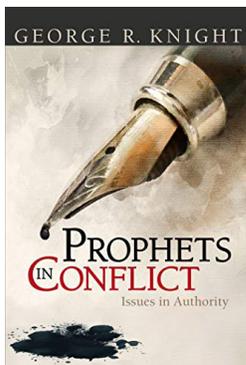


## BOOK NOTES

George R. Knight,

### *Prophets in Conflict: Issues in Authority*

(Nampa, ID: Pacific Press,  
2020), 208 pp.  
\$17.99



George Knight's latest book is *Prophets in Conflict: Issues in Authority*. In "A Word to the Reader" at the start of the book, he says, "In 2017, I published *Adventist Authority Wars, Ordination, and the Roman Catholic Temptation*. The thread that unites that book with the present one is the temptation to misuse religious authority," which he says Adventists have had an inclination to do, whether in the ecclesiastical sphere or the prophetic realm (p. 9). He adds this caution: "The sad news is that being wrong in the area of authority opens the distinct possibility of going astray on everything else" (ibid.).

The book's title grows out of the opening chapter, which compares how two nineteenth-century prophetic leaders—founders of their respective churches—viewed modern-day prophetic authority. Ellen G. White and Joseph Smith make for a sharp contrast on this crucial point. While White saw her work as "a lesser light, to lead men and women to the greater light" (the Bible), Smith saw his work as superseding Scripture—correcting its supposed errors and giving God's revelation for the current age. Though he gave the Bible lip service, he considered it "an insufficient guide." The distinction between Smith and White on this point could not be more dramatic.

Smith and the leaders after him led their followers to regard his writings and those of subsequent Mormon prophets as the ones that were most important for them. Mormon theology teaches that the latest prophetic authority is superior to all that has gone before and takes precedence over it. Knight refers to this as the "Mormon Temptation"—to regard modern prophets above Scripture, or as interpreting Scripture for us, which is tantamount to the same thing. In the second chapter, Knight draws on early Adventist history as well as more recent events to show how Adventists, who especially in the early years were clear on the proper relation of spiritual gifts to the Bible, have not been entirely immune to the Mormon Temptation. These two chapters comprise part 1 of the book, "The Relation of Biblical Authority to the Authority of Modern Prophets."

Here we find what appears to be a major thesis of the book: that we should not use the authority of post-canonical prophets to try to establish doctrine or settle biblical or theological disputes. In introducing the book, Knight asks,

On what basis do we as individuals and as a

church make decisions on how we will live our lives and run the church? What is our authority? . . . Adventists and other Christians are quick to point out that the Bible is their most important authority. But is it really? And what does that claim mean, especially in a movement that has a modern prophet in its midst? (p. 7).

These are good questions, though not everyone will be satisfied with the answers Knight provides.

The two opening chapters will be new to many Adventist readers. Most of the remainder of the book, however, is likely to be more familiar, having been drawn from Knight's earlier books, his contributions to various other works, or his articles published in *Ministry* magazine.

Part 2, "Frameworks for Understanding Ellen White's Prophetic Authority," brings together a number of significant chapters. "The Purpose of Ellen White's Writings" lists seven key purposes, familiar to those who have read *Reading Ellen White*. "Ellen White's Major Themes" (also seven in number) is drawn from another book in that series, *Meeting Ellen White*. Reading it again here was a welcome refresher. "The Myth of the Inflexible Prophet," from *Myths in Adventism*, shows how White could adapt her counsels and apply principles to varying situations. "Principles for Understanding Ellen White's Writings" combines material from several of Knight's publications to elucidate important interpretive principles. "Ellen White and Change" deals with how White could take different positions over time, whether by way of clarification, progressive development, or even reversal when new light called for it. "The Case of the Overlooked Postscript" focuses on questions of verbal inspiration and inerrancy. Both of these latter chapters were originally *Ministry* articles.

Part 3, "The Authority of Compilations," consists of two chapters, exploring both the positive values and some problems that arise in compilations of White's writings. With some today questioning the legitimacy of compilations, this treatment is generally helpful in understanding and navigating the issues. Part 4, "Proper and Improper Uses of Ellen White's Authority," also has two chapters: one dealing with the often-contentious issue of the human nature of Christ, and the other a lengthy chapter on White's view of proper education, set against the background of the church's evolving application of it. The book closes with two chapters in part 5, "Authority Applied and Closing Thoughts." The

first of these deals in a pastoral way with how we apply White's counsels to ourselves and to others. The brief final chapter looks at the field of Ellen G. White studies from the perspective of a nearly lifelong involvement, making cogent observations about the directions future Ellen G. White studies may profitably go, whether done within the church or by scholars outside of Adventism.

While some might be put off by the fact that most of the chapters have been published elsewhere, I was not. These materials have significant, needed points to make to those who care about White's writings, and I see their being brought together in this form as a benefit rather than a liability. In general, I felt the book was uplifting and predominantly positive.

Even so, there are aspects of the book that I found disappointing. Chief among these is a need for more clarity on the stated subject of prophetic authority. What authority does Knight see for a modern-day prophet? Quoting a number of passages from White that express her desire that her writings not be used to settle disputes over such biblical matters as the law in Galatians or "the daily" from the book of Daniel, Knight cautions against our appealing to her authority in trying to resolve such matters (the Mormon Temptation). He focuses rather on her substantial authority to speak to our hearts individually on matters of Christian living and to speak to church leadership regarding the institutions and emphases of the church (see, e.g., p. 163).

But is that all there is? I would like to have seen some substantial treatment of her statement that God gives visions in the last days "not for a new rule of faith, but for the comfort of His people, and to correct those who err from Bible truth."<sup>1</sup> What is the extent and limit of prophetic authority in that last clause? Other such statements invite similar examination. The light God has given her is to "correct specious errors, and to specify what is truth."<sup>2</sup> "Serious errors in doctrine and practice were cherished. . . . God revealed these errors to me in vision and sent me to His erring children to declare them."<sup>3</sup> The book also makes no mention of her having taken a strong stand against the theological views of Dr. Kellogg on pantheism or of A. F. Ballenger on the sanctuary. White's vigorous involvement in opposing those views indicates that she saw a role for prophetic authority in theological matters, and a book on prophetic authority should explore what it is.

A fuller elucidation of legitimate prophetic authority might have prevented Knight from using the book to accuse church leadership of succumbing to the Mormon Temptation in the proposed "Statement of Confidence in the Writings of Ellen G. White" that the 2019 Annual Council voted to send to the next General Conference session. According to Knight, one paragraph of the statement "departs from mere affirmation and indicates that one purpose of Ellen White's writings is to 'correct inaccurate interpretations imposed' on the Bible." This, he claims, "places the modern gift of prophecy in an unbiblical position and pushes Adventism off the Protestant platform and back into the sectarian realm" (p. 44).

Are we really to believe that the modern gift of prophecy has no such legitimate role at all? The statements quoted above seem to indicate otherwise. And the church has long affirmed such a role. The "Methods of Bible Study" document says,

Seventh-day Adventists believe that God inspired Ellen G. White. Therefore, her expositions on any given Bible passage offer an inspired guide to the meaning of texts without exhausting their meaning or preempting the task of exegesis (for example, see *Evangelism*, 256; *The Great Controversy*, 193, 595; *Testimonies*, vol. 5, pp. 665, 682, 707–708; *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, 33–35).<sup>4</sup>

The term "guide" suggests something less than a commentary or a Mormon role; the qualifying expressions here back us away from the Mormon Temptation. The current proposed "Statement of Confidence," quoted more fully, says something quite similar:

We believe that the writings of Ellen G. White were inspired by the Holy Spirit and are Christ-centered and Bible-based. Rather than replacing the Bible, they uplift the normative character of Scripture and correct inaccurate interpretations *imposed* upon it [emphasis supplied]. They also help us to overcome the human tendency to accept from the Bible what we like and distort or disregard what we do not like.

For certain, we are to study the Bible; this is primary. But this need not make us rule out a helpful role for White in enlightening our understanding.

The book occasionally speaks disparagingly of last generation theology or last generation perfectionism, which Knight says characterized him in his earlier days. This provides a basis for one of his critiques of compilations, specifically *Counsels on Diet and Foods*. He sees the compilers as promoting a theology White did not endorse when in the chapter "Flesh Meats" they included a section called "Preparing for Translation" and followed it with one called "Perfecting Holiness."<sup>5</sup> The latter section, which he characterizes as "in the context of preparing for translation" (p. 135), makes no reference to translation or perfection. Its major quoted portion, he claims, while dealing with meat eating, is concerned with "the attitudes of those involved in the struggle [over Dr. Kellogg's reform efforts] even more than flesh eating itself, which Ellen White repeatedly asserted was not to be made 'a test of fellowship,' even if it was not God's ideal" (p. 134).

However, a fair reading of the whole manuscript from which the passage comes does not, I think, establish this claim, which is based more on Knight's reconstruction of the historical setting. The statement itself clearly deals with flesh eating, not just for its effects on physical health, but for its spiritual effects as well. The

heading to which he objects, “Perfecting Holiness,” is a biblical expression about living a godly life: “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor 7:1). White’s statements under that heading are exhortations to spiritual and moral cleansing and advancement, specifically relating to diet. Is there no fit here? I think there is. Though I was initially persuaded by Knight’s presentation on this point, a closer look has made me question it and made me more cautious toward his other examples regarding problems in compilations. I should also note in passing that his statement that White “repeatedly” denied that flesh eating was “a test of fellowship” seems exaggerated; I could find only two such references, about twelve years apart. The others are in various compilations, quoting a single reference in *Testimonies for the Church*.<sup>6</sup>

In a number of places (such as in chapter 6 on principles) Knight correctly calls readers to take a balanced view of White’s writings. However, I noticed that essentially all of the book’s illustrations of failure to do so come from Adventism’s theological right; I did not notice any from the left, unless one puts LeRoy Froom and *Questions on Doctrine* on the left. Perhaps this imbalance is simply because the right generally seems more involved with White’s writings than the left. But is there really such a dearth of examples from the left? I believe I can think of some, where an author quotes White selectively to support a position that she did not take or that she even opposed. Inclusion of such things would extend the book’s applicability, improve its balance, and might make it easier for those on the right to hear what is being said.

Similarly, might the “Mormon Temptation” apply to those who find their prophetic voices in other sources, such as science, sociology, or various politically inspired movements? These sources, being more recent than White’s writings or the Bible, seem to have greater authority for some, particularly on the left, in such areas as creation/evolution, among others. Touching on matters of this kind would broaden the book’s scope. The Mormon Temptation concept offers wide ground for serious thought.

The final purpose of White’s writings listed in chapter 3 is missiological purpose. Knight correctly urges us to read her writings with her mission in mind, to avoid

making them “do things that they were never written to accomplish” (p. 55). But there is a danger here, too, of being reductionistic, of limiting the writings by our own view of her mission or by other standards that we may devise. I would welcome some wrestling with that concern. While some take matters to extremes in one direction (such as in kneeling for every prayer, as mentioned under the sixth item in this chapter), others today, claiming to live by a principle-based approach, may seem too willing to dismiss anything that goes against their own ideas. Where do we find the balance? A revision of the book might address such issues as these, strengthening what in many instances is a helpful presentation.

Despite these and other issues, I was blessed in reading *Prophets in Conflict: Issues in Authority*. Interested readers who can overlook a tendency to interpret White’s writings through the author’s own reconstruction of social and historical context or his own theological viewpoints will find in it much useful information and a largely positive and appreciative outlook on White’s writings and work.

Reviewed by  
**William Fagal**,  
retired Editor and Associate  
Director for the Ellen G. White  
Estate. He continues to work  
part-time for the White Estate.



<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1882), 78, emphasis supplied.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 3 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1980), 32.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 9 vols. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1855–1909), 5:655–656.

<sup>4</sup> General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Executive Committee, “Methods of Bible Study,” October 12, 1986, <https://www.adventist.org/articles/methods-of-bible-study> (accessed September 15, 2020), sec. 4.12 (L).

<sup>5</sup> Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Diet and Foods* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1938), 380–384.

<sup>6</sup> White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 9:159.

*It is not theoretical knowledge you need so much as spiritual regeneration. You need not to have your curiosity satisfied, but to have a new heart. You must receive a new life from above before you can appreciate heavenly things (DA 171).*

Ellen G. White, *The Faith I Live By* (Washington DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1958), 137.