

## CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN ELLEN G. WHITE'S WRITINGS IN AFRICA (Part One)

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### Abstract

*This research highlights the complexities and challenges of interpreting and applying Ellen White's writings in the African context. The study offers practical ways for African Adventists to contextualize Ellen G. White's writings, making them relevant to their local settings. The article argues that a more nuanced understanding of her writings, considering the context, and focusing on sola Scriptura and a faithful study of her writings, is essential. This research aims to contribute to a more inclusive and contextualized understanding of Ellen G. White's writings in Africa, promoting a more empowering approach to Adventist mission and ministry on the continent.*

**Key words:** Ellen White's writings. Adventism in Africa context. Contemporary issues. and Sola scriptura.

### INTRODUCTION

As Seventh-day Adventism continues to experience unprecedented growth on the African continent, engaging with Ellen White's writings in their various cultural and societal contexts has become increasingly complex. The challenges arise from the need to balance the revered status of her inspired writings with the diverse realities and evolving dynamics facing African Adventists in the modern era.

One significant issue is the tendency toward extreme literalism or selective use of Ellen White's statements to promote rigid practices. Addressing this challenge requires a nuanced approach that upholds the integrity of Ellen White's writings while emphasizing the principles of

unity, context, and Christ-centered hermeneutics. Ellen White warned against any form of extremism. She had to deal with it herself during her entire ministry. In 1894, she wrote:

There is a class of people who are always ready to go off on some tangent, who want to catch up something strange and wonderful and new; but God desires us all to move calmly, considerately, choosing our words in harmony with the solid truth for this time. The truth should be presented to the mind as free as possible from that which is emotional, while still bearing the intensity and solemnity befitting its character. We must guard against encouraging extremists, those who would be either in the fire or in the water.

Those holding extreme views, the fringe groups, do not have specific places where they have pitched their headquarters, but they are in almost every single country of Sub-Saharan Africa. Ellen White was shown in a vision that many individuals “have taken the extreme meaning of what has been shown in vision, and then have pressed it until it has a tendency to weaken the faith of many in what God has shown.” This prophecy finds its fulfilment in what is happening with the offshoots in Seventh-day Adventism in Africa.

Within the context of contemporary Seventh-day Adventism in Africa, several issues are at the heart of the teachings of fringe groups, as identified through my communication with pastors across sub-Saharan countries. I now examine and critique seven of these issues from the perspectives of Ellen White’s writings and official responses from the White Estate and its leadership, as well as providing key principles as how to deal with these extremisms.

### **Issue of Legalistic adherence to dietary counsels**

One of the most prominent contemporary issues surrounding Ellen White’s writings in Africa is the tendency toward an overly rigid and legalistic interpretation of her dietary counsels. While

Ellen White advocated for a wholesome, plant-based diet and abstinence from meat, some individuals and groups have taken these principles to the extreme.

In various regions across Africa, there have been instances where particular statements from Ellen White's writings on diet and health practices have been selectively quoted and applied in an excessively literal manner. This has resulted in the establishment of stringent food rules and regulations that go beyond the original intent of her counsels. A pastor from Tanzania narrated a story:

A case of my uncle, a brother to my father, who decided to be a strict vegetarian. He told his wife to make sure that she does not serve meat and the food should not be cooked using oil, instead she should use groundnuts to put in the vegetables. The family continued with that lifestyle and slowly the health of my uncle changed. He became weak and sickly. Whenever they told him to go to hospital he refused because Ellen White advised not to use chemicals in the body, instead she said we should use natural remedies, he answered. When the situation became worse, they took him to hospital. The moment a provision was made to fill the gap, his health improved. When he went back home the lifestyle was the same. He went back to strict vegetarianism. His health was deformed and he died.

Such extreme dietary legalism has not only led to a distortion of Ellen White's balanced approach but has also fostered an atmosphere of exclusivity among those who adhere to these rigid interpretations. Individuals who advocate for the rejection of meat base their view on this quote of Ellen White:

Greater reforms should be seen among the people who claim to be looking for the soon appearing of Christ. Health reform is to do among our people a work which it has not yet done. There are those who ought to be awake to the danger of meat eating, who are still

eating the flesh of animals, thus endangering the physical, mental, and spiritual health. Many who are now only half converted on the question of meat eating will go from God's people, to walk no more with them.

Based on this text, some Adventists believe that not eating meat is one of the requirements for inheriting the kingdom of God. The appeal of Ellen White was for Seventh-day Adventists to become health reformers for health reasons. She herself stopped eating meat not for theological reasons. "She made a personal decision to become a strict vegetarian because of ethical concerns—the cruelty against animals." She confessed: "But when the selfishness of taking the lives of animals to gratify a perverted taste was presented to me by a Catholic woman, kneeling at my feet, I felt ashamed and distressed. I saw it in a new light, and I said, I will no longer patronize the butchers. I will not have the flesh of corpses on my table."

It is reported in Burundi that those who follow the advice of Ellen White believe that "they cannot share food with their friends who are still using meat. The meat users are considered sinners not meriting the kingdom of heaven." In South Sudan, a group of Adventists proclaimed that their firm standing on the writings of Ellen White restrain them from eating meat.

A similar story is narrated in Rwanda. A Pastor shared his experience with me:

Two months ago, I went to two distinctive districts to settle a similar issue of misunderstanding among the church committee. What was the problem? One of the elders of the church has served the flesh food (fish) in the ceremony of marriage of his child. His brothers judged it as an act of deviation, and an evil example in the church. Therefore, he was required to publicly confess. If not, He will never stand before the congregation for his duties any more. This brought a bitter experience in the local church as the supposedly guilty rejected the request. While we were sitting together to seek an amicable solution, the heated debate ended in a disgraceful mood. More than a half of the local church committee decided to resign their functions. This is one in many cases in the church. Some of

them (especially in rural regions of my Conference), cannot elect a meat eater for any job in church despite his giftedness, even to offer a prayer in Sabbath school program.

Ellen White never considered eating meat a sin. Yet, she advised Adventists to avoid eating meat, not because it is regarded as a sin, but because it is good for their health. She warned before her death that “I have something to say in reference to extreme views of health reform. Health reform becomes health deform, a health destroyer, when it is carried to extremes.”

Another example of extreme view on diet is seen in a story of a gentleman from South Africa, a vibrant Seventh-day Adventist. He developed strange views on diet.

He was against taking water or liquids with meals. He decided not to use even soya milk with his cereals, including granola which is usually very hard. When he read about the dangers of yeast when bread is eaten too fresh, he decided to dispense [sic] with yeast completely. He would not bath with soap or use lotion but he would bath with salt and use olive oil as lotion. One time he tried to go on a 40 day fast because he wanted to be like Jesus. During this attempt he did not take any water for drinking and around 21 days he fainted because of starvation and dehydration. When he was taken to a local lifestyle center the doctor recommended that he be given an IV so that he could be rehydrated and the gentleman refused and accused the lifestyle center of being in apostasy because they were offering him drugs which are against Ellen White’s counsels. He nearly died and a brother who is very good with herbs ended up helping him in that situation and his life was spared.

Seventh-day Adventists in Africa should consistently emphasize the importance of maintaining a balanced and contextually appropriate understanding of Ellen White’s writings on health and diet. They should urge church members to focus on the underlying principles of temperance, moderation, and the promotion of physical and spiritual well-being, rather than adhering to a rigid set of rules. Ellen White noted:

If those advocating health reform will take my books where all phases of these subjects are presented, or if they will study my articles as a whole, they will get precious truths. But for them to take a sentence here, and a paragraph there, and a few lines somewhere else, and group them together according to their fancy or judgment, they may sadly misrepresent my teachings and give the people distorted views of Health Reform, or of whatever subject they are handling.

Ellen White promoted vegetarianism as the best and the ideal diet for humans for health benefits and ethical concerns. She never supported extremity in diet. For this reason, the Seventh-day Adventist church should be responsible in educating believers to cultivate green garden for vegetables and fruits for every household. This will help to supply vegetables and fruits that can compensate for flesh nutrients. Also, deliberate training should be provided to Adventists on how to cook and have access to healthy meals.

### **Issue of Dress standards**

Another area where contemporary issues have arisen in relation to Ellen White's writings in Africa is related to rigid dress codes. While Ellen White promoted principles of modest and humble dress befitting Christianity, some individuals have taken this to an extreme by enforcing very strict and culturally insensitive dress requirements. For instance, in Guinea Conakry, some Adventists believe that traditional African clothes are not to be used for church services and that church members should not be wearing clothes with different colors. The key principles in terms of dress in the writings of Ellen White are modesty, simplicity, cleanness, and convenience. The clothing should also be of "good quality," and "suited for service. It should be chosen for durability rather than display." White also noted that dress should be palatable with the weather. It should be used for protection and warmth. As regard to woman's dress, she advised that clothing should be long enough, but it should also "sit loosely and comfortably."

Ellen White never said that modest cultural attire should not be used for church service. Indeed, God is interested in seeing His people mounting the pulpit with modest African dress. Western modest clothing, while they can also be used for church services, should not be highly regarded over traditional African clothing. “Traditional fabrics like Aso-oke (historically known as Ofi), Ankara, Adire, Kente, and Bogolan, among many others, have achieved global acclaim for their vivid hues and intricate patterns.” Also, Gondar Amhara, Habesha Kemis, Toghu/Atoghu among other African clothes from East and Central Africa, if modestly sewn are beautiful for church services.

These clothes are carefully woven and carry symbols of protection, unity, modesty, love, and purity. Such clothes are indeed the pride of African culture, which if they are used for pulpit ministrations, add to the beauty and solemnity of the worship of God on Sabbaths. This philosophy of African clothing goes in line with Ellen White’s writings that promote an inward renewal of heart and mind over an excessive preoccupation with external conformity. Ellen White wrote: “In order to secure the most healthful clothing, the needs of every part of the body must be carefully studied. The character of the climate, the surroundings, the condition of health, the age, and the occupation must all be considered. Every article of dress should fit easily, obstructing neither the circulation of blood nor a free, full, natural respiration. Everything worn should be so loose that when the arms are raised the clothing will be correspondingly lifted.” Taking the context and place into consideration while choosing clothing is thus necessary.

### **Issues Related to Prophetic interpretations of White’s Writings on the End-time**

Ellen White’s writings contained prophetic insights and descriptions of events related to the end times and Second Coming of Christ. However, in parts of Africa, certain individuals have developed extreme interpretations of prophetic teachings, leading to date-setting.

One manifestation of this issue is the rise of self-proclaimed “prophetic voices” who claim to have unique insights into Ellen White’s writings on the end times. This creates confusion, fear, and a fixation on apocalyptic thinking among their followers. Such was the case “of a group of church members from the southern part of Tanzania in the year 2004 who ... started preaching on the second Advent mobilizing people about the soon return of Jesus. So, they left their homes and moved to Dar es salaam where they stayed at Mwalimu Nyerere Airport saying they are waiting for the Second Advent. The government intervened and they were arrested.”

A similar narrative unfolds among certain congregations in Adventist churches throughout East Africa, where a group of individuals has proclaimed themselves as part of the Elijah Movement. Drawing parallels to the biblical figure Elijah, whom God took to heaven, they see themselves as modern-day Elijahs awaiting a similar ascent to the clouds. Through fervent prayer and fasting, they distance themselves from the perceived evils of contemporary society. They read from the writings of Ellen White that the signs of the end of times are being fulfilled. “The signs which He Himself gave of His coming have been fulfilled, and by the teaching of God's word we may know that the Lord is at the door.” The year 2022 was heralded as the set time of their anticipated ascension to heaven. However, their prophecy seems more akin to a collective dream or hallucination fueling their religious fervor. These doomsday prophetic teachings based on Ellen White’s writings have led members to make extreme decisions, such as encouraging isolation in preparation for the imminent end. The spiritual and emotional distress caused by such unfulfilled prophetic claims can damage families, communities, and the credibility of the church.

Ellen White warned about the setting of date of the return of Christ. She wrote: “Many who have called themselves Adventists have been time-setters. Time after time has been set for Christ to come, but repeated failures have been the result. The definite time of our Lord’s coming is declared to be beyond the ken of mortals. Even the angels, who minister unto those who shall be heirs of salvation, know not the day nor the hour.” Her advice is for the Seventh-day

Adventists to be in “the state of expectancy and preparation for the second appearing” of Jesus Christ.

### Issue of Country Living

The promotion of a very literalistic take on Ellen White’s counsels about “country living” and avoiding urban areas is another issue in African Seventh-day Adventism. Certain offshoot movements that make a rigid teaching out of Ellen White’s country living advice have arisen. They espouse that it is time for Seventh-day Adventists to relocate to isolated rural locations, bushes, or mountain regions away from any semblance of city life and societal influences. Several individuals in Kenya, Tanzania, South Sudan, Burundi, and across the Sub-Saharan Africa believe that it is time for God’s people to “leave the cities and stay on the outskirts” in order to “avoid being contaminated” with sinful living and “separate” from “Babylon – the confusion in the church and the world.” This is often tied to an apocalyptic interpretation that cities have become dens of wickedness and violence.

Ellen White encouraged people to prefer some reasonable level of distance from immorality and corruption while still fulfilling Christ’s mission to serve the cities and people in need of the gospel’s influence. Her writings put primary emphasis on maintaining spiritual devotion and raising a faithful legacy for one’s children, which can be done with wisdom and moderation. While wisdom in choosing environments conducive to spiritual focus is needed, the extreme naturalistic separatism and doomsday premises behind these “escape to the wilderness” offshoots are noted to neglect Christ’s broader commission to be “in the world but not of it.”

Seventh-day Adventists are to be the sanctuary that welcomes the world to its midst. Their message is destined to reach the whole world. The majority of the world population today live in the cities. The gospel commission must be taken to them. Ellen White did not encourage people to stay away from preaching the gospel to those in the cities. But she admonished that the people of God should not absorb influences not worthy of their calling which is generally

prevalent in cities. The call to be light in the midst of darkness also means that Seventh-day Adventists should shine through their behaviors. In her counsels to church workers in Africa, Ellen White said: “Great and solemn work is before us—to reach the people where they are.” She counseled: “Repeatedly the Lord has instructed us that we are to work the cities from outpost centers. In these cities we are to have houses of worship, as memorials for God, but institutions for the publication of our literature, for the training of workers, are to be established outside the cities. Especially it is important that our youth be shielded from the temptations of city life.”

While Ellen White made her appeal to leave the cities because of its corruptions and relocate to rural areas, she counseled Seventh-day Adventists to do so with wisdom. “Let everyone take time to consider carefully; and not be like the man in the parable who began to build, and was not able to finish.” Serious plans and thoughts should precede our move. “Not a move should be made but that movement and all that it portends are carefully considered—everything weighed.” One should not therefore wake up and thinks that he/she should leave the city and go to live in the rural area. Ellen White counseled: “Let there be nothing done in a disorderly manner, that there shall be a great loss or sacrifice made upon property because of ardent, impulsive speeches which stir up an enthusiasm which is not after the order of God, that a victory that was essential to be gained, shall, for lack of level-headed moderation and proper contemplation and sound principles and purposes, be turned into a defeat.” African Seventh-day Adventists should heed to the divine counsels within their contexts.

### **Issue of abandoning Western Education and Hospitals**

One of the more extreme interpretations of Ellen White’s writings that became very problematic in some African contexts is the outright rejection of Western education models and biomedical healthcare facilities. While Ellen White did provide counsel on integrating faith into curriculum and promoting natural remedies, some have misconstrued this as a categorical denunciation of modern secular academics and medicine.

In various parts of Africa, there have been reports of offshoot individuals that withdraw or attempt to withdraw their children from established schools thereby denying them access to conventional education. This is based on claims that Ellen White's writings proscribe participation in "worldly" or "pagan" educational systems influenced by evolutionary or non-biblical philosophies. In April 2024, a TV station in Kenya, in a mind-blowing report, accused the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Kenya of hiding occultists in its midst who advocate for not going to hospitals, abandoning the school system and avoiding marriage so they could intensify the preparation for the soon coming of Christ. The president of the Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in Western Kenya, through an exemplary message, denounced the biased reporting of the TV station and highlighted that the SDA church adheres to advocating for the school system and health institutions. His response was loudly distributed across social media, especially WhatsApp groups, among Seventh-day Adventists to show their support for the traditional response given, echoing the historical memory of the global Adventist roots.

Another striking event happened in Kenya between 2016 and 2017. There was a group of individuals, itinerant preachers, who disrupted the Adventist youth gathering at Kenyatta University in Nairobi. They urged Adventist students to drop out from schools. The itinerant preachers claimed to have interpreted the writings of Ellen White through their intuitive communication with the Holy Spirit. Such a dramatic appeal in the name of God led some students, including those preparing for medical careers, to drop out from their schools.

In Cape Verde, a tragic loss occurred when a church member passed away after declining hospital medication, despite his family's diligent efforts to bring him to the medical facility. The individual's refusal to accept treatment stemmed from his unwavering trust in the writings of Ellen White, highlighting concerns over his adherence to extremist literalism and its consequences on personal health decisions. The influence of these types of teachings on Seventh-day Adventists in Africa is notable. Many itinerant preachers target rural areas, but their presence also influences larger communities where they operate.

These groups discourage their members from seeking treatment at hospitals, clinics, or from trained medical professionals because they believe that Ellen White promoted prevention of diseases through the observance of natural laws and distrust of “drug” medication. These are reasons why they entirely shun mainstream healthcare infrastructure. Alternative herbalism and faith healing are proclaimed as the only valid approaches based on an extremely rigid reading of Ellen White’s health writings. Such unbalanced positions represent a failure to account for Ellen White’s actual intent and method. Her promotions of integrating biblical truth into education and prioritizing a preventive lifestyle were never meant as blanket prohibitions against benefiting from worthwhile secular knowledge or ethical professional medicine. She herself worked with educational leaders and medical institutions during her lifetime. Ellen White’s counsels and visions paved the way for the founding of pioneering educational institutions, healthcare facilities, publishing endeavors, and the driving force behind global missionary outreach within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Ellen White affirmed in her classical book on Christian education that “the work of education and the work of redemption are one.” She also recognized the significance of medical work in championing the work of redemption. “I can see in the Lord’s providences that the medical missionary work is to be a great entering wedge, whereby the diseased soul may be reached.”

### **Ellen G. White and the Bible**

The centrality of Scripture as the supreme authority for faith and practice is a foundational principle upheld by the Seventh-day Adventist Church globally, including across Africa. The church acknowledges the Bible as the inspired Word of God and the immutable standard against which all teachings and doctrines must be tested.

Ellen White’s writings are subject to the Bible and must remain subordinate to and in harmony with the Bible as the transcendent, infallible Word of God. Her writings are meant to illumine, amplify and reinforce members’ understanding and application of Scripture’s principles

in their daily lives. Indeed, she even stated that her writings would not have been needed if Seventh-day Adventists did not neglect the reading of the Bible. She wrote:

If you had made God's word your study, with a desire to reach the Bible standard and attain to Christian perfection, you would not have needed the *Testimonies*. It is because you have neglected to acquaint yourselves with God's inspired Book that He has sought to reach you by simple, direct testimonies, calling your attention to the words of inspiration which you had neglected to obey, and urging you to fashion your lives in accordance with its pure and elevated teachings.

In brief, while highly esteemed, Ellen White's legacy in Africa is theologically positioned as a "lesser light" leading people to the "greater light" of God's infallible Word in the Bible. Maintaining this balance between the two has been an ongoing focus amidst any tendencies toward extreme literalism or overemphasis of her writings over the primacy of Scripture itself. Ellen White appealed: "Brethren and Sisters, I command unto you this Book," referring to the Bible. Thus, "at no time did Ellen White even hint that Scripture could be replaced by her writings, or that her writings could function equally with Scripture. Neither did White believe that Scripture may be fully understood only when viewed through the lens of her writings." Her writings and testimonies provide enough ground to affirm that "it is abundantly clear that Ellen White did not believe that her writings should be used as some sort of final arbiter in matters relating to Christian faith, or as the basis for doctrine." She grounded her writings, teachings, and counsels in Scripture. African Adventists would do well to understand that God told Ellen White that:

‘Your work’ is to bear My word. Strange things will arise, and in your youth I set you apart to bear the message to the erring ones, to carry the word before unbelievers, and with pen and voice to reprove from the Word actions that are not

right. Exhort from the Word. I will make My Word open to you. It shall not be as a strange language. In the true eloquence of simplicity, with voice and pen, the messages that I give shall be heard from one who has never learned in the schools. My Spirit and My power shall be with you.

Ellen White's writings are to exalt the truths of the Bible, point people back to divine revelation found in the Bible, and to the will of God "the standard of character, the revealer of doctrines, and the test of experience."

### **The "Ellen White Said" Challenge**

A significant contemporary issue surrounding the use of Ellen White's writings in Africa is the prevalent practice of verbally quoting her statements without providing proper references or sourcing. This tendency to simply preface a quote with "Ellen White said..." rather than citing the exact publication and context has led to several problems.

The lack of referencing makes it extremely difficult to verify the accuracy and authenticity of the quotes being shared. Without knowing the original source, there is a risk that statements could be distorted, taken out of context, or even mis-attributed entirely. This opens the door for potential spread of misinformation under Ellen White's name. Arthur L. White warned that "It is not difficult to find individual sentences or paragraphs in either the Bible or the Ellen G. White's writings, which may be used to support one's own ideas rather than set forth the thought of the author."

By stripping Ellen White's counsel of its proper context and framing from the source material, there is greater potential for listeners to misconstrue the original intent behind her

words. Nuances, clarifying statements, and the surrounding narrative that lends meaning can be completely lost. She clearly instructed that her writings should not be used to substantiate individual opinions. She wrote:

In public labor do not make prominent, and quote that which Sister White has written, as authority to sustain your positions. To do this will not increase faith in the testimonies. Bring your evidences, clear and plain, from the Word of God. A “Thus saith the Lord” is the strongest testimony you can possibly present to the people. Let none be educated to look to Sister White, but to the mighty God, who gives instruction to Sister White.

This “Ellen White said” phenomenon is especially concerning when it involves extreme or fringe interpretations of her writings being promulgated irresponsibly. Questionable teachings on doomsday scenarios, legalistic standards, or offshoots calls can appear to gain undue credibility when shared as unverified, disconnected snippets under Ellen White’s authority.

The church in Africa should advocate for a diligent cross-checking of any quotes against the officially published writings of Ellen White.

### **PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATING ELLEN WHITE’S WRITINGS IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT**

This section focuses on four principles in the interpretation and application of the writings of Ellen White. They help in understanding and appreciating Ellen White’s influence within their proper contexts.

#### **Sola Scriptura**

The principle of *Sola Scriptura* affirms the Bible as the supreme, infallible standard of truth. White's writings are always subject to and harmonious with Scripture, never superseding or contradicting it. The Bible remains the supreme authority over her writings, which are a "lesser light" leading people to Scripture's "greater light." Ellen White spoke of returning to the principle of *sola scriptura*. "There is need of a return to the great Protestant Principle—the Bible, and the Bible only, as the rule of faith and duty."

Ellen White repeatedly affirmed the Word of God as the standard of faith. She counseled: "The Bible and the Bible alone, is our rule of faith." She also noted: "The Bible, and the Bible alone, is to be our creed, the sole bond union." She also affirmed the sufficiency of the Scripture: "The Bible contains all the principles that men need to understand in order to be fitted either for this life or for the life to come." In her book, *Testimonies for the Church*, she counseled: "The Truth of God is found in His Word. Those who feel that they must seek elsewhere for present truth need to be converted anew." So, the key principle in matters of faith and practices is "the Bible and the Bible alone."

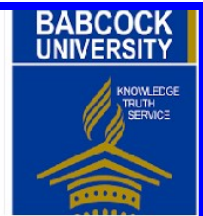
Ellen White clearly distinguishes the role of her writings in relation to the Bible. She noted: "Our position and faith is in the Bible.... And never do we want any soul to bring in the Testimonies ahead of the Bible." She also admitted that her writings are not "an addition to the word of God." Ellen White insisted: "God has, in that Word, promised to give visions in 'the last days' but this is "not for a new rule of faith, but for the comfort of His people, and to correct those who err from the Bible truth." This is why she famously said: "The Lord desires you to study your Bibles. He has not given any additional light to take the place of His Word."

African Seventh-day Adventists should integrate the counsels of Ellen White. There should be no controversy over the relation of Ellen White's writings to the Bible. She clearly clarified this relation herself.

### Context is Key



## Insight: Journal of Religious Studies Volume 17 (2024)181-202



One of the key principles in understanding and applying the writings of Ellen White is to interpret them in their full literary and historical context. Church members must avoid selectively lifting quotes without regard for the original intent, circumstances, and complete narrative they are part of. W. C. White warned on this point. He wrote: “When we take what she has written, and publish it without any description, or particular reference to the conditions existing when and where the testimony was given, there is always the possibility of the instruction being used as applying to places and conditions that are very different.” Thus, the original context of a text matters in understanding its meaning.

Ellen White emphasized the significance of literary setting. She noted:

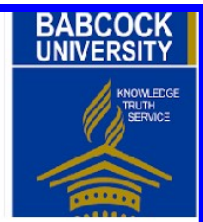
Many study the Scriptures for the purpose of proving their own ideas to be correct. They change the meaning of God’s Word to suit their own opinions. And thus they do also with the testimonies that he sends. They quote half a sentence, leaving out the other half, which, if quoted, would show their reasoning to be false. God has a controversy with those who wrest the Scriptures, making them conform to their preconceived ideas.

Ellen White condemned the cherry-picking quotations from her writings without paying attention to their literary and historical contexts. She was upset with people picking sentences here and there to substantiate individual opinions. W. C. White noted in 1904 that “much misunderstanding has come from the misuse of isolated passages in the *Testimonies*, in cases where, if the whole Testimony or the whole paragraph had been read, an impression would have been made upon minds that was altogether different from the impression made by the use of selected sentences.”

Ellen White insisted that her writings should be read in their connections and contexts. This is the very reason why she warned the delegates at the 1891 General Conference Session that “you treat the Testimonies as if you believed them, quoting from them to strengthen any



## **Insight: Journal of Religious Studies Volume 17 (2024)181-202**



statement you wish to have prevail. But how is it when light is given to correct your errors? Do you then accept the light? When the Testimonies speak contrary to your ideas, you treat them very lightly.” It is strongly advised that readers of Ellen White’s writings thoroughly examine all accessible materials on a particular subject before forming conclusions about having fully understood her guidance. This advice holds particular importance, especially considering that many of Ellen White’s writings are compilations. Compilations typically combine various quotations drawn from different works by Ellen White, organized according to related topics and deliberately grouped into chapters to fulfill specific objectives. The White Estate often compiles these works in response to requests from General Conference Departments or in recognition of particular needs. However, a challenge with compilations is that many quotations lack their original historical and literary contexts. Ellen White’s writings were penned in a specific time and place. By understanding the historical context of her writings, Seventh-day Adventists in Africa can better grasp the underlying principles and timeless truths that are applicable to their current context.

### **Focus on Central Themes**

The principle of focusing on central theme in the writings of Ellen White is important. Instead of getting bogged down in minor details, Adventists and readers of Ellen White’s writings in Africa should center their attention on the fundamental principles and central themes of the prophet’s writings. Ellen White noted: “When men pick up this theory and that theory, when they are curious to know something it is not necessary for them to know, God is not leading them. It is not His plan that His people shall present something which they have to suppose, which is not taught in the Word. It is not His will that they shall get into controversy over questions which will not help them spiritually, such as, who is to compose the hundred and forty-four thousand? This those who are the elect of God will in a short time know without question.” Greater attention should be given to identifying key themes in her writings such as salvation, grace, love,

and discipleship, which are relevant to the African settings. Ellen White recognized that the central theme of the Bible should be viewed as the themes that should retain believers' attention. "The central theme of the Bible, the theme about which every other in the whole book clusters, is the redemption plan, the restoration in the human soul of the image of God," affirmed Ellen White. Recognizing the central themes allows readers to contextualize Ellen White's writings within the specific historical, social, and political landscape of Africa. This involves understanding the unique challenges, experiences, and perspectives of Africans, which may differ from those of Ellen White's primarily American audience. For instance, the appeal to leave the cities for the countryside should be taken with much wisdom in regions of Africa where insecurity is dominant. Regions such as Northern Nigeria, South Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia have high risks of insecurity and vandalism in the countryside.

Focusing on central themes allows for a unified understanding of Ellen White's teachings that transcends cultural and linguistic differences, fostering greater unity and solidarity among Adventists globally, and Adventists in Africa more specifically. Rather than cherry-picking isolated quotes or passages, Seventh-day Adventists in Africa should have a better understanding of Ellen White's writings.

As Christians, our primary duty lies in prioritizing the core teachings of the Bible and Ellen White's writings over peripheral matters. The peripheral concerns will naturally find their rightful place within the broader framework of God's principal message to His people. Exploring theological nuances at the periphery may lead to fresh insights, but these revelations could ultimately appear obscure when compared to the central, steadfast doctrines of the Bible. It is therefore unnecessary for Seventh-day Adventists in Africa to tear one another down over issues of whether meat should be served or not at weddings or religious gatherings. Adventists should focus on topics of salvation, evangelism, love for God and their neighbors, compassion, and acts of charity to the poor.

### Faithful Study

A diligent study of the writings of Ellen White should be encouraged. My personal experience over the years has proven that it is beneficial to take time for intentional reading of the Testimonies. Individual readings and group study can help develop better understanding of her writings. Fortunately, various WhatsApp and physical groups which foster the understanding and application of Ellen White's writings within the African context exist. A couple of these groups are located in Adventist Universities and satellite campuses across Africa. For instance, Babcock University in Nigeria has at least of two groups that regularly meet at Pioneer Seventh-day Adventist Church and at Heritage Church. These groups should be equipped with materials and the books of the Prophet should be made available to them. The White Estate and the various existing Ellen White research centers in Africa should encourage the creation of study centers across university campuses such as Cosendai Adventist University in Cameroon, Adventist University of Central Africa, in Rwanda, Ethiopian Adventist College, Adventist University of West Africa, in Liberia, and maybe one or two centers in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Faithful study of Ellen White's writings is not merely an academic exercise but a spiritual endeavor that requires the illumination and direction of the Holy Spirit. Seventh-day Adventists in Africa must approach her writings with an attitude of humility, openness, and dependence on the Holy Spirit to grant them the right attitude and concentration.

### Conclusion

The General Conference and Adventist leadership in Africa should continually provide balanced counsel to avoid extremisms when interpreting Ellen White's writings. The church leadership should stress Ellen White's own cautions about not taking her words for fostering an extreme or fanatic mentality. When interpreting White's writings, it is essential to adhere to key principles, including: 1. The significance of Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone), 2. Understanding the historical context, 3. Focusing on central themes and main messages, 4. Conducting faithful and

methodological study. These principles ensure an accurate and meaningful interpretation of White's writings.

### Endnotes

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- xxxix Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 1: 166.
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- xxxix Communication through email with a Tanzanian Pastor, May 20, 2022. For the sake of the protection of the individual, the name is withheld.
- xxxix Ellen G. White, *Counsels to the Church* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1991), 230.
- xxxix Theodore Levterov, "Ellen White and Vegetarianism," in *Understanding Ellen White: The Life and Work of the Most Influential Voice in Adventist History*, ed. Merlin D. Burt (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2015), 2022, soft copy.
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- xxxix Esdras Mupenzi, Seventh-day Adventist Pastor in Rwanda, Email Communication with the Author, May 20, 2022.
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- xxxix James A. Babalola, Dauda D. Gambo, and Gabriel Masfa, "Threads of Identity: Nigerian Fashion Navigating Cultural Roots and Global Trends," Manuscript Paper, May 2024, 1.
- xxxix Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), 293.
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- xxxix Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4 (1873), 307.
- xxxix Ellen G. White, *Last Days Events* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1992), 33.

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