A Portrait

Ellen Gould harMon White (1827–1915) mentioned Queen Victoria only once. In a sermon she preached in Washington, D.C. in 1889, she bemoaned the buzz for the monarch on the occasion of her visit to the nation’s capital two years earlier in the golden jubilee of her reign. “During the jubilee, the queen’s name was on every lip,” the prophet complained. “How I desired that Jesus might be as highly honored, and his name be spoken with as much praise.” 1 White’s allusion to Victoria suggested that more than an ocean separated the American prophet from the British queen. Yet despite obvious and vast differences between them, the charismatic leader of a global church and the queen of the British Commonwealth were women whose lives paralleled each other in remarkable ways. Both enjoyed the gift of longevity. Queen Victoria (1819–1901) lived to be eighty-one years old, Ellen White to eighty-seven. Victoria ascended the throne in 1837, Ellen’s tenth year, but White lived fourteen years beyond the queen’s death. Victoria had inherited the throne by bloodline, the old-fashioned way, as the last monarch in the House of Hanover, while White had become the leading figure within her Victorian religious subculture by the even older “divine right” of a prophetic calling. At eighteen years of age, Victoria had become England’s queen as the daughter of Prince Edward Augustus, Duke of Kent, and the granddaughter of King George III. At seventeen, Ellen Harmon, a hat-maker’s daughter from New England, had “risen higher and higher above the earth” by way of a first vision that would exalt her to a kind of religious royalty. While one owed her status to Britain’s aristocratic tradition, the other was a product of America’s Jacksonian democracy.

. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 1). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

ellen harMon White: aMerican ProPhet In their own distinctly different ways, however, these two contemporaries became magisterial figures. The prophet’s Seventh-day Adventist Church was never more than an obscure enclave of Victoria’s world, unknown to Victoria and most of her subjects. Yet White, preaching in her nation’s capital, seemed unimpressed by Victoria’s celebrity. Indeed, inspired by the millennial impulse of her American Protestantism, the prophet regretted the “bustle of preparation for the coming of England’s queen” in Washington, D.C.; she urged people instead to prepare for “the coming of Christ.” For those with the ears to hear her sermon, Jesus would be the royal that mattered, not Victoria. White’s American context also differed from Queen Victoria’s British setting. In England, somewhat ironically, the Queen’s most Victorian of subjects lived at the margins of genteel society and political influence. In White’s America, on the contrary, Victorians came to dominate their social, economic, and political world. For this reason, Daniel Walker Howe has suggested that Victorian culture may have been “experienced more intensely in the United States than in Victoria’s homeland.” 2 Though White throughout her life remained at the margins of mainstream American culture, it might also be argued that she became more Victorian in a sense than Queen Victoria herself. Indeed, she emerged as another of those homegrown American religious figures whose life and career blurred the distinction between marginal and mainstream. 3 And by any measure, she belongs in the company of other notable nineteenth-century American women. The American Victorian era emerged in the 1830s, during Ellen Harmon’s childhood, from the furor and ferment of the greatest evangelical revival in American history. And Victorianism can be understood as a taming and ordering of Second Awakening religious, cultural, and social impulses, much as White’s prophetic career proved to be a more stable and durable outgrowth of her early trance experiences. From the mid to late nineteenth century, evangelical Protestantism came to sustain a culture-shaping role in America, especially in the way that it sought and succeeded in imposing its Protestant values on society; and White alternated as outsider and insider relative to this value system. Throughout her life, White, like all her contemporaries, witnessed an era of profound and pervasive change in the United States, probably the single most transformative period in the nation’s history. Americans like White were no longer content with a vertically structured Calvinist cosmos, and they exchanged it for a horizontally oriented world marked

. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 2). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

A Portrait 3 by romantic values and intense experience. Despite the fundamental changes in her life and those of other Americans, however, these nineteenth-century Protestants were just as sure of themselves as their grandparents had ever been of God. White was hardly alone when she asserted that “we have the truth.” The changes had led to no loss of certitude. 4 To describe these self-assured, even smug, Victorians is therefore to set the stage for White’s life and career and to understand her at the deepest level. “In ancient times God spoke to men by the mouth of the prophets and apostles. In these days He speaks to them by the testimonies of His Spirit,” White wrote, referring to her own messages. 5 Just as the classic Hebrew prophets had been called to speak to an ancient world, and the Apostles had been chosen to spread first-century Christianity in the Pax Romana, White had been selected as “the Lord’s messenger” to declare God’s “last-day” message to the Victorian world. There was no mistaking her sense of mission, for White saw herself as a prophet who was blessed—gifted—in two unique ways. She had seen in vision the most complete understanding of Christianity yet revealed. And her era provided an ideal “fullness of time” in which to preach and write that message. Like so many prominent women of her time, White found her quintessential calling as a writer (see Chapter 5). In pursuing a prolific publishing career, she took full advantage of the dramatic expansion of print communication and the great increase of literacy among her contemporaries. But she did more than disseminate the word; she spread her people. In this she benefitted by being a New Englander who followed the migratory path of others in her subcultural zone, traveling from Maine to upstate New York to Michigan heralding her message. And this geographic diaspora, which strung Seventh-day Adventists from the Northeast to the Midwest, was held together less by a sense of common space than uncommon time. In this White insisted that their faith was all in the name “Seventh-day Adventist.” In her preoccupation with time—both the time for worship and the time of the end—White’s seventh-day sabbatarianism resonated with the contemporary importance of weekly Sabbath observance, but worshipping on Saturday rather than Sunday set Adventists apart from—and above— her generation. Her Adventism drew on the historical consciousness of her age as well, in that she saw all ages prior to hers as incomplete stages on the way to her own. Her world mattered like none before it because her world marked the end of the world.

. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 3). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

ellen harMon White: aMerican ProPhet To prepare for this imminent end meant to build character. And as character builders, Adventists would appear very much like other nineteenth-century Protestants but would make an ardent effort to surpass them. Every page White wrote and every sermon she delivered urged Adventists to the highest possible moral ground in readiness for Christ’s coming. And as was typical of the period, she did this by embracing morals with more ardor than theology, the experiential over the ideological. She wrote impromptu letters or “testimonies” (eventually published as Testimonies for the Church) rather than systematic theological tomes. And in her crucial Conflict of the Ages series she cast Adventism as an epic story rather than as a set of ideas. As a prophet and literary figure, she was most herself when flooding Adventist homes with advice literature on child nurture and education, diet and health, self-improvement and sanctification, personal etiquette and social ethics. 6 In order to stand morally spotless before their heavenly Judge, Adventists must listen to their “mother.” For White had become the spiritual mother of this latter-day Israel and had transformed her community into a cult of domesticity. Though always known warmly and respectfully as “Sister White,” she was, without any doubt, the one and only founding mother of her church. Her domestic agenda for Adventists turned them into a home, a family, over which she reigned as the spiritual queen. All the while, however, her charismatic status within Adventism would remain a paradox. She gave the “brethren” their due. She knew “her place” as a demure and submissive figure relative to the founding fathers of her church. But her insistence that she was merely a “lesser light,” both to the brethren and to the Bible, would prove the means by which she assumed a singular and unsurpassed importance within her community. In the course of her stellar and ever-ascendant ecclesiastical career, she parlayed her position within the conventional “woman’s sphere” into something more; she mounted a public stage of considerable influence and power. Within Seventh-day Adventism and beyond, she served as another illustration, if unintentionally, of the triumph of a domestic feminism (see Chapter 15). 7 To encapsulate her life within her nineteenth-century context is both modest and ambitious. It is easy enough to sketch her story in the form of an insular narrative, but to begin to interpret her life calls for the more complex demands of cultural biography. To view the Adventist prophet as a Victorian woman can be a way of understanding and appreciating her achievement without unduly celebrating or derogating it. White’s portrait

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A Portrait 5 belongs in the Victorian room of an American art museum, so to speak, but neither as a bland derivative work nor as a burlesque piece. The Prophet in Her Place From her petit bourgeois background, Ellen Harmon was in a sense adopted into Victorian culture, not born a Victorian. She therefore came to embrace aspects of the new culture with all the ardor of the “born again.” At about nine years of age, however, it looked like Harmon would not live to see most of the nineteenth century when, as she later wrote, “an accident happened to me which was to affect my whole life.” A classmate, “angry at some trifle,” struck her on the nose with a stone that spread its ruin throughout her face, at least for a time. Her mother later told her that, after the injury, “Ellen noticed nothing, but lay in a stupid state for three weeks.” Her father, on returning from business in Georgia, found his bedridden daughter so physically disfigured by the trauma that he could not recognize her. This childhood “misfortune” left her with a host of physical disorders and put an end to her formal schooling, which would always distress her. Throughout the remainder of her paradoxically long life, she considered herself a “great sufferer from disease.” In her diaries, letters, and autobiographical writings, she would chronically complain of a whole panoply of physical and psychological problems: weakness and fainting, breathing difficulties and lung pains, “heart disease,” loss of sight and loss of consciousness, “inflammation of the brain,” paralysis and lameness, stomach trouble, dropsy, and rheumatism, as well as melancholy and severe depression. Clearly she was deeply ensconced in the cult of frailty, but her maladies probably had less to do with her call to prophesy than did her religious background. 8 The “Shouting” Methodism of Harmon’s childhood and adolescence sustained the spirit of a Second Great Awakening that paved the way to Victorian America (see Chapter 2). It also laid the spiritual groundwork for White’s career as a prophet. In the Chestnut Street Church where her father served as a Methodist exhorter, the Harmon family favored the “Shouters” in the backless benches of the church’s gallery, not the quieter members in the pews below. Though Ellen Harmon, along with several in her family, later forsook Methodism for Millerism and ultimately became mother of her own church, in many respects the Adventist prophet would remain a child of Methodism her entire life. Long after the “Shouters”

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of her childhood church had been muted, White would be exclaiming “Glory, Glory, Glory,” as she vaulted into vision among the Seventh-day Adventists. 9 Without leaving Methodism for Millerism, however, Harmon might never have embraced Jesus or heard the call to prophesy. First came her conversion to an evangelical Jesus. Like so many in her day, especially young women experiencing revival fervor, Harmon abandoned the “old rules” of the Calvinist-Federalist era, which for her meant discarding God as a sovereign for God as a beneficent Father. In a conversion narrative typical of her times, Harmon provided all the gloomy and glorious details of her personal transformation. Vacillating in her mid teens between faith in one kind of God and faith in another, she ultimately eschewed allegiance to a remote, harsh, and arbitrary deity and embraced an immanent, personal, and loving Jesus. Indeed, her new God may have been more like her mother and less like any father she knew. 10 Harmon found this more maternal Jesus, ironically, after hearing a man named William Miller—known affectionately as old “Father” Miller—speak in her hometown of Portland, Maine in 1840. And by way of Millerism, Harmon not only came to Jesus, she found her calling. To pass as she did from the receding shadows of Colonial Puritanism’s “old rules” to the “new rules” that enveloped mid-nineteenth-century American Victorianism involved traversing the “no rules” of Romantic revivalism and “freedom’s ferment.” The Millerite movement, inspired by Miller’s own rules of prophetic interpretation, plunged Harmon into a millenarian vortex of “no rules” that proved an ideal milieu for the birth of a prophet. When the world did not end “about 1843,” as Miller had predicted, Harmon gravitated to a younger, less educated, and more “radical” movement within the larger movement that looked for Jesus to come on October 22, 1844. After the failure of that date, known to heartsick Millerites as the Great Disappointment, Harmon’s first vision in December of 1844 explained the delay. Two months later, her second vision implored a frail, introverted, seventeen-year-old girl to pursue prophesying among disheartened Millerites. 11 Looking back on that time, she would declare it “the happiest year of my life.” God had imparted the “gift of prophecy” on her, and she had been rescued from the miseries of this world by envisioning a new heaven and new earth. Her life without prospects had become the life of a visionary. In the reckless excitement of that moment, however, Harmon could not have

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imagined the new order that a Protestant culture would soon impose or the significant role she would play in that culture. However extraordinary her prophetic gifts, she could not have predicted that her life or her world would last some seventy more years. 12 Harmon was the fragile trance figure of a motley group of ephemeral millenarians. She would be transformed into the full-fledged, incredibly forceful prophet of a viable and durable church. A comprehensive explanation for her success story should no doubt include a variety of factors rooted in her life and her times, but none of them was more important than her marriage to James White. If Harmon might never have budded into a millenarian visionary without hearing William Miller preach, she most certainly would never have flowered into her church’s prophet without marrying White. Their critics had faulted the unmarried couple for traveling together unchaperoned to preach Adventism and share Harmon’s visions. But they chastised them even more for their marriage in 1846, as it implied that the world’s end was not so imminent after all. By way of marriage, however, the Whites drew a bold line between themselves and what they had come to see as the excesses and fanaticism of millenarianism. They had snubbed “promiscuous” (mixed) foot washing and “holy kisses,” as well as scandalous “spiritual wifery,” for the institution of a bourgeois and respectable marriage. And their marital institution would prove paradigmatic for the institutional church they would found together. 13 Theirs would be the marriage of two religious traditions as well. A nineteen-year-old “Shouting” Methodist, whose upbringing had predisposed her to charismatic phenomena, had married a twenty-five-year-old Christian Connexion school teacher and minister who, by background, was generally resistant to visionaries. For the Whites as a couple, their marriage had been “arranged” by religious circumstances and would assume a fairly distinct social division of labor along gender lines. In her husband, the visionary had taken on a promoter, the artist had retained an agent, and, ultimately, the writer had acquired an editor and publisher. Throughout their marriage, in one way or another, James White supported his wife’s visions but her visions exclusively; he would promote one visionary at the most. 14 In her home state of Maine, Harmon’s initial visions seemed indistinguishable, in phenomenological terms, from those of numerous female visionaries; yet she transcended this sorority of seers and asserted herself as a singular figure, while the others would swoon and fall facedown in obscurity. 15 She would later account for her success and their failure in

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starkly supernatural terms: she spoke for God; they were pawns of Satan. But the more mundane explanation lay in the fact that she married James White and the others did not. The Ellen White the world would see would be a refracted glimmer in her husband’s eye. And he refused to endorse a romantic medium given to outlandish displays of emotion. He idealized instead his visionary wife as the sentimental woman of the 1840s, slim, pale, and spiritually transparent, whose visions unveiled another world as surely as her demure clothing revealed character. 16 For James White, to describe his young wife in trance was to depict the then fashionable sentimental woman, a prototype of the Victorian woman: In passing into vision... she seems to drop down like a person in a swoon, or one having lost [her] strength; she then seems to be instantly filled with superhuman strength, sometimes rising at once to her feet and walking around the room. There are frequent movements of her hands and arms, pointing to the right or left as her head turns. All these movements are made in a graceful manner. In whatever position the hand or arm may be placed, it is impossible for anyone to move it. Her eyes are always open, but she does not wink; her head is raised, and she is looking upward, not with a vacant stare, but with a pleasant expression. 17 In James White’s irenic portrait of a lone visionary, there was nothing reminiscent of what had once been a turbulent mural of romantic men and women convulsed by the spirit, rolling on the ground, barking and howling at otherworldly sights. A Victorian woman, the “weakest of the weak” as Adventists dubbed her, took on “superhuman strength.” Though timorously delicate in manner, it was “impossible for anyone to move” her. 18 As a prophet, she accessed not only “superhuman strength” but the human strength of the men in her emerging movement, and this combination of the divine and the human—the woman’s gift and the men’s prowess—would always involve a quid pro quo. The Whites, as a couple, added Joseph Bates, a grizzled fifty-five-year-old sea captain, as the third member of their founding triumvirate. The prophet impressed Bates with her vision of the planets and their moons that no ordinary woman could have known. Bates in turn convinced the Whites of the truth of the seventh-day Sabbath. In the subsequent Sabbath Conferences of 1848, the “brethren” hammered out Scripture-based church doctrines on the

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Sabbath, the sanctuary, and conditional immortality in arcane discussions that the woman confessed she could not understand. “During the whole time I could not understand the reasoning of the brethren,” she regretted. “My mind was locked, as it were, and I could not comprehend the meaning of the scriptures they were studying.” 19 But this lent all the more credibility to her subsequent visions that clarified for them an opaque Bible. Studious men had reasoned their way through the Scriptures but could not reach agreement based on the Scriptures alone. They needed the revelations of an inspired woman to resolve the impasses among them on points of faith. Once God had bridged this gender gap, however, the doctrines had been established, and they could then be disseminated. “I have a message for you,” she told her husband. “You must begin to print a little paper and send it out to the people.” 20 In his wife’s vision that he should become a publisher, James White had been thrown into a briar patch; he therefore had no trouble seeing God’s hand in his wife’s message. In 1849 he produced The Present Truth and followed in 1850 with the Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, in which written versions of his wife’s visions were featured. The following year the Whites moved to Saratoga Springs, New York, where James published A Sketch of the Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G. White, a collection of her earliest writings. Moving to Rochester, New York, in 1852, the Whites continued their writing and publishing blitz from a rented house, shared with editorial colleagues, where a printing press would be their most important piece of household furniture. 21 Criticism of the couple, however, revolved around an apparent imbalance of power that had developed between them and how that might affect the church as a whole. The prophet had not stayed within her “proper place” relative to the Bible. Rather than the Bible occupying a head-of-household position within the Adventist family, as the brethren maintained, the church’s doctrines appeared tied to a woman’s apron strings. And a Victorian husband took the criticism personally, as if perhaps the charges reflected poorly on his marriage. As a result, he became defensive. In the summer of 1851, he unilaterally decided to exclude his wife’s vision-based writings from the widely circulated Review and Herald and confine them to a bi-weekly Extra with a more limited circulation. Since only one Extra was ever published, this move resulted in a five-year moratorium on the prophet’s ministry. In his effort to keep the prophet in her proper place, White undercut any meaningful place at all for her in the movement. Curtailed by her

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Visions

among the camp meeting songs that have come down to us from the early nineteenth century, there is one titled simply “The Methodist.” From it we learn not only that John Wesley’s followers in America were “despised. . .because they shout and preach so plain,” but also that they proudly referred to themselves as “shouting Methodists.” Though the shout tradition with its rich biblical imagery, exuberant worship, and stress on the felt presence of God was embraced by substantial numbers of early American Methodists, it was not exclusive to them. Rather it is a tradition that emerged in the context of late-eighteenth-century revivals in the Chesapeake Bay region and radiated from there into Virginia and the Carolinas to the south, Kentucky to the east, and north into New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and, in the 1790s, into New England. 1 When Methodist preachers steeped in the shout tradition entered New England, the leadership of the more established Congregationalist and Presbyterian churches responded with dismay. Though New Englanders had a long history of revivals, they disliked the Methodists’ enthusiastic style of worship, their uneducated preachers, and their all-round lack of respectability. In response to this populist challenge, the clergy looked back to the colonial awakening in New England, reclaiming Jonathan Edwards as the father of a tradition of sober revivals, a staunch critic of enthusiasm and excess, and, in the language of the early national period, an unequivocal opponent of “fanaticism.” 2 The phenomena that the more “respectable” sort branded as “fanatical” typically involved claims regarding the presence of God that the respectable folks felt were too bold. Where critics heard noise and confusion at

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revivals and camp meetings, those prone to shouting spoke of the power of God descending as the unsaved cried out in distress and the newly saved shouted with joy. In their accounts of such meetings, shouters often described overpowering emotions that led them to fall under the weight of their sins and rise shouting praises to God, as illustrated in the early 19th century print of a Methodist camp meeting (Figure 2.1). In the throes of conversion or sanctification, a few offered more dramatic accounts of falling into trance, journeying to heaven in the manner described by St. Paul, and dreams and visions in which they had direct encounters with Jesus or God. While opponents characterized such claims as fanatical, shouters viewed them as the essence of religion and characterized their critics as “formalists,” that is, Christians who understood the form of religion but failed to grasp its substance. In the late 1820s, in the context of the Second Great Awakening, clergy eager to discredit “fanaticism” began applying explanations advanced to account for the experiences supposedly caused by mesmerism and animal magnetism to the unusual phenomena associated with revivals. Methodists, especially shouting Methodists, figured prominently in these

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discussions of the “influence of the imagination on the nervous system,” since, following John Wesley’s lead, they often resisted naturalistic explanations and attributed unusual experiences to “a supernatural influence, either good or bad.” 3 In light of the evident sincerity of those who made such claims, naturalistic accounts of the powers of animal magnetism provided critics with a way to account for experiences that people attributed to the power of God in psychological terms without accusing them of lying or seeking to deceive. As public demonstrations of the power of mesmerism became more common in the 1830s and 1840s, mesmerism became widely available as a way to account for unusual experiences. Tensions between these two sides of the revival tradition informed the Millerite movement from which Seventh-day Adventism eventually emerged. Although the Millerite movement drew from many denominations and ultimately reflected a wide spectrum of views regarding unusual experiences, Ellen Gould Harmon grew up as a Methodist, and her responses to William Miller and the Great Disappointment of 1844 were shaped by the visionary culture of shouting Methodism. Though the details are somewhat sketchy, we know that Harmon was raised in the Chestnut Street Methodist Church in Portland, Maine, where her father was an exhorter. Sometime during her childhood, a conflict erupted between advocates of “shouting” and advocates of instrumental music, which was won by the latter. The Harmons most likely sympathized with the shouters but did not withdraw from the church. 4 Ellen Harmon heard William Miller lecture on the imminent second coming of Christ in Portland in 1840. She was deeply impressed by Miller’s warnings, and she brought her newly awakened anxiety with her to a Methodist camp meeting where she began to “seek the Lord.” Shortly thereafter, she experienced conversion at a prayer meeting. Sometime in her twelfth year, she was baptized, presumably after the traditional six months of probation, and became a formal member of the Methodist church. After attending Miller’s second course of lectures in Portland in 1841, Harmon decided she was “not ready for Christ’s coming” because, in her words, she had not experienced “the soul-purifying [i.e., sanctifying] effects of the [advent] truth.” For the next year or so, she attended both adventist meetings and Methodist class meetings and experienced no contradiction in doing so. She described herself as all the while “hungering and thirsting for holiness of heart,” suggesting that she did not distinguish between the purification of soul that she sought in preparation for the second coming and the Methodist experience of sanctification. 5

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Millerism became a subject of great concern in the Methodist conferences of the northeast during the early 1840s. It came up at the Maine annual conference in both 1842 and 1843. By the end of 1843, records of the Maine conference indicate that eight or ten ministers in full connection and three on trial were reproved by the conference and told to abstain from advocating “the peculiarities of Millerism.” Portland was the center of advent-oriented Methodism in the conference. Gerschom Cox, Harmon’s former minister at the Chestnut Street church, was the most prominent adventist in the conference. As presiding elder of the Portland district and editor of the Maine Wesleyan Journal, he was in a position both to promote and protect the Millerite movement in the Portland area. By 1842, Cox’s efforts were so successful and, in the eyes of the conference, so detrimental to the church that he was appointed to Orrington, a town outside Bangor. There, a Methodist source recounts, he continued to teach “the doctrines of Miller, to the damage of the strong and flourishing society in that place.” 6 The removal of Cox as presiding elder led to the expulsion of Harmon and other Portland-area Millerites from the Methodist church in 1842. Methodists and Adventists Between 1842 and 1844, adventist lecturers, known up until that time primarily for their rationalistic exposition of the prophetic texts of the Bible, turned to the Methodist revival tradition as a means of proclaiming their message. By 1842, a year before the predicted Second Coming, the ranks of both believers and opponents had grown dramatically. The growing opposition within the denominations made it more difficult to hold meetings in churches, while burgeoning numbers made it harder to find rental halls suitable for the largest adventist gatherings. At the adventist General Conference held in Boston in 1842, the Millerites, a majority of whom were by that time come-outers from Methodism, voted to adopt the camp-meeting as a means of holding large gatherings and effectively spreading the advent message. 7 In recasting the camp-meeting for their own purposes, adventists downplayed communion and love feasts, potentially divisive rituals in a movement that had come out from a variety of Protestant traditions, and substituted the by-then traditional adventist lecture with its detailed exegetical charts for the traditional camp-meeting sermon. Despite adventist leaders’ efforts to avoid any hint of enthusiasm, adventist camp-meetings

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did not lack for emotion. Although adventist lectures were rationalistic in tone, their content evoked strong emotional responses. Indeed, while the Millerites’ rationalistic exegesis, precise predictions, and pre-millennial eschatology were novel, their effect was to intensify and often revitalize traditional evangelical fears of damnation and longings for the felt-presence of God and heaven. 8 Adventist emotions were caught up in camp-meeting hymns and spiritual songs, rapidly amended and abridged where necessary to reflect adventist theology. In many cases little adaptation was needed. Much of the practical theology and ritual of the Methodist camp-meeting was appropriated without change. Millerite camp-meetings, for example, continued the shout tradition’s focus on Jerusalem, the Jerusalem prefigured in the camp and the new heavenly Jerusalem soon to come. As adventists circled the camp before departing, they typically sang the traditional camp-meeting spiritual “Jerusalem.” A song of longing and expectation, tinged with this-worldly sorrow and otherworldly hope, it played off inverse images of departing the camp to return to the world and departing the world for heaven. In the interplay of images, the sorrow of departure from the camp was transformed into longing for the second coming where “we shall our Jesus meet,/And never, never part again.” The longing and hope were caught up in the concluding lines of the chorus in a call-and-response dialogue (“What, never part again? No, never part again”) popular among both Millerites and Methodists. 9 Conversion and sanctification remained central to the adventist camp-meeting, the urgency of both only enhanced by the advent message. As at Methodist camp-meetings, convicted sinners came forward to the mourner’s bench or the anxious seat and were directed from there to prayer tents after the sermon was over. 10 Those already converted sought sanctification or, as they more commonly put it, strove to “consecrate” themselves more fully in preparation for the coming advent. Milton Perry argues that the adventist camp meetings were less emotional, and in particular gave less evidence of “physical exercises,” than Methodist camp meetings. Nonetheless, he presents considerable evidence to the contrary. At a camp-meeting in Kentucky in 1844, for example, the newspaper reported that “the mourners or converts, of whom there were a very large number, threw themselves in the dust and dirt around the pulpit, and for nearly an hour, men and women were praying, singing, shouting, groaning, and weeping bitterly.” 11 In the prayer tents, in particular, there was seemingly little restraint. There, the New York Herald reported,

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“men and women [were] down in the straw lying and sitting in every conceivable posture; praying, shouting, and singing indiscriminately with all their might.” 12 The power of God manifested itself at smaller meetings as well. Hiram Edson reports that during a meeting in his home in 1844 a number of people were “so deeply convicted” that they attempted to leave before succumbing to the advent message. While two left, “the third one fell upon the threshold; the fourth, the fifth, and so on, till the most of the company were thus slain by the power of the God.” All then lay on the floor, uttering “agonizing cries and pleading for mercy.” 13 In light of the antipathy of the movement’s most prominent leaders toward any displays of Methodist-style “enthusiasm,” Perry evinces some puzzlement in the face of the abundant evidence of “emotional and ecstatic experiences” among the Millerites. 14 I suspect that he is right in finally attributing the prevalence of such experiences to the disproportionate numbers of Methodist preachers and people in the ranks of the Millerite movement. But knowing that not all Methodists were “shouters,” we might also speculate that adventism, especially after it appropriated the camp-meeting tradition, had a disproportionate appeal to those Methodists most steeped in the shout tradition. Ruth Alden Doan has emphasized the supernaturalism inherent in the Millerite movement. “For most Millerites,” she points out, “mention of 1843 served as a reminder of a supernatural order so real as to be almost palpably, physically present.” 15 For “shouting Methodists,” early adventism undoubtedly aroused or intensified traditional longings for the felt-presence of Jesus-in-heaven and precipitated renewed attention to sanctification as a means of preparing for his imminent return. Viewed in light of their intense concern for sanctification, adventist come-outers from Methodism had features in common with both “respectable” holiness advocates, such as Phoebe Palmer, and the more radical holiness “come-outers” of the late-nineteenth century. 16 The early religious experiences of Ellen Harmon make a great deal of sense when viewed in relation to the Methodist shout tradition. While some scholars have questioned her mental health, her religious experience was not unlike that of the Methodist itinerant preacher Benjamin Abbot. In both cases, dreams and trances played a significant role. Where Abbot had a long and tortuous conversion experience accompanied by significant dreams and a relatively unanguished trance-based sanctification experience, Harmon’s conversion was relatively uneventful and her experience of sanctification long and tortuous. The latter process was

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accompanied by dreams and ended in trance. Her experiences presupposed and elaborated on the shouter’s typological reading of the Bible. 17 Harmon’s first dream was set in the heavenly temple in the New Jerusalem. All who entered the temple were expected to “come before the lamb and confess their sins, and then take their place among the happy throng who occupied the elevated seats.” In her dream, Harmon was “slowly making [her] way . . .to face the lamb, when the trumpet sounded, and the building shook, and shouts of triumph went up from the saints in that building” and she was left “alone in the place in great darkness.” 18 Here imagery prominent in the shout tradition—the temple, the trumpet, and shouts of triumph—blended with the Adventist imagery of an imminent end. In the second dream, she met face to face with Jesus, again it seems within the heavenly temple. As I entered I saw Jesus, so lovely and beautiful. His countenance expressed benevolence and majesty. I tried to shield myself from his piercing gaze. I thought he knew my heart, and every circumstance of my life. I tried not to look upon his face but still his eyes were upon me. I could not escape his gaze. He then, with a smile, drew near me, and laid his hand upon my head, saying, “Fear not.” The sound of his sweet voice, caused me to feel a thrill of happiness I never before experienced. I was too full of joy to utter a word. I grew weak, and fell prostrate at his feet. And while lying helpless, scenes of glory and lasting beauty passed before me. I thought I was saved in heaven. At length my strength returned. I arose upon my feet. The loving eyes of Jesus were fixed upon me still, and he smiled upon me. His presence filled me with such holy awe that I could not endure it. 19 Here we have an encounter with Jesus that begs to be described as “mesmerizing.” The effect of Jesus’ gaze stands out. It pierced her heart and seemed to know every circumstance of her life. She tried to shield herself from it, to turn herself away from his face, but his eyes did not leave her and she could not escape it. He broke the spell with a smile and a touch. Harmon, thrilled by the sound of his voice, filled with joy, and unable to utter a word, responded to his presence in the manner of the shout tradition. She fell prostrate and lay helpless while scenes of heavenly glory passed before her eyes.

. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 36). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

Shortly after recounting these dreams to her mother and a Methodist minister who was preaching to “the Advent people in Portland,” she experienced sanctification at a prayer meeting. There, apparently for the first time, she entered into trance and “the burden and agony of soul” that she had so long felt finally left her. As she described it: Wave after wave of glory rolled over me, until my body grew stiff. Everything was shut out from me but Jesus and glory, and I know nothing of what was passing around me. I remained in this state of body and mind a long time, and when I realized what was around me, everything seemed changed. Everything looked glorious and new, as if smiling and praising God. 20 Here again in its language and imagery and in its use of trance, Harmon’s experience of sanctification was entirely in keeping with the Methodist shout tradition. Although White would not have denied her Methodist heritage, it was largely presupposed in her account. She emphasized the importance of her faith in the imminent second coming of Christ, and indeed her “Methodist” narrative was infused with this expectation. Harmon’s expulsion from her Methodist class meeting was precipitated by her refusal to abandon her adventist understanding of her sanctification experience. After testifying in her class meeting shortly after Gershom Cox left Portland for Orrington, her new presiding elder asked Harmon “if it would not be more pleasant to live a long life of holiness here, and do others good, than to have Jesus come and destroy poor sinners.” Harmon responded by expressing her longing for the second advent, adding that then “sin would have an end, and we should enjoy sanctification forever.” 21 While this exchange prefigured later controversies over the meaning of holiness, it was only after she left Methodism that Harmon faced opposition as a “shouter.” The “shouting Methodist” in Ellen Harmon, in other words, stands out in sharpest relief for us, as indeed it did for her, not while she was among Methodists, where it was still reasonably well accepted, but in adventist meetings filled with “come-outers” from a variety of other Protestant denominations. In a section of her Experience and Views titled the “Opposition of Formal Brethren,” White recounted the conflict that emerged between herself and the adventist “formalists” at the Portland adventist meetings in 1842. Here, in the unmistakable cadences of the shout tradition, she wrote:

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At times the Spirit of the LORD rested upon me in such power that my strength was taken away. This was a trial to some of those who had come out from the formal churches ....They did not believe that any one could be so filled with the Spirit of the LORD as to lose their strength. ...But soon one of the family which had been most forward in opposing me, while praying fell prostrate like one dead. His friends feared he was dying; but...he regained his strength to praise GOD, and shout with a voice of triumph. ...While attending an evening meeting I was much blessed, and again lost my strength. Another of the family mentioned, said he had no faith that it was the Spirit of GOD that was upon me. ...Bro. R. was immediately prostrated, and as soon as he could give utterance to his feelings, declared that it was of GOD. 22 As Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart have noted, “the intense desire for experience of the divine presence is an aspect of Mrs. White’s experience that is often overlooked.” 23 While Bull and Lockhart look to St. Teresa and the Catholic mystical tradition for a point of comparison, it was Methodism, and above all the Methodist shout tradition, that provided Ellen Harmon with an initial sense of the form that an experience of the divine presence might take. Fanatics While many outsiders viewed the Millerites as fanatics, most adventists did not view fanaticism as a serious threat to their movement until after the Great Disappointment. After October 22 passed, seemingly without event, many left the movement. Those who remained were divided and confused. Within a month prominent leaders, such as Joshua V. Himes, publicly admitted not only that their calculations had been wrong, but that they had erred in attempting to anticipate a definite date. The radicals who rejected this conclusion were typically branded as “fanatics” by the more moderate adventists who renounced dates. The radicals, while remaining committed to the idea of a definite date, differed with respect to particulars. Some sought new dates; others sought to find meaning in the apparent uneventfulness of October 22. Between November 1844 and April 1845, moderates and radicals battled for the loyalties of those who remained in the movement. 24 In April 1845, probably in response to widely publicized reports of fanaticism in Maine, the moderates held a convention and formed a new

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denomination, the Advent Christian Church. The new denomination abandoned camp meetings and revivals and denounced the fanaticism of their opponents. They specifically rejected the practices associated with the radicals, stating “we have no confidence in any new messages, visions, dreams, tongues, miracles, extraordinary revelations, impressions, discerning of spirits, or teachings not in accord with the unadulterated word of God.” 25 While the moderates returned to a more traditional understanding of the second coming, the radicals forged ahead in their efforts to understand the significance of October 22. Relying on biblical exegesis and visions, the radicals did not suffer for lack of creative insights into the Great Disappointment. Indeed their problem, as the moderates clearly discerned, was that they had too many solutions and no way to adjudicate among them. Ellen G. White emerged out of this period of exegetical and visionary “enthusiasm” as the prophetess of a new denomination, the Seventh-day Adventists. This did not happen overnight. Indeed, initially the unmarried Ellen Harmon was only one among a number of radical adventist visionaries attempting to make sense of what had occurred. While by the late 1840s or early 1850s she may have been the only active adventist visionary, sabbath-keeping or sabbatarian adventists had reached no consensus regarding the significance of her visions. 26 Her visions were, in fact, so troubling to many that in 1851 her husband, James White, editor of a widely distributed sabbatarian adventist paper, decided to suspend printing his wife’s visions to avoid arousing further controversy (see Chapter 1). It was not until 1855, at a general meeting of the sabbatarian leadership, that James White was replaced by a new editor and Ellen White’s visions were again featured in the paper. The move to a new editor signaled a more general acceptance by sabbatarian adventists of the authority of Ellen White’s visions and of her status as a prophet of the movement. Those who granted her this status and thus viewed her visions as authoritative began the process of forming the Seventh-day Adventist Church under her visionary leadership six years later. 27 While the official writings of Ellen G. White and other early sources uncovered by Adventist historians portray the process of “prophet-making” rather differently, both acknowledge the challenge that mesmerism presented to that process. The many volumes of the writings of Ellen G. White published by the Review and Herald Publishing Association, Pacific Press, and Southern Publishing Association, although historically useful, are

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documents of the church. These documents, including White’s narratives of her life experience and her visions, were all edited to a greater or lesser extent by Ellen and James and after James’s death by Ellen alone. They reflect their faith that she was called by God as a prophet to the faithful remnant in the wake of the Great Disappointment, challenged by Satan in the guise of mesmerism, and confronted by the opposition of nominal adventists on the one hand and fanatics on the other. Other historical sources discovered by Adventist historians in the last twenty years provide a view of the young Ellen Harmon only hinted at in the official writings. These sources indicate that she was one among a number of adventist visionaries who surfaced in Maine in early 1845 and that she participated fully in the “fanaticism” from which she would later want to distance herself. 28 Taken together, they illustrate how early Seventh-day Adventists “made” a prophetess by demonizing mesmerism. In doing so, Seventh-day Adventists both neutralized mesmerism and inscribed it at the heart of the Seventh-day Adventist cosmos.

. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 40). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

Testimonies

on thursday, octoBer 8, 1857, James and Ellen White traveled by wagon from Caledonia, Michigan, south to the village of Monterey for a preaching appointment. Arriving at the schoolhouse where local Adventists were gathering, the Whites were unsure what theme to speak on, so they encouraged the believers to fill the time by singing and praying, and waited for inspiration. Then, unexpectedly, because her husband usually preached first, Ellen, not yet thirty years old, stood to speak and soon the meeting was “filled with the Spirit of the Lord.” The feelings of the faithful quickly intensified; some were joyful, others wept. When seated again, Ellen continued to pray aloud, “higher and higher in perfect triumph in the Lord, till her voice changed, and the deep, clear shouts of Glory! Hallelujah! thrilled every heart.” Ellen was in vision. In her audience sat Victor Jones, a poor farmer and heavy drinker trying to reform his life and better care for his wife and young son. As James wrote for the church paper a few days later, Ellen delivered a “most touching and encouraging message.” The man “raised his head that very evening, and he and his good wife are again happy in hope. Monterey church will never forget that evening. At least they never should.” 1 Yet Ellen did not disclose all of her vision in the meeting. Next morning she walked a mile to the nearby home of Brother Rumery, a local church leader and community pioneer present the previous evening, hoping to “speak plainly” to him. Nearing the house, she stopped and instead returned and wrote him a letter. Confident she had kept the vision

. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 52). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

confidential, she concluded with the following paragraph and sent the letter off: Dear Brother Rumery, I came to your house purposely to tell you the vision but my heart sank within me. I knew my weakness and knew I should feel the deepest distress for you while relating it to you, and I was afraid I should not have the strength to do it, and should mar the work. Now brother, I am afflicted and distressed for you, and when at your house was so burdened I could not stay. I send this communication to you with much trembling. I fear from what I have seen that your efforts will be too weak. You will make no change. Oh, will you get ready for Jesus’ coming? I kept the vision from every one, even my husband, but I must speak plainly to you. You must have a thorough work done for you or you will fail of heaven. Said the angel, “It is easier for a camel to go through a needle’s eye, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” Luke 18:25. 2 Starting in the late 1840s, Ellen—or “Mrs. E. G. White” as readers came to know her—wrote hundreds of such personal letters, known as “testimonies,” to individuals, families, and churches. From these intimate epistles, she forged an extraordinary career as a religious leader and writer of pamphlets, periodical articles, and books on topics ranging from biblical interpretation to health care, organizational development, and Christian spirituality. Although few expected to ever receive one, her testimony letters helped mold the fragmented Millerite movement into a new American religion denomination. The testimony letter remains Ellen White’s distinctive literary signature. Modern readers encounter these letters in nine red or black hard-bound volumes known as Testimonies for the Church—elegant cloth editions with corrected spelling, improved grammar, and the identities of the original recipients disguised by editors. Largely stripped of places and dates of writing, they have been read for 150 years in a deepening social and historical void. Some readers project special religious powers upon them while others have denigrated them as relics of an outmoded worldview. Clearly, the testimonies are no ordinary letters, but what are they? 3 Fortunately, more than a hundred of White’s antebellum letters and manuscripts have been preserved, along with a few printed editions, accommodating research into their origins and role in early Adventism. 4

. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 53). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

In her testimony letters, Ellen White adapted a literary and rhetorical standby familiar to the Anglo-American legal and religious traditions and rich in cultural resonances. As discourses presenting an eyewitness viewpoint, secular and religious testimonies emerged after the American Revolution as important tools of public persuasion. Whether delivered as “exhortations” in a Methodist social meeting or proclaimed in a court of law, they were customarily transcribed from oral discourses and verified by the signature of the speaker or other witnesses. Religious examples reflected the Puritan emphasis on individual experience—personal narratives, confessions of faith, signs of divine workings in the soul—linking their authority to that of the Spirit through visions, voices, dreams, and providences. Whether published as broadsides or pamphlets or in denominational periodicals, the testimonies of emerging spiritual leaders harmonized their life experience with the core narratives of Christianity. 5 Among the Millerites of the 1840s, testimony carried the common evangelical meanings, along with expressions of confidence in the imminent Second Coming of Christ. Even finer theological nuances arose among those who followed the revisions of Millerism advocated by James and Ellen White and their circle, known as Bridegroom and later Sabbatarian Adventists (see Chapter 9). Their solution to the problem of the “Great Disappointment” (the failed prediction of the Second Coming of Christ, on October 22, 1844) proposed that Miller was right as to the date, but wrong regarding the event. The fateful day instead marked the start of Judgment Day—a complex event centered not on earth but in heaven. With a dramatic cast of adjudicating Father, advocating Son, accusing Satan, and angelic clerks writing names and deeds in a book, this apocalyptic scene provided an ordering framework for all aspects of human life, especially for the faithful. The very first rule for reading the Bible, claimed a writer in the church paper, was “NEVER open the Book of God, without remembering that you must be tried by it at the judgment seat of Christ.” Separated from unbelieving society and formed into small “bands” as they waited for the End of the World, they “carefully examined every thought and emotion” while experiencing deep raptures of hope and love—a scene that crystallized the ideals of community found in her subsequent testimonies. With the grand audit or “cleansing” of the heavenly realm already under way, White’s

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early testimonies reported on the progress of “cases” in the proceedings and outlined the purification of heart and life expected of earthly believers. 6 Within a few weeks of the Great Disappointment, White experienced her first “holy vision” in which she visited heaven, talked with Jesus, and saw “events all in the future” before returning to the earth (see Chapter 2). At meetings throughout New England, she fell into trances and analyzed the spiritual condition of individuals, seeming to read into their very souls. The visions offered consolations to those stymied by the failure of Miller’s predictions, conveying divine sympathy for their plight and compensating for the scorn of newspapers and neighbors. White mentioned her visions in letters to friends and family and published a few in Millerite periodicals or as broadsides with local printers. 7 Falling into trance, having a vision, and writing it out was arduous work for a young, illness-prone, and barely educated woman such as Ellen Harmon. The process of writing gave expression to her acute moral and social sensitivities, relieving her “burdens” or intense religious feelings. “It was not until I began to have visions that I could write so anyone could read it,” she wrote in a later autobiographical manuscript. “One day the impression came to me as strong as if some one had spoken it, ‘Write, write your experiences.’ I took up a pen, and found my hand perfectly steady, and from that day to this it has never failed me.” By the time the printed version came off the press, however, the “impression” had become an angel’s voice, the “experiences” specified as visions, and taking up the pen was in response to a divine command. In this way, White reified her spiritual experiences to produce a lifetime of testimonies and other writings while remaining true to her inner world of images and voices. 8 How to Recognize a Testimony when You See One Each year, Ellen White wrote dozens of testimonies and hundreds of pages expressing her convictions and persuading Adventists to change their attitudes and habits. Not all of her letters were testimonies, however, so how would a recipient know? Growing out of White’s regular familial correspondence, the testimony letter developed over a decade into a distinguishable document with a definable structure, standard sentence types, stock arguments, and repeated rhetorical strategies. Although shorter testimonies might lack or truncate portions, the letter usually followed

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this order (most of the following examples are from the letter to Brother Rumery): Date, place of writing, and salutation. Most addressees are readily identifiable, including those stated as “Dear Brother...,” “Dear Sister...,” or “Friend.” Occasionally, she played with a name, displaying satire or irony such as “Victory Jones” or “Sir Emory Fisk.” These formal features become standardized early in her life and rarely changed over the years. Occasion of writing. The opening sentence or two linked the letter to a recent vision and announced the subject of the testimony. Reading this sentence was the recipient’s first clue that he or she had received a testimony letter. “You remember the vision given last Thurs. evening,” she wrote to Brother Rumery. “In that vision I saw the case of Brother Victor Jones....” Announcement of theme. In a few sentences, White summarized the general topic of the testimony and identified its principal persons. She often expressed the theme as a general complaint, or as a failure to exhibit certain traits or perform certain actions. For example, “I saw that the Lord loved him [Jones] but he had reasons for discouragement...,” she announced in the same letter. “He looked for and expected to find the same disposition in his brethren but was disappointed. They said by their profession we are pilgrims and strangers, yet their heart and treasure were here.” From this summary, the remainder of the letter expanded on the themes of discouragement/encouragement, wealth/ poverty, and profession/practice. Analysis of case(s). Using moral language mixed with religious images and ideas, White compared her subject’s behavior or spiritual condition, as she saw it, with her own moral and social ideals. “Brother Rumery, you could have in many little acts have eased Brother Jones’ burden, and never felt it,” she opened her analysis of Rumery’s case, “but for years you have loved money better than religion, better than God.” Viewing current problems as continuous with the past, she referenced her subjects’ life histories in the longer testimonies. Fully developed testimonies contained extended discussion of several linked “cases” and ran ten or twenty written pages. Call to action. The testimony followed analytical with prescriptive language, usually a required response mixed with the language of appeal. Most often, White used imperative forms from biblical

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passages—“earnestly seek the Lord,” “do not become discouraged,” “cleanse your heart,” and so forth, but also borrowed contemporary idioms. “You must cut loose, cut loose from the world,” she insisted to Brother Rumery. Warrants and principles. In order to reinforce her analysis and call to action, White called upon a half-dozen commonplace beliefs. As we have seen, her readers assumed the Adventist worldview with its apocalyptic images: Judgment scenes, an omniscient deity, record-keeping angels, and the shortness of time available to humans. If she referenced a person’s sins or secrets, readers could assume that she was accessing in her visions the life histories kept by “recording angels.” She also relied on moral and social ciphers accepted by most American evangelicals, such as the ban on “worldliness”—a term whose meaning varied from group to group, but which typically prohibited amusements, frivolity, and preoccupation with material matters. “Reform,” on the other hand, was code for earnest concern with personal and social change. She was steeped in the language of sentimental theology that proposed shared feelings between the human and divine realms, and salvation through transformation of the affections. In these instances, she described the feelings and facial expressions of Jesus, trusting such imagery would evoke sympathy and self-reflection in her readers. Appeal. Toward the end of each testimony, White made appeals to her readers to embrace the changes she had outlined. The mature testimony frequently appealed to particular emotions: fear, hope, anxiety, love, and sympathy. The spiritual outcome most feared was to “be left to themselves,” “in darkness,” or “unaware” that the Spirit had left a person or church. In her most eloquent appeals, White invoked the popular evangelical trope of the sufferings of Christ in his betrayal and death on the cross, asking believers to measure their meager inconveniences against the infinite sacrifice of Christ their “Example.” Accustomed to the rhetorical strategies of sentimentalist writers such as Harriett Beecher Stowe, readers viewed such appeals as encouragement to face awkward feelings or espouse unpopular causes. 9 Personal note. Sometimes White added a short note of greeting, an expression of love to family members, a request for her correspondent to make a copy and return the original, or instructions regarding the reading of the letter to others. The final paragraph of her testimony to Brother Rumery explained her intense “distress” and failure to arrive at his home that morning.

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Sign-off. The concluding phrase White commonly used in all her correspondence echoed the urgent sense of time and the supreme social value expressed in the Millerite and Adventist communities. Although sometimes abbreviated, it rarely changed over the years: “In haste and love, Ellen G. White.” But to Brother Rumery she signed off, “In trial, E. G. White.” Audiences: Individuals, Families, Churches Adventists lived in a transparent universe. Angels scrutinized every act and word; the gaze of believing and unbelieving neighbors was continuously on church members. “I was shown, Mary, that many idle words have fallen from your lips,” White wrote to her close friend Mary Loughborough. “If the recording angel should place them before you, it would astonish, distress, and alarm you.” Messages tailored to individuals were needed because humans, unable to perceive the heavenly realm—or peer into their own souls or interpret the actions of others—were oblivious to the causes and consequences of their actions. “Brother and Sister Wright... could have seen and understood the spirit of Sister Booth, from observation,” White wrote to friends, “and if they had stood free in God could have discerned the spirit, acts, and words, and the character developed. But they failed to see.” The testimonies met this deficit by mediating knowledge from hidden sources, but she expected her readers to develop the self-insight to view and correct themselves. 10 While White wrote most often to individuals, the best of her analyses emerge in her letters to families. As young parents, James and Ellen White traveled and visited homes in New England, observing the piety, parenting styles, and domestic practices of their hosts. “I saw that our keeping house has discovered selfishness in your families,” she wrote to one family in the summer of 1851, “and I saw that there has not been true faith in the visions.” The two families were joined by an emotional “link” that should be “broken” because it produced collusion rather than mutual strengthening and growth in grace. Each family needed to stand more “separate” and direct their love to Jesus, if they wanted to have “vital godliness and heart holiness.” 11 Like a modern family therapist, White used her powers of moral discernment and social observation—including critical attention to stories and snippets of conversation—along with her growing experience as a

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parent, to craft prescriptions for a happier and holier life. When young women wrote for advice on family matters, she answered using notes from her visits and visions. Certain types and motifs appear regularly in the testimonies: the garrulous wife undermining her husband’s authority; the impulsive socialite whose unthinking actions bring bewilderment to others; the hypocrisy of religiosity that covers an underlying lack of genuine spiritual experience; overly sympathetic parents who fail to discipline their children; the unkempt and slovenly housewife; the minister who competes with or openly disrespects his fellow ministers; the elderly church leader who resists passing the baton to younger leadership. Just as middle-class mothers relied on Catherine Beecher’s rules for cleanliness and amusements in her Treatise on Domestic Economy, the testimonies became the official source of rules and practices of domesticity for Adventist families. 12 White’s concern with character and influence expanded from individuals to larger units of believers, where the increased social and spiritual effect—either positive or negative—counted for or against the credibility of Adventism, especially in small rural towns where most believers lived. Testimonies for the church as a whole, usually addressing the spiritual health of the widespread body, were usually read at conferences and quickly printed in the church paper. She adapted and focused the testimony to the needs of the Adventist community, mediating between divine expectations and human capabilities while protecting the church’s reputation. Writing: Composition, Circulation, Reception When Ellen White went into vision during a public meeting, associates such as James White or Hiram Edson often took notes of her utterances, which she later used to reconstruct her memory and write out her interpretation of the vision. She then addressed a letter to the subjects of the vision—a page or two up to twenty or more—describing their role in it and urging them to follow its prescriptions. A single vision, if it concerned several people or families, could generate five or ten letters, which were “circulated” to an even wider readership. After writing, White visited the subject and read it aloud in their presence—if an individual, at his or her home; if a church or conference, before the assembly. If the recipient was not local, she mailed the letter to

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the named person or an associate, with instructions to pass it along to any other persons mentioned in the letter or to read it before a church gathering. Occasionally, as in a letter to the Kellogg family of Battle Creek, she waited a year or more after a vision before sending a testimony. 13 Once the testimony was delivered, White “anxiously watched the result, and if the individual reproved rose up against it, and afterwards opposed the truth, these queries would arise in my mind. Did I deliver the message just as I should?” She sometimes met with and observed the person and her family, looking for signs of improvement. As she told Angelina Andrews, “I read over the testimony frequently for you and sister Mary ... and inquire in my own mind, Are they living up to the testimony?” White then inquired of others to discover what Angelina had been doing about it before she calculated and sent her response. 14 In return for the letter, she hoped for the original back, along with an acknowledgment of the accuracy of the visions and a “confession” of all wrongs. Others wrote back asking for clarification, or expressed gratitude and regret while promising to reform. Many of the surviving responses seem to follow a prescribed outline: I received your letter, I thank God that he notices me, I acknowledge my errors, I will try to do better. 15 Readers: Believers, Resisters, Defenders No one, it seems, expected to receive a testimony letter from White. Its arrival might throw its subject into a moral crisis—a person might “break in pieces” and engage in a “thorough work” by confessing wrong attitudes and surrendering to “present truth.” White expected that through constant reform or “cleansing,” recipients would “overcome” wrong feelings and behaviors—or expect another confrontation. Phoebe Lamson read James’ and Ellen’s letter to John Andrews (a young scholar and minister mentored by James White) and it “deeply affected” her. “My eyes opened to our sad state .. .how unworthy and unprofitable we have been in the service of the Lord.” Andrews, for his part, admitted that he had “expressed opinions ...in some matters” that “seemed to open the door for the prince of darkness to step in,” and promised to “keep in my proper sphere”—in submission to the Whites. The testimonies became indispensable to those committed to improving themselves while maintaining social relations with the Whites. 16 Questions about the visions arose in the reading and reception of the testimonies and became a central issue in the growing Adventist community,

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Prophet

For ellen harMon, personal, physical, and social factors all combined to create a prophet—a person who perceived herself to be a messenger for God who received special revelations from Him. Naturally there were others who perceived her as a “wonderful fanatic and trance medium,” a victim of mesmerism or demonic possession, or one who merely experienced “religious reveries, in which her imagination runs without control” and whose sentiments were obtained from “previous teaching, or study.” 1 Prophetic Identity Ellen White never called herself a “prophet.” “I have not stood before the people claiming this title,” she said, “I am God’s messenger.” She may not have used the terms “prophet” or “prophetess,” but she clearly believed that she had the gift of prophecy, that she was what other people would call a prophet, that she received, directly from God, revelations containing specific content, and that it was her calling and duty to convey these messages to others in “testimonies” and counsels. Once this conviction became a fixed part of her identity, she was essentially unable to recognize or acknowledge any evidence that might be at odds with it. As a child her “ambition to become a scholar had been very great,” doubtless an indication of success in the limited formal education she did receive before her childhood accident. 2 With that ambition thwarted, she discovered a new calling as she eagerly anticipated the literal second coming of Christ in 1844. “I arranged meetings with my young friends .... Others

. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 74). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

thought me beside myself to be so persistent in my efforts.” 3 Undaunted, she continued her efforts until every one of them was converted. Thus her identity shifted from scholar to soul-winner, an identity she never lost, even after she acquired her prophetic role. About the same time that she was converting her friends she found herself troubled by thoughts of unworthiness, despairing of her acceptance with God. Then she had some puzzling dreams. Her mother encouraged her to counsel with Levi Stockman, an aged Methodist minister who had adopted Millerite views. On hearing her story, Stockman “placed his hand affectionately upon my head, saying with tears in his eyes: ‘Ellen, you are only a child. Yours is a most singular experience for one of your tender age. Jesus must be preparing you for some special work.’” 4 To this young woman it must have been a virtual ordination. It was, after all, a laying on of hands, a confirmation of a special identity. Now she had a positive, powerful identity: she was a successful soul-winner being prepared by Jesus for a special work. Her mother was also supportive. Having seen her share of Methodist camp-meeting worshippers prostrated under religious fervor, she was not alarmed when Ellen experienced prostration. When onlookers wanted to call a doctor, her mother “bade them let me alone.” For the mother, it was “the wondrous power of God” that had prostrated her daughter. 5 She and her brother Robert, two years older, felt keenly the disapproval of the other Methodists in their class meeting when they testified about their faith in Jesus’ soon return. The two decided to stop attending. 6 This was a serious decision. Failure to attend meetings was a breach of discipline that, along with other factors, led to their being put out of the Methodist church in 1843. 7 Of the eight Harmon children, two became active Seventh-day Adventists: Ellen and Sarah, five years older, who chaperoned her when she began travelling around Maine to relate her visions (Figure 4.1). Both of Ellen White’s parents (Figure 4.2) believed in her prophetic gift and died Seventh-day Adventists. Her brother Robert died a little more than ten years before the Adventist church officially organized in 1863, but he apparently accepted Ellen’s gifts as genuine. Mary, six years older than Ellen (Figure 4.3), considered herself a Seventh-day Adventist, although there is no record of her formally joining the church. Her remaining three sisters, including her twin, Elizabeth, (Figures 4.4 and 4.5) and older brother, John, never joined her church and doubtless remained ambivalent about her claims. Ellen White, nevertheless, maintained close relationships with

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these siblings, corresponding and visiting with them, and sending them copies of her books and subscriptions to Adventist journals. Ellen Harmon’s first vision occurred in December 1844. In 1845 James White brought her to public notice when, in the Day Star journal, he shared the highlights of the vision. In doing so, he used many of the same phrases Ellen White echoed in her own later account. “I think the Bible warrants us in looking for visions,” he wrote. 8 A central question is why Ellen White’s followers believed her to be a true prophet. The Whites’ friend Otis Nichols provided early evidence. He testified to her good character and was impressed that although Ellen was so sickly that her voice could hardly be heard, she was miraculously strengthened and able to speak in a loud voice for nearly two hours. Nichols contended that she occasionally healed others through prayer. (Soon thereafter she abandoned her healing ministry and this claim disappeared from the apologetic accounts.) Nichols also noted that her ministry

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At Israel Dammon’s trial in early 1845 (see Chapter 2) witnesses identified Ellen Harmon as “Imitation of Christ.” Over a century earlier John Wesley had translated Thomas à Kempis’s famous devotional book of that same name. It was the first book published by the Methodist Book Concern in America in 1789. 10 The book includes a passage where Kempis offers to God “gladness of all devout hearts, their ardent affection, their mental raptures, their supernatural illuminations and heavenly visions.” Any erstwhile Methodist familiar with that passage might easily have seen White’s visions as an example. “Imitation of Christ” never caught on as a nickname for White. In other early accounts of her prophetic role, believers simply referred to “the

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visions” or “the gifts.” The latter term often appeared in arguments for the “perpetuity” of spiritual gifts, which contended that they had not disappeared after New Testament times, as most orthodox Protestants believed. In 1862 a Seventh-day Adventist minister, M. E. Cornell, published a book titled Miraculous Powers: The Scripture Testimony on the Perpetuity of Spiritual Gifts. 11 A subtitle explained that it comprised “Narratives of Incidents and Sentiments Carefully Compiled from the Eminently Pious and Learned of Various Denominations.” With James White’s endorsement, Cornell cited various instances of divine visions, miracles, and prophecies. Such arguments did not, however, become a lasting part of the Adventist understanding of the gift of prophecy. Subsequent apologists for the visions never pointed to any other genuine post-biblical prophets. The later names ascribed to Ellen White were reflected in the progression of titles of her books. At first, her visions were often referred to as “views.” So her first book was titled A Sketch of the Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G. White. Later, she published four volumes titled Spiritual

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Gifts and still later another multi-volume set called Spirit of Prophecy. 12 The name “Spirit of Prophecy,” which applied to both her writings and to Ellen White herself, arose as Sabbath-keeping Adventists came to see themselves as the “remnant” of God’s true church, a people against whom the “dragon” of Revelation 12:17 went to make war. Characteristic of this remnant, according to that text, was that they “keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.” Revelation 19:10 identifies this “testimony of Jesus” as the “spirit of prophecy.” Because Seventh-day Adventists were among the few Christians who kept the “commandments of God” by observing the seventh-day Sabbath of the fourth commandment, and because they had a prophet among them—the “spirit of prophecy”—they claimed that these two phenomena identified God’s true “remnant church.” Even today new Adventists, as part of their baptismal vows, are asked: “Do you accept the biblical teaching of spiritual gifts and believe that the gift of prophecy is one of the identifying marks of the remnant church?” 13 Although Adventists sometimes called Ellen White

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herself the “Spirit of Prophecy,” in less formal settings they referred to her simply as “Sister White.” Another evocative title applied to Ellen White was “weakest of the weak.” In the early 1890s Adventist historian J. N. Loughborough claimed that, before God chose Ellen Harmon as his messenger, he had called two other former Millerites: Hazen Foss (1818–1893) and William Foy (1818– 1893). Foss—a brother-in-law of Ellen’s older sister Mary—is said to have received visions but refused to relate them. In 1890 Ellen White recalled that his refusal had had dreadful consequences. She alleged that he told her he was a “lost man” because of his refusal, and warned her not to do the same. 14 Foy, an African-American Free Will Baptist and Millerite preacher, published his vision as The Christian Experience of William E. Foy. He is said to have received another vision, which he did not understand; so he ceased preaching. Soon afterward, according to Loughborough, he “sickened and died.” In fact, Foy lived and continued as a preacher-farmer until

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his death in 1893. 15 Some of the language he used in describing his visions appeared again in Ellen White’s descriptions of her own revelations. After Foss and Foy refused the prophetic gift, God turned to Ellen Harmon, described by Loughborough as the “weakest of the weak.” 16 This image became a trope in the Adventist narrative about White. It helps to explain why her prophetic gift never translated into any belief that women in general might be fitted for leadership roles in the church and why to this day the central church leadership has refused to approve the ordination of women to the gospel ministry. Very early, the containment of charisma came into play, eliminating other possible recipients of the prophetic mantle. Although Adventists argued for the perpetuity of spiritual gifts, they acknowledged only one genuine manifestation of the gift in a person called to prophetic office since New Testament times: Ellen Harmon White. This contrasted with the experience of Mormons in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, who more literally believed in the perpetuity of spiritual gifts. For them, not only was Joseph Smith, their founder, a prophet, but so were all the succeeding presidents of their church. 17 Miracles Early followers of Ellen Harmon White attached considerable importance to what they believed were the genuine miracles that attended her ministry. Otis Nichols, one of her first converts, mentioned earlier, displayed a special fondness for miracle stories. He claimed, for example, that during a vision in his home Ellen had held a large Bible aloft above her head, pointing to particular texts and quoting them correctly even though she could not see the passages to which she was pointing. Such miraculous claims became a staple of the church’s defense of Ellen White’s prophetic gift. They reached their apogee with J. N. Loughborough’s book Rise and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventists, published in 1892, but continued to echo through many other apologetic works, especially those written for children and youth. 18 Most of the arguments for physical miracles date from the early part of Ellen White’s life, when she was experiencing her dramatic day-time, ecstatic visions. These visions subsequently decreased in frequency as all forms of enthusiastic worship declined among Adventists, before dying out entirely in the 1870s. 19 After that, vivid dreams, often called “visions of the night,” became her main revelatory experience. But though the visions

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and miracles ceased, the stories about them did not. Two proved especially popular: her apparent lack of breathing during visions and her ability to hold the 18½-pound Harmon family Bible on her outstretched hand for half an hour. The apparent suppression of her normal respiration during her visions first attracted mention in 1848, when James White observed that Ellen had been in vision for an hour and a half during which time she “did not breathe at all.” A few observers expressed concern about such spells, but “experienced Christians,” such as Ellen’s mother, knew that she would recover. Her mother probably also knew that William Foy, the Millerite visionary mentioned earlier, had reportedly exhibited “no appearance of life, except around his heart” during his visions. 20 In 1866 John Loughborough made the extravagant claim that even while she was not breathing, she uttered audible words. In the same article he mentioned for the first time that others had tested her by holding a mirror in front of her nose and mouth to see if it would gather moisture. Two years later, in Life Incidents, James White told of witnesses pressing on his wife’s chest and covering her mouth and nostrils to determine whether she was breathing during visions. For his 1892 book Loughborough collected several testimonials from eyewitnesses about Ellen White’s failure to breathe during visions. 21 Ellen White recommended a different physical test for the genuineness of visions. Confronted by a young woman she believed was having a “false vision,” she recommended getting “a pitcher of cold water, good cold water” and throwing “it right in her face,” which White predicted, would “bring her out of it the quickest of anything you can do.” Before anyone could bring the water, however, the visionary snapped out of her trance. 22 Apparently no one ever applied this test to Ellen herself. Shortly after her first vision, another divine revelation impressed on her a duty to travel and relate what she had seen. At first she resisted; then, during yet a third vision, she seemed to be struck by a “ball of fire.” Half a century later Loughborough recast this “ball of fire” vision as the setting for an amazing feat of strength on the part of the thin, frail, seventeen-year-old Ellen. Her father had purchased an enormous Bible, one of three thousand printed by Joseph Teal in Boston in 1822. During this vision, as the story goes, she picked it up and held it open on her outstretched left hand at right angles to her body for half an hour. 23 The actual Harmon family Bible, now called simply the “Big Bible,” remains on display in the offices of the Ellen White Estate at church

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headquarters near Washington, D.C. It is eleven inches wide, eighteen inches tall, four inches thick, and weighs 18½ pounds. Just to hold it at one’s shoulder like a waiter carrying a tray would cause severe strain. Holding it on an extended arm would create such tremendous torque as to render it impossible for a mere mortal to do so for more than two or three minutes. For a sickly, five-foot, two-inch teenage girl to hold it on her outstretched arm for half an hour defies all the laws of physics and physiology. Ellen White and her supporters made many other claims of miraculous powers, but the questionable origin and growth of the story of the Big Bible is the most dramatic example of how her visions were moved, over time, from a context of communal enthusiasm to one of physical miracle. 24 Ellen White never mentioned the Big Bible in her published or unpublished writings. James White did mention it—the Harmon family Bible— in Life Incidents, but he made no reference to her having held it during vision. He says only that he and Ellen had inherited it as a precious family heirloom. The story seems to have surfaced orally in the late 1880s and then finally in print in 1892, in Loughborough’s Rise and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventists. Loughborough was more hagiographer than historian, and often proved unreliable in the latter role. 25 Prophecy and Family Although James did much to establish Ellen’s initial role as a prophet, as time went on he grew sensitive to criticism that he and his fellow Sabbath-keeping Adventists were making the visions a test of fellowship and an authority for doctrine outside of the Bible itself. Around 1850 he virtually stopped printing Ellen’s messages in his newly minted Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, and for the next five years he and other church leaders made little publicly of her gift. The symbiotic relationship between the prophet and her followers is graphically illustrated by the fact that Ellen White noticed that her visions had grown less and less frequent during this period when they were neglected. She had all but concluded that her work “in God’s cause was done.” 26 After a five-year delay, other church leaders acted to restore the “gifts” to the church. They confessed they had not appreciated the “the glorious privilege of claiming the gifts” and affirmed that they now believed the messages emanated “from the divine mind.” In response, the prophet promised that God “would graciously and mercifully revive the gifts again.”

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Chastened, James resumed being Ellen’s major supporter and promoter. Unfortunately, a series of strokes in the late 1870s rendered him more and more difficult. In a peevish moment, he once admonished her not to lecture him on matters of mere opinion, but he never lost confidence in her prophetic gift. 27 Ellen White’s dual role as mother and prophet also became complicated at times. She and James had four sons: Henry, Edson, Willie, and John Herbert. The youngest, John Herbert, died in infancy; the oldest, Henry, died at age 16. So it was Edson and Willie whose beliefs, actions, and influence had the greatest relevance to Ellen White’s prophetic career. When her calling as a prophet conflicted with her responsibilities as a mother, she almost always opted to honor the former. While traveling extensively as a young mother, she left her children in the care of others. Edson, a problem child and teenager, was a constant source of concern and object of criticism for his mother. As an adult he earned a reputation for financial irresponsibility and for a period virtually left the church. After experiencing a reconversion in the early 1890s, he built a riverboat, The Morning Star, and sailed to Mississippi, where he founded Adventist churches and schools for African Americans. He frequently invoked his mother’s prophetic writings to support his work and fundraising efforts; he also published her appeals for work among African Americans in a little book titled The Southern Work. After he left Mississippi and went into the religious publishing business in Nashville, Tennessee, his old reputation for financial irresponsibility returned, which led to frequent conflicts with church leaders in Battle Creek. When, in defense, he quoted selected passages from his mother’s earlier letters endorsing his work, she rebuked him and warned him that such a practice undermined her influence. At times Edson felt that his brother, Willie, was influencing his mother against him. The mere fact that he believed she could be influenced by other humans shows that he was not altogether persuaded that every counsel she issued was divine. Willie, in contrast, became the model son—capable, sensible, and always supportive of his mother. After the death of his father, he served as her counselor, confidant, business agent, editor, and representative on numerous church committees and boards. 28 On at least one occasion he even decided whether one of her testimonies should be delivered to its addressee. This sort of thing led inevitably to charges, even from his older brother, that he manipulated her writings.

Author

durinG her liFetiMe, Ellen White wrote some 26 books, 200 tracts and pamphlets, and 5,000 periodical articles. At her death the typing of her assorted manuscripts, letters, and diaries remained incomplete; when fully typed, these materials amounted to well over 70,000 pages. 1 Her literary heirs drew on these sources to assemble scores of additional titles. Although White recycled much of her prose and borrowed extensively, writing occupied more of her time and effort than any other activity. And nothing she did generated more accolades or greater controversy than her claims of authorship. Ellen Harmon’s publishing career began inadvertently in 1846, when a fellow Millerite, Enoch Jacobs, took the liberty of printing her description of her first “vision.” Her future husband, James White, republished the account as a broadside, launching his career as her publisher. Until 1884, when the Seventh-day Adventist Pacific Press brought out an attractively bound edition of The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan for the non-Adventist public, Ellen White generally aimed her writings at fellow Adventists. Her only book initially published by a non-Adventist publisher, Steps to Christ (Fleming H. Revell, 1892) became her all-time best-seller, eventually circulating in over 100 million copies in more than 165 languages. Methods Ellen White always wrote in longhand, but later in her career shorthand enabled her assistants to record her oral presentations, which often

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became articles and chapters. During the early period, her writing served as an adjunct to her larger role as an itinerant speaker among scattered Millerites who were becoming Sabbatarians and seeking a new identity. After her marriage in 1846 she took on various wifely duties and, between 1847 and 1860, she became the mother of four sons. So often was she absent from her family that one of her sons reflected, “I had lots of mothers and they were all good ones.” 2 Between 1868 and 1909, White complained of “head troubles” that at times limited her writing to half a day: “some of the time my head troubles me and then I have to rest, lie down, stop thinking, and take my time for writing when I can do so comfortably.” 3 Two decades later, when resident in her much-loved Sunnyside in Australia, White wrote most frequently while others slept, occasionally from 11:30 p.m., but more often between 3 a.m. and breakfast at 7 a.m. After her Australasian sojourn she hurried back to the United States in 1900, eager to confront emerging heresies. During her seventies and eighties, White and her staff brought to completion literary tasks that had long been on her mind, but without the flourish of the previous decade. Her hopes for Elmshaven, in California’s Napa Valley, as a sanctuary for reflective writing went largely unrealized because she increasingly turned her attention to protecting her educational, medical, and theological ideas. White repeatedly expressed a profound sense of inadequacy, even to the point of feeling “less than nothing.” She often described herself as “prostrated with sickness” or “sorely afflicted” by illness that brought her “very near death’s door.” This was especially true during the early years of Adventism, when she experienced a number of episodes from which she was miraculously restored by prayer. With only three or four years of formal schooling she acutely felt her academic limitation. Even after becoming well established as an author, she lamented being neither a “scholar” nor a “grammarian.” During the 1890s, the most fruitful decade of her literary career, she confessed: “I am but a poor writer, and cannot with pen or voice express the great and deep mysteries of God.” 4 White long cherished the editorial and publishing assistance of her husband, James White (1821-1881), the principal founder of Adventist publishing and frequent editor of its flagship periodical, Second Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, widely known simply as the Review. When her son Henry was three, Ellen White mentioned that she was “denied the privilege” of his company “as our house is all employed in writing and folding and wrapping papers.” After the Whites acquired their first hand press in 1852, their house doubled for three years as the office of the

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Review. By 1854 the Review was providing “almost the only visible cohesion” for Sabbatarian Adventism, and the Whites’ Rochester (New York) home was at once “editorial office, printshop, bindery, and staff boarding house” for a group of fifteen to twenty persons. Later, according to memories recorded by the Whites’ third son, William (Willie, 1854-1937), Ellen would read manuscripts aloud to James, and “if he discovered weaknesses in the composition, such as faulty tenses of verbs, or disagreement among subject, noun, and verb, he would suggest grammatical corrections” that she would incorporate into the manuscript before continuing to read. 5 Understandably, Ellen felt “inexpressibly sad” on the occasions when James fell too ill to fulfil his role as “helper and counsellor.” “I cannot prepare my own writings for the press,” she lamented. “Until I can do this I shall write no more. It is not my duty to tax others with my manuscript.” 6 Fortunately, such desperate feelings did not usually last long. Late in 1877 James reported: “Her books now in print amount to not less than five thousand pages, besides thousands of pages of epistolary matter addressed to churches and individuals.” 7 Even before James’s death in 1881 Ellen began turning to her favorite son, Willie, for assistance. After his father’s death, Willie increasingly became his mother’s travelling companion, confidant, editor, counsellor, staff manager, representative, and custodian. At first he shrank from the criticism that he knew “would come to any person who assisted mother in her literary work.” 8 But his mother convinced him that it was God’s commission that he should help prepare her writings for publication. When Willie became so “overwhelmed with responsibilities” that he did not have “time to read any articles of any description,” she experienced an acute sense of bereavement. 9 Others also assisted. In 1907, for example, one of White’s secretaries, Clarence C. Crisler (1877-1936), solicited the help of William W. Prescott (1855-1944) in preparing for publication a series of articles by White on Old Testament history. 10 A graduate of Dartmouth College, Prescott had built an impressive reputation within Adventism. At thirty years of age, he had accepted the presidency of Battle Creek College; thereafter, his long and very public service involved administering and founding educational institutions, editing the Review, traveling, teaching, writing, and engaging in various aspects of church leadership, including close association with six General Conference presidents. Ellen White and her associates valued Prescott’s erudition. During the final revision of The Great Controversy (1911), Willie White and others urged Prescott to check the manuscript.

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Prescott suggested over a hundred changes that he thought would improve the book and make it more accurate. Initiatives to engage the expertise of individuals such as Prescott dovetailed with White’s own pattern of relying on the skills of individuals whom she deemed reliable. White frequently entrusted manuscripts to ministers, administrators, editors, and others for advice. Once after placing copy in the hands of a senior minister, she recorded her disappointment: “He just did a miserable job. He did not change anything or improve it at all.” 11 By contrast at the time, White especially prized the literary assistance of her niece, Mary Clough, an experienced journalist who worked for her aunt in 1876 and 1877. Although she never converted to Adventism, Clough worked “tremendously,” at times “driving to the uttermost” until midnight or later. The quality of her work prompted White to describe her as “the best copyist for me, I can ever have.” 12 In preparing her main volume on the “Life of Christ” for publication in the 1890s, a project on which White spent three thousand dollars of her own money for literary “workers,” she relied most heavily on her long-time “bookmaker,” Marian Davis, who served as her trusted friend and assistant from 1879 to 1904 (Figure 5.1a). 13 White began writing about Christ as early as 1858, in a manuscript published as the first volume of Spiritual Gifts. Later, in the 1870s, she expanded her treatment of Christ’s life from 50 to 640 pages for her Spirit of Prophecy volumes; and in the 1890s her writings on Christ culminated in a plethora of articles and four volumes: Steps to Christ (1892), Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing (1896), The Desire of Ages (1898), and Christ’s Object Lessons (1900). To keep the production moving forward while travelling in New Zealand during much of 1893, White delegated to Davis, a former school teacher and proofreader, the task of assembling her materials on the life of Christ. Writing from Melbourne, Australia, Davis explained “the necessity of having the matter from articles and scrapbooks, that might be available for use in the life of Christ, copied, so as to be convenient for reference.” “Perhaps,” she continued, “you can imagine the difficulty of trying to bring together points relating to any subject when these must be gleaned from thirty scrapbooks, a half-dozen bound volumes, and fifty manuscripts, all covering thousands of pages.” 14 In 1900, Ellen White described Davis’s bookmaking role to the General Conference president, G. A. Irwin. Davis, she explained, took “my articles which are published in the papers” and pasted them into blank books. As Davis prepared a book chapter, White explained, “Marian remembers

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that I have written something on that special point, which may make the matter more forcible. She begins to search for this, and if when she finds it, she sees that it will make the chapter more clear, she adds it.” When White was travelling, Davis at times wrote to her employer suggesting “improvements to be made in articles” or chapters; White implemented some suggestions and declined others. In addition to combing through and selecting snippets from a wealth of written material in scrapbooks and other sources, Davis occasionally gleaned additional insights from attending lectures on subjects related to White’s themes. Davis played a large role in the production of The Desire of Ages, working “for a better opening to the chapters” so the book would seem less like a diary, trying to begin both chapters and paragraphs with short sentences, simplifying where possible, dropping out “every needless word,” and making the book “more compact and vigorous.” In a letter to Willie White Davis wrote: “I never realized the power of simplicity and compactness, as since I began this work.” Keeping her mind on “the many thousands who will read the book,” she wanted “just as little human imperfection as possible to mar its divine beauty.” Davis repeatedly urged individuals such as H. Camden Lacey (1871-1950), the brother of Willie White’s second wife and a teacher of Scripture and Greek, to assist with editing the manuscript. Reflecting on his knowledge of Davis’s role, Lacey noted that the title page or preface should clearly state “that The Desire of Ages was written by Mrs. E. G. White, and edited by Miss Marian Davis.” 15 On the occasion of Davis’s death from tuberculosis in 1904, White wrote: “Of Sister Davis it can be truly said, ‘She hath done what she could.’ All the energies of her being were freely given to the work that she loved. Her quick appreciation of truth, and her sympathy for the seeker after truth, enabled her to work enthusiastically in preparing for the press the matter which the Lord had given me for his people.” 16 From such examples, Ellen White’s method of writing becomes apparent. White wrote letters–always in longhand–on a host of topics addressed to people in different parts of the world. She also kept a diary and notes on her reading; she travelled frequently, spoke often, and wrote articles and books on multiple themes. Rarely a solitary author, White customarily led a team of valued associates who helped her produce her prophetic writings. Davis and other secretaries typed and retyped developing manuscripts as they were readied for printing. Although White hoped and attempted to read all the copy to ensure that the final product accorded with her views, on many occasions she simply had to trust others to complete the editing processes.

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In addition to being a highly collaborative author, White drew freely from religious tracts, magazines, and books that related to her subjects. For decades she had access to the range of magazines that came to the Review office, exchanged with other publishers. In addition, White often requested her associates to seek, secure, or send reference materials to her: You need not send Walks and Homes of Jesus when you send the books I laid out. 17 Send books, red-covered Jewish Antiquities and the Bible Dictionary. Is Night Scenes of the Bible there? If so, send it. 18 Tell Mary to find me some histories of the Bible that would give me the order of events. 19 White’s staff took an active role in finding and recommending books that might be valuable in their group Bible study or in “the preparation of articles on Bible subjects.” 20 Her personal and office libraries at the time of her death comprised some 1,400 volumes. Often White’s development of a particular idea or theme can be followed from its first expression in a letter or a diary entry, through its form as a periodical article, to its appearance in a book chapter. Her description of the Protestant Reformation, for example, evolved from five tiny pages in Spiritual Gifts in 1858 to more than a hundred pages in the 1884 edition of The Great Controversy to almost 200 pages in the 1911 edition. White’s treatment of the Czech reformer John Hus (ca. 1369-1415) is of particular interest, owing to the fact that, atypically, her initial handwritten manuscript has survived. Hus does not appear in White’s 1858 account of the Reformation, but he attracts 540 words in the 1884 edition of The Great Controversy and about 4,800 words in the 1888 edition. As historian Donald R. McAdams has shown, White selectively abridged and adapted the sources that she used. At times she followed one earlier historian “page after page, leaving out much material, but using their sequence, some of their ideas, and often their words.” McAdams “found no historical fact in her text that is not in their text.” She included both “historical errors and moral exhortations.” His study “revealed that Mrs. White’s literary assistant at the time, Miss Marian Davis, not only improved Mrs. White’s English but also played a very significant role in deleting a large amount of original material dealing with the spiritual significance of events and adding additional material from [James A.] Wylie,” a well-known historian of Protestantism. 21

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At times White took precautions to avoid being influenced by the thoughts of others. On one occasion she explained, “I have not been in the habit of reading any doctrinal articles in the paper [Review and Herald], that my mind should not have any understanding of anyone’s ideas and views, and that not a hold of any man’s theories should have any connection with that which I write.” 22 Willie believed that although his mother received heaven-sent messages, she remained free to borrow the expressions of others. As he explained: In the early days of her work, Mother was promised wisdom [ from the Holy Spirit] in the selection from the writings of others, that would enable her to select the gems of truth from the rubbish of error. We have seen this fulfilled, and yet when she told me of this, she admonished me not to tell it to others. Why this restriction I never knew, but am now inclined to believe that she saw how this might lead some of her brethren to claim too much for her writings as a standard with which to correct historians. 23 The above depiction of White’s authorial methods would seem unexceptional except for two factors: her explicit claims of divine agency and her copious, unacknowledged use of sources written by others. As a teenager Ellen Harmon opened her first written communication of its type with the bold claim, “God has shown me in holy vision.” The four-volume Index to her writings lists more than a hundred references by White to herself as in some way the “Lord’s special messenger.” 24 The tone of her first “testimony” matches countless remarks made during a lifetime of writing. “Sister White,” she wrote later in life, “is not the originator of these books. They contain the instruction that during her life-work God has been giving her. They contain the precious, comforting light that God has graciously given His servant to be given to the world.” 25 Concerns Typical of Ellen White’s literary borrowing is the following example: The greatest want of the world is the want of men–men who will not be bought or sold, men who in their inmost souls are true and honest, men who do not fear to call sin by its right name, men

. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 97). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole, men who will stand for the right though the heavens fall. 26 White’s sentence has been quoted often by Adventist authors, memorized by devout believers, and cited on plaques that adorn the walls of Adventist homes. However, it was not original with her. A common aphorism in nineteenth-century North America, versions of it even appeared in the Review: The great want of this age is men. Men who are not for sale. Men who are honest, sound from center to circumference, true to the heart’s core—men who will condemn wrong in a friend or foe, in themselves as well as others. Men whose consciences are as steady as the needle to the pole. Men who will stand for the right if the heavens totter and the earth reels. 27 White did not limit her copying to nicely phrased passages and historical facts. Occasionally, the words of others found their way into descriptions of visionary experiences. In 1890, for example, she recorded in her diary what she had seen in a recent vision, in which her “guide” said: The whys and wherefores are often concealed from you, yet speak the words I shall give you, however painful it may be to you. The ways in which God leads his people are generally mysterious....God knows better than you do what is good and essential for his children. He never leads them otherwise than they would wish to be led if they were able to see as clearly as He does what they must do to establish characters that will fit them for the heavenly courts. The latter part of this passage was subsequently recycled in The Desire of Ages as “God never leads his children otherwise than they would choose to be led, if they could see the end from the beginning.” Decades earlier, in a work published in English in 1836, the German author Frederick W. Krummacher had penned the following in his Elijah the Tishbite: The whys and wherefores are concealed from us....The ways God leads us are generally mysterious. ...God...knows exactly and much better than we do what is good and necessary for His children; and, in truth, He never leads them otherwise than they would

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wish Him to lead them, if they were able to see as clearly into their hearts and necessities as He does. 28 The issue of White’s use of sources, mooted as early as the 1840s, increasingly became a focus of debate between her defenders and detractors. During the 1860s, her early treatises on health, which displayed a striking similarity to the writings of other health reformers, prompted skeptics to charge her with copying. In response she insisted that her “views were written independent of books or the opinion of others.” She explained in the Review that although she was as “dependent upon the Spirit of the Lord in writing my views as I am in receiving them, yet the words I employ in describing what I have seen are my own, unless they be those spoken to me by an angel, which I always enclose in marks of quotation.” 29 For her critics, her strong denials of copying from or even being influenced by earthly sources compounded the problem. Among White’s colleagues one of the most troubled was Dudley M. Canright (1840–1919), a minister who served two years as one of the three-member General Conference committee. By the 1880s, after ruminating on the problem for two decades, Canright began openly expressing his doubts. In 1889, after leaving the church, he published Seventh-day Adventism Renounced, which explicitly charged White with plagiarism, most notably in her Sketches from the Life of Paul (1883) and in the fourth volume of Spirit of Prophecy (1884). That year the Healdsburg Enterprise reported at length on the growing controversy. Some non-Adventist clergy in the northern California town, where Adventists had established an academy, imported Canright from Michigan to help them address the issue “Is Mrs. White a Plagiarist?” Would not any literate critic judging from the quotations adduced and a comparison of the passages indicated, conclude that Mrs. White in writing her “Great Controversy” Vol. IV had before her the open books and from them took both ideas and words. We ask the candid reader if we have sustained our position. Does she not stand convicted of “introducing passages from another man’s writings and putting them off as her own.” If so, we have proved the point in issue, and, according to Webster, Mrs. White is a plagiarist, a literary thief. 30 Henceforth Canright’s expose would provide the normative arsenal for many subsequent critics of White and Adventism.

. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 99). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

Speaker

it Was 1842, and the world was supposed to end soon. Ellen Harmon, a teenaged girl in Portland, Maine, wrestled with her awakening religious experience. Not yet fifteen, self-conscious about her facial injury, and reticent, she resisted an impression to pray in public. After weeks of agonizing spiritual isolation, her private prayers led her to join a group worshiping in her uncle’s home. “I consented to go with my mother to a little prayer meeting, to please her,” she recalled. “I knelt on my knees, and my mouth was opened. No sooner did I begin to speak than The power of God gave voice that reached a mile, and There I dedicated myself to God....from that day the cloud burst.” When she achieved this victory over her reluctance to pray aloud, she later recalled, I held it with a grip that never would let it go. I went from house to house, and I did not go to greet the people. I went right to my companions, and I talked with them all night long, and I would pray with them until they gave their hearts to God. 1 Many years later, in August 1876, Ellen Harmon White encountered a setting far removed from her adolescent world of 1842. At the Groveland camp meeting site near Haverhill, Massachusetts, train after train emptied passengers onto the grounds until an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 listeners awaited her temperance sermon. The next evening a thousand of the “finest and most select of the city” packed an auditorium in Haverhill to hear her again. “The Queen of England could not have been more

. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 110). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

honored,” she wrote to her family. 2 Her spiritual messages and speaking practices had placed her firmly in the public sphere. 3 How did this religious woman evolve from the ecstatic shouts of 1842 to the sober cadences of her 1876 lecture at Groveland, and how did public speaking shape her historical role? Ellen Harmon White’s movement from spontaneous public physical behaviors to formalized oral and written discourse traced the route of her own spiritual experience. Likewise her Adventist flock, drawn initially by her public visions, came to rely on the apparently more objective world of her transcribed sermons and written words. Ellen White’s physical, charismatic discourse—her bodily texts—faded into the background, while her written discourse became canonical. Her public speaking, from the early shouted ecstasies to the eventual full-text published transcriptions, bridged the two discourses. The trajectory of Ellen White’s speaking career traces several chronological phases: reliance on the visions in small gatherings during the 1840s and 1850s; creation of a dynamic with James in the 1860s, initially featuring visions but evolving into a dual sermon approach; development of an independent speaking voice during the mid-1870s as James’s illnesses separated their labors; and expansion of her solo career after James’s death in 1881, increasing contact with the general public. 4 Although Ellen White never claimed the title of “prophet” and never was voted into a church office, her words carried more weight than any other leader of her denomination. Throughout her seventy-year career, public speaking renewed her own confidence in her message, established and reinforced her authoritative voice, and supported her institution-building role. In the United States, women speaking in public were at best curiosities when Ellen Harmon began to be heard. The American public sphere in her lifetime scarcely heard a female voice, let alone one like hers. Those who wished to speak presented contexts and qualifications: the egalitarian Quakerism of Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony, and Angelina Grimké, the reformism of Lucy Stone, the didacticism of Catherine Beecher, the politics of Anna Dickinson, or the literary world of Harriet Beecher Stowe. These worlds were not open to Ellen Harmon in the 1840s. She shared the role of charismatic female prophet with a handful of all-but-unknown women such as Dorinda Baker and Phoebe Knapp. 5 Although the Millerite preaching of Sojourner Truth, Zilpha Elaw, and Harriet Livermore had familiarized some early Adventists with the sound of female voices raised in public discourse, most Millerite preachers were men, as were almost all Adventist preachers. 6 The avenue of communication open to charismatic

. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 111). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

religious women had more in common with early Quakers and Shakers than with social reformers or conventionally published authors. The mode was more Mother Ann Lee than Elizabeth Cady Stanton. It was the avenue used by religious enthusiasts bursting with spiritual intensity but lacking formal education and conventional social clout, and it comprised public physical manifestations of personal religious experience. It was a familiar context for Ellen Harmon’s fellow Methodists. In spite of her initial awkwardness, painful shyness, and physical infirmities, Ellen White found the speaking role manageable; it did not require mediation by unpredictable visions or insistent editors. Skilled publicists framed her messages to best advantage in their own accounts of her speaking appointments, but she welcomed the scrutiny of newspaper reporters who found their way onto camp meeting grounds and into Methodist churches and public buildings for her talks. These news reports provide a valuable perspective beyond her circle of believers. Ellen Harmon would not have gained a consistent audience or confidence in her own voice without a physical requisite: a reliable speaking instrument. An ironic legacy of her childhood accident was a quality shared with only a few men and even fewer women—a resonant voice that carried across distances and was distinctly audible indoors or out. She described the quality of her voice as a compensation for her childhood injury: After the accident “I began to talk down lower. In time, by using the abdominal muscles in talking, I could extend my voice to almost any company.” 7 An individual who witnessed many of Ellen White’s sermons recalled that she had two voices: a mezzo soprano for conversation or visiting and her speaking voice, which she called her “‘stomach’ voice. It was a deep contralto with a wonderful carrying power. It was not a monotonous voice but a constant voice. She never raised her voice in an effort to be heard.” 8 Although at times Ellen White talked herself hoarse, she spoke up to 150 times a year for decades and kept a regular speaking schedule well into her eighties. Knowing that her voice could be heard, she repeatedly found that speaking in public made her feel stronger. In June 1865, she described a series of tent meetings in Wisconsin: “I took my position with much trembling, knowing my exhausted condition of body, but the Lord strengthened me.” 9 An aspiring public speaker has to establish authority; a credible voice gains an audience. For early Adventists, Ellen Harmon’s frail body in vision provided evidence of her spiritual authenticity (see Chapter 4). Her early travels, aided by James White and sometimes Joseph Bates, sifted

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the disparate remnants of Millerites into supportive and antagonistic groups. “Most of our meetings were held in private houses,” she recalled. “Our congregations were small. It was seldom that any came into our meetings excepting Adventists, unless they were attracted by curiosity to hear a woman speak.” 10 Curiosity to see a woman in vision was also a factor. The public aspect of the spectacle invited viewers to test her body themselves. In 1845, during a vision at the Thayer home in Randolph, Massachusetts, the host decided to establish her veracity by placing a large Bible on her as she reclined against the wall in a corner of the room. 11 When Ellen went into vision while she and James were making presentations together, James would invite people from the audience, including physicians, to evaluate whether she was breathing. Onlookers’ curiosity about Ellen White’s female body in vision, their willingness to touch her with apparent freedom, and James White’s encouragement that they do so seem incongruous in the setting of a religious meeting. The experiences of other women speakers in the nineteenth century, however, provide a context. In 1858 an Indiana audience goaded Sojourner Truth into baring her breast to prove she was a woman. 12 Unconventional speakers seeking a hearing were in some cases willing to be tested. Ellen Harmon’s marriage to James White in 1846 created a speaking alliance that endured for decades. Early in their marriage they traveled to meetings in homes and then in barns as Adventist groups, still without churches of their own, grew larger. During their joint speaking engagements in the 1850s and 1860s, James and Ellen White’s public speaking developed a pattern: James would preach a closely reasoned, text-based message during the morning sermon hour, and Ellen would conduct a more emotive service in the afternoon, reflecting on her own experience and sharing her vision-related testimonies about other individuals. Often such sessions were followed by a “social meeting,” when members of the congregation gave their personal testimonies. The number of testimonies at these social meetings became an index to the success of their joint efforts. James’s and Ellen’s approaches complemented each other. As Ellen noted, “My husband would give a doctrinal discourse, then I would follow with an exhortation of considerable length, melting my way into the feelings of the congregation. Thus my husband sowed and I watered the seed of truth, and God did give the increase.” 13 When Ellen experienced public visions, James reminded audiences that the visions occurred spontaneously and that Mrs. White dreaded having them. In the aftermath of her December 1865 vision on health reform,

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which led to several thousand pages of written testimonies, James reported that “Mrs. W. has said, more than twenty times ...if she could have her choice, to go into the grave or have another vision, she should choose the grave.” 14 The visions exhausted her because the real work began after the vision ended. A conventional sermon, in contrast, concluded when she was finished speaking, and this fact may have affected her reliance on sermons as time went on. After Seventh-day Adventists formed a denomination in Battle Creek, Michigan, in 1863, its membership continued to expand outside the context of New England religion. At the same time, Ellen White spoke more frequently to audiences who were not Adventists. These guest sermons followed traditional discourse modes and did not include visions. At these appointments she carefully avoided offending the congregations with sectarian messages, and she refrained from the pointed testimonies she frequently aimed at her fellow church members. While traveling through Michigan with James in the spring of 1868 she was invited to speak in the Tuscola Methodist church. She spoke for about an hour and a half on themes of salvation to a standing-room-only congregation. After her sermon she was surprised to learn that she had used the same text employed by the Methodist minister that morning. She noted with satisfaction that one of the “wealthiest and most influential men in town” stated that she “carried it much higher than our minister.” 15 Ellen White welcomed the opportunity these speaking forays presented to dissipate prejudice against Adventists. A prominent feature of her 1878 and 1880 trips to the Northwest were multiple public-speaking engagements. After a sermon at a large Methodist church in Salem, Oregon, Ellen reported to James that “one of the Methodist ministers said to Brother Levitt that he regretted Mrs. White was not a staunch Methodist for they would make her a bishop at once.” 16 Her reputation continued to extend beyond her own denomination. As Ellen’s speaking career increased in the 1870s, James’s health became more precarious. Constitutionally unable to stop hurling himself into every challenge, he kept up a stiff work regimen even after a series of paralytic strokes debilitated him physically and emotionally. He became depressed and querulous when his body gave out under his demands and when his closest colleagues, including his wife, would not bend to his will. James White’s biographer Gerald Wheeler discusses the strains James’s condition placed on the Whites’ marriage. 17 Ellen was torn between her desires to tend to James’s needs and to keep pushing “the work” forward.

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For James, the 1870s involved significant travel, periods of enforced rest, and attempts to restore his health, first at their new home in California and later back at Battle Creek. For Ellen, the 1870s involved a decision: If “the work” beckoned, and if James remained unable to participate, she would go on alone. In response to James’s erratic health, Ellen began to surround herself with younger assistants, in addition to her son W. C. (Willie) White. In 1875 she engaged her niece Mary Clough as an editorial assistant (see Chapter 5). Mary was bright, well trained in writing and editing, and a congenial companion for Ellen. Although her primary responsibility was editorial assistance, she soon proved to be an outstanding publicist for Ellen White’s speaking engagements. By the summer of 1875 Mary was doing advance work along the camp-meeting circuit, sending news releases to nearby newspapers and arranging interviews with journalists on the camp-meeting grounds. Mary dove enthusiastically into her publicity work. She hired up to six copyists to make transcripts of news releases and copies of White’s remarks for eventual publication. Ellen noted that even when both she and Mary lost their appetite for the appalling food served at camp meetings, Mary did not complain. 18 Ellen and Mary, sometimes accompanied by James, swept through the Midwest and the East Coast during the summers of 1875, 1876, and 1877. Near the beginning of the 1875 camp-meeting season, Ellen and James traveled to Gallatin, Missouri. Delayed from their onward travels by rain, they decided to preach at a Christian church in the evening. James delivered a sermon on Adventist doctrine and then announced that Ellen would speak at the same church on Sunday morning, at a time that would not interfere with the services of other churches. According to a newspaper account, the pastor of the church “stated that, as there was a positive command in the Bible against women teaching, she would not have the use of their church.” Instead of speaking at the church on Sunday morning, Ellen spoke on Sunday afternoon at the court-house. “The court room was crowded,” reported the newspaper. “She delivered a very interesting and instructive discourse concerning the duties of parents in the proper training of their children, both physically and morally. No one could object to the sentiment she proclaimed, and we doubt not many will be benefitted by having heard her. She is a pleasant, forcible speaker, and the audience, after having listened attentively an hour, were not weary.” 19 With Mary Clough’s help, the accomplishments of Ellen White came to the attention of a large public. As curiosity seekers were drawn in larger

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numbers onto Adventist campgrounds, White offered more sermons and lectures on health and temperance. This activity peaked in 1876 during the camp meeting at Groveland, Massachusetts. Swelling the audience of 500 campers, crowds of non-Adventists flocked to the site on special trains dedicated to the event, undoubtedly encouraged by Mary Clough’s glowing press releases. By Sunday, August 27, Clough later reported, trains from nearby towns, filled with “intelligent [in other words, well-educated] people,” arrived for the morning meeting and heard James White preach. As the trains continued to roll in, Ellen White prepared to take her turn at the podium to deliver a sermon on temperance. She later noted that an estimated 20,000 gathered on the grounds that day, calling it “the most solemn sight I ever beheld.” 20 To top it off, the Temperance Reform Club from nearby Haverhill invited her to address an audience of 1,000 at the city hall on Monday evening. Ellen and James were escorted to a large platform fifteen or twenty feet above the audience, which included “the first men of Haverhill,” Ellen wrote to Edson and Emma. Although she had had a severe headache for several days and was “nervous,” she recalled, “the Lord helped me speak. I was never more clear. ...I was stopped several times with clapping of hands and stomping of feet. I never had a more signal victory.” 21 A Haverhill journalist who followed Ellen White that day reported: “The railroads were taxed beyond the utmost capacity of all their preparations for the occasion, and large numbers were prevented from attendance” by lack of transportation. He described how thousands waited at the railroad station in Lawrence while sixteen full cars left for the camp. Steam yachts plied the Merrimac River, arriving hourly, and many visitors traveled by horse and carriage. The reporter noted that doctrinal sermons were nearly continuous that day, interspersed with two temperance lectures by Ellen White. The site, he said, was destined to be a permanent meeting spot for the Adventists’ annual camp meetings, and it could be “thus occupied till the time shall arrive which is fixed in the dream which we think constitutes their faith; if so, it may be a very long time, the duration of which the B. and M. Railroad will not object to. It always was the desire and delight of the race to occasionally assemble in great numbers, and in order to do so they must have a central idea to rally round, and that of this sect may as well be one of those ideas as anything else.” 22 When Uriah Smith published this article in the Review and Herald, he retained the skeptically condescending final paragraph, perhaps to reinforce the veracity of the crowd-size estimate earlier in the article.

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Ellen White’s development as a public speaker faltered when James died in 1881, a few days after contracting malarial fever. Two days after sharing the pulpit in the Battle Creek Tabernacle on July 30, they both were hospitalized with the malady. Ellen rallied just enough to be at James’s bedside when he died on Sabbath afternoon, August 6. She was devastated. “The shock of my husband’s death—so sudden, so unexpected—fell upon me with crushing weight,” she recalled. “In my feeble condition I had summoned strength to remain at his bedside to the last, but [then] ... exhausted nature gave way, and I was completely prostrated.” 23 At midnight that evening Ellen thought she was dying. Her pulse became imperceptible, and Dr. John Harvey Kellogg stimulated her heartbeat with an electrical shock. Nurses sponged her spine with hot and cold water for three hours until her pulse improved. Her life remained in the balance for several more days. One week after James’s death, on August 13, his funeral was conducted in the church where he had preached two weeks earlier. Ellen was transported to the service in a wheelchair and sat on a couch near the front of the sanctuary. Although she had been bedridden for nearly two weeks, she felt it was her “duty” to testify to the congregation why a bereaved spouse would feel hope in the Resurrection. She was assisted to the pulpit. “I shall be alone, and yet not alone, for my Saviour will be with me,” she told the congregation. “My heart can feel to its very depths, and yet I can tell you I have no tears to shed for the dead. My tears are for the living. And I lay away my beloved treasure to rest,—to rest until the morning of the resurrection, when the Lifegiver shall call the captives from the prison-house to a glorious immortality.” 24 Even though she and James had often worked separately in the 1870s, she was not sure she could survive alone. She later recalled, “For one year after his death, I felt my loss keenly, until the Lord, when I was at the gates of death, healed me instantly. This was ... about a year after my husband’s death.” 25 Ellen White returned to California after James’s funeral and attended a Sacramento camp meeting in October 1881. Newspaper accounts noted that she was still recovering from a recent illness and from the death of her husband. During the camp meeting she was able to rekindle some of her usual fervor against one of her favorite villains, tobacco, the “most enslaving” of the vices. “The Tree of Life has no branches that bear tobacco,” she warned her audience. 26 Her speaking engagements for the next year, though, were few and far between. In late August 1882 she was felled by another serious bout of fever while in Oakland. Willie and his

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wife transported her to Healdsburg in September, fearing she would die before they arrived. In early October she asked Willie to take her to the local camp meeting, and once again public speaking rallied her. After the Sabbath afternoon sermon, Ellen asked Willie and an assistant to help her to the pulpit so she could speak. “For five minutes I stood there,” she said, trying to speak, and thinking it was “the last speech I should ever make—my farewell message.” She steadied herself against the pulpit. “All at once I felt a power come upon me, like a shock of electricity. It passed through my body and up to my head. The people said that they plainly saw the blood mounting to my lips, my ears, my cheeks, my forehead.” She recalled feeling healed both physically and emotionally. Uriah Smith, who was present, said she spoke six times during the camp meeting “with her ordinary strength of voice and clearness of thought.” Arthur L. White identified this event as a turning point in Ellen White’s physical condition. 27 She would spend several more decades speaking in public. Ellen White’s nine-year sojourn in Australia during the 1890s was in many ways a retreat from the demands of the American church that allowed her to focus on the production of some of her most important books. In spite of an eleven-month struggle with inflammatory rheumatism and periodic flare-ups of malarial fever, she maintained a vigorous schedule of public speaking and camp-meeting appointments. Relying on letters and articles to communicate with believers in the United States, she missed the face-to-face public communication she had depended on there to underscore her writing. As she wrote to her fellow female Adventist speaker, the temperance activist S.M.I. Henry, in 1899, “I would much prefer to meet the people in America face to face than to send them written communications.” She complained that the brethren who knew her best did not understand her, which prompted her to labor even harder over her letters. 28 During the nineteenth century Ellen White had played a significant role in developing the Seventh-day Adventist faith, but her most far-reaching influence on its institutional structure came in the twentieth century, in her old age. Her spoken words proved crucial; it is unlikely that her written discourse would have had the same effect if she had remained in Australia. She returned to the United States in time to make a significant impact on the 1901 General Conference session in Battle Creek, the denominational governance meeting that at that time convened biennially.

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Builder

“an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man,” wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson in an 1841 essay celebrating the genius of the individual. Historically, however, a founder has usually needed the support of a diverse team to create a viable institution. Ellen White arguably exerted a greater influence on the development of Seventh-day Adventist institutions than any other one person, but she did not act alone. Much of her work was that of a consultant, sometimes initiating new directions, often evaluating and refining the suggestions of others, but always acting as part of a team. She never held an elective or administrative office in the denomination. She often served as an adviser to such boards, because, in the words of one Adventist historian, she “generally had a more expansive view of the possibilities for the denomination than did its voted leaders.” 1 Her role as an institution builder began to emerge in 1848, about four years after her first vision. Publishing The first institution that Ellen White co-founded, a publishing house, started from almost nothing. “I have a message for you,” she said to her husband, James, after a vision in December 1848. “You must begin to print a little paper and send it out to the people. Let it be small at first; but as the people read, they will send you means with which to print, and it will be a success from the first. From this small beginning it was shown to me to be like streams of light that went clear round the world.” 2

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In July 1849, James located a printer who was willing to print a paper on credit and wait for payment until readers could send donations. The Whites mailed The Present Truth, postage due, to all the Adventists they knew in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, and Eastern Canada. By September 3, the printer had been paid. 3 After James had published ten issues of Present Truth, his wife reported another vision, in which she was instructed to “take the testimonies that the leading Adventists published in [18]44 and republish them and make them ashamed” of abandoning their earlier faith. 4 Because this paper would primarily reprint the writings of the Millerite Adventists, James called it the Advent Review. He soon merged the two papers, Present Truth and Advent Review into one, Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, which later became Review and Herald and is now published as Adventist Review. Despite the apparent success of the paper, Joseph Bates, the elder statesman among sabbatarian Adventists, opposed it. To him, publishing a periodical looked like imitating other religious movements that had lost their initial fire and settled into conventional religion. Bates’s attitude so “discouraged” James White that he vowed to give up publishing journals “forever.” But that night Ellen White had a vision that “God did not want James to stop yet; but he must write, write, write, write, and speed the message and let it go.” Hearing this, James wrote to a friend, “I do not doubt for a moment Brother Bates’ good will and kindness toward us; still he does not see everything correctly at one glance. I shall write to him this vision, which will, no doubt, make him see a little differently in some things.” 5 Believing that publishing the message in a paper was “as necessary” as preaching it, Ellen admonished Bates for not supporting James and the paper. She warned her husband not to feel “jealous” of his older colleague. She urged them both to “press together” to keep the fledgling movement intact. The disagreement took thirteen months to resolve. From December 1849 to January 1851, Bates refused to write for the paper. His opposition, combined with James White’s physical exhaustion, so discouraged James that in January 1851 he wrote a note for the paper that he would “publish no more.” But the next morning his wife had a vision in which she saw “that my husband must not give up the paper, for such a step was just what Satan was trying to drive him to take. I was shown,” she went on, “that he must continue to publish, and that the Lord would sustain him.” Meanwhile, her strong words eventually got through to Bates. Realizing his mistake, Bates reversed himself and became a wholehearted supporter

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of the Review, writing for it, soliciting subscriptions, and raising funds to buy a press on which to print it. 6 In 1860 the need to protect the growing assets of the publishing work prodded the reluctant Adventists to form their first legal corporation—the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association in Battle Creek, Michigan. This was the first official use of the name Seventh-day Adventist. 7 By the time of Ellen White’s death in 1915, three Adventist publishing associations covered North America: the Review and Herald in Takoma Park, Maryland; the Pacific Press in Mountain View, California; and the Southern Publishing Association in Nashville, Tennessee. Organizing a Denomination Adventist leaders recognized the need for an organization as early as 1849; by 1853 it had become a public campaign, and in 1863 the goal was reached with the creation of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Ellen White’s role in building a membership base and confirming a doctrinal core for the emerging denomination was so challenging that it consumed her energy for more than a decade, as it did for Joseph Bates and James White. All three of them were heavily involved in traveling, preaching, teaching, evangelizing, and writing. Bates, the eldest (1792–1872), was the foremost evangelist among the three, the leader in integrating the concepts of Sabbath and Sanctuary with the end-time prophecies of the book of Revelation. He did so by authoring small books and by taking strategic trips to engage with other leaders. 8 James White possessed gifts for writing, editing, and administration. He started several new periodicals (Present Truth, 1849; Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, 1850; Youth’s Instructor, 1852; and Signs of the Times, 1874), and from 1869 to 1873 his editorial skills and good judgment rescued the Health Reformer from almost certain demise. With the possible exception of his protégé John Harvey Kellogg, his ability to organize institutions was unsurpassed among his Adventist contemporaries. 9 Ellen White’s distinguishing contribution was her visions, which often provided specific, focused guidance to her colleagues and followers. James White seems to have been the first to notice the need for organization. In September 1849, he urged the necessity of financial support for ministers and asserted congregational authority to expel misbehaving members. In March 1850, he argued the need for “gospel order” in

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credentialing ministers. His wife’s first mention of the subject came in December 1850. Her endorsement helped convince the scattered Adventists that uniting was according to God’s will. 10 During the 1850s Ellen White maintained a lower profile than did the other two founders, in part because James for years refused to publish her writings in the Review and Herald. Throughout her life her role was advisory rather than executive. It could be added that each of the three founders had a period of dominance. Bates had exercised the decisive leadership during the period of doctrinal formation (1846–1849), with collaboration from James and confirmation from the visions of Ellen. During the organizational phase (1850–1863) and for almost twenty years afterward, James White had led the charge, with Ellen as counselor and advisor. His death in 1881 would divide his wife’s career almost exactly in two. For thirty-five years her life had been “so interwoven” with his that she thought it might be “impossible for [her] to be of any great account without him.” 11 But she would continue her ministry for another thirty-four years, during which she would produce more than half of the books and articles she published during her lifetime. Thus for seventy years after the crisis of 1844, the last of the founders would exert a steadying influence on the movement. Developing the Western Health Reform Institute On June 5, 1863, just ten days after the organization of the General Conference, a two-and-a-half-hour vision revealed to Ellen White that the laws of health were just as much God’s laws as were the Ten Commandments. Care for personal health was, therefore, a religious obligation. Although numerous health-related articles had already appeared in denominational magazines, this health reform vision symbolizes the beginning of the special Adventist emphasis on health (see Chapter 11). 12 By August 1864 Ellen White had completed the fourth volume of Spiritual Gifts, which included an article on “Health” summing up her 1863 vision. Immediately on sending the book to press, she and James White led five other ailing Adventists on a three-week visit to James Caleb Jackson’s “Home on the Hillside,” a prominent water cure in Dansville, New York. They came away favorably impressed and began to spread through the churches what they were learning about drugless healing. “Our people are generally waking up to the subject of health,” wrote James White, “and they should have publications on the subject to meet their present wants,

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. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 129). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition. at prices within reach of the poorest.” Already available were books on health reform by Sylvester Graham, William Alcott, James C. Jackson, Russell T. Trall, Joel Shew, and Larkin B. Coles, a Millerite physician. But many of these books were too large, too technical, or too expensive for the average lay person. So the Whites prepared a series of six pamphlets collectively titled Health: or, How to Live (1865), with content drawn from “personal experience, from the word of God, and from the writings of able and experienced health reformers.” 13 This flurry of activity took place against the background of the American Civil War and James White’s already excessive workload. In August 1865, he suffered a paralyzing stroke. After Ellen had cared for him at home for five weeks without discernible improvement, they decided to go back to Dansville. This time they stayed for almost three months, gathering “many things of value” from those more experienced in health reform. But the Dansville physicians advocated entire rest—complete physical and mental inactivity—for James White. 14 They also believed that because his breakdown had resulted from overwork in religious lines, recovery would require a complete break from religious exertion, even prayer. Contrary to the physicians, Ellen White reasoned that for her husband, who was “naturally a man of great activity, both of body and mind,” to “sink down in aimless inactivity” would hinder rather than help his recovery. As she saw him declining mentally, she determined to take him away from Dansville to nearby Rochester, New York, where he had friends. There, on Christmas Eve 1865, among a group praying for James’s recovery, Ellen received another vision. On the basis of this vision, she laid before the next General Conference session in May 1866 a proposal for an Adventist-owned health care institution. 15 Ellen White pointed out that the work of health reform among Adventists had barely begun, and that for God to hear their prayers for healing, they needed to change their way of living. She appreciated Jackson’s pioneering work in drugless therapies. But she also maintained that maximum therapeutic benefit required hope, optimism, and faith. Because of the dissonance between the Adventist faith and the popular amusements at Our Home, she believed that Adventists could not “receive that benefit from the popular health institutions of the day that others of a different faith can. They [Adventists] have to carry along with them at all times the gospel sieve and sift everything they hear, that they may choose the good and refuse the bad.

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Theology

it is iMPossiBle to discuss Ellen White and theology without paradox. On the one hand, if one thinks of “theology” in its broad etymological sense— Greek theos (god or God) + logos (thought, speech, message) = “God talk”— Ellen Harmon White produced a great deal of it in her seventy years and millions of words of prophetic thinking, speaking, and writing. On the other hand, if one thinks of “theology” in its more specific formal sense as “faith seeking understanding” or “the interpretation of faith,” she produced very little theology. In that context it is more accurate to discuss “some theological implications of Ellen White’s thinking,” and that is the intention of this chapter. For her, theology was always incidental to her primary vocation as a “messenger of the Lord” whose mission was to call “the remnant church” to prepare for and facilitate the imminent Second Advent of Jesus the Messiah. To the extent that her thinking was theological, it was intuitive rather than deliberate, informal rather than structured, practical and occasional rather than theoretical and systematic. 1 Strictly speaking, very seldom did Ellen White “do theology.” That is, she did not ordinarily do what professional theologians typically do. She did not produce a book of or about theology. She did not think, speak, and write in theological language. She did not expound detailed arguments. She did not outline a comprehensive conceptual system. She did not analyze and critique traditional or technical theological terms. She did not compare and contrast various views of Scripture, God, human nature, salvation, and eternal life. She did not elaborate a particular doctrine of the Trinity, atonement, God and time, or free will. She did not explain the precise meaning and broader implications of her own language and ideas,

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nor did she always use her theological vocabulary consistently. She did not endeavor to explain verbal or conceptual inconsistencies—either those of Scripture or her own—or to reduce the tensions inherent in her overall theological understanding. Perhaps the most striking exception to this generalization is her vigorous response in 1904 to the alleged pantheistic views of John Harvey Kellogg, the physician-entrepreneur who had joined the Western Health Reform Institute in 1876 and by the end of the century had developed it into the world-famous Battle Creek Sanitarium and affiliated American Medical Missionary College. To address the controversy—which she described four years later as involving “new theories” and “sciences of satanic origin,” and which editors forty years later described as precipitating “the greatest crisis the Seventh-day Adventist Church has ever faced”— she wrote eighty-one pages on the “The Essential Knowledge,” including discussions of “A Personal God,” “Danger in Speculative Knowledge,” and “The Knowledge Received Through God’s Word.” But even this theological enterprise was motivated by practical concerns; it concluded with a description of “Our Great Need,” referring to the experiences of Enoch and John the Baptist and citing God’s promises. 2 An equally influential involvement in Adventist theological conversation was her affirmation of traditional Christology, when, in opposition to the practice of some Adventists to speak of Christ as the first created being rather than eternally pre-existent, she asserted unequivocally that “in Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived.” Earlier she had said that the Son and the Father “were of one substance, possessing the same attributes,” and later she explained that “Christ was God essentially, and in the highest sense.” 3 White did not have a high opinion of the traditional discipline of theology and its practitioners. Although she did mention “true theology” on a couple of occasions, many of her references to “theology” and “theologians” appear in negative or (at best) neutral contexts, as in her observations that “the errors of popular theology have driven many a soul to skepticism, who might otherwise have been a believer in the Scriptures,” and that “Theology is valueless unless it is saturated with the love of Christ.” Indeed, she was convinced that “To a large degree, theology, as studied and taught, is but a record of human speculation, serving only to darken ‘counsel by words without knowledge’ [Job 38:2].” 4 She did, however, maintain a continuing interest in what might be called “practical theology”—careful reading of the Bible and accurate

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understanding of its teachings as vital ingredients in personal and ecclesial spiritual health (see Chapter 9). Her theological ideas emerged in letters, articles, and manuscripts addressing spiritual issues, church matters, and Scripture. Some of her most important theological ideas were expressed succinctly and powerfully in her devotional classic, Steps to Christ, intended to encourage and facilitate a mature Christian spirituality. An example is her explanation of the spiritual dynamic of prayer, which “does not bring God down to us, but brings us up to him.” This suggested that the proper objective of prayer is not to persuade God to fulfill one’s desires, however well-motivated, but to align one’s own will with the divine will. Always, her thinking was thoroughly “Advent-ist,” motivated by her continuing expectation of the imminent “coming of the Lord.” 5 Cultural and Personal Context Ellen Harmon White was very much American in her thinking, speaking, and writing; and in spite of travels in Europe (1885–1887) and a prolonged stay in Australia (1891–1900) she remained thoroughly American in her thinking throughout her life. She revealed a typical national self-consciousness in interpreting the Scriptural prophecies in the biblical book of Revelation in terms of a decisive American contribution to the historical future of the world (see Chapter 12). Her view of the American future, however, differed significantly from the optimistic idea of “manifest destiny” propounded to justify the controversial Mexican-American War (1846–1848) and the continent-wide expansion of the United States; she envisioned the United States going radically wrong religiously and politically, to the extent of harassing and persecuting “the people of God.” This pessimistic outlook contrasted also with the postmillennialism of many Protestants, according to which the Second Advent would occur after rather than before a thousand years of peace and prosperity. 6 White lived in a Protestant America of widespread anti-Catholic sentiment, with much nervousness about Catholic immigration and its resulting influence. “To Protestants, Catholics threatened American civilization at two points: temperance and Sabbath [i.e., Sunday] observance,” writes Jonathan Butler. “Hard-drinking Catholic laborers were suddenly invading American city life, with their more permissive continental Sabbath unsettling Protestants reared on the idea of American Sabbath-keeping.” To combat this and other tendencies toward a lax view of Sunday sacredness,

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in 1888 and 1889 Senator H. W. Blair introduced in the United States Congress national legislation mandating the observance of Sunday as a day of worship. Seventh-day Adventists helped to defeat the effort, but the threat was regarded as real. 7 Her culturally inherited literalistic understanding of Scripture was reinforced by the prophetic interpretations expounded by ex-army officer, ex-deist, and reconverted Baptist farmer William Miller (1782–1849). A crucial instance was the “day-year principle,” which, applied to the “two thousand three hundred days” of Daniel 8:14, led to the calculation of a 2,300-year period beginning in 457 Bce and ending in 1844 ce (since there was no year 0), when the “sanctuary” (understood as symbolizing the Earth) would be “cleansed” by the climactic events of the Second Advent. Being a woman also made a difference in White’s theological thinking. It helps to explain, for example, her continuing relational emphases on divine love and human community, as well her preference for the term “messenger” rather than “prophet” to describe her own role in Adventist Christianity. Her gender may well have been a factor also in her attention to practical and pastoral concerns—illustrated by her books on education and health as well as spirituality—and her comparative lack of theoretical interests (see Chapter 15). 8 Basic Principles Although Ellen White was not a theologian in any formal sense, she did articulate clear convictions about philosophical and theological matters that have often been addressed under the headings of “philosophy of religion,” “philosophical theology,” or “theological prolegomena.” These include the relation of faith, evidence, and reason; the nature of biblical revelation; the relation of science and Scripture; and the progressive understanding of truth. She directly addressed the relation of faith, evidence, and reason in at least nine statements published over a period of nearly forty years, from 1864 to 1903. 9 The most familiar—and also the most comprehensive—is a paragraph from 1892: God never asks us to believe, without giving sufficient evidence upon which to base our faith. His existence, His character, the truthfulness of His Word, are all established by testimony that

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appeals to our reason; and this testimony is abundant. Yet God has never removed the possibility of doubt. Your faith must rest upon evidence, not demonstration. Those who wish to doubt will have opportunity; while those who really desire to know the truth, will find plenty of evidence on which to rest their faith. 10 Her reasoning here was clear and succinct: (1) faith is properly based on available evidence, which (2) “appeals” to “reason” and (3) is abundant, but (4) is not rationally coercive, so that doubt is always possible, with the result that (5) faith is a rationally responsible but free choice, and unbelief is also a rational (although decisively mistaken) option. White insisted on the theological and spiritual priority of Scripture over secular knowledge and personal experience. Although there is no evidence that she ever used the Protestant Reformation slogan sola Scriptura, or advocated the idea in any absolute sense (as if no other sources of information about the character and activity of God were valid), she certainly did advocate the Bible in the sense of prima Scriptura, as the preeminent, supremely authoritative source of religiously relevant knowledge: The Bible, and the Bible alone, is to be our creed, the sole bond of union; all who bow to this holy word will be in harmony. Our own views and ideas must not control our efforts. Man is fallible, but God’s word is infallible. Instead of wrangling with one another, let men exalt the Lord. Let us meet all opposition as did our Master, saying, “It is written.” Let us lift up the banner on which is inscribed, The Bible our rule of faith and discipline. 11 Convinced that the Bible teaches the whole will of God concerning human life, she habitually thought, spoke, and wrote in the language of Scripture. She devoted four of the five books of the “Conflict of the Ages” series— known informally as Patriarchs and Prophets, Prophets and Kings, The Desire of Ages, and The Acts of the Apostles—to elaboration and interpretation of the biblical narrative. In addition, Christ’s Object Lessons is a series of expositions of the parables of Jesus, and Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing is an exposition of the Sermon on the Mount. Education also relies significantly on Scripture. 12 In short, White advocated what sola Scriptura had meant in the Reformation—namely, not only that one does not need the church or its clergy to interpret Scripture, but also that it is the privilege and

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responsibility of every believer to read the Bible for oneself: “Jesus said to all, Search for yourselves. Allow no one to be brains for you, allow no one to do your thinking, your investigating, and your praying.” 13 Although the explicit message here was to encourage personal diligence in the study of Scripture, the clear implication was that with “painstaking effort” and “diligent searching” one can indeed “understand the treasures of the word of God.” It was indicative as well as dramatic that in 1909, at the end of her last address to a session of the church’s General Conference, she “spoke a few words of good cheer and farewell, and then turned to the pulpit, where lay a Bible. She opened the book, and held it with hands that trembled with age. And she said, ‘Brethren and sisters, I commend unto you this book.’ Without another word she closed the book, and walked away from the platform.” 14 At the same time that she was convinced of the divine origin and authority of Scripture as “God’s Word,” she insisted that it is not God’s words. Responding to those “who think they find something to criticize” in the Bible, she replied, “I take the Bible just as it is, as the Inspired Word. I believe its utterances in an entire Bible.” But she recognized that “the writers of the Bible had to express their ideas in human language” rather than “in grand superhuman language,” and that “everything that is human is imperfect.” As she explained: The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God’s mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. ...The writers of the Bible were God’s penmen, not His pen....It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. ...The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God. 15 The most basic reason for the perceived and sometimes troubling diversities in Scripture, she insisted, is the inherent impossibility of adequately formulating infinite truth in finite language. Another, related, dimension of White’s view of Scripture is reflected in her understanding of the conditional nature of prophetic predictions. When this became an issue in regard to her own expectation of an imminent Advent and her claim in 1851 (at the age of 24) that “time cannot last but a very little longer,” she replied, “How is it with the testimonies of Christ and His disciples? Were they deceived?” Then, after

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Practical Theology

Ellen harMon White’s community understood her role in the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a contemporary manifestation of the New Testament “gift of prophecy” (Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 14:1; Eph. 4:11). Functionally her role was that of a practical theologian, undergirded and reinforced in her community by the authority attributed to her divinely endowed charisma. White’s ministry was clearly consistent with the branch of theology called practical theology. Distinct from the role and function of a biblical or systematic theologian, her vision-based expressions were the practical application of a theological system already largely embraced by her church community. While the roles of practical and biblical theology worked closely together within early Seventh-day Adventism, the evidence suggests that White’s function was not to resolve theological issues as an authoritative “biblical theologian” (see Chapter 8). Rather, she consistently urged lay church theologians to resolve disputed issues of theology through their own careful scriptural analysis. Ellen White did not introduce distinctively new doctrinal insights to Seventh-day Adventists; neither did she directly correct even the erroneous theological teachings of others, as one might reasonably expect an authority on biblical interpretation to do. On those few occasions when White considered that she had resolved points of theological conflict using the authority of her charisma, she maintained unity by deemphasizing the supposed importance of the theological issues that were being contested. She brought a measure of unity to the church by emphasizing its core theological positions and focusing her fellow believers on mission and the

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daily task of forming a Christian character that would make them ready for the Second Coming of Jesus. Ellen White’s emphasis on practical theology presupposed the presence of other approaches to “doing theology” in the Seventh-day Adventist community, evident in the work of colleagues such as her husband, James, John Nevins Andrews, Joseph Bates, and Uriah Smith. Her approach also presupposed a broadly agreed on theological framework of understanding. This overarching theological system had been framed during the Second Great Awakening and later became known as the “restorationist movement” because of its effort to return to early Christian practices and beliefs. Shaping White’s role as a practical theologian was the intense eschatology introduced by William Miller. In the years following 1844, White’s visionary experiences enabled her community to discern the practical implications of this theological system, inherited primarily from the Christian Connexion faith as it was shaped by the Millerite Adventist experience. The Christian Connexion Not long after Ellen Harmon began to experience visions, she gained the acquaintance of former Christian Connexion minister and staunch Millerite believer James White. Ellen had earlier known something of this Connexion faith through her attendance at the Casco Street Connexion church in her hometown of Portland, Maine, where her family at times worshipped after their dismissal from the Methodist Church. At the Christian church on several occasions Ellen had listened to William Miller expound on the soon return of Jesus. The Christian Connexion faith, the first indigenous Christian movement in America, thus became a major influence during the earliest history of what became the Seventh-day Adventist church. Its distinctive theological features—such as its belief in a minimal organizational structure, as well as its involvement in the anti-slavery movement, advocacy of religious freedom, temperance, health reform, manual labor, and women in leadership—all had a pervasive impact on Seventh-day Adventism through much of the nineteenth century; some of its teachings survive to this day. 1 The Christian Connexion had developed simultaneously at the conclusion of the eighteenth century in three separate geographical areas and out of three separate faith traditions in the United States: Virginia (from

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Methodism), Kentucky (from Presbyterianism), and New England (from the Baptist tradition). Initially, none of the groups knew of the existence of the others. In seeking a broad unity based on the premise “when the scripture is silent, we are silent,” the believers preferred using only biblical names and phrases for their beliefs and structure and hence rejected such terms as “trinity,” “deity of Christ,” and “imputation” and took the name “Christian.” Their sole basis for church fellowship was Christian character. Challenging the orthodoxy of Christian Connexion believers, Presbyterian theologian Gilbert McMaster provided a list of their “errors,” which included (1) denial of the Trinity, relegating Christ to a created being; (2) denial of the Holy Spirit as a distinct person; (3) conditional immortality; (4) emphasis on achieving human obedience to God’s requirements rather than admitting humanity’s fallen nature; (5) denial of imputationist views of the atonement; (6) teaching annihilation instead of everlasting punishment of the lost; and (7) belief that women could be public teachers of religion. 2 James White’s use of a sermon chart emphasizing the law of God (Figure 9.1) reflects his careful emphasis on Christian obedience. This listing is useful for our purposes because these ideas are all found not only within Christian Connexionism but also in the earliest Seventh-day Adventist theological system inherited by Ellen White. She especially integrated into her understanding of ministry the stress on the overwhelming importance of Christian character. When she married James White, an ordained Christian Connexion minister, she moved into the orbit of Christian Connexion theology. The newly wed Ellen Harmon White received a vision in April 1847 that her husband, James, printed later that year as A Word to the Little Flock. This vision stressed the importance of observing the seventh-day Sabbath as the day of worship. White’s understanding came not from her biblical exegesis but from such biblical theologians as Joseph Bates and James White and from her own visionary insight when she saw a “halo of glory” surrounding the fourth commandment. Through this vision White “saw that the holy Sabbath currently was, and will be, the separating wall between the true Israel of God and unbelievers; that the Sabbath was the great question, to unite the hearts of God’s dear waiting saints.” Not only were God’s people to evangelize the former Adventists concerning the Sabbath; they were to do so with the knowledge that such evangelization would generate persecution from the existing churches, as well as from “nominal Adventists,” and usher in the end. Reflecting an emphasis on

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adherence to God’s commands, inherited from the Christian Connexion, the vision reported that obedience to the neglected commandment of God gave Sabbath-keepers a “right to the tree of life” (Rev. 22:14). 3 The initial body of Sabbath-keeping Adventists originated sometime in 1844 or early 1845 from a Christian Connexion group that had coalesced in Washington, New Hampshire, in the 1830s. These Christians had become Adventists in 1842 through the ministry of Millerite evangelist Joshua Goodwin and sabbatarians when William Farnsworth, an influential

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Christian Connexion believer, stood during a service and informed the congregation that his study of Scripture had convinced him that the seventh day was the day to be observed as Sabbath. Before long a group of at least 15 worshiped in his father’s house. 4 These members of the Christian Connexion tended to a very literal reading of scripture, as did Ellen Harmon. This approach affected Farnsworth’s Sabbath observance in several ways. He concluded that Revelation 11:19 applied to the last days: “God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple.” Since the ark contained the Ten Commandments, the seventh-day Sabbath continued to be relevant. Farnsworth carefully studied the creation week in the beginning of Genesis and concluded that the Sabbath began when the sun went down on Friday evening. He inferred from Exodus 20 that the fourth commandment demanded not only observance of the seventh-day Sabbath, but also that “six days shalt thou labor.” As the Washington Sabbath-keepers continued to grow, they so outnumbered the Christians that the latter voted in 1862 to donate their church building to the Seventh-day Adventists, who for the past eighteen years had been meeting in private homes. By 1867 the Whites had held meetings in Washington on at least four occasions. In that year, one of Farnsworth’s sons, Eugene, noticed that his father had very discreetly relapsed in his usage of chewing tobacco. He decided to test Ellen White’s ability to uncover this practical issue. If she could reveal his father’s secret, Eugene would consider her visionary gift genuine. White in due time received a vision, which led her publicly to castigate William Farnsworth for telling the community that he had disavowed chewing tobacco. William accepted the public reprimand and gained life-long confidence in her gift. He also helped vindicate White’s role within the Washington community. As she wrote: “We pleaded earnestly with the children, until thirteen arose and expressed a desire to be Christians.” 5 Several of the children were William Farnsworth’s, including Eugene, who was among the youth baptized after the meeting with the Whites. He ministered for many years for the Seventh-day Adventist church and planned the Elmshaven funeral of Ellen White in 1915. Shut-Door Ministry Another aspect of Ellen White’s earliest ministry involved retaining the confidence of her followers that the Lord had guided the Adventists in

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the past and continued to do so. Her group was frequently identified with the term “shut door,” a phrase that arose from Jesus’ parable of the ten virgins—five wise and five foolish—who attended a wedding, recounted in Matthew 25:1–13. Just before the bridegroom arrived, the five foolish virgins discovered that their lamps had gone out for lack of oil. When they went to buy more oil, the groom arrived—“and the door was shut.” The message: “Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.” Reflecting on this parable, most sabbatarian Adventists concluded that salvation was available solely to those who had accepted Miller’s teaching that Jesus would return in 1844, a belief that estranged them from the larger Christian community. About the time of his marriage and acceptance of the seventh-day Sabbath in late August of 1846, James White described to a friend his intention to preach a funeral sermon for a fellow believer, moaning that he would be in a community of “hard, ugly Congregationalist and Methodist” believers. He had already become convinced of the futility of trying to convert them to the Advent faith for, he quipped, “It’s too late.” In another situation he considered it not too late to “give a reason of our hope ... even to swine.” 6 After visiting a group of Adventists in Portland, Maine, in April 1845, Joshua V. Himes noted that the shut-door teaching prevented those believers from “exercis[ing] benevolent feelings toward sinners, with a view to save them, so that that most essential element of the spirit of Christ, and of Christian character, is annihilated. Under such circumstances, the wonder with us is, not that there have been some extravagances, but that there have not been more.” 7 A shut-door ministry demanded a practical theologian. As James White was beginning to lead the sabbatarian group toward a more organized structure in the early 1860s, he reflected on the nature of the group’s ministry during its shut door-period of late 1844 to 1852, when members believed that “our work for the world was finished.” Back then they considered that the world and “fallen churches” had been given their last opportunity to receive the everlasting gospel message and been called out of “Babylon” or the fallen Protestant churches: As individuals would go scores and even hundreds of miles to present the truth to one or two who had been believers in the first message, so would the laborers go long distances to visit, to comfort, and to strengthen the scattered ones who had embraced the faith. In all cases where difficulties existed they were untiring in their

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efforts to give aid, traveling far, holding meetings sometimes all night, enduring toils and trials sufficient to exhaust the energies of any class of men. 8 The experience of Samuel Rhodes, “one of the most faithful, and self-sacrificing lecturers on the Second Advent,” illustrates the commitment to the shut-door teaching. After the Great Disappointment he became discouraged and isolated himself “in an uninhabited part of New York State.” Encouraged by Ellen White, who had seen Rhodes in vision, Hiram Edson and a “Bro Ralph” traveled over 1,000 miles over a period of months to persuade Rhodes to rejoin his Adventist colleagues. In vision White had seen “that Brn Edson and Ralph should make him believe there was hope and mercy for him, and tear him away, then he would come among the flock; and that Angels would attend them on their journey. I heard an Angel say ‘Can ye not see the worth of the soul?’” White also “saw that in Bro Rhodes’ mouth there had been no guile in speaking against the present truth,” that is, “the Sabbath, and Shut Door.” 9 Ellen White’s visionary experiences validated the community’s understanding of shut-door theology. On at least seven occasions she invoked visions endorsing the shut door. In 1850 she was instructed during a vision to urge her husband to publish the shut-door statements that Millerite Adventist leaders had made in 1844. Given the pre-disappointment theological perspective of that time, those statements exhibit the most extreme interpretations of shut-door theology. In addition, in 1850 Ellen White received a vision about the Adventist preacher Joseph Baker, a former member of the Christian Connexion: “I saw that Brother Baker must not sink down, that God had a work for him to do, not to feed the dogs, but the starving sheep, feed the sheep, feed the sheep, said my accompanying angel. It was melting weeping time when I related the vision.” 10 The Third Angel and the Sabbath Seventh-day Adventists during 1848 convened six separate “Sabbath Conferences” designed to solidify the community on the importance of obedience to the seventh-day Sabbath, which they considered to be the message of the Third Angel of Revelation 14. An August 1848 conference at Volney, New York, typified White’s role at these gatherings. As James White described it: “One of the number was not on the Sabbath but was

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humble and good. Ellen rose up in vision, took the large Bible, held it up before the Lord, talked from it, then carried it to this humble brother who was not on the Sabbath and put it in his arms.” Here again she performed no explicit exegetical role; instead, according to James White, she remained in vision for one and a half hours without breathing. In his letter James gave the rationale for the present truth held by Seventh-day Adventists: “So the Shut door and Sabbath is the present truth. These truths will form and keep up the same mark of distinction between us and unbelievers as God made in 1844.” 11 James White made a similar linkage in his next letter, on October 2, 1848: “The principal points on which we dwell as present truth are the 7th day Sabbath and Shut Door. In this we wish to honor God’s most holy institution and also acknowledge the work of God in our Second Advent experience.” 12 White and Joseph Bates, the first Adventist evangelist of the seventh-day Sabbath, coordinated their travels in proclaiming that message, and for several years the two former Christian Connexion believers were the sole sabbatarian Adventists proclaiming the Third Angel’s Message regarding the seventh-day Sabbath. Joseph Bates witnessed Ellen White in vision a number of times, taking notes from her spoken words both during and after these experiences. In his tract A Seal of the Living God he quoted her remarks after coming out of a couple of visions in November 1848 during meetings in Dorchester, Massachusetts: “Who has relaxed that fourth commandment? ...Stand out from him entirely. ...I saw that he rolled, and turned on his bed, to see how he could get round this law of God....Who was this you saw? Answer J B Cook.” 13 Cook was a former Second Adventist minister who had initially espoused the seventh-day Sabbath but had recently given it up. In a vision in January 1849 Ellen White continued to emphasize the practical importance of obedience to the fourth commandment while the saints eagerly awaited the Second Advent. Referring to a company she had seen “howling in agony,” she explained that they had lost out on salvation because they had once kept the Sabbath but had given it up. Here again, without biblical explication, White stressed her understanding of the practical results from disobedience to the Sabbath. 14 As White reflected on the context of the Third Angel’s message in Revelation 14, she identified the Sabbath as a final testing truth that would pit the obedient children of God against those who instead followed the “beast,” interpreted as a prophetic representation of the papacy. She saw in vision that some would be lost through their failures to dispense means

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that would support the “messengers” giving the final truth of the Sabbath. The soon-to-occur final events would destroy their possessions. According to the vision, “The angel said, can such enter heaven? Another answered, No never! never! never!” An angel also informed White that not all those going forth as so-called messengers were truly called. Some took it upon themselves to waste money in travels that prevented God’s true messengers from giving the truth to souls that were starving. Every dollar spent in useless traveling would have to be accounted for in the soon-coming judgment. “I saw that the judgments were just upon us, and that the trouble would soon be to this land, and that blood would flow in streams.” 15 James White soon wrote his close friend Leonard Hastings, whose wife had recently died, with some details that illustrate how Ellen functioned nonexegetically: “As God has revealed some things relative to your wife’s death to Ellen in vision we felt that our first duty was to communicate it to you....Ellen is writing a cutting message for Brother [E.L.H.] Chamberlain, that God has never called him to travel.” James believed that Chamberlain possessed the gift of tongues, a gift displayed at an 1848 Sabbath conference, which seemed to confirm to the believers that the true time for the Sabbath to begin was 6 p.m. Friday night. “It is true that God may occasionally call on those who have other gifts, but they are not the messengers. ‘A messenger has a message,’ said Ellen in vision.” 16 Ellen White also wrote to Hastings about this vision. She informed him that Joseph Bates had recently had a dream which if he had followed he would have been with you in your wife’s distress and if Brother Chamberlain had not been with him he [Bates] would have gone to God alone and he would have seen by the dream and by the drawings of the Spirit, that he must come directly to your house, when Satan had got your wife in his grasp, and by faith in God would have wrenched her from the power of the enemy, but he leaned upon Brother Chamberlain some for duty and followed his impressions instead of the light God gave him in the dream. Ellen assured Hastings that his wife “would come up at the voice of God” and that those criticizing him for having his wife’s funeral on the Sabbath were wrong to do so. 17 Although there were just several hundred Sabbatarian Adventists in the early 1850s, White’s confidence in the sabbatarian message of the

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Third Angel led her to announce that they were witnessing the birth of a movement that would fulfill God’s purpose at the end time: “I asked the angel if Zion should languish. Said the angel, She is rising never to fall again. God has stretched out his hand the second time to recover the remnant of his people.” White sought to unify a group of believers on one central truth, the message of the Third Angel. So crucial was this issue that White reported a vision of August 10, 1851, that reflected the regnant system of theology: “we had a perfect right in the city for we had kept the commandments of God.” 18 The first sabbatarian Adventist, William Farnsworth, had concluded from Scripture that the Sabbath began at sundown Friday evening. In contrast, Joseph Bates believed that it began at 6 p.m. In 1848 the ecstatic experience of E.L.H. Chamberlain convinced the majority, including James White, that the 6 p.m. time was correct. According to James, “the Holy Ghost came down,” filling Chamberlain with the gift of tongues after which the group concluded that the Sabbath began at 6 p.m. “Here is where the Sabbath begins at 6 p.m.,” said James. “Satan would get us from this time. But let us stand fast in the Sabbath as God has given it to us and Brother Bates. God has raised up Brother Bates to give this truth.” The controversy continued, however, and sundown remained a minority position that surfaced from time to time. James White eventually commissioned various biblical theologians to study the sundown position. Finally, in 1855, John N. Andrews reexamined the subject and concluded that the Sabbath began at sundown. James White now affirmed that he had “never been fully satisfied with the testimony presented in favor of six o’clock.” 19 James White later reflected on the entire experience in a Review and Herald article. Sensitive about accusations that Ellen White had endorsed the 6 p.m. time through her visionary experience, he discussed her 1847 vision at Topsham, Maine, when Ellen had heard an angel affirm, “From even unto even shall ye celebrate your Sabbath.” Interestingly, Joseph Bates, present at the meeting where the vision occurred, “succeeded in satisfying all present [including Ellen White] that “even” was six o’clock. Far from resolving the issue through her own biblical analysis, Ellen White, as she seems to have consistently done, deferred to the conclusion of the biblical theologians in whom she maintained confidence. James affirmed that Ellen’s vision in the aftermath of the Andrews study in 1855, which argued that the “sunset time was correct,” brought unity to that conclusion and even convinced Bates. 20

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Joseph Bates had introduced the seventh-day Sabbath message to believers in Jackson, Michigan, in 1849, but the church soon disunited and James and Ellen White felt constrained to visit it to offer counsel. Their doing so provides a telling example of the tenet of Christian character as a central test of church fellowship and of the practical ministry of Ellen White. She had seen in vision that certain of the ministers who served as itinerant evangelists in that area “lorded it over God’s heritage,” through their severe requirements demanding sacrifice of property by the believers. I saw an oppressive spirit exercised by some of the brethren toward others. Bro [J. A.] Bowles has partaken largely of this oppressive exalted spirit. So, also, had Brn [H. S.] Case and [C. P.] Russell, drinked deeply of it. Some others have been affected with it. The little leaven has almost leavened the whole lump, and in order for sweet union and harmony to be in the church this unholy leaven must be entirely purged from it. She also saw that other ministers within the church should have perceived this negative influence and “stood in a place to correct these errors, and exerted a good influence in the church.” “Those [chosen] to be teachers,” she advised, “should be patterns of piety, meekness and great humility, possessing a loving, kind spirit winning souls to Jesus, and the truth of the Bible.” Instead, the Jackson church had become a hugely negative influence within the community. 21 This pioneer Midwestern church had splintered over an incident involving the wife of Dan Palmer, one of the earliest believers in Jackson. On one occasion Mrs. Palmer had placed her washing on the clothes line; when it had almost dried, her upstairs neighbor, a non-Adventist, had thrown water over the ledge, which splattered in the mud and dirtied the clothes. The daughter of minister Case, in reporting the incident to her father, heard Palmer call the woman a “bitch.” Palmer denied using that word. Case and his ministering partner, Russell, demanded strong church discipline for Mrs. Palmer. It was within that setting that Ellen White experienced visions emphasizing Mrs. Palmer’s error in losing self-control—but subsequently revealed that Mrs. Palmer had not used the word of which she was accused, but rather one that sounded like it. Mrs. Palmer then confessed her error and admitted that she had used the word “witch.” As a

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result of the controversy, Case and Russell, who had initially acknowledged White’s visions to be from God, bolted from sabbatarian Adventism and formed the first splinter group to spring from the community. Reflecting on this experience, Ellen White explained her role within the sabbatarian community as it had developed in the Jackson incident. Late in June 1853 she informed the Jackson church that God had pled “with you face to face” through the “weak clay” of her ministry. She urged the believers there to “acknowledge the teaching of God” through her. They should not ignore “the means God had taken” to set them in the right. 22 Perhaps the most dramatic example of a practical application springing from Ellen White’s early theological world is evidenced in her assessment through vision of the family and person of Elon Everts, Seventh-day Adventist minister, writer, and originator of the term “investigative judgment.” Following their abandonment of the shut-door theological system, Seventh-day Adventists had embarked on a major evangelistic thrust centering on spreading the Third Angel’s Message to midwestern America. In the mid-1850s the Review office had moved to Battle Creek, Michigan, prompting a number of ministers, including Everts, to transfer to the Midwest, where they intended to engage in evangelism. As early as 1855 Ellen White had been “shown the danger of those brethren who moved from the East to the West of becoming worldly minded, and warnings were given me for them.” The ministers making the move should be supreme exemplars of sabbatarian Adventism in their daily living; “They must live out their faith, and show that they regard the present truth above everything else.” Ellen White exhibited an understanding of her role when she wrote the following: “If those moving from the East to the West had regarded these warnings, and had stood in the counsel of God, he would have wrought through them to the salvation of many souls.” Unfortunately, a number who made the move became bogged down in non-evangelistic matters and “their works have shown that their object in settling West was for gain, and not to save souls. The special frown of God has rested upon those who have taken this course, especially upon some the Lord had called into the gospel field.” 23 Ellen White specifically applied this view to the Everts family, which included Elon, his wife, and their daughter. In 1856 White reported that God had intervened and “removed” Everts’ wife through death: “Three times she was reproved by vision, and the third time I was shown if she did not stand out of her husband’s way, that he might be free to teach perishing souls the truth, God would move her out of the way. It is even so; she sickened and died.

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Second Coming

in 1856 ellen White delivered what came to be known as her “Food for Worms” sermon. Speaking to sabbatarian Adventists at a conference in Battle Creek, Michigan, she electrified them with a prediction: “I was shown the company present at the Conference. Said the angel: ‘Some food for worms, some subjects of the seven last plagues, some will be alive and remain upon the earth to be translated at the coming of Jesus.’” 1 As the Adventist prophet, who kept company with angels by way of visions and quoted them verbatim, White preached in the sobering language of immediacy, for each of her listeners now lived in the “last generation” of earth’s history. But with just sixty-seven believers in her audience, she also spoke with a compelling sense of intimacy. This was God’s “remnant people.” And for them, the end of the world would be an altogether personal matter. In the “last hour” of earth’s history, these sixty-seven Adventists would each represent roughly a minute on the ticking end-time clock, with perhaps only a few minutes to spare. Every death among them and every life transformed by the crucible of tribulation would push the hands on the clock a minute closer to Christ’s coming. White’s Battle Creek sermon therefore allowed these Adventists to cast their eyes from pew to pew that day and take heart at seeing teenagers and even infant children in the meetinghouse. There was, thankfully, still time remaining. There had to be time before some of them were “food for worms,” and, judging by the inattentive children among them, some time to prepare for their translation, too. But how much time? To the children

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her sermon no doubt seemed to last forever. In contrast, the aging saints could wonder how many more sermons had life allotted them. If they needed time to prepare for death or deliverance, they could nonetheless be encouraged that the “last generation” was also the “last generation.” The prophet who preached the sermon was herself still frail enough to be of concern regarding her own longevity. But two of her children, James Edson and Willie, were turning just seven and two that year, and John Harvey Kellogg fidgeted in his seat as a four-year-old. Even if a generation equaled a nineteenth-century lifespan, however, none of them could be sure when his or her life would end. Sister Clarissa Bonfoey said she felt fine that day but was nevertheless deeply impressed that she would become “food for worms” before Christ’s coming. And within three days she was gone. 2 The End of Her Millerism The twenty-eight-year-old prophet who delivered the “Food for Worms” sermon was more than a decade removed from the teenage girl who, through Millerism, had converted to a soon-coming Jesus. Though she remained the spiritual child of Father Miller, in many respects she had also grown up and left home. Like many Adventists at that Battle Creek conference, White had once been a Millerite who measured the end time in a few short years, then months, and finally a single, fateful day, as depicted in William Matthew Prior’s Millerite prophetic chart (Figure 10.1). But it was two months after the Great Disappointment of October 22, 1844, that she had received her first vision. Its contents made clear that Ellen Harmon had been called as a prophet less to proclaim Christ’s imminent coming than to explain His delay. 3 Her publication of the vision, more than a year after receiving it, was exit literature from Millerism. In the dark, troubled waters that engulfed the grief-stricken Adventists after the bitterest of disappointments (they had “wept and wept until the day dawned” on October 23), Harmon’s vision provided a life raft to rescue them from the sensational highs and the incredible lows of their turbulent Millerite experience. But immediately following the Millerite debacle, her apocalyptic timetable still remained short enough that she could be almost persuaded by specific predictions of the end, for example on the first anniversary of the Great Disappointment (1845) and on the seventh (1851). In this period, she still

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felt certain that there would be no time to marry, to bear children, to pursue a career, to seek converts around the world, much less to enjoy a long and prosperous life. She saw such plans as a denial of her faith in an imminent end to the world. 4 By 1856, however, much had changed for the prophet and her people. In the ten years since her marriage to James White she had co-founded with him and their mentor, a former New England sea captain named Joseph Bates, a flourishing new movement whose nearly 2,000 members exceeded all her earlier expectations. Drawing on the pamphlets of Bates, Adventism’s “first theologian,” Ellen White had fostered the transformation of a single-minded, short-term apocalyptic revival into a complex, durable church that measured time not in days but in a generation that would, she came to believe, see death before seeing heaven. 5 White’s interpretations of the “third angel’s message” in Revelation 14:9–11 not only distanced her from other churches but from William Miller himself, for the third angel called for true Christians to observe the seventh day, not the first, as the Sabbath. The “beast” was Roman Catholicism; the “image of the beast,” the fraudulent Sunday worship introduced by the papacy. Bates had convinced the newly wedded James and Ellen White of the correctness of seventh-day Sabbath observance, and Ellen had confirmed the all-important biblical view of Bates in vision. She saw into “the most holy place” of the heavenly sanctuary, where the original Ten Commandments lay carved in stone within the Holy Ark. The fourth commandment—hallowing the seventh-day Sabbath—occupied a vaunted place within the Decalogue. Indeed, the visionary saw “a brighter light shining upon it than upon the other nine, and a halo of glory all around it.” For White, seventh-day sabbatarianism had become the ultimate shibboleth. Only through keeping the true Sabbath could the faithful reach heaven. 6 Not only her belief in sabbatarianism on earth but also her understanding of the sanctuary in heaven distinguished Ellen White from William Miller. Miller had seen the biblical sanctuary of the ancient Hebrews as a symbol of the earth about to be cleansed by Christ’s Second Coming. Following the Great Disappointment, however, White radically revised Miller’s view of the biblical sanctuary. Drawing on a Millerite lecturer and editor, O.R.L. Crozier, by way of Bates and a Methodist-turned-Adventist, Hiram Edson, White came to account for Christ’s delayed Advent by locating the biblical sanctuary in heaven, not on earth as Miller had done. By way of the sanctuary doctrine, the prophet “spiritualized” the Second

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Coming; and, more important, she reinterpreted it as a non-falsifiable event. In 1844, Christ had not gone from heaven to earth to cleanse it cataclysmically of all sin and establish forever the kingdom of God. Instead, He had stayed in the sanctuary in heaven—an archetype of the sanctuary of the Jewish people—and had then as “our High Priest” moved from the “holy” to the “most holy place.” If the history of the world amounted to a single Jewish year, 1844 marked the beginning of the Jewish “Day of Atonement.” Humanity had entered, in effect, the highest and holiest of days on a figurative Jewish calendar: Yom Kippur. 7 For several years the visionary viewed humankind as largely a lost cause post-1844, as most would be judged and found wanting. Only those who had been Millerite Adventists, and who remained faithful despite the disappointments of 1844, had a chance to be saved. But theirs was only a slim chance, as slim as the ascending path in her first vision. God had shown her what her fellow Adventists had seen for themselves by December of 1844. Many had “rashly denied the light,” Harmon complained. For some once-ardent Adventists, who trekked upward toward heaven, “the light behind them went out, leaving their feet in perfect darkness, and they stumbled and lost sight of the mark and of Jesus, and fell off the path down into the dark and wicked world below.” Those Adventists who kept the faith, however, had to traverse the upward path warily, for this was a solemn, morally demanding time. They must keep their robes “spotless.” During their “Day of Atonement”—which, in time, would seem less like a day than an era—they must prepare for the end, for the Lord would cease his duties as High Priest and then return to the earth as Judge and Redeemer. The prophet warned Adventists of just how high the moral bar had been set. In Oswego, New York, in 1850, she “saw that many do not realize what they must be in order to live in the sight of the Lord without a high priest in the sanctuary through the time of trouble.” 8 The prophetic timetable that ended for Miller “about 1843” stretched into the future for White and her sabbatarian Adventist following. With the Second Coming an intangible, spiritual reality for them, their small company of stalwart fellow believers pressed on in their Adventist belief. They remained believers in the Advent because they experienced the outpouring of the Spirit—the numerous visionaries and healers, tongues-speakers, and exorcists—and these visible expressions of the Spirit demonstrated to them that their belief had not been “a cunningly devised fable.” 9 But the passage of time had allowed the movement to outgrow such youthful enthusiasms, which Miller’s colleague Joshua V. Himes had dubbed

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“visionary nonsense” and White herself came to denounce as “fanaticism.” The Adventist prophet instead encouraged a more stable “Gospel order” and eventually shunned any outbreaks of enthusiasm in her community as a Satan-provoked counterfeit of her prophetic ministry. The Holy Spirit would be channeled through White as the single prophetic figure. Indeed, by 1846, only her prophetic gift provided an unprecedented and compelling evidence of God’s Spirit in the Advent movement. Only she personified the “Spirit of prophecy.” 10 In passing from instability to order, sabbatarian Adventists and their prophet mirrored the shift from a transitory pre-Victorian ferment to a more stable, durable Victorian culture. Such a pervasive religious and social transformation provided time for the prophet’s immediate family to grow and for her church to expand as well. Though at first Harmon had shut the door to salvation on all but the post-disappointment Adventists, by the early 1850s she saw that door was now open to a wider world of potential converts. 11 There was now time for White to immerse herself in travel, writing, and publishing. There was time for her and her husband to relocate the movement’s headquarters from New England to western New York and then to Michigan. And in a generation, there was time for accomplishments that not even the prophet could have earlier imagined. The extension of time allowed Adventists to launch a publishing enterprise, organize a church, create an impressive network of sanitariums and hospitals, and establish a huge system of elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities (see Chapter 7). There was also time for them to make their mark in this world. No wonder American religious historians Winthrop Hudson and Edwin Gaustad could agree that while “Seventh-day Adventists were expecting a kingdom of God from the heavens,” as Hudson put it, “they worked diligently for one on earth.” Their prophet allowed Adventists time to experience a kind of “realized eschatology.” 12 The hyphenated name adopted in 1860—Seventh-day Adventism— reflected the variegated identity by which the movement abandoned its millenarian enthusiasm for a new kind of community. Ellen White’s Adventism acknowledged on a daily basis the absence of Christ. A coming Lord was not yet here but delayed. Her seventh-day sabbatarianism established a new rule, a new morality by which her community experienced, on a weekly basis, Christ’s presence among them. On every seventh-day of the week White called on Adventists in their meetinghouses to remember earth’s creation and long for earth’s re-creation in the palpable presence

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of Christ. The ache of Christ’s absence was relieved weekly when the sabbatarian church itself served as a sacrament of His presence. The Second Coming had eluded expectant Adventists, but the seventh-day Sabbath had not. 13 Touring the eastern United States with her husband in 1857, the year after her “Food for Worms” sermon, the prophet preached Sabbath-keeping Adventism, not Millerism. “I saw that this message would not accomplish its work in a few short months,” she told a new generation of Adventists. “It is designed to arouse the people of God, to discover them their backsliding, to lead them to zealous repentance, that they may be favored in the presence of Jesus, and be filled with the loud cry of the third angel [that is, proper Sabbath observance].” She added, “If the message had been of as short duration as many of us supposed, there would have been no time for them to develop character.” In these demanding cadences, the prophet had moved from apocalyptic pronouncement to prophetic jeremiad. In identifying her church as Laodicea, she had shifted her focus from an immediate eschatological deliverance into another world in favor of the indefinite timetable and the manifold expectations of a spiritual life in this world. Taking this for the moment as the extent of her eschatology, White had here abandoned the apocalyptic telescope, trained on cosmic events in politics, society, religion, and astronomy, which had captivated Millerites. Instead, she now placed her people under a spiritual microscope and looked to their moral development as the means to the Second Coming. 14 The End of Her World Nothing more clearly indicates how immersed Ellen White had become in her own world than an examination of how she expected it to end. For this it is necessary to turn from the spiritual interiors of her eschatology as a jeremiad addressed to her people and focus on the exterior world that she saw coming to an eschatological end. William Miller had dramatized the historicist interpretation of Daniel and Revelation by deciphering its prophecies as an actual historical timeline ending in 1844. Late in the “70 weeks” and the “2,300 days” of Daniel’s prophecies, events such as the Lisbon earthquake (1755), the “wounding” of the papacy (1798), New England’s “dark day” (1780), the “star showers” (1833), and the “fall” of the Ottoman Empire (1841) all served as signs of his times that the world was about to end. 15 For White, these signs were still recent and vivid enough

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to remain valid and potent as signs of her times. But she fully understood the first rule of prophetic interpretation that an apocalyptic perspective must continually regenerate itself. The end of the world could not be near unless Daniel and Revelation proved especially applicable to her own times. However idiosyncratic her slant on the world and how it would end, it is fully apparent when reading her that she wrote in the context of her own world, not Miller’s. Catholic immigrants flooded into the United States. Protestants capitulated to Catholics in regard to papal Sunday worship, with the ominous threat of a national “blue law” that could persecute a sabbatarian Adventist minority. Spiritualism became a popular influence on liberal religion. The labor-capitalist conflict subsequently erupted in a series of social “earthquakes.” Intemperance became a cancer that metastasized in American society. All this marked for the prophet a decline in America’s republican and Protestant values that spelled doom for her world. 16 White stubbornly stuck to Miller’s historicist approach to the end-time prophecies even as she emphatically abandoned his ill-conceived time setting. And her adherence to historicism ensured that her Seventh-day Adventist followers would remain in an American backwater of prophetic interpretation for generations to come, while the British-based John Nelson Darby popularized dispensationalism as a total departure from the discredited historicist approach. The Darby view, which came to define American evangelicalism, divided history into long, chronologically successive periods or dispensations in which God related to humanity in different ways according to different biblical covenants. Unlike the historicist White, Darby promoted a futurist biblical hermeneutic that bracketed contemporary history as mostly irrelevant to prophetic fulfillments. White and Darby, therefore, saw the world through the same lens of biblical apocalyptic but in notably contrasting ways. The Anglo-Irish Darby assigned no prophetic significance to American history, but the American White believed that she was witnessing the American story uncannily play itself out in Bible prophecy. Moreover, modern Jews were fundamentally important to Darby’s eschatology as the latter-day Israel would occupy Palestine and provoke the final events of earth’s history. White, in contrast, identified the Seventh-day Adventists themselves as the latter-day, spiritual “Israel” that would prove integral to the last-day scenario. 17 White in effect embraced the sacrosanct doctrine of sola scriptura, but she arrived at her own unique interpretations of the Bible, especially the books of Daniel and Revelation. To use James West Davidson’s analogy, the

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images in these books served as Rorschach inkblots that, when scrutinized by an apocalypticist such as White, revealed less about the Scriptures than the interpreter herself. Because the apocalyptic Scriptures by themselves were opaque, they invited a prophet’s imagination to interpret them. For example, White based her prophetic scheme on two miniscule but critical proof texts in Numbers 14:34 and Ezekiel 4:6—upholding a “day” in prophecy as a “year.” White’s contributions to apocalyptic interpretation, however, proved useless as biblical exegesis for anyone outside the tight circle of her faith community. Indeed, biblical exegetes have found her less interesting than cultural historians have. Even Adventists, who looked to her writings for their understanding of end-time events, did not follow the Bible as much as they adopted what she saw in the Bible. 18 Reading Ellen White’s writings on Daniel or Revelation caused the scales to fall from Seventh-day Adventist eyes. Her visions of the end did not so much provide Adventists with a crystal ball that revealed events in the distant future as they gave a new understanding of the past, present, and the immediate future. White’s self-proclaimed predictions of the future were, in fact, more like projections on a screen that only enlarged and dramatized the scenes of her contemporary world. For White, America would reprise Europe’s dark past. A once promising nation would assume the “power to wage war against God’s holy people,” because for her, America was the “second beast” in Revelation 13:11–17, “coming out of the earth.” Its origins in the “earth” meant America had materialized in an unpopulated area (Native Americans did not count here) rather than the “sea” of densely populated Europe. America had “two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon.” The two horns represented America’s high-minded claims of Protestantism and republicanism. Its dragon speech meant that it recanted those principles for Catholic totalitarianism and intolerance. Catholics, Protestants, and Spiritualists (the “unclean spirits like three frogs”) would join in a conspiratorial triad that would carry out a medieval inquisition in modern America. It would do so by first denying commerce to seventh-day Sabbath-keepers. They could not “buy or sell” unless they had the “mark of the beast” tattooed on their “foreheads” or “right hands,” as would all Sunday keepers. Ultimately, an American-triggered Apocalypse would spread to a worldwide pogrom, as capital punishment would be imposed on Seventh-day Adventists everywhere. 19 White believed that the American “two-horned beast” exposed its true colors as a dragonic nation during the Civil War. America’s organized

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churches, both Catholic and Protestant, had fallen. American slavery, and the complicity of the American churches in slavery, had made obvious a decaying nation and, ultimately, a dying world (see also Chapter 14). In a chapter on “The Sins of Babylon” in Spiritual Gifts (1858) White could have been channeling William Lloyd Garrison or Harriet Beecher Stowe in writing: All heaven beholds with indignation human beings, the workmanship of God, reduced by their fellow men to the lowest depths of degradation and placed on a level with brute creation. Professed followers of that dear Saviour whose compassion was ever moved at the sight of human woe, heartily engage in this enormous and grievous sin, and deal in slaves and souls of men. God will restrain His angels but little longer. His wrath burns against this nation and especially the religious bodies that have themselves engaged in it.... The cries of the oppressed have reached unto heaven, and angels stand amazed at the untold, agonizing sufferings which man, formed in the image of his Maker, causes his fellow man. Said the angel, “The names of the oppressors are written in blood, crossed with stripes, and flooded with agonizing, burning tears of suffering. God’s anger will not cease until He has caused this land of light to drink the dregs of the cup of His fury, until He has rewarded unto Babylon double.” 20 White’s political jeremiad on the state of the Union blended apocalypticism with Radical Republicanism. Like Abraham Lincoln, she saw Union setbacks at the First Battle of Bull Run and elsewhere as divine judgments. Unlike the Lincoln prior to emancipation, however, she felt sure of the reason. “God is punishing this nation,” she declared in a testimony to the church in 1862, “for the high crime of slavery. He has the destiny of the nation in His hands. He will punish the South for the sin of slavery, and the North for so long suffering its overreaching and overbearing influence.” 21 By the 1880s, however, America’s political and social landscape had fundamentally changed, and a remarkably malleable prophet had adapted her eschatological message accordingly. Radical Republicanism had receded into an unhappy memory, and the prophet had mostly forgotten her dire predictions that the American Civil War had lit the fuse of a world-sized Armageddon. The Republican Party had realigned itself around new issues

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that included contemporary attitudes on Rum and Romanism. In the new context, White shifted her focus from the American slaves that she had once believed would be in shackles at Christ’s return to the American Adventists who would suffer an even worse fate at the hands of a failed Republic. Again she saw the end in terms of a delayed end. Though still not enamored of the social and political order, White nevertheless envisioned a less imminent collapse of the Republic. If in the 1860s her eschatology had reflected President Lincoln’s world, in the 1880s she resonated with Protestant clergyman Josiah Strong’s more parochial American nationalism. In so many respects, she hoped to save Strong’s America, at least for a short time. Here she departed from her earlier, fatalistic interpretation of the two-horned beast in Revelation 13 and wrote that America still brandished the lamblike horns of civil and religious tolerance and only eventually would become a dragon. For the eyes that could see what she had been shown, however, a dark cloud of conspiratorial forces gathered, threatening to smother the republic. 22 White saw the American “crisis” along the lines that Strong did in his widely read Our Country, but she rejected his optimism in the face of it. She also translated his supremacist evangelicalism into her own sectarian dialect. For White, the variegated elements of contemporary religion, politics, and society had polarized, as in any Apocalypse, but her world had divided seventh-day sabbatarians from Sunday-keepers as well as the temperate from the intemperate, labor from management, and country-dwellers from urbanites. Her Seventh-day Adventists were either caught in the middle of or forced to take sides in this “great controversy” between good and evil, but finally they would be victimized by it. Catholic, Protestant, and occult Spiritualist—virtually everyone in White’s purview—would form a malevolent alliance against the Adventist “Remnant,” as Sunday-keepers would oppose seventh-day sabbatarians in a spirit of religious intolerance. In the long counter tradition of the “suffering church,” White expected the abuse of an Adventist minority—not a slave minority—to prove the undoing of American republicanism. Eschatologically, the oppression of an American minority remained central, but the particular minority proved transferable. 23 “When Protestantism shall stretch her hand across the gulf to grasp the hand of the Roman power,” White wrote in a testimony given in 1885, “when she shall reach over the abyss to clasp hands with spiritualism, when, under the influence of this threefold union.

. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 188). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

Science and Medicine

For a nineteenth-century woman with little formal education, Ellen White took a surprisingly active interest in science and medicine. She wrote frequently on physiology and hygiene and occasionally on astronomy, biology, and geology. She expressed strong feelings about “the sciences of phrenology, psychology, and mesmerism,” denouncing them as theories of Satanic origin. As we shall see, her greatest influence on popular science and medicine lay in the fields of health reform and creationism. Along with many other Christians Ellen White frequently adopted the metaphor of nature as a book. “Since the book of nature and the book of revelation bear the impress of the same master mind, they cannot but speak in harmony,” she explained in a typical passage. By different methods, and in different languages, they witness to the same great truths. Science is ever discovering new wonders; but she brings from her research nothing that, rightly understood, conflicts with divine revelation. The book of nature and the written word shed light upon each other. They make us acquainted with God by teaching us something of the laws through which He works. Since God had written both books, she never doubted that “True science and Bible religion are in perfect harmony.” However, because conflict could arise when interpreters of nature or the Bible misread their sources, she repeatedly warned against “science falsely so called” (1 Timothy 6:20), characteristic of what she thought was taught in non-Adventist schools. To avoid exposing Adventist young people to “infidel” science, in 1874

. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 196). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

she supported the founding of a denominational institution, Battle Creek College, which she hoped would show “the harmony of science and Bible religion.” 1 Despite her professed love of “true science,” White consistently subordinated science to her religious community’s interpretation of Scripture. “The Bible is not to be tested by men’s ideas of science,” she explained, “but science is to be brought to the test of the unerring standard.” She warned fellow believers “to guard continually against the sophistry in regard to geology and other branches of science falsely so called, which have not one semblance of truth. The theories of great men need to be carefully sifted of the slightest trace of infidel suggestions. One tiny seed sown by teachers in our schools, if received by the students, will raise a harvest of unbelief.” 2 Ellen White attributed most of her scientific and medical knowledge to divinely inspired “visions” rather than to reading or research. Her earliest vision relating to science came about the time of her nineteenth birthday, when she was “wrapt in a vision of GOD’s glory, and for the first time had a view of other planets.” As her new husband, James White, proudly reported, “She was guided to the planets, Jupiter, Saturn, and I think one more. After she came out of vision, she could give a clear description of their Moons, etc. It is well known, that she knew nothing of astronomy, and could not answer one question in relation to the planets, before she had this vision.” Apparently she received this revelation primarily for the benefit of another former Millerite, Joseph Bates, who harbored doubts about the validity of her visions. “A great lover of astronomy,” he was so impressed by her detailed knowledge of the heavens—especially the number of moons circling Jupiter, Saturn, and Uranus and her description of the “opening heavens” in the constellation Orion—that he concluded her vision was “of the LORD” and joined her band of believers. 3 A couple of years later, using wings provided by the Lord, she flew in vision with her unnamed angel attendant from one heavenly abode to another, occasionally stopping to chat with the local inhabitants. Coming at a time of great speculation about the possibility of life on other worlds, this vision, as one historian has noted, “provided her church with what few congregations can claim: a theology incorporating extraterrestrial beings.” Again she saw “the open space in Orion, from whence came the voice of God”—and through which, she predicted, the Holy City (New Jerusalem) would eventually come. 4

. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 197). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

In the early 1830s the Presbyterian evangelist and temperance lecturer Sylvester Graham (best remembered for his namesake crackers) began warning Americans of the dire consequences of flesh foods, drugs, corsets, stimulants, and frequent sex. In 1837 he united with other health reformers to form the American Physiological Society. This organization taught “that the millennium. . . can never reasonably be expected to arrive, until those laws which God has implanted in the physical nature of man are, equally with his moral laws, universally known and obeyed.” This postmillennial expression was virtually identical to the premillennial message of the Millerite preacher-physician Larkin B. Coles. Taking as his theme the proposition that “it is as truly a sin against Heaven, to violate a law of life, as to break one of the ten commandments,” he developed the traditional arguments of the health reformers for fresh air and exercise, a vegetarian diet, the nonuse of stimulants, reform in dress, sexual purity, and drugless medicine. 5 As a self-described “great sufferer from disease” and “lifelong invalid,” Ellen White took more than a passing interest in health-related matters. From time to time throughout her life she complained of weakness and fainting, episodes of unconsciousness, breathing difficulties, “heart disease,” pain in her lungs, “pressure of blood on the brain,” intense headaches and “inflammation on the brain,” dropsy, weak back, lameness, “tenderness of the stomach,” nosebleeds, pleurisy, and rheumatism. On occasion she experienced dimmed eyesight, paralysis, lack of sensation, and muteness—to say nothing of repeated visions and hallucinations. She frequently suffered from depression and despondency. 6 She dated her discovery of the health-reform movement to a vision in June 1863, during which God showed the thirty-five-year-old prophetess the evils of medicinal drugs, alcohol, tobacco, tea, coffee, meat, spices, fashionable dress, and sex and the benefits of a twice-a-day vegetarian diet, internal and external use of water, fresh air, exercise, and a generally abstemious life style. However, she had known about health reform for some time and had recently used the water cure recommended by some of its leaders to save the lives of two of her sons from diphtheria. Even before his marriage to Ellen, James had abandoned alcohol, tobacco, tea, and coffee; and their close associate Joseph Bates, who enjoyed excellent health, had embraced Grahamism in the 1830s. From time to time the Advent Review and Sabbath Herald had published advice on healthful living, and

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Ellen herself had experienced at least two previous visions touching on health. The first came in the fall of 1848. According to James’s testimony years later, she was then shown that tobacco, tea, and coffee should be put away by those looking for the Second Coming of Christ. In a private letter to a brother struggling with the tobacco habit Ellen mentioned that her “accompanying angel” had told her in the vision that the weed was not fit even for medicinal purposes. In 1854 she received a second health-related vision, reminiscent of Graham’s teaching, in which she saw that Sabbath-keepers were making “a god of their bellies,” that instead of eating so many rich dishes they should take “more coarse food with little grease.” The next year witnessed a spurt of anti-tobacco articles in the Review and Herald. The early 1860s also saw a dramatic increase in such articles, as well as in articles about health generally. 7 In the wake of her 1863 vision Ellen White first turned her attention to the subject of sex. In addition to what she had seen, she had a deeply personal reason for doing so. Her eldest son, Edson, had turned thirteen in 1863 and had begun to display some disturbing behaviors: a lack of interest in religion, a “passion” for reading story books, a fondness for girls, and irresponsibility—all characteristics that she, along with other health reformers, associated with self-abuse or masturbation. By 1864 Ellen White had acquired at least two recently published books on sex— Russell T. Trall’s Pathology of the Reproductive Organs, Embracing All Forms of Sexual Disorders (1862), and James Caleb Jackson’s The Sexual Organism, and Its Healthful Management (1862)—and was penning her first work on health, a plain-looking pamphlet similar in content and appearance to Solitary Vice: An Address to Parents (1839), printed in White’s hometown of Portland and attributed to Mary Gove (Nichols). White entitled her work An Appeal to Mothers: The Great Cause of the Physical, Mental, and Moral Ruin of Many of the Children of Our Time (1864). 8 Writing for an Adventist audience expecting the imminent end of the world, White warned that “solitary vice” would ruin life and health on Earth and preclude a future existence in Heaven. She told of how her angel guide had exposed her to the horrors of human depravity. “Everywhere I looked,” she recalled as though describing a real event, “I saw imbecility, dwarfed forms, crippled limbs, misshapen heads, and deformity of every description”—all the result of the practice of solitary vice, so widespread that “a large share of the youth now living are worthless.” Even adults had fallen victim to this satanic lure. At one point in her vision she recognized an acquaintance, “a mere wreck of humanity,” who had been brought near

. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 199). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

death by this demonic habit. To drive her message home, White noted that continued masturbation would produce not only hereditary insanity and deformities but a host of diseases, including “affection of the liver and lungs, neuralgia, rheumatism, affection of the spine, diseased kidneys, and cancerous humors.” Not infrequently, it led its victims “into an early grave.” 9 White believed that special care should be taken to protect the young from the contaminating influence of other children. As an adult she had come to view her crippling childhood accident, which had left her an invalid for years, as a blessing in disguise that had preserved her innocence. Self-conscious about her intimate knowledge of masturbation, she insisted (as had Mary Gove before her) that she had grown up in “blissful ignorance of the secret vices of the young” and had learned about them only after marriage, from “the private death-bed confessions of some females.” To maintain the purity of her own offspring, she never permitted them to associate with “rough, rude boys” or to sleep in the same bed or room with others of their age. 10 She expressed particular concern about two neighbor boys, Samuel and Charles Daigneau, who, she saw in vision, had “gone to great lengths in this crime of self-abuse”—so great that Charles was losing his intellect and eyesight. (Somehow he survived to age 71 without going blind or insane. Samuel went on to serve two terms in the Michigan state senate and died at age 82 after enjoying a life of “remarkably good health.”) 11 Although White, unlike other health reformers, grounded her sexual advice on revelation, not reason, in her writings on sex she invoked both religious and scientific sanctions. She not only attributed her insights and advice to special revelation but sprinkled her text with Devil-talk, religious admonitions, and biblical citations. The editor of Appeal to Mothers (undoubtedly her husband) appended a 29-page essay on “Chastity,” which cited persons “of high standing and authority in the medical world” who agreed with her: Graham, Gove, Jackson, Coles, the phrenologist O. S. Fowler, and Samuel B. Woodward, superintendent of the Worcester State Lunatic Hospital. So closely did the views of these individuals parallel those of Ellen White, the publisher (that is, James White) felt compelled to add a note denying that she had read their works before writing out what she had seen in vision. Taking her word at face value, he asserted that “she had read nothing from the authors here quoted, and had read no other works on this subject, previous to putting into our hands what she has written. She is not, therefore, a copyist, although she has stated

. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 200). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

important truths to which men who are entitled to our highest confidence, have borne testimony.” 12 Nearly five months after the appearance of Appeal to Mothers, Ellen White published a brief account of her 1863 vision, a 32-page sketch tucked into the fourth volume of Spiritual Gifts. In an essay entitled “Health,” influenced heavily by Coles, she recited the established principles of health reform, attributing them to her recent vision. Willful violations of the laws of health—particularly “intemperance in eating and drinking, and the indulgence of base passions”—caused the greatest human degeneracy. Tobacco, tea, and coffee depraved the appetite, prostrated the system, and blunted the spiritual sensibilities. Meat-eating led to untold diseases; pork alone produced “scrofula [a form of tuberculosis], leprosy and cancerous humors.” Living in low-lying areas exposed one to fever-producing “poisonous miasma.” Following Coles virtually word for word, she declared: “It is as truly a sin to violate the laws of our being as it is to break the ten commandments.” 13 Because of the glaring similarities between her health advice and that of other reformers, some who heard or read early accounts of her vision suspected that she had borrowed from her predecessors. Her stock reply, however, was that she had not and would not read the writings of others until she had fully written out her views, “lest it should be said that I had received my light upon the subject of health from physicians, and not from the Lord.” But the embarrassing questions persisted until finally she issued a formal statement in the Review and Herald disclaiming any familiarity with health-reform publications prior to receiving and writing out her vision. “My views,” she insisted, “were written independent of books or of the opinion of others.” 14 On October 2, 1868, over five years after her first view of the world’s corrupt state, Ellen White received a second major vision on sex, which left her confidence in humanity “terribly shaken.” As the sordid lives of “God’s professed people” passed before her, she became “sick and disgusted with the rotten-heartedness” of her fledgling church. Protected by the cloak of divine revelation, she voyeuristically reported seeing reputable Adventist brethren leaving the “most solemn, impressive discourses upon the judgment” and returning to their rooms to engage “in their favorite, bewitching, sin, polluting their own bodies.” Adventist children, she learned, were “as corrupt as hell itself.” Speaking to the Battle Creek Seventh-day Adventist church in March 1869, she insisted that “Right here in this church, corruption is teeming on every hand.”

. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 201). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

Privately, she estimated “that there is not one girl out of one hundred who is pure minded, and there is not one boy out of one hundred whose morals are untainted.” Given the odds of any petitioner being a health-sapping masturbator, she decided to refuse future requests for prayers of healing. 15 For years Ellen White had held physicians in low esteem. As early as 1849 she had counseled her followers not to seek medical assistance: If any among us are sick, let us not dishonor God by applying to earthly physicians, but apply to the God of Israel. If we follow his directions (James 5:14,15) the sick will be healed. God’s promise cannot fail. Have faith in God, and trust wholly in him.... Relying on prayer instead of physicians became common practice among sabbatarian Adventists in the early 1850s. Many times during her early public career White herself was blessed with the power to heal. But when the death of an Adventist sister in New York in the early 1850s was charged to the young prophetess, White had a vision condemning the Adventists who had attended the dying woman for carrying “matters to extremes” and for engaging in fanatical behavior by not calling in a doctor. In 1860 she denied having ever opposed the use of physicians, advising that “in some cases the counsel of an earthly physician is very necessary.” 16 In addition to the multitudes who were abusing themselves, there were many others, she soon learned, who were abusing their spouses. In How to Live (1865), a set of bound pamphlets reporting various health-related aspects of her 1863 vision along with excerpts from the writings of like-minded reformers, she had urged couples to “consider carefully the result of every privilege the marriage relation grants,” but until her 1868 vision she had focused on self-abusers, not spouse-abusers. After 1868, however, she warned that even married persons were accountable to God “for the expenditure of vital energy, which weakens their hold on life and enervates the entire system.” In phrenological language (discussed below) she counseled Christian wives not to “gratify the animal propensities” of their husbands, but to seek instead to divert their minds “from the gratification of lustful passions to high and spiritual themes by dwelling upon interesting spiritual subjects.” Husbands who desired “excessive” sex she regarded as “worse than brutes” and “demons in human form.” In 1870 her husband brought out an expanded version of Appeal to Mothers, covering

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not only self- but spousal-abuse and published under the revealing title A Solemn Appeal Relative to Solitary Vice, and the Abuses and Excesses of the Marriage Relation. 17 Central to White’s understanding of sexual physiology was the then-common notion of “vital force,” the mysterious energy that maintained human life. As she saw it, God had endowed each person, according to sex, with “a certain amount of vital force”; when this was expended, death ensued. Since each sexual act used up an irreplenishable amount, it behooved those who coveted a long life to keep their sexual activities to a minimum. “The practice of secret habits,” she wrote, “surely destroys the vital forces of the system,” producing “diseases of various kinds,” such as tuberculosis, and leading to premature death. 18 Following the spate of sex-oriented testimonies in 1869 and 1870, some of which she published with the guilty identified by name, Ellen White wrote little on the subject for the rest of her life. One of the primary reasons she ceased to write about sex was that her protégé John Harvey Kellogg replaced her visionary mantle with his own cloak of scientific authority, beginning in 1877 with his Plain Facts about Sexual Life (1877), which in later editions became a turn-of-the-century bestseller. She remained generally antipathetic toward sex, though she always stopped short of advocating celibacy. As far as we can determine, she never wrote a positive word about sex. In her waning years she looked forward expectantly to an idyllic existence in the New Earth free from such unpleasant activities. When some members inquired in 1904 if there would be any children born in the next life, she replied sharply that Satan had inspired the question. It was he, she said, who was leading “the imagination of Jehovah’s watchmen to dwell upon the possibilities of association, in the world to come, with women whom they love, and of their raising families.” As for herself, she needed no such prospects. 19 From 1863 until her death in 1915 Ellen White, with varying degrees of success and zeal, proclaimed the gospel of personal health reform (while largely ignoring the public-health reforms of the day). Although she at first reported great progress in changing the eating habits of Adventists, there soon appeared signs of “a universal backsliding on health reform.” Fish and flesh reappeared on believers’ tables, and even among ministers vegetarianism became the exception rather than the rule. By the mid-1870s White herself was indulging her appetite for flesh foods, to the chagrin of the few who remained true to her health-reform message. It was not until the 1890s that she finally gained a permanent victory over meat and began

. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 203). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

leading her church back into the vegetarian fold. 20 (As Laura Vance shows in Chapter 15, dress reform proved equally frustrating for White.) During her seminal 1863 vision White learned that she was to direct the world “to God’s great medicine, water.” Since the 1840s, water enthusiasts, called hydropaths, had been curing the sick with an arsenal of baths, packs, and douches; and water-cure establishments had sprung up across the nation. In 1864 and again in 1865 Ellen and James White visited one of the most successful of these operations, in Dansville, New York, and returned home determined to start an Adventist water cure in Battle Creek (see Chapter 7). The Western Health Reform Institute experienced a rocky first decade. Then young Dr. John Harvey Kellogg took over and turned the ailing institute into a world-famous sanitarium (Figure 11.1). In his spare time he invented flaked cereals and other health foods, from which his brother W. K. made a fortune. (Dr. Kellogg had initially offered the rights to his wheat flakes to the Adventist church, accurately predicting that the organization could “make enough money out of it to support the entire denominational work,” but White ignored his offer, and a decade later she vetoed a chance to obtain the rights to the even more successful corn flakes.) 21

. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 204). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

In the years after 1863 Ellen White wrote hundreds of pages on health-related subjects. As medical science changed, so too did her vocabulary. In her early writings, for example, she related how God had shown her that flesh-meats filled the blood “with cancerous and scrofulous humors.” Within a few decades, however, scientists such as Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch convinced the world of the existence of “germs,” and White revised her terminology accordingly. Thus in her most mature work on health, The Ministry of Healing (1905), she discarded humors for the more scientifically up-to-date “tuberculous and cancerous germs.” Until his expulsion from the church in 1907 Kellogg made a point of supplying the prophetess with the latest data from his laboratories and apprising her of developments in medicine and nutrition. When visiting Battle Creek, she stopped by Kellogg’s office to learn of any new scientific discoveries relating to health. At other times, she relied on his multitudinous publications or corresponded with him by mail. Whether because of his influence or not, she did late in life recommend blood transfusions, undergo an extensive series of x-ray treatments for a dark spot on her forehead, and receive a vaccination against smallpox. 22 Following her return from Australia in 1900 she vigorously encouraged the opening of a medical school and sanitariums in southern California (see Chapter 7). Mind, Body, and Soul In the November 1871 issue of The Health Reformer, Ellen White wrote that “Mental and moral power is dependent on the physical health.” Decades later she asserted, even more explicitly, that “The brain is the organ and instrument of the mind, and controls the whole body. In order for the other parts of the system to be healthy, the brain must be healthy. And in order for the brain to be healthy, the blood must be pure. If by correct habits of eating and drinking the blood is kept pure, the brain will be properly nourished.” 23 In seeking how she came to these conclusions and why she believed that the brain—the locus of the mind—was the sacred place for authenticating the authority of her prophetic (sacred) words, we need to go back to her experience with Millerism in the 1840s, when she suffered a crisis of faith in God because of her inability to reconcile a loving God with an eternally burning hell for the damned. Fearful for her own salvation, she became so disturbed that she later commented that “many inmates of insane asylums were brought there by experiences similar to my own.” 24

. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 205). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

Consoled by her mother’s belief that the dead remain unconscious and heartened by a Christian Connexion preacher’s sermons that argued the same, Ellen rejected her earlier belief in an immaterial and immortal soul housed in a body and instead came to believe that human identity comprises only the body and its faculties (attributes and powers). This conviction eventually led White to a new understanding of the human self with a highly relational definition of the mind and body. 25 She concluded that the minds of humans are continuously open to influences from the mind of God and the mind of Satan. The extent to which an individual human’s will submits to the voice of God or Satan determines that person’s mortal and eternal destinies. The relationship of humans with the natural and the supernatural, however, was not an either/or relationship, but rather a continuous, dynamic encounter among all three natures—God’s, Satan’s, and the person’s—in a lifetime process of struggle to choose good over evil. During her ministry White taught that it was a person’s responsibility continuously to place his or her will on the side of Christ. When you yield your will to his, he immediately takes possession of you, and works in you to will and to do of his good pleasure. Your nature is brought under the control of his Spirit. Even your thoughts are subject to him. If you cannot control your impulses, your emotions, as you may desire, you can control the will, and thus an entire change will be wrought in your life. When you yield up your will to Christ, your life is hid with Christ in God. It is allied to the power which is above all principalities and powers. You have a strength from God that holds you fast to his strength; and a new life, even the life of faith, is possible to you. 26

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Society

a visit By “men of intemperance” in 1859 to the Seventh-day Adventist publishing office in Battle Creek, Michigan, marked a transition in Ellen White’s conception of how believers in the near second advent of Christ should interact with the society around them. The visitors commended the sabbatarian Adventists now headquartered in Battle Creek for holding convictions against voting, similar to those of Quakers. The Adventist prophet detected satanic purpose behind the visitors’ “flattering manner.” She approved of a consensus that the movement’s leaders had just reached about using the vote “in favor of right and against wrong” rather than by inaction contributing to the electoral success of “intemperate men.” She relished the hope that Satan would be “disappointed” by the Adventists thus abandoning radical separatism and taking responsibility for their influence in the public arena of “our city.” The course change led, by the 1870s, to benevolent initiatives that included selective yet fervent advocacy in the political arena. Between the Civil War and the Great War, as movements proliferated to rectify injustices created by rapid industrialization, urbanization, and immigration and to address the dilemma of emancipated slaves trapped far short of freedom, Ellen White guided Adventist responses to the nation’s social problems. Her castigation of the manipulative “men of intemperance” as earthly workers for “Satan and his evil angels” in her diary points to the religious narrative that motivated her. A vision experienced at Lovett’s Grove, Ohio, the previous spring had presented to her “the great controversy of the ages between Christ and Satan,” which became the central theme of her

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career. 1 In White’s “great controversy” narrative the American government, employing coercion like all human governments, remained essentially enemy territory. White looked instead to a radical renewal movement within the Christian church—the “remnant church” in Adventist terminology (see Rev. 12:17)—as the decisive human instrument through which God would resolve the controversy. The “great controversy” narrative shaped, though not without tension and ambiguity, her approach to public issues such as temperance and prohibition, woman’s rights, poverty and economic injustice, race relations, and religious liberty. The “great controversy” employs the Whig or republican view of history, centering on the Protestant struggle for liberty from the union of ecclesiastical and royal power that corrupted medieval Catholic Christendom. In Protestant America’s failure to live up to its ideals of religious and civil liberty, Ellen White and the Adventists saw signs of a final collapse of freedom in a soon-coming “time of trouble” immediately prior to the return of Christ and full establishment of God’s government. 2 From the beginning, the theme of freedom drives White’s “great controversy” narrative. Since “the exercise of force is contrary to the principles of God’s government,” God did not snuff out the primeval rebellion—the fountainhead of all the evil, suffering, and death that afflicts humanity. Redemption from Satan’s domain and the full restoration of God’s government on earth likewise must unfold in accordance with the principle of freedom. Because God “takes no pleasure in forced obedience,” he created human beings as “free moral agents ...with full liberty to yield or withhold obedience.” 3 Amidst the controversy, in this view, God’s faithful witnesses struggle against evil by deploying the principles of liberty rather than the coercive power of government. The people of God are most authentic when they are a suffering, dissenting minority, bearing costly, non-coercive witness to truth and righteousness while striving against oppressive powers. This is the human agency for cooperation with divine power through which the “great controversy” finally reaches a happy end. 4 Such witnesses do not invest hope in any human government or political program, however idealistic, but only in the coming reign of Christ. Yet White also recognized a historical pattern in which the prophetic minority exerts a transforming influence in society. In the book Education (1903) she urged that the study of history center on “the great reformatory movements” and how advocates of reform based on divine principles, “though

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often brought to the dungeon and the scaffold, have through these very sacrifices triumphed.” 5 Though submission to God’s government comes only by way of free choice, prescribed order and content–“the law of love”–structures that government. In 1895, White referred to the beneficent tree in the dream of the ancient Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar (see Daniel 4) as a “representation” of “the only kind of ruling acceptable to [God]—a government that protects, restores, relieves, but never savors of oppression.” 6 “The Great Controversy” and the Politics of Temperance Ellen White never made political transformation of American society a central target of her work. Her ministry focused on holistic transformation of individuals in the contexts of family, church, and benevolent agencies connected with the church’s apocalyptic mission. Yet her early formation in New England took place in an antebellum evangelical culture that drew no sharp boundaries between sins involving one or two individuals and evil embedded in the nation’s political and economic system, most notably slavery. 7 In an 1847 account of an early vision depicting dramatic events connected with the second coming of Christ, Ellen White’s narrative moves seamlessly from vindication of the “little flock” persecuted for adherence to the biblical Sabbath (Saturday) to the “jubilee”—the liberation of the slaves—at least the “pious” among them (see Chapter 14). 8 By the 1864 presidential election, many Adventists, in a shift paralleling that of abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison, had come to see the importance of using the ballot to resist slavery. But, as we have seen, temperance had already generated momentum in favor of voting, and after the Civil War it was the issue that drew Ellen White, along with thousands of other American women, most directly into the public arena. Indeed, her involvement closely paralleled the rise of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) as one of the nation’s most powerful reform agencies. 9 White assumed the role of temperance reformer in 1874, the same year the WCTU organized, and the cause remained a primary focus during the remaining four decades of her life. As she mobilized her people at churches and camp meetings and in scores of articles, she repeatedly

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urged them to join forces with the WCTU. She also became a public lecturer, speaking to crowds, sometimes numbering in the thousands, in the United States, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand (see Chapter 6). Her public debut was orchestrated by an interdenominational committee in Battle Creek, where she spoke to an audience of more than five hundred at a rally held in a city park on July 14, 1874. Three years later, collaboration among the WCTU, the Battle Creek Reform Club, and the Adventists’ Battle Creek Sanitarium drew a crowd of five thousand to hear her. 10 Initially emphasizing “gospel temperance” efforts to influence drunkards and liquor sellers to repent and reform, the WCTU soon added legislation to its arsenal, endorsing state prohibition laws in 1876. Ellen White, too, ventured this far into politics. Her temperance articles, which began appearing in 1878, urged that governmental leaders be held accountable not only for their laws and policies but also for their own sobriety of life. In 1881, though, she became more emphatic about the necessity of working for prohibition laws. An incident at the Adventists’ Iowa Conference camp meeting that year reflects the depth of her conviction on this point. After battling to be heard over a heavy thunderstorm during a Sunday afternoon meeting, she retired to her tent for the night. But in response to an urgent summons, she returned to the main tent to head off a move to delete “the ballot box” from a proposed resolution specifying the ways that Adventists should support the temperance cause. She declared that Adventists should vote for prohibition “to a man, everywhere,” adding “perhaps I shall shock some of you if I say, If necessary, vote on the Sabbath day for prohibition if you cannot at any other time.” 11 In the Review and Herald the following November she insisted that helping individuals change would never bring success to the temperance cause as long as the liquor traffic enjoyed the support of law in overwhelming human weakness with the allure of drink. By licensing liquor sales governments “sustain an evil which is sapping their very foundations” and “causing a moral paralysis on society.” Because in America “every voter has some voice” in those laws, she reasoned, all share responsibility for them. Lecturing in California in 1881, she ridiculed state policies that regulated liquor sales while funding “inebriate asylums” to free individuals from addiction. National prohibition, “rigidly enforced from ocean to ocean,” she declared, would be “the grandest inebriate retreat ever erected.” 12 However, like many in the WCTU itself, Ellen White did not share the conviction of Frances Willard, elected the Union’s national president

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in 1879, that women themselves needed the ballot as a means for exerting virtuous influence on society. White did not oppose woman suffrage as an intrinsic evil, but she seemed to regard suffragism as an unnecessary distraction from the benevolent work that she saw as the more urgent task for Adventist women (see Chapter 15). White did not follow Willard in the latter’s “Do Everything” program for extending the WCTU’s political work beyond prohibition to comprehensive social and economic reform. The “great controversy” marks this difference. As a type of premillennialism, White’s theology of history expected destruction of the present sinful world at the return of Christ before the millennium, and an eternity beyond free of evil. Willard’s rhetoric as WCTU president, in contrast, reflected postmillennialism—Christian reforming endeavor would lead to a millennial era in which righteousness holds sway over earthly society, after which Christ would establish His eternal, divine Kingdom. 13 After the Civil War, postmillennialism lost influence as a system for understanding literal fulfillment of end-time prophecy, but it continued, for Protestant social reformers such as Willard, to generate the language of hope for progressive advance toward the perfection of society. Thus, at the 1887 national convention, the WCTU president called on her audience to “recognize Christ as the great world-force for righteousness and purity and enthrone Him king of nations in faith, as he will one day be in fact, through Christian politics and laws, no less than Christian living.” 14 Given the differences between postmillennial reformers and Adventist premillenialists, how could Ellen White urge her people to cooperate with the WCTU on behalf of prohibition laws, which she continued to do during Frances Willard’s leadership? White and the Adventists, like Willard and the WCTU, believed that the church was to carry forward the work of Christ in society, which meant a ministry of healing and restoration for the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed, not just the saving of sinful souls. In White’s view, however, the outcome envisioned was not realization of the kingdom of God through national institutions, but the vindication of the faithful minority (the remnant church) and the establishment of God’s eternal reign (see Chapter 10). Thus, she kept her focus firmly on the mission of the remnant church—its institutions, agencies, and interests took precedence over all else. White’s commentary on the aftermath of the San Francisco earthquake in 1906 illustrates how her premillennialism held out the possibility

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that prohibition could bring about social change that was meaningful but much more limited in scope and duration than that envisioned by Willard’s postmillennialism. With liquor stores and saloons closed for two and a half months after the earthquake, the city had been largely free of violence and crime, despite expectations to the contrary. “Thinking men,” including editors of some of the leading newspapers, thus advocated keeping the saloons closed, but the city government, with an eye on tax revenues, allowed them to re-open, leading to a dramatic upsurge in crime. On the basis of these developments, White summoned her followers to a two-fold task of apocalyptic warning and social action. First, in fulfilling biblical prophecies, “whereby we may know that Jesus will soon appear in the clouds of heaven,” the events in San Francisco added urgency to proclaiming the message of apocalyptic warning. Paradoxically, though, she also pointed to the societal benefits resulting from the prohibition laws passed immediately after the earthquake as rationale for ameliorating the same social evils pointing to Jesus’ soon return. ...How important it is that God’s messengers shall call the attention of statesmen, of editors, of thinking men everywhere, to the deep significance of the drunkenness and the violence now filling the land with desolation and death! As faithful colaborers with God, we must bear a clear, decided testimony on the temperance question. ...O that our cities might reform!.... 15 The signs of Jesus’ imminent return called for a mission both to transform individuals and improve public policy as preparation for the Savior’s eternal reign, but not to bring about the kingdom of God through the reform of human institutions. Social activism could disappoint the devil but only the second coming of Christ could defeat him. Just as mission driven by the “great controversy” involved both intense apocalyptic warning and vigorous social action, it also required Adventists, in White’s view, both to adhere to their own distinctive purpose and to cooperate with interdenominational reform agencies “in benefiting and elevating humanity.” She envisioned Adventists “at the head in the temperance reform,” indeed “in the forefront of every true reform,” but recognized how experienced activists could guide them to that goal. Thus, she recommended inviting WCTU women to Adventist camp meetings to “teach our sisters how to work.” 16

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White’s calls for cooperation with the WCTU became more fervent and frequent after Willard’s death in 1898 and the conversion to Adventism of S.M.I. Henry, a prominent figure in the Union’s national leadership. In a letter to Henry sent from Australia in December, 1898, White noted that she had been saddened that in recent years many in the WCTU were “becoming politicians,” involving themselves in “questions and debates and theories that they have no need to touch.” 17 Remarkably, though, even during the late 1880s, when the WCTU was most vigorous in lobbying for national Sunday rest legislation as a means of protecting the rights and welfare of industrial workers, White continued to advocate Adventist cooperation on matters of agreement. No issue alarmed Adventists as much as Sunday legislation, which they saw as central to the drive for a “Christian America” through political coercion—the trigger for the demise of liberty and the final “time of trouble” before Christ’s return. However, in remarks at the annual meeting of the American Health and Temperance Association held in Oakland in 1887, White urged Adventists not to be put off by the situation but to view it as an opportunity: “You say they are going to carry this [temperance] question right along with the Sunday movement. How are you going to help them on that point? ...How are you going to let your light shine without uniting with them in this temperance question?” 18 Although it was supremely important for White that Adventists keep their allegiances free from other power centers in society, she wanted them to do so without unnecessarily provoking conflict or creating barriers to cooperation. Thus she sought to mute criticism and avoid confrontation as much as possible. After Willard’s death, the appearance of eulogistic poems and stories effusively lauding her virtues in some Adventist publications prompted a lengthy rebuke from White to A.T. Jones, co-editor of the Review and Herald. The prophet was incredulous that Adventists would “extol Frances Willard in so ample a manner,” especially in view of her leadership in the movement to exalt the “false Sabbath” (Sunday) in defiance of God’s law. White herself had never publicly criticized Willard despite points of intense disagreement, and she quickly followed up her missive to Jones with instruction that he not show it to anyone other than co-editor Uriah Smith and Dr. John Harvey Kellogg. She did not want “indiscreet” persons to “blaze this matter abroad” so that she would be seen as denouncing the late, widely beloved leader of benevolent reform. Her concern was the blurred sense of identity and mission reflected in the fawning praise, but she did not want Adventist periodicals to expound on

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the negatives of Willard’s legacy, either. Her approach was to “leave this our sister in the many good and valuable works, with her God.” 19 The WCTU was, by far, the most influential agency for public activism in the American culture that Ellen White encountered in her role of guiding a small, new religious movement through the decades from the Civil War to the turn of the twentieth century. And the temperance issue, according to the noted economist and social gospel advocate Richard Ely, stood at the center of “the deep, wide movement for social reform” that was “spreading out in ever more inclusive circles.” 20 No better gauge of White’s interaction with the public realm could be found, and it shows a pattern of vigorous, whole-hearted involvement, without loss of distinct identity and purpose through absorption into the broader movement. White’s approach included strategic alliances in the service of a distinctive agenda, derived from her understanding of the “great controversy.” She wanted benevolent impact on American society to accompany that mission, but structural transformation of the nation’s political and economic order was not her main target. Healing Social Maladies Though she was willing, even eager, to engage the political process as a component of the church’s broader mission, White emphasized that such involvement must not become partisan. While she lived in Australia during the 1890s, some Adventist ministers and teachers, it seems, used their positions to advocate the Populist proposal for the coinage of silver, touted as a panacea for the economic woes of rural and working classes. Silver became the central issue in the election of 1896, when the Democratic and Populist parties fused to support William Jennings Bryan. 21 White viewed “the changing of the circulating currency” as a plan deriving from the devil rather than God. The danger she saw lay not in the envisioned ideal of economic justice for the poor, but in the fact that its result would be the very opposite of its promise: “a state of things that will bring oppression to the poor, and create great distress.” In this, she may have been influenced by the Republican position. Yet Bryan biographer Michael Kazin writes that the Democratic nominee never overcame the “uncomfortable reality” that the urban working class not only “had nothing concrete to gain from free silver” but would be hurt by the inflation that proponents intended as a benefit to debt-ridden farmers. White declared that the voice of the “only-begotten Son of God” gave direction

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on the matter: “ye will not give your voice or influence to any policy to enrich a few, to bring oppression and suffering to the poorer classes of humanity.” 22 White was adamant that the church and its funds should not be used to underwrite partisan political advocacy. Yet nothing indicates that she changed her 1883 view affirming Battle Creek College students who harbored ambitions to “sit in deliberative and legislative councils, and help to enact laws for the nation.” As individuals, Adventists could succeed in the realm of government without sacrificing principles. By taking “firm hold on divine power,” the prophet exhorted, they would be positioned to “stand in society to mold and fashion, rather than to be fashioned after the world’s model.” 23 Even in her lengthy 1897 warning about the dangers associated with politics, Ellen White reminded readers “not to live reclusive lives” but, like Christ, to meet human needs. The admonition against bringing partisan political strife into the church was not an exemption from the battle against the social sins of economic, racial, and religious oppression. During the Progressive era, when, as White put it, “largehearted men and women” were “anxiously considering the condition of the poor and what means can be found for their relief,” she commended the instructions in the Mosaic law concerning the sabbatical and Jubilee years as the best solution for “the labor question and the relief of the poor.” She issued sharp apocalyptic warnings to violators of those principles and called on Adventists to address the social crisis by proclaiming the final message of warning and extending Christ’s mission of mercy to the poor and oppressed. 24 Sabbatical and jubilee provisions to restore property and to release debtors and slaves constituted God’s safeguard against the evils resulting from “the continued accumulation of wealth by one class, and the poverty and degradation of another.” She even asserted that God designed these regulations “to promote social equality.” Such egalitarianism would not equally distribute resources or obliterate class distinctions, however. Rich and poor would always exist; indeed she believed the different classes needed each other for mutual benefit: the poor making essential contributions to the common good—and uplifting their status—through hard work and the rich developing Christian character by fulfilling their duty to the poor. All, she wrote, are “woven together in “the great web of humanity,” in which “whatever we can do to benefit and uplift others will reflect in blessing upon ourselves.

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Culture

When ellen Gould Harmon entered the world in November 1827, Charles Finney was carrying his fervent evangelistic efforts into the burgeoning cities of the East. Finney’s successful endeavors helped define the Second Great Awakening. Ellen Harmon’s formative years thus coincided with evangelical Christianity’s imprint on American culture. She came of age assuming a religious culture that was socially dominant, indeed still unchallenged by the later appeals of mass culture. When Ellen G. White died in July 1915, the Great War in Europe had been raging nearly a year. The self-assurance of Western Civilization had taken a hit (though the United States was yet to feel the brunt of barbarism’s outbreak). More tellingly, that year witnessed the appearance of the final slim volumes of The Fundamentals. This influential series of popular theology, inaugurated in 1910, announced a new religious impulse: Protestant Fundamentalism. White’s final years saw an American Christianity no longer abuzz with anticipation of success but instead frantic about ways to neutralize the corrosive acids of higher criticism, evolution, and liberal theology in general. A mid-nineteenth-century America idealized by John Greenleaf Whittier verse and Currier & Ives prints had clearly given way to an emerging mass society characterized by O. Henry stories and Art Nouveaux posters. Ellen White’s America was changing almost beyond recognition. The ten decades of White’s life witnessed the evolution of an urban and commercialized culture that increasingly defined America. Americans threw themselves enthusiastically into sports and commercial

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entertainments of many sorts. Christians were not immune to these enticements, as the enthusiastic embrace of sports at Battle Creek College and the Avondale school in Australia testified. White never came to terms with what in her mind was cultural declension. Thus, among the essential functions in her mature ministry was securing her church family against an abundance of secular temptations. In the process she also shaped a set of Adventist attitudes about recreation and culture that endured for decades. White was raised a Methodist. This historical accident had huge implications for the future of Adventism. The distinctives of that religious subculture were, through White, firmly imprinted on emerging Adventism. Methodism sought sanctified perfection for its members. Accomplishing this meant avoiding those popular songs, stories, and most forms of commercial entertainments that could only serve to degrade minds. Fiction of any sort remained suspect through much of the nineteenth century. In 1877 the Methodist Discipline implemented an amusement ban that threatened reproof—or even expulsion—for attending such amusements as the theater. Idealized Methodist culture also stressed the possibilities of every moment. Even times of relaxation, the Methodist Quarterly Review (MQR) advised, should be made “tributary to our mental and moral improvement” (what the Puritans had earlier termed “redeeming the time”). 1 The anxiety-ridden rhetoric of the MQR and of Ellen White could at times be indistinguishable. An “appetite for fiction,” one Methodist writer penned, may become “more and more craving, and finally so morbid that it requires the abominable trash which corrupts and blasts whatever it touches.” Compare this to White’s admonition: “If you have been in the habit of reading storybooks, will you consider whether it is right to spend your time with these books, which merely occupy your time and amuse you, but give you no mental or moral strength? If you are reading them, and find that they create a morbid craving for exciting novels, if they lead you to dislike the Bible, and cast it aside, if they involve you in darkness and backsliding from God,–if this is the influence they have over you, stop right where you are.” 2 The point is not to attribute literary influence but rather to grasp a shared sensibility. White carried into emerging Adventism a thoroughgoing moralism that was shaped by culturally middle-brow Methodism. This can be seen most directly in her subscription to the Ladies’ Repository. This mid-nineteenth-century women’s magazine, founded and edited by Methodist Bishop Leonidas Hamline, sought to provide cues for a life of

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enhanced sophistication while remaining safely within acceptable religious bounds. 3 The Methodist community, older and more established than Adventism, typified American upward mobility and cultural accommodation. The more comfortable among them patronized resorts at Saratoga or Long Branch, and a few even ventured to Europe. This desire for refinement, what one historian has called “consecrated respectability,” was reflected in the pages of the MQR. In the latter half of the nineteenth century arguments in favor of quality literature began to be seen, even attempting, according to literary scholar John O. Waller, “a theoretical groundwork for a Christian esthetic of prose fiction criticism.” 4 But Ellen White and her Adventist community expressed little concern with wedding gentility to piety. Adventists had traveled fewer miles down the path of “Culture.” They remained a largely small-town and agrarian people of modest education. Their cultural suspicions more resembled those of the emerging Pentecostal tradition (though the latter’s adherents were probably even more adamant in their forsaking the world’s cultural allures). Further, White did not bow–nor would she ever–to the strenuous demands made by Victorian arbiters of taste on those who sought an aura of refinement. Dilettantism had no part in a people with eyes set firmly on impending last days. Cultural uplift for its own sake was a hollow distraction. In any event, the limitations of White’s education precluded sophisticated aesthetic taste. She would not read Henry James; she quite possibly never heard of him. 5 Ellen White on the Arts The Advent movement was born amidst the Dionysian impulses of the Burned-over District. Apocalyptic visions, religious frenzies, and subsequent public disrepute characterized the various forms of Ultraism in antebellum America. Such upheaval would seem fertile soil in which art could flourish, giving creative expression of the divine order. For the Shaker and Mormon traditions, this seems to have been true. But for Seventh-day Adventism, one of the most enduring religious movements to emerge from this time, no artistic tradition developed (music partly excepted). How do we explain this? In part, at least, one must look to the influence of the church’s prophet, Ellen White. White held a utilitarian view of the arts. They were to be useful either in cultivating spirituality and moral discernment or in inculcating values

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such as hard work and thriftiness that promoted success. There was no place for mere aestheticism or amusement. She wrote considerably more about literature than about music or the plastic arts. This may be because she was herself a writer. She also had more exposure to writers than to the efforts of painters, sculptors, or musicians. And words conveyed ideas more directly than did the other arts. There seemed more at stake with written works, both for good and ill. “Novel and storybook reading are the greatest evils in which youth can indulge. Novel and love-story readers always fail to make good, practical mothers,” she wrote. “They are dwarfed in intellect, although they may flatter themselves that they are superior in mind and manners.” 6 This statement of White’s (the likes of which could fill many pages) captures her prevailing tone and message regarding literature: a tendency toward absolute– even hyperbolic–statements (“the greatest evils,” “always fail,” “dwarfed in intellect”) and an unremitting stress on moral danger. For reasons discussed below, she returned to fiction’s dangers again and again, particularly in regard to the proper education of children. Perhaps no other of her admonitions became more thoroughly ensconced in Adventism than this one. What were her primary objections? First, fiction makes addictive readers unfit for life, seeking as they do romance and thrill rather than reality and the quiet pleasure of real accomplishment. Second, it carries direct hazards to mental and physical health. “The memory is greatly injured by ill-chosen reading, which has a tendency to unbalance the reasoning powers, and to create nervousness, weariness of the brain, and prostration of the entire system.” (White held a view of the mind that posited a finite amount of memory capacity; too much knowledge of any sort will fill it up. For her, “Much less information with a mind well disciplined, would be of far greater value.”) Third, even useful moral lessons from literature, such as might be afforded by classical writers, require too much dredging through “superstition, specious reasoning, and error.” “Why should we wade through the mass of error contained in the works of pagans and infidels, for the sake of obtaining the benefit of a few intellectual truths, when all truth is at our command” (in Scripture)? And, finally, the artificial excitement of romance causes the Bible to pale. “My dear young friends ...do you not find the Book of God uninteresting? The charm of that love story is upon the mind, destroying its healthy tone, and making it impossible for you to fix the attention upon the important, solemn truths that concern your eternal welfare.” 7

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Twenty-first-century readers who find these comments extreme should recall the cultural backdrop against which they were penned. America was experiencing a revolution in publishing. The end of the nineteenth century witnessed the new power of the steam press and the creation of a national reading market that elicited an outpouring of popular fiction. Dime novels were the best known products of the day: westerns, romances, and adventures that were printed and purchased in the hundreds of thousands. Weekly and monthly fiction magazines further fed the hungry maw of an enlarged urban populace. In fairness, some well-known works appeared alongside the ephemera, including such religious best-sellers as Lew Wallace’s Ben Hur and Henryk Sienkewicz’s Quo Vadis. But, on balance, one must judge the outpouring of fiction as a gush of formulaic pap, the nineteenth-century predecessor to the inanities of multi-channel cable TV programming of the next century. 8 Thus, when White wrote that much of her day’s reading “like the frogs of Egypt, are overspreading the land,” and are “not merely commonplace, idle, and enervating, but unclean and degrading,” she was exaggerating only in the last two adjectives. Nor was she alone in her condemnation. Christian moralists widely shared her opinion. Few expressed the outrage more colorfully than T. DeWitt Talmage, popular pastor of a Brooklyn church and a leading Christian controversialist. “The longest rail train that ever ran over the Erie or Hudson tracks,” he wrote in 1888, “was not long enough nor large enough to carry the beastliness and the putrefaction which have been gathered up in bad books and newspapers of the land in the last twenty years.” 9 But if White’s writings could not match the rhetorical flourishes of Talmage, she was perhaps even more categorical in her judgments. Talmage, like most educated Christian writers of his age, respected the potential of great writing. “There are novels that are pure, good, Christian, elevating to the heart,” he admitted. No such concession came from White, whose resistance to the genre was unremitting, a salient so critical to the Advent war against the diversions of modern culture that it could not be surrendered. 10 Even so, White’s practice was more complex than her statements would suggest. Beginning in the 1850s she began compiling large scrapbooks of stories, brief homilies, and interesting scraps of information about science, health, and history from religious periodicals. These were originally for her children’s edification. But in the mid-1870s she and husband, James, saw wider possibilities for them. They soon produced a series of

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twenty small volumes, each just sixteen pages between colored paper covers. These were advertised by the church’s press at two cents each for children ages five to twelve. The stories blended moralism with exhortations to work and thriftiness, typifying the moral economy of Victorian youth literature. But this was only the beginning. A more ambitious four-volume series, Sabbath Readings for the Home Circle, followed over the next few years. These were substantial volumes, each around four hundred pages, the early volumes for youth, the last one appealing to more adult tastes. Care was taken to avoid “anything of a sectarian or denominational character” so that a broad Christian market might be reached (the project was undertaken partly to boost the newly established Pacific Press). 11 By testimony of her husband, Ellen White made all the selections. And significantly, all the stories appear to be fictional. Not that White ever used the “f” word; she preferred the more neutral “story.” But there is little question that despite White’s many animadversions against fiction, she had no scruples about recommending a certain type as an appropriate Sabbath-afternoon activity. To the Whites, these homely tales (which “will inculcate principles of obedience to parents, kindness and affection to brothers and sisters and youthful associates, benevolence to the poor, and the requirements of the gospel”) had nothing in common with fiction as they knew it. Although she never made the analogy explicit, White probably viewed the stories much like biblical parables, containing truths that transcended facticity. What the Adventist public believed about the stories cannot be known. Readers likely assumed that if their prophet was involved, factual authenticity was assured. 12 White had rather less to say about music and the visual arts. Her comments on music were generally more nuanced and positive than those about literature. White understood music to be part of the core of worship. “Music was made to serve a holy purpose, to lift the thoughts to that which is pure, noble, and elevating,” she rhapsodized, “and to awaken in the soul devotion and gratitude to God.” She found scriptural warrant for her opinion, citing the Israelites’ experience as they prepared to enter Canaan, singing “the songs that had cheered the wilderness wandering.” In an extra-scriptural insight, she even described the joyful singing of young Jesus. While acknowledging that good music could be “a blessing,” she worried that Satan often made it one of his “most attractive agencies to ensnare souls,” thus turning it into “a terrible curse.” 13 Adventists, firmly in the Protestant tradition, were from their beginning people of the word. Representations of divinity seemed uncomfortably

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close to violation of the Second Commandment; religious art of any sort smacked of Catholicism. When evangelical Protestant churches began seeking through the various arts a common religious culture for America, Adventists resisted, seeing in this another example of mainstream apostasy. During White’s travels about Europe in 1885, she took the opportunity to visit both Versailles and some cathedrals. The magnificence of the Milan Cathedral especially impressed her. “I never saw such a gorgeous combination of colors,” she marveled. But it was, finally, a monument to idolatry. Nonetheless, Adventist church leaders early discovered the power of iconography, most clearly, of course, in prophetic charts. Acceptable art taught religious truth. 14 Something of a turning point in the Adventist embrace of art came in the early 1870s when medical pioneer Merritt G. Kellogg brought to James White’s attention an allegorical illustration called The Way of Life. The busy composition presented the story of man’s fall and redemption. “Read” from left to right, it showed Adam and Eve being driven from the Garden with the coming of sin, the ceremonial sacrifices of the Old Testament, Jesus and the disciples, the Cross, and future glory. It conveyed the “Great Controversy” in a nutshell. James White saw an opportunity. Currier & Ives lithographs, which became in these decades the very definition of middle-class domestic art, included some prints with religious themes. Should not Adventism find its own visual voice for church members’ homes and for evangelistic use? Thus began an interesting publication history. First appearing in 1874, The Way of Life: From Paradise Lost to Paradise Restored went through several renderings, which tell of both a new awareness of art’s legitimacy and of important theological development in Adventism. The original sketch put the Ten Commandments front and center, dwarfing the Cross, reflecting Adventism’s early stress on the persistence of God’s law (Figure 13.1). But in the early 1880s James reconsidered the emphasis. He traveled to New York City in 1881 to commission Thomas Moran, one of America’s leading artists (best known for his heroic landscape canvases) to redesign the illustration. James died before the project could be concluded, but Ellen saw it to completion. Now titled Christ the Way of Life, Moran’s rendition has Christ on the Cross dwarfing all other details (Figure 13.2). Ellen White’s new theological emphasis on Christ’s work and God’s love for mankind found pictorial statement well before her major work on the life of Jesus, Desire of Ages (1898), appeared in print. Thousands of copies of the various versions were engraved. 15

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Historian David Morgan sees The Way of Life series as bespeaking an important moment in Adventist artistic as well as theological sensibilities. James White, cash-strapped as always, was willing to pay $1,100 to Moran to obtain the engraved plate. In the “Key,” which accompanied the purchased illustration, James White wrote, “when Art is employed in the fulfillment of her Heaven-born mission,” it is “of heavenly origin” and becomes “a benefactor of mankind.” A “tidal change” in Adventist use of art was under way, Morgan notes. Ellen White and her church were having to come to terms with the fact that America was becoming a “visually rich print culture.” Adventism began adapting its methods to appeal to “the theatrical illusionism so much a part of twentieth-century popular culture.” In the 1890s illustrated editions of White’s books began to appear, though she remained conflicted about this development. On the one hand, she objected to any poor-quality art, thinking it demeaned her message; on the other hand, she fretted that illustrations were driving up the price of her books, making them less accessible to some. In one extreme example, an 1899 morocco leather-bound edition of The Great Controversy was issued for $7.00 (about $194.00 in 2013 dollars). 16 Ellen White on Recreation As with the arts, recreation had the potential for good or ill. Ellen White herself was not one for vigorous outdoor recreation; nor did she attend concerts (save the occasional religious performance at a school), the theater, sporting events, or other commercial amusements of the day, which she avoided on principle. For relaxation, she sought periodic rest in country retreats, enjoyed outdoor walks and an afternoon in a comfortable chair in the sunshine. One might even say she partook of early American tourism through her many cross-country train journeys and travels to Europe and Australia. But her priorities were always clear: life was serious, the end of time was near, and recreation was purely instrumental. White held firmly to the medieval origin of the word. “Recreation” was to refresh or cure. “When true to its name, re-creation, tends to strengthen and build up,” she noted. To this end she exhorted members of her Adventist community to provide their children with “innocent recreation, to lead them in pleasant paths where there is no danger.” Family outings were essential. “Parents should become children with their children. ...Let the whole day be given to recreation.” The criterion for proper amusements, then, was the degree to which they restored the Christian to full powers for the urgent work at hand. 17

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In her predisposition toward rural, outdoor recreation, Ellen White shared a Jeffersonian impulse that powerfully affected American culture. The inexorable urban and industrial landscape toward which America marched was matched by a nostalgic longing for earlier, simpler times. “In this age life has become artificial, and men have degenerated,” White concluded, a judgment that the sage of Monticello himself might have penned had he survived another 70 years. White imagined instead an ideal that reached back to biblical times. “In early ages, with the people who were under God’s direction, life was simple. They lived close to the heart of nature. Their children shared in the labor of the parents and studied the beauties and mysteries of nature’s treasure house.” It was God’s “design that we shall be happy in the charms of nature.” 18 Anything else, mere “amusements,” was a diversion–or worse. The worse included virtually all forms of theatricals. For her, theaters ranked “among the most dangerous resorts for pleasure.” Rather than being a school for morality, White saw the theater as “the very hotbed of immorality. Vicious habits and sinful propensities are strengthened and confirmed by these entertainments. Low songs, lewd gestures, expressions, and attitudes deprave the imagination and debase the morals. Every youth who habitually attends such exhibitions will be corrupted in principle.” The theater in Shakespeare’s metaphorical sense as a stage for the enactment of the cosmic drama, however, appealed to White. “The world is a theater,” she wrote; “the actors, its inhabitants, are preparing to act their part in the last great drama.” But commercial entertainments of most kinds–circuses, billiards, dance halls, saloons, the usual suspects of the religious community–were not to be considered. So far as we know, White never witnessed a commercial theatrical, which may have contributed to her hyperbole. But her stridency also came from living the final decades of her life during a time of explosive growth in American theatricals, including vaudeville, the legitimate stage as well as the new motion pictures. These cultural threats to religious values were clear. 19 A sense of apocalyptic urgency could not well coexist with the multiplying amusements tempting Adventist youth. Ellen White’s reputation within Adventism as an opponent of sports and games is well earned. Her counsel was pointed, and it was repeated across the decades in many compilations. One should “shun the false and artificial, discarding horse racing, card playing, lotteries, prize fights, liquor drinking, and tobacco using.” Chess and checkers also came in for disapproving comment: “Heaven condemns them.” 20

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Participatory sports, though, would seem to be in a different category, combining exercise and the outdoors. Why did they likewise earn White’s disapprobation? Because of the overwhelming threat she perceived in them. Context is everything here. The late nineteenth century witnessed the greatest profusion of organized spectator sports since the days of Rome. As Americans left the farms for the cities their need for periodic release from the confinements of city life found various outlets. Professional baseball and college football were the most prominent of the many sports Americans watched and played. The twenty-first-century American baseball fan, used to gleaming ball parks and middle-class family attendance, would have difficulty imagining the male-dominated, hard-drinking, profane atmosphere of nineteenth-century venues. And today’s college football players, though faster, larger, and capable of even harder hits, enjoy protective equipment that their counterparts of a century past never knew. There were a handful of deaths each year in college football, a mayhem so scandalous that President Theodore Roosevelt threatened to ban the game. Ellen White perceived Satan’s hand in all this: “He has invented sports and games, into which men enter with such intensity that one would suppose a crown of life was to reward the winner.” 21 The passion for sport infected the fledgling Adventist colleges. The boys of Battle Creek College organized a school football team in 1893 and began playing other Michigan college teams. A rah-rah spirit pervaded the campus. When word of this reached Ellen White in Australia, she sent a message to college leaders: Students “act as if the school were a place where they were to perfect themselves in sports, as if this was an important branch of their education....This is wrong from beginning to end.” Throughout the decade other Adventist colleges confronted student bodies clamoring for organized sports. From Union College in Nebraska came complaints about the nonsensical cheers set up by spectators. The Keene Institute (Texas) broom-shop manager fretted to her that football and baseball were luring away his workers. Where were the watchmen, White sadly asked in response, when these “unseemly games and athletic sports” were occurring? 22 But athletic trouble was also brewing right in White’s backyard of Australia (where she spent most of the 1890s). Students at young Avondale College shared the proverbial national passion for sports. A Founder’s Day afternoon picnic included organized games of cricket and tennis. White, who had just that morning delivered an address to students and faculty about their high calling, was severely dismayed. School leaders were

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rebuked for encouraging a “species of idolatry,” where the forces of the enemy gained a decided victory, and God was dishonored. In this case, school leaders became defensive, feeling that White had overreacted to innocent games. But in the end they submitted to the “voice of prophecy” among them. 23 What would she have them do for fun? Students needed breaks from their studies, she conceded. “I do not condemn the simple exercise of playing ball,” she wrote. But she would have preferred youth to find their need for physical exertion in a manual-labor program. Let “useful employment take the place of selfish pleasure.” 24 Indeed, she carried a larger concern that games were going to interfere with the structured manual labor that she deemed an important part of education. White may have been guilty of confusing the impulse to play, so strong in the young, with the sheer physicality of hard work. She had put tremendous effort into the creation of Avondale as a model Adventist school. To see its young charges so soon capering about the playing fields was akin to Moses’s finding his people dancing before a golden calf the moment he descended from the mount. Casting a Long Shadow What difference did Ellen White’s writings on culture make to the Adventist community then or now? One cannot quantify such influence, but historical testimony and personal observation based on involvement in the community suggest it was considerable. This should not be surprising. Her admonitions about the arts and recreation were aimed at a fellowship that already shared her inclinations. New members largely came from other Christian traditions with similar strictures, and much of rural or small-town America, the source of most Adventists then, was outside the orbit of intensive commercial entertainments (one recalls the whiff of scandal that a threatened pool hall brought to Meredith Willson’s imaginary River City). 25 In short, White reinforced cultural standards, which, while weakening and often honored in the breach, nonetheless continued to enjoy resonance in the memory of many Americans. Certainly other emerging American religious traditions, such as the Holiness and Pentecostal churches, would find much in common. But what differentiated Adventism under White’s influence from its nearest religious kin, the Methodists, was the former’s lack of structured debate over cultural matters. White was, after all, a prophet, and in matters

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of behavior her words carried unique sanction. By contrast, the Methodist sub-culture was becoming more socially assimilated. Its church leaders, unrestrained by an oracular presence, carried on lively debates over church standards. For several decades general conference sessions occasioned discussion of how specific the Discipline should be regarding unacceptable behavior. The 1872 Discipline for the first time enumerated a list of activities the devout should avoid: “dancing, playing at games of chance, attending theaters, horse races, circuses, dancing parties, or patronizing dancing schools, or taking such other amusements as are obviously of misleading or questionable moral tendency.” But even from the beginning there were some in church leadership who felt this behavioral labeling was wrong-headed, undermining the sort of moral reasoning a mature Christian should nurture. It was “a grave blunder of ecclesiastical legislation,” one Methodist divine wrote. Yet the moralist party successfully warded off change in the Discipline. “If the theater is an evil institution,” wrote Henry Brown, “if it is degrading in its influence, hurtful to society, and an enemy to the Church of Christ” (“gilded nastiness” in the creative phrase of another churchman), why should prohibitions against it not continue? Not until 1924, during that secular, culturally rebellious decade, would the amusement ban be lifted, a concession no doubt to the changing practice of too many members. 26 To say that no respected voice within Adventism demurred from Ellen White’s counsel on arts or recreation is not to say that behavior always followed. Collegiate youth loved their sports; other Adventists no doubt read novels, attended plays, or found the popular syncopated rhythms of ragtime enticing. But to enjoy the forbidden fruit of modern literature in the quiet of one’s home was one thing, to indulge in the very public act of theater or cabaret attendance quite another. Adventism was marked for much of its history by a high degree of adherence to those recreational behavioral norms defined by Ellen White. The enforcement of such norms proceeded through the informal but powerful system of peer influence, beginning with the socialization that took place in the expanding elementary, secondary, and collegiate school system. The very insistence with which Review and Herald editors approached the subject of amusements suggests that temptations persisted. Pastor William P. Pearce wrote two lengthy diatribes in 1902 against card playing and theater. Both were heavily adorned with quotations by notables of the Western tradition, from Plato to John Milton to Joseph Addison, against the reckless misspending of time.

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War, Slavery, and Race

Both ellen harMon White’s critics and her followers have distorted her statements about the American Civil War and its aftermath, including the issues of race and reunion that remained significant at her death in 1915. Too often her comments, assumptions, and expectations have been wrested from any appropriate historical context and conscripted into the service of such polemical purposes as proving either that she was a “false prophet” or a truly inspired one. But a twenty-first-century historian might profitably begin the study of a nineteenth-century visionary by noticing where the official apologists and the angry heretics agree. They all assume, for example, that slavery and the Civil War were centrally important topics to Ellen White, as intrinsically important to her as to later observers. They agree that her credibility would be damaged if she could be shown to be a “racist” by today’s standards. They are also sure that her role as a prophet and sectarian leader was built on prediction of the future, or, at least, unique insight into the events around her. 1 If she was really a prophet, by their assumptions, she should be expected to anticipate the course of events. What she actually said about the American crisis presents a challenge to both her enemies and her defenders. Her strictly predictive writings turn out to be remarkably secondary to another objective—namely, instructing Adventist believers in their duty. Her commentary on the Civil War and slavery is, in fact, surprisingly spotty. She had nothing to say about the Fugitive Slave Law until nearly a decade after its enactment, when the law was already a dead letter in key areas of the North. Her private

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correspondence yields not a single reference to the name of Lincoln, a leader about whom the historian expects her to have definite and quotable opinions. After a flurry of comments about slavery and disunion between 1858 and 1863, she drops the subject, giving no evaluation of the Emancipation Proclamation, the employment of black troops, or the decisive victories of Grant and Sherman. 2 She does not return to the Civil War issues until the 1890s, when Adventist efforts to evangelize black southerners encountered ferocious opposition, compelling a mostly northern church to consider (belatedly) the troubling matter of ecclesiastical segregation. Once again, she offers little in the way of prediction. If we put aside our ideas about what Mrs. White “should have said,” and try to understand her world view on its own terms, perhaps we will be less surprised. We will find, I believe, a woman who was first and last a preacher of the second coming of Christ, an apocalyptic prophet who interpreted everything around her as a “sign of the times.” She approached the War of the Rebellion and related matters not as an historical analyst or a political activist, but as an evangelist preaching the end of her world. Slavery, race, secession, and the war were important topics, to be sure, but subjects to be taken up or discarded as they helped to explain biblical prophecy and God’s requirements for his faithful “remnant people.” Her ideas about war, American nationality, “the Afro-American character and destiny” (to borrow George M. Fredrickson’s phrase) were all shaped by the more fundamental matter of the mission of Seventh-day Adventism. 3 Civil War Ellen White’s historical context is not easily recovered. Indeed, only a painstaking exercise of historical imagination can re-create her world, the Adventist world of the Civil War era. When Confederate artillery opened fire on Fort Sumter and its tiny Federal garrison in April 1861, there were few believers in “present truth”—no more than 4,000 Seventh-day Adventists in the entire world, almost all of them residing in the northern part of the United States. This group was not yet organized into a national denomination. The very name “Seventh-day Adventist” was new, the brethren having agreed upon it only eight months earlier. These scattered believers were evolving into fully recognizable Seventh-day Adventists, but in crucial respects they were different from the species as it exists today. They were remarkably united, however, on

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their view of America, a nation they saw as rapidly declining from its original greatness, undone by the sin of slavery. As preacher J. H. Waggoner said, the nation’s “democratic professions” were inconsistent with its “slaveocratic practices.” Although the Adventists opposed slavery, at the same time they were certain that slavery would never be abolished, since, by their reading, the book of Revelation taught that slavery would exist at the time of the Second Coming. Uriah Smith, editor of the Review and Herald, took the unusual step of reprinting Lincoln’s “House Divided” speech in 1858, but rejected Lincoln’s views as hopelessly unrealistic: “He who looks for good, or hopes for reform in the legislative or executive departments of this government, is doomed, we think, to utter and hopeless disappointment.” Ellen White’s husband, James, accurately summarized the Adventist position in 1862: “For the past ten years the Review has taught that the United States of America were [sic] a subject of prophecy, and that slavery is pointed out in the prophetic word as the darkest and most damning sin upon this nation.” 4 Once the fighting began, Adventists expected the worst, believing that the conflict in the United States could well be the herald of earth’s final crisis. “What then will be the end of these things?” asked Uriah Smith early in 1862, as the Army of the Potomac prepared for its spring offensive. “One of the two things must follow: either a continuation of our national difficulties, or a peace upon dishonorable and disgraceful terms.” In his thinking, a clear victory for the Union was simply not a possibility. 5 A few months later, as Northern armies were finally advancing on Richmond, J. H. Waggoner was equally glum. “As a question of rights,” he wrote, the slaves were entitled both to freedom and an education that would “restore the capability” to properly use their rights. “In my opinion, education and gradual emancipation would be the best for all parties. But who has any hope for such a thing?” 6 “The hope which animates others,” wrote James White, “that the war will soon terminate with the freedom of the millions of ‘bond-men and bond-women’ of North America, and that a period of peace of millennial glory is to follow, we do not cherish.” He proceeded to explain the Adventist understanding of Revelation, especially chapter six in which the prophet describes kings, mighty men, chief captains, bond-men and free men, all calling for the rocks and mountains to fall on them in the day of the Lord’s wrath. “We think we see, though the prophetic word,” explained White, “the continuation of slavery down to the end of all earthly governments.” As White demonstrated that biblical prophecy predicted the

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continuation of slavery, his timing was unfortunate: President Lincoln had already decided to issue an emancipation proclamation. Indeed, a confidential draft of this document lay in the President’s desk, awaiting a Union victory to be activated. 7 Despite their condemnation of slavery, Adventists did not reject America. Even as they despaired of the future of the United States’ experiment in democracy, they did not embrace an ideology that saw the nation as flawed from the start or inherently oppressive. Even in the darkest days of the Civil War, they believed that America had “the best government under heaven,” and that, “with the exception of those enactments pressed upon it by the slave power, its laws are good.” Like Lincoln, they saw the United States as the last, best hope of earth; unlike him, they were certain that the last hope was failing, that the nation was degenerate, rapidly departing from “the wisdom and virtue of its founders.” 8 Although they lamented the failure of the federal government to move immediately against slavery, Adventists’ sympathies were, “as far as they are enlisted,.. .on the side of the government.” The South’s campaign for independence was simply a rebellion, “one of the most causeless and wicked that ever was incited,” comparable to the “hellish rebellion” of Satan and his angels. With slight hyperbole James White declared: “We know of not one man among Seventh-day Adventists who has the least sympathy for secession.” 9 Such was the consensus among Adventists. There is no evidence that Ellen G. White deviated from this consensus. Indeed her visions and prophetic utterances served to confirm the judgments of her fellow believers about the providential significance of the Civil War. She placed a divine imprimatur on their insights that slavery was wrong, that the war was about slavery, and that the North’s early missteps were based on a failure to act on these truths. Neither she, nor any other Seventh-day Adventist, expected the war to end in a “new birth of freedom” or a period of national prosperity, peace, and expansion. Slavery Like many other opponents of slavery, Ellen White focused her comments more on the sins of the slaveholders than on the aspirations of the enslaved. At times she so emphasized the damaging impact of slavery on black people that she risked dehumanizing them. As early as 1858, she

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blamed the owners of slaves for treating human beings as brutes, and creating circumstances in which slaves could not justly be held accountable for their moral choices. “I saw that the slave-master would have to answer for the soul of his slave whom he had kept in ignorance,” she wrote, adding that the slave who was too ignorant of the Bible to be saved, would be “as though he had not been.” But apparently not all slaves were so benighted. At the same time, she predicted that the “last call” would reach some slaves. 10 In 1859, she urged Adventists to disobey the Fugitive Slave Law and “abide the consequences for violating this law.” (Unlike Henry David Thoreau, however, she had no expectation that disobedience would bring about significant reform.) “The slave is not the property of any man,” she declared. “God is his rightful master.” 11 Even before the opening guns of the war, in January 1861, she warned the Parkville, Michigan, congregation that the nation would endure a terrible war. She had seen in vision, she said, the marshaling of huge armies, followed by ferocious combat and families in “distress and anguish.” 12 After the defeat at the first battle of Bull Run, she said: “God is punishing this nation for the high crime of slavery. He has the destiny of the nation in his hands. He will punish the South for the sin of slavery, and the North for so long suffering its overreaching and overbearing influence.” Although some devout Christians explained the Union defeat as God’s punishment for the North’s initiating combat on Sunday, Ellen White insisted that the Northern armies had failed at Bull Run because God “would suffer no victories to be gained faster than He ordained.” Indeed, if the Union forces had not panicked as the direct result of divine intervention, the defeat would have been worse. 13 In a “testimony” published in pamphlet form in 1862, Mrs. White offered wide-ranging comments on the war, attributing most of her insights to specific visions. 14 “I was shown,” “I saw,” “This scene was presented before me,” “I had a view,” and similar expressions are sprinkled throughout her testimony. She asserted that the “accursed system of slavery,” and it alone, lay “at the foundation of the war.” Even if the North now succeeded in quelling the rebellion, she warned, it had not dealt with the central issue. “The system of slavery, which has ruined our nation, is left to live and stir up another rebellion.” “It seems impossible to have the war conducted successfully,” she wrote, because so many Union leaders were proslavery. Accepting the assumptions (if not the prescriptions) of the Radical faction within the

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Republican party, her comments on current events had a distinctly partisan flavor. Those who, like the war Democrats, wanted to preserve the Union but “despised” abolitionists, she described as “rebels at heart.” Perhaps thinking of General George McClellan’s scrupulous respect for the rights of slave masters, she strongly condemned those who denied freedom to runaway slaves or even “sent them back to their cruel masters.” No doubt her fellow Adventists recognized her references, direct and indirect, to recent events. She eloquently rejected, for example, the Lincoln administration’s call for a day of fasting and prayer on Thanksgiving, 1861, as “an insult to Jehovah.” Without naming the battle, she also referred to the embarrassing Union defeat on October 21, 1861 in the minor battle of Ball’s Bluff, an event central to the Radical case that disloyal officers were weakening the war effort. After a small force under the command of General Charles Stone was repulsed with heavy loss, Congress created the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War to investigate the humiliating failure, especially the death of a promising Republican officer, former Senator Edward Baker. Under a cloud of suspicion, General Stone was arrested and held in prison for six months. 15 The Adventist prophet referred to the incident by reminding her readers of the biblical story of Uriah: “Valuable men have thus been sacrificed to get rid of their strong antislavery influence. Some of the very men whom the North most need [sic] in this critical time, whose services would be of the highest value, are not. They have been wantonly sacrificed.” Ellen White offered little in the way of specific predictions. She did anticipate great and increasing distress, including famine and ultimately (after a “little time of peace”) “strife, war, bloodshed, with famine and pestilence” that included “other nations.” She expected the United States to be “humbled into the dust.” She phrased most of her comments in contingent or qualified language: “It looked to me like an impossibility now for slavery to be done away.” “Had our nation remained united it would have had strength, but divided it must fall.” “When England does declare war, all nations will have an interest of their own to serve, and there will be general war, general confusion.” 16 She did not foretell the outcome of particular battles or campaigns or identify crucial turning points. If she seldom revealed the future in unmistakable clarity, she did have strong and definite counsel about the duty of Seventh-day Adventists, especially after a debate about military service broke out in the summer and fall of 1862. This debate was set off by James White’s editorial “The Nation,” which appeared in the August 12, 1862, issue of the Review and

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Herald. Published at a low point in the Northern war effort, the editorial dealt with how Adventists should respond to the impending military draft. Although the fledgling denomination opposed slavery and secession, “our people have not taken that part in the present conflict that others have,” White admitted. Adventists declined to volunteer, he wrote, because they believed that the Bible predicted that slavery would never be abolished. In addition, the Adventist affirmation of the “perpetuity and sacredness of the law of God” clashed with certain of the “requirements of war.” It was not possible, he asserted, to serve as a soldier and yet obey the divine injunctions against Sabbath-breaking and killing. 17 White moved onto controversial ground with his next statement, which proved to be the most explosive two sentences in the entire history of the official church publication: “But in the case of drafting, the government assumes the responsibility of the violation of the law of God, and it would be madness to resist. He who would resist until, in the administration of military law, he was shot down, goes too far, we think, in taking the responsibility of suicide.” Although believers “might call into question” the policies of “our amiable president, his cabinet, or of military officers” (especially the decision to keep “the precious blacks” out of battle, while sending “the valueless white man” to “fall in battle by thousands”), they still had an obligation to honor “every good law of our land.” Adventists had no need to flee the country “or stand trembling in their shoes for fear of a military draft,” White concluded. Believers needed to trust in God’s mighty power. 18 In the intense discussion that followed, one reader declared that White’s editorial had “grieved and astonished” him, leaving his faith “terribly shaken.” The claim that the government bore the responsibility when a conscripted soldier violated God’s law struck him as a “dangerous and untenable” position. If the government can “assume the responsibility now for the violation” of the fourth and sixth commandments, “and we go clear,” he asked, “why may not the same government assume the responsibility . . . and we go clear” at the end of time when Adventists expected national legislation requiring Sunday worship. 19 M.E. Cornell pithily summarized the Adventist consensus on the war: “The cause of the North is just, but there are too many Achans in the camp,” a reference to Israel’s defeat at Ai, caused by the secret disobedience of Achan (Joshua 7:10–26). Although he rejected an interpretation of “Thou shalt not kill” that forbade all warfare, he still objected to “voluntary service in this war,” since soldiers could not keep the Sabbath and were

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exposed to corrupt “camp associations” such as swearing and card playing. Another reader insisted: “We should move in reference to the shortness of time....We cannot now move as good Christians did in reference to the revolutionary war.” If we really believe that “this generation” will witness “the fall and dissolution of all earthly governments,” we will not act as if we expected an indefinite extension of “probationary time.” Therefore, he fully endorsed White’s editorial. 20 A few Adventists were ready to move farther away from pacifism. One brother ready to fight was Joseph Clarke, a man who “almost fancied that the time might come when a regiment of Sabbath-keepers would strike this rebellion a staggering blow.” Although his imagination was “full of Gideons, Jephthahs, and fighting Davids,” even Clarke did not expect “the full destruction of slavery.” 21 In response to this controversy about conscription, Ellen White’s leadership role—or her “role as a prophet” —was manifested most clearly. If her comments on the war had been neither original nor predictive, she now made unmistakably clear statements about the obligations of “God’s people.” Writing in early 1863, she began by noting “the dreadful state of our nation.” The key issue for her was spiritual, not political or military. “The one all-important inquiry which should now engross the mind of everyone is: Am I prepared for the day of God?” She warned Adventists of the dangers of excess, repeatedly employing words such as “caution,” “discretion,” and “quiet,” while rejecting “fanaticism” and agitation and indiscretion. Since their failure to volunteer made some people think that they were Rebel sympathizers, Adventists needed to be very quiet about “refusing to obey a draft.” She counseled her fellow believers to let the denomination’s “true sentiments in relation to slavery and the Rebellion to be made known.” At the same time, she made it clear that Adventists should not volunteer to fight. “I was shown that God’s people ... cannot engage in this perplexing war, for it is opposed to every principle of their faith.” Without specifically commenting on the debate about the sixth commandment and killing in war, she warned of worldly officers, and the “requirements of rulers” that conflict with the Ten Commandments. 22 If volunteering for the Union Army was one extreme, the other was political sympathy with the South. Ellen White rebuked an Adventist from upstate New York for his “indiscreet course” in supporting the South and defending the institution of slavery. “Your views of slavery cannot harmonize with the sacred, important truths for this time. You must yield your views” or be expelled from the Advent fellowship, she warned. 23

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Her own political views remained resolutely Radical Republican, at least in analysis. She never went beyond what Jonathan Butler has described as “paper radicalism” to advocate diverting any time or money to campaigning for Republican politicians or legislation. It was too late for that. “Everything is preparing for the great day of the God,” she wrote, and time would last only “a little longer.” She thus interpreted the Democratic gains in the 1862 Congressional elections as the Radicals would: “Many were blinded and grossly deceived in the last election, and their influence was used to place in authority men who would wink at evil . . . who are Southern sympathizers, and would preserve slavery as it is.” She continued to interpret Union military failure as the Radicals did, blaming highly placed “rebel sympathizers” and proslavery “professed Union men.” In a claim with particular power for Adventists, she asserted that many Union generals were influenced by spiritualism, which she believed was Satanic. “These leading men” were often led to defeat, she said, by following the instructions of evil spirits posing as great warriors of the past. 24 In a clear reference to the Union defeat at Second Bull Run (1862), she wrote: “In some cases when generals have been in most terrible conflict, where their men have fallen like rain, a reinforcement at the right time would have given them a victory. But other generals cared nothing how many lives were lost, and...withheld necessary aid, fearing that their brother general would receive the honor of successfully repulsing the enemy.” As Ellen White’s readers were likely to know, this was precisely the accusation against General Fitz-John Porter, who faced a court-martial after Second Bull Run for failing to obey orders. An admirer of McClellan and a proslavery Democrat, Porter had first taken little initiative to help John Pope, the blustery antislavery general who had superseded McClellan, and then moved slowly to obey direct orders. In private, both Porter and McClellan were pleased to see Pope discomfited. 25 And there Ellen White left the subject. She could muster no optimism beyond this faint hope: “I saw that God would not give the Northern army wholly into the hands of a rebellious people, to be utterly destroyed by their enemies.” After early 1863, she had nothing more to say about the nation’s fiery ordeal. Having endorsed the emerging consensus that condemned both volunteering and Confederate sympathies, she left the details of dealing with the state and federal government to the brethren. As the scholarly John N. Andrews and others negotiated a legal exemption from combat for Adventist conscripts, she was silent. She had already

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moved on to other subjects, including health reform, dress reform, and wrong use of her testimonies. 26 Race and Reconstruction She did venture a strange, off-handed statement about race (or more precisely, races) in 1864 that has provoked considerable controversy ever since. 27 In the third volume of Spiritual Gifts, Ellen White retold the history of ancient Israel, as presented in Genesis and Exodus. In describing the crimes of antediluvian man, including idolatry, polygamy, and cruelty, she declared: “But if there was one sin above another which called for the destruction of the race [i.e., the human race] by the flood, it was the base crime of amalgamation of man and beast which defaced the image of God [in man], and caused confusion everywhere.” In this intriguing statement, which stands without elaboration, her reference was to the human race in general. She added a second comment a few pages later, however, that applied to the post-Flood world and races: “Since the flood there has been amalgamation of man and beast, as may be seen in the almost endless varieties of species of animals, and in certain races of men.” 28 These statements provoked significant debate among Seventh-day Adventists, with critics charging that she believed Negroes were not human and defenders insisting that she meant no such thing. A strong Adventist consensus rejected theories of polygenesis (which asserted that some humans were not descendants of Adam and Eve), as well as any other religious or scientific justification for slavery. 29 Uriah Smith defended Mrs. White by noting that she was, after all, discussing “races of men,” and therefore human by definition. At the same time he was certain that certain primitive groups were low “in the scale of humanity,” mentioning “the wild Bushmen of Africa, some tribes of Hottentots, and perhaps the Digger Indians of our own country” as examples. 30 For Smith (and White), it should be noted, “race” was a looser term than it is in today’s usage, which would not label a particular tribe or discrete ethnic group as a “race.” Significantly, Smith did not mention the recently freed African Americans as an example of the lowest or most backward groups. Ellen White no doubt knew what Smith was saying in her defense, and there is no evidence that she objected to it. It is reasonable, in fact, to assume that she agreed with him. For either Smith or White, the discovery of some particularly backward tribe, far from Battle Creek, would not

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justify American slavery or diminish the philanthropic and evangelistic obligations of Christians. In Smith’s words, “What has the ancient sin of amalgamation to do with any race or people at the present time?” “Has any one a right,” he asked, “to try to use it to their prejudice?” 31 Neither the prophet nor other church leaders were changed greatly by the crisis of the house divided. In the light of a sweeping Union victory and the end of slavery, Adventists might have re-examined their interpretation of prophecy, their suspicion of political activism, and their certainty that their nation was rapidly declining. Instead, they reacted to the crises of Reconstruction much as they had to the conflicts of the Civil War. As Andrew Johnson, in effect, broke diplomatic relations with the Republican party, and promoted his own mild form of Reconstruction, Adventist leaders hardly remained neutral. “The President is a rebel and traitor,” declared the Review and Herald early in 1866. In the next issue, the editors continued to cite Republican denunciations of Johnson and even quoted a speech from the old abolitionist warrior, William Lloyd Garrison. At the same time the editors rejected direct political involvement, insisting that Adventists should “keep aloof from political matters.” Although they might note “these commotions, as signs of the times,” they should not “drink into their spirit,” commented the Review and Herald, adding, “We are pilgrims and strangers here, and our citizenship is in a better country over which the Prince of Peace shall reign.” Just before the autumn congressional elections, the church paper published an appeal from a sympathetic non-Adventist calling upon Adventists to join other Christians in opposing Johnson’s dangerous policies. Editor Smith commented that he was “in sympathy with the sentiments it expresses,” but emphatically rejected political action: “For our own part, we feel less and less inclined to have any connection with political matters.” 32 Ellen White returned to the issue of race only when it was necessary to do so. For a long time Seventh-day Adventists had virtually no black adherents. As late as the 1890s, there were “not over twenty colored Seventh-day Adventists south of Mason and Dixon’s line.” Then prompted by the prophet herself, Adventist evangelists (black and white) began a “mission to black America,” with the result that by 1907 some 700 African Americans had become Adventists (out of a North American membership of roughly 60,000). She urged Adventists to develop schools for blacks in the South, including Oakwood Industrial School (Figure 14.1).

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Gender

Four years aFter her first vision, Ellen White attended a gathering of fifty sabbatarian Adventists with her husband, James. The group, a remnant of William Miller’s millennial movement, discussed the nature of Ellen White’s visions, which they determined were divine; and while in attendance at the conference, Ellen received a vision directing that James should commence printing a “little paper,” which they titled The Present Truth and later the Second Advent Review and Sabbath Herald. In the same year, in Seneca Falls, New York, a group led by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton voted its support for the Declaration of Sentiments, which advocated the extension of rights to women—including property, marital, divorce, educational, and voting rights. While the gathering of sabbatarian Adventists attracted little attention, the Seneca Falls convention was widely noted and ridiculed in the press; Seneca Falls participants were accused of “unwomanly behavior” and the convention was called the “most shocking and unnatural incident ever recorded in the history of womanity.” 1 As a female religious leader writing in a cultural-historical context in which the prevailing ideology relegated women to the domestic realm, and in which women who participated in public work were denied access to positions of authority, Ellen White held a precarious position. If she promoted women’s participation in socially proscribed roles too adamantly, she might be seen both as addressing the question of the legitimacy of her own leadership and as self-promoting. As a young prophet White had been subjected by her followers to physical tests of her authenticity, such as having heavy weights placed on her outstretched

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arms and being deprived of oxygen while in vision, something to which nineteenth-century male prophets such as John Humphrey Noyes, Joseph Smith, and others were not subjected. Adventist history indicates that God selected White as a prophet after other potential prophets failed in the task. Even James, Ellen’s husband, demonstrated some reluctance early in the life of the movement to promote his wife’s visions when between 1851 and 1855 he restricted their publication. 2 Unpublished, her visions dwindled until in 1855 sabbatarian leaders encouraged greater attention to White’s visions and replaced James as editor of the Review and Herald. Never again would her visions be denied an audience or place of reverence among committed Adventists. Still, White left primary defense of her prophetic role to male religious leaders. Her apparent reluctance to speak in defense of her legitimate claim to public religious leadership may have manifested itself further in her unwillingness to make specific claims on women’s religious authority, such as a clear statement of support for women’s ordination. Nonetheless, White’s writings provided clear support for women’s active participation in diverse religious work. She did not hesitate to call on women to serve in a variety of capacities—as colporteurs who sold Adventist books, Bible instructors who prepared people for baptism, missionaries, and as ministerial assistants working with their minister husbands. The imminent advent necessitated the involvement of not only women, but of all Adventists. White asked women to “take their places in his work at this crisis,” promising that “if they are imbued with a sense of their duty, and labor under the Holy Spirit, they will have the self-possession required for this time. The Savior will reflect upon these self-sacrificing women the light of his countenance, and will give them a power that exceeds that of men.” 3 American society in 1848 defined men and women as fundamentally distinct, though complementary, and as responsible for different spheres. Barbara Welter has described this distinction as one that divided spheres and concomitant responsibilities into the public and private, and relegated men to the former and women to the latter. The realm of men existed primarily outside of the home, in the harsh and competitive public sphere, which included business, politics, education, law, journalism, and religious leadership. Women’s realm—the home—was therefore to be a haven into which men could retreat in order to be replenished and find refuge. The home was widely recognized as a sanctuary, the moral center of the society, and it was women’s responsibility—through their child

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care, nurturing, and domestic efforts—to keep it so. This ideology of separate spheres and responsibilities, though not always realized, especially by disprivileged women, was used to justify women’s exclusion from voting, employment in most occupations, equal participation in higher education, or access to religious authority. So strong was the cultural proscription against women’s participation in public work or leadership that in 1837 Congregational ministers in Massachusetts called the public speaking of the sisters Sarah and Angelina Grimké “unnatural,” warning that such activities would lead to “widespread and permanent injury.” 4 By 1848 the cult of domesticity was deeply entrenched in American life. Married women had no legal right to property ownership—even to wages that they earned, or to custody of their children if they divorced, and divorce itself was extremely difficult for women to attain. Women could not vote; and, according to a U.S. Supreme Court decision, husbands could “chastise” their wives in order to safeguard the order of the home, and thereby society. 5 The suffrage campaign’s call for fuller and more equitable participation of women in public life was met with derision; even the Seneca Falls delegates only reluctantly supported female suffrage. Lucretia Mott warned Elizabeth Cady Stanton that her support for suffrage “will make us ridiculous. We must go slowly.” 6 One major branch of the movement, the American Woman Suffrage Association, relied on the ideology and rhetoric of the cult of domesticity to assert that women should vote in order thereby to exert their moral influence more broadly. In short, in the same decades in which Ellen White emerged as the leader of what would become a worldwide Christian denomination, many early advocates of women’s rights embraced the ideals of the cult of domesticity. Ellen White focused on a variety of topics in her writings on women—their duties, training and employment as physicians, pay, their family responsibilities, marital relationships and obligations, adornment, modesty, and sexual temptation—and in so doing recognized a sphere for women that was not limited to the domestic realm. The common theme uniting these writings was an emphasis on gathering and preparing souls for the Second Coming of Jesus. Though she remained ambiguous in delimiting the specific parameters of women’s access to authority—via ordination, especially—she unequivocally and repeatedly called all Adventists to religious work, to the work of hastening and preparing for the advent in a variety of capacities. White clearly indicated the import of women’s participation in religious work: “Whenever a great and decisive work is to be done, God chooses

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men and women to do this work, and it will feel the loss if the talents of both are not combined.” In another context she wrote: “Women can be the instruments of righteousness, rendering holy service. It was Mary that first preached a risen Jesus .... If there were twenty women where now there is one, who would make this holy mission their cherished work, we should see many more converted to truth.” 7 White insisted in her writings that women were essential to the work of Adventism in a variety of capacities—as ministers, teachers, and physicians. “Women as well as men are needed in the work that must be done,” she wrote at the end of the nineteenth century. A decade or so later she recalled that the “Lord has shown me that women teachers are just as greatly needed to do the work to which He has appointed them as are men.” Continuing, she wrote that the Lord had “instructed me that our sisters who have received a training that has fitted them for positions of responsibility are to serve with faithfulness and discernment in their calling, using their influence wisely and, with their brethren in the faith, obtaining an experience that will fit them for still greater usefulness.” 8 White advocated for women’s participation in the work of Adventism to increase the success of that work, not as an explicit challenge to the prevailing gender ideology. Though her support for women’s religious work encouraged women’s participation outside of the domestic realm, she did not contest the notion of an essential difference between genders; indeed, she saw women workers as more appropriately (especially in the case of female physicians) and effectively working with other women. “I have felt recently,” White wrote in 1911, “that it should be so arranged that women have greater responsibilities. It is their privilege to be educated in some lines of work just as thoroughly as the men are educated. In Bible times the women always took charge of the women. ...[Women and men are] not to mix and mingle right together....” In order to maintain modesty, female physicians were to treat women, and male physicians, men. Female physicians “should utterly refuse to look upon the secret parts of men.” Women should be thoroughly educated to work for women, and men to work for men. Let men know that they must go to their own sex and not apply to lady physicians.” 9 It is important to emphasize the context in which Ellen White called for women’s participation in religious work. In 1873 the U.S. Supreme Court, in Bradwell v. Illinois, held that Illinois could exclude even women who had passed the state bar from practicing law in the state in order to preserve “respective spheres of man and woman.” While some

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women were employed for pay within (as laundresses and wet nurses, for example) and outside the home, protective legislation served greatly to restrict women’s paid work to low-prestige, low-paying jobs, and the dominant ideology maintained that women be relegated to the domestic sphere. In marked contrast, Ellen White told women that they “should not feel that they are excused because of their domestic cares.” Instead they should do the “utmost of their ability in the work of God.” For Adventists, in the process of building what would become one of the largest and most extensive systems of religious educational, publishing, and healthcare institutions, this call to religious service involved varied contributions—as teachers, administrators, nurses, physicians, writers, editors, and publishers. In the Review and Herald in 1899 Ellen White wrote: “teach this, my sister. You have many ways opened before you. Address the crowd whenever you can; hold every jot of influence you can by any association that can be made the means of introducing the leaven to the meal. Every man and every woman has a work to do for the master.” Ellen White urged women to “take any post that might be offered—as superintendents, Sabbath school teachers, Bible workers,” physicians, and teachers. 10 Moreover, White frequently emphasized that women engaged in the work of Adventism should be paid: the “conference should have the wisdom to understand the justice of her receiving wages.” She consistently and adamantly supported fair remuneration of Adventist women involved in the work from church tithes. “I was instructed,” wrote Ellen White, that “injustice has been done to women who labor just as devotedly 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.” She repeatedly called for equitable remuneration for women and, when adequate pay for female workers was not forthcoming, she used her personal tithes to establish a fund for their payment. 11 Ellen White encouraged women’s participation in public religious work not at the expense of women’s domestic responsibilities, but in addition to those, allowing that women might hire others to assist them in the home. Calling on Adventists not to “belittle women’s work,” White suggested the propriety of a “woman [putting] her housework in the hands of a faithful, prudent helper, and [leaving] her children in good care, while she engages in the work.” 12 With a domestic staff of her own, she insisted on the value of and respect for paid domestic workers, who could help women to free them for religious work.

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Although she encouraged women to participate in religious work, including public religious work, White did so in a way that was not entirely at odds with feminine ideals embedded in her larger socio-historical context. Though she told women to have “staunch, noble independence of character [and to be] reliable and true as steel,” White also cautioned modesty and humility for women and men engaged in Adventism’s work, writing that “women are needed who are not self-important, but gentle in manners and lowly of heart.” She warned that “wives and mothers should in no case neglect their husbands and their children”; they could “do much without neglecting home duties.” 13 Contemporary controversy surrounding women’s roles in Adventism focuses especially on the propriety of ordaining women to serve as pastors. In 1888 the Disciples of Christ became the first Christian denomination to institute women’s ordination via a change in denominational rules. Less than a decade later, White wrote that women engaged in “service of the Lord” should “be set apart to this work by prayer and laying on of hands.” At a time when it was not socially acceptable for women to speak publicly, White wrote that “not a hand should be bound, not a soul discouraged, not a voice should be hushed; let every individual labor, privately or publicly, to help forward this grand work. Place the burdens upon men and women of the church.” In a period when higher education was just beginning to become widely available to American women, White called on women to prepare for religious work by cultivating their intellect, urging them to “take advantage of schools that have been established for the purpose of imparting the best of knowledge.” 14 Still, there is no question of the ambiguity surrounding Ellen White’s position regarding ordination of women, in spite of her obvious support for women’s participation in and remuneration for public religious work. Before 1860, in her first decade as a religious leader (though prior to the formal organization of Seventh-day Adventism), White remained silent about the ordination of women. Given both the socio-historical prejudices against women’s participation in public work, especially in positions of authority, and the precarious position this young and emerging female religious leader held, this is not surprising. After formal organization (1863), Adventists, increasingly attentive to who should publicly represent the new denomination, began to train and license (and pay) women as ministers. In the late 1870s White began advocating women’s participation in public religious work, and in 1881 the General Conference introduced a resolution in support of women’s ordination. White, mourning the recent death of her husband, was not in attendance

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and never took a public position on the resolution, which said that “females possessing the necessary qualifications to fill that position may, with perfect propriety, be set apart by ordination to the work of Christian ministry.” After discussion, the resolution was tabled before coming up for a vote. The failure of the resolution did not prevent Adventism from encouraging women to evangelize and minister throughout the 1880s. 15 Expansion of the ministry to include those trained in other fields, such as healthcare, increased opportunities for participation in Adventist evangelical work by women. In the face of economic difficulties that Adventism confronted in 1891, White encouraged diversely trained Adventists to evangelize as they provided practical assistance in their work. As medical evangelists commenced “Christian help work,” both women and men were ordained to the new work. According to Bert Haloviak, “it was the ‘ministry of compassion’ that naturally brought women to a prominent role in. . .ministerial team efforts.” 16 Late in her life, in 1911, Ellen White wrote in the Review and Herald that the “Lord ordained me as His messenger,” describing herself as a “channel for the communication of light.” Historical documents indicate that she saw ordination by men as unnecessary for herself. At various times both local conferences and the General Conference gave her ministerial credentials, but these documents did not consistently indicate whether or not she was considered ordained (Figure 15.1). 17 White and her followers understood her to have unique access to the divine, though she did not insist on being labeled a prophet: “To claim to be a prophet is something that I have never done. If others call me by that name, I have no controversy with them. But my work has covered so many lines that I cannot call myself other than a messenger.” 18 As a female nineteenth-century charismatic religious leader, White was not unique, but the long-term success of the movement that she helped found was extraordinary. With approximately 18 million adult members, Seventh-day Adventism’s membership has now surpassed that of The Church of Christ, Scientist (Christian Science), and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) as a worldwide Christian denomination with origins in nineteenth-century America. Though her lifetime saw legal advances for women, White died five years prior to the ratification of the nineteenth amendment extending suffrage to American women. She lived in a culture in which attempts to improve opportunities for women were never without controversy, often evoking ridicule and disdain. As a female leader within an emerging religious organization—one

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ordination by the beginning of the 1900s. 19 While White actively promoted women’s participation in public religious work, she may have perceived advocacy of women’s ordination as excessively controversial. In addition to dealing with the question of Adventist women’s roles, Ellen White addressed three major nineteenth-century women’s reform movements: suffrage, temperance, and dress reform (see also Chapter 12). Regarding the first, White did “not recommend that woman should seek to become a voter or office-holder.” Given widespread Adventist reluctance to vote or participate in politics in the nineteenth century, this is not surprising. Nevertheless, White consistently supported temperance and encouraged Adventist participation in the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). White saw the WCTU advancing important goals concomitant with her own health message and identified the WCTU as “in some matters ...far in advance of our leaders.” 20 Though many members of the WCTU endorsed women’s suffrage, in part as a tool by which to implement temperance reform, the temperance movement did not challenge nineteenth-century gender ideals in the same way that suffrage did; to many, temperance appeared as an effort to protect the domestic realm from harms associated with alcohol consumption, such as domestic violence. Suffrage directly challenged women’s domestic role. The third nineteenth-century reform movement in which White became involved, dress reform, also threatened the prevailing gender ideology. The reform dress, a combination of a knee-length skirt worn over ballooning pantaloons that gathered at the ankles with a short ruffle, was introduced in the United States in 1851 by Elizabeth Smith Miller, Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s cousin, who had encountered the outfit while traveling in Europe. Miller, Stanton, and other suffragists saw the outfit as providing significant health, comfort, and safety advantages over the then-fashionable women’s clothing. In the mid-nineteenth century most fashion-conscious women wore corsets made of whalebone, often tied so tightly as to restrict breathing, under layers of long, heavy, petticoats. The pantaloon outfit became widely known after Amelia Bloomer described it in Lily, a women’s magazine, and then published sewing instructions, prompting hundreds of women to write to the magazine requesting additional information. Women who donned the outfit met ridicule and found themselves targeted with eggs and stones thrown by men and boys. 21 In 1863 White connected the reform dress with her health message, though she initially indicated divine disapproval: “God would not have his people adopt the so-called reform dress.” Adventist women “who

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feel called out to join the movement in favor of women’s rights and the so-called reform dress,” she declared, “might as well sever all connection with the third angel’s message.” Pants made “women in their dress and appearance as near like the other sex as possible,” something “God pronounces [an] abomination.” White linked the reform dress with spiritualists and suffragists, leading her to express concern that Adventists, by adopting dress reform, might be associated with those and lose their efficacy in evangelism: “Christians should not take pains to make themselves a gazing-stock by dressing differently from the world.” 22 Nonetheless, during an 1864 stay at the “Home on the Hillside” in Dansville, New York, White became intrigued by the “American costume” worn by female physicians and some patients at the facility. She wrote to friends at Battle Creek: They have all styles of dress here. Some are very becoming, if not so short. We shall get patterns from this place, and I think we can get a style of dress more healthful than we now wear, and yet not be bloomer or the “American costume.”...I am going to get up a style of dress on my own hook which will accord perfectly with that which has been shown me. Health demands it. Our feeble women must dispense with heavy skirts and tight waists if they value health. 23 Guidelines for female dress outlined in Ellen White’s sixth pamphlet on health reform in 1865 couched the need for dress reform with references to health and safety (Figure 15.2). The “female form” wrote Ellen White, “should not be compressed in the least with corsets and whalebones.” Recalling her vision, White described a dress shorter than that normally worn by women, which should “reach somewhat below the top of the boot.” Somewhat modifying the American costume, she recommended that her dress be worn in combination with “lined pants gathered into a band and fastened about the ankle, or made full and tapering at the bottom...long enough to meet the shoe.” 24 White’s proposed modification in women’s dress, especially her incorporation of pants, met fierce resistance from Adventists. In a testimony she described a “strange spirit of blind and bitter opposition” to the outfit. In the face of this opposition, White initially defended the propriety of women’s pants: “We advocate that the limbs of women should not be exposed, but sensibly, neatly, and comfortably, clad. Is this immodest? Many say that they have no objections to the length of the dress, but they

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could never put on the pants.” 25 For a period of time she wore the outfit herself (Figure 15.3). White insisted that reform dress was worn not to “be odd” or “attract notice,” but instead should be donned out of a “sense of duty” and because the reform dress—including pants—was the “most convenient, the most truly modest, and most healthful style of dress worn by woman.” In the face of continuing opposition, “that which was given as a blessing was turned into a curse, [and] the burden of advocating reform dress was removed.” In 1897, when some Adventist women wished to promote the reform dress, White wrote a letter in which she indicated that “some have supposed that the very pattern given was the pattern that all were to adopt. This is not so.... No one precise style has been given to me as the exact rule to guide all in their dress.” She eventually opposed women’s pants as “objectionable” and “extreme.” 26 Although White took a position on dress reform at variance with prevailing nineteenth-century gender norms, persistent Adventist opposition

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to the shortened dress and pants eventually led her in the end merely to advocate “modest, convenient, and healthful” dress for women. Her support for the WCTU did not conflict with the predominant gender ideology. The WCTU may have allowed for women’s participation in leadership of a social movement and supported suffrage as a mechanism for implementation of temperance, but preventing men from drinking was understood and presented as a way for women to protect the home and family. White did not actively oppose women’s suffrage but discouraged Adventists from working for women’s vote. Thus in her positions on three major nineteenth-century reform movements, White did not radically challenge gender norms, except in her support for reform dress, and she retreated from the controversial components of this when resistance to it proved intransigent. White defied major nineteenth-century gender expectations and ideals only inconsistently. She sometimes employed the language of the cult of domesticity to describe women’s role, writing, for example, that “God has assigned woman her mission; and if she, in her humble way, yet to the

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best of her ability, makes a heaven of her home, faithfully and lovingly performing her duties to her husband and children, continually seeking to let a holy light shine from her useful, pure, and virtuous life to brighten all around her, she is doing the work left her of the Master.” She also wrote that “A young woman may dispense with a knowledge of French and algebra or even piano, but it is indispensable that she learn to make good bread, to fashion neatly fitting garments, and to perform efficiently the many duties that pertain to homemaking.” Like other proponents of domesticity, White saw women’s influence extending to society, especially through their children. “The mother’s influence,” she contended, “never ceases. It is ever active, either for good or for evil.” There is no indication, however, that she advocated limiting women’s activities to the domestic sphere. While acknowledging and valuing women’s domestic work, White at the same time asked Adventist women to consider that “society also has claims upon” them: “Women and men are not fulfilling the design of God when they simply express affection for their own family circle.” Reminding women that they “should not feel that they are excused because of their domestic cares,” White encouraged them to “become intelligent as to how they can work most effectively and methodically in bringing souls to Christ.” 27 White wrote much less about men than women. In her few statements she departed from nineteenth-century gender ideals. She referred to married men as “house-bands” and promoted men’s “practical usefulness” in a variety of household responsibilities, but she also emphasized the husband’s “authority” and his role as the family’s “lawmaker.” Especially in her later writings, she emphasized that a man should “love and cherish his wife” and “should never correct his children while impatient or fretful, or while under the influence of passion.” 28 White’s position as a nineteenth-century female prophet may have been unusual but it was not unique: Mary Baker Eddy, and earlier, Jemima Wilkinson and Ann Lee, had visions and religious messages that they shared with followers. But the movement that White nurtured has prospered the most. Indeed, Seventh-day Adventism today exceeds in number of adherents some American religious movements founded by nineteenth-century men. Despite this, White is largely forgotten except by Adventists, and women in Adventism in the twenty-first century continue to confront a world church opposed to their ordination. 29

. Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (Page 291). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.