

APPENDIX THIRTY-SIX

Ellen G. White And The Charge Of Plagiarism

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Here is a volatile subject worthy of our careful thought. Not yet is the research of this issue complete. But some suggestions may be offered.

1. It is quite correct that E.G. White drew upon scores of sources to aid her in her writing. *Great Controversy* alone cites about ninety of such. *Desire of Ages* drew upon **at least** the greater part of a dozen well-known commentators on the life of Christ. Her health works reflect such writers as L.B. Coles, Trail, and Jackson, and her educational volumes incorporate much from Pestalozzi, Herbart, Froebel, Horace Mann and others.
2. This fact need not, in itself, be disconcerting for those who recognize:
 - a. The biblical dictum that God never does supernaturally what can be done naturally. This is often called the law of the economy of miracle. We see it frequently in Scripture which records how Christ chose to ask questions instead of drawing upon His omniscience, and how He chose to use human rather than miraculous effort in many situations such as removing the stone from the tomb of Lazarus and filling the water pots of Cana with water.
 - b. Other prophets, even Biblical ones, were led of God to incorporate sections of the writings of others. Matthew and Luke used approximately 99% of Mark, 2 Peter and Jude reflect similar practice, and so do some Old Testament passages. The list of intertestamental names in Christ's genealogical table indicates that Luke drew upon temple records. The Bible's closing book contains almost 500 allusions to previous writings. There is hardly an original image in the entire Apocalypse.
3. Ellen White made it very clear that she herself did read other writers. Through the pages of the church papers she made known her evaluation of Conybeare and Howson's classic work on Paul, as well as her appreciation and study of D'Aubigné.

She recommended such works to the study of church members apparently without any concern that the most intelligent of them would recognize that she had borrowed liberally from such sources. Thus there does not seem to be any intention on her part to deceive by such usage. Wylie's *The History of the Waldenses* was being offered for sale in the same church offices selling her own works, but this particular volume was certainly one of her *Great Controversy* sources.

4. We have from Ellen White the clear statement that she herself had to provide the words to clothe the concepts given her from heaven.

“Although I am 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” (*Review and Herald*, Oct. 8, 1867).

We know also that she felt her own inadequacy in this area. Thus she wrote, and wrote most beautifully, on this awareness of her insufficiency:

“Oh, how inefficient, how incapable I am of expressing the things which burn in my soul in reference to the mission of Christ. ... I know not how to speak or trace with pen the large subject of the atoning sacrifice, I know not how to present subjects in the living power in which they stand before me. I tremble for fear lest I shall belittle the great plan of salvation by cheap words” (Letter 40, 1892).

“I am but a poor writer, and cannot with pen or voice express the great and deep mysteries of God” (Letter 67, 1894).

Inasmuch as it was necessary for her to find words to express the ideas she was commissioned to proclaim there is nothing inherently strange in the fact that where she found valuable summaries of truth it appealed to her to use such. This helped her in her own lack and also was a considerable saving of time and effort.

5. A major reason why Ellen White never gave credit is intimated in her sole statement about her use of quotations from others. In *Great Controversy* 13 we read that she had no wish to represent the writers she used as authoritative. That is, she did not feel free to endorse all that was written by such writers and was not recommending that others should either. Elsewhere we read her counsel to gather up the scattered gems of truth and put them in right settings. This is precisely what she did herself — winnowing much of literature and providing the gems for a church which tragically read very little. Her metaphor of “gems” for quality literary fragments suggests that she looked upon them as God’s gifts intended to bless all, like the rich treasures of earth, rather than contrived artefacts to which individuals could claim ownership. Thus in *Education*, she clearly states that every brilliant flash of thought “is from the Light of the world” (p. 14). In the same paragraph she uses the illustration of the moon and stars which “shine by the reflected light of the sun” to represent the teachings of “the world’s great thinkers” wherever they are true, and therefore belong to all. When with the passing of time and the increasing rigor of literary standards she was urged to give credit there is no evidence of any reluctance on her part to comply. This was not done for paraphrasing any more than it was customary for popular literature so to do at that time.
6. Most of those who have been scandalized by Ellen White’s use of sources reveal:
 - a. They have a superstitious view of inspiration which is not supportable from either Scripture or Ellen White.
 - b. They know little about writing or preaching. In these areas, all practitioners of note have stood on the shoulders of their predecessors. It is a well-known dictum that “he who never reads will never be read; he who never quotes will never be quoted; and he who does not use other men’s brains reveals he has no brains of his own.” One of the evidences that a prophet spoke from God was his **lack of originality**, by which we mean that true prophets ever drew from the existing well of acknowledged truth, and applied their drawings to current needs. Even the teachings of Jesus contain little that cannot be found in the Old Testament in root form.
 - c. They are not well aware of the literary practices by authors of **popular** [non-academic] works in the 19th century.
7. It is very significant that when Ellen White chose a source which most nearly reflected her own view of inspiration she chose C.B. Stowe, whose summary on the matter was a far cry from the beliefs of the fundamentalists of his day, and similarly a far cry from the views of most Seventh-day Adventists today. He could say that the Bible writers were God’s penmen not his pen, and that God as a writer was not represented in Scripture, that the logic and rhetoric employed by Scripture writers was not faultless, that the manuscripts were imperfect, that chronology in Scripture and scientific expression were defective, and that the Bible was given for practical purposes and revealed a union of the human and divine. With all this Ellen G. White agreed, having this advantage, that she personally had experienced divine inspiration for many years.

8. It has been pointed out that nineteenth century works do often give credit to their sources, and that the evil of plagiarism was recognized. This, however, is only a half truth, it is certainly correct to acknowledge that copyright laws were far less stringent in the nineteenth century (thus American publishers could reproduce the works of Dickens without his consent, and without paying him a cent), and the incorporation of sources **in popular works** without credit was a recognized phenomenon. We quote Dr. Olson's excellent article on this subject.

“The Ethics of Nineteenth-Century Literary Borrowing”

Apparently no one, even among Ellen White's secretarial staff, questioned the propriety of her use of the works of other writers before the mid-1880's. When, at that time, she was criticized for this practice she at first disregarded the criticisms, probably feeling as John Wesley did, that a series of credit lines would interfere with the flow of the message being portrayed. W.C. White explains her attitude:

In many of her manuscripts as they came from her hand quotation marks were used. In other cases they were not used; and her habit of using parts of sentences found in the writings of others and filling in a part of her own composition, was not based upon any definite plan nor was it questioned by her copyists and copy writers until about 1885 and onward.

When critics pointed out this feature of her work as a reason for questioning the gift which had enabled her to write, she paid little attention to it. Later on when complaint was made that this was an injustice to other publishers and writers, she made a decided change — a change which you are familiar with. — W.C. White to L.E. Froom, Jan. 8, 1928.

When *Sketches from the Life of Paul* and *The Great Controversy* were published she was advised to leave out the quotation marks and did so. But afterward when presented with the fact that this was considered unfair to the people from whom she had made quotations she said to have them in by all means.

In her desire to get the best possible description for the benefit of her readers she overlooked the importance of that which has been the subject of severe criticism. — W.C. White to J.C. Stevens, July 25, 1919, W.C. White Letter-book #129.

As to the propriety of copying from others, it appears that this was a common practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. John Wesley (1703-1791) frankly stated his attitude toward using the works of others:

It was a doubt with me for some time, whether I should not subjoin to every note I received from them the name of the author from whom it was taken; especially considering I had transcribed some, and abridged many more, almost in the words of the author. But upon further consideration, I resolved to name none, that nothing might divert the mind of the reader from keeping close to the point of view, and receiving what was spoken only according to its own intrinsic value. — *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, Preface, quoted by F.D. Nichol, *Ellen G. White and Her Critics*, p. 406.

Another Bible commentator notes that borrowing has long been a common practice among theological writers:

All the commentators have drawn largely from the fathers, especially from St. Augustine; and most of them have made general property of Patrick, Lowth, and Whitby. Poole has exhausted the old continental writers; Henry had made very free with Bishop Hall and others; Scott and Benson have enriched their pages abundantly from Henry: Gill has translated the spirit of Poole's "Synopsis," but he most generally gives this authorities; Adam Clarke and Davidson have been much indebted to all the best critics, though the former does not always mention his obligations, and the latter never; but his preface to his admirable "*Pocket Commentary*" is an honest confession that he pretends to be more than a compiler. — Ingram Cobbin, quoted by F.D. Nichol, *E.G. White and Her Critics*, p. 406.

In defending John the Revelator's use of other sources, Preston and Hanson state:

In fact, of course, every great writer has materials and sources which he uses (Aeschylus and Shakespeare are admirable examples). The important question is not, What sources does he use? but What use does he make of them? Indeed, if we once get some idea of John's technique, the masterly way in which he adapts and combines his various sources will make us pay more, and not less, attention to what he is using those sources to express. — *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, p. 93.

Conybeare and Howson borrowed from other writers without giving credit or using quotation marks (See Nichol, pp. 424-425). D.M. Canright, who in 1887 condemned Mrs. White for this practice, borrowed extensively himself in an 1878 publication of his own, with no indication in the preface or anywhere else in the book that he was doing so (See Nichol, p. 408).

Ellen White made no attempt to hide her borrowing. She even called special attention to Conybeare and Howson's work in the same year that she was drawing extracts from it. In support of an advertisement for the book in the *Signs of the Times* of February 22, 1883, she wrote, "*The Life of St. Paul* by Conybeare and Howson I regard as a book of great merit, and one of rare usefulness to the earnest student of the New Testament history" (*ST*, Feb. 22, 1883, p. 96). Four months later, in June, 1883, her own volume on Paul was published. She must have known that the relationship between *Sketches from the Life of Paul* and the Conybeare and Howson book would soon become apparent to her readers, but this obviously was of no concern to her.

She also recommended d'Aubigné's *History of the Reformation*, from which she borrowed extensively, as an ideal holiday gift (*RH*, 12-26-1882).

Raymond Cottrell states that when he was working on the *SDA Bible Commentary*, he had occasion to compare thirty commentaries on 1 Corinthians with one another. To his amazement he discovered that many of these respected commentators had "copied significant amounts of material from one another without once giving credit." Cottrell concluded that "nineteenth-century literary ethics, even among best writers, approved of, or at least did not seriously question, generous literary borrowing without giving credit" ("The Literary

Relationship Between the *Desire of Ages*, by Ellen G. White and *The Life of Christ*, by William Hanna.” p. 6).

Since Ellen White lived most of her life in the nineteenth century, it is not surprising that she should conduct most of her literary activities according to nineteenth-century literary standards. (“*Ellen G. White’s Use of Uninspired Sources*,” by Robert W. Olson, pp. 13-15)

9. The main error responsible for the current perplexity is not Ellen White’s use of sources, a practice followed by every good writer since the first quill was invented, but the non-biblical view of inspiration that has been current among the majority of Seventh-day Adventists, as well as non-Adventist fundamentalists and evangelicals in general.
10. God does not require that all should be literary critics before they can discern His voice as echoed by His messengers. The texts, “he who is willing to do His will, he shall know of the doctrine” and “by their fruits ye shall know them” offer conditions that can be fulfilled simply so that “the labouring man, though a fool, need not err” Isa. 35:8.

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