

The Authority of the Prophets



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 4:10–16, 1 Sam. 12:1–14, 2 Kings 22:10–13, Jer. 36:22–31, Mark 1:21–27, Acts 16:25–34.*

Memory Text: “Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:20, 21, NKJV).

All through the Bible, a theme recurs: God talks to people through His prophets, and the people either accept or reject what's being said. Of course, by rejecting the words of the prophets, they're not rejecting the prophets, they're rejecting the One who sent them.

It's a very serious thing, then, to claim to speak in the name of God. If you claim to speak for Him, and are, then you are a mouthpiece for the Creator of the universe, no small responsibility. People have been delegated authority to speak for the boss of the company, or the president, or prime minister—but to speak for the Lord? That's heavy. Unfortunately, much of biblical history is a story of God speaking through His prophets and of people rejecting what was said. How careful we need to be so as not to make the same mistake today.

The Week at a Glance: Why was Moses so reluctant to become God's prophet? What authority did the prophets have in Israel, even those who never wrote a book of the Bible? Is there a difference between the authority of the canonical and extracanonical prophet?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 21.*

The Prophet as God’s Mouthpiece

Read Exodus 4:10–16, the dialogue between God and Moses. What happened here, and what can we learn from this exchange about how prophets are called and how they operate?

According to the arrangement God put in place, Moses was literally “to become God” to Aaron (*see* *Exod. 4:16*), and Aaron was to become Moses’ mouthpiece or “prophet” (*Exod. 7:1*). This defines accurately the intimate relationship between God and all His prophets; they were His mouthpieces, His spokespersons. Furthermore, as in the case of Moses and Aaron—God “taught” all His prophets what they were to do in regard to being a mouthpiece. Moses was, however, somewhat of a reluctant prophet.

According to her own testimony, Ellen White was reluctant when first called by the Lord, as well. “In my second vision, about a week after the first, the Lord gave me a view of the trials through which I must pass, and told me that I must go and relate to others what He had revealed to me. It was shown me that my labors would meet with great opposition, and that my heart would be rent with anguish; but that the grace of God would be sufficient to sustain me through all. After I came out of this vision I was exceedingly troubled, for it pointed out my duty to go out among the people and present the truth. My health was so poor that I was in constant bodily suffering, and to all appearance had but a short time to live. I was only seventeen years of age, small and frail, unused to society, and naturally so timid and retiring that it was painful for me to meet strangers.

“For several days, and far into the night, I prayed that this burden might be removed from me, and laid upon some one more capable of bearing it. But the light of duty did not change, and the words of the angel sounded continually in my ears, ‘Make known to others what I have revealed to you.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White*, p. 69.

In what way are we called, regardless of our position in the church, to “make known to others what I have revealed to you”? What has God revealed to you? How can you better share that with others?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *1 Thessalonians 5:20, 21*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: The authority of a prophet comes from God.

Feel: Willing to accept the message God communicates through His prophets.

Do: Regard the Bible as the supreme authority for Christian life and doctrine.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Speaking for God (*Exod. 4:10–16*)

A What was the basis of Moses' authority? What is the respective importance of being called, being sent, and encountering God?

B What was the basis and evidence of Jesus' authority (*Matt. 21:23, John 17:2*)? How does this apply to prophets?

II. Responding to Authority (*2 Kings 22:10–13*)

A What feelings are involved in relinquishing autonomy to an external authority?

B Read Jeremiah 36:22–31. Do prophets have authority if no one listens? How does it make you feel when people reject the Bible or the writings of Ellen G. White?

C Read Hebrews 4:12. God's Word always calls for a response or choice. What role do emotions play in our response?

III. Relative Authority (*1 Chron. 29:29, 30*)

A In what way is the preacher of a sermon inspired? With what authority should we regard his or her message?

B How much authority should we give to inspired writings outside of the biblical cannon? How can we ensure that we don't ascribe more authority to Ellen G. White's writings, to contemporary authors, or to church leaders than we give to Scripture?

► **Summary:** Prophetic authority derives from the Source, content, and scope of the message. Personal power, influence, or charisma should not be confused with prophetic authority. Scripture is the ultimate authority.

The Authority of the Incarnate Word

“And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth” (*Matt. 28:18*).

In Matthew 21:23, while Jesus was teaching, the chief priests and the elders asked Him, “‘By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?’” (*NKJV*). Jesus responded to the question in good rabbinic fashion, and that was with a counter question: “‘The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?’” (*vs. 25, NKJV; see vs. 24–27*). In rabbinic debates the counter question was meant to point the way to the answer of the original question. When they refused to answer, He refused to give a clear answer in return, because if they refused to acknowledge God’s power in John’s ministry, there was little point in discussing His own—which was also from God.

What do the following texts tell us about Jesus’ authority? *Matt. 7:28, 29; Mark 1:21–27; Luke 8:22–25; 9:1; John 5:25–27.*

Ultimate authority belongs to Christ as our Creator (*John 1:3*) and Redeemer (*Rom. 3:24*). He is at once the final court of appeal and the absolute norm by which each life is to be judged. Divine authority finds its focus and finality in Him. The Gospels, therefore, declare that His teaching caused astonishment because He taught as One having authority (*Matt. 7:29*).

Throughout the Gospels we find Christ’s more-than-human authority. He forgave sins (*Mark 2:10*), drove out devils (*Mark 3:15*), and claimed the right to judge men’s hearts (*John 2:24, 25*) and give eternal life (*John 10:28*). Yet, the authority that Christ exercised within His earthly commission was granted to Him by the Father (*John 17:2*). Whatever He did, including all the miracles He performed, always was done in dependence on and in cooperation with His Father (*John 5:19*). At the same time, He had absolute authority (*Matt. 28:18*). Therefore, He could delegate authority to His disciples (*Mark 6:7*) and will in the end judge all people (*John 5:27*).

We live in a day and age when it’s fashionable to question authority. How are we to relate to authority? What factors should determine our answer?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: A prophet is God’s human instrument to proclaim His Word. The authority of the 66 books of the Bible supersedes any other prophetic utterances.

A woman once told the following story:

One night in a dream she found herself in a room with lots of people. Suddenly there was a bright light in the room. The light focused on her and said, “You are doing well, but go tell it to others.”

The woman woke up. She had the strongest feeling that she had been in the presence of God, and that He had told her what He wanted her to do.

“Go tell what? To whom?” she wondered. Perplexed, she shared her dream with her pastor.

“I think maybe the Lord has someone He wants you to share Him with” was his answer. “I recently received a call from a woman who would like to study the Bible. Would you be willing to go and study it with her?”

The woman was petrified. She had tried giving Bible studies before. The whole time she had felt completely inadequate. She really didn’t want to try it again. However, she was unwilling to offer a flat No. After much hesitation she said, “I guess I’ll try.”

Each week for several weeks thereafter, she drove to the woman’s house, Bible in hand. Every time she prayed that the woman wouldn’t be home! But every time she was there and waiting.

A month later the woman with the dream moved to a new area across the country. She felt very relieved to give up the Bible studies.

About a year later the woman received a letter in the mail from the person to whom she had started giving Bible studies.

The letter read, “I just have been baptized! I wanted you to know immediately. I had been praying for someone to help me study the Bible when you originally called me. I know the Lord sent you! I shall never forget you. Thank you, thank you!”

Consider This: What if the woman with the dream had refused to begin the Bible studies? Do you believe God directs happenings like this? Why, or why not?

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The Authority of the Written Word

Compare these two responses to God's Written Word: 2 Kings 22:10–13; Jeremiah 36:22–31. Though we might not act quite as dramatically as the folk did here, how do these incidents represent the basic responses to God's Written Word?

One can reject God's Word today without openly burning it, as did this king. Instead, it can be ridiculed, ignored, denounced as out-of-date, or interpreted in such a way that it is deprived of any historical value or authority.

Yet, no one can disregard the authority of Scripture with impunity. Sooner or later, he or she will suffer the consequences of that rejection. In the Written Word, the character and will of God, the meaning of human existence, and the purposes of God for humanity in all ages are stated in propositional form that all can understand. To reject it may not have immediate consequences, but it will certainly result in eternal loss.

"He [Christ] pointed to the Scriptures as of unquestionable authority, and we should do the same. The Bible is to be presented as the word of the infinite God, as the end of all controversy and the foundation of all faith."—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, pp. 39, 40.

All through her life Mrs. White exalted the Word of God. In regard to the controversy between science and Scripture she wrote: "There should be a settled belief in the divine authority of God's Holy Word. The Bible is not to be tested by men's ideas of science. Human knowledge is an unreliable guide."—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 114.

In 1909 she attended her last General Conference session. At the close of her last sermon she picked up the Bible, opened it, and held it out on extended hands.

" 'Brethren and Sisters,' " she said, " 'I commend unto you this Book.' "—Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Later Elmhaven Years*, p. 197.

Examine your own attitude toward the Scriptures. Ask yourself the following questions: How much time do I spend in them? How seriously do I try to follow the teachings? When I read, am I trying to find fault with it? What's my attitude toward passages that I find disturbing or that express ideas that I don't like? What can I learn from my answers?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED► **STEP 2—Explore****Bible Commentary****I. The Prophet's Relationship to God's Authority**

If you were giving permission to someone to speak for you, you would want to be very sure that he or she understood your position and what you stood for. You would choose someone you highly trusted to represent you.

That describes the kind of relationship God had with Moses. The first 40 years of Moses' life were lived learning the ways of his world. The second 40 years were lived learning the ways of God's world and building a close relationship with Him.

Consider This: Which education was more valuable and why? Have someone read Exodus 3:10–12. How is Moses' attitude at this stage of his life different from what it had been when he tried to deliver the Israelites 40 years before? Which education prepared him better to be a *mouthpiece* for God? What made the difference in his success?

The Seventh-day Adventist Church considers Ellen G. White to be a spokesperson or prophet from God. It does not consider her writings to be above or even equal to the Bible.

■ *What is Ellen G. White's authority in relationship to God? What position should her writings have in the church?*

II. Jesus' Relationship to God and His Authority

Jesus was God's authority on earth. He spoke for God. He healed in God's name. He did miracles in the name of God. His authority is and was absolute. No doctrine, no religious authority, no prophet, no preacher, is equal to or above Jesus.

Consider This: Read in class John 1:1–4 and Romans 3:21–24. Ask the following questions:

Where did Jesus' authority come from? What gives Him absolute authority? Is there any authority now or ever equal to His? Why, or why not?

Why is Jesus' authority important to us? What can we experience because of it?

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The Authority of the Spoken Word

In ancient times, when writing material was scarce and most people could not read, the spoken word was very important. What effect did the spoken Word of God have on people in the following passages? *Jer. 38:1–4, John 3:1–10, 6:51–66, Acts 16:25–34.*

The Word of God, whether spoken or written, has a double function. It is like a two-edged sword, says Paul, “piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (*Heb. 4:12, NKJV*). In the context of what Paul is saying, the word refers to the messages that were preached both to ancient Israel and to Christians (*Heb. 4:2*).

Like a surgeon’s scalpel, the spoken Word of God can penetrate to heal and restore, or it can furnish the evidence of a deadly disease that will result in eternal condemnation. Unless the word preached meets with faith on the part of the hearers, it cannot benefit them.

While not everyone in the church was willing to accept Ellen G. White’s prophetic authority, the church by and large listened to her counsel and benefited by it. The following story reveals the good things the church experienced by following Ellen G. White’s advice. For example, church organization between 1863 (when the General Conference was organized) and 1901 remained basically unchanged. As work in different lines developed, various associations (Medical Missionary, Sabbath School, Religious Liberty, Tract Society, etc.) were formed to foster these ministries. Because these associations were all autonomous organizations represented by independent corporations but not integral parts of the General Conference organization, they were sometimes in competition with one another. On the other hand, all major decisions in regard to the worldwide work were made by a few people at the General Conference in Battle Creek.

The day before the General Conference session in 1901, Ellen G. White met with the church leaders and urged them to make drastic changes in the running of the church. Accordingly, when the conference opened, the usual order of business was set aside, and a large committee (about 75 people) was appointed to work on the reorganization of the church structure. The result was that the General Conference committee was enlarged considerably, the various associations became departments of the General Conference, and union conferences were organized to enable leaders in the field to make decisions on the spot without having to wait for answers from Battle Creek.

The reorganization of the church structure, directed by divine counsel, was accepted unanimously and has stood the test of time. With some modifications and enlargements, it is still the structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church today.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**III. The Authority of the Written and Spoken Word**

Consider This: Put the following texts on slips of paper and give them out to members of the class in advance: 2 Samuel 12:1, 1 Kings 11:29, Luke 7:24–27.

1. Ask the class to name some of the prophets who wrote the books of the Bible. What was their basic message? How does it apply to us today?
2. Now turn to the texts that were given out earlier, reading one at a time. Ask the class the following questions about each one:
 - a. Who was the prophet?
 - b. What was his message?
 - c. To whom was it given?
 - d. What application can be made from it to today?

The prophets in the texts we read did not write any of the 66 books in our Bible. Yet we believe that what they said were messages from God, and as such there is something for us to learn from them today.

God's Word—the 66 books in our Bible—supersedes any other prophetic words. While we understand that God uses additional prophets to speak His words, they never will speak for the Bible, change the Bible, or add to the Bible. They may help us better understand the Bible and how to apply it to our lives today. That is the role of Ellen G. White's writings in the church.

Consider This: What is a noncanonical prophet? How do we or should we relate to the authority of noncanonical prophets?

► STEP 3—Practice**Thought Questions:**

Just for Teachers: Type or write the following questions and possible answers on 3" x 5" cards to give to each class member. Read them over in class and suggest that the class members put them in their Bibles to remind them to study God's Word on a regular basis.

How seriously do you take the Bible in your life today as

- a. an authority on religious information or ancient history,
- b. an expression of God's will,
- c. a guide to daily life,
- d. a means to reach eternal life?

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The Authority of Noncanonical Prophets

Apart from the canonical prophets, such as Isaiah and Amos, we find in Scripture a number of prophets whose books did not become part of the canon. What do the following texts tell us about these prophets and their writings? *1 Chron. 29:29, 2 Chron. 9:29, 12:15.*

Among its sources, the books of Chronicles refer to different prophetic books written by extracanonical prophets: Gad, Nathan, Ahijah, Shemaiah, and Iddo.

What authority did extracanonical prophets have? *2 Sam. 12:1–4, 1 Kings 11:29–39, 14:2–18, Luke 7:28.*

In David's time, Scripture was the books of Moses, but not for one moment did David question the authority of Nathan. He knew that Nathan was a prophet and that his word was authoritative, even though Nathan had no books that ever made it into the Bible.

Let us suppose that archaeologists found a book written by Nathan today. Would it be added to the Bible? No; it would remain an inspired book outside of the canon. And if a theological statement were found in the book, it would remain an inspired and authoritative statement outside of the canon.

The canon is simply the collection of books that under God's guidance was put together as the rule of life and faith for God's people and by which everything else has to be measured. It contains everything a person needs to know to be saved. However, not everything the prophets wrote under inspiration is in the Bible. We know, for example, that Paul wrote more inspired letters than we have in the New Testament today (*1 Cor. 5:9, Col 4:16*). Now, if we found one of these letters today, it would not become part of the Bible. It would remain an authoritative, inspired letter, outside of the canon.

Ellen White's authority can be compared to the authority of the extracanonical prophets. The inspired messages she received for the church are not an addition to the canon. Her writings are not another Bible, nor do they carry the kind of authority found in the Bible. In the end, the Bible and the Bible alone is our ultimate authority.

**Why must even Ellen White's writings be tested by the Bible?
Why must she not be the final authority on doctrinal matters?**

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Application Questions:**

How well do you know the writings of Ellen White?

- a. Well enough to know I don't believe in them.
- b. I don't know them well at all.
- c. I'm not sure how well I know them.
- d. I read them on a regular basis.

Consider This: If your answer was a, b, or c, why not try reading some of her writings again, asking yourself the following questions:

1. Whom is Ellen White pointing to? Does she uphold the Bible?
2. Is she really being judgmental and nitpicking or have I allowed the way others read her or talked about her to influence me unduly?
3. Would it be helpful to ask God to clear my mind of preconceived ideas or past experiences before I begin to read her writings?

Witnessing

Consider This: Print the following pairs of lists in two columns on a whiteboard, flip chart, or on slips of paper to hand out to the class.

Bold	Timid
Strong	Weak
Good speaker	Poor with words
Well educated	Not highly educated but teachable

Which of these characteristics can God make the best use of in His work? Why?

► STEP 4—Apply

Consider This: You are just as important to God as any prophet He ever has called. He has a specific plan for your life. Do you know God's plan for your life? What has He revealed to you that you have done or refused to do?

■ *If you already are not spending quality time with Jesus each day, how about rescheduling your life to include time to prayerfully study His Word—His messages to the prophets—and Ellen G. White's writings. When you do so, God will help you discover His special plan for you.*

Further Study:

In 1982, an ad hoc committee of the General Conference prepared a statement on the relationship between the Bible and Ellen G. White. It reads in part, “**Affirmations:** (1) We believe that Scripture is the divinely revealed Word of God and is inspired by the Holy Spirit. (2) We believe that the canon of Scripture is composed only of the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments. (3) We believe that Scripture is the foundation of faith and the final authority in all matters of doctrine and practice. (4) We believe that Scripture is the Word of God in human language. (5) We believe that Scripture teaches that the gift of prophecy will be manifest in the Christian church after New Testament times. (6) We believe that the ministry and writings of Ellen White were a manifestation of the gift of prophecy. (7) We believe that Ellen White was inspired by the Holy Spirit and that her writings, the product of that inspiration, are applicable and authoritative especially to Seventh-day Adventists. (8) We believe that the purposes of the Ellen White writings include guidance in understanding the teaching of Scripture and application of these teachings, with prophetic urgency, to the spiritual and moral life. (9) We believe that the acceptance of the prophetic gift of Ellen White is important to the nurture and unity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. (10) We believe that Ellen White’s use of literary sources and assistants finds parallels in some of the writings of the Bible. **Denials:** (1) We do not believe that the quality or degree of inspiration in the writings of Ellen White is different from that of Scripture. (2) We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White are an addition to the canon of Sacred Scripture. (3) We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White function as the foundation and final authority of Christian faith as does Scripture. (4) We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White may be used as the basis of doctrine. (5) We do not believe that the study of the writings of Ellen White may be used to replace the study of Scripture. (6) We do not believe that Scripture can be understood only through the writings of Ellen White. (7) We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White exhaust the meaning of Scripture. (8) We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White are essential for the proclamation of the truths of Scripture to society at large. (9) We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White are the product of mere Christian piety. (10) We do not believe that Ellen White’s use of literary sources and assistants negates the inspiration of her writings.”—“The Inspiration and Authority of Ellen G. White Writings” in *Ministry*, August 1982, p. 21.

The conclusion then was drawn that a correct understanding of the inspiration and authority of the writings of Ellen White will avoid two extremes: (1) regarding these writings as functioning on a canonical level identical with Scripture; (2) considering them as ordinary Christian literature.

Discussion Question:

Go through the lists above. How does this help clarify some issues regarding Ellen G. White? What questions does it raise?