

## A Look in the Mirror: Ellen White, Blacks, and the Adventist Church

Benjamin Baker, PhD, Assistant Archivist, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists  
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At the dawn 1889, Charles Marshall Kinney (also Kinny) packed his bags once again and looked east to the bustling port city of half a million that was St. Louis. For the last four years the lone itinerant preacher had crisscrossed the state of Kansas, the grueling undertaking of colporteur and preaching paying off in the form of pockets of black believers in Wichita, Emporia, and Topeka.<sup>1</sup>

Born into slavery in the capitol of Virginia in 1855, at the time he and his family were emancipated, Charles' wanderlust could finally be satiated. Swept up in the crowds in search of gold, the young man went west, finding employment in the mining boomtown of Reno, Nevada. It was there in the late summer of 1878 that Kinney discovered the Adventist message under a tent through the preaching of John Loughborough and Ellen White.<sup>2</sup>

When he was baptized Kinney was one of literally a dozen or so black Adventists. After proving himself in a church clerkship and as secretary of the Nevada Tract and Missionary Society, Charles was sponsored by the members of the Reno church to study for the ministry at Healdsburg College in 1883. Upon finishing in 1885 he was sent by the General Conference to canvas Kansas.<sup>3</sup>

An Adventist minister with three strikes against him—minority race, minority religion, minority marital status for his age (he was single), Charles was anything if not grimly persistent. Apprising *Adventist Review* readers of his progress, he penned modest pieces detailing modest successes. In toto, Kinney won about two dozen souls to the faith in bleeding Kansas. During this time GC secretary Dan Jones wrote to Kinney that “Your success or failure will largely shape the policy of the General Conference in planning for the work among the colored people in the future.”<sup>4</sup> Jones was not exaggerating; Kinney was basically the *only* black Adventist minister.

Entering St. Louis, Kinney couldn't know that the next couple of months would signal a turning point in the history of the fledgling denomination. The indefatigable 34 year old won a number of blacks “of a fine class” (in Dan Jones' words) to the Adventist message there. But when the new believers, still in the blush of their fresh faith, arrived at the all-white congregation of 50 in the city, they were treated reprehensibly by their Caucasian brothers and sisters. Although Kinney's letters from 1889 have not survived, we get a feel for the sorry episode from a Dan Jones letter and Ellen White, who later visited.<sup>5</sup> Kinney, for his part, departed the city for Louisville, Kentucky, shortly afterward, and it is unclear whether he left because of the prejudice

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<sup>1</sup> Charles M. Kinney, “Labor Among the Colored People,” *Review and Herald*, May 25, 1886, v. 63, n. 21, pg. 333; Charles M. Kinny, “Canvassing in Kansas and Missouri,” *Review and Herald*, January 29, 1889, v. 66, n. 5, pg. 77.

<sup>2</sup> “KINNEY. [obituary],” *Review and Herald*, September 27, 1951, v. 128, n. 39, pg. 20.

<sup>3</sup> S.N. Haskell, “The Cause on the Pacific Coast,” *Review and Herald*, May 19, 1885, v. 62, n. 20, pg. 320.

<sup>4</sup> D.T. Jones to C.M. Kinny, June 26, 1889, GC Archives, RG 11, Box 3059.

<sup>5</sup> D.T. Jones to C.M. Kinny, March 6, 1889, GC Archives, RG 11, Box 3059.

toward him and his converts or in line with the early Adventist tradition was simply moving on to evangelize in another locale.<sup>6</sup>

Later that year in October Kinney was ordained—the first black to be thus honored in the Adventist church—and the face of white supremacy appeared to haunt him again at the ceremony, the gathering being segregated.<sup>7</sup> Kinney deemed treatment like this as such an impediment to his mission to his people that shortly after he recommended the two races minister separately, maintain separate churches, and separate conferences, all to best advance the Advent cause.<sup>8</sup>

The next year in late March Ellen White stopped at the gateway to the West on her way to a camp meeting in Kansas. From her reaction to the situation in the St. Louis church, it is evident that the ill-treatment had not abated. On March 21, 1891, in an address to GC leaders at the tail end of the GC session that year, White recalled:

While at St. Louis a year ago, as I knelt in prayer, these words were presented to me as if written with a pen of fire: “All ye are brethren.” The Spirit of God rested upon me in a wonderful manner, and matters were opened to me in regard to the church at St. Louis and in other places. The spirit and words of some in regard to members of the church were an offense to God. They were closing the door of their hearts to Jesus. Among those in St. Louis who believe the truth there are colored people who are true and faithful, precious in the sight of the God of heaven, and they should have just as much respect as any [other] of God's children. Those who have spoken harshly to them or have despised them have despised the purchase of the blood of Christ, and they need the transforming grace of Christ in their own hearts, that they may have the pitying tenderness of Jesus toward those who love God with all the fervor of which they themselves are capable. The color of the skin does not determine character in the heavenly courts.<sup>9</sup>

Fifteen years after the episode Ellen wrote to her son Edson:

I am free to say that the Lord does not call upon me to take upon myself the burden of doing pioneer work in a place where there have been Sabbathkeepers for years, and where there are two classes of believers, white and colored. We had some experiences at St. Louis that I can never think of without a feeling of dread.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> C.M. Kinney, “Labor among the Colored People,” *Review and Herald*, v. 66, n. 45, pg. 716.

<sup>7</sup> R.M. Kilgore, “Tennessee Camp-Meeting and Nashville Institute,” *Review and Herald*, October 29, 1889, v. 66, n. 43, pg. 683.

<sup>8</sup> R.M. Kilgore interview with C.M. Kinney, October 2, 1889, GC Archives.

<sup>9</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Southern Work* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1898), pg. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Ellen G. White to James Edson White, March 1, 1904, Letter 105, 1904 (Ellen G. White Estate).

In a letter to the Evanses, White wrote:

At St. Louis the state of our missions was revealed to me like a flash of lightning, making everything distinct that was in darkness. I was bearing a testimony, clear and cutting to men and women in responsible places.<sup>11</sup>

As the above quotes attest, St. Louis triggered something in the mind of Ellen White. You all may know that White's special emphases—from publishing to education to the health work—were almost always ignited by a vision or traumatic experience. In 1865 at the GC Session after the emancipation of the black captives it was resolved “That a field is now opened in the South for labor among the colored people and should be entered upon according to our ability.”<sup>12</sup> This resolution did not prompt a mad dash south from the ministers present. No, the period from 1865 to the St. Louis episode was characterized by tepid and piecemeal forays into the South by the largely Northern and Midwestern white Adventists. And, Ellen White was quiet, at least publicly and in correspondence, on this neglect up to 1891. It is no mystery as to what initiated a veritable onslaught from her on the absolute necessity of a vigorous program of education and evangelism by Adventists to the 5 or so million blacks in the South: it was a traumatic experience coupled with a vision.

In the 20 years that followed St. Louis, Ellen White wrote some 600 pages on the necessity of the church evangelizing Southern blacks, as well as raised money, gave addresses, extracted promises, politicked, campaigned and even supported her son when he embarked on his hazardous and ill-fated foray into the deep South, much of this, inexplicably, when she resided in Australia, a world away from the American South. Her burden for the black work was so considerable that she would provide for it them from the grave, clause 5 of her last will and testament allotting moneys to the Negro Department and Oakwood.

The St. Louis episode served as a mirror at the cusp of the inauguration of White's new burden. The episode revealed the true character of White, the Adventist church, and African Americans. In fact, White's very agitating, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century sense of the word, was a mirror to the church. In St. Louis we see a black minister winning blacks to the message, the said converts desiring fellowship, only to be refused. We glimpse a white church which did nothing to win the blacks who had accepted the message, and not ready for fellowship. Finally, there is a prophetess who seems to be largely ignorant of racial dynamics among Adventists, at least in certain regions, and is transformed by trauma and a subsequent revelation into a vocal advocate of racial equality and missions to African Americans.

The three-way relationship from 1890 to 1910, halved by the inauguration of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, captures each entity at a compelling juncture in their development.

**First Ellen White:** Her husband James had died in 1881. We may say that after this she truly came into her own, becoming a force as never before. By then her prophetic role was almost institutionalized, and although it was still attacked (e.g. 1888), the proving days were largely

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<sup>11</sup> Ellen G. White to Brother and Sister Evans, June 10, 1891, Letter 8b, 1891 (Ellen G. White Estate).

<sup>12</sup> “Report of the Third Annual Session of the General Conference of S.D. Adventists,” *The Advent Review, and Sabbath Herald*, May 23, 1865, pg. 197.

over. Because of this, at least partly, the last 25 years of White's life were arguably her most productive.

**Next African Americans:** Emancipation left some three million blacks bound one day, and manumitted the next, with no place to go, no job, no money, no shelter, no food, and no education. To make matters worse, new varieties of slavery quickly emerged, lynching was common, and other kinds of racial terrorism haunted the everyday lives of blacks. Largely illiterate and uneducated, as well as being psychologically ravaged by slavery, this was an era of crisis for African Americans. The need was tremendous, some historians posit unprecedented in history on such a large scale. From 1890 to 1910 Jim and Jane Crow policies were woven into the fabric of American society, the effects of which are still being felt today, despite the civil rights movement and claim of a post-racial Obama era.

**And the Adventist Church:** By 1890 the church's membership was just at 30,000, and although it couldn't be called an "international church" yet, very modest foundations that would eventually support a robust multinational church presence were being laid in locales across the globe. From 1881-1890, the church dispatched 149 missionaries. The deployment of this amount of IDEs indicates something of the level of the church's establishment and administrative competency, and although the 1880s were tempestuous with the winds that any young organization faces, the denomination entered the '1890s forward-facing. On the flipside are the tempestuous winds: the identity crisis post-1888, and indeed, the aftermath of 1888 saw all of the major feuding participants dispersed across the globe; there was the reorganization of 1901; the Review and Herald fire; the relocation of the GC and the Review to Battle Creek; the apostasy of A.T. Jones and J.H. Kellogg; etc.

Now there are 9 permutations in the tripartite relationship in which I am using the mirror as a metaphor. And since I am in the Ellen White section of the program and have a time restraint, I will only treat on Ellen White's catalytic aspect in this relationship

Ellen White→blacks→church  
Ellen White→church→blacks

These two permutations represent a lens for the first entity, Ellen White, that becomes a mirror to the third entity. That is to say, Ellen White related to the church through the lens of the black predicament, and the church saw itself in the mirror. Further, Ellen White had a relationship with blacks through the lens of the Adventist church, and blacks could see themselves on the other end.

I pause before wading into these waters. In my research on Ellen White's appeals to the church to work for blacks from 1890-1910 and the church's response to her, I discovered that the whole two-decade affair is overwhelmingly negative, to the point of being depressing. To be frank, Ellen White was brutal toward the church in their response or lack thereof, castigating and upbraiding it and even accusing certain leaders of fraud, misappropriation, and outright embezzlement of funds earmarked for the Southern work. Now I love my church, but the evidence shows that there was a tragic disconnect not only between the church and Ellen White on this matter, but the church and African Americans. I found myself craving the comforts of the

good old triumphalist narrative, but there's no triumphalism in the documents, in this part of history. I hope the rest of this presentation will be instructive for us, that, the Christological imperative toward "the least of these," in the end, is what the church's and our evaluation will hinge on.

The first permutation: Ellen White often related to the Adventist church through, or in light of, black people.

To illustrate this dynamic, listen to a line from Ellen White's 1891 address "Our Duty to the Colored People:"

Sin rests upon us as a church because we have not made greater effort for the salvation of souls among the colored people.<sup>13</sup>

Here White reveals the church—represented in the person of its leaders—to itself through black people, in this case what Adventists have not done for them. Sin is resting on the church; the church is guilty. Mark that, for our purposes here, such a conclusion could only have been made through, or in light, of blacks. As an aside I find it disconcerting that certain voices in the Adventism and on its fringe have declared that sin rested on the church due to its supposed rejection of the 1888 message. But the aforementioned Ellen White's statement, more direct than any statement she made on the church's guilt over 1888, gets nary a mention.

In this next pericope from a 1901 letter, we see that through blacks the church sees in the mirror that it may claim to adhere to what God says through His prophet, but it in fact does not when she bears a message that is disagreeable:

I know not how to describe the way in which the Southern field has been presented to me. In this field thousands and thousands of people are living in wickedness and corruption, and they are right within the shadow of our doors. That field bears testimony to the neglect of a people who should have been wide awake to work for the Master, but who have done scarcely anything in this field. A little work has been done there, we have touched the field with the tip ends of our fingers, but not one-thousandth part of the work has been done that should be done. God calls upon his people to stand in a right position before him, to heed the light given ten or fifteen years ago—that the abused, down-trodden people of the South were to be labored for and helped.<sup>14</sup>

Listen to this:

What excuse can be rendered to God for the awful condition of the colored people? God asks, Why are those living in this part of My vineyard left to become the sport of Satan's temptations? He calls for universal action...Angels have hushed the music of their harps as they have looked upon a people unable, because of their past slavery, to help themselves. And yet those who have the torch of truth, kindled from the divine altar, have not carried the light to this sin-darkened field. I present this subject to

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<sup>13</sup> White, *The Southern Work*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Ellen G. White, *General Conference Bulletin*, April 25, 1901, pg. 1.

you as it has been presented to me. There are those who have turned from the work of rescuing the down-trodden and degraded. They have refused to help the helpless. Let the servants of Christ now act their part in the way that seems to open before them. Let them begin at once to redeem their neglect. Let the gospel message ring through our churches, summoning them to universal action, that the dark stain of neglect on their record may be wiped out.<sup>15</sup>

Yes, the premise of almost every one of Ellen White's statements to the church about the South—"South" was the early Adventist term for the work among African Americans, who were then primarily concentrated in the Southern United States—is that this is the Adventist church's non-negotiable mission. As the remnant of Revelation whose tasked with proclaiming the gospel to every nation, kindred, tongue and people, they *must* reach blacks with the message. This I see as the profound mistake of the Millerite and Shut Door periods: How can Jesus come or probation be closed when blacks in the South, and people across the world, had not heard the glad tidings. Ellen White assures the church time and time again that there is no way around the great commission, there is no ducking it. Yet also implicit in her statements is that the work can indeed be accomplished. God was not setting His people up for failure.

I conclude this very limited exploration on a positive note, since it seems that the degradation of blacks just after slavery has been such a prevalent theme.

Our second relationship path: Ellen White related to blacks through the church.

Now I can demonstrate this in a number of ways, but for now share one angle: Ellen White viewed blacks through the lens of her distinctly Adventist worldview, and blacks could look at her statements and see in the mirror what they were and what they could be:

On the mental capacity of blacks (this sounds demeaning and not up for discussion now, but when White wrote the following in 1905, it was not only up for discussion but heated debate, with perhaps the majority of white Americans arguing against...well, let's move on). Also note that if these quotes sound somewhat paternalistic or patronizing, it's because this is still the Victorian era. White pens:

There are among the negro race those who have superior natural intelligence, and who, if converted to Christ, could do a good work for their own people. Many are to be trained to labor as evangelists, Bible workers, teachers, nurses, hygienic cooks, and colporteurs. Many can be taught to be home missionaries.<sup>16</sup>

Some blacks have superior natural intelligence—and no doubt this is seen most clearly in the performance of some sort of Adventist ministry function. Black intelligence is recognized in White's worldview in church-related ethnic labor in order to achieve the *raison d'être* of her church. Here blacks can see in the mirror that, despite what whites have programmed them to

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<sup>15</sup> Ellen G. White, Ms 67, 1902, May 20, 1902 (Ellen G. White Estate).

<sup>16</sup> Ellen G. White, "The Collection for the Colored Work," *Advent Review, and Sabbath Herald*, September 28, 1905.

think about themselves for centuries, they were just as intelligent, and occupied a place in God's plan.

In this next quote White's Adventist eschatology informs her thinking about blacks:

The powers of hell are working with all their ingenuity to prevent the proclamation of the last message of mercy among the colored people.<sup>17</sup>

The larger context of this statement is a cataloguing of the tremendous degradation that blacks suffered from their enslavement to the present racial terrorism of the post-Reconstruction South—this, this sturm und drang was a strategy of satanic agencies to prohibit them from hearing the gospel. Recall in another place that Ellen White wrote “Satan invented the system of slavery.” Blacks were facing a cunning foe fixated on preventing them from fulfilling their eschatological destiny. This is a look in the mirror that perhaps only an Adventist prophetess could provide. I've never seen it anywhere else. In fact, in the 1850s, John Andrews and Uriah Smith identified the United States as the eschatological villain of Revelation 13—the lamblike beast who spake us a dragon—because of its cruel treatment of blacks via chattel slavery. Blacks were integral to the prominent features of Adventist eschatology, and this look in the mirror placed their harrowing American sojourn in divine perspective.

One more passage on African Americans and the eschaton, here the last judgment:

In the eyes of the Lord the Southern field is a most distressing spectacle, a deformity in the midst of a Christian nation, bearing testimony before angels and before men to the neglect of a people who might be helped were it not for the selfishness and covetousness of professing Christians, who will be called to account for their neglect in the day when every man is judged according to his works. The colored people of the South, who have been left in degradation, will then bear witness against the Christian world.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, in the following lines, Ellen White's notion of Adventist perfectibility and the limitless potential of man through the power of the gospel, is applied to black Americans:

They may have a life that measures with the life of God.<sup>19</sup>

Many among this race have noble traits of character and keen perception of mind. If they had an opportunity to develop, they would stand upon an equality with the whites.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ellen G. White, “Proclaiming the Truth Where There is Race Antagonism,” Manuscript 103, 1908, October 19, 1908 (Ellen G. White Estate).

<sup>18</sup> Ellen G. White, Letter 113, 1901, August 13, 1901, pg. 2 (Ellen G. White Estate).

<sup>19</sup> Ellen G. White, “An Appeal for the Southern Field,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, November 26, 1895, pg. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Ellen G. White, “An Example in History,” *Advent Review, and Sabbath Herald*, December 17, 1895.

Many who have been looked upon as hopeless will become educators of their race. Through the grace of God the race that the enemy has for generations oppressed may rise to the dignity of God-given manhood and womanhood.<sup>21</sup>

And to Oakwood students in 1904:

God has bestowed on the colored race some of the best and highest talents.<sup>22</sup>

In conclusion, we see Charles Kinney in 1951, aged 96. He is haggard and stooped, ambulating, when he deigns to, with a cane. He is curmudgeonly by even the most generous estimate, but the network of creases hallowed on his visage approximate that trails and roads he traversed to touch blacks with the truth. This man who offered his life in the gospel field in an often thankless work, was one among only a handful of black Adventists upon his conversion in 1878, and now, the year of his death, there are nearly 27,000 African American Seventh-day Adventists. Indeed, after World War II when regional conferences were formed, the black church was a paragon of prodigious soul-winning for global Adventism, outstripping even their white American brethren in this regard. Times had changed, and now there was an altogether different image in the mirror.

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<sup>21</sup> Ellen G. White, "Volunteers Wanted for the Southern Field," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, February 4, 1896, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Ellen G. White, "The Work of the Huntsville School," Manuscript 60, 1904, June 21, 1904 (Ellen G. White Estate).