

HISTORY

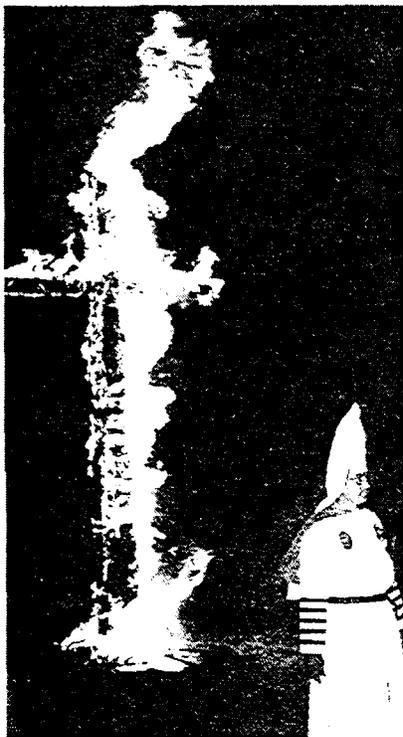
THE "RACE WAR" QUESTION: ITS RELEVANCE TODAY

America had been at war with itself. Now that war was over.

A myriad of civil perplexities faced the nation just emerging from bloody conflict. The volatile slavery-freedom question had been legally settled but remained unanswered in practice. The tense racial climate took various forms in different parts of the country. Disagreement on how to implement Reconstruction divided the nation. Many questioned how the ex-slave and former master should relate to each other.

Amid all these considerations the infant Seventh-day Adventist Church confronted an often-hostile environment. Ellen White, faced with unique challenges as God's messenger, repeatedly outlined the most prudent approach to relations between whites and blacks "until the Lord shows us a better way."¹

Understanding the historical, sociological, and religious settings provides a helpful perspective on statements concerning racial relations in *Testimonies*, volume 9. Such a perspective brings out the prudence of Ellen White, who was willing to forgo acceptance by whites and blacks and to risk misunderstanding in order to set forth views that would provide for the long-range good of both. In a message entitled *Our Duty to the*



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Colored People, presented at an 1891 General Conference session in Battle Creek, Michigan, she set forth a series of reformatory principles that were confrontational and ahead of her time.

Sixteen years later, on April 29, 1907, in Loma Linda, California, Ellen

White, in an interview with three church leaders, made the prediction "I knew that this very race war would be introduced."² Ellen White also said, "There will be slavery just as verily as it has been, only upon a basis that is more favorable and secure to the white people."³

Statements such as these raise certain questions, such as "What did she mean?" "Was this fulfilled?" A study of this subject reveals the rich balance Ellen White had on the sensitive race issue, discloses principles that will help us today, and brings confidence in God's prophet.

A careful study of history reveals that both predictions of Ellen White were distinctly fulfilled within approximately 15 years after she made them.

Placing the Statements in Context

Most of Ellen White's statements on the race issue came between 1891, when she first called attention to the need for work among the blacks in *Our Duty to the Colored People*, and 1908, when she completed material for *Testimonies*, volume 9, entitled "Among the Colored People." As a result of this emphasis, her son William White felt the need to prepare a book that would give Adventists a picture of the fields in the Southern

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states and the work (i.e., the black work) needed to be done there.⁴ He hoped this book would be the means of encouraging youth to give themselves to the work.

As of January, 1895, his brother, James Edson White, had been doing a commendable work in the South on a riverboat, *Morning Star*. But he needed more means and workers. Willie, like his mother, no doubt realized that the sooner work could be done there, the better, before the avenues started to close up.

For these reasons and with these burdens, William White and Percy Magan, along with Dores Robinson, arranged the 1907 interview with Ellen White to share their thoughts and get her counsel.

Ellen White had said in 1895, 12 years before, "The colored people might have been helped with much better prospects of success years ago than now. The work is now tenfold harder than it would have been then."⁵ In 1900, seven years previous, she stated, "The Lord is grieved at the indifference manifested by His professed followers toward the ignorant and oppressed colored people. If our people had taken up this work at the close of the Civil War, their faithful labor would have done much to prevent the present condition of suffering and sin."⁶ In 1895 she referred to the fact that some work had been done, "When freedom was proclaimed to the captives, a favorable time was given in which to establish schools and to teach the people to take care of themselves. Much of this kind of work was done by various denominations, and God honored their work."⁷

The Sociological Setting

The four discussed a variety of related issues during the interview, such as the advantage of a book on the Southern work, the kind of work required there, the need for schools, and the value of working the soil. At that point Magan said to Ellen White, "You know, years ago you made the statement that the time would come when there would be a terrible race war in the South. I do not know

A mob of 400 white men invaded the colored district of Wilmington, set fire to buildings, killed and wounded many Negroes, and chased hundreds out of town.



H. ARMSTRONG ROBERTS



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Top: Martin Luther King, Jr., delivers his famous "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington, D.C., August 28, 1963. Bottom: Brooklyn, New York, residents inspect damage to stores and tenements after racial disturbances in 1970.

whether you ever said it in so many words, but you intimated that slavery would exist again."⁶

Apparently Magan recollected a statement by Ellen White at an earlier time, "Slavery will again be revived in the Southern states; for the spirit of slavery still lives."⁷ A little later in the interview he compared his recollected "race war" statement with the "slavery" statement. As we shall see, Ellen White made the same comparison.

Without directly responding to his recollection, Ellen White explained what he referred to: "Just as soon as people begin to make any kind of movement to educate the blacks, there are some who are determined that it shall not be done."⁸

Here Ellen White relates Magan's "race war"/"slavery" recollection to opposition against educating or bettering the condition of blacks. Magan elaborated on this thought, "It is the common talk all over the South that there will be a race war within the next few years. Senator Tillman has talked it in the house. Governor-elect Hoke Smith and Tillman have published a plan that they are advocating everywhere. . . . They will divide every county into districts, and every Negro is to be numbered. He will have a brass plate strapped to his arm . . . giving his number. . . . and then he is never to be allowed outside of that district without a passport from the officers."⁹

In response to this remark, Ellen White made the statement "There will be slavery just as verily as it has been, only upon a basis that is more favorable and secure to the white people."¹⁰

Magan elaborated on the meaning of "secure to the white people." "More secure, because they do not have to feed the Negroes and care for them. Then if the Negro has got outside that district, or if he is loafing and not working, they can put him on the chain gang for a year. . . . There are many of the Negroes today who are selling their property and hiding their money in the earth for fear that their land and houses, if they were known to own any, would be taken from them."¹¹

In 1899 Ellen White made this comment: "It is the prejudice of the white against the black race that makes this field hard, very hard. The whites who have oppressed the colored people still have the same spirit. They did not lose it, although they were conquered in war. They are determined to make it appear that the blacks were better off in slavery than since they were set free."¹²

Magan moved to the subject of the book, saying, "I had thought we ought, without taking sides or creating any disturbance, tell in a moderate way the conditions in the South. . . . If we could depict the present status somewhat, it would interest our people to go south to work before it is too late. And yet I felt, on the other hand, that we should be very careful in the doing of that, lest we stir up a hornet's nest."¹³

Careful Approval

This careful approach Ellen White had advocated for years. She responded, "That is the danger. That is why I have pleaded, and entreated, entreated, and entreated for the work to be done in the South, because I knew that this very race war would be introduced."¹⁴

This was not the first time Ellen White had voiced such a warning. Eight years before, in an 1899 letter, she made the following prediction: "At the least provocation the poison of prejudice is ready to show its true character, and provocations will be found. It is very hard to make the work run smoothly. Outbreaks will come at any moment, and all unexpectedly, and there will be destruction of property and even of life itself."¹⁵

By 1907 the crisis had come upon the nation and the church. Problems increased in intensity and took the form of violence between the races, most of which would be realized within the next 15 years. While fulfillment of the "slavery" and "race war" predictions was imminent, there would be a difference in how they came to pass. The "slavery" reference did not indicate a condition the same as had existed in the past, with slaves on plantations. Instead, there would

come a political, economic, and social bondage. The race war was to be a natural outgrowth of the new slavery, in the form of violent antagonism between whites and blacks, with mobs, riots, people beaten, shot, and lynched.

C. Vann Woodward described the scene. "It was inevitable that race relations should deteriorate rapidly under such pressure [referring to Hoke Smith's anti-Negro disfranchisement campaign]. The immediate consequences in two states were bloody mob wars upon the Negro. Shortly after the red-shirt, white-supremacy election of 1898 in North Carolina a mob of four hundred white men led by a former Congressman invaded the colored district of Wilmington, set fire to buildings, killed and wounded many Negroes, and chased hundreds out of town. The sequel to Hoke Smith's white-supremacy victory in Georgia in 1906 was a four-day rule of anarchy in Atlanta, during which mobs roved the city freely looting, murdering, and lynching."¹⁶

In a period that witnessed the struggle for Southern self-government, the Knights of the White Camellia, the revival of the Ku Klux Klan, and a reaction by blacks, slavery in its new form and race war as a bitter result became sad realities.

To be concluded

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- ¹⁰ DF 151, p. 4.
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RACE WAR PREDICTIONS REACH FULFILLMENT

Second of two parts

History abounds with vignettes of racial tensions during the post-Civil War Reconstruction period. Ellen White saw that these problems would take on new dimensions at the turn of the century. They would manifest themselves especially during the first two decades of the twentieth century, which would set the pace for the following 30 to 40 years and would even impact on us today.

Three realities of the early 1900s relate to Ellen White's prediction that racial strife would rise again.

1. Emancipation Into "More Favorable" Slavery

Abraham Lincoln assured the Southern states that he aimed to "bind up the nation's wounds." But pulling the Union together again, rebuilding the South, and dealing with 4 million freed slaves proved a formidable task. It required a whole new way of thinking about blacks, now free citizens with rights equal to those of whites. This adjustment many whites found impossible.

Blacks, on the other hand, found themselves faced with the adjustments required by freedom. With families often separated when sold into slavery, locating lost relatives was difficult. They had to find work and a place to live, as well as education and a sense of purpose.

Many factors militated against their success. While some whites

rejoiced that blacks were no longer slaves, many feared the new condition. In too many cases fear mushroomed into open hostility, the kind that Ellen White referred to as "slavery just as verily as it had been, only on a basis that is more favorable and secure to the white people."¹ An avalanche of discriminatory legislation began in 1870 and culminated during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

"The Civil War officially ended slavery in the United States, but in the postwar decades of Reconstruction and the rebuilding of the 'New South' slavery was replaced by other forms of economic and social bondage. Sharecropping and peonage, plus the persistence of racial segregation in the form of 'Jim Crow' laws, assured white Southerners of continued control over the black population."²

2. Segregation

"Jim Crow" came to represent segregation of blacks and whites throughout society. The "slavery" that Ellen White referred to as "more favorable and secure to the white people" resulted because the black race could still be controlled and contained without the responsibility of feeding, housing, or attending to their needs as in the former slavery system.

This racial bondage expressed itself in a succession of decisions by

the United States Supreme Court before the turn of the century in which the Court removed protection by the government over many rights of the blacks. "The Court held that the Fourteenth Amendment gave Congress power to restrain states but not individuals from acts of racial discrimination and segregation."³ It was ruled that a state could not prohibit segregation on a common carrier, and later that a state could constitutionally require such segregation. The "separate but equal" rule became the justification for segregation. Finally, "the Court completed the opening of the legal road to proscription, segregation, and disfranchisement by approving the Mississippi plan for depriving the Negroes of the franchise."⁴

In 1895 Ellen White noted, "Judges and jurors, lawyers and citizens, would, if they had a chance, bring decisions which would . . . cause much suffering." She continued by saying that "all the colored people everywhere would be placed in a position of surveillance, and under cruel treatment by the white people, that would be no less than slavery."⁵

After the turn of the century one state after another enacted clauses to eliminate the black voter by the literary qualification rule, the poll tax, or the white primary, leading to a time that black historian John Franklin called "a long dark night."

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By 1910 segregation was not only established legislatively but had become an accepted part of society throughout both the North and the South.

3. "Race War"

Did a "race war" occur in fulfillment of Ellen White's prediction? Emphatically, yes! The racially inspired riots and battles are well documented. Trumped-up stories of Negro crime, rape, arrogance, or lack of proper servility abounded. Lynchings, beatings, and other forms of violence were perpetrated by groups out to keep blacks in "their proper place."

A modest approximation of lynchings during the first two decades of the twentieth century places the number at about 1,800. Lynching, a punishment administered by hanging that sometimes included burning, was normally carried out by a mob in a spirit of revenge, malice, and frenzy. Ninety percent of these lynchings took place in the South, with more than 85 percent of the victims being black.⁶ Less than one fifth of all lynchings involved a crime calling for capital punishment.

Ellen White made what is probably her only allusion to lynching in a letter to Frank Belden, dated October 22, 1899:

"The colored people have had before them the example of commonness and adultery. These evils are all through our world, but when the . . . [black] . . . do commit sin—sin that committed by white people is scarcely condemned—*colored people are tortured to death whether proved guilty or not.* And the nation that permits this bears the name of Christian. God says, 'Shall I not judge for these things?' "⁷

In addition to lynchings, other crimes against blacks became common. Citizens from every strata of society took part in these persecutions.⁸ Sometimes blacks would resist and seek to defend themselves, but most of the time they lost this "race war," owing to the weapons, numbers, and sometimes even

the authorities arrayed against them.

In a black backlash, bloody racial wars or battles were fought between the two races from 1908 to 1921.⁹ "Six major race riots occurred between 1900 and 1910. . . . The riots . . . involved mobs of white citizens perpetrating crimes against Negro life and property, and Negro citizens returning the favor."¹⁰

Not until the mid-1890s did Adventists begin any serious work in the South. By that time segregation had taken root, making the church's situation there precarious. Ellen White urged the church to move quickly and quietly in the South because of yet more difficulties to come. "When the truth is proclaimed in the South, . . . great care must be exercised, not to do anything to arouse . . . prejudice. Otherwise, we may just as well leave the field entirely, for the workers will have all the white people against them. . . . They will seek to hinder the work in every possible way."¹¹

Conclusions

Individuals to whom Ellen White spoke of future "slavery" and "race war" understood that she referred to imminent racial strife that culminated in approximately the first two decades of the twentieth century.

About 1909 Ellen White wrote: "The relation of the two races has been a matter hard to deal with, and I fear that it will ever remain a most perplexing problem."¹² Ten years earlier she had written the same in a letter to a minister.¹³

History testifies to the validity of Ellen White's prophetic insight in urging the church to work for blacks in the South before conditions changed, making any work more difficult. With 4 million blacks free and searching for religious orientation, the fields were ripe, the time was prime, for evangelism. Hundreds of ministers moved in to assume leadership. Unfortunately, Seventh-day Adventists were not among that number, at least not to any significant degree. So the vast

majority of blacks turned to the Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians.

This unprecedented time for evangelism lasted only ten to 20 years after the Civil War. Ellen White saw this opportunity and helped to support the black work in any way she could. Knowing that this period would not last long, she entreated the church to work the Southern field. The church failed to respond until the mid-nineties.

In spite of the struggles, Ellen White was hopeful on the race question and spoke of the power of Christ over the power of prejudice. Advances have been made. It appears as though we may be nearing the end of that era she spoke of when she said, "The time has not yet come for us to work as if there were no prejudice."¹⁴

We need to examine ourselves seriously lest a spirit other than Christ's be found. We thank God for what He has done through His messenger and for what He will do. The spirit of Christ exhibited in love and unity in race relations provides a witness that will rebuke prejudice in the world around us. □

Concluded

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Delbert W. Baker is editor of *Message*. This series is condensed from "A Statement on Ellen G. White's Use of the Term 'Race War,'" available from the Ellen G. White Estate.