

SOME OBSERVATIONS FOR SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS ON ELLEN WHITE AND VACCINES

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May 14, 2021

God cares about each of us. It is not only our spiritual life that He cares about, but also our physical, emotional, and social life. In his last letter, recorded in the Bible, the apostle John wrote, “Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers” 3 John 2 (NKJV). Through the health message Adventists have sought to experience and practice the healing ministry of Jesus. Ellen White, one of three co-founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, received a call from God to be His messenger. Her prophetic ministry was not to take the place of or add to Scripture, but rather to point us to Bible principles and apply them where necessary for the development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. But the Holy Spirit also led her to guide the church in its major ministries of publishing, health, education, and world mission. Ellen White had four major visions supporting the broad work of health ministry. These and many other subsequent revelations led to the establishment of hospitals, clinics, and a world-wide medical ministry. Her most extensive writing on the subject of health is found in her book *The Ministry of Healing*, first published in 1905.

No Specific Counsel on Vaccines

Ellen White had much to say about many things relating to health, but she did not provide any specific counsel on vaccinations. Therefore, this document is not intended to in any way settle the matter of whether a person should have a particular vaccine or not. This is a personal decision that needs to be guided by prayerful study, consideration of Biblical principles, and medical counsel. We only have a few stories about interactions of Ellen White, her family, and workers in regard to vaccinations. These help us to understand how she applied Biblical principles related to developing scientific advances in vaccines in the absence of direct prophetic revelation.

Stories Relating to Vaccines

W. C. White:

In 1924 W. C. White, Ellen White son, wrote to Dr. L. C. Kellogg in Loma Linda, California. Kellogg had asked about Ellen White’s attitude toward vaccinations. According to W. C. White “she regarded it as a perplexing question.” He continued, “I do not remember of [*sic*] her ever saying or writing that she had special instruction regarding vaccination.” Willie saw his mother as approaching the matter rationally in the absence of direct prophetic revelation:

In my earlier days she spoke of it as something dangerous and related my own experience. She said that as a child I was perfectly healthy until I was vaccinated and by that my health was much

impaired. Mother listened attentively to the arguments that the methods of vaccination had been improved, and when in our travels we were brought to a large city where smallpox was raging and the matter was discussed as to whether or no [*sic*] that I and my associates should be vaccinated, she offered no objection, and in view of the argument of the physicians that it was not only for our own safety but for the safety of others. I and my associates were vaccinated.”¹

Because of the way nineteenth-century smallpox vaccines were made and delivered they not only could produce smallpox symptoms; they also might contain bacterial contamination that could cause other serious diseases. As time passed improvements were made in the vaccine.

D. E. Robinson:

Ellen White’s grandson-in-law and long-time office assistant, D. E. Robinson, responded to a letter addressed to Ellen White about vaccination. Robinson is the person who wrote the widely influential book *The Story of Our Health Message*.² He responded similarly to W. C. White that “Sister White’s writings contain broad principles that should guide us in all our work. When it comes to details, however, it is necessary for us to study these and to come to our own conclusion. Owing to our finite limitations, we do not always see alike on some of these matters.” Robinson then shared an interesting, though tragic story of a close relative who died of smallpox:

When I was a young man, I was vaccinated, and had quite a serious time. This led me to feel that vaccination was wrong. On the other hand, I felt differently about it when I heard of the death, in India, of my uncle, Elder D. A. Robinson, who had refused to be vaccinated. Others who had been vaccinated were very closely associated with him, and they either escaped the disease entirely or had it in a very mild form. Before he died, he stated that if he had it to do over again, he would certainly be vaccinated.”³

Robinson concluded that it was important to follow the “simple treatment” of natural remedies laid out in the testimonies of Ellen White and that we may also benefit from a vaccination. But he again concluded that this was his own personal statement “for which Sister White is in no way responsible.”

In 1931 D. E. Robinson wrote another letter in response to a question on vaccination. He indicated that even Ellen White received a vaccination against smallpox.

You will be interested to know however, that at the time when there was an epidemic of smallpox in the vicinity, she herself was vaccinated and urged her helpers, those connected with her, to be vaccinated. In taking this step Sister White recognized the fact that it has been proven that vaccination either renders one immune from smallpox or greatly lightens its effects if one does come down with it. She also recognized the danger of their exposing others in they failed to take this precaution.⁴

Robinson, who had been a missionary in Africa, remembered that at their mission, “Smallpox was all

¹ W. C. White to L. C. Kellogg, February 5, 1924, Q and A 34-E-2, Ellen G. White Estate, Inc., Silver Spring, MD (EGWE).

² Dores Eugene Robinson, *The Story of Our Health Message: The Origin, Character, and Development of Health Education in the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing, 1955).

³ D. E. Robinson to A. C. Anderson, Archie, MO, February 10, 1915, EGWE.

⁴ D. E. Robinson to Clarence Hocker, June 12, 1931, EGWE.

about us and got into the school. After the students were vaccinated, we had not another case, and in no case did we see any ill results.”⁵

Adventist health papers, Union papers, and occasionally general church papers, from the twentieth century, provided educational information about vaccinations, particularly for smallpox and polio. They were generally supportive of vaccinations when it was shown that the vaccine had relatively few side effects and greatly reduced the danger of death or disability. Also, as noted by Robinson above, during the twentieth century, providing vaccinations was a part of Seventh-day Adventist mission work.⁶

Arthur L. White:

During the Polio outbreak of the mid-twentieth century, there were discussions about whether or not to take the vaccine. Arthur White, grandson of Ellen White and secretary of the White Estate, responded to a letter he received, “If someone has informed you that Sister White counselled against vaccination or inoculations, they are mistaken.” A. L. White then observed:

I think of missionaries who went out in the earlier years of our work, some of whom thought was a violation of principle to be vaccinated. They were cut down with disease and filled early graves giving virtually no service to the mission field. Would it not have been much more pleasing to God for them to have taken the steps which would have prevented their succumbing to these dread diseases?

White then told a sad story:

I think of one of our physicians who today must spend much time in an iron lung [an early type of ventilator]. In the prime of life, he was sent a few years ago to North Africa where he led out in our medical work in a good way. The Lord blessed his ministry. The vaccine was secured for polio shots, but for some reason, there was not sufficient for all. The doctor gave the shots to everyone but himself. He recognized that it would be the part of wisdom for him to have taken the shots, but due to the shortage of vaccine, he did not do so. In the epidemic which swept the country, he succumbed to the disease, in a very paralyzing form. With the cooperation of the United States government, he was flown back to the United States in an ambulance plane. What the man suffered is hard to describe. There is little hope of his ever gaining the use of his normal faculties. He is a man with a family, a young man.”⁷

Example of Quinine and a Principle of Health

God has provided, through Ellen White’s writings, principles that can guide us in considering whether or not to receive a vaccine. In the absence of direct counsel from God, we are called upon to exercise good judgment and pay attention to medical advances. At one point she wrote, “God wants us all to have common sense, and He wants us to reason from common sense. Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Two other examples: Letter from Leatha Coulston to her family, April 16, 1934, from Zhangjakou, Hebei, China: “Elmer amputated three feet, vaccinated two hundred prisoners, had twenty one patients at the clinic. . . .” Elmer F. Coulston Collection, Loma Linda University, Archives and Special Collections; Solusi had a vaccination day during an outbreak, *South African Missionary*, September 21, 1914.

⁷ Arthur L. White to L. D. King, March 13, 1961, EGWE.

the relation of things” 3SM 217.

Ellen White applied this principle regarding the use of quinine, a strong and toxic drug that for many years in the mid-nineteenth century, was used by doctors without correct scientific medical basis. Later it was found that quinine could be effective in treating malaria. Some Adventists refused to use quinine to treat malaria because of what Ellen White had written against the earlier dangerous and false medical practice (such as heroic therapy). While in Australia in the 1890s, W. C. White remembered his mother responding to a tragic inquiry by a man who had lost his first-born son to malaria. Because of Ellen White’s early testimony against quinine, as used by doctors without scientific basis, he refused to allow his son to be treated with this drug. “When he met with Sister White, he asked her this question, ‘Would I have sinned to give the boy quinine when I knew of no other way to check the malaria and when the prospect was that he would die without it?’ In reply she said, ‘No, we are expected to do the best we can.’”⁸

In the context of guidance from God we are encouraged to follow principles that are given. On the matter of the new COVID-19 vaccines there may be reasons why a person believes that it is wisest to not take the vaccine or make the decision to take one particular version rather than another. These are all matters of personal decision and not a matter of divine mandate either through the Bible or the writings of Ellen White.

Website link to article: <https://whiteestate.org/about/issues/vaccinations/>

⁸ W. C. White to “Dear Sister,” September 10, 1935, EGWE; see also footnote in 2SM 281-282.