

The Authority of the General Conference in Session

Ellen White makes it clear that the General Conference in Session is God's highest authority on earth.

"I have been shown that no man's judgment should be surrendered to the judgment of any one man. But when the judgment of the General Conference, which is **the highest authority** that God has upon the earth, is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be maintained, but be surrendered." {9T 260.1}

"At times, when a small group of men entrusted with the general management of the work have, in the name of the General Conference, sought to carry out unwise plans and to restrict God's work, I have said that I could no longer regard the voice of the General Conference, represented by these few men, as the voice of God. But this is not saying that the decisions of a General Conference composed of an assembly of duly appointed, representative men from all parts of the field, should not be respected. God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have **authority**. The error that some are in danger of committing is in giving to the mind and judgment of one man, or of a small group of men, the full measure of authority and influence that God has vested in His church in the judgment and voice of the General Conference **assembled to plan for the prosperity and advancement of His work**. {9T 260.2}

Notice that the authority that God has vested in his church is "to plan for the prosperity and advancement of His work." Whenever Ellen White emphasizes the authority that God has placed in the General Conference Session, the immediate context is always operational and policy decisions.

"Your error was in persistently maintaining your private judgment of **your duty** against the voice of the highest authority the Lord has upon the earth." {3T 492.2}

"Your duty." Duty would be obligatory tasks, actions, or responsibilities. It doesn't sound like she's talking about doctrine here.

The General Conference is responsible for making decisions as to how the work is to be carried forward. Its quinquennial Session is the voice of God regarding the execution of our mission. It establishes the policies that direct our united efforts. But does that authority extend to the formulation of doctrine? I haven't found a single inspired statement that says the church is authorized to formulate doctrine. That job belongs only to God. "He Himself has taught us what is truth." {Lt329-1905.18} He has plainly told us everything we need to know about Him. Our task is simply to read and believe what He has said.

But Ellen White does directly address the question of how much authority the church has in the establishment of doctrine:

"The opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils, as numerous and discordant as are the churches which they represent, the **voice of the majority**—not one nor all of these should be regarded as evidence for or

against any point of religious faith. Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a **plain ‘Thus saith the Lord’** in its support.” {GC 595.1}

“Very many will get up some test that is not given in the Word of God. We have our test in the Bible—the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ” {Ms 149, 1901, par. 8}

“In the commission to His disciples, Christ not only outlined their work, but gave them their message. Teach the people, He said, ‘to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.’ The disciples were to teach what Christ had taught. That which He had spoken, not only in person, but through all the prophets and teachers of the Old Testament, is here included. Human teaching is shut out. There is no place for tradition, for **man’s theories and conclusions, or for church legislation**. No laws ordained by ecclesiastical authority are included in the commission. None of these are Christ’s servants to teach.” {DA 826.1}

That answers our question. Church rulings carry no weight at all in determining what is truth. God, through His prophets, has already told us in plain language just what we are to believe and how we are to understand it.

We may be strengthened and confirmed in the past experience that holds us to the essential points of truth which have made us what we are—Seventh-day Adventists. {Lt326-1905.2}

The past fifty years have not dimmed one jot or principle of our faith as we received the great and wonderful evidences that were made certain to us in 1844, after the passing of the time. The languishing souls are to be confirmed and quickened according to His Word. And many of the ministers of the gospel and the Lord’s physicians will have their languishing souls quickened according to the Word. Not a word is changed or denied. That which the Holy Spirit testified to as truth after the passing of the time, in our great disappointment, is the solid foundation of truth. Pillars of truth were revealed, and we accepted the foundation principles that have made us what we are—Seventh-day Adventists, keeping the commandments of God and having the faith of Jesus. {Lt326-1905.3}

Messages of every order and kind have been urged upon Seventh-day Adventists to take the place of the truth which, point by point, has been sought out by prayerful study and testified to by the miracle-working power of the Lord. But the waymarks which have made us what we are are to be preserved, and they will be preserved as God has signified through His Word and through the testimony of His Spirit. He calls upon us to hold firmly, with the grip of faith, to the fundamental principles that are based upon **unquestionable authority**. {Ms44-1905.21}

The unquestionable authority upon which our fundamentals are based is not the authority of the man’s opinions that are voted on in a General conference session. The Bible truth, as confirmed by God through His messenger, Ellen White, provides this unquestionable authority regarding the truth we possess.