

Question About Ellen White Statement that Some in 1856 will be Alive When Jesus Returns

By Pastor Ed Anderson

Explain Ellen G. White statement that Some in 1856 Alive When Jesus Returns?

This is from the Estate of Ellen G. White:

Concerning a conference in 1856 Ellen White declared: "I was shown the company present at the conference. Said the angel, 'Some food for worms, some subjects of the seven last plagues, some will be alive and remain upon the earth to be translated at the coming of Jesus.' " All who were alive then are now dead. Does this prediction mean that Mrs. White is a false prophet?

(She explains why the Lord didn't return after her 1856 prophecy.)

"...It is the unbelief, the worldliness, unconsecration, and strife among the Lord's professed people that have kept us in this world of sin and sorrow so many years" (Ms 4, 1883, quoted in *Evangelism*, pp. 695, 696).

Answer:

This is a thoughtful and important question that many have asked. Let's examine **Ellen G. White's 1856 statement**, the context in which it was given, and how the Seventh-day Adventist Church understands this today.

The 1856 Statement

At a conference in Battle Creek, Michigan, Ellen White wrote:

"I was shown the company present at the conference. Said the angel, 'Some food for worms, some subjects of the seven last plagues, some will be alive and remain upon the earth to be translated at the coming of Jesus.'" (1T 131.3, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 131)

This seemed to suggest that **some people at that 1856 meeting would be alive to see the Second Coming**. However, history tells us that **all who were alive at that meeting are now deceased**. So does this mean Ellen White gave a false prophecy?

Key Points to Understand the Statement

1. It Was a Conditional Prophecy

Ellen White herself later clarified that the delay in Christ's coming was due to the **failure of God's people to prepare**:

"It is the unbelief, the worldliness, unconsecration, and strife among the Lord's professed people that have kept us in this world of sin and sorrow so many years." — *Manuscript 4, 1883; Evangelism, p. 696*

This is a **foundational principle of prophetic interpretation**—some prophecies are **conditional**, depending on the response of the people (see Jonah 3:4–10). If God's people had fully responded to the message of revival and reformation, **Jesus could have returned in their generation**.

"Had Adventists after the Great Disappointment in 1844 held fast their faith... Christ would have come ere this." — *Evangelism, p. 695*

Thus, the **delay in Christ's return was not due to a failed prediction**, but to **God's people not fulfilling the conditions** of readiness.

2. She Did Not Say Which Individuals Would Be Among Each Group

She did **not say "you, Brother Jones, will live to see Jesus return"**—rather, she grouped the audience into **possibilities**:

- *Some will die ("food for worms")*
- *Some will suffer the plagues*
- *Some will be alive and translated*

These were **categories of outcomes**, not individual guarantees. The statement reflects the possibility that **the end could have come in that generation**—but did not, due to spiritual failure.

3. The Bible Has Similar Conditional Prophecies

This is not unique to Ellen White. The **Bible** contains examples of **conditional timelines**:

- **Jonah** told Nineveh: *"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown."* (Jonah 3:4)

But it wasn't—**because the people repented**.

- **Jesus** told His generation: *“This generation shall not pass away till all these things be fulfilled.”* (Matt. 24:34)

Yet, the **Second Coming did not occur** in that generation. Why? Because **God’s mission continued, and the gospel had not yet gone to all nations.**

In both cases, **God’s mercy and people’s response impacted the outcome.**

Conclusion: Was Ellen White a False Prophet?

No. The 1856 statement was a **conditional prophecy**, based on the spiritual preparedness of God’s people. Ellen White **never set a date** for Christ’s return. She repeatedly warned that **delay could occur** if the church failed to respond. Her statement about those present in 1856 was in harmony with the biblical model of prophecy—**where human response affects divine outcomes.**

Rather than disproving her prophetic calling, this episode **shows consistency with how God has worked through prophets in the past.**

Final Reflection

Ellen White’s writings consistently pointed people to Christ, the Bible, and holy living. Instead of discrediting her ministry, this 1856 quote serves as a **solemn reminder:** We can hasten or delay the return of Jesus based on our collective readiness (2 Peter 3:12).

“Let us therefore be diligent...” (Hebrews 4:11)