

Wahlen & Abstimmungen am Sabbat

Kurzversion

Ellen G. White – Question of Voting on Sabbath & Other Thoughts...

(The first four paragraphs below are excerpts from the book written by Herbert E. Douglass, "Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White." Chapter 13, "Delivering God's Message," and in subsection "Manner of Delivering Messages Varied.")

The Question of Voting on the Sabbath

A vision (or a dream) often turned a group from hasty decisions to the right course of action to be seen better as time went by. In the summer of 1881 James and Ellen White were tired. She was ill. However, she had a "deep impression" that they should leave the Michigan camp meeting and go to the Iowa camp meeting, which was to open in two days. When they arrived in Des Moines, she said to a minister, "Well, we are here at the Lord's bidding, for what special purpose we do not know, but we shall doubtless know as the meeting progresses."

The Whites did much of the preaching. On Sunday evening, after Mrs. White had retired, the constituency was conducting a business meeting on the subject of voting, especially in regard to temperance and prohibition. After a short time the message came that the group wanted her counsel. G. B. Starr recalled later that Ellen White related a dream that described the Iowa circumstance and that the heavenly spokesman had said: "God designs to help the people in a great movement on this subject. He also designed that you, as a people, should be the head and not the tail in the movement; but now the position you have taken will place you at the tail."

In the meeting, Mrs. White was asked whether the Iowa Adventists should vote for prohibition. Her answer was swift: "Yes, to a man everywhere and perhaps I shall shock some of you if I say, if necessary, vote on the Sabbath day for prohibition if you cannot at any other time."

Writing later, Starr emphasized: "I can testify that the effect of the relation of that dream was electrical upon the whole conference. A convincing power attended it, and I saw for the first time the unifying power of the gift of prophecy in the church" (White, Arthur L. Ellen G. White, Vol. 3, Six-volume biography [Washington, D. C.: RHPA, 1981-1986]: pp. 158-160. Ellen White endorsed G.B. Starr's report).

The Battle Creek Example

EGW also encouraged all of Battle Creek Adventists to rise up and vote the then sitting Mayor out of office, a candidate for office (not just an issue), because he was a womanizer, a drunk, and a gambler and thief, and because he assumed 1) that Adventists didn't believe in voting, and 2) they would not vote on the Sabbath because they were "Sabbath-keepers." (See the book Temperance, pages 255-256.)

Exception or the Rule?

The more I read of EGW, the more I am impressed that she believed it was a citizen-stewardship duty to vote. It is, however, unclear if voting polls back in those days were mainly and traditionally only open on the Sabbath in various (if not many, or most) local communities where Sunday keeping was strictly observed. On the other hand, if it was a rarity for voting polls to be open on the Sabbath, it would make voting on the Sabbath an exception as a matter of practice rather than the rule and thus why she had no problem with it

I personally believe EGW was a very practical woman and looked for opportunities to carry out her civic duty, even on the Sabbath because in those days the issue of temperance and prohibition was continually before the people for a number of years during her lifetime. It was an ongoing issue, along with the matter of prohibition (at least until Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was issued in 1863). Furthermore, I'm not sure one could truly make the argument from the Bible that voting on the Sabbath is somehow a sin. Hey, we have a hard enough time convincing some, yea many, Adventists that it is not a sin to vote! I think you get the picture.

Practical Counsels on Voting

EGW's counsel is also pretty straightforward in *Gospel Workers*, pages 387, and 391-92. She writes: "Every individual exerts an influence in society. In our favored land, every voter has some voice in determining what laws shall control the nation. Should not that influence and that vote be cast on the side of temperance and virtue" (page 387.) Notice that she didn't just single out "temperance," but also "virtue." We must stand up for what is right is right because it is right, while also being ever cognizant that we are not like some who seek to push an agenda for the purpose of seizing political power. This kind of partisan politics EGW opposed in the strictest terms. Corresponding pages in this section of *Gospel Workers* makes this point very clear. But the question of voting is very clear in this reference. We are encouraged to vote. There is no statement by EGW encouraging us not to vote.

There is the reference on pages 391-92 of *Gospel Workers* that some misread and interpret to mean that Seventh-day Adventist Christians should not vote, when in fact the reference implies just the opposite. She writes: "We cannot with safety vote for political parties; for we do not know whom we are voting for." This simply means that we must remain independent voters and not be loyal to any specific political party, be it Republican, Democrat, or any other party platform. She goes on to say that "We cannot labor to please men who will use their influence to repress religious liberty, and to set in operation oppressive measures to lead or compel their fellow-men to keep Sunday as the Sabbath.... The people of God are not to vote to place such men in office; for when they do this, they are partakers with them of the sins which they commit while in office."

One must take this last portion in context and understand that voting for men or women who will use their influence to repress religious liberty is what she is referring to and not the message that we should not vote. Quite the contrary. One of the clear signals we should watch for is the promise of candidates to nominate "strict constructionist" judges to the federal or Supreme Court bench. Such judges typically support the establishment and enforcement of certain types of Christian acts of loyalty and devotion in the public square in violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, and in violation with the spirit and use of the first table of the law of God, which is off limits to the power and jurisdiction of the state.

The establishment and enforcement of such acts in the public square represents the spirit of constitutional and historical revisionism. While professing to be "strict constructionists," these presidential candidates and the judges they promise to nominate actually propose a radical sort of judicial activism that would see America return to the good old days of the Puritans in which religious freedom was only for those religions that were favored, and where all others were merely tolerated or even worse. Here we see how such thinking – the establishment and enforcement of acts of religious loyalty and devotion could very easily lead to a National Sunday law. That is why it is very important to vote for those who you believe will make religious freedom – the constitutional principle of the separation of church and state (i.e., the Establishment Clause) and the free exercise of religion – a singular priority to protect while serving in office.

Questionable Comparisons & Distinctions

Some have argued that voting on the Sabbath should not be the rule, but the exception. This may be true today, but strangely enough it may not have been in EGW's day because of the historical possibility that voting may have been frequently done only on Saturday in some local communities. We don't know this for sure, but research would need to be done on this point.

1) Forced to Vote on the Sabbath

Also, voting is a voluntary act of citizenship. No one is forcing you to vote or forcing you to violate your right to keep the Sabbath. The comparison of the three Hebrew worthies being forced to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's image has been used to suggest that to refrain from voting on the Sabbath is the principled equivalent. Yet the Hebrew worthies were forced to bow down. It's a good thing they did not; but such a comparison does not work for me when it comes to the matter of voting and that is because voting is a volunteer act. No one is being forced to vote. Everyone has the option to be fully persuaded in their own mind on whether they should vote on the Sabbath if that is the only option available, such as in Nevada a few weeks ago.

2) A Violation of Civil Rights

Some have argued that Seventh-day Adventists are being disenfranchised in the same way that Black Americans were before the 1960's. Not so. Black Americans were specifically targeted. No one can seriously make the claim that the State of Nevada was specifically targeting Jews and Seventh-day Adventists and that they intended to do so during the Primary caucus vote a few weeks ago. Yes, by opening the polls during the prime time hours of the Sabbath, during Sabbath School and Church

service, the process was inherently inconvenient; but to make the case that it was purposely made unfair to Jewish and SDA voters, or that they were somehow forced to vote on their Sabbath, against their sincerely held convictions, is a case that cannot be made. Such a claim may be true for numerous orthodox Jews, but it cannot be made for Seventh-day Adventists. This is because the act of voting is voluntary and we have a history that suggests that it is not necessarily against our church's sincerely held religious convictions, or any supposed policy, to refrain from voting on the Sabbath. There is no such church policy, nor can anyone make the claim that it is a sin to vote on the Sabbath, particularly today when voting polls are rarely only open on the Sabbath.

The best way to deal with states and various communities that open their polling stations only on the Sabbath is to seek to change such practices by encouraging and backing legislation that would put into motion an all-state wide mail-in voting ballot, such as is practiced in Oregon and Washington, as well as in other states across our country. It is better to be active on this level than to whine in the press about how Seventh-day Adventists were somehow disenfranchised and discriminated against by forcing them to vote on the Sabbath. I think the former approach provides a much better long term solution to the problem, if there really is one, depending on your personal perspective as you weigh the counsel of EGW above.

3) Issues vs. Individual Candidates

Finally, some have argued that a distinction has to be made between voting on the Sabbath in a general primary or election and voting for or against certain issues. While such a distinction may seem like an important one, however finely parsed it is, my thinking is that you cannot separate the issues from the candidates, just as EGW did not separate the issues (mainly the matter of "character") from the mayoral candidate seeking re-election in Battle Creek. (This is a limited example, but it is one of the few we have on record.) Outside of routine ballot measures that come up from time to time at the state and local level, by voting for an individual you are voting for the issues they believe in and have stated so during the election campaign. As to character, that is an important qualification or disqualification to make as well, as in EGW's Battle Creek example. Therefore, to make a seemingly important distinction between "issues" and "candidates," one has to remember that such a distinction is oftentimes flawed. I find it is often an excuse not to vote at all during general primaries and general elections, whether congressional or presidential or both, or for those running for state offices, etc.

If you have any questions, do not hesitate to write. I open to revising my thinking on this depending on the evidence and the reasoning behind the evidence presented. Thanks for your time. I thought some of you would appreciate receiving these insights regarding the matter of voting, particularly when so many continue to find ways and excuses to refrain from voting altogether, let alone be worried about voting on the Sabbath. We have problems enough, as it is, to get people to vote at all! May the good Lord reverse that trend in our midst is my prayer.

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