

Why Are Ellen White's Writings Called "The Spirit of Prophecy"?

Description

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Question:

Why are Ellen White's writings referred to as "The Spirit of Prophecy"?

Answer: (by [Trent Wilde](#))¹This was written in December 2020 and revised for wider circulation in May 2024.

Great question!

Despite looking, we aren't aware of any evidence that SDAs referred to Ellen White's *writings* as "the Spirit of Prophecy" during her lifetime. On the contrary, it appears that this usage of "Spirit of Prophecy" only arose after her death (the earliest instance we know of being in 1916).²See the A. T. Jones section of our article [What is the Spirit of Prophecy? SDA Edition](#). Prior to that, SDAs used the term to refer to the gift of prophecy manifested through a living prophet in any generation. In other words, they regarded the Spirit of Prophecy as a mode of communication between God and humanity consisting of the Holy Spirit delivering Jesus' testimony through a living human spokesperson—a prophet. This mode of communication was sometimes "in exercise" and sometimes not. When there was no prophet alive and active among God's people, they didn't have the Spirit of Prophecy manifest among them.

The possession of the writings of past prophets didn't amount to having the Spirit of Prophecy; it only amounted to having a *product* of the Spirit of Prophecy. The Spirit of Prophecy itself, though, could only be active through a real-time manifestation of the prophetic gift through a living person. This is the early SDA doctrine of the Spirit of Prophecy and they based this doctrine on the plain testimony of Scripture. It is this understanding which showed that other churches didn't have the Spirit of Prophecy. They had the writings of previous prophets, but they didn't have the Spirit of Prophecy active among them since the Spirit of Prophecy is the gift of prophecy, and they didn't have the gift of prophecy actually and actively manifested through a living servant of God.

Soon after Ellen White's death, at least some in the church started to shift their terminology and their doctrine regarding the Spirit of Prophecy. The new view was that the "Spirit of Prophecy" is Ellen White's *writings*, which is obviously reflected in the now widespread use of the term "Spirit of Prophecy" in the church. The impact of this shift was that SDAs could continue to claim to have the Spirit of Prophecy regardless of the fact that they now had only what every other denomination always had: writings of deceased prophets. Our view is that this change in terminology and doctrine obscures the SDA pillar doctrine regarding the Spirit of Prophecy. We regard the early-SDA view on this point as both Scriptural and true, and we regard departing from it as a grave danger. The reason it is a danger is that it encourages many to discard the need for manifestations of the prophetic gift beyond Ellen White. Many Jews in the time of Jesus had discarded the need for more prophets, being satisfied with the writings of past prophets. This same attitude prevailed among Christian churches when Ellen White was called to the prophetic office. In both of these cases, those who advanced with the progression of truth had either never held the view that no more prophets were needed, or they had to abandon that view in order to advance. We hope and pray that Seventh-day Adventists will learn the lesson from what they acknowledge to be a theological mistake of the Christians and Jews before them. We hope they will return to the progressive doctrine of the Spirit of Prophecy that prevailed in the SDA church during Ellen White's lifetime.

But Didn't Ellen White Call Her Books "The Spirit of Prophecy"?

People can sometimes get confused by the title of Ellen White's 4-part series of books: *The Spirit of Prophecy*. Does this title prove that Ellen White claimed her writings to be the Spirit of

Prophecy? The simple truth is that this title refers to the major *topic* of the series of books; it is not a claim regarding what the books themselves are. Consider the title of another of Ellen White's books: *The Acts of the Apostles*. Is this title a claim that the book, or the whole of Ellen White's writings, is the actual acts of the 1st-century apostles? Obviously not. The title simply indicates what the book is *about*. This is also the case for Ellen White's series entitled *The Spirit of Prophecy*. Verification of this can be found in the contents of the books, which recount the work of the Spirit of Prophecy (the gift of prophecy) from the beginning of history until the end. The books themselves plainly maintain the view that the Spirit of Prophecy is the prophetic gift manifested in different times and places through persons of God's choosing, who, of course, had to be alive while the prophetic gift was being exercised through them.

We recommend reading [James White's article *The Spirit of Prophecy*](#), which Ellen White included at the beginning of *The Spirit of Prophecy*, Vol. 1. It expresses the early SDA doctrine of the Spirit of Prophecy in straightforward terms. We also recommend reading our article [What is *The Spirit of Prophecy*? SDA Edition](#), the first section of which examines the Scriptural evidence regarding this subject, while the second section is a compilation of statements from the early SDA pioneers, illustrating that their view is the one outlined here.

Learn more about: [The Spirit of Prophecy](#)

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See the A. T. Jones section of our article [What is the Spirit of Prophecy? SDA Edition](#).