

ELLEN WHITE AND HER UNDERSTANDING OF *SELF*

Peter van Bemmelen
Professor Emeritus of Theology
Andrews University

This paper presents a brief exploratory study of the use of the word *self* and some related words in the writings of Ellen White. The study does not pretend to be exhaustive for reasons explained in this introduction. The purpose of the paper is to compare how the word *self* and related words are used in Ellen White's writings in reference to human beings in general and to Jesus Christ in particular. The conclusions are of necessity tentative.

A study of the word *self* in Ellen White's writings is a voluminous task. The CD-ROM of her writings employed for this task, *The Published Ellen G. White Writings on Compact Disc Version 2.0* (Silver Spring, Maryland: Ellen G. White Estate, 1994), records in its dictionary 24,390 occurrences of the word *self*, in its search modality it records 16,872 units or paragraphs in which these 24,390 occurrences can be found. To go through all of these thousands of units would be a very elaborate and somewhat repetitious task. A further complication is that these more than 24,000 occurrences include not only the word *self* as a simple word but also the composites of the word *self* such as *self-denial*, *self-exaltation*, etc., of which so far more than 150 have been listed in this research. These composites of *self* are not mentioned separately in the dictionary of the CD-ROM. The four-volume *Comprehensive Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, vols. 1-2, 1962; vol. 3, 1963; vol. 4, 1992), which is included on the CD-ROM as the "Topical Index," was more helpful for this research because it lists scores of these composites.

A study of the use of the word *self* is enhanced by the study of closely related words such as *selfishness* and *unselfishness* and their adjectives. These words occur more than 10,000 times in Ellen White's writings. Time would not permit an exhaustive study on all occurrences of the word *self*, composites including the word

self, and closely related words. The research was selective and incomplete. However, a serious attempt has been made to make this study as balanced and fair as possible.

There are also some observations on the use of the word *individuality* and on the understanding of certain Bible texts in Ellen White's writings which help to put her use of the word "*self*" in perspective. Standard abbreviations are used in the references to Ellen White's published works.

Use of the Word Self and Its Composites With A Negative Sense

One quickly becomes aware when studying the use of the word *self* in Ellen White's writings that many times the word is used in a negative sense. *Self* is "the strongest foe man has to meet,"¹ "the enemy we most need to fear,"² "the worst of tyrants."³ Human beings "are naturally inclined . . . to live for self"⁴ (5T 382). Instead of loving God supremely, "*self* interposes its desire to be first."⁵ Commenting on Jesus' parable of the foolish rich man in Luke 12:13-21, Ellen White writes, "This man has lived and planned for *self*," but in "living for *self* he has rejected that divine love which would have flowed out in mercy to his fellow men. Thus he has rejected life."⁶ The consequence is death. "To live for *self* is to perish. Covetousness, the desire of benefit for *self*'s sake, cuts the soul off from life. It is the spirit of Satan to get, to draw to *self*. It is the spirit of Christ to give, to sacrifice *self* for the good of others."⁷

This *self* is qualified in Ellen White's writings by the use of a variety of negative adjectives. It is called "*self*, sinful *self*,"⁸ "*self*, the old natural *self*,"⁹ "your own poor, weak, faulty *self*,"¹⁰ "my weak, unchristlike *self*,"¹¹ "*self*, unsubdued, unsanctified, unholy,"¹² and "unconsecrated *self*."¹³ This "unsanctified *self* will never see the kingdom of God."¹⁴ The Christian is called to wage unrelenting warfare against this sinful *self*. "We have no enemy without that we need to fear. Our great conflict is with unconsecrated *self*."¹⁵ God's children, "at whatever sacrifice of ease or selfish indulgence, at whatever cost of labor or suffering,

... must maintain a constant battle with self."¹⁶ Our allotted task is that "day by day and year by year we shall conquer self."¹⁷

Many other verbs are used in reference to self. Self must be "abased,"¹⁸ "buried with Christ,"¹⁹ "crucified,"²⁰ "denied,"²¹ "humiliated and Christ exalted,"²² "slain,"²³ "subdued and kept in subjection,"²⁴ "surrendered to God,"²⁵ and "yielded to the disposal of the Holy Spirit."²⁶ Other expressions could be added.

Perhaps no expression is so incisive as the oft-repeated admonition that "self must die." What that means becomes clear from the following quotations. In addressing ministers, Ellen White said, "Will you put self out of sight and let Jesus appear? Self must die before God can work through you. . . . I tell you, in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, your wills must die; they must become as God's will."²⁷ It seems that the death of self means the total submission of our will to God's will. It also means that "we must renounce our own righteousness and plead for the righteousness of Christ to be imparted to us. We must depend wholly upon Christ for our strength. Self must die."²⁸ An expression very similar in intention is that we need to "die to self." In a testimony entitled "Man's Duty to His Fellow Men," she stated, "You know not the will of God, neither can you know it while you live for self. . . . What you all need is to die to self, cease clinging to self, and surrender to God."²⁹ In another context she wrote, "We need to understand how necessary it is that we die to self. Self-crucifixion will place souls on vantage ground."³⁰

We encounter the same negative emphasis in Ellen White's use of composites of the word self. She uses many composite words with a negative connotation such as self-abuse, self-aggrandizement, self-conceit, self-deception, self-esteem, self-exaltation, self-glorification, self-gratification, self-importance, self-indulgence, self-justification, self-love, self-righteousness, self-seeking, self-sufficiency, self-will, self-worship, their related adjectives, and many other words.

Following the Bible, Ellen White attributes the origin of sin to self-exaltation, both in heaven and on earth. Of Satan she writes, "God entrusted him with power and wisdom, but he became filled with self-exaltation and thought that he should be first in

heaven. Through this self-seeking, this striving for the supremacy, sin entered into the world.”³¹ “It was through the desire for self-exaltation that sin entered into the world, and our first parents lost the dominion over this fair earth, their kingdom.”³² In order to justify his rebellion and to draw others into sympathy with himself, Satan “misrepresented God, attributing to Him the desire for self-exaltation. With his own evil characteristics he sought to invest the loving Creator. Thus he deceived angels. Thus he deceived men.”³³ This accusation against God is at the heart of the great controversy.

Composites of Self With A Positive Sense

In contrast with the negative composites, Ellen White even more frequently uses composite words of self with a positive connotation such as self-abasement, self-abnegation, self-forgetfulness, self-renunciation, self-sacrifice, self-surrender. These words primarily are used in Ellen White’s writings in reference to Jesus Christ. While through self-exaltation “our first parents lost the dominion over this fair earth. . . . It is through self-abnegation that Christ redeems what was lost.”³⁴ Satan had accused God of self-exaltation and concomitantly maintained “that there was no self-denial with God, and that Satan, in struggling to carry out his purposes and have his own way, was only imitating the example of God.” He argued that, “If God followed his own will perfectly and continually, why should not the first sons created in his image do so? By this argument Satan deceived many of the holy angels.”³⁵ He accused God “of requiring self-denial of the angels, when He knew nothing of what it meant Himself, and when He would not Himself make any self-sacrifice for others . . . Christ came to the world to meet these false accusations, and to reveal the Father.”³⁶ “Christ, in his life and his death, has forever settled the deep and comprehensive question whether there is self-denial with God, and whether God is light and love.”³⁷ When Christ “hung upon the cross of Calvary, with wounded, bruised body and broken heart” as a result of Satan’s enmity, it was clearly seen by all the universe “that God had in His Son denied Himself, giving

Himself for the sins of the world, because He loved mankind. . . . Here the question ‘Can there be self-denial with God?’ was forever answered.”³⁸

It is important to notice that self-denial is a basic law of God’s universe. This law applies to all beings created in the image of God whether holy angels or fallen human beings. Ellen White sees a close connection between Christ’s life of humiliation, self-denial, and self-sacrifice and the life of His followers. “All who desire to share His glory hereafter must share His self-denial and self-sacrifice at every step heavenward.”³⁹ As we have seen before, this can only be realized through a life-long struggle against the sinful self.

Did Christ in His incarnation have to wage such a life-long warfare against a corrupt, sinful self? It seems that Ellen White does not explicitly deal with such a question, but the writer of this paper has found no statements that attribute such a self to the incarnate Son of God. The fact that Jesus lived a life of self-denial and self-sacrifice does not imply that He had to battle with a weak, unchristlike, faulty self. Christ’s entire life was a life of self-denial. “From the manger to Calvary He followed the path of self-denial and sought not to be released from arduous tasks, painful travels and exhausting care and labor. . . . It was His meat and drink to do the will of God and to finish His work. Self and self-interest had no part in His labor.”⁴⁰ “Jesus emptied Himself, and in all that He did, self did not appear. He subordinated all things to the will of His Father”⁴¹ “So utterly was Christ emptied of self that He made no plans for Himself. He accepted God’s plans for Him, and day by day the Father unfolded His plans. So should we depend upon God, that our lives may be the simple outworking of His will.”⁴²

Selfishness and Unselfishness

Further light in Ellen White’s writings on the similarity and the difference between fallen human beings and the incarnate Christ is found in her use of the adjectives selfish and unselfish and the nouns selfishness and unselfishness. As far as fallen humanity is concerned, the testimony of Ellen White is clear. “Men are selfish

by nature. They act from impulse, without reference to God. Their own will is their criterion.”⁴³ “In the human heart there is natural selfishness and corruption which can only be overcome by most thorough discipline and severe-restraint; and even then it will require years of patient effort and earnest resistance.”⁴⁴ She speaks of “the natural selfishness of the human heart,”⁴⁵ “the natural selfishness of the children of men.”⁴⁶ Human beings must “consent to be freed from their natural selfishness.”⁴⁷ “Man’s wisdom is untrustworthy. Man is fickle, filled with self-esteem, pride, and selfishness.”⁴⁸ The only hope for selfish human beings is to receive a new heart, to be born again. “Men and women . . . are to receive the new heart, that is kept soft and tender by the grace of heaven. The selfish spirit is to be cleansed from the soul.”⁴⁹

Again there is no evidence in Ellen White’s writings that Jesus, although He came in the likeness of sinful flesh, had to contend with the natural selfishness of the human heart. On the contrary! She refers to Christ as “the embodiment of unselfishness.”⁵⁰ “His life was one of unselfish service, and it is to be our lesson book. His tender, pitying love rebukes our selfishness and heartlessness.”⁵¹ Christians need to study “the character of Christ in whom there was no imperfection, no selfishness, no spot, no stain of evil, who lived not to please and glorify himself, but to glorify God and to save fallen humanity.”⁵² “Self-denial and nobility of purpose marked his life. From the beginning to the close of his earthly ministry he went about doing good. In his life no sin appeared. No selfishness marred word or act. ‘Which of you convicteth me of sin?’ he asked the Pharisees, knowing that they could find nothing of which to accuse him.”⁵³

Ellen White stressed both the similarity of Christ’s human condition to our condition and also the difference between Christ’s perfect humanity and our selfishness and corruption. Urging ministers to make the mission and life of Jesus Christ the burden of their message, she wrote, “Let there be a dwelling upon the humiliation, self-denial, meekness, and lowliness of Christ, that proud and selfish hearts may see the difference between themselves and the Pattern, and may be humbled.”⁵⁴ In describing the humiliation and suffering of Christ on the cross, she wrote

in the same article, “Christ was not insensible to ignominy and disgrace. He felt it all most bitterly. He felt it as much more deeply and acutely than we can feel suffering, as his nature was more exalted, and pure, and holy than that of the sinful race for whom he suffered”⁵⁵ Elsewhere speaking about Christ’s liability to yield to temptation she again stressed the similarity and the difference between Christ and all other human beings. “Our Lord was tempted as man is tempted. He was capable of yielding to temptations, as are human beings,” yet she warned that “we must not become in our ideas common and earthly, and in our perverted ideas we must not think that the liability of Christ to yield to Satan’s temptations degraded His humanity and He possessed the same sinful, corrupt propensities as man,” for “Christ took our nature, fallen but not corrupted.”⁵⁶ In His life “there was no trace of selfishness.”⁵⁷

Another Meaning of the Word Self: Self As Individuality

While the word *self* in Ellen White’s writings often refers to the sinful self, this is not always the case. In a letter to O. A. Olsen she wrote these surprising words, “We need to be self-reliant; it is the duty of all to respect self.”⁵⁸ This statement obviously does not refer to the corrupt, unchristlike self from which we need to be set free. Rather, this use of the word *self* seems to refer to a person’s God-given individuality. “Every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator – individuality, power to think and to do.”⁵⁹ It is the work of education and redemption to restore the image of God in human beings, to restore and develop man’s true individuality. At the General Conference session of 1901 Ellen White highlighted the importance of this individuality. “Let each worker remember that he has an individuality of his own, and that this individuality is not to be submerged in any other human being. That individuality is to be sanctified, purified, refined, but it is not to be lost in the individuality of someone else.”⁶⁰ Elsewhere she wrote, “Subjection to God is restoration to one’s self,—to the true glory and dignity of man.”⁶¹

This concept of the self finds expression in Ellen White's writings in such composites of self as self-appreciation, self-command, self-control, self-culture, self-development, self-discipline, self-education, self-government, self-help, self-improvement, self-instruction, self-mastery, self-possession, self-reliance, self-respect, self-restraint, self-training, and related adjectives. It is not within the scope of this brief paper to go deeply into this meaning of the word self, so a few examples of the use of these composites must suffice. "Our first duty to God and our fellow-beings, is that of self-development."⁶² "Far more might be accomplished in the work of self-education if we were awake to our own opportunities and privileges. True education means more than the colleges can give."⁶³ "The object of discipline is the training of the child for self-government. He should be taught self-reliance and self-control."⁶⁴ "It is not pleasing to God that you should demerit yourself. You should cultivate self-respect by living so that you will be approved by your own conscience and before men and angels. . . . While we should not think of ourselves more highly than we ought, the word of God does not condemn a proper self-respect."⁶⁵

Our self, our individuality, is created by God and redeemed at an infinite price. It is our responsibility to develop and to guard this individuality through unreserved surrender to and complete trust in God. This is evident if we look at the context of the sentence quoted at the beginning of this section. "While we each have an individuality, while we each should hold our convictions firmly, we must hold them as God's truth and in the strength which God imparts. . . . We need to be self-reliant; it is the duty of all to respect self; but we are to remember that we are God's property, that we are bought with a price, body, soul, and spirit. . . . To trust in ourselves, to become boastful as if we had created and redeemed ourselves, is to dishonor God."⁶⁶

It is significant how Ellen White expresses the fact that the purpose of Christ's redemptive work is to restore the self-respect of sinful human beings. "The sense of sinfulness has poisoned the springs of life and true happiness. Now Jesus says, Lay it all on Me; I will take your sin. I will give you peace. Destroy no longer

your self-respect, for I have bought you with the price of My own blood. You are mine; your weakened will I will strengthen; your remorse for sin I will remove.”⁶⁷ In a testimony “To Men in Responsible Positions in the Work” she wrote, “In no case neglect the work you must do for your individual self. You are not your own. You belong to God.”⁶⁸ As quoted above, “It is not pleasing to God that you should demerit yourself.”⁶⁹ In view of the fact that Christ has bought us with the price of His blood, “we need not exalt self, neither need we take special words to God, to depreciate self. We are the Lord’s property.”⁷⁰ In other words, Christ takes away both sinful self-superiority and self-inferiority.

While the sinner must die to self, sinful and corrupt self, self in the sense of our God-given individuality, is restored through the self-sacrifice of the Son of God on our behalf. One of the deepest truths of the mystery of salvation is expressed in the words of Jesus in John 12:24-25, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.” Commenting on these words Ellen White writes, “The life must be cast into the furrow of the world’s need. Self-love, self-interest, must perish. And the law of self-sacrifice is the law of self-preservation. The husbandman preserves his grain by casting it away. So in human life. To give is to live. The life that will be preserved is the life that is freely given in service to God and man. Those who for Christ’s sake sacrifice their life in this world will keep it unto life eternal.”⁷¹ By contrast, “The life spent on self is like the grain that is eaten. It disappears, but there is no increase. A man may gather all he can for self; he may live and think and plan for self; but his life passes away, and he has nothing. The law of self-serving is the law of self-destruction.”⁷² The same truth is expressed elsewhere in similar words, “Self-renunciation is the great law of self-preservation, and self-preservation is the law of self-destruction.”⁷³

Concluding Remarks

A study of the word *self*, its composites, and related words in Ellen White's writings leads us to the central question in the great controversy, "Is there self-denial with God?" The response of the Godhead is focused in the incarnation, suffering, and death of the Son of God. "Christ, in his life and his death, has forever settled the deep and comprehensive question whether there is self-denial with God."⁷⁴ Self-denial is the law of God, the law of the universe. Satan wanted to change that law and introduced the law of living for self, the law of self-exaltation. Unfortunately, that law became the law of this world. Man by nature is selfish and lives for self, not for God. The consequence of this is guilt, suffering, and ultimately eternal death. The human self, human individuality, created in the image of God, is destroyed.

Through the incarnation and self-sacrifice of the Son of God, that self, that individuality, can be restored. Christ, taking upon Himself human nature in its fallen, weakened condition, nevertheless was "the embodiment of unselfishness."⁷⁵ Although tempted more than any other human being, His human nature was holy and free from sinful, corrupt propensities. Whereas "men are selfish by nature"⁷⁶ in Christ "there was no trace of selfishness."⁷⁷ His nature and His life were pure and holy, His self free from the stain of sin. But He took sin and guilt upon Himself, sacrificed Himself that He might restore in us, through faith in Him, a self transformed in the image of God. He calls us to follow His example in self-denial and self-sacrifice so that we no longer live for self but that like Christ we live for the service of God and for the salvation of other human beings.

¹Ellen White, *Messages to Young People* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing, 1930), 134.

²Ellen White, *MH* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1942), 485.

³Ellen White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958), 676.

⁴Ellen White, 5T (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 382.

⁵*Ibid.*, 6:103.

⁶Ellen White, COL (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1941) 258.

⁷*Ibid.*, 259.

⁸Ellen White, 8T, 234.

⁹Ellen White, *That I May Know Him* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1964), 55.

¹⁰Ellen White, 3T, 457.

¹¹Ellen White, COL, 159.

¹²Ellen White, *Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, 4 volumes (Washington, DC: Ellen G. White Estate, 1987), 3:1296-1297.

¹³Ellen White, *Counsels on Stewardship* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1940), 21.

¹⁴Ellen White, *Special Testimony to the Oakland and Battle Creek Churches*, 1897, 157, 14.

¹⁵Ellen White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, 21.

¹⁶Ellen White, *Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958), 565.

¹⁷Ellen White, 5T, 345.

¹⁸Ellen White, 8T, 234.

¹⁹Ellen White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946), 472.

²⁰Ellen White, 6T, 125.

²¹Ellen White, *Faith and Works* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1979), 46.

²²Ellen White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1938), 110.

²³Ellen White, 3T, 475.

²⁴Ellen White, 2T, 163.

²⁵Ellen White, *In Heavenly Places* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1967), 72.

²⁶Ellen White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1956), 15.

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- ²⁷Ellen White, 9T, 181.
- ²⁸Ellen White, 5T, 219.
- ²⁹Ellen White, 3T, 542, 543.
- ³⁰Ellen White, *The Upward Look* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982), 269.
- ³¹Ellen White, "The Great Controversy," *RH*, September 7, 1897.
- ³²Ellen White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, 17.
- ³³Ellen White, *Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1940), 21-22.
- ³⁴Ellen White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, 17.
- ³⁵Ellen White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 4 volumes (facsimile reproduction, Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1969), 3:77.
- ³⁶Ellen White, *Selected Messages*, 3 volumes (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958, 1980), 1:406, 407.
- ³⁷Ellen White, "Christ the Missionary's Example (concluded)," *RH*, October 21, 1902.
- ³⁸Ellen White, *Selected Messages*, 1:342.
- ³⁹Ellen White, "Who Will Keep the Way of the Lord?" *Bible Echo* (Australia), July 20, 1896.
- ⁴⁰Ellen White, *Steps to Christ* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing, 1956), 78.
- ⁴¹Ellen White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, 14.
- ⁴²Ellen White, *Desire of Ages*, 200.
- ⁴³Ellen White, "Home Mission," *RH*, January 6, 1891.
- ⁴⁴Ellen White, 4T, 496.
- ⁴⁵Ellen White, 18MR, (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1981, 1987, 1990, 1993), 205.
- ⁴⁶Ellen White, 6T, 184.
- ⁴⁷Ellen White, *Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, 4:1511.
- ⁴⁸Ellen White, 8T, 106.
- ⁴⁹Ellen White, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7 volumes (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1953-1957), 4:1165.
- ⁵⁰Ellen White, CG, (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing, 1954), 352.
- ⁵¹Ellen White, 9T, 31.

⁵²Ellen White, "Contemplate Christ's Perfection, Not Man's Imperfection," *RH*, August 8, 1893.

⁵³Ellen White, "Following Christ," *RH*, February 29, 1912.

⁵⁴Ellen White, "The Work of the Minister," *RH*, September 11, 1888.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*

⁵⁶Ellen White, 16MR, 182.

⁵⁷Ellen White, "Lessons in Economy and Self-Denial," *Youth's Instructor*, September 10, 1907.

⁵⁸Ellen White, *Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, 4:1626.

⁵⁹Ellen White, Ed, (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1952), 17.

⁶⁰Ellen White, [Remarks at General Conference Session, 1901], *General Conference Bulletin*, April 25, 1901.

⁶¹Ellen White, *Desire of Ages*, 466.

⁶²Ellen White, "The Primal Cause of Intemperance," *ST*, April 20, 1882.

⁶³Ellen White, COL, 334.

⁶⁴Ellen White, Ed, 287.

⁶⁵Ellen White, "Nothing Is Hidden," *RH*, March 27, 1888.

⁶⁶Ellen White, *Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, 4:1626, 1627.

⁶⁷Ellen White, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, 2 volumes (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing, 1977), 2:451. See also *Testimonies to Ministers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1962), 519- 520.

⁶⁸Ellen White, *Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, 4:1685.

⁶⁹Ellen White, "Nothing Is Hidden," *RH*, March 27, 1888.

⁷⁰Ellen White, 15MR, 4.

⁷¹Ellen White, *Desire of Ages*, 623-624.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 624.

⁷³Ellen White, "Looking Unto Jesus," *ST*, July 1, 1897.

⁷⁴Ellen White, "Christ the Missionary's Example (concluded)," *RH*, October 21, 1902.

⁷⁵Ellen White, CG, 352.

⁷⁶Ellen White, "Home Wisdom," *RH*, January 6, 1891.

⁷⁷Ellen White, "Lessons in Economy and Self-Denial," *Youth's Instructor*, September 10, 1907.