

## Ellen White's Counsel Against Kellogg's Chicago Building Project

Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, founder of the Battle Creek Sanitarium, began having doubts about Ellen White's prophetic gift when she rebuked him for building a Chicago sanitarium which had actually never been built. At that time, Mrs. White was living in Australia, so her knowledge of events in the United States was somewhat limited.

Dr. Kellogg had renovated a building in Chicago, opening it as the Chicago Branch Sanitarium on May 1, 1893. The branch sanitarium was geared toward Chicago's wealthy, who would pay top dollar for an upscale health spa. However, Kellogg's primary aim in Chicago was not health reform for the rich: His aim was to improve the living conditions of Chicago's poor through health reform, instruction in cleanliness, and, if possible, basic Christian instruction. In keeping with Kellogg's higher goal, the profits of the branch sanitarium were to be used for a Chicago Medical Mission to minister to the destitute. The Chicago Medical Mission opened its doors two months after the Chicago Branch Sanitarium (Schwarz, *John Harvey Kellogg, M.D.*, 165).

To find a location for the mission, Kellogg had asked the Chicago police to identify the most crime-infested neighborhood in Chicago. Dr. Kellogg then arranged to share a building with another mission in this area (Schwarz, *John Harvey Kellogg, M.D.*, 165).

The Chicago Medical Mission provided free baths and a free laundry service for the unkempt populace because Kellogg believed that cleaning people would make them more receptive to the gospel. Free medical care, medications, food, and clothing were also provided as needed to the poverty-stricken. Inexpensive hot lunches were served twice daily, costing recipients just one penny. Special efforts were made to rescue prostitutes from their self-destructive lifestyle. Older nurses were sent out in pairs to counsel prostitutes and encourage them to enter a safe-house where they could be reformed. An adoption service was set up for children of prostitutes whose mothers decided not to keep them. Kellogg acquired a farm outside the city, and reclaimed prostitutes, panhandlers, etc., were put to work growing fresh foods for the mission. Other unemployed men were taught rug-weaving and broom-making skills (Schwarz, *John Harvey Kellogg, M.D.*, 165-169). The Chicago Medical Mission was doing an admirable work, but it was soon to become part of a controversy that would eventually result in Dr. Kellogg's departure from the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Kellogg did not envision an institution that would promote only SDA beliefs. He stated that the mission should "rescue lost souls, not...teach theology" (Schwarz, *John Harvey Kellogg, M.D.*, 170). To ensure the non-denominational, humanitarian focus of the institution, Kellogg established a committee of ministers from various denominations to advise in this project (Schwarz, *John Harvey Kellogg, M.D.*, 170). Dr. Richard W. Schwarz, one of the most prominent Seventh-day Adventist historians, states,

"The undenominational aspect of the mission...led to misunderstanding between the doctor and other Adventists and eventually resulted in the termination of the Chicago Medical Mission. Most Seventh-day Adventists were convinced that their only excuse for existence was to proclaim distinctive religious principles. They naturally questioned the value of a program which appeared to be absorbing an increasing amount of both the denomination's financial resources and its potential leaders without at the same time spreading Adventist beliefs. Although Ellen White had indicated approval of Kellogg's initial ventures in Chicago, she later

counseled him not to place his major emphasis on work for social outcasts and, in particular, not to solicit funds for such programs among Adventists at a time when the denomination's other financial needs were so great" (Schwarz, *John Harvey Kellogg, M.D.*, 170).

Writing from Australia, Ellen White described a vision in which she had seen a large building being erected in Chicago as part of the Medical Mission. She was told that this sanitarium was being built in opposition to the will of God, and she rebuked Kellogg and his associates for building it. However, this building had never been built. It had been planned by a committee while Kellogg had been in Europe, but Kellogg had personally nixed the plan (Numbers, *Prophetess of Health*, 192-193; Schwarz, *John Harvey Kellogg, M.D.*, 178-179). Kellogg's decision was probably due to the same financial considerations that prompted Mrs. White to condemn the building. Unfortunately for Mrs. White, there was no building: Kellogg had already rejected the proposal without needing divine intervention.

The spectacular misinformation in this testimony caused great concern among Dr. Kellogg and his associates regarding the validity of Ellen White's visions. Many of these individuals eventually left the church.

It is interesting that Mrs. White's original testimony regarding this building may not exist now. If so, we are evaluating her message based on the recollections of Ellen White, W. C. White, and Dr. Kellogg and his associates. Professor Schwarz believes the letter that started all the fuss was written in 1899 (Schwarz, *John Harvey Kellogg*, 370; Numbers, *Prophetess of Health*, 312 n31). The earliest EGW letter that still exists regarding the building in Chicago was penned on February 27, 1900 (Numbers, *Prophetess of Health*, 312 n31). The White Estate quotes a small portion of the Feb. 27, 1900 letter in *A Critique of Prophetess of Health*, and in this letter, Mrs. White appears to be backing away from her previous assertions:

"Three mornings ago I laid my hand upon several papers, exchanges from America, sent me about two years since. In the *New York Observer* of August 6, 1896, I saw your name and the heading, 'Dr. Kellogg's Work, The Workingman's Home, and Medical Missionary Work in Chicago.' There followed an account of the work then going forward, and the large amount of means required to sustain it. Since that time the work has greatly extended, and of course a much larger amount is required for its support. As I read the article and thought of these things, I could understand the light given me by the Lord as to what the principles of truth and righteousness would lead the Sanitarium supporters and workers to do; that they should make it their first business to aid the work in this country [Australia], where the Lord had sent experienced workers fitted to carry forward His work" (Letter 33, 1900, qtd. in *A Critique of Prophetess of Health*, 88).

Notice that in this selection quoted by the White Estate, no mention is made of the disputed building.<sup>1</sup> Mrs. White uses the *Observer* article to show that a great deal of money was spent on the Chicago Medical Mission in the past, and then she estimates, "Since that time the work has greatly extended, and of course a much larger amount is required for its support." It is interesting that she is not citing her vision as the source of this information, which is her usual

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<sup>1</sup>Of course, the White Estate might not have wanted to release the original embarrassing statement if that original testimony is indeed found in this Feb. 27, 1900 letter. This investigation is greatly hampered by lack of complete source material which might modify the conclusions.

pattern when rebuking someone. Instead, she appears to be making a reasoned guess based upon data from an old periodical, and this may indicate a small defensiveness and a lack of certainty. Since Ellen White seems to be backpedaling, it seems likely that Schwarz is correct: we no longer have the first letter. Since Ellen White's writings were meticulously preserved, we must wonder why this one in particular should be missing.

As the controversy over the phantom Chicago medical building continued unabated, Mrs. White's son Willie attempted to show that the entire vision was not based on a combination of the aforementioned 1896 *New York Observer* article and trans-Pacific gossip. He wrote that his mother first saw the article February 24, 1900. He continued:

"For many months previous to the finding of this article, Mother had been writing cautions and reproofs regarding the Medical Missionary work, including the special work in Chicago.... When the vision was given Mother which was finally written out in the letter of February 27, she was greatly depressed, and seemed especially burdened because the facts as presented to her were not recognized by those to whom she wrote. When she found the Sherin<sup>2</sup> article in the 'Observer' she said to me 'Here is the evidence that they have been planning great things. I will call their attention to this article'" (W.C. White Letter to C.E. Stewart, April 10, 1906, qtd. in *A Critique of Prophetess of Health*, 88).

There are some important observations to be made from this letter. First, W.C. White indicates that his mother had not seen the *Observer* article until after she had written out her vision, in that the word *finally* ("When the vision...was finally written out in the letter of February 27...") denotes that there had been a delay in writing out the vision, and it seems like that delay would have been longer than the three days between her first viewing of the article and her inclusion of it in her letter. W.C. White very much wants to show that the testimony wasn't dependent upon any research. He also wants to make it clear that the February 27, 1900 letter is the letter containing the vision, but we have already called that thesis into question.

Ironically, evidence within Willie's own letter strongly points to a missing original testimony condemning the Chicago project. He admits that his mother had sent several previous letters regarding the mission. As summarized by Schwarz, we have already seen that she objected to solicitation of funds from Adventists to support derelict cases, as she believed that church funds were already stretched too thin (Schwarz, *John Harvey Kellogg, M.D.*, 170). We have also seen that she wanted more funds sent for medical work in Australia where she was living (Letter 33, 1900, qtd. in *A Critique of Prophetess of Health*, 88). According to Schwarz, "John Harvey reluctantly agreed to restrict his attempts to raise funds for mission work from Adventist sources" (Schwarz, *John Harvey Kellogg, M.D.*, 170). Since Kellogg had agreed to follow her counsel, why should she have been "greatly depressed" with regard to these communications? The fact that she was "especially burdened because the facts as presented to her were not recognized by those to whom she wrote" can only mean one thing: that she had already been rebuffed by Kellogg's truthful claim that he had never built, nor did he intend to build, an edifice such as her vision had revealed.

From the strong (but circumstantial) evidence shown, it appears that Schwarz is correct in speculating that the original Chicago building testimony was written in 1899. Thus, Willie is

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<sup>2</sup>S.S. Sherin was the Methodist minister who headed Dr. Kellogg's advisory committee for the Chicago Medical Mission (Schwarz, *John Harvey Kellogg, M.D.*, 170).

incorrect in asserting that the primary account of this vision is the February 27, 1900 letter. The February letter has an element of uncertainty which would not have been seen in the original, and Mrs. White's great depression prior to the February letter can best be explained by a strong negative response from Kellogg, which would have called the divine authority of her entire visionary experience into question. Willie's complete role and motives in this affair must be regarded as unclear at this time. His insistence that the February letter is the original Chicago building letter leaves room to suspect a cover-up. However, Mrs. White was likely not aware of her son's possible actions in this matter.

Mrs. White later explained the vision from her perspective: "I understand that someone said that the testimony that I bore in regard to this was not true,—that no such building was erected in Chicago. But the testimony was true. The Lord showed me what men were planning to do" (Letter 135, 1903, qtd. in *A Critique of Prophetess of Health*, 88). The White Estate concedes that Ellen White "indeed thought buildings had been erected" when she wrote her original testimony, and the Estate goes on to add, "It must be kept in mind that the Lord did not always reveal to her whether certain events had taken place or not" (88).

If one accepts the explanation of Mrs. White and the White Estate, the burden for this mistake must rest with God for not telling her whether the building had yet been built. Given God's great wisdom, however, it seems that He would have made this clear had He been the source of the vision. It would have been a simple explanation, and it would have prevented loss of confidence in the prophet, along with preventing a great schism in the SDA health ministry. For what purpose would God withhold information that could have saved His message from being rejected, and His prophet from embarrassment?

Regarding Mrs. White's role in this whole affair, and her insistence that the vision came from God, we should view her as sincere. As a long-time subject of either unusual seizures or paranormal phenomena, she should not be expected to clearly understand her situation and repudiate these vivid occurrences on the basis of this failure. She could be expected to seek an explanation that would preserve her divine connection, and this is what she did.

Finally, we should consider the other main point of her visions: that the SDA church should not prioritize aid to the needy in the large cities. The withdrawal of most SDA funds slowly strangled the ministry, forced the closure of Kellogg's Chicago Medical Mission in 1913. In addition, the loss of cheap labor in the form of SDA student nurses, after Kellogg left the church, had accentuated the mission's decline. Kellogg had even dipped into his own savings in a last-ditch effort to maintain this life-line ministry to Chicago's poor, but the money had been insufficient (Schwarz, *John Harvey Kellogg, M.D.*, 170-171). It seems out of character with God to quash such a program by advising Adventists not to contribute financially, especially considering Christ's admonition, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40). Surely there was enough money in Adventist circles to support the Australian health work as well as the Chicago outreach. It certainly seems that the Lord wasn't behind this ill-fated testimony.

testimonies

footnote