

Seventh-day Adventists and Life Insurance

Background of the Issue

Since their earliest years, Seventh-day Adventists have discussed whether church members should participate in insurance plans for protection against loss, with special attention being given to life insurance.

Although the denomination as a whole has not taken an official position, much less made it a test of fellowship, many church members have believed that the church discouraged or disapproved of the purchase of life insurance policies as being incompatible with the kind of trust in God's providence that marks the dedicated Christian. Ministers have often included testimony against insurance in their public presentations and have encouraged believers, both old and new, to discontinue any insurance policies which they already had.

Many early Adventists, while recognizing that the Bible does not address the subject of insurance directly, urged that no type of insurance should be taken by Christians. For example, in 1860 Roswell F. Cottrell, prominent author and leader, cited these Bible texts in support of his position:

"He that hateth suretyship is sure" (Prov.11:15). "Be separate and touch not the unclean" (2 Cor. 6:17). "I have not sat with vain persons. . . . I have hated the congregation of evildoers; and will not sit with the wicked" (Psalm 26:4, 5). "Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help" (Psalm 146:3). "He shall deliver them from the wicked, and save them, because they trust in him" (Psalm 37:39, 40). "Blessed is the man that trusteth in thee" (Psalm 84:12).--RH June 5, 1860, p. 20.

While concurring with Cottrell's general position, James White had reservations about the texts' applicability and expressed his concern about the consequences, writing:

"As for insurance, we said [in Vol. xv, No. 23], 'In regard to insurance we have nothing to plead at this time. We do not get our own buildings insured and if the church agrees to trust the Office property without insurance, we shall be suited.' Therefore Brother RFC's 'strong reasons' are one side of the main question under discussion. But we hope that all will carefully consider his proof texts and their connections, and see for themselves the amount of direct testimony against insurance. Truth will stand."--*Ibid.*

While the early discussion among Adventist leaders dealt with insurance of all kinds, the risks involved led them in time to accept the principle of insuring property against fire, storm and theft. The change in attitude developed about 1860, at the time the church was accepting legal incorporation as a means of holding church-held properties. In that period the risk of fire was especially threatening, for heat was provided by coal or wood stoves and light was often by oil lamps.

Ellen G. White's acceptance of insurance protection for property is illustrated by her letters. In 1880 she wrote her son, W. C. White, "I wish you would see that the house at Healdsburg is insured. Talk to Lucinda about it. I feel anxious in regard to it" (Letter 17, 1880). Four years later she wrote, "Brother Palmer says he has written to you in regard to the insurance. If the house is not insured, it should be at once" (Letter 53, 1884).

Such counsel was in harmony with her often-repeated instructions that every reasonable step be taken to safeguard property. While she was still living, her son, W. C. White, responded to an inquiry concerning fire insurance:

"We do not find in Mother's writings any condemnation of the practice of insuring our property against fire. Mother has always regarded this as very different from life insurance. She keeps her own buildings properly insured, and has encouraged some of our institutions to do the same."--W. C. White Letter, August 5, 1912.

Ellen G. White and Life Insurance

Life insurance, however, was seen in a different light. In the main, those who took a position against life insurance did so in response to statements by Ellen White, beginning with her two-page article, "Life Insurance," first published in 1867 in *Testimony* No. 12. Because it is her earliest and most extensive discussion of the subject, it is reproduced here in full:

"I was shown that Sabbathkeeping Adventists should not engage in life insurance. This is a commerce with the world which God does not approve. Those who engage in this enterprise are uniting with the world, while God calls His people to come out from among them and to be separate. Said the angel, 'Christ has purchased you by the sacrifice of His life. What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.' 'For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with Him in glory.' Here is the only life insurance which heaven sanctions.

"Life insurance is a worldly policy which leads our brethren who engage in it to depart from the simplicity and purity of the gospel. Every such departure weakens our faith and lessens our spirituality. Said the angel: 'But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that he should show forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.' As a people we are in a special sense the Lord's. Christ has bought us.

"Angels that excel in strength surround us. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without the notice of our heavenly Father. Even the hairs of our head are numbered. God has made provision for His people. He has a special care for them, and they should not distrust His providence by engaging in a policy with the world.

"God designs that we should preserve in simplicity and holiness our peculiarity as a people. Those who engage in this worldly policy invest means which belong to God, which He has entrusted to them to use in His cause to advance His work. But few will realize any returns from life insurance, and without God's blessing even these will prove an injury instead of a benefit. Those whom God has made His stewards have no right to place in the enemy's ranks the means which He has entrusted to them to use in His cause.

"Satan is constantly presenting inducements to God's chosen people to attract their minds from the solemn work of preparation for the scenes just in the future. He is in every sense of the word a deceiver, a skillful charmer. He clothes his plans and snares with coverings of light borrowed from heaven. He tempted Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit by making her believe that she would be greatly advantaged thereby.

"Satan leads his agents to introduce various inventions and patent rights and other enterprises, that Sabbathkeeping Adventists who are in haste to be rich may fall into temptation, become ensnared, and pierce themselves through with many sorrows. He is wide-awake, busily engaged in leading the world captive, and through the agency of worldlings he keeps up a continual, pleasing excitement to draw the unwary who profess to believe the truth to unite with worldlings. The lust of the eye, the desire for excitement and pleasing entertainment, is a temptation and snare to God's people.

"Satan has many finely woven, dangerous nets which are made to appear innocent, but with which he is skillfully preparing to infatuate God's people. There are pleasing shows, entertainments, phrenological lectures, and an endless variety of enterprises constantly arising, calculated to lead the people of God to love the world and the things that are in the world.

Through this union with the world, faith becomes weakened, and means which should be invested in the cause of present truth are transferred to the enemy's ranks. Through these different channels Satan is skillfully draining the purses of God's people, and for it the displeasure of the Lord is upon them."--*Testimonies*, vol. 1, pp. 549-551.

A careful reading enables us to see the five reasons Ellen White gives for opposing life insurance:

1. It encumbers believers excessively with the world.
2. It encourages a worldly, secular spirit contrary to the simplicity and single-mindedness of Christian service.
3. It diminishes one's sense of God's providence.
4. It represents a denial of true stewardship before God by diverting His funds to risky ventures in hope of gain.
5. It manifests greed comparable to speculation in rights to patents and inventions.

From an analysis of Ellen White's reasoning it is clear that she regarded participation in life insurance both as a threat to spiritual experience, and as defective because it is a speculative venture.

Following her initial article of 1867, Ellen White made only occasional references to life insurance in her writings. Her principal later statement was addressed to N. D. Faulkhead, a prominent worker in Australia, who, along with his deep involvement with the Masonic Lodge, carried an insurance policy in the amount of 200 pounds. Ellen White, in urging him to sever connections with the Lodge, also counseled him to discontinue his life insurance policy. Responding to her appeals, Faulkhead wrote:

"I have also seen wisdom in your testimony regarding the life insurance. I held a policy in one of the offices in town, and with the help of God I have let that go too."--N. D. Faulkhead to Ellen G. White, September 18, 1893.

Sister White wrote him in reply, saying:

"Your letter has been received and has been read with deep interest. I am very thankful to our gracious heavenly Father that He has given you the strength through His imparted grace, to cut yourself loose from the Free Mason Lodge. . . . I rejoice also that you have been cut loose from the life insurance policy. . . .

"The assurance of heaven is the best life insurance policy you can possibly have. The Lord has promised His guardianship in this world, and in the world to come He has promised to give us immortal life."-- Letter 21, 1893.

Ellen White's several subsequent references to life insurance do not reflect further philosophical development, but are largely metaphorical uses of the term "life insurance," frequently related to the assurance found in 2 Peter 1:10, 11. For example, she wrote:

"No one need to spend sleepless moments in regard to his life insurance papers. His title deed as heir to God, and joint heir with Jesus Christ is to an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away."--Ms 63, 1899.

A review of the Ellen G. White statements brings us to the conclusion that life insurance, as it was practiced during her lifetime, was contrary to Christian principles both from a spiritual viewpoint and as good stewardship over the goods of the Lord.

Insurance Practices in the Late Nineteenth Century

The post Civil War period was a time of rapid expansion in the United States and in technological innovation. It has been described accurately as an age of rampant opportunism and speculation virtually unregulated by government. Monopolistic practices and industrialization were focused toward the amassing of vast personal fortunes almost untouched by taxes. Get-rich-quick schemes were the order of the day, generally ending in the loss of one's investment. It was a time well characterized by P. T. Barnum's famous quip, "There's a sucker born every minute."

The fledgling insurance industry was fully involved in the spirit of the times, a spirit steeped in the essence of high risk. Undercapitalized insurance stock groups, while

promising quick wealth, frequently collapsed without notice, leaving their policies worthless. Company dealings with their customers often were unjust and not infrequently fraudulent in nature. Policies written on the lives of complete strangers were urged upon a public that was encouraged to invest in the hope of profiting from the death of the insured.

The abuses of such a system led to public demand for government regulation. Beginning in 1906, State and Federal regulatory laws were designed to limit fraud and require the insurance industry to follow sound practices.

Today's life insurance industry, heavily regulated by law and government agencies, differs in important ways from that of the late 1800's. Ellen White's counsel against investing in life insurance must be understood against the background and practices of her times if the meaning of her words is to be properly understood.

Provision for the Time of Need

Both the Scriptures and the writings of Ellen White elevate to a divine mandate the Christian responsibility to protect and provide for one's loved ones. In both faith and practice the Bible assigns prime responsibility for such care upon near relatives. Building on the authority of the fifth commandment, "Honor thy father and thy mother . . .," the apostle Paul stresses the importance of this principle in the strongest of terms. He wrote:

"But if any widow have children or nephews, let them learn first to shew piety at home, and to requite their parents; for that is good and acceptable before God. . . . But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel" (1 Tim. 5:4, 8).

Jesus reinforced the same principle, referring to it as the "command of God" (Matt. 15:6).

Repeatedly Ellen White stressed the importance of providing for future needs. Examples of such counsel include the following:

"You might today have had a capital of means to use in case of emergency, and to aid the cause of God, if you had economized as you should. Every week a portion of your wages should be reserved, and in no case touched unless suffering actual want, or to render back to the Giver in offerings to God.

"The means you have earned have not been wisely and economically expended so as to leave a margin, should you be sick and your family be deprived of the means . . . to sustain them."--*The Adventist Home*, p. 396.

"Had you and your wife understood it to be a duty that God enjoined upon you, to deny your taste and your desires, and make provision for the future instead of merely living for the present, . . . your family could have had the comforts of life."--*Testimonies*, vol. 2, p. 432.

Throughout her lifetime Ellen White encouraged as Christian duties such practices as diligence, hard work, exercise of foresight, self-denial, and generous benevolence to the Lord's cause. She encouraged the purchase of quality goods and the care of them. She spoke in favor of home ownership where possible, and approved the accumulation of reasonable reserves for use in necessity. She conceived of such reserves as available not only for personal needs, but also for extending the work of God and assisting those outside one's family who experienced need. She looked favorably upon the acquisition of a modest but comfortable home for one's retirement, and spoke of the self-respect that would follow from having provided for the future. (See *Testimonies*, vol. 7, pp. 291, 292.)

Conclusion

In seeking to understand the teachings of the Scriptures and the writings of Ellen White on life insurance, many Adventists have focused on her warnings against insurance to the neglect of her equally pointed testimony toward making provision for times of necessity. The effect has been to deprive members of benefits of the kind that prudent planning could provide.

Under today's conditions, the ultimate questions are: Do life insurance policies offer a method for meeting emergency needs that is compatible with Christian principles? Could they help meet the crisis raised by the disability or death of the wage earner without weakening one's faith or commitment to trust in God providence? Could they help meet the divinely-given responsibility of protecting the innocent survivors of tragedy in a hazardous world? Could they help fill the void created by the diminished role of family ties in the modern world as increased individualism and governmental programs displace the ancient bonds?

A study committee of the General Conference and the Ellen G. White Estate conducted a thorough study of life insurance, summarized in a 50-page report issued in 1957. Its propositions, based upon careful investigation, provide a sound interpretation of the principles concerned and should be taken into account in arriving at a decision. Those principles include the following:

1. The Spirit of Prophecy counsels unhesitatingly and definitely teach that the Christian should make provision for a "rainy day." We should recognize that a time will come when there will be reduced or terminated income; and looking ahead, we should, if possible, have a reasonable amount of property or money in reserve to meet such needs so that "the charities of others need not be depended upon."
2. It is proper to have the security of a modest home of our own and conservative financial investments--money in the bank, invested in the Lord's work, or in other sound investment.
3. It is proper to avail ourselves of the protection offered by fire insurance and insurance on the automobile.

4. In whatever provision he makes for the future, the Christian is to be ever mindful of the special and tender watchcare of God over His children and not be forgetful of the needs of the cause of God.

5. The family and the church have a responsibility to its members in time of need or bereavement. The Christian should share in his brother's burdens so that none will suffer.

6. The extent of the provision that should be made for the day of need and how it should be made are to be left with the individual to settle carefully and prayerfully, with heart fully surrendered to God, and with the determination that in fulfilling these responsibilities, every move will be made in harmony with God's will.

7. The Spirit of Prophecy counsels on life insurance made in the 1860's were given at a time when life insurance was uncontrolled and often handled by "fly-by-night" concerns, as a gambling proposition in a "get-rich-quick" scheme.

8. Although the Spirit of Prophecy counsels in the years between 1867 and 1909 continued to be consistent in discouraging life insurance, it should be recognized that in the United States such insurance did not come under the control of state banking laws until 1906 and onward. Even as late as 1910 some companies were still involved in questionable and often dishonest practices. However, there were no statements on life insurance made by Ellen White after 1909.

9. Various savings and insurance plans which are today termed "life insurance," protected by carefully enacted state laws, and subject to close inspection of state authorities, are generally considered to be a safe investment and sounder than many other investments.

10. In most so-called life insurance plans as they are written today, the principle of putting something aside for the day of need and of sharing one another's burdens is actually carried out. The circle reaches out beyond the family or the church to include quite a large number of persons, thus equalizing the burden and minimizing the expense.

11. Health care insurance is simply another plan for equalizing what may be an unusual and heavy expense. In this case, also, a large number of persons share the burdens of one another.

12. Burial insurance provides a means whereby the expense now connected with death is provided for in a certain and sure manner through advance payments over a period of years.

13. Burial societies, in which a large number of persons participate either by specified dues or by assessments at the time of the death of a member, are a means of systematically spreading the expense in such a way that we bear one another's burdens. Through a well-organized plan we make proper provision for an expense which must be met.

14. Social Security is recognized by the church as a plan whereby employer and wage earner unite in systematically placing in reserve that which will be available in time of need, either at retirement or at death.

15. These various plans virtually accomplish for the lay member wage-earner what the denominational retirement plan--called into being through the Spirit of Prophecy--has for many years provided for ministers and other employees of the denomination. This is a plan by which a regular percentage of the payroll of the various employing organizations is accumulated in one central fund which is to be disbursed in

monthly payments to retired or incapacitated laborers or their widows, and in case of need, to meet unusual medical and burial expense.

16. The Seventh-day Adventist Church, although it does not officially encourage or discourage its members in the matter of insurance of different types, has by actions of the General Conference Committee in Annual Council, formally placed its approval on Social Security and Survivor's Benefit plans.

17. In the choice of the method employed in providing "a capital of means to use in an emergency" (*The Adventist Home*, p. 396), whatever that method shall be, care should be taken to seek and follow the counsel of those of experience who can be depended upon to give safe guidance.

18. Whatever provision the wage earner makes in preparation for the day of financial adversity or lessened income, he must guard carefully against a course of action which will lead to a love of money, or the creation with his own hands of something in which he places his trust, thus impairing that close connection with his Creator and Redeemer.

19. The Lord, through the Spirit of Prophecy counsels, has given an abundance of instruction and guidance relating to our responsibility for financial stewardship, making clear our obligations to God, our family, our fellow church members, and those about us. These counsels should be carefully studied, re-studied, and adhered to, so that we may lay up treasure in heaven, lest Satan lure us into soul-destroying entanglements.

Voted:

1. To urge all believers, especially those who have financial responsibility for families, to make a thoughtful, planned provision for meeting unforeseen emergencies that affect themselves and their families.

2. To regard those forms of life insurance which offer no conflict with Christian principles as legitimate means of making provision for times of need.

3. To consider that decisions regarding the degree to which insurance policies are used to contribute to family financial planning are a matter of personal conscience, and that the church should take no official position in that respect.

4. To counsel that the act of providing for future needs grants no license for the exercise of greed.

5. To advise those who endeavor to make provision for the future to exercise care lest selfish motives become a part of their planning.

6. To educate church members through the stewardship ministry regarding sound principles of family financial planning.

7. To take no steps as a church toward establishing or promoting any form of general life insurance for members.

General Conference Officers, 1985
(See Annual Council Minutes, 1985, p. 29)

Retyped by Ellen G. White Estate Washington, D. C. March, 1989