

Steps to Christ (book)

DENIS FORTIN

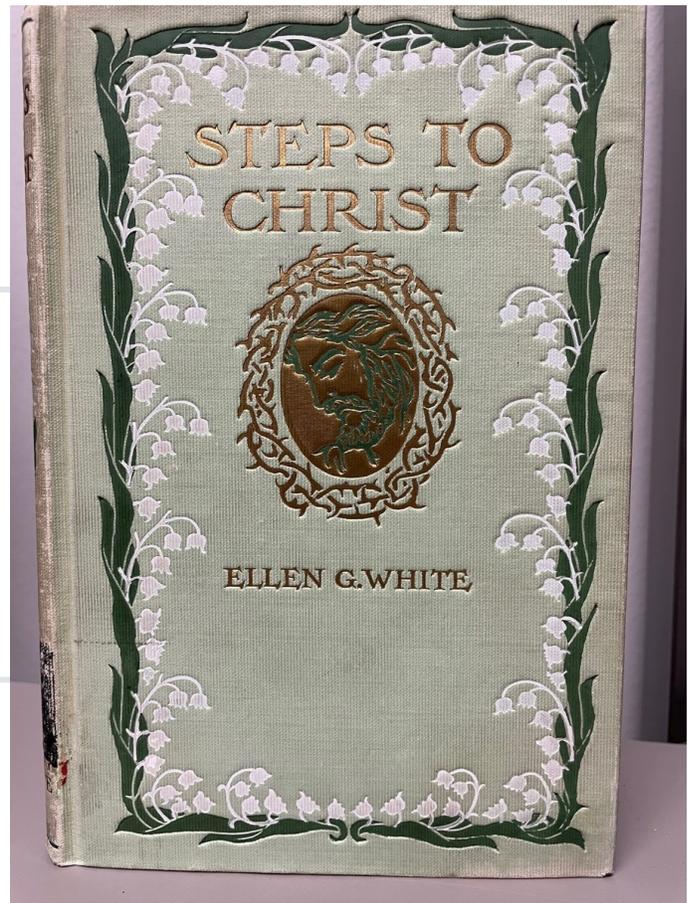
Denis Fortin is professor of historical theology at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Since joining the seminary faculty in 1994, he has served in several administrative roles, including dean (2006-2013). Among the most recent of his many publications on Adventist history and theology are *One in Christ: Biblical Concepts for a Doctrine of Church Unity* (Pacific Press, 2018) and the annotated 125th anniversary edition of the Ellen G. White classic, *Steps to Christ* (Andrews University Press, 2017).

Ellen G. White's book *Steps to Christ* was published in 1892 by Fleming H. Revell Publishing Company in Chicago, Illinois.

Ellen White's book *Steps to Christ* holds a special place in Adventist history and is one of the most translated books of all times by any author. Its publication occurred at the beginning of a period in Ellen White's ministry, from about 1890 to the early 1900s, when she published a number of books on the life of Christ. Shortly after the experience of the 1888 General Conference session in Minneapolis, Minnesota, when Adventists passionately debated the concept of righteousness by faith, White felt convicted that Seventh-day Adventists needed to learn more about the meaning of salvation in Christ—not only to gain a better knowledge of salvation, but to experience its renewing power, something she felt was deficient in a young denomination that had become too legalistic. During that decade she and her assistants worked on five major books on the life of Christ: *Steps to Christ* (1892), *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessings* (1896), *The Desire of Ages* (1898), *Christ's Object Lessons* (1900), and the first one hundred pages of *Ministry of Healing* (1905).

The Manuscript

Ellen White's son and assistant, William C. White, recalled that in the summer of 1890 some pastors suggested to Ellen White that she prepare a small book on the themes of salvation to be used in their evangelistic efforts and



1908 edition cover.

Photo courtesy of Ellen G. White Estate, Inc.

to be sold by colporteurs. Ellen White liked the idea and began to work on the project.

Over the years she had preached many sermons on these themes, which were then often published as articles in the *Review and Herald* and *Signs of the Times*. Her assistant, Marian Davis, whom she called her “book maker,”¹ searched White’s books, articles, and manuscripts for suitable materials and compiled the chapters of book. The following summer (1891), White shared the manuscript with some church leaders during a convention in Harbor Springs, Michigan, and Davis explained how the manuscript had been organized and put together. “The brethren who read the manuscript were deeply impressed regarding its powerful appeal,” recalled her son. “They were enthusiastic regarding its value and predicted great things regarding its sale.”²

The title of the book alludes to the story of Jacob’s dream in Genesis 28 in which he saw a ladder reaching down from heaven to earth, with angels ascending and descending. Ellen White mentioned this dream in the first chapter of the first edition (pages 19 and 20 in chapter two of our current edition) and understood this ladder to be a metaphor for Christ who connects heaven and earth, each step of the ladder representing an aspect of the process of salvation and of one’s relationship with Christ on the way to heaven.

After completing the manuscript, next came a discussion of the publisher. To some church leaders it seemed that it might be appropriate to secure an evangelical publisher for this book to give it a wider circulation. George B. Starr, who had earlier worked with Dwight L. Moody in Chicago, suggested that the manuscript be offered to Moody’s brother-in-law, Fleming H. Revell. Ellen White liked the idea, and Revell enthusiastically accepted the offer. The first edition, published in 1892, contained twelve chapters and went through seven printings in the first year.

Later in 1892, the Adventist publishing houses in Australia and the United Kingdom expressed their desire to publish the book since Revell had waived copyrights outside of the United States. Ellen White added an introductory chapter on the love of God, expanding the book to its current chapters. In 1896 the Review and Herald Publishing Association purchased the copyright from the Revell Company and in 1908 it was transferred directly to Ellen White. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has published the book in more than 160 languages and has distributed hundreds of millions of copies. In the early 1980s the Review and Herald published simplified versions of the book under the titles *Steps to Jesus* (1981) and *Knowing Him Better* (1982).

Recognizing her literary deficiencies, Ellen White felt the need to hire assistants to help her in the preparation of her articles and books. As already mentioned, her assistant Marian Davis prepared the manuscript of *Steps to Christ* in 1890-1891 from Ellen White’s writings. However, it came as a surprise in 1932, somewhat out of the blue, when the journal *The Gathering Call* claimed that Fannie Bolton was the real author of *Steps to Christ* and had never received proper credit for her work while employed by Ellen White.³

Fannie Bolton (1859–1926) worked for Ellen White intermittently between 1887 and 1896.⁴ During her employment with Ellen White, Bolton had claimed a number of times that her work on White’s manuscripts was not adequately recognized and that what was published under White’s name was in part Bolton’s original

material. Ellen White and her colleagues repeatedly refuted this claim, but it nonetheless persisted.

The falseness of the allegation regarding Bolton's authorship of *Steps to Christ* is shown by the fact that she was not in Ellen White's employment when the manuscript was prepared in 1890–1891 just before White sailed to Australia in November 1891. During that year Bolton was a student at the University of Michigan and rejoined White's team of assistants in September 1891. By then the manuscript was completed and almost ready to send to Fleming Revell, as Marian Davis told pastors in Harbor Springs that summer. Further, a comparison of *Steps to Christ* with other writings of Ellen White shows that many sections of the book had been written before Bolton joined White's team in 1887, much of it even before Bolton became an Adventist.⁵

While Marian Davis's work on the manuscript was drawn from Ellen White's writings and done under her supervision, it is fair to say that the organization of the material to a great degree reflected Marian Davis's knowledge and understanding of Ellen White's thoughts. Given that so many passages of *Steps to Christ* came from personal letters to believers and churches and from sermons published in the church's journals, it is understandable why the tone of the book is so personal and conversational. Ellen White makes direct appeals to her readers about their experience of salvation in Christ. In this little book, her thoughts on salvation are practical and framed in the experience of a simple evangelical faith.

What Are Ellen White's Steps to Christ?⁶

For many readers the title *Steps to Christ* discloses immediately its heritage within a particular strand of Protestant Christianity—the Wesleyan Methodist tradition. Methodist theologians have described John Wesley's orderly and methodical doctrine of salvation as an *ordo salutis*, the order or steps to salvation. Many of White's thoughts in *Steps to Christ* are similar to some of John Wesley's most famous sermons on his understanding of salvation.⁷ The Methodist roots and affinities of Ellen White's theology of salvation grew naturally from her upbringing in the Methodist Church but also matured in a nineteenth-century American context that favored a Wesleyan Arminian understanding of salvation when it comes to God's prevenient grace, the place of human free will in conversion, and the distinction between justification and sanctification. These Wesleyan themes and concepts of salvation are easily seen in the first eight chapters of the book.

The two dominant concepts in *Steps to Christ* are the love of God for humanity (chapter 1) and the freed will of human beings enabled to follow the leadings of the Holy Spirit and obey God's will as presented in Scripture. These two theological concepts work in synergy in her theology of salvation.

It is very clear at the beginning of the book that for Ellen White God took the initiative in our salvation and His love for humanity is manifested in Christ's sacrifice on the cross. God's initiative and Christ's sacrifice thus open the way for the salvation of mankind (10-15).

If humankind needs salvation, it is because it has inherited since the Fall of Adam a spiritual condition (original sin) that deprives humanity of the possibility of attaining salvation on their own. It is impossible for sinful humans to free themselves out of “the pit of sin” in which all are fallen (18). The only solution is Christ coming down to earth to save humanity. The universal work of God’s grace and the prevenient and imperceptible work of the Holy Spirit on people’s hearts and minds restore a measure of free will to all humans to counteract the depravity all are born with. If not resisted, this divine influence opens the way for the next steps to salvation (18-22).

This imperceptible work of God’s grace and the Holy Spirit is seen when people begin to sense a desire for something better in their lives. Ellen White emphasizes this when she references John 12:31, “I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me,” to state that, far from being a human accomplishment, Christ is the source of every right impulse (26). This conviction of sin, if not resisted, or of one’s spiritual limitations is a first step. It is only then that sinners are open to other important steps in their experience of salvation. As the Holy Spirit makes people aware of their sinful condition and awakens a desire for repentance, sinners are invited to repent, to feel a sorrow for sin, to wish to turn away from a life alienating them from God and from others (23-25).

Ellen White understands the sinner’s confession of sins as a prelude for growth in grace and sanctification (37-41). At the moment of repentance and confessions of sins, the penitent sinner is forgiven, this is the moment of justification. Covered with Christ’s robe of imputed righteousness, one now stands before God as if they had never sinned (62). Faith and trust in God’s promise of forgiveness brings peace and joy. It is the ultimate experience of salvation.

Growth in Christ and the development of a sanctified character become the trend of one’s life as regeneration and new life in Christ provide a new beginning. One’s faith in Christ’s gift of salvation and spiritual growth are evidenced by a life of discipleship and obedience to God’s Word. And at every stage of spiritual growth, Christians stand perfect in Christ as they abide in Him and seek to reflect His character. This experience of salvation gives assurance of God’s acceptance and brings forth the grateful spiritual fruit of a life dedicated to following the example of Christ (67-75).

The last five chapters of the book focus on practical matters of such a life dedicated to following Christ’s example. Ellen White shares a series of practical counsels on five aspects of spiritual growth: service (77-83), growth in the knowledge of God (85-91), prayer (93-104), what to do with doubts (105-113), and praise (115-126). In these chapters she presents simple, yet straightforward, invitations to Christians. As Jesus lived His life on earth to bless and minister to others, never to satisfy His own needs, so the Christian’s life should be witnessing to the work of God’s grace in one’s life. One also receives a better appreciation of God’s faithfulness as His loving character is seen in nature, God’s acts of providence in one’s life, and in the Word of God. She presents prayer as an essential element of God’s plan for the sanctification and growth of the believer, and also as a crucial

devotional habit, and not a mere optional practice. One of her best-known phrases refers to prayer as “the opening of the heart to God as to a friend” (93).

As in the nineteenth century, Christians today still have doubts, questions, and skepticism when it comes to many ideas expressed in the Bible. While for Ellen White, Christianity is a revealed and reasonable religion, she also understood that at times faith must precede reason and that not all occasions for doubts can be removed from one’s religious experience. Doubt is destructive to one’s faith in God and in the church, and for her, doubt is a spiritual issue in the great controversy between good and evil. Both the testimony of those who wrote Scripture and of those who have lived since are evidence of the existence and power of God and His help in responding to the doubts one may have.

Finally, Ellen White ends her book with a simple pastoral exhortation on the benefits of positive thinking. Jesus is again set as the example for the Christian. As Christ did not dwell on His difficulties and temptations, so is the Christian to live consciously in the presence of God and refrain from unnecessary conversation about negative feelings and circumstances.

In his advertisement for the sale of the book, Fleming Revell summarized the value of the book, a value that is still appreciated today.

It is not often that a publisher has the opportunity of announcing a third edition of a new work *within six weeks of the first issue*. This, however, is the encouraging fact in connection with Mrs. E. G. White’s eminently helpful and practical work, *Steps to Christ*. If you will read this work, it will *ensure* your becoming deeply interested in extending its circulation. *Steps to Christ* is a work to guide the inquirer, to inspire the young Christian, and to comfort and encourage the mature believer. The book is unique in its helpfulness.⁸

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1986), 3:91.
2. White Estate, "The Story of 'Steps to Christ,'" 1.
3. "Just recently we received the best of evidence that Fannie Bolton wrote 'Steps to Christ' without any dictation or assistance from Mrs. White whatever. It was her product in total, but was published as Mrs. White's production." "Extract from *The Gathering Call*," September 1932, 20, 21, in White Estate, *The Fannie Bolton Story*, 116.
4. A brief summary of Fannie Bolton's experience as Ellen White's assistant can be found in Robert W. Olson, "Bolton, Frances 'Fannie,'" in Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, eds., *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2013), 316–318 and in Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Australian Years* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1983), 4:237–250. See also Francis D. Nichol, *Ellen G. White and Her Critics* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1951), 468–486.
5. See the appendix of Denis Fortin's annotated edition of *Steps to Christ* published by Andrews University Press in 2017.
6. This section is adapted from the author's article on Ellen White's theology in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, 248–258 and from the introduction to the author's annotated edition of *Steps to Christ* published by Andrews University Press in 2017.
7. Wesley's sermons "The Scripture Way of Salvation" and "Salvation by Faith" are among the most obvious.
8. Quoted in Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Australian Years*, 36.

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