

The Truth About Seventh-Day Adventism

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Part 1: Its Historical Development from Christian Roots

Seventh-day Adventism, as a religious movement, sprang from the great second advent “awakening” which shook the religious world toward the middle of the nineteenth century.

During this particular period of theological development, speculation relative to the second advent of Jesus Christ had been rampant on the continent of Europe, and it was not long before the European prophetic scheme of interpretation bridged the Atlantic and penetrated American theological circles.

Based largely upon the books of Daniel and Revelation (both apocalyptic), advent theology became a topic of conversation discussed in newspapers as well as theological journals; in short, New Testament eschatological study suddenly competed with current stock market quotations for front-page space, and the “seventy weeks,” “twenty-three hundred days,” and “the abomination of desolation” (see Daniel 8-9) became common subjects of conversation.

Following the chronology of Archbishop Ussher and interpreting the twenty-three hundred days of Daniel as literal years, many Bible students of various faiths concluded that Christ would come back near or about the year 1843. Of this studious number was one William Miller, a Baptist minister and resident of Low Hampton, New York, who arrived at the final date, October 22, 1844, as the time when Jesus Christ would return for His saints and usher in judgment upon sin, culminating in the establishment of the Kingdom of God upon earth.

The great second advent movement, which was to sweep the United States particularly in the early 1840’s, stemmed from the activities of this William Miller, who confidently taught, beginning in the year 1818, that in “about” twenty-five years from that date, i.e. 1843, Jesus Christ would come again, or as Miller himself put it, “I was thus brought in 1818 at the close of my two-year study of the Scriptures to the solemn conclusion that in about twenty-five years from that time all the affairs of our present state would be wound up.” ²

Lest anyone reading the various accounts of the rise of Millerism in the United States come to the unwarranted conclusion that Miller was a “crackpot” and an uneducated tool of Satan, the following facts should be known: The great advent awakening which spanned the Atlantic from Europe was bolstered by a tremendous wave of contemporary biblical scholarship, and though Miller himself was uneducated, there were literally scores and scores of interpretative prophetic scholars, both in Europe and the United States, who espoused Miller’s view before he himself announced it; and in reality his was only one more voice proclaiming the 1843/1844 fulfillment of Daniel 8:14, or the twenty-three-hundred days’ period allegedly dating from 457 B.C. and ending in 1843/1844.

William Miller was born in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, on February 15, 1782, and while still a young child his family relocated in Low Hampton, New York, close to the Vermont State borderline. Miller was raised by a deeply religious mother, but despite her zeal for his conversion, Miller himself at length became an infidel, and only after a soul-searching experience which culminated in his conversion did he begin his preparation for the ministry in the Baptist Church. A great many books have been written about William Miller and the rise of the Millerite movement, but to this writer’s knowledge none of them has even accused Miller on verifiable grounds of being either dishonest or deceptive in his prophetic interpretation of Scripture. Indeed, he always enjoyed the reputation among all who knew him as an honest, forthright, Christian man. One does not have to endorse the errors of Millerism and its unbiblical date-setting records, therefore, to have respect for the historical figure of William Miller, for regardless of his shortcomings, Miller himself was a deeply religious Christian who, had he had the benefit of a more extensive understanding of the Scriptures, most probably would never have embarked upon his date-setting career.

Clearly it may be seen that although Miller popularized the 1843/1844 concept of Christ coming again, he was far from being alone; if we hold Miller up for scorn we must also hold up a whole ream of internationally known scholars who have some of the best education in the world but who had a “blind spot” in prophetic interpretation and so endorsed the Millerite interpretational system of chronology. It was the Lord Jesus Christ who said, “No one knoweth the hour of my return,” and at another time the Master plainly stated that it was not given to us,

His followers, to know the times nor the seasons “which the Father hath put in his own power.” This should have been enough to deter the Millerites from their foolhardy quest to set a date for the return of the Lord, but, unfortunately, they persisted in their chronological speculations and suffered tremendous humiliation, ridicule, and abject despair.

According to the prophetic interpretations of William Miller, he had set the time for the probable return of the Lord somewhere between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844³ and as the time drew nigh a religious frenzy shook the Millerite world—the Lord was coming back!

Zealous though the followers of Miller were and terribly sincere in their faith as they must have been, stark disappointment waited them as the Jewish year “1843” faded from time and the Lord had not come. As the realization that the dream closest to their hearts had not materialized sank into the consciousness of the disillusioned Millerites, word from William Miller was eagerly sought, and with his characteristic honesty it was shortly forthcoming. Wrote Miller in the very shadow of spiritual anguish: “Were I to live my life over again, with the same evidence that I then had, to be honest with God and man I should have to do as I have done. Although opposers said it would not come, they produced no weighty arguments. It was evidently guess-work with them; and I then thought, and do now, that their denial was based more on an unwillingness for the Lord to come than on any arguments leading to such conclusion. I confess my error, and acknowledge my disappointment; yet I still believe that the Day of the Lord is near, even at the door; and I exhort you, my brethren, to be watchful and not let that day come upon you unawares.”⁴

In the wake of this stunning declaration by their leader, the Millerites strove vainly to reconcile the prophetic interpretation of the Scripture to which they had adhered with the stark reality of the fact that Christ had not come again. And with one last gasp, so to speak, Miller with reluctance endorsed what has come to be known historically as “The Seventh-Month Movement,” or the belief that Christ would come on October 22, 1844, the tenth day of the seventh month according to the Karaite reckoning of the Jewish Sacred Calendar.⁵ Once again the Millerites’ hopes were lifted, and October 22, 1844 became the new battle cry for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. The outcome of the “Seventh-month Movement” can be best summed up in the word of Dr. Josiah Litch, one of the leaders of the Millerite movement, who

from his home in Philadelphia wrote on October 24 these words, “It is a cloudy and dark day here—the sheep are scattered—the Lord has not come yet.”⁶

From Litch’s statement, it is a simple matter to piece together the psychological framework of the Millerites in the wake of these two disappointments. They were shattered and disillusioned people—Christ had not come to cleanse the sanctuary, to usher in judgment, and to bring the world into subjugation to the “everlasting gospel.” Instead, the physical sky was cloudy and dark, and the historical horizons were black with the failure of the Millerite movement. There was, understandably, terrible confusion, of which God, the Scripture tells us, is not the author.

The final phase of the Millerite movement, then, came to a close with the “Great Disappointment” of 1844, and as the Millerites began to disintegrate as a movement there gradually emerged other groups (First-day Adventists, etc.) but in our study we are concerned primarily with three distinct segments which later joined in an indissoluble fusion eventually producing the Seventh-day Adventist denomination as we know it today. William Miller, it should be noted, was *never* a Seventh-day Adventist and confessed himself that he had “no confidence” in the “new theories” which emerged from the shambles of what was previously the Millerite movement. Dr. LeRoy Froom of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, in the fourth volume of his masterful series *The Prophetic Faith of our Fathers*, succinctly states exactly what Miller’s position was. Wrote Dr. Froom: “Miller was outspokenly opposed to the various new theories that had developed following October 22, 1844, in an endeavor to explain the disappointment. He deplored the call to come out of the churches that had been given, and he never accepted the distinctive positions of the Sabbatarians. The doctrine of the unconscious sleep of the dead and the final destruction of the wicked was not, he maintained, part of the original Millerite position, but was introduced personally by Storrs and Litch. He even came to deny the application of a parable in *The Midnight Cry* to the Seventh-month Movement and eventually went so far as to declare unequivocally [*sic*] that the movement was not ‘a fulfillment of prophecy in any sense’.”⁷

The theology of William Miller, then, except for his chronological speculation, differed from the Seventh-day Adventist theological interpretations in these three distinct ways: Miller denied the Seventh-day Sabbath, the doctrine of the unconscious sleep of the dead, and the final annihilation of the wicked—all doctrines held by the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. He

also differed theologically in that he never held to the “day of atonement” and “investigative judgment” theories as developed by Seventh-day Adventists. For William Miller the era of chronological speculation was over, and he died shortly thereafter, a broken and disillusioned man who was, nevertheless, honest and forthright when in error or when repudiating error, and there can be no honest doubt that he now enjoys the presence of the Lord whose appeared he so anxiously awaited.

We return now to the three branches or groups which eventually united to form the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, for it is important that the reader understand the early background of the Seventh-day Adventist history and theology.

Each of the three groups mentioned held a distinctive doctrine. The group headed by Hiram Edson in western New York proclaimed the doctrine of the sanctuary “as embracing a special or final ministry of Christ in the Holy of Holies in the heavenly sanctuary, thus giving new meaning to the message, ‘The Hour of God’s Judgment has come’.” The second group, headed by Joseph Bates, with the main following in Massachusetts and New Hampshire, advocated the Sabbath feature or the observance of the Seventh-day “as involved in the keeping of commandments of God.” The third group emphasized the “spirit of prophecy” or the testimony of Jesus, which they believed was to be manifest in the “remnant church” (Revelation 14:6-12, also Revelation 12:17, and 19:10), or “the last segment of God’s church of the centuries.” Between the years 1844 and 1847 the thinking of these groups crystallized and was actively declared and promulgated in the writings of their respective leaders, Hiram Edson, O. R. L. Crosier, Joseph Bates, James White, and Ellen G. White.

Though the name “Seventh-day Adventist denomination” was not officially assumed by the group until 1860 at a conference held in Battle Creek, Michigan, Seventh-day Adventism had been born, and in 1855 the headquarters of the movement was centralized in Battle Creek, where it remained until 1903, when the national headquarters was moved to Washing, D. C.

The three distinctive doctrines of Seventh-day Adventism, which were previous enumerated, will be discussed along with others in the second and third articles of this series on Seventh-day Adventism, so at this time we shall omit any discussion of them. However, the Adventists

had a definite theological platform, which through the years has varied little, but which in comparatively recent years has undergone a very definite evolution toward a more forthright declaration concerning the principles of the historical Christian faith, especially as they are embodied in the tenets of orthodox Christian theology. These matters as previously stated will be discussed in our second and third articles.

As is the case with most religious movements, one extraordinary personality often dominates the entire history of the group, and Seventh-day Adventism is no exception to this rule. The dominant personality of Seventh-day Adventism was Ellen G. White, one of the most fascinating figures ever to appear upon the horizon of religious history, and a controversial personage whose memory and work have been alternately praised by the Adventists and damned by their enemies since the early years of the movement's history. Born Ellen Gould Harmon in Gorham, Maine in 1827, and reared a devout church-going Methodist in the city of Portland, Mrs. White, early in her religious experience, became known as an unusual person, for she bore witness to certain "revelations," which she believed she had received from Heaven, and as early as the age of seventeen embraced the Adventist faith of the Millerites.⁸

Although Mrs. White, after her marriage to James White, a prominent Adventist leader, eventually exerted a tremendous influence upon the thinking of the Seventh-day Adventists—and does to this day through her prolific writings—she never claimed for herself infallibility in matters of inspiration; or as Dr. Froom has put it, "She neither claimed nor accepted the role of infallibility, which is vastly different from inspiration, or the influence of the spirit of God upon the spirit of the submissive servant and messenger. Like the prophets of old she illuminated and applied truth and gave guidance to her fellow believers. She did not lay claim to the title of prophet, preferring to be called a 'messenger' and 'servant of God'."

The writer has read extensively in the publications of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination and almost all of the writings of Ellen G. White, including her testimonies, and feels free to state that there can be no doubt that Mrs. White was a "born again" Christian woman who truly loved the Lord Jesus Christ and who dedicated herself unstintingly to the task of bearing witness for Him as she felt led. It should be clearly understood that in some places orthodox Christian theology and the interpretations of Mrs. White do not agree; in fact, in some places

they are at direct loggerheads, but on the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith necessary to the salvation of the soul and the growth of the life in Christ, Ellen G. White has never written anything which is seriously contrary to the simple, plain declarations of the gospel. One may disagree with Mrs. White's interpretation of the atonement and the scapegoat; one may challenge her stress upon the Seventh-day Sabbath, health reform, and conditional immortality, etc.; but no one can fairly challenge her writings on the basis of their conformity to the basic principles of the gospel, for conform they most certainly do!

Many critics of the Seventh-day Adventism have assumed *a priori*—mostly from the writings of professional Adventist detractors such as E. G. Jones—that Mrs. White was a fearsome ogre who devoured all who opposed her, and they have never stopped saying that Seventh-day Adventists believe that she is infallible despite the published official position of the denomination, which states the direct contrary to these perversions. To quote the official denominational position: “Ellen G. White's writings are not the source of our expositions. We derive our faith from the Scriptures, and our interpretations of prophecy were all established before Mrs. White spoke or wrote thereon. We hold her writings in highest esteem and believe that the Holy Spirit illumined her mind in the penning of these counsels to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Their conformity with biblical, historical, and scientific facts is truly remarkable we feel, but we do not and never have put them on a parity with Scripture as some falsely charge.”

In addition to this statement the following comment from representatives of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, which is the governing body and voice of Seventh-day Adventism worldwide, clearly states the denominational position relative to Ellen G. White: “Seventh-day Adventists uniformly believe that the canon of Scripture closed with the book of Revelation. We hold that all writings and teachings are to be judged by and are subject to the Bible, which stands alone and unique as the source and norm of our Christian faith. We do not consider Ellen G. White to be in the category of the writers of the canon of Scripture. Her writings are regarded by Adventists as containing special counsel from God concerning personal religion and the conduct of our denominational work. That portion of her writings which might be classified as prediction actually forms a very small segment. And even when she deals with what is coming on earth, her statements are only amplifications of Bible prophecy. She did not assume the title of prophet, but simply a messenger of the Lord ‘To claim to be a prophetess in

something that I have never done. . . but my work has covered so many lines that I cannot call myself other than a messenger sent to bear a message from the Lord'." 9

While it is true that Seventh-day Adventists hold Mrs. White and her writings in great esteem, the Bible is their only rule of faith and practice. We as fellow Christians may violently disagree with their attitude toward Mrs. White, but nothing she ever wrote on those doctrines essential to salvation or Christian living would characterize her in any way as being other than a Christian in every sense of the term.

D. M. Canright,¹⁰ in his two books on Ellen G. White, has gone into great critical details based upon his early association and personal acquaintance with Mrs. White, and many of the points which Canright makes from the standpoint of a personal opinion no one is capable of challenging for the simple reason that nobody ever had source material enough to question Brother Canright's analysis. Having read D. M. Canright, E. B. Jones, and every major work on Seventh-day Adventism printed in the United States and Europe over the past fifty-seven years, the writer, too, is unable to determine whether or not Canright's judgments where Mrs. White is concerned are 100 per cent valid.

If the reader is seriously interested in a comparison of the two positions, he is urged to read F. D. Nicol's book, *Ellen G. Wright and Her Critics*¹¹ and compare it with Canright's volumes, *The Life of Mrs. E. G. White*¹² and *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced*,¹³ at the end of which reading he is free to make up his own mind as to the character and work of Ellen G. White. To this writer as a student of comparative religions it is irrelevant whether or not Mrs. White as a person was actually everything that Brothers Canright or Nicol proclaim. After all, she never claimed infallibility for herself, and therefore, to refute Ellen G. White either as a person or theologically is certainly *not* to refute Seventh-day Adventism *per se*, for there are schools of interpretation within the Seventh-day Adventist movement which disagree with Ellen G. White's interpretations on some points, and it is significant to note that her writings are *not* a test of fellowship in the denomination! To emphasize this point the *Review and Herald* made the following statement: "We therefore do not test the world in any manner by these gifts. Nor do we in our intercourse with other religious bodies who are striving to walk in the fear of God in any way make these a test of Christian character."¹⁴

Another significant fact is that James White, three times President of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, when speaking on the work of his wife, expressly declared that “Adventists do not, however, make a belief in this work a test of Christian fellowship.”¹⁵ F. M. Wilcox who for thirty-five years was editor of the *Review and Herald*, the Adventist denominational church paper, wrote, “In the practice of the church it has not been customary to disfellowship one because he did not recognize the doctrine of spiritual gifts. . . . A member of the church should not be excluded from the membership of the church because of his inability to recognize clearly the doctrine of spiritual gifts and its application to the second advent movement.”¹⁶

Today the Seventh-day Adventist denomination numbers over a million throughout the world, operates a total of forty-two publishing houses and produces literature in more than two hundred languages, while publishing over three hundred periodicals, which include correspondence courses, Sabbath School lessons, etc. In their Bible study courses, advertised over the *Voice of Prophecy*, their official denominational radio program, the Adventists have enrolled more than three million persons, and the *Signs of the Times*, their weekly paper, has a circulation of over a million copies per month.

In addition to their tremendous printed propaganda the Adventists have excelled in medical works on the mission field and in the United States and have numerous sanitariums and hospitals, which enjoy excellent reputations.

We cannot hope to cover the entire scope of Seventh-day Adventist historical development in an article of this length. However, enough has been shown to indicate clearly that from meager beginnings in the wake of the Great Disappointment of 1844 and the collapse of the Millerite movement, the Seventh-day Adventist denomination has pressed forward and expanded until today it constitutes an important segment of American Protestantism. Its theology will be the subject of our next article.

Notes

1. The author was director of Cult Apologetics for the Zondervan Publishing House, contributing editor of *ETERNITY* Magazine, and a member of the staff of The Evangelical Foundation in Philadelphia.
2. Francis D. Nicol. *The Midnight Cry*. (Washington, D.C., Review and Herald) 1944. Page 35.
3. Francis D. Nicol. *The Midnight Cry*. (Washington, D.C., Review and Herald). 1944. Page 169.
4. Sylvester Bliss. *Memoirs of William Miller*. (Boston: J. V. Himes). 1853. Page 256.
5. Francis D. Nicol. *The Midnight Cry*. (Washington, D.C., Review and Herald). 1944. Page 243.

6. Francis D. Nicol. *The Midnight Cry*. (Washington, D.C., Review and Herald). 1944. Page 263.
7. LeRoy Froom. *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*. (Washington, D. C. Review and Herald). 1946. Pages 828-829.
8. E. G. White. *Life Sketches of James White and Ellen G. White*. (Battle Creek: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association). 1880, 1888. Pages 64-68.
9. From *Review and Herald*, vol. 83, no. 30, July 26, 1906, page 8.
10. An ex-Adventist leader of great magnitude and a personal friend for many years of Ellen G. White. He left the movement, became a Baptist minister, and wrote much against SDA. His criticisms where they bear upon the Sabbath, soul sleep, annihilation of the wicked, the sanctuary doctrine, the investigative judgment, the spirit of prophecy as manifested in Mrs. White, and health reform in SDA are frequently well taken; however, much has changed since Canright's day and his work must be viewed in the light of current SDA theology.
11. F. D. Nicol. *Ellen G. Wright and Her Critics*. 1951.
12. D. M. Canright. *The Life of Mrs. E. G. White*. 1919.
13. D. M. Canright. *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced*. 1914.
14. From *Review and Herald*, vol. 35, no. 9, February 15, 1870.
15. From *Review and Herald*, vol. 37, no. 26, June 13, 1871, page 205.
16. Francis M. Wilcox (1865-1951) *The Testimony of Jesus*. Pages 141 and 143.

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