

THE ADVENTIST MOVEMENT:

Its Relationship to the
Seventh Day Church of God

by

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Important Ideas

Man is by nature *mortal*, the dead are unconscious until the resurrection, the punishment of the wicked is total extinction, and immortality is a gift from God (paraphrase of **George Storrs**, circa 1842).

“Whoever is opposed to the personal reign of Jesus Christ over this world on David’s throne, is Antichrist . . . all sects in Protestant Christendom . . . are opposed to the plain Bible truth of Christ’s personal reign on earth; they are Antichrist If you intend to be found a Christian when Christ appears, come out of Babylon, and come out now” (**Charles Fitch**, July 1843).

We should be called “Church of God,” and not “Adventist.” The “true people of God” must have the name, “Church of God” (paraphrase of **Joseph Marsh**, May 21, 1845).

You Sabbath-keepers are inconsistent. The same scriptures which support the Sabbath also support the keeping of Passover and the Feast Days (paraphrase of **A.N. Seymour**, 1856).

“The kingdom of Heaven, kingdom of David, kingdom of God, and kingdom of Israel are one and the same . . . Jesus and the Saints are heirs to this kingdom nowhere in the Bible, is the Christian Church called a kingdom!” (**R.V. Lyon**, circa 1860).

Summary

William Miller proclaimed the end of the world in 1843-1844. The American Adventist Movement which Miller led spawned a number of churches, including Sunday-keeping Adventists (Advent Christian Church, Church of God of Abrahamic Faith), as well as Sabbath-keeping Adventists (Seventh-Day Adventists, Seventh Day Church of God). The Seventh Day Church of God has much in common with Sunday-keeping Adventists.

The Adventist Movement generated several key ideas that were

carried over to the Seventh Day Church of God, including the name, “Church of God,” the Sabbath/Holy Day question, conditionalism, the “Age to Come,” the regathering and identity of Israel, church government, the soon return of the Messiah, and coming out of Babylon.

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THE ADVENTIST MOVEMENT

I. The Setting

Seventh Day Baptists in the early 1800s were characterized by “coldness and apathy” and were generally in a lethargic state. Yet, strangely, the period of 1820-1840 saw their greatest growth in membership. Numerically they were growing, but spiritually they were in the depths of false doctrine.

Seventh Day Baptists were not alone in a general religious depression during this period. "Toward the latter part of the 18th Century there was much spiritual unrest and the churches of America were dead in religious formality and certain Bible truths seemed all but lost."¹

Ellen G. White states in her work *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* that the "Reformed" churches were in need of reforming: "... the condition of the church at this time is pointed out in the Saviour's words in Revelation: 'you have a name that you livest, and art dead.'" Churches, she said, had refused to learn new truth. To awaken them, she states, God sent "an American Reformer," William Miller.²

Millennial Views: Post versus Pre

The commonly accepted 1800s view of the millennium was what is known as "post-millennialism," the belief that the "Kingdom of God" would come by *gradual* stages; as more and more of the world's population became "converted," the millennium would be established. At the end of the 1000 years, with the earth perfected, Christ would return. Before the return of Christ, the Jews would have to return to Palestine, set up their own state, and be converted.³

"Pre-millennialism," held by William Miller and others who came to be known as "Millerites," or "Adventists," was the belief that Christ's second coming would precede the 1000-year Millennium, and that this event was soon coming. It was a radically "new" idea that gained enthusiastic advocates in an era marked by religious and political fervor.⁴

Sociological Explanation

Western New York, described in a book of the same title by Whitney Cross, was in the period of 1800-1850 a "Burned Over District."⁵ It was the scene of much religious enthusiasm, including the birth of Mormonism and Shakerism. Numerous Seventh Day Baptist churches were established in the region during these years, and a center of Adventist activity was Rochester, where Joseph Marsh's papers were published, and where the *Advent Review* and *Sabbath Herald* was later published for a time. Religionists there tended

to be emotional. There was much religious competition, rivalry and bitter strife between the different sects.

After the depression of 1837, the pre-millennialist idea of the soon-coming millennium was an instant panacea, an escape from economic woes for poorly educated people. In a day of "spiritualizing away" much of the Bible, the close literalistic interpretations of Scripture by Miller and his associates initiated a northern United States revival that brought interest in religion among many to a fever pitch.

Aftermath: "Blackness and Desolation"

The Millerite movement was like a prairie fire; it created fervor when the issue was burning, but when the 1844 original "date-setter's" time had passed, ridicule and scorn caused numerous "converts" to lose all faith in the Bible and become infidels. "For years the spiritual condition of some parts of the State of New York was not unlike that of a prairie after it has been swept by fire. All was blackness and desolation and death."⁶

After 1844, a noticeable decline in "conversions" occurred nationwide. The period of revivals had come to an end, and even greater "spiritual lethargy" followed the collapse of Millerism.⁷

II. William Miller — "The Old Man With the Concordance"

A veteran of the War of 1812, William Miller subsequently had become a farmer in New York. He had scorned organized religion and rejected the Bible until the death of a friend and pangs of guilt from cursing led him to profession of Christianity. When his friends ridiculed his switch, he made them a bet: he would carefully study the Bible, and if he could not harmonize its apparent contradictions, he would renounce his faith. A two-year study, during which he used mainly a Cruden's Concordance, convinced him that the Bible is its own interpreter. Especially intrigued by the prophecies of the Book of Daniel, Miller came to believe that the Second Coming would occur "about the year 1843."

For thirteen years he kept studying, rechecking his figures and keeping his ideas basically to himself. He was too shy to preach

publicly his views, until in 1831 some of his fellow Free Will Baptists in Low Hampton, New York, asked him to preach on his theories of the Second Advent. His first sermon, at the age of 57, he described as a “cold, dull, lifeless performance.”⁸

Miller improved greatly, and became one of the most influential preachers in the history of American evangelism. His sincere, unaffected style made his message greatly appealing to the common people.

From 1831 through 1839 Miller preached mostly in small towns and villages in New England, going only where he was invited to speak. He subsequently became a licensed Baptist minister, although he spoke his prophetic ideas at churches of many denominations. Numerous Baptist, Methodist, Congregational, and other churches invited him to speak before them. Often they did not agree with his prophetic preaching, but, as “spiritual lethargy had been prevalent in some of the churches,” they invited him to speak to stir up religious enthusiasm. A man who spoke on the soon-coming end of the world had “drawing power.”⁹

Miller was not out to start a separate religious denomination; he lived and died a Baptist. However, his theories of the end of the world created a religious revival that shook all the churches of the North. His detailed calculations, coupled with ignorance of ministers and credulity of the uneducated populace led, many to embrace his theories.¹⁰

Calculation of the Crucial Date

The Book of Daniel has been called the “Battleground of Bible Criticism,” and the misuse of it by men such as William Miller have made it a muddy field indeed.

William Miller’s theories of the end of the world “about the year 1843” centered on the so-called 2,300-days prophecy of **Daniel 8:14**, coupled with the 70-weeks prophecy of **Daniel 11**. His interpretations stemmed from at least five assumptions, all of them false:

- (1) in Bible prophecy, a day always represents a year
- (2) the 70-weeks and 2,300-days prophecies begin at the same time
- (3) the starting date was 457 B.C.
- (4) there was a year zero
- (5) the cleansing of the sanctuary of

Daniel 8:14 means the purging of the earth with fire at the return of Christ¹¹

To these may be added a sixth assumption, that the 2,300 mornings and evenings stand for 2,300 days in prophecy, rather than 1,150 days. Of the 2,300-days, or prophetic years, the first 490 years, from 457 B.C. to 34 A.D., were said to be the years allotted to the Jewish nation (70-weeks), and the rest, 1,810 years, allotted for the gospel to go to the Gentiles. Christ was said to have died in the midst of the week of seven years, 27-34 A.D.

Several calculations were involved in determining that the year 1843 (later changed to 1844) date was the date of the return of Christ. However, the most basic method used was adding 2,300 years to 457 B.C., and arriving at 1844. Miller never set an exact date, but in January, 1843, he stated that the Second Advent would occur between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844, the “Jewish year” of 1843 (obviously, Miller counted the non-existent year “zero” in his initial calculations). After the 1844 date had passed, Miller’s associates, especially Samuel S. Snow, revised the date to the tenth day of the seventh Jewish month — October 22, 1844 as they (erroneously) figured it — for the second coming of Christ.¹²

Apparently the exact date was not the criterion of the Millerite movement; Joshua Himes, Henry Dana Ward and Henry Jones, leaders in the movement, did not hold to the 1843 date, but believed the time was near.¹³

Miller’s Ideas

Miller’s linkage of the 2300-days prophecy to the 70-weeks prophecy was not original. Other students of prophecy had pointed to similar ideas before his time. What was “new” was his belief that the coming of Christ precedes the millennium, and that Christ would come about 1843. In this Miller radically departed from “evangelical Christians” of his day.¹⁴

Miller believed that the wicked would be destroyed by Christ’s coming, the just would be resurrected at the return of Christ, and the dead unjust would be resurrected at the close of the millennium. Contemporary “Christians” often spiritualized away the resurrection, as well as the millennium.¹⁵

In direct contrast to English Adventists, or

Literalists, who were active at the same time, Miller believed that the literal Jews would *not* return to their homeland and be converted prior to the return of Christ. One of the five “Fundamental Principles on Which the Second Advent Cause Is Based,” which were continually listed in the major Millerite periodical, *The Midnight Cry!*, is that the “only restoration of Israel yet future, is the restoration of the saints to the new earth, when the Lord my God shall come, and all His saints with Him.”¹⁶

The other four “Fundamental Principles” of the Millerite movement are these:

(1) The earth will be regenerated, restored to the Edenic state, and be the eternal abode of the resurrected righteous.

(2) The only millennium spoken of in the Bible is a period of 1000 years between the first and second resurrections.

(3) All prophecies have been fulfilled except those relating to the coming of Christ, the end of the world, and the restitution of all things.

(4) “There are none of the prophetic periods, as we understand them, extending beyond the [Jewish] year 1843.”¹⁷

Part of a Worldwide Movement

Miller’s proclamation of the soon-coming end of the world was not unique, as other religious leaders were proclaiming much the same thing, and some of them even before Miller. “During the early decades of the nineteenth century a profound conviction of its [Second Advent] imminence developed simultaneously and spontaneously among pious scholars in practically all religious bodies in the different countries of Christendom.” The belief that the “end of the age” was near became common.¹⁸

Christ’s speedy advent was proclaimed by Joseph Wolf in 1831-1845 in Asia and around the world. Extensive Second Advent beliefs permeated the Moravians in Germany; Kleber’s book *The End is Coming* set 1843 or 1844 as the crucial date. In England, Edward Irving preached the soon return of Christ and published an English translation of a Spanish book, *The Coming of Messiah in Majesty and Glory*. In 1840-1844, some 700 ministers of the Church of England were proclaiming the Advent doctrine (the figure may have been 300

ministers of the Established Church and more than twice that number of nonconformists.)¹⁹

In the United States, a minister named Davis in South Carolina began at the same time as Miller to proclaim similar views, although the two men originally had no knowledge of each other.

In Sweden, children were seized upon and began preaching the Second Advent, despite a law forbidding teaching anything contrary to the Established Lutheran Church. Eighteen year old Erik Walboam wrote that he and others were “seized by this heavenly power . . . that we could in no wise resist . . . [and] we began to proclaim to the people, and to proclaim with a loud voice that the Judgment hour had come”²⁰

Loughborough states that this “simultaneous work . . . is indeed a striking evidence of God’s hand in the movement.”²¹

III. Miller’s Associates

In Europe the Second Advent movement was principally fostered by individuals. However, in America the movement was much more extensive and more organized. “Millerism,” as it was originally termed, was an inter-church movement led by William Miller, a licensed Baptist minister of Low Hampton, New York, and supported by scores of leading Protestant clergymen of nearly all denominations. Some 200-300 ministers proclaimed his ideas, and 500 public lecturers toured the country.

Miller’s ideas became commonly known in much of the nation. From 50 to 100 thousand people identified themselves as Second Adventists in 1843-44, and the Hartford Universalist alluded to a million adherents.²² The South generally was not receptive because slaveholders were against the message, fearing their slaves would revolt if they felt the end was near.²³ Many leading Adventists, such as Joseph Bates, were anti-slavery and pro-temperance, and these ideas were not popular in the South.

Himes — Promoter of Adventism

Until 1840, William Miller preached mostly in small towns and villages of New England, speaking only where he was invited. He was a good preacher but not a promoter. In

December, 1839, he was asked to preach in cultural Boston by Pastor Joshua V. Himes of the Baptist Chardon Street Chapel. A former Unitarian, Himes was a born promoter. He started the two major Millerite papers, *Signs of the Times* (1840), later renamed the *Advent Herald*, and *The Midnight Cry!* as well as several others. With Himes, Millerism spread to the larger cities and was no more a one-man work, but that of a great and increasing number of ministers.

Himes, as editor of these influential papers, became second only to Miller as the leader of the movement. In 1864, Himes became an Advent Christian minister, and he later died in the Episcopal church.²⁴

Himes did not believe in the 1843-44 date, but he wholeheartedly supported the work because he thought the truth would become evident.²⁵

Confederation on One Idea

Various conferences were held by Millerite ministers to give unity and direction to the movement. The first conference, held in Boston, in 1840, specifically stated that the movement was not out to form a separate church but to proclaim that the Second Advent was very near.

The third conference, held in Portland, Maine, in October of 1841, formed a committee for “examining, advising and recommending” qualified lecturers; but there was nothing to prevent a man from rising up and claiming to preach Millerite doctrines. Miller encouraged all to distribute literature and write “useful and interesting articles.”

There was remarkable unity for so loosely organized a movement. At conferences, the various Protestant ministers even held communion together. Except for the issue of the Second Advent, the theological views of most could easily pass for orthodox views in most denominations.²⁶ The Advent date was the only real cohesive factor; when that failed, it was natural that the movement splintered and divided.

Leading Millerite Ministers

Josiah Litch, a Methodist minister, was one of the first really prominent men to join Miller in wholehearted promotion of the Second

Advent movement. In 1838 he published a scholarly work, the “Probability of the Second Coming of Christ about the Year 1843.” In 1841 he was hired as “general agent,” for the movement and traveled widely, preaching at the expense of the publications.²⁷

Charles Fitch was a former Presbyterian of New Jersey who in 1841 wrote “Reasons for Believing in the Second Advent of Christ in 1843.” At the close of 1842 he began a paper in Cleveland, *The Second Advent of Christ*.²⁸ It was Fitch who wrote the most famous Millerite sermon, “Come Out of Her, My People!” which encouraged Millerites to come out of their churches and be separate. It was largely due to his influence that Millerism became more than an interdenominational movement.

Timothy Cole was another leading Adventist minister from the time the Second Advent movement was organized in 1840. He was later the first editor of the *Bible Advocate* (1846-1848), published in Hartford, Connecticut.

James White, although not a leading Millerite minister, deserves mention because of his later importance among Sabbatarian Adventists. He was baptized in the Christian Church at the age of 15. In 1842, White attended a Millerite campmeeting in Maine, and although only 21 years old, decided he must preach. In 1843 was ordained a Christian minister.²⁹

Joseph Bates — Pioneer Adventist

A self-made sea captain from Fairhaven, Massachusetts, Bates had been a prisoner during wartime, 1812-1815. Bates drank, chewed tobacco and swore like any other salt until his wife packed a New Testament among his reading materials during one voyage. He subsequently abstained from tobacco and cursing and resolved never to drink another drop of alcohol. Later he was baptized into the Disciples of Christ Church, and the same day he organized a local Temperance Society. Afterwards, Bates became a vegetarian and quit tea and coffee. In 1839 he heard about William Miller, studied thoroughly his prophetic theories, and became firmly convinced that “about the year 1843” would be the end of the world.³⁰

Bates became a leading Millerite lecturer

and often presided over Millerite conferences. After 1844 he became a Sabbatarian (observing the Sabbath from six o'clock Friday to six o'clock Saturday) and spread the message into Ohio. He also pioneered Adventism in Michigan and other states in the Midwest.³¹

IV. Organization of the Millerite Movement

The first Millerite conference, called the "General Conference of Christians Expecting the Advent of Our Lord Jesus Christ," was held in Boston at Himes' church on October 14-15, 1840. Its stated purpose was "not . . . to form a new organization in the faith of Christ; nor to assail others of our brethren who differ from us in regard to the period and manner of the advent; but to discuss the whole subject faithfully and fairly . . . [and] by so doing we may [spread the gospel] . . . that the way of the Lord may be speedily prepared . . ." ³² Further sessions were to coordinate and plan the loosely knit movement.³³

The second General Conference, held in Lowell, Massachusetts on June 15, 1841, was attended by over 200 from Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maine, Vermont, and New York. It recommended the formation of Bible classes for discussing articles and literature on the Second Advent, the questioning of local ministers on the Adventist message by presenting texts for them to explain, and the establishment of Second Advent libraries in various cities of the North. If Adventist believers were opposed by their local churches, they were advised to continue attending and "do what they can to bring the church to a better mind."³⁴

The attitude of being above partisanship was still evident: ". . . the Conference will not be a place for controversy, or party strife, or sectarian display; and least of all, a place for assailing the great pillar of holy truth, the church, its ministry, its ordinance, or its Sabbaths."³⁵

Other conferences were held before 1844 in Maine, New York City, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Rhode Island. Gradually there developed from the Millerite movement a sectarian philosophy which after 1844 led to the formation of several distinct churches.

Camp Meetings and Prophetic Charts

A conference held in Boston on May 24, 1842, stressed the soon-coming end and the urgency of giving the "Midnight Cry" of **Matthew 25**. It was decided to hold Adventist camp meetings, the first one was held at East Kingston, New Hampshire, in the summer of 1842. Numerous speakers, including Miller, lectured at the eight-day East Kingston camp meeting, which was attended by 7,000 to 15,000 Adventists of many denominations from New England and Canada. It was further agreed during the 1842 conference to publicize prophetic charts. One such chart, based on the visions of the beasts in the books of Daniel and Revelation, was constructed by Fitch and Apollos Hale.

The value of the prophetic charts was proved during the lectures at East Kingston; charts became a distinguishing feature of Millerite speakers, and later Seventh-Day Adventist and Seventh Day Church of God evangelists. It was believed that the charts fulfilled **Habakkuk 2:2** in making visions plain. Listeners might forget the words of a speaker, but the lurid caricatures of the beasts of Daniel and Revelation were burned upon the audiences' minds. Millerite lecturers "needed to do little more than hang up the chart in order to grip the interest of the audience and hold it throughout a lecture."³⁶

Growth of Movement and Conflicts

At the time of the 1842 camp meeting, Himes wrote in the Signs of the Times advising those who wished Adventist lecturers to visit them to send in their request to the editor. Himes remarked, ". . . new lecturers are now entering the field, and we hope to be able to supply more of the numerous calls in the future, than we have been able to in the past."³⁷

Much ridicule was heaped upon "End of the World Miller" and his associates. Advertisers cashed in on the Adventist interest; cigar advertisements caught newspaper readers' eyes with headings such as "End of the World" and "The Second Advent." Conservative Philadelphia newspapers described Millerite meetings as "wild orgies." Disrupters and hoodlums often cleared lecture halls by shouting "Fire!" at the top of their lungs. The

New York Times published an extra section portraying Miller's chart with a refutation of Millerism by "Rev." Dowling, a Baptist minister.³⁸

In the face of intensifying opposition, Miller branded those who made up stories and twisted what he said as liars. Millerite papers devoted much space to refuting false charges and included a "Liar's Corner" which merely listed false reports without refutation.³⁹

Exaggerated rumors were spread about the supposed fanaticism of Millerites, and it was even claimed that numerous people had been driven insane by his teachings. Miller himself promoted calmness, and in an article in the Signs, "Occupy Till I Come," he urged farmers to continue to work and plant crops. Some, however, did engage in fanatical excesses; many farmers in late 1844 failed to harvest their crops, thinking the end was sure to come.⁴⁰

The real problem in the movement was not fanaticism but friction between the Millerites and their respective denominations. To say the least, Millerite adherents were often coldly received by their churches; many were even expelled.

Conditional Immortality

George Storrs, editor of his own paper, the Bible Examiner, was a leading Adventist who began to advocate the mortality of man. His famous "Six Sermons," published c. 1842, showed that man is by nature mortal, the dead are unconscious until the resurrection, the punishment of the wicked is total extinction, and immortality is a gift of God.

Thousands of Adventists accepted this doctrine although it was not a test of Adventist belief. Yet, conditionalism ran counter to the "immortal soul" teaching of major Protestantism, and aroused so much ire that many "soul sleeping" Adventists were expelled from their churches for "heresy."⁴¹

"Church of God (Adventist)." It was aptly descriptive.Ω

FOOTNOTES

¹General Council History, published by General Council of the Churches of God, Meridian, Idaho.

²Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (1961 ed.), 297, 309, 317.

³John N. Loughborough, *Rise and Progress of the Seventh Day Adventists* (Battle Creek, Michigan: 1892), 86; Francis D. Nichol, *The Midnight Cry*, Washington, D.C., 1945, 446-48.

⁴Nichol, 446.

⁵Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned Over District, A Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca, New York: 1950), 6-7, 43, 293, 317-18.

⁶Henry C. Vedder, *A History of the Baptists in the Middle States* (Philadelphia: 1898), 203.

⁷Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Revised) (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: 1963), 297.

⁸Booton Herndon, *The Seventh Day: Story of the Seventh Day Adventists* (New York: 1960), 43, 47-48.

⁹Clara Endicott Sears, *Days of Delusion: a Strange Bit of History* (Boston: 1924), 49-50.

¹⁰Joseph Bates, *The Autobiography of Joseph Bates* (Battle Creek: 1868), 255.

¹¹Anthony A. Hoekema, *Four Major Cults* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1963), 91.

¹²Nichol, 126; Leroy E. Froom, cited in Vergilius Ferm, *The American Church of the Protestant Heritage* (New York: 1953), 372-73.

¹³Nichol, 94-95.

¹⁴Nichol, 445-46.

¹⁵Nichol, 507.

¹⁶Southard, cited in I. Daniel Rupp, *An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States* (Philadelphia: 1844), 669.

¹⁷*Western Midnight Cry!* (February 10, 1844), 65.

¹⁸Froom, cited in Ferm, 371.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰*Advent Review* October 7, 1890, cited in Loughborough, 23.

²¹Loughborough, 20-24.

²²Froom, cited in Ferm, 372.

²³Bates, 278.

²⁴Nichol, 60-61, 70-73.

²⁵Bates, 250.

²⁶Nichol, 91-93.

²⁷Nichol, 81, 88; Rupp, 669.

²⁸Rupp, 669.

²⁹Arthur W. Spalding, *Origin and History of Seventh Day Adventists* (Washington, D.C.: 1961), 45-52.

³⁰Herndon, 52; Bates, 139, 143, 170-73, 204-5, 234; Spalding, 40-41.

³¹Spalding, 251.

³²*First Report of the General Conference of Christians Expecting the Advent of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Held in Boston, October 14, 15, 1840* (Boston: 1841), 7.

³³Nichol, 81-82.

³⁴Nichol, 85-87.

³⁵*Signs of the Times*, April 15, 1841, 12.

³⁶Nichol, 101-109.

³⁷*Signs of the Times*, June 29, 1842, 101.

³⁸Nichol, 128-133.

³⁹Nichol, 89-90.

⁴⁰Nichol, 132-33, 146-47.

⁴¹Loughborough, 69-70.