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# Lest We Forget

*"We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history." LS 196*

## Ellet Joseph Waggoner

### Prior to 1888

*by Richard Cooper*

*"The advent movement was born with its eyes on Jesus. 'Jesus is coming soon' was the watchword of the Millerites. 'What is Jesus doing now?' was the question that followed the disappointment. . . . Seventh-day Adventism is basically a message about Christ and what He has done and is doing to save sinners." Thus commented retired Church History Professor, C. Mervyn Maxwell on these early years of growth in the church. (Tell It to the World, p. 231.)*

Into this church developmental milieu, Ellet Joseph Waggoner (EJW) was born in Wisconsin, January 12, 1855.

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E. J. Waggoner  
1855 - 1916

## Ellet

## Joseph

## Waggoner

**E** was the sixth child of Joseph Harvey Waggoner (featured in *Lest We Forget*, Vol. 4, No. 4) and Margaretta Hall whom he had married on April 30, 1845. EJW had four brothers and five sisters. His father joined the Adventist Church in 1852, and was an active preacher and writer until his death in 1889.

There is little information about EJW's early years. He resided in Burlington, Michigan for a while. He attended Battle Creek College and studied medicine at Bellevue Medical College in New York City. He married a college friend, Jessie Fremont Moser, and they had two daughters, Bessie and Pearl. After spending some time at Battle Creek, the family moved to California about 1880. Although Waggoner completed his medical studies, he apparently had a strong interest in preaching, possibly as the result of seeing his father's example.

### An Important Occasion

In 1882, Waggoner attended a camp meeting in Healdsburg. He recalled how he became unaware of the speaker and the message being delivered, and continued telling of his experience,

*"Suddenly a light shone about me, and the tent seemed illumined, as though the sun were shining; I saw Christ crucified for me, and to me was revealed for the first time in my life the fact that God loved me, and that Christ gave Himself for me personally. It was all for me. If I could describe my feelings, they would not be understood by those who have not had a similar experience, and to such [as have,] no explanation is necessary.*

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*"I believed that the Bible is the word of God, penned by holy men who wrote as they were moved by the Holy Ghost, and I knew that this light that came to me was a revelation direct from heaven; therefore I knew that in the Bible I should find the message of God's love for individual sinners, and I resolved that the rest of my life should be devoted to finding it there, and making it plain to others. The light that shone upon me that day from the cross of Christ, has been my guide in all my Bible study; wherever I have turned in the Sacred Book, I have found that Christ set forth as the power of God, to the salvation of individuals and I have never found anything else." (E. J. W., "The Everlasting Covenant," p. 5.)*

In 1883, EJW was called to assist his father in editing *Signs of the Times*. In 1884 he met A. T. Jones. The two became lifelong friends, sharing a passionate interest in justification by faith. In assessing the influence of Waggoner's work in the next few years, it is well to remember that Adventist beliefs were still being studied and clarified. Their understanding of the person and work of the Holy Spirit was not complete. Adventist preaching was significantly shaped by issues of prophecy and eschatology. A strong emphasis was placed on law keeping, and the tension between this and the role of Christ in salvation was not in a healthy balance.

In the next few years EJW wrote numerous articles in *Signs of the Times* dealing with such issues as the law and the gospel, justification and sanctification, and the role of Christ in relation to these issues and individual Christian experience. Space does not allow a detailed analysis of his thinking, but the following is a brief synopsis of the areas he explored.

He believed that justification through Christ's sufferings was real, and that Christ's perfect life, as well, was lived for us. When the sinner believes this, he is transformed and obeys from the heart.

*"Christ also had to keep the law in His life so that His perfect obedience could be counted as ours. . . . He was absolutely good, the embodiment of goodness, yet he was counted as a sinner. . . . Herein is the unspeakable love of Christ, that the innocent should assume the crimes of the guilty, and die in his stead."* (*Signs of the Times*, September 18, 1884.)

Waggoner also set out his belief that the law in Galatians was the moral law. He knew that this position was directly opposed to that of General Conference leaders, G. I. Butler and Uriah Smith. Sensing the increasing friction of opposing positions, the then General Conference Theological Committee voted a resolution that there should be no publication made of views contrary to those *"held by a fair majority of our people"* until *"examined and approved by the leading*

*should be made apparent. I have no hesitancy in saying that you have made a mistake.*

*"I have no hesitancy in saying you have made a mistake here. You have departed from the positive directions God has given upon this matter, and only harm will be the result. This is not in God's order. You have now set the example for others to do as you have done, to feel at liberty to put in their various ideas and theories and bring them before the public, because you have done this. This will bring in a state of things that you have not dreamed of . . . . It is no small matter for you to come out in the Signs as you have done, and God has plainly revealed that such things should not be done. We must keep before the world a united front. Satan will triumph to see differences among Seventh-day Adventists. . . . There are those who do not go deep, who are not Bible students, who will take positions decidedly for or against, grasping at apparent evidence; yet it may not be truth, and to take differences into our conferences where the differences become*

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*brethren of experience."* (December 10, 1886.) Butler published and distributed at the 1886 GC Session a booklet entitled *"The Law in the Book of Galatians."*

Despite this, the two sides continued to publish their ideas. By February 10, 1887, Waggoner had completed a 71-page letter to Butler and Smith entitled *"The Gospel in the Book of Galatians: A Review."* Ellen White wrote a letter to Waggoner dated February 18, 1887, in which she commented,

*"Even if you are fully convinced that your ideas of doctrine are sound, you do not show wisdom that that difference*

*widespread, thus sending forth all through the fields various ideas, one in opposition to the other, is not God's plan, but at once raises questionings, doubts whether we have the truth, whether after all we are not mistaken and in error."*

Waggoner's response was to delay publication of his letter until December 1888. Butler and Smith, however, responded to this silence by publishing more material opposing Waggoner's views.

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# A Letter to Waggoner and Jones

*from Ellen G. White*

Elder Butler has had such an amount of burdens he was not prepared to do this subject justice. Brother E.J.W. [Waggoner] has had his mind exercised on this subject, but to bring these differences into our general conferences is a mistake; it should not be done. There are those who do not go deep, who are not Bible students, who will take positions decidedly for or against, grasping at apparent evidence; yet it may not be truth, and to take differences into our conferences where the differences become widespread, thus sending forth all through the fields various ideas, one in opposition to the other, is not God's plan, but at once raises questionings, doubts whether we have the truth, whether after all we are not mistaken and in error.

The Reformation was greatly retarded by making prominent differences on some points of faith and each party holding tenaciously to those things where they differed. We shall see eye to eye ere long, but to become firm and consider it your duty to present your views in decided opposition to the faith or truth as it has been taught by us as a people, is a mistake, and will result in harm, and only harm, as in the days of Martin Luther. Begin to draw apart and feel at liberty to express your ideas without reference to the views of your brethren, and a state of things will be introduced that you do not dream of.

My husband had some ideas on some points differing from the views taken by his brethren. I was shown that however true his views were, God did not call for him to put them in front before his brethren and create differences of ideas. While he might hold these views subordinate himself, once they are made public, minds would seize [upon them], and just because others believed differently would make these differences the whole burden of the message, and get up contention and variance.

There are the main pillars of our faith, subjects which are of vital interest, the Sabbath, the keeping of the commandments of God. Speculative ideas should not be agitated, for there are peculiar minds that love to get some point that others do not accept, and argue and attract everything to that one point, urging that point, magnifying that point, when it is really a matter which is not of vital importance, and will be understood differently. Twice I have been shown that everything of a character to cause our brethren to be diverted from the very points now essential for this time, should be kept in the background.

Christ did not reveal many things that were truth, because it would create a difference of opinion and get up disputations, but young men who have not passed through this experience we have had, would as soon have a brush as not. Nothing would suit them better than a sharp discussion.

## Response to a controversy over the discussion of doctrinal differences in the *Review and Herald* and *Signs of the Times*

If these things come into our conference, I would refuse to attend one of them; for I have had so much light upon the subject that I know that unconsecrated and unsanctified hearts would enjoy this kind of exercise. Too late in the day, brethren, too late in the day. We are in the great day of atonement, a time when a man must be afflicting his soul, confessing his sins, humbling his heart before God, and getting ready for the great conflict. When these contentions come in before the people, they will think one has the argument, and then that another directly opposed has the argument. The poor people become confused and the conference will be a dead loss, worse than if they had had no conference.

Now when everything is dissension and strife, there must be decided efforts to handle, [to] publish with pen and voice these things that will reveal only harmony. It is a melancholy and dispiriting thing to observe how little effect the solemn truths relating to these last days have upon the minds and hearts of those who claim to believe the truth. . . .

Elder [J. H.] Waggoner has loved discussions and contention. I fear that E.J.W. [Waggoner] has cultivated a love for the same. We need now good, humble religion. E.J.W. needs humility, meekness, and Brother Jones can be a power for good if he will constantly cultivate practical godliness, that he may teach this to the people. . . .

We are one in faith in the fundamental truths of God's word. And one object must be kept in view constantly, that is harmony and cooperation must be maintained without compromising one principle of truth. And while constantly digging for the truth as for hidden treasure, be careful how you open new and conflicting opinions. We have a worldwide message. The commandments of God and the testimonies of Jesus Christ are the burden of our work. To have unity and love for one another is the great work now to be carried on. There is danger of our ministers dwelling too much on doctrines, preaching altogether too many discourses on argumentative subjects when their own soul needs practical godliness.

There has been a door thrown open for variance and strife and contention and differences which none of you can see but God. His eye traces the beginning to the end. And the magnitude of mischief God alone knows. The bitterness, the wrath, the resentment, the jealousies, the heart burnings provoked by controversies of both sides of the question causes the loss of many souls.

May the Lord give us to see the need of drinking from the living fountain of the water of life. Its pure streams will refresh and heal us and refresh all connected with us. Oh, if the hearts were only subdued by the Spirit of God! If the eye was single to God's glory, what a flood of heavenly light would pour upon the soul. He who spake as never man spake was an educator upon earth. After His resurrection He was an educator to the lonely, disappointed disciples traveling to Emmaus, and to those assembled in the upper chamber. He opened to them the Scriptures concerning Himself and caused their hearts to be bound with a holy, new, and sacred hope and joy. . . .

*Harmony and cooperation must be maintained without compromising one principle of truth*

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**A Letter to Waggoner  
and Jones**

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**I**wish that finite minds could see and sense the great love of the infinite God, His great self-denial, His self-sacrifice, in assuming humanity. God humbled Himself and became man and humbled Himself to die, and not only to die, but to die an ignominious death. Oh, that we might see the need of humility, of walking humbly with God, and guarding ourselves on every point.

Were it not that I know [that] the Captain of our salvation stands at the helm to guide the gospel ship into the harbor, I should say, Let me rest in the grave.

Baptized with the Spirit of Jesus, there will be a love, a harmony, a meekness, a hiding of the self in Jesus that the wisdom of Christ will be given, the understanding enlightened; that which seems dark will be made clear. The faculties will be enlarged and sanctified. He can lead those He is fitting for translation to heaven to loftier heights of knowledge and broader views of truth. The reason that the Lord can do so little for those who are handling weighty truths is that so many hold these truths apart from their life. They hold them in unrighteousness. Their hands are not clean, their hearts are defiled with sin, and should the Lord work for them in the power of His Spirit corresponding with the magnitude of the truth which He has opened to the understanding, it would be as though the Lord sanctioned sin.

That which our people must have interwoven with their life and character is the unfolding of the plan of redemption, and more elevated conceptions of God and His holiness brought into the life. The washing of the robes of character in the blood of the Lamb is a work that we must attend to earnestly while every defect of character is to be put away.

*continued on page eight*

**TIME LINE**

Birth, January 12	1855
Studied at Battle Creek College	1876-1878
Studied at New York Bellevue Medical School	1879+
Marriage	?
Moved to California	1880
Managed St. Helena Sanitarium	1882
Special spiritual experience	
Assistant editor <i>Signs of the Times</i>	1883
Met A. T. Jones	1884
Wrote 33 articles in the <i>Signs of the Times</i> on Righteousness by Faith	1886
GC officers voted against publishing of contrary views	
Wrote letter to Butler and Smith on Galatians	1887
EGW wrote EJW was mistaken bringing in controversy on the subject of the gospel in Galatians	
Minneapolis, MN, General Conference, presented Righteousness by Faith	1888
General Conference delegate at large	1889
Taught Bible, Church History and Hebrew at School for Ministers	
At General Conference presented 16 Bible Studies on the book of Romans.	1891
E. G. White confirmed the R/F message is from God.	1892
GC, presented Bible Studies	1897
GC, again presented Bible Studies	1898
Conducted training school with W. W. Prescott	1899-1900
General Conference, reveals he is influenced by Pantheism	1899
Editorial ministry in England	1899-1903
E. G. White warned him Satan was seeking to wean his affections from his wife to another woman	1904
Died of a heart attack at the age of 61	1916



n response to this action on the part of Butler and Smith, Ellen White wrote,

*"I have sent copies of letters written to Brethren Waggoner and Jones to Elder Butler in reference to introducing and keeping in the front and making prominent subjects on which there are differences of opinion. I sent these not that you should make them weapons to use against the brethren mentioned, but that the very same cautions and carefulness be exercised by you to preserve harmony as you would have these brethren exercise. I believe now that nothing can be done but open discussion. You circulated your pamphlet; now it is only fair that Dr. Waggoner should have just as fair a chance as you have had. . . . If we have any point that is not fully, clearly defined and can bear the test of criticism, don't be afraid or too proud to yield it."* Letter 13, April 5, 1887, also in *Manuscript Releases, Volume 16*, 281-284.)

In 1886 alone, EJW wrote at least 33 articles in *Signs of the Times*. He spoke of the sinner's continuing obedience as "sanctification. . .

# Ellet Joseph Waggoner

concluded from  
page three

*the work of a lifetime. . . not an instantaneous, but a progressive work."* *Signs of the Times*, April 1886. Writing again the next month he said "Having accepted Christ, His righteousness is imparted to us, which makes us clear before the law."

While Waggoner may not have been wise in developing his thinking in such a public forum, he certainly made a strong effort to understand and explain what he saw as key issues. He tried to balance the roles of man and Saviour in justification and sanctification, stating,

*"If Christ dwells in our hearts by faith, then we can exhibit in our actions the righteousness of the law, for if we have Christ in the heart, we must have the law there also. And having lived thus, when we are brought before the judgment-seat, and God fixes upon us His piercing gaze, He will see, not us, but the image of Christ, and because He lives we shall live also."* *Ibid.*, February 10, 1887.♦

**Note: *Lest We Forget*, Volume 8, Number 3, the next issue, will continue with the biography of E. J. Waggoner after 1888.**

## Lest We Forget

Volume 8

Number 2

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## A Letter to Waggoner and Jones

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Thus are we working out our own salvation with fear and trembling. The Lord is working in us to will and to do of His good pleasure. We need Jesus abiding in the heart, a constant, living well-spring; then the streams flowing from the living fountain will be pure, sweet, and heavenly. Then the foretaste of heaven will be given to the humble in heart. I know that Satan's work will be to set brethren at variance.

Truths connected with the second coming of Christ in the clouds of heaven will be talked of, written upon, more than now. There is to be closed every door that will lead to points of difference and debate among brethren. If the old man was purged from every heart, then there would be greater safety in discussion, but now the people need something of a different character.

There is altogether too little of the love of Christ in the hearts of those who claim to believe the truth. While all their hopes are centered in Jesus Christ, while His Spirit pervades the soul, then there will be unity, although every idea may not be exactly the same on all points.

The Bible is but yet dimly understood. A life-long prayerful study of its sacred revealings will leave still much unexplained. It is the deep movings of the Spirit of God that is needed to operate upon the heart to mold character, to open the communication between God and the soul, before the deep truths will be unraveled. Man has to learn himself before God can do great things for him. The little knowledge imparted might be a hundredfold greater if the mind and character were balanced by the holy enlightenment of the Spirit of God. Altogether too little meekness and humility are brought into the work of searching for the truth as for hidden treasures, and if the truth were taught as it is in Jesus, there would be a hundredfold greater power, and it would be a converting power upon human hearts, but everything is so mingled with self that the wisdom from above cannot be imparted. ♦ Letter to E.J.W. & A.T.J., 1887, *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, pages 23-27, and 29-31.

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