

Seventh-day Adventists

Taken from Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Christian Churches of America: Origins and Beliefs*, rev. ed., 182–192.

Late in the second decade of the nineteenth century, William Miller (1782-1849), a farmer from Low Hampton, New York, commenced a serious, methodical examination of biblical prophecies. Although a former Deist, Miller became converted to the Christian belief that Jesus is the Christ, after which he concluded that the chronological portions of the Bible should be examined as conscientiously as other parts of that sacred work. As he studied and contemplated, Miller decided that Daniel 8:14 was a key unlocking the mystery of the Second Coming. This scripture read, “Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed.” Believing that a day in symbolic prophecy represents a year, Miller thought that after a period of 2,300 years the sanctuary (which in his opinion meant the earth) would be purified by fire at the time of the Second Coming. His next problem was to determine the starting point for the 2,300 years.

As Miller continued his investigation of biblical prophecy, he read Daniel 9:24, which said, “Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon the holy city.” According to Miller’s analysis, “determined” in that passage meant “cut off” and the seventy weeks (or 490 years) to be cut off pertained to the only period of time mentioned in the preceding chapter, or the 2300 years. The next step in Miller’s chain of interpretations was to conclude that the two periods mentioned in Daniel chapters 8 and 9 began simultaneously — in 457 B.C., the date referred to in Ezra as the year of the command to rebuild and restore Jerusalem. Consequently, according to Miller’s calculations, Christ would return 2,300 years after 457 B.C., or about 1843.¹

For nine years after calculating an approximate date in which he believed Christ would return, Miller informed only a few relatives and intimate friends of his biblical discovery. During these years, he became a Baptist and, although he was not ordained, in 1833 he secured a license to preach.

Early in the 1830s, William Miller publicly announced that the ancient prophets had predicted Christ’s Second Coming and that he had correlated their prophecy with the current calendar. With astonishing rapidity, the advent message gained momentum. Several hundred ministers of different faiths and more than 50,000 converts joined the Advent movement launched by Miller. Although it was not his original intention to organize a new religious society, some of Miller’s supporters either withdrew voluntarily or were excommunicated from their congregations and formed independent religious societies.

For many years Miller hesitated to be more precise than to predict Christ would come about 1843. After it was reported in the *New York Herald*, however, that he had fixed

¹ William Miller, *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ About the Year 1843* (Boston, 1840), p. 54; Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1950), pp. 325–27.

April 3 for the advent, Miller wrote an article on 4 February 1844 for the *Signs of the Times*, in which he identified clearly his position concerning the date of the Second Coming. “Jesus Christ will come again to this earth, cleanse, purify, and take possession of the same, with all his saints,” Miller announced, “some time between 21 March 1843 and 21 March 1844.” He further insisted on that occasion that he had never designated a specific day, month, nor hour for the return of the Savior.²

Excitement and tension mounted as 21 March 1844, the last anticipated day for the Second Coming, approached. While converts to the movement increased, hostility intensified; and Miller was denounced in his own country as a “fanatic,” a “liar,” a “deluded old fool,” and a “speculating knave.” Amidst growing criticism, the third week of March 1844 passed without any startling ecclesiastical interruptions. Miller was disappointed and perplexed. While confessing that he had erred, the Advent leader asserted that “the day of the Lord was near, even at the door.”³ But a failure in his biblical interpretations was evident and, disillusioned, many abandoned the movement.

The most dramatic event in the history of the Millerites, however, had not yet transpired. After a reevaluation of the scriptures, one of Miller’s followers noted that according to Habakkuk 2:3 and Leviticus 25:9 there was to be a “tarrying time” of seven months and ten days, after which the earth would be purified. In August 1844, during an Adventist camp meeting held in Exeter, New Hampshire, a new expectation date, 22 October 1844, was proclaimed. Although Miller had previously resisted setting an exact date for the coming of the Bridegroom, early in October of that year he was converted to the “seventh month movement” and on October 9 proclaimed that Christ would return on October 22.⁴

Preparations for the Second Coming were hastily renewed in many American communities. During the third week of October 1844 hundreds suspended their work to contemplate, to attend meetings, and to warn their neighbors. Some turned their possessions into cash and paid their debts. Others disposed of their material goods and gave alms to the poor. But there was no general selling of farms by the Millerites, and reports describing the preparation and donning of ascension robes were branded by Miller as “false and scandalous.”⁵

² James White, *Sketches of the Christian Life and Public Labors of William Miller* (Battle Creek, MI: 1875), pp. 182–83.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 184; Francis D. Nichol, *The Midnight Cry* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1945), p. 171.

⁴ White, *Sketches of the Christian Life*, p. 296.

⁵ Nichol, *The Midnight Cry*, pp. 239, 251–52; White, *Sketches of the Christian Life*, p. 299.

On 22 October 1844 thousands gathered in homes, fields, and houses of worship, watching and waiting for the coming of Christ; but again the pronounced time passed, leaving many lonely, confused, and humiliated. As William Miller confessed, the adventists' expectation of the Second Coming proved premature. Whereas the era between 21 March 1843 and 21 March 1844 was a period ending in much disappointment, 22 October 1844 was the day of the "Great Disappointment." Although the Millerites disbanded and many returned to their former churches, a number of religious societies trace their historical roots back to phases of this movement, the largest of these Adventist churches being the Seventh-day Adventists.

Although Seventh-day Adventists teach that throughout the history of Christianity groups have maintained beliefs that parallel their interpretations of the gospel of Christ, they claim that the modern history of this faith occurred after the "Great Disappointment" of 1844 when three segments of the Millerite movement fused.

One of the zealous leaders who emerged in the spiritual vacuum created by the disintegration of the Millerites was Hiram Edson (1806-1882). Early in the morning of 23 October 1844, fearing the jeers and scorn of those who had refused to attend his Adventist cottage meetings, Edson strayed into a secluded cornfield in Port Gibson, New York. There, after a night of great anticipation followed by intense grief, Edson pleaded to the Lord, seeking an answer to the disappointment that gripped him and his religious associates. Suddenly, he testified, he received an overwhelming conviction that on 22 October 1844, Christ, instead of returning to this earth, entered for the first time a second apartment of the heavenly sanctuary. There he commenced a second phase of his ministry, a work in that holy place that was necessary before the Second Advent.⁶ According to Seventh-day Adventists, on that date Christ began the "investigative judgment." The Savior commenced determining those eligible to enter God's presence and will continue this ministry until he leaves heaven and returns personally to this earth. While these Adventists admit that Miller unfolded many correct concepts, they contend that he erred in interpreting the sanctuary as this earth (instead of a second compartment of heaven) and in determining a precise date for the Second Coming.

While Edson's interpretation of the "cleansing of the sanctuary" grew in popularity, another group of former Millerites increased in strength under the leadership of Joseph Bates (1792-1872) of New Bedford, Massachusetts. In 1821 this unusual sea captain discontinued drinking "ardent spirits" and during a subsequent voyage resolved not to drink wine. Later he gave up smoking, chewing tobacco, and drinking tea and coffee and became a temperance leader in Massachusetts. At one time Bates captained a "temperance vessel" in which he ordered the crew not to consume alcoholic beverages, to discontinue swearing, and not to wash or mend clothes on Sunday. Early in the 1840s, he discarded meat from his diet and eventually became one of the enthusiastic contributors and supporters of the Seventh-day Adventist health code. This program includes abstinence from liquor, tobacco, tea, coffee, and meats classified in the Old Testament as unclean (such as pork, lobster, and crab).

⁶ Don F. Neufeld and Julia Neuffer, eds., *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 10 vols. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1966), 10:354-65.

After retiring with a modest fortune, Bates accepted Miller's views concerning the Second Coming and in 1839 became an itinerant Adventist preacher. After the "Great Disappointment," he was converted to the doctrine that the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord and in 1846 published a tract, *The Seventh Day Sabbath, a Perpetual Sign*, in which he defended Saturday as the true Sabbath on the basis that the Ten Commandments was a moral guide which should not be changed. Traveling westward from New England, the pioneer Adventist preacher gathered followers in Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa.⁷

The foundation of this native American religion was not completed until a third force — the "spirit of prophecy"— was added to the movements promoted by Hiram Edson and Joseph Bates. According to Seventh-day Adventists, this prophetic gift was the contribution of one of the cofounders of their society, Ellen Gould Harmon White (1827-1915).

Born on a farm near Gorham, Maine, Ellen Harmon was reared in Portland. When she was nine, Ellen was struck by a rock thrown by a classmate and suffered a broken nose and a possible concussion. For three weeks, she remained unconscious; after she recovered, her face was blemished by a broken nose. This disfigurement caused serious embarrassment and emotional distress which impaired her general health; for several years she was unable to breathe properly through her nose. When she attempted to return to school at the age of twelve her health again interrupted her education. Although she received little formal training after her ninth year, she learned by the help of her conscientious parents and later by reading and conversing with others.

While Ellen's parents were members of the Methodist society in Portland, she did not unite with the group until after she had heard Miller preach in Portland, had accepted his views on the Second Coming, and had claimed a converting experience. When she was baptized on June 26, 1842 she requested that the ordinance be performed by immersion, after which she was admitted into full fellowship in the Methodist Church.

Ellen Harmon remained a Methodist for only a few months. After William Miller returned to Portland in 1842, the young woman acknowledged her endorsement of his prediction, and she, her parents, and other members of her family were disfellowshipped from the Pine Street Methodist Church.⁸

As October 22, 1844 approached, Ellen Harmon sincerely tried to prepare herself for the return of the Savior. For weeks, the young convert to Protestantism had prayed earnestly and evaluated her innermost thoughts and emotions. When the anticipated date of the Second Coming passed without any miraculous manifestations, Ellen was gravely perplexed and disappointed. Believing that the signs of the times clearly indicated that the "end of all things was at hand," she decided to continue preparing for the eventful day of Christ's return.

In December 1844 Ellen Harmon united in prayer with four other women and while praying received her first vision. The seventeen-year-old woman said that the power of God rested upon her. "I seemed to be surrounded with light," she testified. "[I] saw a straight and narrow path, cast up high above the world." Under the direction of God, she continued, Advent people were traveling toward a heavenly city. Some

⁷ *Ibid.*, 10:107-8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10:1406.

fell by the wayside, but 144,000 marched over a sea of glass to the gate of the city. Upon their arrival, "Jesus raised his mighty, glorious arm, laid hold of the pearly gate, swung it back on its glittering hinges," and welcomed those who were worthy to enter. After being given "harps of gold," the 144,000 gathered near the tree of life and throne of God and, touching their golden harps, "sat down to look at the glory of the [heavenly city]."⁹

After informing a small group of Adventists in Portland that she had beheld a glorious vision, Ellen was comforted by their decision that it was light from God. Shortly thereafter, she said she received other visions. Throughout the remaining years of her life, Ellen Harmon acted as an instrument in God's hand, revealing light and knowledge to the inhabitants of the earth. Present-day custodians of her estate estimate that she received at least 2,000 visions.

Ellen Harmon lived for eighty-seven years, although at the time of her initial report of a vision and for many years thereafter she complained that her health was so poor that she suffered constantly. In her reminiscences, this woman specified that she was "unusually sensitive," was plagued with emotional and physical problems and was subject to fainting spells. But notwithstanding her nervous disorders and serious illness, Ellen Harmon stated that on many occasions when her body seemed to be in an unconscious state, heavenly beings sent from God would instruct her.¹⁰

During one of her earliest visions, Ellen maintained that an angel informed her to publicize the information which she received from heavenly channels. In response to this command, Ellen said, she went forth reluctantly to bring others "the light and peace of Jesus." During her travels she met James White (1821-1881), a twenty-three-year-old Adventist preacher. This acquaintance developed into a genuine love; and on August 30, 1846 the two religious leaders were married, after which they united in proclaiming their distinct message to mankind.

After learning the views of Joseph Bates in 1846, Ellen White received a vision which seemed to substantiate his teachings concerning Saturday as the proper day for worshipping the Lord. James and Ellen White then joined Bates in unifying and strengthening the new Sabbath Adventist movement.

Eventually Mrs. White became acquainted with Hiram Edson's view concerning the religious event of October 22, 1844. Through "prophetic insight" this influential woman confirmed the belief that on that historic date, Christ entered the holy of holies and appeared in the presence of God "to make an atonement for all ... entitled to its benefits."¹¹ Meanwhile, Bates, Edson, and many others concluded that Ellen G. White possessed the gift of prophecy. Subsequently, many segments of the former Millerite movement fused, and the work of gathering converts progressed more rapidly.

Ellen G. White was not only a pioneer Adventist preacher, but she was also a prolific writer. During her adult

⁹ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, n.d.), pp. 58-61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62. See also pages 9-12, 55, 67, 80, 87, 92, and 93 for references to Mrs. White's physical and emotional problems. After adopting a special diet her health improved and during the later years of her life she enjoyed average good health.

¹¹ White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 480.

life, she wrote about sixty books, forty-four of which are currently in print. She also contributed about 4,600 articles to church periodicals. In the opinion of Seventh-day Adventists, her most significant literary accomplishment was a five-volume Bible commentary entitled, *Conflict of the Ages*. Another of her popular publications, *Steps to Christ*, has been translated into eighty-five languages.¹²

Seventh-day Adventists do not regard the writings of Ellen G. White as an addition to the Bible. Members of the denomination emphasize that White possessed the gift of prophecy, one of the gifts promised by Christ to his Church to unify and strengthen Christians. Rather than considering these writings as scripture, though, Adventists employ them as a key disclosing what they consider to be proper interpretations of the Bible.

The publications of James White also became a significant element in advancing this religious community. In 1849 he began publishing *Present Truth*; a year later the name of this paper was changed to *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*. After a group of Adventists in Michigan offered to build a printing office for White, the *Review and Herald* was moved in 1855 from Rochester, New York, to Battle Creek, Michigan.

The early organization of this religious society was informal and lacked an official name. Converts were at first referred to as "Sabbath-keepers" or "believers in the Second Advent." However, more than a decade after the initial disciples commenced gathering, members met in Battle Creek and on October 1, 1860 adopted the name "Seventh-day Adventist," to reflect their distinctive beliefs. Three years later, when their membership was 3,500, another meeting was held in Battle Creek, during which the formal denominational organization was finalized. Since 1903 the world headquarters of this faith has been in Washington, D.C.¹³

The Seventh-day Adventist organization has a representative system of church government. Congregations govern themselves through officers, which include a minister and lay members. Local elders, deacons, deaconesses, and other leaders are nominated by the membership and voted upon by the congregation. Officers within a defined geographical area are elected to serve as representatives in conferences, and this body has direct responsibility for church and evangelistic work within its region. Work pertaining to larger geographical areas is supervised by other bodies, including a general conference which holds sessions every four years. All units of this church, except for the local congregation, have elected officers who devote full time to various church-related activities.

Ministers of this religious community are graduates of Seventh-day Adventist colleges and are ordained after two or more years of internship. As in many other faiths, ordained ministers are appointed pastors of congregations and only these men may baptize and conduct weddings.¹⁴

Following the formal organization of this denomination in May 1863, Adventist preachers carried their particular message of salvation from the northern states to many other parts of the nation and throughout the world. In the 1880s,

¹² Richard H. Utt, *A Century of Miracles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1963), p. 15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

¹⁴ *Seventh-day Adventist Fact Book* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1967), pp. 19-23.

after Adventist societies were constituted in the South, members were fined, imprisoned, and forced to serve in chain gangs for violating Sunday laws. Before 1890 the movement had not only spread across the United States, but had been carried into Canada, Europe, South Africa, and Russia. During the last decade of the nineteenth century, Seventh-day Adventist missionaries introduced their beliefs into India, South America, and Japan. At the turn of the century, this society reported a world membership of 75,767.¹⁵

During the twentieth century, the numerical growth of this denomination was greater outside the United States than within U.S. borders. In the mid-1960s, when church membership in the United States and Canada was 380,855, more than 300,000 members resided in three other geographical regions — Latin America, Africa, and the Far East—and more than 200,000 lived in Europe. Out of a membership of one and one-half million, 24 percent resided in North America. This ratio has remained constant during the past few years; in 1980 approximately one of every four Adventists lived in the United States.

There are other distinguishing characteristics of the Seventh-day Adventist faith in contemporary America. Members of this religious community have remained, theologically speaking, orthodox, retaining the basic beliefs unfolded by the cofounders of their society. They have also retained their zealous evangelistic spirit. Missionaries have labored in approximately two hundred countries, teaching others in nearly a thousand languages. Many people have been introduced to their religion by listening to the “Voice of Prophecy” radio program and by reading their popular monthly magazine, *Signs of the Times*. Early in the 1960s more than 50,000 members (3.5 percent of their world membership) were employed by the church for evangelistic, educational, medical, publishing, and other ecclesiastical activities. Currently this denomination is recognized for its support of educational institutions. Next to the Roman Catholics and Lutherans, they maintain the largest parochial school system in the United States. Seventh-day Adventist hospitals, sanitariums, and clinics are also recognized for their efficiency in serving others. Members are distinguished by their conscientious study of the Bible, by their genuine support of welfare and civil defense programs (including mobile disaster-aid units and disaster-preparedness classes), and by their smoke clinics, temperance programs, and food factories, which produce high-protein foods especially designed for vegetarians. While these Protestants are willing to serve in the military, they believe in noncombatant service, and many Seventh-day Adventists have won recognition for courageous activities in the Medical Corps of the United States Army.

Distinguishing Beliefs¹⁶

Although many Americans recognize that one of the distinguishing beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventists is the observance of the Sabbath on Saturday, there are many other

¹⁵ Utt, *A Century of Miracles*, pp. 17–18.

¹⁶ One of the best descriptions of Seventh-day Adventist theology is in *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1957). A more recent description of their beliefs (with a few revisions) was published in *Adventist Review* (1981), vol. 158.

doctrines and practices held by members of this church that differ from beliefs generally held by Christians living in the contemporary world.

While explaining their position concerning the Sabbath, Seventh-day Adventists teach that this special day should be observed from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. They also teach that this seventh day is sacred because it was designed to be a memorial to God’s creative power and is a sign of his authority.

Another unusual belief of members of this religious community is that while the Bible is the sole rule of faith and practice and that all theological beliefs and practices should be judged according to the information contained in that work, the writings of Ellen G. White provide a lesser light leading individuals to this greater light. God, they claim, has relayed his desires and admonitions to mankind through this messenger, and the counsel and writings of Ellen G. White have served as a major factor in maintaining doctrinal unity in this church.

Seventh-day Adventists also hold a distinct view concerning Christ’s participation in the judgment. According to members of this faith, Christ’s intercession in man’s behalf in the heavenly sanctuary is as essential to the plan of salvation as was his death on the cross. Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, they explain, was an atonement for sin, was provided for all men, and was the beginning of the work of reconciliation. It will, they hold, be efficacious for all who repent, accept the grace of God, and surrender their lives to God. Christ’s work of atonement in the heavenly sanctuary, Seventh-day Adventists continue, refers to the application of the benefits of salvation which were provided at Calvary to all believers according to their needs. It is also their conviction that since 1844, when Christ entered a heavenly sanctuary, the Savior in the “investigative judgment” has been determining the destinies of all men. There the “High Priest” intercedes as the lives of men are called into judgment.

Another doctrine of members of this religious community is that the soul of man is the entire man and that the spiritual body cannot exist independent of the physical body. All men, they say, rest in the tomb until the resurrection morning, and during this period of slumber, all men are in a state of total unconsciousness. Moreover, they declare that the wicked will not suffer everlasting punishment (in the traditional sense of the term of burning eternally in hell), but will be annihilated.

Seventh-day Adventists further testify to the world that the second coming of Christ is near. This coming, they affirm, will be literal, physical, and visible to all mankind. After Christ returns, members of this faith teach that the millennium will be inaugurated. During the thousand years, the righteous will remain in heaven and Satan and fallen angels will be imprisoned on the earth. At the end of the millennium, Satan will be loosed for a season, after which he will be destroyed with all the unrepentant inhabitants of the earth.

One of the requirements for membership in this faith is strict abstinence from liquor, tobacco, tea, coffee, and meats which they teach are classified in the Old Testament as unclean. Many members are also vegetarians.

“Attendance at motion picture theaters is frowned on by the church,” women are advised not to resort “to the overuse of cosmetics,” and wearing much jewelry is considered a

display of pride and vanity.” Active members also refrain from card playing and dancing.¹⁷

Several beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventists parallel some of the most popular distinguishing beliefs of the Baptists. For example, Seventh-day Adventists teach that baptism should be observed by all of sufficient maturity to understand its meaning and should be performed by single immersion. Like Baptists, they also state that the Lord’s Supper should be regarded as a commemorative ordinance in which communicants celebrate the Savior’s death. Approximately four times a year members of this faith observe the Lord’s Supper by partaking bread and wine, elements which are viewed as symbols of the flesh and blood of Christ.

Unlike Baptists, however, Seventh-day Adventists believe that the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper should be preceded by a preparatory ordinance of foot washing.

Seventh-day Adventists also believe that Michael is the pre-incarnate name of Jesus Christ and has existed eternally. Although a few early Adventists taught that the Son must have had a beginning (or was created in a pre-mortal life by the Father), the concept is generally rejected today. In harmony with the belief of many other Christians, members of this faith teach that Jesus Christ is God, being of the same nature and essence of the Father.

Miscellaneous Beliefs

Although Seventh-day Adventists employ the writings of Ellen G. White as a key to unlock the mysteries of the Bible, in harmony with the views of most Protestants they insist that the Bible is the sole rule of faith and practice.

In harmony with a tenet held by many orthodox Protestants, Seventh-day Adventists also insist that the popular theory of evolution should not be considered as a correct explanation of the origin of man. It is the belief of members of this church that God created the earth and all life as explained by individuals who endorse a literal creationist view.

The belief of Seventh-day Adventists concerning the fall of Adam and Christ’s sacrificial atonement on the cross in which he met in full the penalty of the broken law is also similar to the teachings of many other Christians.

When Seventh-day Adventists explain their position concerning authority they declare: “Our Divine authority for teaching the gospel and baptizing in the name of our Lord was received directly from Jesus Christ while He was on earth and has not been lost, but has remained with God’s true followers ever since.

¹⁷ *Seventh-day Adventist Fact Book*, pp. 71–72.