

Adventists Between the Times: The Shift in the Church's Eschatology

by Roy Branson

Quite surprising in view of their [Seventh-day Adventists] firm belief in the imminent end of the world was their heavy investment in publishing houses, hospitals, homes for the aged, and especially educational institutions. Not only did they maintain numerous academies, colleges, graduate schools, and both a theological seminary and a medical and dental school, but they also established a widespread network of elementary schools. Noting their many good works, one observer has commented that seldom while expecting a Kingdom of God from heaven has a group worked so diligently for one on earth.

Winthrop Hudson, *Religion in America*¹

The remarks of the one-time president of the American Society of Church History highlight a paradox that puzzles many Adventists themselves. If the Lord is coming as soon as Adventists preach, how can the church and its members genuinely throw their energies into activities, projects and institutions that demand long-term plans and efforts? How can the church leader-

ship tie up the tithes and donations of members in long-term stocks and bonds? How can academics undertake prolonged graduate programs? How can ministerial students delay their proclamation of the Second Advent by enrolling year after year for seminary study?

The crux of the dilemma is that observers and church members alike identify Seventh-day Adventists with those Christians who are certain when Jesus is coming and that it is within their lifetime, this year, or the next few months. In other words, the present time. Seventh-day Adventists have been equated by others and themselves with the followers of William Miller in the nineteenth century who were absolutely certain that they would see Jesus within the few months they allowed before His return, and with the earliest followers of Jesus who saw Him ascend into heaven and who remained in Jerusalem to welcome Him as He descended to finally establish His kingdom.

If any sense is to be made of a group's expecting a Kingdom of God from heaven while working diligently to represent one on earth, there must be an appreciation of the difference between the eschatology of Seventh-day Adventists and that of both the Millerites and the beginning Christian community. To do so, one must see the eschatology of the initial Christian church as described by the Acts of the Apostles

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developing distinctly different emphases in the New Testament epistles, and the eschatology of the Millerites making a similar shift into the eschatology of Seventh-day Adventists.

In outlining such parallel developments in the New Testament Church and the Christian Adventists of the latter part of the nineteenth century, we will examine whether believers focused on the present or the future as the time for the Second Coming and the ways their attitude affected their actions. The first few pages will look at the New Testament writers before concentrating on our Adventist forebears, and finally on our own present beliefs. We will see that Seventh-day Adventists celebrate God's actions past, present and future; that they have a thoroughly biblical eschatology that justifies their intense and sustained effort here and now to demonstrate the character of the Kingdom of God.

The very earliest Christian community is depicted by Acts as expecting the risen and ascended Lord to return momentarily to Jerusalem. While written much later, Acts no doubt relies on early memories of Christian groups. It is certain that the miraculous wonders of the resurrection, ascension and all the miracles and signs "done through the apostles" (Acts 3:43), were all considered part of what the prophets had foretold as the great day of the Lord. All that remained was His triumphant appearing. His return was a part of the events filling the present, rather than an action coming in some period in the future.

In the light of this expectation, what did the disciples think it was appropriate to do? "All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers." (Acts 2:14) And, "Attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts." (Acts 2:46) Prayer, worship and fellowship together appear to have consumed their time. They did not stop to organize evangelistic teams to travel throughout the empire, nor were they convening councils to settle doctrine or establish canons or orthodoxy. They appear not to have been preoccupied with improving their property or vocational skills. Indeed, "all who believed were

together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need." (Acts 2:44, 45)

Of course, the Lord did not return immediately. Acts tells the story of a group that only gradually realized that their Lord was not coming at once, and that their mission was much more extensive than they had initially realized. They began with assumption that they were to witness among Jews in Jerusalem. Persecution drove them out to other parts of Judea, Samaria and Galilee, where they learned that the gospel was to go to the Gentiles, even those in Asia and Greece. Finally, Paul arrived in Rome, the capital of the empire, having preached the gospel to the "uttermost parts of the earth."

Among churches raised up throughout the Mediterranean area, anxiety developed concerning the delay of Christ's coming. Some twenty years after the earliest events in Jerusalem depicted in Acts, Paul wrote to converts in Thessalonica who were wondering what would happen to those friends and relatives who believed in Christ, but who had died while waiting for His appearing. Paul said that "concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope . . . God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep." (I Thess. 4:13, 14) In explaining in more detail why there should be no anxiety about those who have already died, Paul made it clear that the Lord was coming so soon that Paul and those to whom his epistle was written would still be alive at that great day. "We who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. . . . We who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord." (I Thess. 4:15, 17)

Some believers became sufficiently concerned about when the Lord would return that they asked for signs and portents. But Paul dismissed their questions. "As to the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need to have anything written to you . . . the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." (I Thess. 5:1, 2) The Lord's return will be both immediate and sudden.

Shortly after sending this letter to the Thessalonians, Paul found it necessary to write another. The Thessalonians' sense of immediacy had

gotten out of hand. Certain believers claimed that Paul had said that Christ was already here. Paul now found it necessary to emphasize that Christ's return was still in the future. He mentioned events that must take place between the present and Christ's appearing. "Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed." (II Thess. 2:3) Christ's coming is imminent, but not tomorrow. It is sudden, but not without warning signs.

Some Thessalonians had been so sure that Christ was coming at any moment they had given up their worldly work and relied on fellow-believers and the Lord to support them. They received a tongue-lashing from Paul. To a community who must endure a period when designated events will take place before the Lord returns, Paul said in no uncertain terms that they were to continue ordinary economic relationships. "We hear that some of you are living in idleness . . . Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living." (II Thess. 3:11, 12) While Acts seems to applaud those in the Jerusalem community who sell possessions so the needy may join them in prayer and worship just prior to Christ's appearing, Paul now forcefully tells the Thessalonians not to disrupt their normal economic patterns. "If any one will not work, let him not eat." (II Thess. 3:10)

Not only to the Thessalonians, but also in his communications to the Corinthian believers, Paul seemed to emphasize both the shortness of time and also the extension of some time, however limited, before the Lord returned. In chapter fifteen of First Corinthians, Paul outlines a sequence of momentous events that appear to stretch the period before Christ's appearing. Beginning with Christ's resurrection, "He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet," a time for his "destroying every rule and every authority and power," including death, after which Christ "delivers the kingdom to God the Father." (I Cor. 15:20-25) On the other hand, Paul also stressed the lack of time, advising "that in view of the impending distress . . . do not seek marriage . . . I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none." (I Cor. 7:26-29)

Much later, the epistles addressed to Timothy reveal an eschatology that unequivocally takes the Second Coming out of the present and puts it in the future. The most striking evidence are references to a future period when apostasies will take place; an era that has come to have its own designations, distinguishing it from the present. "In *later times* some will depart from the faith by giving heed to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons." (I Timothy 4:1) "In *the last days* there will come times of stress, for men will be lovers of self, lovers of money," etc. (II Timothy 3:1, 2) (*Italics mine in both quotes.*) The present has its duties and opportunities. But there will be a future time when things will be different and worse. "The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings." (II Tim. 4:3, 4)

The present is filled with teaching, exhortation, training in godliness, "always being steady." (II Tim. 4:5) Considerable attention must be paid to "how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God," how one is to remember the faith and be a "bulwark of truth." (I Tim. 3:15) In short, prevent heresy and apostasy. By now, a developed church organization, complete with deacons, elders and bishops, has emerged both to preserve order and orthodoxy in the present and to prepare the church to defend itself against the apostasies of the last days.

A church preserving the truth delivered to it, patiently and soberly waiting for a future, not present, return of Christ, emanates a different atmosphere from the earliest Christian community inflamed by tongues of fire and the sudden rush of mighty winds to expect Christ's appearance at any moment. Rather than exhibiting "great power" with testimonies, and "many wonders and signs," (Acts 4:33; 2:43) the church, according to James, is to develop the virtue of patience.

Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it until it receives the early and the latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand . . . As an example of suffering and

patience, brethren, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we call those happy who are steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job. (James 5:7-11)

The church is being encouraged to endure the long haul.

Second Peter makes the point even more forcefully. Here, too, Christ's return is not described as part of the present, but coming in some future period. As in the epistles to Timothy, Second Peter says that before Christ's coming there is a period still in the future when "there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies . . . many will follow their licentiousness and because of them the way of truth will be reviled." (II Peter 2:1, 2) As in Timothy, this period is called "the last days." For First and Second Timothy and Second Peter there is the present, then the future last days, and finally the Second Coming.

But in a way that the epistles to Timothy do not, Second Peter describes these false teachers as doubters of the Second Coming, scoffers "saying where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation." (II Peter 3:3, 4) That these doubts were already being expressed, even within the church, is suggested by the time taken in the epistle to respond to such an argument. There were three answers for both unbelievers and wavering Christians. All the answers allowed for the possibility of an extended period of time before the appearance of Christ.

First, the God whose word created the heavens, the earth and the water, could "store up" the heavens and earth for His future purposes. (II Peter 3:7) The earth and the future—space and time—are His. Neither are out of control; both will respond to His will.

Second, God and man experience time differently. "Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about His promises as some count slowness." (II Peter 3:8) What might be an enormous delay for man, stretching his hope to the breaking point, can be a brief pause to God. No matter how long the delay might seem to

man, God will certainly fulfill His promise that Christ will return.

Third, any delay from man's viewpoint is not explained by any capriciousness of God's, or lack of power or love on His part. Rather, precisely because of His love and mercy God has exercised His sovereignty over the earth and the future in man's favor by not returning to judge the quick and the dead. God "is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should reach repentance." (II Peter 3:9) The delay allows more persons to repent and be saved. "Count the forbearance of our Lord as salvation." (II Peter 3:15)

As in James, there is an admonition to be patient. "According to his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." (II Peter 3:13) As in the epistles to Timothy, the believers who wait are to develop character. "What sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness." (II Peter 3:11) "Beloved, since you wait for these [new heavens and new earth], be zealous to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace." (II Peter 3:14)

What began in the earliest Christian community as a preoccupation with the return of Christ in the present shifts into a teaching of what will happen in the future. What was

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initially considered a problem—the delay of Christ's return, making it impossible for the initial believers to live long enough to see Christ's appearing—becomes interpreted as a boon: God's merciful act in giving the non-believer time to repent and be saved. What starts as an indifference to institutions—not just property and business but even marriage and

church organization—develops into a major concern for how Christians are to represent the Kingdom of God in institutional form.

During the middle of the nineteenth century a group reenacted in the eastern United States the sense of Christ's immediate return felt by the early Jerusalem Christians. As a result of their interpretations of Daniel, they approached the spring (March 21, then April 18), and finally the fall (October 22) of 1844 with the certainty that normal human life was ending its course; that the establishment of the Kingdom of God was a part of the present period.

As in the initial Christian community, property and business seemed superfluous. F. D. Nichol, in his detailed study of the Millerites, says unequivocally, that "most of the believers, however, gave up all their worldly occupations for the last few weeks, before the expected end of the world. The testimony on this is clear."² Devout northern New England farmers expressed their faith by abandoning their fields as early as the spring of 1844. "Some, on going into their fields to cut their grass, found themselves entirely unable to proceed, and conforming to their sense of duty, left their crops standing in the field, to show their faith by their works, and thus to condemn the world. This rapidly extended through the north of New England."³ Part of the faithful sold the goods which they would soon not be needing. "Numbers of the believers turned their possessions into cash, and no small part of this money was used to purchase literature or in some other way to advance the movement."⁴ An example in New York City was "Brother Abraham Riker, a well-known shoe dealer in Division Street, who was for many years a class leader in the M. E. Church, closed his store and spent considerable time in distributing papers, attending meetings, and warning others."⁵ The Adventist press itself reported that other believers had emulated the early Christian church in spending their few days before Christ's appearing, sharing their wealth with the poor. "Many of our brethren and sisters have disposed of their substance and given alms, agreeable to Luke 12:33, in the confident expectation of the speedy coming of the Lord."⁶

When the Lord did not come on October 22, 1844, those who retained a belief that the

prophecy had been fulfilled on that date (primarily through seeing actions of Christ in a heavenly sanctuary fulfilling Daniel's 2300-day prophecy), continued the sense of God's immediate return characteristic of Millerite eschatology. The Second Coming was still so close as to be a part of the present. James White and Ellen Harmon, for example, who had met once before the great disappointment, traveled together afterwards, preaching to Adventist congregations. They believed that the Lord would return in 1845. A few days before the expected date, Ellen Harmon had a vision that they would be disappointed again, "and that the saints must pass through the 'time of Jacob's trouble' which was future."⁷

Even so, James White, like Paul, continued to think that time would not allow for marriage; that taking such a step was evidence of doubt in the soon return of Christ. James wrote a letter during October 1845, in the Adventist journal *Day Star*, saying that an Adventist couple who had announced wedding plans had "denied their faith in being published for marriage," and that "we all look upon it as a wile of the Devil. The firm brethren in Maine who are waiting for Christ to come have no fellowship with such a move."⁸ When James and Ellen finally did get married a year later, partly so they could travel to churches together without others gossiping, James acknowledged four days before the wedding that some firm Adventist believers were concerned about a possible slackening of faith in the immediate return of Christ. "Brother Nichols said that he was tried when he first heard of our marriage, or intended marriage, but he is now satisfied that God was in it."⁹

One of the clearest evidences that Adventists continued to rely on a Millerite eschatology for a few years after the disappointment was their persistence in preaching that God had shut the door on those who had not already accepted the midnight cry. The signs, after all, had been fulfilled; none remained to be enacted before Christ's return. Probation had closed. Those who had heard the midnight cry of the bridegroom's appearing and rejected it had sealed their doom. Those who had accepted it were only to remain faithful until the moment for leaving the earth to meet the returning Lord in the air.

Mrs. White admitted that she had been among those who had preached the shut door after the

October 1844 disappointment. "For a time after the disappointment in 1844, I did hold, in common with the advent body, that the door of mercy was then forever closed to the world."¹⁰ The White Estate says that her earliest visions of December 1844, and February 1845, by confirming the validity and importance of the "bright light" of the "Midnight Cry," contributed to the convictions among Adventists that the door of salvation had been closed. Although the term shut door itself is not used in the first published accounts of these visions, when they initially appeared in 1846 editions of the Millerite journal *Day Star*, distributed among Adventists who were certain that all the signs of Christ's coming had been fulfilled, the visions by "*confirming confidence in the fulfillment of prophecy on October 22 just naturally established in their minds a close of probation on October 22.*"¹¹ (Italics supplied by the White Estate.) Mrs. White insisted later, in 1874, that "I never had a vision that no more sinners would be converted," but her use of the term "shut door" in letters written as late as 1847 and 1849 could well have contributed to the assumption that Ellen White, even then, continued to share the Millerite eschatology: Probation had closed and the appropriate action of those who had heard and accepted the midnight cry was to gather together and wait in faithfulness and prayer for the Lord's return.¹² (Italics mine.)

The shut door teaching was pervasive during this period. According to the White Estate, "what might be termed the 'shut door era' in our history extended from 1844 to 1851 or 1852."¹³ James White's remarks are taken as primary evidence that the era had ended. In 1851 he wrote in the *Review* that "now the door is open almost everywhere to present the truth and many are prepared to read the publications who have formerly had no interest to investigate."¹⁴ By 1852, he was saying that the embracing of the Sabbath by Adventist brethren was a work "not confined to those who have had an experience in the past advent movement. A large portion of those who are sharing the blessings attending the present truth were not connected with the advent cause in 1844."¹⁵

As late as May 1856, Mrs. White, in a manner reminiscent of Paul in First Thessalonians, was

certain that Christ would return during the lifetime of her contemporaries. At a conference at Battle Creek, Mrs. White said that while the door was no longer shut to those who had not accepted the 1844 truth, time would not allow the door to remain open very long. "A very solemn vision was given me. I saw that some of those present would be food for worms, some subjects for the seven last plagues, and some would be translated to heaven at the second coming of Christ, without seeing death."¹⁶

As time continued to extend beyond 1844, and it became clear a decade after the great disappointment that the Lord's coming had been delayed, the persistent search began for actions beyond prayer, fellowship, study and worship that might allow believers to hasten the Lord's appearing. A mighty work of reformation within the remnant was an initial alternative. Adventists had accused others of unfaithfulness. Now they turned on themselves. Millerite Adventists before 1844 had come to call not only the Catholic church but the Protestant denominations that rejected their message apostate Babylon. After 1844, those Adventists who continued to believe prophecy had indeed been fulfilled in 1844 by Christ's work in the heavenly sanctuary and who accepted the Sabbath turned on their fellow-Adventists and accused them of falling into the Laodicean sin of lukewarmness to truth. Now, beginning in 1856, and reaching a peak in 1857, Adventists who had accepted the sanctuary truth and the Sabbath confessed that they themselves were guilty of delaying Christ's return by slipping into a Laodicean condition. James White sounded the warning October 16, 1856, in a study of the letters to the seven churches, concluding with Laodicea. "It will not do, brethren, to apply this to the nominal churches; they are to all intents and purposes, 'cold.' And the nominal Adventists are even lower than the churches." No, "it will be of no use to try to evade the force of this searching testimony to the Laodicean Church... What language could better describe our condition as a people, than this addressed to the Laodiceans?"¹⁷

By November 13, favorable responses had appeared in the *Review* and the editor, James White, could report that "we rejoice to hear from all parts of the field that the testimony to the Laodiceans is being received, and is pro-

ducing good results upon the remnant.”¹⁸ Articles or letters discussing the Laodicean message increased from twenty during the balance of 1856 to 178 in 1857, dying down to 51 in 1858 and only two during the next three years.¹⁹

Looking back on the experience in 1859, Ellen White reported that in the Spring of 1857 she and her husband preached the Laodicean message on a tour of the east, “and the people of God were stirred everywhere. Nearly all believed that this message would end in the loud cry of the third angel. But as they failed to see the powerful work accomplished in a short time, many lost the effect of the message.” Then Ellen White for the first time made clear what had been increasingly implied since the 1844 disappointment: Sabbathkeeping Adventists had a different eschatology than the Millerites. “I saw that this message would not accomplish its work in a few short months.” Just as the eschatology of the initial Christian community expecting Christ in a few days shifted into the eschatology of First and Second Timothy, James and Second Peter that anticipated considerable time might elapse before Christ returned, so the Millerite conviction that Christ’s coming was part of their present experience had developed into a sense that Christ’s return was clearly in the future. Mrs. White, in this same statement, even gave as a reason for the delay one found in second Peter—God’s mercy. “I say that God would prove his people. Patiently Jesus bears with them and does not spue them out of his mouth in a moment . . . If the message had been of as short duration as many of us supposed, there would have been no time for God’s people to develop character.”²⁰

The sense of time lengthening on this earth had concrete implications for how Adventists acted. The Millerites had been preoccupied with immediately entering heaven. Mrs. White, on the other hand, in the same 1859 message, said “God proves his people in this world. This is the fitting up place to appear in his presence.”²¹ That was why concern with organization was appropriate. “God is well pleased with the efforts of his people in trying to move with system and order in his work. I saw that there should be order in the church of God, and

arrangement in regard to carrying forward successfully the last great message of mercy to the world.”²²

A year later, in the fall of 1860, James White convinced a group of believers from various states to come to Battle Creek to create a publishing association. Once together, they also

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adopted a name—Seventh-day Adventist.²³ But they could not bring themselves to create a denomination. Ellen White’s response revealed how her movement away from the eschatology of a shut-door Millerite had also taken her well past their indifference or hostility to human institutions. “August 3, 1861 [at Roosevelt, New York] I was shown that some have feared that our churches would become Babylon if they should organize . . . unless the churches are so organized that they can carry out and enforce order, they have *nothing to hope for in the future*.”²⁴ Thorough-going Millerites did not worry about the future and its institutions.

Later that year, a plan was devised and printed in the *Review* for organizing local churches, and believers in Michigan went on to organize themselves into the first conference. In 1862, six other conferences organized. Finally, at a general session held in the spring of 1863, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists was duly constituted. The report of the meeting in the *Review* did not sound like the Seventh-day Adventist denomination was convinced that the end was now. Its reference to church officers and their duties was reminiscent of the concern for the responsibilities of church leaders found in the epistles to Timothy, though Seventh-day Adventists had gone even further to create a national and legal structure. To “the organization of a General Conference, and the further perfecting of State conferences, defining the authority of each, and the important duties

belonging to their various officers, there was not a dissenting voice, and we may reasonably doubt if there was even a dissenting thought. Such union, on such a point, affords the strongest grounds of hope for the immediate advancement of the cause, and its future glorious prosperity and triumph.”²⁵

For a while, the new denomination remained where it had already established itself—the east and midwest. The center continued to be Battle Creek. Six years after establishing The Advent Review Publishing Association and three years after creating the Seventh-day Adventist denominational organization, the new church created its second institution: the Western Health Reform Institute, later Battle Creek Sanitarium. It was not for six more years that a third institution, a school, was organized, also in Battle Creek.

The first dramatic expansion geographically and institutionally was the work on the Pacific coast in the seventies. California was the site of

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the first institutions established outside Battle Creek. In a pattern that was to become familiar elsewhere, a publishing house, sanitarium and school were organized: Pacific Press (1875); the Rural Health Retreat (1878), later St. Helena Sanitarium; and Healdsburg College (1882), later Pacific Union College.²⁶

Opening the work in California excited the new denomination. It now spanned the continent, and some were ready to fling the organization across the seas. Already in 1871, Mrs. White insisted that “missionaries are needed to go to other nations to preach the truth . . . Every opportunity should be improved to extend the truth to other nations. This will be attended with considerable expense, but expense should in no case hinder the performance of this work.”²⁷

Others, however, did not find that their theology could develop rapidly enough for them to become enthusiastic about undertaking such a vast task. No faster than the early Jerusalem church could they envision a message for all men throughout the world. Certainly during the period of Millerite eschatology extending through the shut-door period of the early fifties, it had never occurred to believers that there was enough time to accomplish such an immense mission. Besides, probation had closed. What was the need for evangelism?

Even in the late fifties and sixties, the emerging sense that time was being extended, which meant that attention could be devoted to organization, had not led immediately to a redefinition of mission. In 1859, the *Review* received a letter asking “Is the Third Angel’s Message being given, or to be given except in the United States?” Uriah Smith, the editor, explained why overseas missions were unnecessary. “We have no information that the third Message is at present being proclaimed in any country besides our own. Analogy would lead us to expect that the proclamation of this message would be coextensive with the first: though this might not be necessary to fulfill Rev. 10:11, since our own land is composed of people from almost every nation.”²⁸ Just as the followers of Christ initially considered themselves as followers of the Way within Judaism, Seventh-day Adventists thought of themselves as a movement within Christendom which had already taken the gospel to all the world. Indeed, the phenomenal nineteenth-century expansion of particularly Protestant missions from America and Europe to Asia and Africa was cited in the *Review* as late as 1872 as evidence that the signs of Matt. 24:14 had been fulfilled and the Lord was therefore returning very soon.²⁹ When immigrants to America became Seventh-day Adventists, they wanted to go back to Europe to proclaim the three angels’ messages, some opposed them because plunging heavily into such a grand enterprise was evidence that they did not really believe that Christ was coming soon.³⁰

Still, Mrs. White’s urgings, and the appeals for help from Sabbathkeeping Adventists who had heard through unofficial and circuitous routes about an organized Seventh-day Adventist church, finally led the General Conference of 1874 to select J. N. Andrews as the first official

Seventh-day Adventist missionary. He landed in Europe that same year. Even so, he and the other denominational leaders assumed that the mission of Seventh-day Adventists overseas would be limited to what it had been in America: Proclaiming distinctive Adventist truths—the Sabbath and the judgment—to already converted Christians.³¹

During the next three decades, the Seventh-day Adventist denomination preached the gospel and established institutions on every continent of the world except Antarctica. The seventies saw Adventists spreading throughout Europe. In the eighties, they established permanent institutions in Australia, Africa and the West Indies, and during the nineties traveled on to Latin America, India, China and Japan.³²

In the United States, the nineties saw the rapid development of institutions. Academies appeared that would become colleges, and colleges such as Union and Walla Walla emerged from previously established academies.³³ By the end of the century, the beginning of a denomination-wide elementary school system could already be seen.³⁴ Medical institutions also sprang up during this period. While the eighties had been devoted to building up Battle Creek Sanitarium, the nineties gave rise to several other sanitariums that have continued to the present. The ambitious American Medical Missionary College in Battle Creek and Chicago, opened in 1896.³⁵ Publishing houses, schools and sanitariums were also founded in Europe and Australia.

Still, there appears to have been opposition to expansion and institutionalization; and for the same reasons that had been given for opposing organization thirty years before: Time lavished on institutions was time taken from preparing for an immediate return of Christ. Mrs. White, who had been instrumental, with her husband, in establishing the Pacific Press and the opening of the work in California in the seventies, and who had spent two years in Europe during the eighties, settled down for almost the entire decade of the nineties in Australia. She consistently and strongly supported Adventists expanding their work throughout the world, and in every area building up institutions.

Returning from Australia to America for the fateful 1901 General Conference that would

establish a still more elaborate denominational organization (at her strong personal insistence and implemented by A. G. Daniells, a young protégé brought with her from mission work in New Zealand), Mrs. White released for publication a strong response to opponents of institutions.³⁵ The statement appeared just before the General Conference session that would, in response to her forceful demands, crystallize the present denominational structure that has encouraged Adventists to become involved in creating myriad institutions. It articulates a position on the relationship of eschatology to institutions that has continued to be standard for our denomination today. As such, it deserves to be quoted here at length.

Let no one conclude that, because the end is near, there is no need of special effort to build up the various institutions as the cause shall demand. You are not to know the day or the hour of the Lord's appearing, for this has not been revealed, and let none speculate on that which has not been given him to understand. Let everyone work upon that which has been placed in his hands, doing the daily duties that God requires.

When the Lord shall bid us make no further effort to build meetinghouses and establish schools, sanitariums, and publishing institutions, it will be time for us to fold our hands and let the Lord close up the work; but now is our opportunity to show our zeal for God and our love for humanity.

We are to be partners in the work of God throughout the world; wherever there are souls to be saved, we are to lend our help, that many sons and daughters may be brought to God. The end is near, and for this reason we are to make the most of every entrusted ability and every agency that shall offer help to the work.

Schools must be established, that the youth may be educated, that those engaged in the work of the ministry may reach higher attainments in the knowledge of the Bible and the sciences. Institutions for the treatment of the sick must be established in foreign lands, and medical missionaries must be raised up who will be self-denying, who will lift the cross, who will be prepared to fulfill positions of trust and be able to educate others. And besides all this, God calls for home mission-

aries. The workers for God, in the field or at home, are to be self-denying, bearing the cross, restricting their personal wants, that they may be abundant in good fruits.

A faith that comprehends less than this denies the Christian character . . . Use your means to create, rather than your influence to diminish agencies for good. Let no one listen to the suggestion that we can exercise faith and have all our infirmities removed, and that there is therefore no need of institutions for the recovery of health. Faith and works are not dissevered. Since the Lord is soon to come, act decidedly and determinedly to increase the facilities, that a great work may be done in a short time.

Since the Lord is soon coming, it is time to put out our money to the exchangers, time to put every dollar we can spare into the Lord's treasury, that institutions may be established for the education of workers, who shall be instructed as were those in the schools of the prophets. If the Lord comes and finds you doing this work, He will say: 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant . . . enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.'³⁷

Mrs. White emphasizes that we do not know the day or the hour of Christ's appearing. There will be a period in the future when God will tell us to cease building institutions that save souls and demonstrate our love for humanity. In the meantime, we must busy ourselves with actions that a returning Lord will applaud whenever he appears. Mrs. White refers to the Lord's soon coming to emphasize the need for proceeding with activities she says the Lord would wish to find a good and faithful church pursuing. Seventh-day Adventist eschatology, as expressed by Mrs. White, does not depend on the Lord's coming in a day or two. It does not reveal the indifference to the character and nature of present, earthly institutions seen in the earliest Christian community in Jerusalem and the Millerites in nineteenth-century America. Seventh-day Adventist eschatology resembles the sensitivity to organization and structure expressed in the epistles of the New Testament. Like Second Peter, Seventh-day Adventists are anxious for the soon-return of their Lord, and would be grateful if He appeared at any moment. But also like Second Peter, Adventists have an eschatology that allows them to sustain

a lively hope and active life for as long as proves necessary.

Given the way Adventists have adjusted to the prolongation of time in the period we have examined, one might conclude that by now, over one hundred years after the establishing of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, the conviction that the Lord will return has waned.

“ ‘Faith and works are not dissevered. Since the Lord is soon to come, act decidedly and determinedly to increase the facilities, that a great work may be done in a short time.’ ”—Ellen White

But no more for Seventh-day Adventists than for the New Testament church does adjustment to the prolongation of time dictate a waning of certainty that He will return. Even Second Peter, which referred to the fact that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, was written precisely to affirm that the Lord would come again. When Christ did not appear immediately, the New Testament writers still maintained their faith. It did not disappear because it was not dependent on future events. Their faith was founded on certainty about the past death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That event established the sovereignty of Christ over His creation, both temporal and spatial.

Paul's appreciation of Christ's resurrection began with his belief that Christ was the creator. "In him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." (Col. 1:16, 17) Paul's language reflects the fact that in his day many, particularly the gnostics, believed that there was a great chain of being descending from God through ranks of heavenly beings in invisible realms, continuing down imperceptibly through earthly

authorities to ordinary men. Certainly, the Biblical writers saw God's power extending through the entire creation, both seen and unseen.³⁸

When Paul preached the centrality of Christ he assumed that rebellion had brought chaos to the whole creation, affecting both heavenly hosts and earthly authorities. Within such a context, the death and resurrection of Christ was not merely the spectacular miracle of one man's rising from the dead. Paul and the other New Testament writers regarded the resurrection as a cosmic event. It was the decisive, irreversible victory over rebellion; the creator restoring order to His creation. Christ "disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them." (Col. 2:15) "Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to Him." (I Peter 3:22) Ellen White also saw Christ as the decisive event in the great controversy.

Christ did not yield up His life till He had accomplished the work which He came to do, and with His parting breath, He exclaimed, "It is finished." (John 19:30) The battle had been won. His right hand and His holy arm had gotten him the victory. As a conqueror He planted His banner on the eternal heights . . . Well, then, might the angels rejoice as they looked upon the Saviour's cross; for though they did not then understand all, they knew that the destruction of sin and Satan was forever made certain, that the redemption of man was assured and that the universe was made eternally secure.³⁹

In the conflict of the ages, Christ is victor. His death and resurrection are the center of history. All events are measured by this event.

As one theologian after the second world war put it, with the resurrection D-day has been fought and won; V-day, the Second Coming, still lies ahead.⁴⁰ On a less heroic scale, but in terms more immediate to Americans in an election year, the crucial primary has been fought and won. There is no question about the outcome of the campaign, but official acclamation of the winner still lies ahead.

Contemporary Seventh-day Adventists live between the times; between the decisive battle and the future celebration. But no matter when

the final victory comes, our life now need not be wracked with doubt and anxiety. The decisiveness of Christ's triumph in the past guarantees the certainty of His return in the future. Nothing can alter the significance of what has already been accomplished. No delay can shatter confidence in the triumph already achieved.

To what should that confidence in the future, that buoyancy in the present be based? The New Testament is clear that the period between the times presents the church triumphant with a challenge—dealing with areas of stubborn resistance to the Creator's authority. Christ's victory is not in doubt, but not all parts of the creation yet recognize His rule. That is why Paul says that Christ "must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet." (I Cor. 15:25) The enemies are those agencies visible or invisible, supernatural or natural that act contrary to God's purposes in the creation. The unique agent of Christ's will in the world during this period is the church. "What is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named . . . he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church." (Eph. 1:19-23)

Seventh-day Adventists have always recognized that these rebellious powers can be earthly, visible and corporate. The creatures and beasts of prophecy directed attention to oppressive authorities usurping God's powers. The Seventh-day Adventist church's response has been to announce the good news of Christ's triumph, to exhibit the meaning of that victory in the nature of individual members' lives and the character of the institutions it has ventured to establish, and to fight vigorously those defiant powers violating God's creation and creatures. The church challenged the institution of slavery, calling not only slavery an evil, but also the religious and political institutions that supported it. Adventists opposed parties that did not assist the black man after emancipation.⁴¹ They opposed ineffective medical institutions, and battled liquor interests. In short, Seventh-day Adventists were not a retiring, helpless group, but a vigorous community, active in an expanding society

during that period of social, political and intellectual ferment that has been the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Seventh-day Adventists today rejoice that Christ may return at any moment. But this assurance in Christ's decisive act in the past makes unnecessary nervous preoccupation with

just how immediate the return will be and what new or previously ignored technique can be employed to hasten His appearing. Rather, confidence in God's gracious and decisive act in the past assures us that the future is His. Adventists living between the times are free to demonstrate God's power in the present.

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