Toward Oneness *and* Freedom: *The Road from 'Babylon'*
to General Conference Organization | BY DOUGLAS MORGAN

Resolved, That the sectarian denominations of New-England should…be considered and treated, by every friend of humanity, as the 'Babylon of apocalyptic vision' 'the habitation of devils, the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird.'

Today, a resolution of such startling severity and sweeping scope might lead to charges of "hate speech." The "sectarian denominations" consigned to spiritual Babylon by this 1843 pronouncement included *all* the well-established, culturally influential churches of the time—Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Lutheran, Episcopalian, and so forth.

The scripture passages from Revelation that underlie the resolution, one announcing the "fall" of Babylon (Rev. 14:8) and the other calling God's people to "come out" (Rev. 18:1–4), were taking on central significance for the Adventist movement just at this time. But this resolution was not passed at an Adventist gathering. Rather, it came from the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, meeting in Haverhill, Massachusetts, for its annual convention. The society denounced the leading denominations "on account of the sanction and support they afford to slavery" (this phrase fills in the ellipsis in the opening quote).[1]

The Seventh-day Adventists would soon associate distinctive meaning of vital importance for their last-day message with the "second angel's message" of Revelation 14:8 and the "loud cry" of Revelation 18:1–4. But during the 1840s, and throughout the era of reform and crisis over slavery leading to the Civil War in the 1860s, Adventists were far from alone in emphasizing these texts. A diffuse movement, or impulse, called "come-outerism" gained momentum in the 1840s, making heavy use of these passages. Radical reformers such as William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the *Liberator*, concluded that the established

denominations had forfeited their spiritual legitimacy by rejecting the abolitionist call for an immediate end to the sin of slavery. Abolitionists, using "No Union with Slaveholders" as their rallying cry, also called upon the free states to "come out" of the federal Union with slave states.[2]

As it turned out, of course, the opposite took place, with the slave states of the South seceding from the Union, leading to the Civil War. During the war, opponents of slavery in the North shifted the identity of apocalyptic Babylon to the Confederacy, and celebrated with the cry "Babylon is fallen" when Union forces finally took the Confederate capital, Richmond, Virginia, near the end of the war.[3]

According to historian Lewis Parry, come-outerism centered on conviction about the "millennial duty to secede from sinful institutions." In other words, the arrival of the millennium—God's ideal future society, understood in a variety of ways—required rejection of corrupt human authority and allegiance to God's government alone—*now!*[4]

Babylon's Fall Means Freedom

And that brings us back to the founders of Seventh-day Adventism, who grappled with a dilemma that evolved with the passage of time after the Great Disappointment of 1844: What happens after Babylon falls, when Jesus has not yet returned and the millennium still has not arrived? The endeavor to work out an answer to that question gave rise to the Seventh-day Adventist movement and its organization as a church, culminating in the establishment of the General Conference 150 years ago.

Let's "listen" in as James White, in a letter written to "Brother and Sister Hastings," in August 1848, hurriedly summarizes a breakthrough that has united a few scores of believers, led by himself, his wife Ellen, and their friend Joseph Bates. They had found their key in the

fourteenth chapter of Revelation, and James's excitement is nearly palpable as he rushes through the meaning of the messages given by the three angels:

> First is the Advent Angel or message of verses 6 and 7. This took place from 1840 to 1843. Second is another angel in the 8th verse crying Babylon is fallen. This was in 1844 when we all rushed out of Babylon. Next a third angel appears with a warning message for us not to go back and receive the marks we got rid of in 1844. Well here yes right here is the little, despised company who embrace the 7th day Sabbath. Oh! how glad I am that I know my whereabouts. Yes, never was there a people whose position was so plainly marked out in the Word as ours. We know where we stand.[5]

Jesus had not returned as expected, right on the heels of the fall of Babylon, marked by Charles Fitch's galvanizing 1843 sermon, "Come Out of Her, My People." And now it is clear why. The message of the third angel reveals what must happen after Babylon falls: the emergence of a people whose adherence to "the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" includes the fourth commandment concerning the Sabbath, and restoration of its true meaning.

That insight has lasted, driving the Adventist movement down to the present, though further light was yet to come on the three angels' messages. The sabbatarian Adventists, groping for direction in the confusion that followed the disappointment of 1844, found distinctive meaning in widely used texts—new identity and purpose in God's prophetic Word.

Yet, similarity in how Adventists and other "come-outers" applied the Babylon texts also remains of critical importance. It comes through in further commentary from James White on what was at stake when "God called us out of Babylon." In the April 1850 issue of Present Truth, he wrote, "If we had stayed there, bound down by ministers and creeds, the glorious light of the Holy Sabbath never would have reached us; but glory to God, the second angel's message called us out from the fallen churches where we are now free to think, and

James Springer White
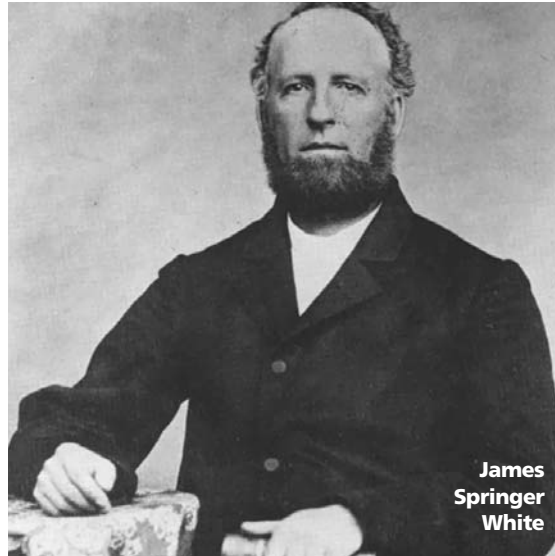
act for ourselves in the fear of God."[6]

For Adventists, as for come-outers in general, the fall of Babylon meant, in a word, freedom. As John N. Andrews put it, the dominant churches had used their creeds to expel believers "for no other crime than that of looking for the coming of Jesus Christ." Coming out, and staying out, of Babylon meant freedom to bear witness to the present truth of the gospel. It also referred to freedom for those shackled by injustice and inhumanity. The "professed church is to a fearful extent the right arm of the slave power," Andrews observed, and thereby "a perfect illustration…of a nation drunken with the wine of Babylon."[7]

The story of church organization centered on tension between an acute need for "gospel order," on the one hand, and zeal to avoid a return to the repression of Babylon, on the other. Would the Sabbath-keeping Adventists find a way to establish the order necessary for unity and mission while maintaining the freedom of the gospel and openness to fresh infusions of its liberating Spirit?

Gospel Order

After building consensus on their defining beliefs in a series of conferences begun in 1848, the ranks of believers in the three angels' messages grew rather impressively to around two thousand by 1852. By 1860, though cen-

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—James White

tered in Michigan, the movement extended from Maine to Minnesota, comprised of small, scattered congregations as well as lone individuals and families united principally by the weekly periodical, the *Second Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (the *Review*, for short). That made James White, as publisher and editor of the *Review*, the movement's informal leader. But other than publications, no formal elements of organization existed: no conference administration, no standard definition of church offices, no church manual, no working policy, no denominational headquarters, not even a name.

In their initial appeals for gospel order, published in 1853, Ellen and James White focused on the need to certify genuine preachers of the three angels' messages to guard against the confusion and division caused by the fraudulent claims of unqualified, ungrounded, "self-sent" men. It seems a clear, practical necessity, but their fellow believers did not quickly warm to calls for greater organization for a couple of reasons.

First, the movement was still in the early stages of working out a challenge that still defies an easy solution. That is, how to sustain conviction about the *imminence*—the any-day-now nearness—of the Second Advent along with *long-term planning* for the possibility that the present age will continue for years, even decades to come. To many, it still somehow seemed a lack of faith to set up systems of formal organization if it was all about to end anyway.

The second factor was deep-seated resistance to creating any authority structure that could become an instrument for the kind of repression that characterized ecclesiastical Babylon. "Take care that you do not seek to manufacture another church," George Storrs had famously warned those who fled "Babylon" in 1844. "No church can be organized by man's invention but what it becomes Babylon the moment it is organized," he declared. A trenchant radical both in his abolitionism and Second Adventism, Storrs made his point in extreme, absolutist terms. But let's hear him out a little further, with two, less frequently quoted sentences: "The Lord organized His own church by the strong bond of love. Stronger than that cannot be made; and when such bonds will not hold together the professed followers of Christ, they cease to be His followers, and drop off from the body as a matter of course."[8]

Throughout their strenuous, sometimes combative efforts to build a unified church in the decades that followed, neither James nor Ellen White lost sight of the truthful element in Storrs's point. Authoritarian dictates and coercive enforcement of policy are far too flimsy to hold the church together in unity. Only the "strong bond of love" can do that, and only the Spirit of Christ can generate it.

James indeed pointed out that some zealous to leave the Babylon of denominational creedalism had ended up in another form of Babylon—sheer confusion and disorder. And he labeled the notion that "the church of Christ is free from restraint and discipline" as "the wildest fanaticism." But the aim of his proposal was the kind of freedom with unity and order that characterized the apostolic church. Having been "called away from the confusion and bondage of man-made creeds," he wanted Advent believers now to enjoy both "the *oneness* and *freedom* of the gospel."[9]

System for a Vast Work

Thus, in the renewed drive for gospel order that began in 1859 and culminated with the formation of the General Conference in 1863, the sabbatarian Adventists faced the daunting challenge of enhancing both *liberty* and *unity*. It was, however, a third value—*mission*—that made it urgent for them to try.

Their understanding of the three angels' messages as going forth in a historical sequence during the 1840s had thrilled the Sabbath-observing Adventists with the conviction that their movement had arisen on time in accordance with prophecy. It fulfilled the divine plan for the interval extending from the fall of Babylon to the Second Coming of Christ. Yet, it also limited their mission. As they initially understood it, their teaching about the third angel's message had pertinence only for those who had accepted the first two. In other words, their mission had a narrow target: to lead those who had accepted the Second Advent message preached by William Miller and come out of the creedal denominations to accept the further truth of the third angel's message, centering on "the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus."[10]

Realization, by 1852, that the door of salvation remained open to all people prompted new thinking about both "Babylon" and the three angels' messages. In brief, our founders concluded that the *second angel's message*

of Revelation 14—"Babylon is fallen" (verse 8)— and *the loud cry* of the angel depicted in Revelation 18 as "having great power" so that "the earth was lightened with his glory" (KJV)— were not simultaneous, but separate events on the prophetic timetable. They remained convinced that the second message had gone forth in 1843 and that they were living in the time when the third message was to be given. Except, now they began to see that the first two messages had continuing relevance to be incorporated into their preaching of the third. And, that all of this was preparatory to the future "loud cry" that would bring the third angel's message to its glorious culmination. Its mighty voice and blazing light would bring the significance of the seventh-day Sabbath as the seal of faithfulness to the true and living God before the world with unmistakable clarity.[11]

This was about something much bigger than lining up last-day events in their proper order. It meant seeing the people of the "fallen" churches of "Babylon" in an entirely new light. They could no longer be avoided as doomed reprobates, but must be sought out as potential allies in the cause of truth. It meant that Seventh-day Adventists, in their role as a faithful remnant, should consider themselves not as the exclusive people of God, but as bearers of the light of reform to "the great body of Christ's true followers" outside their ranks.[12]
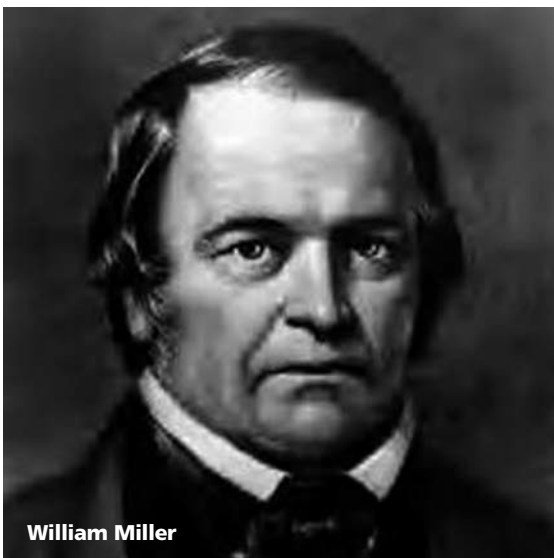
William Miller

That mission gave urgency to church organization. In view of "the thousands in Babylon and the world yet to be brought out by the loud cry," wrote James White in 1860, Adventists had a mission of far greater scope than they had previously imagined—overwhelming, yet at the same time exhilarating in its immensity. A "vast work" lay ahead, and to accomplish it they had to get organized.[13]

Will It Stand the Test of Criticism?

The issues of organization clustered around two major problem areas. James White described the first in 1859 with three words: "We lack system." Here, he referred to the movement's preachers, all of whom in this era were traveling evangelists, often called "messengers." They went where called upon by believers to spend a few weeks or months preaching, perhaps with the use of an evangelistic tent, raising up new congregations, building up existing ones, or both.

While the fraudulent claims of those who usurped "messenger" status still caused occasional difficulty, the system begun in 1853 of issuing credentials signed by two leading ministers—usually James White and Joseph Bates— had lessened the problem. Also, the systematic benevolence plan adopted in 1858 had made a good start at properly paying the preachers. The main systemic deficiency now was coordinating the assignments and itineraries of the traveling preachers as they responded to ad hoc calls for labor, ranging from Maine to Minnesota. In view of their "systematic benevolence," believers had the right, and duty, said James White, to expect "systematic labor."[14]

The other problem area had to do with legal ownership of church property. Mainly, this meant the growing publishing business and meeting houses for congregational worship. The frequently cited experience of a nonsabbatarian Adventist congregation in Cincinnati, which twice lost its church building because the title was held by an individual member who defected from the faith, illustrated the insecurity of local church property if no

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corporate legal entity existed to hold it.[15]

The greater problem, though, lay with the publishing office in Battle Creek, Michigan. By 1859, it not only put out periodicals, principally the *Review* and the *Youth's Instructor*, but also an impressive list of books and pamphlets. Though a committee had been established to see that the work functioned in the interests of the entire body of believers, James White held sole financial and legal responsibility for the entire operation. This put him in an extremely awkward position. Though not in fact making a personal fortune from it, it made him vulnerable to repeated charges of profiteering, painful even if they did not stick. At the same time, he was personally responsible for the business's debts and liable for lawsuits that might be brought against it. On top of that, the property was uninsured.[16]

In early 1860, James White set in motion the decisive push for church organization when he made it clear that he could longer tolerate the ambiguous situation, and called on "preachers and leading brethren" to submit plans for holding church property in a "proper manner." Though it came in the form of a protest, Roswell F. Cottrell's response may have accelerated the process by bringing broader issues into the picture. A former Seventh Day Baptist, Cottrell's frequent contributions to the *Review* and to the *Youth's Instructor* made him a relatively influential figure in the sabbatarian Adventist community. He contended that becoming "incorporated as a religious body according to law" would constitute the kind of alliance between corrupt religion and oppressive political power that was characteristic of Babylon, thus completely undercutting the second angel's message. He worried that his preaching about "the spiritual fornication of Babylon with the kings of the earth" would be silenced by the retort, "You look to the civil arm for aid and protection."[17]

Though Cottrell's objections may seem extreme and impractical in hindsight, they represented widespread sentiment in the sabbatarian Adventist community. The movement's most scholarly writer, J. N. Andrews, for example, had argued just five years before that even though the United States had no national religion, the fact that "nearly all her religious bodies are incorporated by the State" was one reason why those denominations should nevertheless be regarded as "Babylon." Cottrell had a genuine concern that Adventism not lose its free-

dom platform by making even a small compromise with the coercive power of the state.[18]

Interestingly, it was Andrews who, in a conference at Battle Creek in September 1860, proposed a solution that both met the concerns of those who, like Cottrell, feared a return to the bondage of Babylon, and those like James White, who sought the organization necessary to fulfill the mandate of mission. Andrews suggested formation of an "association to hold property" in contrast to a "church incorporated by law."[19]

Before wrapping up on October 1, the conference also took care of another major item of business, selecting "Seventh-day Adventist" as the name for the body of believers on whose behalf the publishing association was to be formed. The following spring, on May 3, 1861, the "Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association" (not the "James White Publishing Company") was incorporated as a nonprofit joint-stock corporation, open to all believers who put up $10 for a share.[20]

Adopting a church name and incorporating the publishing association were not only major strides toward unity but also, despite fears to the contrary, constituted a victory for freedom. Specifically, the freedom to advance in understanding of truth through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Responding to the charge that legal incorporation ran contrary to the second angel's message, James White pointed out to his fellow believers that they had moved beyond a number of things that they once believed. Early on, for example, they held that "going to the ballot box and holding civil office" would mean an illicit union with the state, a return to Babylon, and reception of the "mark of the beast." Though held with deep conviction in accordance with "the best light we then had," further study made clear that "we embraced too much in the second angel's message," and the baggage had to be lain aside.[21]

Progress toward unifying a movement and mobilizing it for mission in nineteenth-century America required freedom to take action in harmony with scriptural principles, without having to support everything with a direct command or precedent from the Bible, as some demanded. And, it meant freedom to change, in accordance with increasing light. Trying to win over a dissenter the following year, White put it this way: "The question with us is, What will stand the test of criticism? and not, What did we once believe?"[22]

Unified by Covenant

Elder White and his pro-organization allies remained committed to preserving that kind of freedom as attention turned next to the need for "system" in the church's ministerial work. The unexpected degree of opposition in New York State that he and Ellen encountered during their summer 1861 "tour" through the Eastern states pushed James to the limit of his patience. "We are done moving out in any enterprise connected with the cause until system can lie at the bottom of all our operations," he exclaimed in the September 3 issue of the *Review*.[23]

While resistance delayed progress in some states, Michigan was ready to move forward at the conference held a month later in Battle Creek. Building on an idea initially broached by White in July 1859 and developed at the April 1861 Battle Creek Conference, the first state conference, the Michigan Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, was launched on October 5. Five more would get off the ground in 1862.

The "conference" at this stage was just that—an annual meeting at which believers in the state (or other territory defined by a district according to need) assembled to worship, study, and conduct business, not standing administrative units in an office building with full-time officers and supporting personnel. Its primary organizational function was to issue credentials to ministers and coordinate their work in the conference's territory. Delegates sent from each congregation elected officers and a small standing committee to oversee the work until the next annual conference. A president, secretary, treasurer, and a three-person executive committee soon became the norm.[24]

The October 1861 conference has achieved due prominence as a landmark in Adventist history for its establishment of the denomination's first state conference. Another action of the conference, taken to ensure that organization would not start the movement down a slippery slope back to Babylon, that the necessary "system" not rigidify and repress gospel
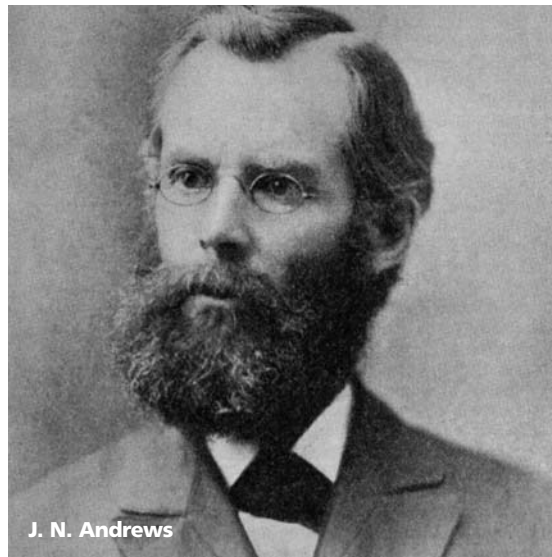
J. N. Andrews

freedom, has not received its due.[25]

Both for legal purposes and for the sake of unity between the congregations about to join together in forming a state conference, it seemed advisable to have a standard, documented process for organizing *churches*. But what then did an individual need to say or do or be in order to become a duly recognized member of the church? How should that membership be attested and recognized? In other words, what, beyond the mere name, *made* someone a Seventh-day Adventist?

Since the Reformation of the sixteenth century, for example, the Tridentine Creed defined what it meant to be Roman Catholic and not Protestant. The Augsburg Confession made one a Lutheran, not a Catholic. The Westminster Confession identified a Presbyterian in contrast to a Lutheran. And so forth.

But for the organizers of the Michigan Conference, a *creed* was the last thing that could identify a Seventh-day Adventist. Fabrication of creeds to suppress the witness of dissenters to their convictions about the truths of God's Word was the feature of ecclesiastical Babylon that Adventists had decried more than any other since 1843. R. F. Cottrell expressed deeply rooted Adventist conviction when he wrote in 1860 that "membership in the church does not depend on our name's being attached to any articles of faith,

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covenant or church book, but upon Christian character, or the keeping of the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus." He warned against adding any kind of test "outside of the Scriptures."[26]

But now the pioneers gathered in Battle Creek a year later *did* want, for the purposes of unity and organization, a standard process for attesting and documenting membership. Though strongly opposing voices apparently did not make it to this conference, those who were there needed to show, for the record, that what they proposed was in harmony with scripture and was not a creed.

John N. Loughborough repeated a formulation he had previously published in the *Review*, summarizing how creeds inexorably lead to persecution:

> *The first step of apostasy is to get up a creed, telling us what we shall believe. The second is, to make that creed a test of fellowship. The third is to try members by that creed. The fourth is to denounce as heretics those who do not believe that creed. And, fifth, to commence persecution against such.*[27]

In following up Loughborough's remarks, White commented that he had been weighing the matter in the light of the apostle Paul's teaching in Ephesians 4:11–13 regarding the spiritual gifts given to the church to unify and build it up in Christ. The passage depicts the gifts working through a dynamic process of growth in knowledge and faith. On the other hand, he pointed out, "Making a creed is settling the stakes, and barring the way to all future advancement."

Creeds represented an attempt to keep God within safe, clear boundaries, and thus preserve the status quo. But the Adventist movement was going somewhere. It needed "the gifts" to make the Bible a genuine, living guide in fulfilling its urgent prophetic mission. In answer to his own question, "Now what is our position as a people?" the Adventist leader declared: "We take the Bible and the gifts of the Spirit; embracing the faith that the Lord will teach from time to time."[28]

The dramatic highlighting of timely biblical truths through the visions of Ellen White was of obvious prominence in the Seventh-day Adventist experience of the gifts of the Spirit. However, a report on local church offices that came out of the same October 1861 Conference shows that the organizers of Seventh-day Adventism saw a wide range of "the gifts" of Ephesians 4:11–13 at work in their community.[29]

How then, as believers undertook the solemn act of joining together to organize a church, should membership be signified, if not by assent to a definitive belief statement (a creed)? Instead of a *creed*, the founders of our movement proposed that scriptural precedents pointed to a *covenant*. With regard to the manner through which churches should be organized, the conference voted the following:

> Resolved, *That this Conference recommend the following church covenant: We, the undersigned, hereby associate ourselves together, as a church, taking the name, Seventh-day Adventists, covenanting to keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus Christ.*[30]

For these founders, then, being a Seventh-day Adventist expressly did *not* mean agreeing to a list of unchanging statements of doctrine. Instead, it meant a pledge of faithfulness stated in a simple phrase drawn from the third angel's message of Revelation 14. Far from being the fatal first step toward Babylon, then, the covenant promised faithfulness to a way of life, to keeping the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus, looking to the Bible as the authoritative guide and to the gifts of the Spirit for help in focusing the scriptural light on the path that lies ahead each day of the journey.

The church covenant offered a valuable legacy to Seventh-day Adventists, both for the remainder of the founding generation and beyond. Not as an unchanging law for the procedure of organizing local churches, but for the way its stance of openness to new light and to the unpredictable leadership of the Holy Spirit provided a check against the deadening impact of overweight organization. It made the quest for "present truth"—new insight based on fresh recovery of scriptural truth to meet the needs of changing times and circumstances—a defining feature of the faith. As the Adventist movement positioned itself to carry forward the great Reformation initiated by Martin Luther in the sixteenth century, the church covenant affirmed a central principle of Protestantism—"the church reformed and always reforming," based on continually renewed study of scripture.

The "Great Regulator"

As the organization of state conferences moved forward somewhat fitfully, Joseph H. Waggoner, one of the church's leading traveling preachers, seems to have been the first to draw the attention of *Review* readers to the

remaining gap in the organizational system. With state conferences, systems were being put in place for credentialing and overseeing the work of ministers within the respective conference territories. But since many, if not most, of the traveling preachers went from state to state, scheduling conflicts and confusion over their preaching assignments were already problems. Annual "general conferences" were needed to resolve such conflicts and ensure appropriate distribution of ministerial labor throughout the various state conferences.[31]

John N. Andrews, earlier leery of Methodist-style general organization, quickly added his support. Without "general conferences that shall represent the whole body of brethren," Andrews now argued, "we shall be thrown into confusion every time that concert of action is especially necessary."[32]

James White initially seemed surprisingly cool to the idea, more concerned about the remaining resistance and foot-dragging that slowed progress in forming state conferences. Then, in the early months of 1863, he became suddenly enthusiastic about an invitation sent from the first regular annual Michigan conference in 1862 for the other state conferences to send delegates to meet for a "general conference" in October 1863. In fact, the elder successfully pled for moving the date of the conference up to May.[33]
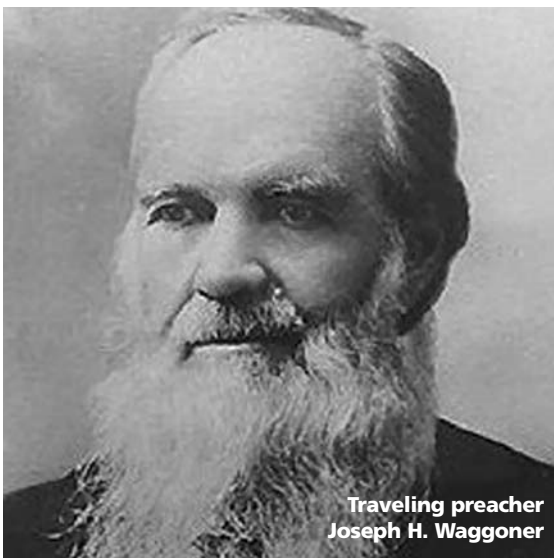
Traveling preacher
Joseph H. Waggoner

As the conference neared, he felt confident enough to bill it as "the most important meeting ever held by the Seventh-day Adventists." And he expressed hopes about the power to be held by the General Conference far in advance of anything he had previously written. He emphasized that the form and function of the General Conference had not been predetermined, but would be opened to the free interchange of ideas. Yet, he did not hold back his own advance suggestion that "the General Conference be the great regulator," and that it would be of little use if not "higher in authority than State Conferences."[34]

Had James White seized the moment to complete a stunningly rapid and thorough abandonment of the spiritual egalitarianism and freedom cherished in early sabbatarian Adventism? Was church organization, after all, about imposing top-down authority over the people of God? Only if one reads the misconceptions of more recent times into the phrase "General Conference."

James White wanted a General Conference strong enough to achieve the specific, limited goal of "systematic labor." A General Conference was needed to correct existing imbalances "by making a judicious distribution of preachers throughout the world field." And, he further suggested, it should "control all missionary labor in new fields." The General Conference would need full authority in carrying out this two-fold responsibility, White believed. And, its organization should be as simple as possible—streamlined to accomplish that end. "Useless machinery," as he put it, would only get in the way.[35]

The Seventh-day Adventists gathered in Battle Creek on May 22, 1863, to formulate a system to strengthen the unity and better coordinate the work of their fledgling denomination amidst a bleak outlook for the unity of their nation. The Union was reeling from another stunning defeat at the hands of Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia two weeks before at Chancellorsville, Virginia. To the

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—James White

west, Vicksburg, Mississippi, remained unconquered after nearly a year of apparently futile effort. The prospects for reunifying the nation through the military defeat of the Confederate rebellion did not look promising.

Yet, whether consciously or not, the Adventists in Battle Creek drew on two of the most important guiding principles of their nation's governmental system: representative democracy and federalism—the distribution of authority among the various levels of government. The General Conference Constitution adopted in 1863 empowered the General Conference, through a five-member executive committee, "to take the general supervision of all ministerial labor, and see that the same is properly distributed," and to "take the special supervision of all missionary labor." Decisions by the General Conference about the assignment of traveling ministers were binding on the state conferences, though they could be appealed. However, the individual conferences did not thereby become mere departments of the General Conference, any more than American states are local subsidiaries of the federal government. The state conferences held complete authority for functions designated by their constitutions—ordaining and credentialing ministers, control over conference funds, ordaining local elders, and so forth.[36]

It also seems clear that, right from the start, the new General Conference began taking a centralizing and unifying role for the overall church beyond its formally stated powers. The 1863 General Conference, for example, adopted a recommended constitution for state conferences. Yet, the operative principle in the new denominational organization was not hierarchical management but distribution of authority appropriate to each level of organization.[37]

The new denomination's governance system was based on the assumption that full authority resides in the entire body of believers, who delegate that authority to elected representatives. It is also true that ordained ministers dominated the early Adventist conference system as a strong majority of the elected representatives. However, the proceedings of the 1863 General Conference as well as the 1862 Michigan Conference contain hints of recognition that lay representation needed to be encouraged. The grand total of nineteen delegates to the 1863 Conference included just two lay members, both from the Michigan Conference. However, one of these lay delegates, William S. Higley, was the conference president—its first, elected in 1862. The other, James Harvey, joined Higley in comprising the lay majority of the first General Conference nominating committee. The only other member and the only ordained minister was B. F. Snook.

Would It Work?

Though much development lay ahead, the church, with the formation of the General Conference, had the basic structure and operational principles of an organizational system. But how well would that system succeed in achieving the dual goal, expressed by James White a decade before, of bringing the people of God into both the *oneness* and *freedom* of the gospel? Could it really succeed in facilitating both the unity essential to mission and openness to the sometimes unpredictable leading of the Holy Spirit?

Within a decade of organization, the danger of turning the General Conference into an instrument of individual authority became apparent during George I. Butler's first term as president (1871–1874). Ellen White pointed out to him that while not wrong in seeking to uphold the authority of the *General Conference*, he had gone way off track "in giving to one man's mind and judgment that authority and influence which God has invested in His church in the judgment and voice of the General Conference." When, she continued, a single leader "is invested with the authority to be judgment for other minds, then the true Bible order has changed."[38]

The 1877 General Conference, providing clarification that remains useful to the present day, affirmed:

That the highest authority under God among Seventh-day Adventists is found in the will of the body of that people, as expressed in the decisions of the General Conference when acting within its proper jurisdiction, and that such decisions should be submitted to by all without exception, unless they can be shown to conflict with the word of God, and the rights of individual conscience.[39]

A decade later in the controversy surrounding the 1888 conference in Minneapolis, denominational leaders in Battle Creek responded with implacable opposition to the Christ-centered teaching of articulate young scholar-evangelists A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner. And once again, the prophetic corrective came from Ellen White, who protested this attempt to use the power of organi-

zation in the precise manner that her husband in 1861 had insisted that Seventh-day Adventists must not and would not. Institutional authority was assuming the creedal stance "in opposition to the gifts" that he described. And not only to her gift, but to those of "men worked by the Holy Spirit" upon whose minds "God's Word flashes light" that "would not perhaps have been present truth twenty years ago" but is "God's message for this time."[40]

The denominational leaders had lost sight of the freedom theme in the second angel's message. "As reformers they had come out of the denominational churches, but they now act a part similar to that which the churches acted," she noted in 1889. While endeavoring in every way to maintain unity, she vowed that she would not "cease to protest against bigotry."[41]

In that determination, the prophet continued, throughout the 1890s, to protest abuse of power in Battle Creek on a range of issues, even though most leaders at least formally "repented" of their resistance to present truth in 1888. On more than one occasion, she indicated that due to the pattern of oppression, the General Conference had lost its authority under God. Only when the reorganization of 1901 brought the General Conference back toward its proper grounding in the entire body of believers, acting through their chosen representatives, could Ellen White once again

Ellen G. White

regard it as having authority under God.[42]

Having reached the other side of an extended crisis, church organization was positioned once again both to provide the order essential for unity and mission and to make way for the transforming, liberating spirit of the gospel. A century later, a sometimes wobbly journey towards that ideal continues. ∎

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Creeds represented an attempt to keep God within safe, clear boundaries, and thus preserve the status quo.

draws on Jonathan M. Butler's illuminating study, "The Making of a New Order: Millerism and the Origins of Seventh-day Adventism," in Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler, eds., *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987), 189–208.

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Left: See *www.adventist.org/150/resources* for slideshows on various aspects of Adventist history.