

The Investigative Judgment: *Adventism's*

Life Raft | BY DON BARTON

To truly understand the vast importance of the doctrine of the Investigative Judgment in the development of Seventh-day Adventism, it is necessary to review its origins in the context of the Millerite movement.

October 22, 1844, is a definitive date in early Adventist history, and came about from the study of the books of Daniel and Revelation. Christ was to come back to the earth that day to redeem the righteous, but as midnight came, there was no reappearing. This has been called the Great Disappointment. Seventh-day Adventists believe this date still has cosmic significance. Even though Christ did not return to earth, a judgment in heaven, called the Investigative Judgment, began on that day and continues even now.

This is a simplistic understanding of a doctrine whose origin evolved from a series of events contrasting unyielding faith and naïve presumption, undying hope and fanatical denial.

The books of Daniel and Revelation have spurred prophetic interpretations for centuries. The physicist Isaac Newton was also a student of scripture, and wrote the book *Observations Upon the Prophecies of Daniel & the Apocalypse of St. John* in 1733, even stating the year 2060 was the soonest Christ would come back to the earth.¹ Charles Wesley predicted the world would end in 1794, based on his study of Daniel and Revelation.² Even in the last few decades, there have been other Adventist offshoot groups who have prophesized the end of the world and the return of Christ; David Koresh and the Branch Davidians, and Michael Travesser (Wayne Bent) and the Lord Our Righteousness Church as recently as October 31, 2007.³ There have been many other predictions made throughout history as well.⁴

The First Great Disappointment

Contrary to what has traditionally been taught, William Miller did not set the date of October 22, 1844, for the Second Coming of Christ. He did set a year—March 21, 1843, to March 21, 1844—coinciding with the vernal equinoxes and the Jewish Feast of Jubilee for the fulfillment of his prophecy. When March 21, 1844, passed, there were many wondering what happened, and most of all, what to do next. On March 25, 1844, Miller was still confident about his prophetic interpretation: “The time, as I have calculated it, is now filled up; and I expect every moment to see the Savior descend from heaven.”⁵

But soon the naysayers began their diatribes and ridicule against Miller and his followers. He responded by saying: *Surely, we have fallen on strange times. I expected of course the doctrine of Christ's speedy coming would be opposed by infidels, blasphemers, drunkards, gamblers and the like; but I did not expect the ministers of the gospel and professors of religion would unite with characters of the above description, at stores and public places, in ridiculing the solemn doctrine of the Second Advent.*⁶

Since all other churches were considered “Babylon” by most of his followers, it is not surprising the churches were quick to point out Miller's failed fulfillment of his prophecies. While Miller writes that he did not support the labeling of the Protestant churches as “Babylon,” he admits that he did not foresee how these accusations by his followers would turn out. To his credit, Miller believed he would not be on earth at this time, and therefore these matters were of no real consequence.

The impact of this apocalyptic prophecy going unfulfilled must have created a tremendous sense of loss in his followers. One need only ask, how many businesses were sold or closed down? How many fields or orchards were left

fallow, unplanted, or unharvested? How many families were divided and relationships severed? The toll on the emotional state and social structure of the believers must have been very great. Due to this, and the failure of the prophecy, many people, not surprisingly, left the movement:

*Time passed on, and the 21st of March, 1844, went by without our witnessing the appearing of the Lord. Our disappointment was great, and many walked no more with us.*⁷

This was to be the first Great Disappointment, and unfortunately not the last.

The Second Great Disappointment

After March 1844 passed, Miller still hoped for Christ's immediate return, but soon realized that this was not about to happen, at least not as he imagined, and contemplated what he should do. Miller's thoughts were thus: "Whether God designs for me to warn the people of this earth any more, or not, I am at a loss to know"⁸

During this time, there was an associated movement, coinciding approximately with Miller's prophecy, called the Seventh Month Movement, which did two things: predicted a later time for Christ's coming, and placed an exact date for the prophecy to be fulfilled—October 22, 1844. This prophecy was not generally received with favor by those who sympathized with Miller.⁹ It wasn't until October 6, just sixteen days before the cosmic event was to take place, that Miller supported this view.

So why did Miller decide to embrace this reinterpretation of his prophecy? The answer seems to have to do with the momentum the movement had acquired. Miller wrote on October 11, 1844:

I think I have never seen among our brethren such faith as is manifested in the seventh month. "He will come," is the common expression. "He will not tarry the second time," is their general reply. There is a forsaking of the world, an unconcern for the wants of life, a general searching of heart, confession of sin, and a deep feeling in prayer for Christ to come. A preparation of heart to meet him seems to be the labor of their agonizing spir-

*its. There is something in this present waking up different from anything I have ever before seen.*¹⁰

But October 22, 1844, came and went without any fulfillment of the prophecy. We don't hear from Miller until November 10, 1844, when he states his feelings:

*Although I have been twice disappointed, I am not yet cast down or discouraged. God has been with me in Spirit, and has comforted me.*¹¹

It is estimated that there were up to fifty thousand followers in the fall of 1844. After the failure on October 22—the Second Great Disappointment—most of the followers left the movement, while a few reorganized into other groups. Miller, ever confident of his message, was still sure that he couldn't be too far off in his reckoning of the time of Christ's second coming and continued to hold fast to his view, exhorting the few who still remained.

The Shut Door

The biggest question looming for the small group of believers was, what did happen on October 22, 1844? There are two responses to this question, which helped precipitate the eventual split in the relationship between Miller and the group that would go on to form the Seventh-day Adventist Church which, by 1846, amounted to only about fifty people.¹² There were other factors that contributed to the split as well; the issue of the state of the dead, and the seventh-day Sabbath, which Miller did not believe in.¹³

The first response to this question was the reinterpretation of what actually happened on that day. On October 23, 1844, the day after the Second Great Disappointment, Hiram Edson had a vision in a cornfield that Jesus went into the most holy place in the Heavenly Sanctuary to cleanse it (i.e., judge the righteous of the world).

This second response follows from a critical assumption of the first: if Christ cleansed the sanctuary in heaven on October 22, then judgment was completed, finished, and probation closed—the individual was now either sealed or

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not; saved or lost. This became known as the “shut door” belief. Implicit to the shut door belief is a cessation of outreach. And the conclusion shared among the believers was that since probation had closed, there would be no further need of warning the world of the end of time.

Miller did believe this second response initially, as we find him saying on November 18, 1844: “We have done our work in warning sinners, and in trying to awake a formal church. God, in his providence, has shut the door.”¹⁴

Later, he changed his mind and personally felt there was no all-concluding judgment. On March 10, 1845, he favors a non-shut door belief—that probation did not close on October 22: “whether, in my judgment, the time of probation came to an end on the 22d of October or not...But to say my judgment was fully convinced that it was closed, I must say, No.”¹⁵

Also pivotal to the shut door theory was the *measure* of the judgment; what constituted the difference between the saved and the unsaved? The criterion for being “sealed” was a belief in the Advent prophecies. If you did believe in them, you were saved; if you didn’t—you were lost. This would also provide a rebuff to the contempt and ridicule from the “Babylon” churches essentially saying to them, we were right, and you were wrong; we have been saved and, because you didn’t believe us, you are not.

One would think this view of the shut door would be short lived, as the inherent self-righteousness, isolationism, and in-reach would eventually contribute to the group’s demise. Surprisingly, the shut door belief wasn’t rescinded until 1852—around seven years later.

When the group of Advent believers realized that holding to a shut door belief was no longer tenable for their long-term survival, they revised their current shut door interpretation, which was attributed to much Bible study and prayer. This I would call the Third Great Disappointment, for they realized that their most desired goal was no longer within their understanding and the primary interpretation of the prophecies was, admittedly, unrealized.

William Miller and the Advent group eventually went their separate ways, and Miller died on December 20, 1849.

What happened next is of extreme importance in the development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as we know it today. As the shut door interpretation was abandoned, a revised interpretation was embraced. The shut door view transitioned from a past-tense completed event to a present progressive tense; from a belief that judgment was complete to a belief in an active, ongoing judgment—from a shut door to a *shutting* door. It is this shutting door that is the basis of the current doctrine of the Investigative Judgment. Had the early Adventists not changed this belief, the movement would have surely died. The shutting door belief became a historical and functional necessity, and a categorical imperative to the group’s existence.

And what did this new interpretation offer the group of early Advent believers?

1. It provided a tremendous amount of psychological resolution. On a personal level, the believers could now bridge the gulf of dissonance between what they believed, and what the everyday reality around them gave evidence of. Christ didn’t have to come right now or at a predefined time. It was also no longer necessary to have a finished act in heaven that had already sealed their destinies.
2. It renewed their relationship with the community, fellow churchgoers, and nonbelievers, in essence allowing them to partake of and contribute to society once again.
3. Most of all, it renewed their journey of faith. This revised belief opened the way for evangelism: seeking new members, redeeming the sinner, and helping the poor and homeless. It gave reason for building new churches, and sending missionaries out to the far reaches of the world. This doctrine alone changed that small group’s inward, self-centered focus to an outward focus that now had a mission directed to all of humanity. Their task in warning sinners had not ended, but was now just beginning anew.

Yet, the only message they had to share at this time was a reinterpretation of Miller's prophecies, in which a defined date of Christ's second coming was removed, and the events that did supposedly occur happened in a celestial sanctuary, and were still ongoing.

One would also have to speculate that this message alone would not have been enough to bring the church to where it is today. Credibility certainly would have also been an issue at this time.

Enter Ellen G. White

Here we must give credit to Ellen G. White and her gift of forth-telling. Moving forward with the small group of Advent believers, she steered the emphasis to include not just a heavenly, but also an earthly ministry that purposed to help and bless humanity. In having this vision for redeeming mankind through the added ministries of education, health, and healing, and preparing a people not just for heaven, but also for an earthly existence, Ellen White's greatest contributions to Seventh-day Adventism could be summed up. One only need to ask where Seventh-day Adventism would be today if not for these two tangible pillars of education and health.

Therefore, we should be thankful for the preaching of William Miller. He brought together a group that although beset by trials and loss, confusion, condemnation, and agonizing denial, was eventually able to develop the insight and vision for a church that, nearly 170 years later, is growing and thriving in most of the world.

And the Investigative Judgment, though unique to Seventh-day Adventists, should be seen for what it really was—a life raft. It kept the crew of a tiny capsized and lost ship alive, and gave them time and direction to reassess their bearings and purpose. It also enabled them to establish the religion in society as a leader in faith, education, health, and healing in a world that is still today waiting for their Lord's return. ■

Don Barton is a laboratory informaticist at Delta County



Memorial Hospital in Delta, Colorado. He and his wife of twenty-seven years, Cindy Frank Barton, a nurse, live in Whitewater, Colorado, and have two daughters. He enjoys camping, hiking 14,000-plus foot mountains, and reading history books, particularly those on early America and World War II.

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4. The reader may refer to Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York, New York: Oxford UP, 1970), chapter 1.
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7. *Ibid.*, 363.
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9. *Ibid.*, 295.
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15. *Ibid.*, 335.

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