

Institute for Christian Teaching  
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists

**THE ADVENTIST HERITAGE**  
**AN ENABLER OF THE FAITH**

by

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## **Introduction**

Properly taught, History is an ideal vehicle for integrating the teacher's faith with the students' learning in the Christian school. Significantly, History has captivated Adventists from the Millerite years to the present. Adventist Historians have suggested that the major contribution of Seventh-day Adventism has not been its commonly recognised doctrinal distinctives but rather its concept of the great controversy between good and evil, the conflict of the ages, a historical approach to belief. A people who take this conflict seriously will remember the injunction of Matthew 24:24 that "... false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect - if that were possible." Such a people will have an interest in understanding how the great struggle between Christ and Satan has ebbed and flowed during the human dispensation in order to meet the challenges of the present with enabling confidence. They would agree with Santayana that "Those who do not learn from the lessons of the past are condemned to relive it." Certainly Ellen White recognised the importance of a proper understanding of the Christian heritage in her statement:

"Again and again I have been shown that the past experiences of God's people are not to be counted as dead facts. We are not to treat the record of these experiences as we would treat last year's almanac. The record is to be kept in mind; for history will repeat itself. The darkness of the mysteries of the night is to be illuminated with the light of heaven." E.G.W. letter. D-238, 1903

## **Methodology**

It is suggested that there are three levels of teaching history available to the Christian educator with the second and third building on what has gone before:

**Factual:** This is the traditional approach; names, dates, wars etc., Unfortunately it is too often the sole approach to the subject and can discourage students as a

consequence. After all there may be little point in simply knowing that the Mayflower pilgrims landed in the new world in 1620.

Rational: A good history teacher would discuss with the students *why* the pilgrims sailed to North America. Their need to live without a king and worship without a pope would be covered through a thorough discussion of the issues relating to religious freedom

Behavioural: The third and last step in introducing a historical concept to students is the ideal opportunity for the Christian teacher to build the faith of the students by asking them to imagine they were living in Holland in 1619, and whether they and their families would be prepared to risk life and limb on a worn-out old ship and cross the stormy Atlantic *for the sake of an idea*.

While many good Christian History teachers work alongside their students to develop their skills in both the cognitive and the affective domains, using the steps outlined above, they too often fail to apply the principles of historical method to contemporary issues confronting the emerging Christian. We tend to use other, more traditional approaches, which do not always work very well. Considering every teacher to be a Bible teacher, the following proposition is presented for consideration.

### Proposition

*The solutions to some of the contemporary doctrinal and lifestyle challenges to the Seventh-day Adventist church may be more readily found in its heritage than in its theology.* Such an approach to dealing with Adventist heritage, properly implemented, should not only provide solutions to problems in the history of the Church but, just as importantly, significantly strengthen the faith of the student in Divine providence.

Several controversial issues in the Adventist heritage are addressed in the pages to follow in order to illustrate ways in which historical method may be used to advantage. It should be stressed, that for reasons of space and the primary need to convey a concept, the examples used are illustrative rather than exhaustive. Others have already given the selected topics full treatment and the references at the end of the paper are provided to provide some direction for those who wish to investigate further.

**Righteousness by Faith:** It may be useful to take a look at the events of the Seventh-day Adventist General Conference Session at Minneapolis in 1888 from a historical point of view, rather than by reviewing the usual and conflicting theological arguments.

It is well known there has been considerable debate within the Adventist church over the events of 1888. As none of the lectures presented at those meetings have been preserved attempts have been made to reconstruct their content. The right wing of the church, generally accepting a post-lapsarian view of the nature of Christ, points to books such as J.E. Waggoner's "The Everlasting Covenant" to reconstruct the argument put forward at the Minneapolis meetings. A commonly used statement by Waggoner justifying the interpretation of this group is the following:

"Before the end comes, and at the time of the coming of Christ, there must be a people on earth, not necessarily large in proportion to the number of inhabitants of earth, but large enough to be known in all the earth, in whom "all the fulness of God" will be manifest even as it was in Jesus of Nazareth. God will demonstrate to the world that what he did with Jesus of Nazareth He can do with anyone who will yield to Him." - Everlasting Covenant, p. 366.

Acceptance of this viewpoint has led some Adventists to maintain the Lord cannot return to earth until His perfect example is reproduced in the sinless lives of His people. This group would also maintain that the law discussed in Galations is limited to the

ceremonial law only. While acknowledging that the Butler and Smith faction, rather than Waggoner and Jones, shared this viewpoint on the law at Minneapolis, this group still insists Waggoner and Jones believed true Christians could keep the law, perfectly, here on earth, through faith in Jesus and that this was the thrust of the 1888 General Conference meetings at Minneapolis. Maintaining the Church has never fully accepted the possibilities of Righteousness by Faith, some from this group have called for corporate repentance by the Church.

Moderates, tending to hold a pre-lapsarian view of the nature of Christ, build their theological support for the probable content of the Minneapolis presentations on the articles by Waggoner and Jones in the "Signs of the Times" during the year or two before and after the 1888 General Conference session. They also cite Ellen White's recollection of Dr. Waggoner's studies:

"The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Gal. 3:24). In this scripture, the Holy Spirit through the apostle is speaking especially of the moral law. The law reveals sin to us, and causes us to feel our need of Christ and to flee unto Him for pardon and peace by exercising repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

An unwillingness to yield up preconceived opinions, and to accept this truth, lay at the foundation of a large share of the opposition manifested at Minneapolis against the Lord's message through Brethren [E.J.] Waggoner and [A.T.] Jones." (Ellen G.White, Selected Messages, 1:234)

The moderates see law in Galations as incorporating all law, moral and ceremonial, and that while one keeps the law dependably, it is never kept perfectly this side of the Advent. They believe this was the view of law presented in the 1888 meetings at Minneapolis.

Clearly the two viewpoints are incompatible. One proposes that Christ's perfect example can and will be reproduced in the lives of his followers on earth before the

Advent. The other maintains that while the law can be kept reliably, and that while the mature Christian will live in perfect dependence on his Lord, perfect performance is not possible this side of the second coming of Christ. It is therefore proposed that the content of the 1888 meetings be reconstructed through the use of historical rather than theological tools and a reason found to explain the paradox of two distinctly different groups each maintaining their position was the one presented and adopted by the Church at the 1888 meetings in Minneapolis.

Historical scholarship has documented the following points:

- By 1888 some Adventists were placing human obedience, righteousness and obedience to law, in addition to the merits of Christ, at the centre of their doctrine and outreach, the same problem Paul addressed in his letter to the church at Galatia. This, in 1888, was probably a consequence of the Church emphasis on the sanctity of the seventh-day sabbath and the current threat of Sunday sacredness legislation in the United States. (Ferch 1990:1 & 2)
- Adventist theology and its terminology was not as well developed as it is today. Therefore modern students need to be careful in analysing the theological discussion of an earlier generation in the Church.
- E.J. Waggoner upheld Jesus in his lectures as Saviour of the world but not all his positions on the nature of Christ and man, and therefore Righteousness by Faith were fully developed. It is suggested that these problem areas contain the initial elements of Waggoner's later Pantheism. (Ferch 1990: 25-61, McMahon 1979)
- A.T. Jones was remembered by Ellen White as one who also uplifted the "Saviour, the sacrifice for the sins of the whole world." However there were

problems with his theology too which were, with time, to lead to perfectionism and pantheistic thinking. (Knight 1987, Olsen 1981)

- The evidence suggests that modern Adventist scholarship does not agree completely with the positions of either camp at Minneapolis, but on balance favours several of the positions promoted by Butler and Smith, rather than Waggoner and Jones (Ferch 1990:7). It should also be noted that while Ellen White supported Waggoner and Jones she did not agree with all Waggoner and Jones taught. Rather she felt their presentations were the closest to truth of those speaking on the subject at the time.
- McMahon believes Waggoner's theology was in transition between 1889 and 1891 and maintains it would be unwise, "even dangerous, to look for the 1888 message in his writings after that time." (McMahon 1979:115-116) This being the case, it is probable that the presentations by Waggoner at Minneapolis were similar to articles on the same topics written on the verge of the conference for publication in church papers (Ibid:75).
- Therefore, Waggoner's books, *The Everlasting Covenant* and *Glad Tidings*, both published after the turn of the century, present views significantly different to those presented at Minneapolis in 1888. It is equally evident that Ellen White's endorsement of the work of Waggoner and Jones at Minneapolis was soon superseded by letters and personal expressions of concern and reproof over the theological directions both men were taking.
- To therefore claim, as Robert J. Wieland has done in the foreword of the Pacific Press Publishing Company 1972 reprint of *Glad Tidings*, that it "was in reality a transcript of the studies that Dr. Waggoner gave personally to a gathering of ministers in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the fall of 1888" is not only inaccurate

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historically but confusing theologically to the sincere reader attempting to come to grips with his need for salvation. To be fair this myth did not originate with Wieland. A.G. Daniels and L.E. Froom also believed later works of Waggoner represented the message of 1888 and only careful analysis identifies the gradual shift in thinking over nearly two decades (McMahon 1979:74). Clearly it was hard for laity and church leaders alike to find fault with the teachings of two men who had been so strenuously supported by Ellen White in what they had to say in 1888. In reality, by the end of the century Waggoner and Jones had joined the legalistic camp they had so energetically opposed at Minneapolis in 1888.

Ideally, the Adventist Christian History teacher would carefully lead students of this issue to understand the history and theology of the development of the doctrine of Righteousness by Faith in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Such a teacher would also strengthen the students' faith by pointing out the providences of God in preserving the truth of the gospel for the Church, even through the theological defection of two of its best minds for both Waggoner and Jones eventually left the Seventh-day Adventist Church while retaining their Christian commitment.

**Progress in Doctrine:** Another area of Adventist belief which lends itself well to historical investigation is progress in doctrine, a concept easier to accept than apply. Revelation 13: 11-18 has been accepted by Adventists since Millerite times to represent the United States in prophecy. It is instructional however to observe how this understanding has been applied over the last 150 years.



In the 1840's and 50's during the lead up to the American Civil War Adventists saw the beast of Revelation 13 as a dragon which had once been a lamb. Strongly abolitionist and civilly disobedient as they defied the requirements of the Fugitive Slave Law, the early Adventists had little respect for the government of the United

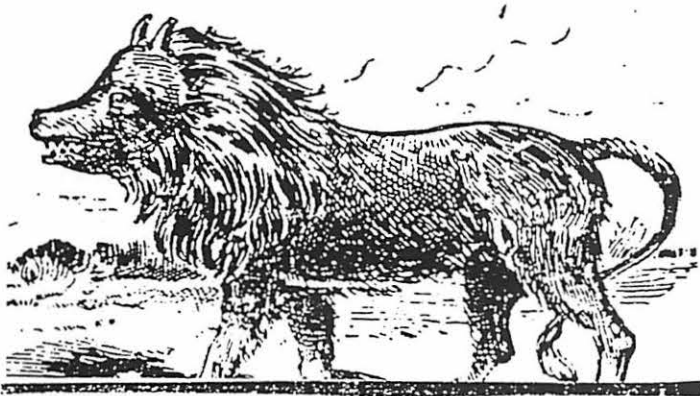


Uriah Smith's 1855 woodcut depicting the United States in prophecy credit: Review and Herald

States. Thus the 1855 woodcut of the beast by Uriah Smith shown on the previous page with its long snout and large incisors portrays the United States as anything but the average friendly household pet. By the 1880's the Church no longer saw the Advent as so imminent. In contrast to the Civil War period which they expected would bring on Armageddon and the Advent, America had now become a pretty good place in which to live. The average Adventist, by the 1880's was probably more optimistic about his country than in the past.

*Less vicious beast of 1888*

credit: Review and Herald

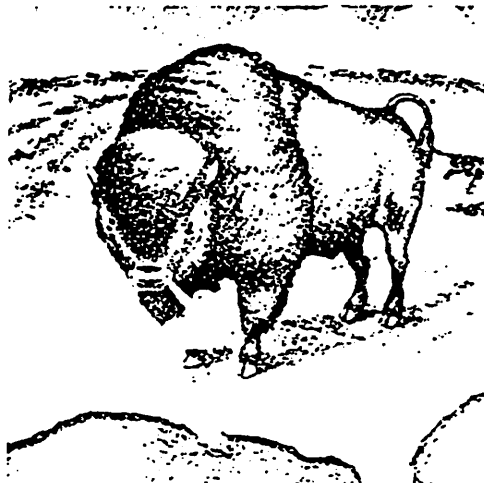


Adventists began to suggest that the Lord had provided a period of prosperity in order that more could hear the message of salvation. Thus the beast on the prophetic charts of the time becomes more like a lion, in some cases with a distinctly manlike visage, and certainly a symbol of national pride and authority.

It is certainly not the repulsive and ugly dragon-like beast of the Civil War period.

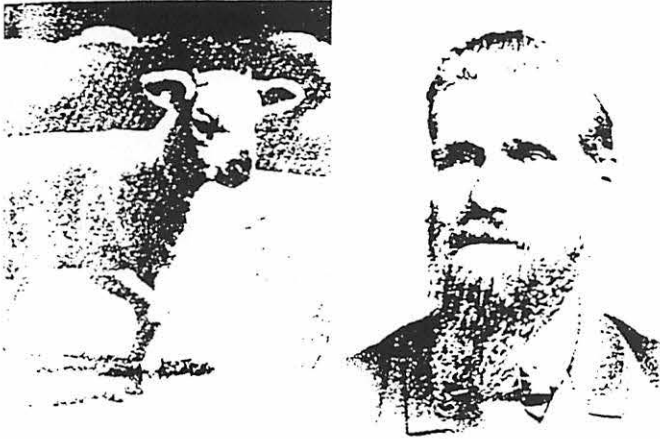
In the early years of the 20th Century Americans felt good about their country "from shining sea to shining sea." They spoke of "Manifest Destiny" as they took control of Cuba, Hawaii, the Phillipines. It was a period of expansion, not only of territory but in wealth and prosperity. Americans began to see themselves as having a role to play on the international stage. The buffalo became the national symbol of America and was depicted on the nickel coinage of the day.

In the age of Teddy Roosevelt the new symbol for America on Adventist prophetic charts was the buffalo, which in time sprouted lamblike horns. This symbol was commonly used by Adventist evangelists on the prophetic charts until the mid-20th century.



*Beast with lamb-like horns  
illustrating a 1944 book on  
prophecy*

But before long the charts began to change once again as evangelists began to depict America in prophecy as a lamb which would one day become a dragon. Thus in about a hundred years the Church had come full circle. Whereas in the pre-Civil War period early Adventists saw America as a dragon that had once been a lamb, by the end of World War II they saw America as a lamb which would one day become a dragon.



*A post-World War II  
representation of the  
United States*  
Credit: Review and Herald

*S. N. Haskell, the first  
to refer to the Ameri-  
can beast as "lamb-like"*

This example of how the teachings of the Church reflect the culture and time in which it finds itself is instructive. For those who may fear change and "new light" it is a good example how the Church can adjust with time yet be faithful to the original pillar of the faith which of course is that Revelation 13: 11-18 represents the United States of America in prophecy.

This example of progress in doctrine can be very reassuring to a student confronted for the first time with the insecurity of the idea that the Church does adjust its teachings. Just as importantly, the student needs to know, from a model such as that suggested here, that the changes are evolutionary rather than revolutionary, that while we do not discard the pillars of the faith we do, with time, walk around to the other side for a new perspective (Butler 1976).

**Inspiration:** Another area of Adventist belief which invites historical investigation is inspiration. There are several issues within that topic which, unless properly understood, can make a shipwreck of a student's faith very quickly.

The Fundamentalist usually believes in the inerrancy of scripture, suggesting that while there are minor errors in the text known today, these were the result of inaccurate copying but the original transmission was flawless. The Evangelical responds to this kind of thinking with the charge that the Fundamentalist makes a paper pope out of scripture. The Adventist Church takes its own position as a consequence of its unique opportunity to see inspiration at work. Several areas of controversy over the role of

Ellen White have surfaced in recent years and Adventist teachers need to be open and affirming in meeting such challenges with their students. The paragraphs which follow are suggested as approaches which may be useful to the Christian History teacher addressing concerns in the area of inspiration in a way which will support the developing faith of the student and show the providences of God.

A close comparison with 2 Samuel 24 with 1 Chronicles 21 is illustrative of the problem of errancy in inspiration. These parallel accounts deal with the census of Israel by David and while essentially similar in structure, differ in important details suggesting that while both accounts are reliable the human instrument working under inspiration is not always faultless. Study of these chapters could be useful in helping students understand the Church acceptance of thought rather than verbal inspiration. The principle followed here is that the methodology of inspiration found in scripture should be equally acceptable in the writings of Ellen G. White and therefore an opportunity to strengthen the student's faith in the Spirit of Prophecy. Certainly, the first verses of these scripture passages are a wonderful opportunity to affirm the greatness, love and mercy of God. The first verse of 2 Samuel 24 states God caused David to number Israel, while the opening lines of 1 Chronicles 21 lay the blame upon Satan. The problem of course is with 2 Samuel 24:1. If God caused David to number Israel why was David later punished? It seems that there are two choices here for the student to consider. Either "God" in this verse is another of the transcription errors in this passage or there is a spiritual lesson which needs unfolding. If the latter, could it be that when Satan caused David to number Israel the Hebrew people knew little, if anything, of a personal devil and that God did not want to introduce this subject to a people not far removed from the polytheism of Egypt? It is suggested that in order to prevent the Israelites from the possibility of worshipping two Gods, one of good, the other of evil, that He decided, as King of the Universe, to assume the responsibility for Satan's actions, as recorded in 2 Samuel 24:1. It is further suggested that 450 years later, when the Chronicles were written, that the nation of Israel had developed to the

point where it was ready for the introduction of the concept of a personal devil. What an opportunity for the Christian teacher to affirm the providences of God!

There has been a lot of talk in the Adventist Church about literary dependency. It may be helpful to illustrate this occurs in scripture. The Chronicles, believed to be based on temple records, provide the account of the dedication of Solomon's temple. Written long after the temple was destroyed, 2 Chronicles 5:9 (last part) remains in the present tense, a clear indication of direct copying from another source.

There has also been controversy in the Church about what Ellen White meant by the term "lesser light" to describe her writings. George I. Butler wrote a series of 10 articles in the Review in 1884 promoting the idea of degrees of inspiration, a concept Ellen White herself firmly rejected (Vande Vere 1979:62-67). More recently some have suggested that the "lesser light" is the most recent light; that as the New Testament reinterprets the old, so the "lesser light" approaches both Testaments which have gone before. The problem with this explanation of course is that other groups have made the same claim, the Book of Mormon being a notable example. Possibly a more useful model for the Christian teacher to convey to the students is the concept that any one inspired writer is a "lesser light" when compared with the total canon of inspiration. In such a case no author, be it Paul, James, or Ellen White should be read in isolation, but studied in conjunction with the entire inspired record, the "Greater light".

Rene Noorbergen, a journalist, in his "Ellen G. White - Prophet of Destiny" (1972) suggested in essence that Ellen White received all her ideas through inspiration, and was not influenced at all by the culture in which she found herself. In response Ron Numbers, a professional Historian, working from the position that historical method makes no allowance for inspiration, maintained in "Prophetess of Health; A Study of Ellen G. White, " (1976) that Ellen White was influenced by her culture, rather than by inspiration, for her views on healthful living. The reality is probably a middle position,

acknowledging that Ellen White was influenced by both her surroundings, and also led of God to selectively choose from the health principles of her time those which would endure and later be supported by scientific enquiry. Certainly there are many instances in scripture also where understanding can be obtained by contemporary man only when he understands the Hebrew setting. For example, to the occidental mind, law generally exists to determine fault or blame; to the Hebrew its purpose was to effect reconciliation. Thus comprehension of the gospel could be significantly influenced by the quality of the understanding of how the Hebrew culture worked. A Christian History teacher therefore, using the two books mentioned above, could be a significant and positive spiritual influence in aiding the development of an understanding of inspiration by students in a way which builds up their faith in the Spirit of Prophecy.

Another issue troubling some church members is that early and late statements of Ellen White seem at times to be in conflict with each other. Her comments on the "shut door" are illustrative. Alden Thompson (1981, 1982) suggests that the longer Ellen White lived the less she spoke on law and the more about grace. Does this mean that she was wrong in her earlier statements? Rather, it would seem that her visions or "panoramas" as she sometimes called them, were like a video or movie to us today. These she subsequently described in her own language. Like us, she brought her humanity to such "viewings" and after a walk of more than 70 years with her Lord had a richer and fuller understanding of the original encounter. This shift, due to maturity, shows in the contrast between some of her early writing when compared with later work.

Thus it is suggested that a student's faith could be considerably enhanced by a History teacher taking the time and effort to survey the issue of inspiration in the manner outlined above, moving progressively through what has been a minefield to many, to a position of strong affirmation of the principles and application of both distant and recent inspiration.

## **Conclusion**

As mentioned earlier these examples are illustrative rather than exhaustive. There are many others which could have been used, to provide a much more comprehensive document. However the intent of this paper has been simply to encourage History teachers, to take an extra step, in an affirming way, to work with their students in applying the principles of historical method to issues facing the contemporary church. As stated in the original proposition, it may very well be that the solutions to some of the contemporary doctrinal and lifestyle challenges facing the Adventist Church today may be more readily found in its heritage than in its theology. If this paper does nothing more than stimulate thinking, by Adventist History teachers, about how to better convey to students the providences of God in the leading of the Adventist church, it will have been an effort well worthwhile.

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