

THE GREAT DISAPPOINTMENT

*and the Hope of the Advent Yet
To Come*

Adventism began in disappointment in 1844 and it has struggled with disappointing delays ever since. And now, 150 years later, how are we to keep hope alive in our young people?

Recently Dale Parnell, a professor at Oregon State University, told about traveling with his preschool son. Not long after they started out, his son began asking those all-too-familiar questions, "Are we almost there? When will we get there? Are we there yet?" Finally, the father, with some exasperation, told the child to be quiet. He would tell him when they were almost there. He would tell him when they *were* there. He didn't want to hear another question.

The boy was silent for about two more hours. Finally, he could contain himself no longer, and with all innocence asked, "Daddy, how old will I be when we get there?"

Sometimes it appears that to be an Adventist is to be like a child riding in the back seat of a car on a seemingly interminable trip. Adventism began in disappointment in 1844 and it has struggled with disappointing delays ever since. And now, 150 years later, how are we to keep hope alive in our young people?

Or perhaps we should ask, *why* should we keep hope alive? Any look at Adventist hope in 1994 must be different than it would have been just a year and a half ago. In that time, we have seen Adventist hope not only plagued by disappointment and delay; we have also seen it go awry in devastation and destruction. For even though we correctly distance ourselves from the Branch Davidians by pointing out our differences and stressing how long ago their forebears broke off from us, we can't deny the fact that many of those who

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BY JOHN BRUNT

died in the fires of Waco had attended Adventist churches and schools.

Even though we want to cry “foul” when Diane Sawyer says on *PrimeTime Live* that Vernon Howell as a youngster joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church where he learned to worship a vengeful God who was coming to destroy, we might be surprised if we knew how many of our own students view God as vengeful when they think about eschatology. Can we keep Adventist hope alive after 150 years? Should we keep it alive? And if so, how do we do it?

I believe that we should keep Adventist hope alive, not just because it is part of our Adventist heritage, but because it is integral to the gospel of Jesus Christ. However, certain elements in Adventist eschatology have obscured this vital connection between our hope and the good news of grace. We will succeed in keeping Adventist hope alive for our students only if our hope is gospel-oriented and grows out of our faith in Jesus Christ.

A Historical Sketch

Before we move to the New Testament to see the shape of this enduring hope, a brief historical sketch may help us understand where we have come from and how our past has influenced our hope.

For our founding fathers and mothers, Adventist eschatology had a strong polemical edge to it. In their day, most of Christianity believed that every day in every way the world was getting better and better. It was moving toward a millennium of peace on earth that would come through human effort. God led our pio-

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neers to recognize that hope for the future rested in God's grace and on His action, not on human efforts alone. Our first statement of beliefs in 1872 reflects this polemical edge when it speaks of both the Second Coming and the millennium. Article 8 reads:

We believe that the doctrine of the world's conversion and temporal millennium is a fable of these last days, calculated to lull men into a state of carnal security, and cause them to be overtaken by the great day of the Lord as a thief in the night; that the Second Coming of Christ is to precede, not follow the millennium; for until the Lord appears, the papal power, with all its abominations, is to continue, the wheat and the tares grow together, and evil men and seducers wax worse and worse, as the Word of God declares.¹

Coupled with this polemicism was an element of William Miller's theology that became an important part of early Adventism.

William Miller for a time believed in a deistic God, a clock-maker who set up the world and let it go on its own. Then he was converted to belief in a personal God who promised salvation in Jesus Christ and a soon return.

However, despite Miller's conversion, he maintained a kind of deistic view of the second coming of Christ. For Miller, God had initiated a great prophetic countdown. Through Scripture, He provided the sure word of prophecy that enabled humans to calculate the exact dates of the momentous events to come.

For Miller, world history proceeded precisely according to this plan. The giant prophetic gears ground inevitably to-

ward the final promise. The predictability of the calculation would motivate people to repent as they faced the coming judgment. Miller saw this “sure word of prophecy” as the basis for the Advent hope. He confidently fitted events such as the French Revolution and the history of Turkey into the prophetic framework. For him, even the Song of Solomon was a prophetic book.²

In 1845, William Miller wrote a letter to Advent believers encouraging them to keep their faith. It was reprinted in the August 19, 1851 *Review*. In it, Miller included this telling sentence as he described his conviction that Jesus would come again: “This to us is a source of great joy and it shows conclusively where our faith is founded and our hope predicated. It is upon the sure word of prophecy and no other evidence that we rely.”

Both this image of a great prophetic countdown and the polemic tone of Advent hope are problematic today, however. First, we no longer live in an age that optimistically predicts an earthly millennium just around the corner. No longer do we need to break down false millennial optimism with predictions of doom and gloom. Instead, we live in an age of despair and meaninglessness. Just listen to the popular music that so many of our students hear. Notice the themes of violence, hopelessness, and despair. The world—and our students—need hope.

Second, the great prophetic countdown model, which helped awaken our pioneers to the promise of Christ’s coming, nevertheless obscures certain important elements of New Testament hope. As we review this gospel-oriented hope and examine its enduring qualities, we see how certain aspects of Miller’s great prophetic countdown model are problematic today. This does not detract from Miller’s positive contribution in calling attention to the importance of the second coming of Christ in an age of false optimism, or his contribution to an understanding of Daniel’s 2300-day prophecy. The world needed to hear what our pioneers said. But today our students need to hear the message in a different key, more carefully nuanced by the gospel. With this in mind, we turn to five aspects of gospel-oriented hope as revealed in the New Testament, which can reassure our students.

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Person, Not Events

Hope that endures is founded on the person of Jesus Christ, not on impersonal prophetic events. Notice how Paul, in Romans 5:1, 2, bases our hope for the future on God’s grace as revealed in Jesus Christ. “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing in the glory of God” (Romans 5:1, 2 NRSV).³ This in no way detracts from the real promise of a never-ending future with Christ. But the present experience with Christ gives shape to the future hope and becomes its assurance.

This is certainly not new to us, yet there have been elements within Adventist eschatology that have militated against this basic New Testament conviction. The great prophetic countdown model that has been with us since Miller’s time tends to focus on events, rather than the personal promise of Christ. Adventists have often referred to eschatology as the study of “last-day events.” But eschatology isn’t a matter of deciphering future prophetic events; rather, it has to do with Christ’s victory and the resulting credibility of His promise.

This emphasis on inserting events into a great prophetic countdown has led us to believe that Scripture provides tomorrow’s headlines today. That, in turn, has led to a long tradition of prophetic speculation. For example:

- Uriah Smith confidently predicted a vital role for Turkey in earth’s history.

- Two women in the church where I was born rebuked my parents for bringing a child into the world when Armageddon (World War II) was already upon us.

- Other Adventists in World War II boldly predicted that Israel would not become an independent state.

- Certain Adventists during the Vietnam War proclaimed that the end was at hand because Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam were the kings of the East and Armageddon was upon us.

- Some Adventists during the 1970s gasoline shortage claimed that the national Sunday law had begun.

- Adventists today try to show how the fall of communism fits in with the very final events.

These illustrations indicate that we have never been any better than anyone else at predicting tomorrow’s headlines. We don’t know whether Yeltsin or Zhirnovsky or someone else will eventually come out on top in Russia. History will continue to surprise us, as it does everyone else, until the Lord comes.

But that is all right, for according to the New Testament, hope that endures is not based on impersonal events or our ability to predict them. Our hope is based on salvation through Jesus Christ. He has promised to return for us. Because of the amazing grace revealed in His life, death, and resurrection, we feel confident that He will not let us down. If Adventism is to keep its hope alive, this hope must be built on the foundation of God’s grace.

Assurance, Not Anxiety

A second feature of gospel-oriented hope is assurance. We have already seen that Paul speaks of boasting in hope. There is a joyful confidence to New Testament hope. In 2 Corinthians 3:12 Paul says, “since we have such a hope, we are very bold.” And the author of Hebrews, in chapter 3, verse 6, says that we are God’s house if we hold fast our confidence and pride in our hope.

This is not a boastful, arrogant belief in ourselves, but a hope that rests in assurance because it has grasped the reality of God’s grace. Those of us who have grown up in Adventism need only to remember our childhood to know that Adventist hope has not always been filled with assurance. Too often, anxiety and fear

have dominated.

A few years ago, when I was teaching an eschatology class, I decided to begin the semester with an ice-breaking exercise. I asked students if they had ever dreamed about the Second Coming. I thought we'd spend about half the period on this. I was unprepared for what followed. We filled the period and more. Most of the 50 students had dreams to share. Their experiences were both moving and haunting.

One young man told of dreaming that his whole family saw the cloud the size of a man's hand in the sky. They rejoiced together that Jesus was coming. As Jesus came down on the cloud, his sister, mother, and father started rising into the air to meet Him. He and his brother, on the other hand, stayed on the ground. They started jumping frantically as high as they could, but gravity and guilt held them down as their parents and sister floated up to meet the Lord in the air.

Another student said he dreamed he was at the railroad station waiting to get on a train. As the conductor began calling the names of those who were to board the train, he recognized the conductor as Jesus. One by one the people got on the train, until there were only a few left. Finally, every name had been called but his. Then the conductor said, "All aboard." He went to the conductor, pleading that he was to be on the train, too. But the conductor said, "Your name isn't here," and shut the door. The train left the station without him. As he watched, it rose into the air while he stood on the platform crying. He woke up, his pillow wet with tears.

I asked the class if anyone had ever had a positive dream about the Second Coming. In that class of 50 students, not a single one had. Can we be terribly surprised if a new generation of Adventists simply pushes eschatology into the background rather than subject their children to the same nightmares they had in their youth? Adventist hope will endure only if our eschatology is consistent with salvation. Otherwise, the gospel becomes a good news-bad news joke. We are saved by grace (or at least forgiven), but unless we get on the stick and get ready, we probably won't make it when Christ comes again. It's not hard to imagine that one of the reasons young Adventists have had such a difficult time grasping salvation by

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faith, as evidenced by the Valuegenesis study, is, at least in part, the countering message they receive in so much of our eschatological teaching. Hope that endures must be founded on God's grace from beginning to end, so that grace is just as real in our eschatology as it is at the cross. Hope that endures is hope with assurance.

Trust, Not Calculation

From the very beginning, Christians have tried to calculate the time of Jesus' return. In Acts 1:6, Luke shows us that before Jesus' ascension the disciples were concerned about when Jesus would restore the kingdom. Jesus told them that it was not for them to know the times or seasons the Father had set by His authority. Instead, Jesus pointed them to their mission. They would receive the Holy Spirit and be His witnesses to the ends of the earth.

The great prophetic time clock approach to eschatology has never fully broken from its initial predilection for time-setting, and so, over and over again, offshoot groups set dates. But even in the mainstream, there is too much general speculation about time that creates false expectations—the "cry wolf" phenomenon—thereby detracting from the important issues of eschatology.

Speculation sets people up for disappointment, so they continue to feel aftershocks of the Great Disappointment. One might argue that the New Testament already does that by emphasizing that Christ is coming soon. But there is a difference. The basis for New Testament imminence is the conviction that the resurrection of Jesus has already initiated the "last days." (See Hebrews 1:2, for example.) As

long as we stand on that foundation, hope can endure even if Christ's coming seems long delayed. But when the foundation for imminence is a never-ending series of dubious speculations about coming events that seem to keep pulling the rug from under our feet, hope inevitably wanes.

Responsibility, Not Passivity

This leads us to an important question. What do we do while waiting for the Second Coming? New Testament hope offers a vision, a responsibility, and a mission, not just a passive waiting for the return. From the beginning, New Testament writers sought to warn their readers that there would be an apparent delay. In Matthew 25's parable of the talents, the master goes away for an extended period. Already it had seemed like a long time to Matthew's readers, but he points out Christians' responsibility in the interim. Burying one's talent in the ground and waiting passively for Christ's return is the wrong thing to do. Hope that endures, grounded in the gospel, not only looks for a kingdom of justice and peace and love, but also works toward these goals in the present. This hope seeks to multiply the values of the kingdom while the Master is away.

As Jesus shows in the final parable of Matthew 25, the hope of His coming feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, and gives drink to the thirsty. Hope that endures has a living, working vision of the kingdom of God that motivates us in the present and offers us assurance for the future.

We have not always understood this as we should. Take, for example, the issue of slavery in early Adventism. In 1856 R. F. Cottrell, arguing against voting, wrote in the *Review*:

"But you can vote against slavery," says one. Very well; supposing I do, what will be the effect? In the last great persecution, which is just before us, the decrees of the image will be against the "bond" as well as the free. Bondmen will exist then until the last—till God interposes to deliver His saints, whether bond or free. My vote then cannot free the slaves; and all apparent progress toward emancipation will only exasperate their master, and cause an aggravation of those evils that it was intended to cure. I cannot therefore, vote against slavery, neither can I vote for it.⁴

Fortunately, not all early Adventists took this view. Ellen White, by way of contrast, spoke and worked against slavery.⁵

Hope that is genuine never uses the future Kingdom as an excuse for not working toward Kingdom values in the present. If God cares enough about the world to promise a day free from prejudice and suffering, war and oppression, how can we care so little that we fail to do what we can to end prejudice, suffering, war, and oppression now?

Inclusive, Not Exclusive

Finally, a gospel-oriented hope that endures takes an inclusive view. Those who hold this hope never claim it as their private possession because they know that Jesus is the Saviour of the world. 1 Timothy 4:10 tells us that Jesus is the Saviour of all human beings, especially those who believe. This is not universalism, but neither is it a narrow sectarianism. Our hope must include a concern for all people. It recognizes that God is working in the whole world with all people, not only with us. It took some time for our pioneers to recognize that. They believed the door was shut. But God led them eventually to open the door and reach out in one of the most impressive mission advances in Christianity. Hope that endures includes the whole world in the loving arms of God's gracious embrace.

Conclusion

In a world with so much despair and discouragement, Adventists have something to offer: a confident, assured hope grounded in the grace of God as revealed in our Saviour, Jesus Christ. In his fanciful tale, *The Hobbit*, J. R. R. Tolkien tells of a group of dwarfs who had been displaced from their land by a mean dragon. These dwarfs sang of the day when a sav-

our would come, their fortunes would be restored, and gold would flow in the rivers. But Tolkien adds, "This pleasant legend did not much affect their daily business."⁶

For Adventists, it is different. Hope transforms daily business into a sense of mission and responsibility for the world. Without this hope, there is no solution to the problem of evil and death. As my friend and colleague, Glen Greenwalt, is fond of saying, "Even on a good day, children die." A God who cares cannot allow that to go on forever. But we have hope that ours is a gracious and kind God whose promise can be trusted. The world needs this hope, and we can proclaim it without being ashamed.

About two years ago at a theological convention, I rode 25 floors down an elevator with two New Testament theologians, Robert Jewett and J. Christian Becker. They were arguing about the role of apocalyptic hope in Christian faith, especially Paul's presentation of faith. Becker was arguing, correctly I believe, that apocalyptic hope is integral to the

gospel. Jewett wasn't so sure. When we reached the ground floor and they separated, Becker shot off the parting salvo, "Just remember, without apocalyptic, the whole world is going to hell." And it is true.

And yet, we must remember that misplaced apocalyptic hope can create its own kind of hell right here on this earth, as Waco has demonstrated. We must preserve hope, but only the *right kind* of hope, which enables us to endure. We will know we have the right kind of hope when we can sing with conviction and vigor, "Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness." ✍

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Quoted in Gary Land, ed., *Adventism in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 233.

2. William Miller, *Evidence From Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ, About the Year 1843: Exhibited in a Course of Lectures* (Boston: B. B. Mussey, 1840), p. 264.

3. All Scripture quotations are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1989.

4. R. F. Cottrell, "How Shall I Vote?" *Review and Herald* (October 30, 1856), p. 205.

5. See, for example, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1948), vol. 1, p. 264.

6. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit: Or There and Back Again* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p. 186.

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