

Picture  
Removed

# William Miller *and the* Rise of Adventism

BY GEORGE R. KNIGHT

**I**f not for William Miller (1782-1849), there would be no Seventh-day Adventist Church.<sup>1</sup> His insight and the fruit of his Bible study stimulated the development of Sabbatarian Adventism in the late 1840s and led to the formation of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination in the early 1860s.

## An Unlikely Preacher

In his early years, Miller seemed an unlikely preaching candidate. In fact, in his twenties young Miller showed more interest in making fun of preachers than in emulating them. He often entertained his

skeptical friends by imitating with “ludicrous gravity” the “devotional peculiarities” of his grandfather and uncle—both Baptist clergymen. “Their words, tones of voice, gestures, fervency, and even the grief they might manifest for such [a lost sinner] as himself” all provided grist for the talented young lampoonist.<sup>2</sup>

But the War of 1812 would bring Miller’s skeptical deistic years to an abrupt halt. The war (in which Miller served as an Army captain) brought him face to face with death and his own mortality. “But a short time, and, like Spencer,” he mused of a recently deceased army companion, “I shall be no more. It is a solemn thought.” He saw no hope in his deistic beliefs. The hard facts of life were pushing Captain Miller toward the faith he had

once so vigorously rejected.<sup>3</sup>

The war also heightened Miller’s doubts about the Deists’ rosy view of human nature. While his historical reading had led him to conclude that human nature was not as good as Deism claimed, he had “fondly cherished the idea that he would find one bright spot at least in the human character, as a star of hope: *a love of country—Patriotism.*” “But,” he penned, “two years in the service was enough to convince me that I was in error in this thing also.”<sup>4</sup>

A third factor in Miller’s disillusionment with Deism and his return to Christianity occurred at the Battle of Plattsburg in September 1814. According to Deism, God did not intervene in human affairs, but Miller and

Pictures  
Removed

several of his colleagues saw the American victory at Plattsburg as nothing less than divine providence. It seemed impossible that the American “apology for an army” could defeat the numerically superior British troops, some of whom had recently been victorious over Napoleon. “So surprizing [sic] a result against such odds,” Miller penned, “did seem to me like the work of a mightier power than man.”<sup>5</sup>

### **The Discovery That Transformed Miller’s Life**

Miller’s disillusionment with Deism drove him to study the Bible. By the autumn of 1816 he had converted to the faith of his childhood. As he later put it, “*the Scriptures . . . became my delight, and in Jesus I found a*

*friend.*”<sup>6</sup> Not being one to do things halfway, Miller soon immersed himself in a thorough and methodological study of the Bible. He commenced with Genesis and read each verse, “Proceeding no faster than the meaning of the several passages should be so unfolded, as to leave” him “free from embarrassment respecting any mysticism or contradiction.”<sup>7</sup>

“Whenever,” he explained, “I found any thing obscure, my practice was to compare it with all collateral passages; and by the help of Cruden[’s concordance], I examined all the texts of Scripture in which were found any of the prominent words contained in any obscure portion. Then by letting every word have its proper bearing on the subject of the text, if my view of it harmonized with every collat-

eral passage in the Bible, it ceased to be a difficulty.”<sup>8</sup>

Miller studied his Bible in that manner for two years. By 1818 he had come to the “solemn conclusion . . . that in about twenty-five years from that time all the affairs of our present state would be wound up.” In other words, Jesus would come about the year 1843.<sup>9</sup>

He arrived at that startling conclusion through a study of the time prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. Especially important was Daniel 8:14: “Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed.” Operating on the commonly accepted interpretation of Numbers 11:34 and Ezekiel 4:5, 6 that a

day in prophecy equals a year, Miller calculated that the 2300-day prophecy (along with several other prophecies) would conclude about 1843. Interpreting the sanctuary of Daniel 8:14 to be the earth and its cleansing as the last-day cleansing of the earth by fire, Miller reasoned that Christ would return to the earth at the end of the 2300 days—about 1843.<sup>10</sup>

But Miller, being a rather modest man, feared that his conclusions might be in error. So between 1818 and 1823 he re-examined his Bible and raised every objection he could think of to his findings.

His conclusions withstood the scrutiny. That left Miller with the uncomfortable conviction that he should do something to warn people of their impending doom. But what could he do? He was no preacher. He sought a minister to sound the alarm and lead out in warning the world. But, Miller noted, “very few” people listened to him “with any interest.”<sup>11</sup>

So, he continued to study his Bible for another eight years. But during those years the Holy Spirit worked ever more strongly on his heart. He came under the unshakable conviction that he needed to share his message. He was assailed by the forceful impression that he must “Go tell the world of their danger.”<sup>12</sup>

### Preaching the Advent

Miller did all he could to avoid witnessing, but by the early 1830s the pressure had become unbearable. He finally “entered into a solemn covenant with God” that if the way was opened, he would do his duty. Feeling he needed to be more specific, Miller promised God that if he received an invitation to speak publicly, he would go and teach about the Lord’s second coming.

“Instantly,” he penned, “all my burden was gone; and I rejoiced that I should not probably be thus called upon; for I had never had such an invitation.”

To Miller’s dismay, however, within a half-hour of this agreement with God, he received his first invitation to preach on the second advent. “I was immediately angry with myself for having made the cov-

enant,” Miller confessed. “I rebelled at once against the Lord, and determined not to go.” Stomping out of his house to wrestle with the Lord in prayer, he finally submitted after another hour.<sup>13</sup>

His first presentation on the second advent led to several conversions. Thereafter Miller had an unending stream of invitations to hold meetings in the churches of several denominations. By the end of the 1830s, Miller had won several ministers to his view that Christ would come about the year 1843.

Picture  
Removed

The most significant of these was Joshua V. Himes of the Christian Connexion.<sup>14</sup>

Himes converted to Miller’s views in late 1839 and early 1840.

Millerism would never be the same after the arrival of Himes, one of the public relations geniuses of his generation. Nathan Hatch, a leading historian of American religion, has described Himes’ publishing efforts on behalf of Miller’s message as “an unprecedented media blitz” and “an unprecedented communications crusade.”<sup>15</sup> Before Himes joined the movement, Millerism had been largely a one-man show. But under Himes’ guidance it became a nationwide crusade.

Himes developed a twofold strategy for spreading Miller’s message. Beginning with *The Signs of the Times*, Himes published mil-

lions of Millerite periodicals, books, and pamphlets between 1840 and 1844. Many other forms of literature were inspired by his efforts.

Himes’ second avenue for disseminating Miller’s message was the many conferences and camp meetings sponsored by the movement between 1840 and 1844. Not just a publisher with ambition and vision, Himes was also an organizer!

During those years, tens of thousands accepted the Advent message and many times their number harbored a haunting fear that Miller might be right.

As 1843 approached, tension developed between the Millerite Adventists and the denominations to which they belonged. As a result, many of them were expelled. That development set the stage in forming strictly Adventist congregations in 1843 and 1844. It also led Charles Fitch and others to conclude that any denomination that couldn’t rejoice in Jesus’ soon coming must be Babylon (a biblical symbol of confusion and false doctrine), as predicted in Revelation 14:8 and 18:1-5.<sup>16</sup>

As the predicted time approached, the tension increased. But the Millerites were not overly concerned. After all, Jesus was coming, and all their trials and troubles would soon be over.

But Jesus didn’t come. Not in the spring of 1844 as Miller had suggested (he held that the Jewish year equivalent to our 1843 ran from March 21, 1843 to March 21, 1844), or on October 22, 1844,

the exact date calculated by S. S. Snow on the basis of the Jewish annual feasts.<sup>17</sup>

The exactness of the calculations and excitement surrounding the October date set the stage for Millerism’s collapse. But out of that collapse would arise a new movement, one that would build on the insights set forth in Miller’s interpretation of the prophecies.

### The Rise of Sabbatarian Adventism

The aftermath of the October disappointment found the Millerites in utter confusion. What had happened to their interpretation of such texts as Daniel 8:14, which predicted the

Picture  
Removed

cleansing of the sanctuary at the end of the 2300 days?

The frustration and need for understanding eventually drove a small group back to a study of that important Bible text. Further study convinced them that something important had happened on October 22 at the end of the 2300-day prophecy. But what was it?

The answer to that question lay in a further study of the words *sanctuary* and *cleansing* in Daniel 8:14. By extending Miller's concordance approach to understanding the Bible, they soon concluded that the sanctuary that needed to be cleansed in the mid-1800s was not the earth, but the heavenly sanctuary. It was this sanctuary that had provided the pattern for the wilderness tabernacle (see Hebrews 9:23, 24; 8:2).

Over time the Millerite remnant concluded that Jesus had begun a new phase of ministry in heaven on October 22 that had to be completed before He returned again. This group eventually came to understand the cleansing in terms of the pre-advent judgment, or what they called the investigative judgment. After all, they reasoned, an important phase in the judgment of the saints would have to be completed before the Second Coming, since Jesus would reward every person at that time.<sup>18</sup>

This new understanding of the heavenly sanctuary and Christ's ministry in it, coupled with Miller's premillennial understanding of the Second Coming, became the theological foundation for the group of Millerites who developed into Seventh-day Adventists between 1844 and 1863.

Another crucial building block was their growing understanding of the importance of the seventh-day Sabbath in end-time events. They became aware of the Sabbath through the Seventh Day Baptists and several texts in the book of Revelation. Perhaps the most significant of those texts was Revelation 14:12, which emphasized the keeping of God's commandments just prior to Christ's coming.

It was significant that that verse concluded the message of the third angel of Revelation 14. Early Sabbatarian Adventists believed that the message of the first angel ("the hour [time] of his judgment is come") had begun to be preached by William Miller, and that the second angel's message (the fall of Babylon) had begun to be sounded by the Millerites who were thrown out of their churches in 1843 and 1844 because of their hope in Jesus' soon return.

By 1848 the Sabbatarians saw themselves as sounding the message of the third angel as they exhorted people to continue being pa-

tient in waiting for Jesus to return and to keep all of God's commandments—including the seventh-day Sabbath.

Thus they saw their movement as a direct extension and continuation of the work of William Miller. The flow of Revelation 14:6-12 ran from Miller's preaching of the hour (or time) of the judgment up through the preaching of God's seventh day in contrast to those who would eventually receive the mark of the beast. The Sabbatarians also recognized that the harvest of the earth at the Second Advent immediately followed the preaching of the third angel's message (see Revelation 14:14-20).<sup>19</sup>

In short, the Sabbatarians understood themselves to be the only genuine continuation of William Miller's message to the world. They never viewed themselves as just a denomination. From their very beginning, they perceived themselves as a people of prophecy; a people with a special message to preach to all the world before Jesus returned in the clouds of heaven. That self-understanding continues to carry Seventh-day Adventists to the far corners of the earth and has inspired great sacrifice and dedication.<sup>20</sup>

Such sacrifice and dedication does not come about by accident. Rather, it stems from a distinct consciousness and conviction of Adventism's role in prophetic history. When that conviction is lost, so will be the willingness to sacrifice. William Miller's conviction that he must "go tell the world of their danger" has been the driving force behind Adventist mission.

Thus, Miller should be thought of as not only the father of Seventh-day Adventism's view of prophecy and its doctrine of last things, but also of its missionary spirit. ☞

*Dr. George R. Knight is Professor of Church History, SDA Theological Seminary, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan. He has been involved in a major way with the study, production, editing, and writing of materials for the 1844-1994 sesquicentennial, including Millennium Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism; and 1844 and the Rise of Sabbatarian Adventism (Reproductions of original historical documents).*

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. For a comprehensive study of Miller's work and influence, see George R. Knight, *Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1993). Many of the most important documents in Millerite and early Sabbatarian Adventism (including most of those used in this article), have been reproduced in

George R. Knight, comp. and ed., *1844 and the Rise of Sabbatarian Adventism* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1994).

2. Sylvester Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1853), pp. 28, 29.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 55; cf. William Miller to Lucy Miller (Nov. 11, 1814).

4. Joshua V. Himes, *Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology, Selected From the Manuscripts of William Miller With a Memoir of His Life* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1842), p. 10.

5. William Miller, *William Miller's Apology and Defence* (Boston: J. V. Himes, 1845), p. 4. For an account of the Battle of Plattsburg from Miller's perspective, see Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, pp. 44-53.

6. Miller, *Apology and Defence*, p. 5 (italics supplied).

7. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 6; cf. *Advent Shield* (May 1844), p. 50; *Midnight Cry* (Nov. 17, 1842), pp. 1, 2.

9. *Apology and Defence*, pp. 11, 12.

10. William Miller, *Letter to Joshua V. Himes on the Cleansing of the Sanctuary* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1842).

11. Miller, *Apology and Defence*, p. 15.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.* pp. 17-19.

14. There is no published book on Himes. The best study is David Tallmadge Arthur, "Joshua V. Himes and the Cause of Adventism, 1839-1845" (M.A. thesis, University of Chicago, 1961).

15. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 142, 145.

16. See Charles Fitch, "Come Out of Her My People" (Rochester, N.Y.: J. V. Himes, 1843).

17. S. S. Snow, *The True Midnight Cry* (August 22, 1844).

18. For more on these developments, see Frank B. Holbrook, ed., *Doctrine of the Sanctuary: A Historical Survey (1845-1863)* (Silver Spring, Md.: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1989).

19. On early Sabbatarian Adventist understandings of the role of the Sabbath, see Joseph Bates, *The Seventh Day Sabbath: A Perpetual Sign*, 2d. ed. (New Bedford, Mass.: [Joseph Bates], 1847); Joseph Bates, *A Vindication of the Seventh-day Sabbath and the Commandments of God* (New Bedford, Mass.: [Joseph Bates], 1848); Joseph Bates, *A Seal of the Living God* (New Bedford, Mass.: [Joseph Bates], 1849). On the early Sabbatarian understanding of the three angels' messages and their place in the course of prophetic history, see James White, "The Third Angel's Message," *Present Truth* (April 1850), pp. 65-69.

20. For an extensive treatment of the relation of SDA mission to the message of the three angels, see P. Gerard Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977, reprinted by Andrews University Press). For a briefer history of the forces underlying the dynamic of Adventist mission as it relates to the three angels and Millerism, see George R. Knight, "From Shut Door to Worldwide Mission," in Baldur Ed. Pfeiffer, Lothar E. Trader, and George R. Knight, eds.: *Die Adventisten und Hamburg: Von der Ortsgemeinde zur internationalen Bewegung* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1992), pp. 46-69; Knight, *Millennial Fever*, pp. 295-342.