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### 2011 Ellen White and Current Issues Symposium: "The Captain Goes To Church"

Angelika Kaiser

Andrews University, [angelika@andrews.edu](mailto:angelika@andrews.edu)

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# Memory, Meaning & Faith

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March 31, 2011

## 2011 Ellen White and Current Issues Symposium: "The Captain Goes To Church"

### Presentation

James R. Nix, director of the Ellen G. White Estate at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, was the first presenter after the devotional. He took the audience back to a series of events that happened in 1899 and that were almost unknown for several decades.\*

On February 15, 1899, the 33rd General Conference Session of Seventh-day Adventists opened in South Lancaster, Massachusetts. According to a letter of M. C. Wilcox to Ellen White nothing important happened during the first two weeks, but this should change soon with the arrival of Elder Frank H. Westphal and his accompanying guest, Captain Henry Norman. Westphal, a 41-year old missionary to Argentina and official delegate from South America, had met Captain Norman on a ship going from Southampton, England to New York City.

Immediately after their arrival, Captain Norman recognized Mrs. S. M. I. Henry who was sitting on the side of the GC Session platform. Conversing with each other he told her that he had seen her several years earlier at a series of her lectures for the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in Washington, D.C.; she had been the national evangelist for the WCTU. After learning that she had been a Methodist before becoming an Adventist, Norman said that he had a Methodist background too, but was discontent already for years with his denomination. Mrs. Henry handed him a pamphlet of hers, "How the Sabbath Came to Me," and got to know from him that he considered the way of meeting Elder Westphal and coming to the GC Session as providential, because he felt like being in the presence of the people of God.

This special guest drew a lot of attention to himself two days later. Ellen White was in Australia at that time and had sent several communications with the appeal for funds to support the mission work in Down Under. These were read on March 1 and many at the session were moved to respond. Collecting the pledges of those willing to give, the stenographers were busy writing names and the respective figures, most of them between \$25 and \$100, except for one with \$5,000, pledged by Captain Norman! In today's worth: around \$125,000. An even bigger amount was pledged by him on March 3 to GC president George A. Irwin—\$400,000 (like appr. \$10 Mio today!) for the work of the General Conference and missions. After having added more detailed information on their initial meeting in England, James Nix pointed to the fact that Westphal and Norman had talked about their beliefs on their nine-day crossing of the Atlantic and that Westphal, like Norman, was convinced of God's leading in the whole encounter.

The closing of the GC Session was held in Battle Creek on March 9, 1899, and soon it became known among the Adventist community in Battle Creek that the new benefactor Captain Norman was in town. In the following days, Captain Norman had the aura of a "celebrity" in Battle Creek: he was presented by Dr. J. H. Kellogg to the sanitarium workers; arrangements were made that J. O. Corliss, a delegate at the GC Session, should become a missionary on one of Captain Norman's ships, the *Fox Hall*, which sailed between Melbourne, Australia, and Singapore; Norman offered his yacht for missionary work in the harbor of New York City.

Norman impressed the leaders of the church and other people around him with his meek and gentle nature. Speaking about his wealth he repeatedly stated that he does not know what to do with the money that is lying in the Bank of England and—after pledging big amounts to various SDA causes—that he does not wish to speak about and make public the monetary promises he has given. Repeatedly he stated that he was grateful for having met "this people", namely Seventh-day Adventists. This left everyone around him with the impression of dealing with a fine gentleman whom God's leading has

brought to meet Seventh-day Adventists in a time of financial need.

On March 11 Elder Westphal and Captain Norman left for Wisconsin, where they wanted to visit Westphal's parents. There Captain Norman developed an interest in a young lady and, as became known later, arrangements were started to have them both get married.

Although Captain Norman wished for silence on his financial pledges, word went around in Adventist as well as public newspapers across the States giving more or less detailed information on a huge gift of \$400,000 coming from a generous donor. And although he had just pledged the money, the impression was given that it was an actual cash gift.

As Norman and Westphal were in Wisconsin—the length of their sojourn is unknown—, preparations were made involving Norman's ship and family Corliss. Norman did not return after his departure from Battle Creek on March 11, and by the beginning of April rumors started to spread on whether Captain Norman was a fraud. These were even deepened when public newspapers started to report on April 6 about the engagement of Captain Norman to another young Adventist lady. Courting two ladies at the same time and, at least from what we know, making detailed promises regarding a speedy wedding and a year-long honeymoon to at least one of them, it soon became obvious for the church, that this man was a fraud and did not only trick the church but even two clueless ladies—actually to the point of asking one of them for money while pretending to be a millionaire. After he had left the second one—officially his fiancée—at the end of April 1899 with the excuses to have urgent business to do in New York City, he was never seen again.

**Fraud unmasked.** One can just imagine the disappointment and perplexity on every side when everyone finally realized what had happened. In the end, nobody was sure who and what this man really was, and to this date the only information we have is, according to Nix, that Henry Norman was registered as an Englishman (there even called "gentleman") on board of the ship from Southampton to NYC and that he was probably married.

**Circumstances back then.** In Nix' presentation the historical context was well carved out, especially two aspects: the financial situation of some church institutions (e.g. Battle Creek College, Review and Herald Publishing Association, new mission fields in e.g. Australia, Europe and South America, etc.) and that it is comprehensible that those who met Captain Norman, were putting their hope in the thought that God was the one who led Norman to help out financially; the challenges of communication at that time (several), where letters between the U.S. and Australia took around 4 weeks to arrive and where even within the United States it was hard to communicate information and upcoming suspicions.

**The Case "Captain Norman" and Ellen White. Summary.** As already mentioned, Ellen White was in Australia during all these events. She was informed about everything by letters and/or GC-Session bulletins and Adventist journals, but with weeks of delay. She herself wrote an appeal to Captain Norman for funds for the work in Australia in the beginning of May—a time, where the Adventists in the States were already informed about Norman being an impostor. And: Ellen White did not get any vision from God regarding the true character of Captain Norman. She herself was very surprised at the outcome, but believed it to be an episode from which lessons could and should be learned: "I see that by this Norman case the Lord tested and proved men, to see what they would do under temptation. If the money promised would have been given to the various objects specified, more harm than good would have been done to our people." (Letter from January 16, 1900 to the Brethren in the Review and Herald Office)

### **Some Lessons to be Learned.**

- 1) When doing research, care should be taken to present things in the kindest, most redemptive manner possible, without distorting things or covering them up. Yet, we need to be aware that even after several decades there can still be some family sensibilities be involved.
- 2) Huge financial gifts can impact negatively the giving of smaller donations.
- 3) Ellen White saw herein an object lesson for the GC church leaders. They were disappointed over Norman's financial gifts that did not materialize. Earlier however, they had promised financial support to workers in the Southern Field, but did not stick to their word.
- 4) God does not show everything to His messenger. Some questioned her prophetic calling for she did not know more about

Norman than what others had written/told her. But it is quite obvious that the lessons, that God wanted his people to learn from this incident, would not have been after revealing to her Norman's true intentions.

5) When problems arise, we should not just sit back and let others take care of it. We should also fast, pray, and see how we can help to solve the problem.

6) Embarrassments and disappointments in life show the true character of persons. Although most of the involved parties were highly embarrassed by what had happened, all of them reacted positively afterwards. No one left his/her faith in God, the church or the ministry.

7) According to Nix, the biggest lesson to be learned is to always keep close to God. Several individuals, including then-GC-president Irwin, said, that the Norman incident would not have happened had they kept close to God. Also, especially Irwin's behavior afterwards, his openness, honest admissions and candid talk about how he and others have been deceived, helped a lot to clarify things and work against rumors and gossip. Therefore the incident was almost forgotten over the years. Taking responsibility for own faults pays always off.


**Response.** Denis Kaiser, Ph.D. student in Adventist Studies at the SDA Theological Seminary, gave the response to Nix' presentation. After expressing his appreciation for the detailed and thorough research, Kaiser pointed to two further possible aspects and lessons that can be learned from the Norman-case: a) Are we more willing to give power and authority to people who have money? And b) we should be aware that it is easy to be deceived, and difficult to find a good balance between being too suspicious and too naïve.

\* Please note that this and other articles on the presentations held are condensed summaries in which some lines of argumentation have been abbreviated. All papers/presentations will be published in a revised form in the *Journal Ellen White and Current Issues Symposium*, vol. 7, 2011, at the next Symposium, i.e. March or April 2012. Orders can be made to the [Center for Adventist Research](#).

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