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People Who Love Jesus

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"Our object is to teach men faith in the Holy Scriptures, [and] to lead them to love our Lord Jesus Christ."

So wrote James White one hundred years ago in the first issue of his brand-new magazine, "Signs of the Times" for June 4, 1874.

It is one of the good things about Seventh-day Adventism that it tries to call attention to Jesus Christ and invites people to love Him.

This, of course, is only what it ought to do! The word "advent" means "coming," and the name "Adventism" refers to the belief that the same Jesus who lived on earth two thousand years ago will "come" back to earth again someday soon. An Adventist by definition is a person who loves Jesus and who looks eagerly for Him to return to earth to put an end to crimes, crises, and corruption and to make all things new. Revelation 21:1-4.

Before there were any "Seventh-day" Adventists in the world, there existed an interdenominational movement known as the great second advent awakening. During the 1820's, 1830's, and 1840's thousands of ministers and leading laymen in the Methodist, Baptist, Anglican, and other churches of Europe and America preached frequent sermons on the second com-

ing (or "advent") of Christ. They based these messages on a deep study of the Bible and in particular on Daniel 8:14, "Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed." Using rules of interpretation that had been employed before them by great Bible expositors, including even the famous scientist Sir Isaac Newton, they reasoned that the 2300 days represented 2300 years and that they ran from about 457 B.C. to about A.D. 1844. (The Bible says that a day in symbolic prophecy can stand for a year. Ezekiel 4:6.)

Unfortunately, of course, they made a serious mistake. They interpreted wrongly the phrase, "then shall the sanctuary be cleansed." They supposed that so long a time prophecy as this one must stretch to the end of the world. They therefore concluded that the "sanctuary" was the church of God on earth and that the cleansing of the sanctuary was to be the destruction of sin and sinners at the second coming of Christ, relieving the world of everything that defiles it and leaving it a beautiful new home for everyone who loves goodness and truth.

It is important to know, however, that the best of these adventists of the early 1800's were more interested in Jesus Christ Himself than

PEOPLE WHO LOVE JESUS

C. Mervyn Maxwell

The people who started SIGNS loved Jesus and wanted others to love Him too.

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HARRY ANDERSON, ARTIST, © REVIEW AND HERALD



Methodists and Baptists, Lutherans and Catholics packed the churches of Boston and New York to hear William Miller describe the lovely Jesus he had found in the Bible.



WILLIAM MILLER



JOSEPH BATES

they were in the date of His return.

For example: The leader of the American branch of this advent awakening was William Miller, an effective Baptist layman. He began his Bible study after serving as a captain in the War of 1812. An experience in the Battle of Plattsburg, when a shell exploded a few feet away from him without harming him, left him wondering if perhaps there might be in heaven a God who cared about him and about the rest of the world. He began his study at the beginning of the Bible, with Genesis 1:1, and in a very short time discovered to his happy surprise that the Bible "did indeed present such a Saviour as I needed."

Immediately after telling us this in his autobiographical account, William Miller added, "and in Jesus I found a friend."

Miller discovered Jesus two years before he discovered the 2300 days

and the cleansing of the sanctuary. When he did at last come to the conclusion that Christ would return to earth around 1843 or 1844, his excitement was not based on proving a mathematical calculation but on the prospect of seeing Jesus, his Friend, in so short a time.

As a matter of fact, Miller was so overjoyed that he refused to preach his new message in public! He was afraid that his calculations might be wrong and that he would "be the cause of misleading any." He supposed that his intense happiness at the thought of seeing Jesus would be shared by his congregations (as indeed it was), and that the people who heard him would accept his message so eagerly that they would not take time to study the Bible cautiously for themselves to see if he were really telling them the truth.

Because of this, William Miller preached no public sermons on the

second coming of Christ for a period of 13 years after he personally became convinced of it. But when reluctantly he did at last respond to the pressing invitations of pastors, he quickly found that ministers by the hundreds—a large number of whom had enjoyed a fine seminary education—endorsed his prophetic interpretation and gave him their active support.

It became common among these adventists to sign their letters, "Yours in the blessed hope." Jesus was coming soon, they believed. This was a blessed hope.

One of the active young ministers in the great second advent awakening, a member of a denomination known as the Christian Connection, was James White, the future editor of "Signs of the Times." He shared in the joyful anticipation of Christ's return—and

never lost it. This is why he wrote in 1874, "Our object is to teach men faith in the Holy Scriptures, [and] to lead them to love our Lord Jesus Christ."

Another active young member of the advent awakening and a former member of the Methodist Episcopal Church was James White's future wife, teen-ager Ellen Harmon. "This was the happiest year of my life," she wrote later about the year 1844. "My heart was full of glad expectation."—"Life Sketches," page 59.

Some people today who are not well acquainted with the advent awakening of the 1840's think that the Millerites were a group of fanatics who spent their time nervously making ascension robes and going insane! Far from it. The adventists were not interested in sewing clothes but in seeing Christ. They were not scared to death but happily looking forward to a new life. "The true believers rested in a sweet communion with God," Ellen remembered. "None who experienced this hope and trust can ever forget those precious hours of waiting."—"Ibid.," page 56.

One who certainly could not be called unbalanced was the beloved Joseph Bates. During the War of 1812 he was impressed into the British Navy and held for a year in England's dreadful Dartmoor prison. Later he made a fortune on his own ship and retired, in 1828, at the age of 36. The love of Jesus, he declared, washed from his heart all bitterness against his former enemies. He gave every penny he had to spread the good news, preaching fearlessly to angry mobs and walking, when necessary, through deep snow to meet his appointments.

As Millerite adventist scholars continued their Bible study, they drew the specific conclusion that Christ would appear to cleanse the sanctuary on or before October 22, 1844. When — as everyone knows, of course—Jesus did not appear at that time, the Millerites were plunged into such sorrow that the event has ever after been referred to in Adventist circles as "the great disappointment." (If, incidentally, the Millerites had been afraid to see Jesus come again, the event would

have gone down in history as "the great relief!")

Many of the Millerite adventists were in fact so keenly disappointed that in their confusion they gave up their faith completely. Some, in bewilderment, simply set another date for Christ's return, and then another, without strong Biblical evidence to support them.

A few of the Millerite adventists—those who later formed the nucleus of the Seventh-day Adventist Church—found relief for their anguish by reexamining the phrase, "then shall the sanctuary be cleansed."

Repeatedly they asked the questions, "Why didn't Jesus come?" "What is Jesus doing?" "When will Jesus come?" "How, what, when, and where will Jesus cleanse the sanctuary?"

Jesus. . . . Jesus. . . . Jesus.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church was born in a period of intensive Bible study that focused on questions about Jesus—not merely questions about the Jesus of the past, the Christ of creation and the cross, but questions also about the contemporary Christ. Again and again they asked their Bibles, What is Jesus doing now?

What they discovered I shall attempt to explain in future articles. For now it is enough to say that they learned that the sanctuary Jesus is cleansing is the one in heaven. Hebrews 9:22-24. In the process of cleansing it He is doing something very helpful in relation to the Sabbath and to people's sinfulness.

When the early Seventh-day Adventists gained their new insights about Jesus, their love for Him deepened still further; so did their desire to spread the word about Him to the world. In his first publication (called "Present Truth"), James White wrote, "Let the message fly, for time is short!"

Reflecting on Christ's matchless love, on the innumerable promises that He has made to meet our needs and on the wonderful things He did for us long ago and is doing for us in heaven now, Ellen Harmon (now Mrs. James White)

wrote article upon article and book upon book. "The Desire of Ages," for example, was intended in the 1890's to encompass her mature thoughts about Jesus, but in the process of writing it her words spilled over into two additional books, "Christ's Object Lessons" and "Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing." Her "Steps to Christ" has sold nearly 15,000,000 copies, and in the 1970's has to be printed literally by the million in order to keep pace with ever-increasing demand.

After Ellen White passed away at the age of 87, the country folk in Napa County, California, where she had spent the last 15 years of her life, remembered her affectionately as the "little old woman with white hair" who had come to see them in their homes and who "always spoke so lovingly of Jesus."

Ellen White's prayers were famous for bringing Christ so close to people that members of all denominations present in her congregations wept for their sins and for His forgiveness.

Not infrequently in her sermons she turned to one side in the pulpit and spoke to Jesus as if He were personally present. At the close of an especially impressive service she said, "Oh, I love Him. I love Him, for He is my love. I see in Him matchless charms, and oh, how I want that we shall enter in through the gates into the [holy] city. . . . I wish you would educate your hearts and lips to praise Him, to talk of His power and glory. . . . God help us to praise Him more and to be found faultless."

Like a lot of people, Seventh-day Adventists fail to live up to their ideals. They get involved in material things and forget their fondest hopes and dearest Friend. But in their hearts, and through their publications, they really do want to help everyone to know Jesus better. Their deep desire today, as it was when James White founded "Signs of the Times" a hundred years ago, is "to teach men faith in the Holy Scriptures, [and] to lead them to love our Lord Jesus Christ." □