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# WHAT IS THE 1888 MESSAGE?

C. MERVYN MAXWELL

**While we do not have transcripts of Jones's and Waggoner's talks at that fateful session, we have an impeccable source for the message of righteousness by faith they were to deliver.**

At the editor's friendly insistence, you and I have been assigned to talk about the "1888 Message," a topic that a lot of people are talking about this year. We're going to take for granted that we all use the term to refer to the special righteousness by faith message, whatever it was, that was presented at the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference session. We're also assuming that it refers to the form of that message that we ought to be preaching today. This is why the title asks what is rather than what was the 1888 message.

Trying to determine the precise historical content of the 1888 Message is a challenge. We have books and articles that E. J. Waggoner and A. T. Jones wrote just before and after the 1888 Minneapolis meeting, three brief items in the *General Conference Daily Bulletin* reporting on Waggoner's presentations, numerous comments by Ellen White, and some reminiscences written years after by persons who were there. But when all is said and done, the simple truth is that no one knows precisely what Waggoner and Jones

actually said in Minneapolis in 1888. Attempts to discover transcripts of their messages have not yet been successful, and claims that such transcripts have been located have not been validated.

The most recent attempt to discover such documentation was made by my colleague, Dr. George Knight, an indefatigable researcher, for his book *From 1888 to Apostasy*.

The custom of transcribing every address at General Conference session was not instituted until 1891. But we do have transcripts of many of the talks Ellen White delivered at Minneapolis. Inasmuch as Providence could have overruled to supply transcripts for Waggoner and Jones too, perhaps we really don't need to know precisely what they said.

## Ellen White's understanding

One reason we don't need to know precisely what they said is that we have a copious recording of Ellen White's perception of it.

It was Ellen White who told us that 1888 was important. It was she who said that at Minneapolis God gave "a most precious message" through His servants, "Elders Waggoner and Jones."<sup>1</sup> It was she who characterized the 1888 message as "matchless charms of Christ,"<sup>2</sup> as "the third angel's message"<sup>3</sup> and even as "the third angel's message in verity."<sup>4</sup> It was she who spoke of it as marking the beginning of the loud cry.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to Ellen White, many of the leading brethren who heard the sermons delivered by Waggoner and Jones in Minneapolis were irritated by them. They were alarmed by Waggoner's interpretation of the "schoolmaster law" in Galatians 3:24,25 as the moral law. During the pre-session they had been equally

alarmed by Jones's substitution of the Alemanni for the Huns in the generally accepted list of the 10 horns of Daniel 7:24. As for the righteousness by faith emphasis, they couldn't see how it differed from what they all had been preaching for years. When they heard their prophetess repeatedly endorse Waggoner and Jones, they wrote home that Sister White had "changed" and that the California fellows had duped her.

Waggoner is the speaker we are most concerned about when we speak of the 1888 Message in Minneapolis, for it was in connection with his interpretation of the schoolmaster law that he made the major presentations on righteousness by faith on the occasion. Jones made his principal contributions to the Adventist understanding of righteousness by faith after the 1888 General Conference session was completed. Incidentally, E. J. Waggoner was a physician as well as minister, so he was referred to at Minneapolis as Dr. Waggoner.

Like many of her brethren, Ellen White didn't like everything she heard Dr. Waggoner say. A year earlier she had written to him expressing God's displeasure over his having published his controversial views on the schoolmaster law in *Signs of the Times*. Early on at the Minneapolis meetings she said she didn't see that he was presenting any new light—though she added that she hadn't made up her mind on the matter, that she wasn't prepared to take a position yet.<sup>6</sup> Even at the close of the meetings she said, "Some interpretation of scripture given by Dr. Waggoner I do not regret as correct."<sup>7</sup> As for the debate between Waggoner and the brethren about schoolmaster law, she saw both sides as partly wrong.<sup>8</sup> In fact, she considered the whole schoolmaster issue as "mere mote."<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, it is highly important in our quest to realize that in between the things she didn't like, Ellen White heard something else that she liked very well. As the days went by, her heart beat ever faster to hear this glorious other something. "I see the beauty of truth in the presentation of the righteousness of Christ in relation to the law as the Doctor has placed it before us."<sup>10</sup> This part of his message, she added "harmonize perfectly with the light which God has been pleased to give me during all the years of my experience."<sup>11</sup> She appealed to the ministers on the final Thursday of the session to accept this message—which, she said, they needed to accept—of "the righteousness of Christ in connection with the law."<sup>12</sup> Shortly after the Minneapolis meetings, she said it was not new light, but rather was "old light placed where it should be in the third angel's message."<sup>13</sup> As she heard it joyfully and gratefully, she said, "Every fibre of my heart said amen"<sup>14</sup>

Some other people present also discerned this 1888 Message in spite of the controversy over the schoolmaster law. Some ministers were so deeply moved to repentance and to new faith in Jesus that they actually asked to be rebaptized.

So what was this underlying something that Ellen White perceived to be so grand, the presentation that we sometimes call the 1888 Message? We'd like to preach it too.

In *From 1888 to Apostasy*, George Knight has done some fine thinking and made some helpful comments. He distinguishes between a doctrine and an experience and suggests that Ellen White desired above all was that we *experience* righteousness by faith rather than define it minutely.

Taking off from there, can we remind ourselves that many doctrines need to be experienced? Sabbath keeping and the tithe paying obviously have dimensions that have to be experienced as well as defined. Even the doctrine of the Second Coming ought to affect all our daily decisions, or believing it isn't worth much.

The fact that a doctrine should be experienced implies of course that we must arrive at an adequate definition of it, or the experience is not likely to be adequate. For example, people who think the Sabbath is Sunday or that it's a holiday rather than a holy day aren't likely to experience the day in the way

God intends.

If Adventists today are to have a genuine experience in the 1888 Message kind of righteousness by faith, we need to know the genuine doctrine. We've seen that at its core it was righteousness of Christ in connection with the law. And that it was righteousness of Christ in the setting of the third angel's message.

Both a legalistic belief that we must earn salvation, and a superficial belief that our sins are forgiven without true repentance and without our offering forgiveness to our neighbors, will result in inadequate experience. When Jesus made His "gospel presentation," He promised immediate acceptance to all who came to Him (John 6). And He promised forgiveness full and free; He didn't promise it, as some people believe, in return for a momentary happy belief in God's kindness. In connection with the Lord's prayer, He said, "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you." Praise His name! Then He added, "but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:14, 15, RSV). No legalism here, or flippant grace.

So we must *experience* the 1888 Message; and in order to do so, we need to know its *content*. But not necessarily in its precise Waggoner-and-Jones details, God not having seen fit to preserve that for us.

So what shall we do? I think we should do what Knight suggests in his book. (As a matter of fact, we talked it over while he was writing.)

Inasmuch as the 1888 Message is something that Ellen White perceived through a process of filtering out what wasn't good and recognizing what harmonized with God's revelation to her; and inasmuch as we really have to depend on her perception to know what it really was, I think we should saturate ourselves in the Bible (of course) and also in the writings of Ellen White—especially in the gloriously Christ-centered, practical books and articles that she wrote immediately before and during the 1890s.

For our purposes just now we'll omit unpublished testimonies and concentrate instead on the books most of us have in our libraries, *Steps to Christ*, *The Desire of Ages*, *Christ's Object Lessons*, and *Testimonies to ministers*, and on another book I think we should all

find very helpful, *Through Crisis to Victory*, by A. V. Olson, recently republished as *Thirteen Crisis Years*. The extant talks Ellen White presented in Minneapolis are included in the appendix of this book and are among our best evidence for what she saw as the 1888 Message.

Having thus saturated ourselves in the Bible and in appropriate Ellen White publications, I think we should compose sermons that meet the *criteria* of the 1888 message. In the space available here I can only make suggestions as to how we meet these criteria. You will make additional discoveries as you study. But for what it's worth, let me suggest that any sermon that represents the 1888 Message would do well to meet these basic criteria—

1. *It should focus attention firmly and permanently on Jesus Christ.*

When discussing the 1888 Message in the classic passage in *Testimonies to Ministers*, pages 89 through 98, Ellen White said, "This message was to bring more prominently before the world the uplifted Saviour, the sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.... Many had lost sight of Jesus. They needed to have their eyes directed to His divine person, His merits, and His changeless love for the human family."<sup>15</sup>

On the next page she added that "unless he makes it his life business to behold the uplifted Saviour, and by faith to accept the merits which it is his privilege to claim, the sinner can no more be saved than Peter could walk upon the water unless he kept his eyes fixed steadily upon Jesus."<sup>16</sup>

At the Minneapolis meeting itself Ellen White preached a beautiful message based on "Behold what manner of love the father hath bestowed upon us" (1 John 3:1), with her emphasis on the verb "*Behold*."<sup>17</sup> When summarizing the 1888 Message in response to an inquirer at a camp meeting in 1889, she said that it was the same message "I have been presenting...to you for the last 45 years (since 1844) *the matchless charms of Christ*."<sup>18</sup>

From time to time Pauline, my wife, says to me, "Let's talk about the matchless charms of Christ." It does us good. You might like to make a list of His charms and preach a sermon on every one of them. Meanwhile we're reminded in *Steps to Christ*, that "Christ in His self denial, Christ in His humiliation, Christ in His purity and holi-

ness, Christ in His matchless love—this is the subject for the soul's contemplation. It is by loving Him, copying Him, depending wholly upon Him, that you are to be transformed into His likeness."<sup>19</sup>

2. *It should lead to Christ-centered confidence in forgiveness and to Christ-centered consistency in obedience to all commandments of God, including the fourth.*

The classic passage in *Testimonies to Ministers* from which we previously quoted says also, "The Lord in His great mercy sent a most precious message to His people through Elders Waggoner and Jones.... It presented justification through faith in the surety; it invited the people to receive the righteousness of Christ, which is made manifest in obedience to all the commandments of God."<sup>20</sup>

The passage further states that "all power is given into His (Christ's) hands, that He may dispense rich gifts unto men, imparting the priceless gift of His own righteousness to the helpless human agent. This is the message that God commanded to be given to the world. It is the *third angel's message*, which is to be proclaimed with a loud voice, and attended with the outpouring of His Spirit in a large measure."<sup>21</sup>

A couple of pages later we find, "This is the testimonies that must go throughout the length and breadth of the world. It presents the law and gospel, binding up the two in a perfect whole."<sup>22</sup>

In the 1880s many Adventist sermons stressed obedience at the expense of assurance. Today, one failure of many sermons on righteousness by faith is that they say too little about obedience. They invite sinners to come to a God who not only accepts them just as they are (thank God for that!), but who after accepting them, has little interest in changing them. This sort of invitation Ellen White could never have called the *third angel's message*. That message closes with the ringing affirmation, "Here are they that *keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus*" (Rev. 14:12):

In Minneapolis, Ellen White saw the character of Christ revealed in the law; conversely, she saw the law of God confirmed the cross. Righteousness by faith sermons today should draw sinners to accept Christ's power to obey as well as His amazing grace to accept and forgive.

### 3. *It should be distinctly Adventist.*

We musn't forget that in the early days of our movement *third angel's message* implied obedience to the holy Sabbath, and was characteristically related to the sanctuary doctrine of the first angel's message and the call to leave Babylon inherent in the second angel's message. In fact, in the 1888 era, *third angel's message* was shorthand for the characteristic system of Seventh-day Adventist beliefs.

For a jewel to be part of a crown it must be set firmly into the crown. One aspect Ellen White greatly appreciated in Waggoner's righteousness of Christ emphasis was that it was "*placed where it should be* in the *third angel's message*."<sup>23</sup> We noticed this a few minutes ago, but it seems important enough to be repeated.

Luther's justification by faith was set in his doctrine of the "bondage of the will" and his hostility to the Sabbath. Calvin's justification by faith was set in his doctrine of the sovereignty of God along with predestination and irresistible grace. By contrast, the 1888 Message puts Christ's righteousness in the setting of the third angel, which in turn links it to the other two angels of Revelation 14:6-12. This means that Ellen White perceived it as set firmly in the "judgment-hour message of 1844, and the sanctuary doctrine, and in the Sabbath.

At Minneapolis she frequently made use of sanctuary theology, as, for example, on Sabbath, October 20: "now Christ is in the heavenly sanctuary. And what is He doing? Making atonement for us, cleansing the sanctuary from the sins of the people. Then we must enter by faith into the sanctuary with Him, we must commence the work in the sanctuary of our souls.... Come and humble your hearts in confession, and by faith grasp the arm of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary."<sup>24</sup>

4. *It should teach us to love one another as well as to love Jesus, and thus also*

5. *It should call us fearlessly and effectively to repent of our respectable sins.*

In many ways the 1890s, the decade after 1888, was a remarkably good one for Adventists. Our first mission stations for non-Christians were established, for example, and our annual growth rate was the second-highest it has been in any decade.

One would like to assume that such success attested the blessing of God on

a people who had accepted and appropriated the wonderful 1888 Message.

Tragically, however, the decade was marked by the need for the constant stream of communications that ultimately appeared in *Testimonies to Ministers*. These messages reveal to us a different picture. You will remember *Testimonies to Ministers* as the book that says that "enfeebled and defective" as the church may be, it is still "the objective" on earth which He bestows His supreme regard."<sup>25</sup>

Repeatedly in this book, in passages that we can easily associate with the 1888 Message, Ellen White presents the sublime beauty of Jesus Christ. In stark contrast appears evidence upon evidence that leadership, laity, institutions, conferences, mission fields, and the church as a whole were desperately in need of reformation in harmony with the sublime beauty of Christ. Over and over we get the picture that "not a few, but *many* had been losing their spiritual zeal and turning away from the light."<sup>26</sup>

There had been an "astonishing back-sliding" among God's people. The church was "frigid," its first love frozen up.<sup>27</sup>

Like the worshipers in Ezekiel 9, leaders in Battle Creek (not all of them) had turned their backs to the Lord; like them, many members also had rejected Christ's leadership and chosen Baal's instead. Conference presidents were "following in the track of Romanism."<sup>28</sup>

All told, the situation was so serious that Ellen White proclaimed that the Lord "has a controversy" with His people and will soon "turn and overturn in the institutions called by His name."<sup>29</sup>

What exactly was going wrong? Here is one answer: "If you harbor pride, self-esteem, a love for the supremacy, vain-glory, unholy ambition, murmuring, discontent, bitterness, evil speaking, lying, deception, slandering, you have not Christ abiding in your heart, and the evidence shows that you have the mind and the character of Satan.... You may have good intensions, good impulses, can speak the truth understanding, but you are not fit for the kingdom of heaven."<sup>30</sup>

Preaching well and doing a lot of good, while gossiping, complaining, doubting God. Misrepresenting

people and making fun of them behind their backs. Jockeying for first place. That sort of thing. Church members were acting like ordinary Christians when they should have been reflecting to the world the beauty of Jesus, radiating the holy glory of God's character, and preparing themselves, by His grace, to be clean vessels for the latter-rain outpouring of His spirit.

When presenting the righteousness of Christ in the 1888 era, Ellen White earnestly appealed for repentance from sins like these. Evidently our righteousness by faith sermons today must call for repentance from ordinary, nasty respectable sins. We must present God as eagerly willing to forgive us and as expecting us to fully admit our nastiness and to forgive others people for theirs.

6. *It should guide us into a relationship with Jesus that results in our making distinct choices.*

The other day a student stopped after class to remind of what *The Desire of Ages* says about Judas, of all people. It says that Judas wanted to be good and that he originally sought a relationship with Jesus in order to be changed in character.

Judas "recognized the teaching of Christ as superior to all that he had ever heard. He loved the Great Teacher, and desired to be with Him. He felt a desire to be changed in character and life, and he hoped to experience his through connecting himself with Jesus." Jesus was very kind to Judas, entrusting him with a commission as an evangelist and giving him power to perform miracles. But neither his relationship with Jesus nor Christ's kindness to him did any good in the long run...

Why? "Judas did not come to the point of surrendering himself fully to Christ. He did not give up his worldly ambition or his love of money. While he accepted the position of a minister of Christ, he did not bring himself under the divine molding. He felt that he could retain his own judgment and opinions, and he cultivated a disposition to criticize and accuse."<sup>31</sup>

Whenever I read this page, remembering that it was written in the 1890s, I get the impression that dealing with her own Christian brethren had helped Ellen White understand what the Lord had revealed to her about poor Judas.

We remember the caution in *Steps to Christ*: "Desires for goodness and holiness are right as far as they go; but if

you stop here they will avail nothing. Many like Judas? like Adventist leaders in the 1890s? like us today? I will be lost while hoping and desiring to be Christians. They do not come to the point of yielding the will to God. They do not now choose to be Christians."<sup>32</sup>

7. *It should be joyful.*

"I wish you would educate your hearts and lips to praise Him," said Ellen White at Minneapolis.<sup>33</sup> "Rejoice evermore," said Paul in Thessalonians 5:16.

What joy to be accepted by Jesus—not with a limp handshake, but with arms open wide. What joy to be forgiven—by the mighty Judge Himself. What joy to surrender our lives to the wisdom of our compassionate Redeemer. What joy to forgive others and have every root of bitterness removed. What joy to grow into the full stature of men and women in Christ Jesus. What joy to keep the Sabbath in purity and holiness in fellowship with our Lord and the household of faith. What joy to know Jesus whom to know aright is life eternal. "Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy" (1Peter 1:8, RSV)—or as the KJV conc-

ludes the verse: "...with joy unspeakable and full of glory."

It's been a great blessing to me to try to think these things through with you. May God help us as we all attempt to preach the 1888 Message this year.

1 *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 91. Footnotes in this article refer to the writings of Ellen G. White.

2 Manuscript 5, 1889.

3 *Testimonies to Ministers*, p.93.

4 *Review and Herald*, April 1, 1890.

5 *Review and Herald*, Nov. 22, 1892.

6 Manuscript 15, 1888.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

9 Manuscript 24, 1888.

10 Manuscript 15, 1888.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*

13 Manuscript 24, 1888.

14 Manuscript 5, 1889.

15 *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 91,92.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Manuscript 7, 1888.

18 Manuscript 5, 1889, (Italics supplied.)

19 Pages 70, 71.

20 *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp.91,92. (Italics supplied.)

21 *Ibid.*, p.92. (Italics supplied.)

22 *Ibid.*, p.94.

23 Manuscripts 24, 1888. (Italics supplied.)

24 Manuscripts 8, 1888.

25 *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 15.

26 *Ibid.*, p.449.  
27 *Ibid.*, pp. 450,167,168.  
28 *Ibid.*, pp.89,467,468,362.  
29 *Ibid.*, p.373.  
30 *Ibid.*, p.441.  
31 *The Desire of Ages*, p.717.  
32 *Steps to Christ*, pp.47,48.  
33 Manuscript 7, 1888.

## TILL HE COMES



Quiet she was, and quietly she has gone. Sarojini Jacob was born on May 2, 1943, third in family of three brothers and one sister in the village of Velakapuri Guntur, Andhra Pradesh. And peacefully passed to her rest on May 29, 1988.

She became a Seventh-day Adventist in 1956, and on her birthday the next year married M. Jacob. Together the couple moved to Salisbury Park, and set up their home. Sarojini Jacob fashioned her home as a place for friendship, good cooking, and a little temple for the Lord. She served the Salisbury Park church as a deaconess for many years.

She worked in the Oriental Watchman Publishing House from 1972 until September last year when she underwent a cardiac surgery. She had a good recovery and showed sign of regaining her full strength and returning to work. But on Friday, May 27, she took ill and passed away on May 29.

Sarojini Jacob now rests in her Lord. Her hope of the resurrection is what sustains and challenges her husband, her children (Vara and Helen, Reena and Ravi), mother, two brothers, and one sister and a host of relatives and friends.

Mrs. Queensilies Wallang, mother of seven girls, Sandra, Birol, Birdie, Annie, Amy, Juanita and Patricia, passed quietly, after a short illness, to her rest on September 9, 1988. Born on December 8, 1910 in Shillong, a city where girls are counted more precious than boys, the first daughter after six sons, she brought a feast to celebrate her birth and she was named Queen.

When the Third Angel's Message came to her in the late 1930's she accepted it with open arms. Her sister Jwinsilies attended a Bible study conducted by the Burgesses and