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The William Miller Legacy

by C. Mervyn Maxwell

IN 1831, after 13 years of delay, William Miller at last promised God that he would begin to preach on condition that he receive an invitation to do so.

When an invitation was extended to him almost immediately, he was alarmed. He wrestled with God for an hour in a nearby maple grove.

As a former deist he had kept his word; as a Christian he could do no less. Besides, he knew that in the Bible Christ promised to go with them that preach.

His decision made, Miller fairly danced and shouted. For him it was a real joy to feel wholly at peace with the Lord.

Heaven blessed him from the start. His first preaching series produced the apparent conversion of all but two members of 13 families, possibly 70 people, considering the size of families in those days.

Miller bequeathed to Seventh-day Adventists a legacy of effective evangelism.

It was not long before Miller was receiving twice as many invitations as he could cope with. Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Methodist, and Baptist ministers heard that his preaching built up congregations, and they vied with each other for his services.

Timothy Cole was one such minister. Having never met Miller personally, he didn't know whom to look for at the train. Mutual friends informed him that Miller wore a white hat and a camlet cloak (an artificial camel's-hair fabric).

Cole imagined that an effective preacher like Miller would appear in a fine white hat and an expensive camlet cloak. But when Miller stepped onto the railway platform, trembling a little from the palsy, he

was wearing a well-worn white hat and a weather-beaten coat.

Cole was dismayed. With scarcely a word of greeting, he led Miller to his home for supper, and to the church later for an unenthusiastic introduction.

Embarrassed to be associated longer with his farmer guest, Cole stepped down from the platform, took a seat among the congregation, and buried his head in his hands.



William Miller bequeathed to Seventh-day Adventists a legacy of effective evangelism and solid Bible preaching.

Miller was somewhat put off. He did not demand flowery introductions. But neither did he want to preach where he was not welcomed. He announced a hymn, read a Bible text and announced a second hymn.

At last he began his sermon, taking as his text Titus 2:13, "Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ."

Miller reminded his congregation that many big city pastors and leading theologians of the day taught a silent, spiritual second coming that would convert the world and introduce 1,000 years of peace.

Then he posed a succession of questions. How, why, and when does the Bible say Christ will return?

The sacred rustle of turning pages echoed through the church as the people looked up Miller's references. They found that the Bible answered each of Miller's questions clearly.

And what about the pastor? Pleasantly surprised, Cole gradually raised his head. Perceiving that Miller handled the Word "like a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15), he rose out of his seat and walked back onto the platform.

The next evening Miller's congregation in Cole's church was larger. Soon the building was jammed. A good number of people professed conversion. Miller was invited back for another series. Each time the number of conversions increased.

A major reason for Miller's success was that he preached systematically from Scripture. Even in the years before he began to preach, he firmly advised a young ministerial friend to prove all things by the Bible.

"You must talk Bible, you must exhort Bible, you must pray Bible, and love Bible and do all in your power to make others love Bible too."

As Miller preached from the Bible, he encouraged a mood of earnestness. He was concerned if individuals in the congregation so much as called out, "Bless the Lord!" His was an ultimate message, and he wanted people to weigh his evidence and think.

How different Miller's method was from the ways of other popular revivalists of the first half of the nineteenth century. Charles Grandison Finney was one of the best of those revivalists, but even he spoke of the glories of heaven and the flames of hell in a manner to exaggerate emotions.

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In a classic instance, Finney focused his attention on a young woman who, for several meetings, had resisted his appeals. On this occasion he portrayed Satan as a hunter aiming a fatal arrow at someone's soul.

Animating his illustration, Finney aimed his imaginary arrow directly at the reluctant young woman. When, at the climactic moment, Finney let the arrow fly, the young woman leaped from her pew and fell into the aisle.

Finney was a deservedly famous revivalist, but as a Bible evangelist, Miller was distinctly his superior. He left Seventh-day Adventists a legacy of solid Bible preaching.

For a little more than eight years (August 1831 to November 1839) Miller preached primarily in the numerous towns and villages that dotted the countryside of New England. In December of 1839, at the invitation of Joshua V. Himes, he delivered his first series in a major city—Boston.

Himes was just the man Miller needed. A born promoter, he launched a series of periodicals (Signs of the Times, The Midnight Cry, and several others), helped inaugurate camp meetings (about 150 were conducted), and secured appointments for Miller in America's larger cities of the day such as Philadelphia, New York, Portland (Maine), Cincinnati, and Rochester.

It was Himes who arranged with Lorenzo Dow Fleming, minister of his own Christian Connection denomination, to have Miller preach in Portland—providing the occasion when Ellen Harmon first heard his message.

Himes can also be credited with the Second Advent Library, a collection of about 50 books that appeared in quick succession in less than five years. Miller's movement left Seventh-day Adventists a vital legacy of city preaching and copious printing.

Miller's movement also fostered openness to new light—and a serious demand that purportedly new light stand up under intense Bible study.

The nonimmortality of the soul was widely adopted by Millerites after six articles by a fellow

Millerite, George Storrs, appeared in their periodicals and had been scrutinized. Some Millerites also accepted the seventh-day Sabbath.

In addition, Millerism bequeathed to Seventh-day Adventists their principal founders:

Joseph Bates, Hiram Edson, and James and Ellen White.

But William Miller's primary contribution to Seventh-day Adventists—and, indeed, to the whole world—was his understanding of Bible prophecy. On most of his characteristic points he was right.

He was right in believing that the close of the 2,300 days marked the beginning of the judgment. He was right in preaching the first angel's message, "The hour of his judgment is come" (Revelation 14:6, 7).

Miller was right, too, in preaching the literal, visible, bodily return of Jesus at the beginning of the millennium. In his day, many religious leaders had adopted postmillennialism, the belief that Christ would not come literally until *after* the millennium.

At the beginning of the millennium, they said, Jesus would come silently and spiritually, converting virtually the entire world and bringing in a thousand years of peace.

A number of postmillennial theologians believed, with Miller, that the 2,300 days were about to end. In the rapid expansion of Sunday schools, Bible societies, and foreign missions, they thought they perceived evidence that as the 2,300 days were coming to an end the conversion of the world was on the verge of taking place.

Miller, too, made mistakes, of course. Principally, he erred in attaching premillennialism to the 2,300 days. Like the postmillennialists, he believed that the millennium would begin as the 2,300 days closed. But, unlike them, he

taught that the literal return of Christ would occur at the beginning of the thousand years, not at the end.

Despite his mistakes, in his characteristic areas of study William Miller was the most nearly correct Bible student God could lay His hands on at the time.

He certainly deserves our respect. There is good common sense in these words from a local editor who, in spite of not accepting Miller's message, penned the following lines about him in his newspaper:

"All who have ever heard him lecture, or have read his works, must acknowledge that he is a sound reasoner, and, as such, is entitled to fair arguments from those who differ with him. . . .

"Mr. Miller is now, and has been for many years, a resident of this county, and as a citizen, a man, and a Christian, stands high in the estimation of all who know him. . . .

"Who that has witnessed his earnestness in the pulpit, and listened to the uncultivated eloquence of nature, which falls in such rich profusion from his lips, dare say that he is an impostor? We answer without fear of contradiction from any candid mind, None! . . .

"Mr. Miller certainly goes to the fountain of knowledge, revelation, and history, for proof. . . ." (Editorial, the Sandy Hill Herald, n.d., cited in James White's *Sketches of the Christian Life of William Miller*, pp. 183-185)

After the Great Disappointment William Miller lived only five years. He was buried in a quiet little cemetery in Low Hampton. But "angels watch the precious dust of this servant of God, and he will come forth at the sound of the last trump" (*Early Writings*, p. 258).

*I remain as ever
looking for the
Lord Jesus Christ
unto eternal life.
Wm Miller.*