

What Happened at Minneapolis in 1888?

Historical background:

James and Ellen White worked very closely together until August 1881 when James died. He protected her largely from the attacks of other male church leaders. In August 1885, Ellen and her son William left for Europe to strengthen the publishing work there at the request of the General Conference. She did not return to the USA until August of 1887.

In December of 1886 there was a General Conference session in which Jones and Waggoner began to explain their views on Galatians and the 10 horns in Daniel 7. This really disturbed the establishment as we shall see.

Moral vs. Ceremonial law:

G. I Butler book: *The Law in the Book of Galatians: Is It the Moral Law or Does It Refer to That System of Laws Peculiarly Jewish?* Elder G. I. Butler, President of the General Conference, November, 1887. In his book he essentially said: The law that was added is the ceremonial law and I don't know how anybody could ever suggest that it is the moral law.

E. J. Waggoner book: *The Gospel in the Book of Galatians: A Review*. First written in February, 1887 in response to things said at the 1886 General Conference meetings, was not sent out until 1888 after Butler's book was sent out and was rewritten as a response to that book. In his response he summarized: It's the moral law; I don't know how anybody could suggest that this is the ceremonial law!

By the 1880s the Seventh-day Adventist Church had been doing for 40 years an excellent job at preaching such distinctive doctrines as the Sabbath, the Second Advent, the state of the dead, and the sanctuary message. But in the process of uplifting that which was distinctively Adventist, it had largely neglected the great truths of Christ and salvation that it shared with other denominations. For many Adventists, the law had come to be more central than Christ, and a strong emphasis on salvation by lawkeeping (legalism) was evident.

In that context, two relatively young preachers, Ellet J. Waggoner and Alonzo T. Jones (both editors of *Signs of the Times* in Oakland, California), had begun in about 1884 to preach a message that was more Christ- and faith-oriented. Their new emphasis was challenged by George I. Butler (General Conference president) and Uriah Smith (General Conference secretary and Review and Herald editor), who feared that the importance of the Sabbath might be lost in the wake of the new emphases.

The context of the times especially made the situation explosive. State Sunday laws were being enforced, and a bill for a national Sunday law was placed before the United States Senate in May 1888. In short, it was a time of prophetic excitement. It was in that explosive context that Waggoner began to set forth a new understanding of the law in Galatians that Butler feared would play into the hands of those who would do away with the Ten Commandments, and Jones began to reinterpret the 10 horns of Daniel 7, a move that Smith believed would bring all of the denomination's apocalyptic interpretation into question. Here was a situation that the denominational leaders took seriously. Beginning in June 1886 Butler opened a letter-writing campaign aimed at getting Ellen White to side openly with him on the Galatians issue, a request that she refused to respond to. Butler's second move took place in December at the 1886 General Conference session, where he organized a theological committee to settle the issue of the 10 horns and the law in Galatians. **Butler's**

final strategy was to silence the younger men. Along that line, the 1886 session passed a resolution aimed at Jones and Waggoner that stipulated that no new teachings could be set forth in Adventist papers or taught in denominational schools until they had been examined and approved by the leading ministers (*RH*, Dec. 14, 1886). Another goal, as might be expected, was to keep the two men and their concerns off the agenda of the 1888 session.

Ellen White was of a different mind. She saw that Jones and Waggoner were being unfairly treated in an unequal struggle and that they had a message that the church needed to hear. As a result, throughout 1887 and 1888 she urged the denomination's leadership and ministry to keep their minds open to Bible truths. The climax to her campaign came in an August 8, 1888, circular letter. She was adamant that the ministers needed to search the Bible for themselves to discover truth rather than merely receiving their theological views from others-lips (i.e., Smith and Butler). The letter also cautioned the ministers to have a Christlike spirit as they dealt with one another (*Lt 20*, 1888, in 1888 Materials 40). The 1888 General Conference session was held in Minneapolis, Minnesota, from October 17 to November 4. A ministerial institute lasting from October 10 through October 19 preceded the formal session. Tensions ran high because of the division among the ministry and because both Waggoner and Jones had a major place on the speaking agenda. But the emotional pressure had been too much for Butler, who had suffered a breakdown and did not attend the meetings.

Both the meetings themselves and the events leading up to them had been marred by rumors of conspiracy as the leaders of the church gave credence to unfounded reports that the California contingent (especially Jones, Waggoner, and W. C. and Ellen White) hoped to change the denomination's theology. The acceptance of the rumors had generated what Ellen White called the spirit of the Pharisees or the spirit of Minneapolis among the Smith/Butler faction. As a result, the unchristlike spirit that Ellen White had feared marred the meetings. The sharpness was directed not only at Jones and Waggoner but also at Ellen White, who had strongly supported both their Christ-centered message and their right to be heard. Never in my life experience, she would write, was I treated as at that conference (*Lt 7*, 1888, in *1888 Materials* 187 [written December 9, 1888]). The conference had been a crisis point in Ellen White's ministry.

The crisis had to do with the heart of Adventist theology and the methods by which theological issues were to be decided. The General Conference leadership had sought to solve the theological issues troubling the denomination by such means as expert opinion, authoritative position, creedlike legislation, and Adventist tradition. But Ellen White and the reforming element had argued for Bible answers at every point.

Having failed in their bid to use human authority in the struggle, Butler and his colleagues sought to solve the issue of biblical interpretation by relying on Ellen White's authority. But she refused that approach and repeatedly directed the denomination back to the Bible as the only valid authority by which to solve issues of biblical interpretation. She refused to let her writings settle the law in Galatians issue (see G. R. Knight, *Angry Saints*, pp. 104-109). Ellen White utilized the events surrounding the Minneapolis General Conference session to repeatedly uphold the place of the Bible. The Bible, she wrote, is the only rule of faith and doctrine (*RH*, July 17, 1888). Ellen White not only stood against the General Conference leadership regarding the authority issue, she also came out against their legalism. During the 1888 session and extending into the 1890s she argued for a central place in Adventist theology for Christ and saving faith in Him. On October 24 she cried out to the delegates, I have seen that precious souls who would have embraced the truth [of Adventism] have been

turned away because Jesus was not in it. And this is what I have been pleading with you for all the time -- we want Jesus (*1888 Materials* 153). Again, in discussing the place of the law in Adventism, she told an audience of Adventist leaders in 1890: Let the law take care of itself. We have been at work on the law until we get as dry as the hills of Gilboa. Let us trust in the merits of Jesus (*1888 Materials* 557), Knight, G. R. (2013). *General Conference Session of 1888*. In D. Fortin, J. Moon, M. W. Campbell, & G. R. Knight (Eds.), *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (2nd Edition, p. 836). Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association.

Legal language. Since the days of the protestant reformation, theology had been burdened by a lot of long theological terms such as justification, sanctification, propitiation, expiation, salvation etc. that ordinary people did not understand. This gave the church leaders the right as they believed to tell people what to believe.

Waggoner and Jones: These young men worked in Oakland, California as co-editors of the *Signs of the Times* and also wrote articles for *The Youth's Instructor*. They also taught at Healdsburg College, the forerunner of Pacific Union College. The leadership in Battle Creek were very worried that the views held by these two young men would influence young pastors training for the work as ministers in the field. Not long after the 1888 General Conference, the leaders in Battle Creek voted to ask Ellen White to go to Australia to help get the work started there. She replied that she had had no indication from God that she was to go. But later, she agreed to go anyway. Ellen White's comments written from Australia in 1896 and 1900:

I am asked concerning the law in Galatians. What law is the schoolmaster to bring us to Christ? I answer: Both the ceremonial and the moral code of ten commandments. Ellen G. White, Manuscript 87, 1900; *1SM* 233.1 (Asterisks used by EGW)

The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith (Galatians 3:24). In this scripture, the Holy Spirit through the apostle is speaking especially of the moral law. The law reveals sin to us, and causes us to feel our need of Christ and to flee unto Him for pardon and peace by exercising repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. {*1SM* 234.5}

An unwillingness to yield up preconceived opinions, and to accept this truth, lay at the foundation of a large share of the opposition manifested at Minneapolis against the Lord's message through Brethren [E.J.] Waggoner and [A.T.] Jones. By exciting that opposition Satan succeeded in shutting away from our people, in a great measure, the special power of the Holy Spirit that God longed to impart to them. The enemy prevented them from obtaining that efficiency which might have been theirs in carrying the truth to the world, as the apostles proclaimed it after the day of Pentecost. The light that is to lighten the whole earth with its glory was resisted, and by the action of our own brethren has been in a great degree kept away from the world.

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The law of ten commandments is not to be looked upon as much from the prohibitory side, as from the mercy side. Its prohibitions are the sure guarantee of happiness in obedience. As received in Christ, it works in us the purity of character that will bring joy to us through eternal ages. To the obedient it is a wall of protection. We behold in it the goodness of God, who by

revealing to men the immutable principles of righteousness, seeks to shield them from the evils that result from transgression. {1SM 235.1}

We are not to regard God as waiting to punish the sinner for his sin. The sinner brings the punishment upon himself. His own actions start a train of circumstances that bring the sure result. Every act of transgression reacts upon the sinner, works in him a change of character, and makes it more easy for him to transgress again. By choosing to sin, men separate themselves from God, cut themselves off from the channel of blessing, and the sure result is ruin and death. {1SM 235.2}

The law is an expression of God's idea. When we receive it in Christ, it becomes our idea. It lifts us above the power of natural desires and tendencies, above temptations that lead to sin. Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them (Psalm 119:165) or cause them to stumble. {1SM 235.3}

There is no peace in unrighteousness; the wicked are at war with God. But he who receives the righteousness of the law in Christ is in harmony with heaven. Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other (Psalm 85:10). Ellen G. White, *Letter 96*, 1896; *Selected Messages, Book 1*, 235.4.

Why was 1888 so important?

1888 was a turning point in the messages that came from Ellen White. After taking up the issue of righteousness by faith in cooperation with Waggoner and Jones, she moved on to talk about the great controversy and who is at war and what it says to us about God and His character and how He runs His government. In her books coming out in the 1890's and early 1900's the great controversy theme is prominent.

The question ultimately was not which law was added but what kind of a God would make so much use of law and why? She stated unequivocally that Jesus Himself had come for one reason and one reason only and that was to correctly represent the Father. Although it was printed in the *Signs of the Times* such a statement should have been repeated hundreds of times in our papers everywhere. It has not been copied even once! See if you can guess why.

Signs of the Times, January 20, 1890:

The law of Jehovah was burdened with needless exactions and traditions, and **God was represented as severe, exacting, revengeful, and arbitrary.** He was pictured as one who could take pleasure in the sufferings of his creatures. The very attributes that belonged to the character of Satan, the evil one represented as belonging to the character of God. Jesus came to teach men of the Father, to correctly represent him before the fallen children of earth. Angels could not fully portray the character of God, but Christ, who was a living impersonation of God, could not fail to accomplish the work. **The only way in which he could set and keep men right was to make himself visible and familiar to their eyes. . . .**

Christ exalted the character of God, attributing to him the praise, and giving to him the credit, of the whole purpose of his own mission on earth, to set men right through the revelation of God. In Christ was arrayed before men the paternal grace and the matchless perfections of the Father. In his prayer just before his crucifixion, he declared, I have

manifested thy name. I have glorified thee on the earth; I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do. [John 17:6,4] When the object of his mission was attained, the revelation of God to the world, the Son of God announced that his work was accomplished, and that the character of the Father was made manifest to men. Ellen G. White, *The Signs of the Times*, January 20, 1890, par. 6,9; compare #60 below; **contrast ST** December 4, 1893; *Manuscript Releases*, vol 18, 358.3-359.1; *RH* August 14, 1900; *YI* November 21, 1883; *RH*, November 1, 1892 par. 12. [Bold type and text in brackets are added.]

Weiland and Short: A Warning and Its Reception, 1959.

These two young men, one from America and the other from South Africa worked together in the publishing and evangelistic work in East Africa. They decided that they needed to get further training and applied to our seminary that was located at that time in Washington, D.C. near the General Conference headquarters. While working on their Masters degrees they decided to take up the question of what happened at the General Conference at Minneapolis in 1888. When they had finished their thesis, they presented it to the committee and while it was accepted as satisfactory for the completion of their degrees, it was forwarded to the Defense Literature Committee of the General Conference for evaluation.

Before Weiland and Short left America to return to their work in East Africa, they shared copies of their work with friends. Shortly thereafter, the Defense Literature Committee officially asked them not to share the document with anyone. They complied, but their friends in America who already had copies began to spread them here and there.

Unfortunately, the 1950s and beyond would see several teachings related to the 1888 General Conference session arise that were based upon the assumption that Ellen White approved of almost everything taught by Waggoner and Jones. The new views generally took Waggoner's and Jones' ideas as the source of their theology, even when those views were on shaky ground in the light of the teachings of the Bible and Ellen White. To see what Ellen White upheld in Jones and Waggoner, it is safer to go to her books on salvation and Christ written after 1888 and her summary statement of Jones' and Waggoner's contribution in *Testimonies to Ministers* (pp. 91-94) rather than to adopt an uncritical acceptance of the two men, both of whom developed serious theological aberrations in the 1890s. Knight, G. R. (2013). General Conference Session of 1888. In D. Fortin, J. Moon, M. W. Campbell, & G. R. Knight (Eds.), *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (2nd Edition, p. 838). Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association.

The Ellen G. White Estate:

Before the work of Weiland and Short, the Ellen G. White Estate, although a legally functioning entity, was hardly known outside the confines of the official establishments in Washington D.C. It was only available to certain scholars with special permission. When it became known that there was all of this material locked up at the General Conference which had all of these incredible messages inside, it became necessary to openly acknowledge that the White Estate Trust existed. This was done in a very short one column notice in the *Review and Herald* in 1952.

Now White Estate study centers are located in every division of the world field. Most of her writings are available from the White Estates as a CD ROM that can be downloaded to one's computer. Many of her works are also available online at www.EllenWhiteestate.org.

So what difference does all of this make to us now? If you are a believer and are seeking to do God's will what makes you willing to obey? Could you say, I do what I do because God has told me to, and He has the power to reward and destroy? Is this why you don't murder or commit adultery, because God has said you mustn't? You would otherwise, but you can't afford to incur His displeasure. This might be all right for a beginner or a little child, but it suggests that God's laws are arbitrary and do not make good sense in themselves. That does not speak very favorably of God.

Would you rather say, I do what I do as a believer because God has told me to, and I love Him and want to please Him? Is this why you don't steal or tell lies? You would see nothing wrong or harmful about doing these things. It is just that you want so much to please God. For some reason, He does not like it when you steal or lie, and since He has been so good to us, you feel under some obligation to please Him. It would only be grateful and fair. Again, this might be all right for a beginner or child. It might even be progress beyond the obedience prompted only by fear of punishment and desire of reward. But it still implies an arbitrariness in God's commandments and does not speak so well of His character and government.

There is another possible approach to obedience. Could you say this? I do what I do because I have found it to be right and sensible to do so, and I have increasing admiration and reverence for the One who so advised and commanded me in the days of my ignorance and immaturity. Then hastening to add, being still somewhat ignorant and immature, I am willing to trust and obey the One whose counsel has always proved to be so sensible, when He commands me to do something beyond my present understanding. A. Graham Maxwell, *I Want to be Free*, 34-35.