

1888: WHEN HEAVEN CAUGHT US UNPREPARED

By Paul Penno Jr.
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1888! What mysterious attraction draws our eyes to this century-old date? Why can't we shake it off and forget it? Why does it rival 1844 in our consciousness?

Why are we interested in a tiny General Conference Session where there were only 90 delegates? Why does 1888 lure Seventh-day Adventists decade after decade to ponder anew its significance? No other General Conference session in our history has elicited such a celebration.

For a hundred years that gathering in the unpretentious Minneapolis church in the fall of 1888 has been the continuing spotlight focus of denominational attention. At the 1893 General Conference session 1888 loomed over all other issues as the supreme topic of discussion. Even today as one reads the brittle yellowed pages of the old *Bulletin*, one senses the tension of "Minneapolis" excitement pervading the conference.

1888 also formed the backdrop of the great 1901 Session, again magnetizing the interest of speakers and delegates. Until her death in 1915, Ellen White kept pleading for the recovery of the spiritual experience that she often said eluded us in 1888.

Throughout the 1920's 1888 surfaced repeatedly in our church consciousness. It dominated *Review and Herald* articles, weeks of prayer, and sermons at ministers' meetings. Testimonials and

reminiscences of then-aging veterans of the 1888 session were collected. No other meeting in our church's history merits such searching for precious eyewitness accounts.

The interest persisted through the 1930's and 1940's. Then rather suddenly came a crescendo of concern. The unprecedented 1952 Bible Conference held in the Sligo Church claimed the 1888 message as the supreme topic of "practically every speaker from the first day onward, . . . spontaneous."¹

Since 1950 our denominational publishing houses have produced book after book about 1888 totalling more than 1500 pages, written to satisfy the deep curiosity of Seventh-day Adventists world-wide about this strange conference.

Why does this story of 1888 surpass even 1844 in interest?

A Built-in Mystery

There was an awareness of an eschatological crisis looming beyond the shadows of that portentous event. We are attracted to it because we sense, perhaps subliminally, that somehow the key to solving our denominational lukewarmness can be found there. Even the seemingly never-ending controversies that swirl around the 1888 history are fascinating.

Seventh-day Adventist historians have described the 1888 Conference as "epochal . . . [standing] out like a mountain peak," "the most crucial of all our General Conferences," "a notable landmark in

¹ William H. Branson, in *Our Firm Foundation*, Vol. Two, p. 616.

Seventh-day Adventist history . . . like crossing a continental divide into a new country,” “a providence designed to initiate the beginning of a new era,” “a new depiction of Christ, delineated by dedicated new draftsmen.” “Minneapolis” and “1888” “go together in Adventist history like husband and wife.”²

The answer to our questions is that the Lord Himself has invested 1888 with a compulsive, mysterious interest. Even if time were to last for a thousand years (which it won't), His Spirit would keep that memory alive for an important reason: 1888 is the story of a divine confrontation with this people. The delegates at this leadership session unexpectedly came face to face with Christ, and they were not prepared for the encounter. It was a fulfillment of the ancient prophecy, “The Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple.”³

Of course, it was not a literal second coming; it was a test appearance. He revealed Himself in a special message and in specially appointed messengers. He loves His people too much to appear in a literal second coming before they are prepared to welcome Him. There must be for them a special preparation in order to endure His holy presence. In mercy He would first reveal Himself in a message of holiness. Their reaction to that

² Cf. L. E. Froom, *Movement of Destiny* p. 187; A. W. Spalding, *Captains of the Host*, pp. 583, 602; L. H. Christian, *The Fruitage of Spiritual Gifts*, pp. 244, 245; Arthur G. Daniells, *Christ Our Righteousness*, p. 56; Mervyn Maxwell, *Tell It to the World*, p. 232.

³ Malachi 3:1.

message would determine what would be their reaction to Him personally if He were to return literally.

In numerous clear-cut statements Ellen G. White has drawn back the curtain that often hides heavenly realities and has disclosed that a rare fulfillment of this Bible prophecy occurred at that unpretentious 1888 gathering. For the most part, the delegates were as unaware of what was happening as the people of Bethlehem were unaware of what was happening in the stable the night that Christ was born.

According to Ellen White's prophetic insight, Heaven came near in 1888 to impart a blessing unprecedented since the grand event of Pentecost. *The story of 1888 is the story of the “beginning” of the latter rain.*

The initial *early* rain outpouring of the Holy Spirit launched the world evangel of Christianity. The 1888 Conference marked the “beginning” of the *final* outpouring of the same Holy Spirit.⁴ Thus Pentecost and 1888 are linked by a common divine purpose. The Lord intended the Minneapolis conference to be the launching pad for the last phase of that world evangel pictured in Revelation

⁴ “The time of test is just upon us, for the loud cry of the third angel has already begun in the revelation of the righteousness of Christ, the sin-pardoning Redeemer. This is the beginning of the light of the angel whose glory shall fill the whole earth.” “The Perils and Privileges of the Last Days,” *Review and Herald* (November 22, 1892).

18—lighting the earth with the glory of the fourth angel’s message.⁵

How this could be staggers our comprehension. Such a stupendous event taking place in a humble gathering of less than 100 delegate-ministers? Surely something as far-reaching as a complement to Pentecost deserves a more auspicious debut! Why didn’t the Lord wait until we have one of our glittering panoramas on spot-lighted stages in some vast arena seating 100,000 people? One of our splendid modern General Conference sessions that convene in the world’s greatest cities would give the loud cry message a great send-off.

Why It Happened in Humble Circumstances in 1888

One reason is that Heaven couldn’t wait. The Lord Jesus was eager to return to claim His bride. His love was real. He had promised concerning those who saw the first signs of the last-day times that “this generation shall not pass, till all those things

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.” Letter 82a, 1892; *Selected Messages*, Book One, pp. 234, 235.

be fulfilled” (Matthew 24:34). The time had come for the glorious finishing of the work of God, and He was eager for it.

Even events in the world demonstrated how a ferment of the human spirit demanded that Heaven’s final message of grace be sounded quickly. To this day, the American Congress has never come so close to passing a national Sunday law, as during the 1888 era of Senator Blair and his proposed religious legislation.⁶ The end was near in 1888. The two young messengers who brought the message to the Minneapolis Conference, A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner, were also instrumental in opposing the intolerant religious legislation of 1888 that almost passed the American Congress and Senate. Clergymen were thirsting to control the government of this republic and violate the principles of our First Amendment by demanding that congressmen and senators pass a national Sunday law.

Congress has never been more ready to do so than it was then. Jones and Waggoner, by voice and pen and in personal appearances before the Senate committees, were effective in defeating the intolerant legislation. Americans are indebted to those obscure humble 1888 messengers for a continuing century of religious liberty, for a national Sunday law in violation of the American Constitution would have opened the floodgates that would have brought persecution and consequent failure of the American dream of liberty and prosperity.

⁶ Cf. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, p. 1273.

God has entrusted to Seventh-day Adventists His last message of more abounding grace for the world. This message must supply a final cure for the terrible problem of deep-rooted sin. It must produce a beautiful change in believing humanity, and thus give evidence that the sacrifice of Christ was not in vain. We have Model T ideas about what “the final atonement” means. And what we ourselves do not clearly comprehend we cannot communicate to the world.

The “most precious message” the Lord sent us a century ago was not a thunder-and-lightning denunciation of sin abounding; it was a heart-warming message of *much more* abounding grace.

How the Message is Easily Misunderstood Today

Many who think they understand the message are mired in a do-it-yourself works program that is essentially legalism while it professes to be righteousness by faith. They are obsessed with the idea that “we-must-do this,” “we-must-do-that,” “we-must-be-more-faithful,” “we-must-get-the-victory,” “we-must-study-more,” “we-must-pray-more,” “we must-witness-more,” *ad infinitum!* As it was a century ago, many are joining the Jews who asked, “Whit shall we *do* that we might work the works of God?” They don’t listen to that divine answer, “This is the work of God, that ye *believe*. . . .” There is a latent fear of salvation by faith lest our program of works suffer. Fear of being lost is the bottom line

because faith is not understood as a heart-appreciation of the *agape*-love that casts out fear.⁷

A distorted righteousness by faith can produce only lukewarmness, historic Adventism or fanaticism and the widespread lukewarmness of the church testifies to that prevailing distortion.

The reason Ellen White was overjoyed with the 1888 message is because it revealed a *faith which works*, and for the first time in many centuries it was a message that transcended fear and truly cast out. And it would have finished the gospel commission because it replaced legalistic imperatives with gospel enablings.

The Lord meant that the last message should go triumphantly to the world through a revelation of His grace in the “third angel’s message in verity,” righteousness by faith. This was to lighten the earth with glory. . . . and iron curtains to isolate billions from hearing it, and before the tragic disintegration of the social fabric that has so corrupted the western world in the last century. Through drug abuse, debauchery, and disease, millions now seem beyond the capacity even to hear or understand the last-days “everlasting gospel.”

Another reason for the suddenness of the 1888 encounter is that God’s way of doing things always catches us by surprise. He has an out-sized sense

⁷ “Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. We love him, because he first loved us.” 1 John 4:17-19.

of humor. Think of His Messiah being born at Bethlehem in a stinking stable with the cows, the chickens, and the goats, instead of in Caesar's or at least the high priest's palace. No one wanted to offer Him a room. Seldom if ever has any other fresh intervention from heaven been recognized and acclaimed when first disclosed. For thousands of years God's messengers have repeatedly been forced to prophesy clothed in sackcloth, their earnest messages despised or ignored by those who should have welcomed them.

Our 1888 history is the same general story with a significant innovation. What makes it profoundly different is that this time it was Seventh-day Adventist ministers and leaders who joined the householders and innkeeper at Bethlehem in saying to Jesus, "No room here!"

According to the little lady who discerned motivations that others could not readily perceive, the astounding truth is that our brethren did worse than that. In scorning His special messengers whom He sent in 1888, Ellen White says they rivaled the Jewish rulers in the way they shamefully treated Christ.⁸ Unbelievable as it may appear, she adds that they actually insulted the Holy Spirit.⁹

⁸ Cf. Mss. 9, 15, 1888, *Through Crisis to Victory*, pp. 292, 297, 300; Ms. 13, 1889; *Review and Herald*, March 4, 11; August 26, 1890; April 11, 18, 1893; *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 64, 75-80.

⁹ Cf. Ms. 9, 1888, Olson *op. cit.*, pp. 290, 291; "I stated that the course that had been pursued at Minneapolis was cruelty to the Spirit of God; and those who went all through that meeting and left with the same spirit with which they came to the meeting, and were carrying on the same line of

Heaven Was Astonished

Whereas the twelve apostles eagerly accepted and welcomed the initial *early rain* outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, most of our own dear brethren were by no means happy to welcome the beginning of the final *latter rain* outpouring of the same Spirit. This surprised the angels and disappointed the Lord Jesus. In chapters to follow, we shall let Ellen White have her say, with documentation.

Thus the 1888 conference stands out in heroic proportions because of two complementary but contrasting phenomena:

(a) The message of grace presented there was unique because of its pristine New Testament purity. It was a recovery of truth unprecedented since apostolic times, a message that carried the sixteenth-century Reformation to greater heights than Luther or even the Wesleys could anticipate.

work they did at that meeting and since they had come from it, would—unless they were changed in spirit and confessed their mistakes—go into greater deceptions" (Ms. 30, 1889); "Be careful what steps you take in expressing your differences with your brethren. You cannot tell how it pains me to see some of our brethren taking a course that I know is not pleasing to God. They are full of jealousy and evil surmising, and are ever ready to show in just what way they differ with Elder Jones or Waggoner. The same spirit that was manifested in the past manifests itself at every opportunity; but this is not from the impulse of the Spirit of God" (Letter S [Uriah Smith] 24, 1892); "But the Holy Spirit has been insulted, and light has been rejected" (*Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 393).

(b) The reaction of our brethren to the message was likewise unique in the nature of its opposition. Never before had Seventh-day Adventist ministers and leaders formed a phalanx of resistance to truth. "We have had the hardest and most incomprehensible tug of war we have ever had among our people. . . . My testimony has made the least impression upon many minds than at any period before in my history" said Ellen White at the time.¹⁰ "I was never more alarmed than at the present time."¹¹

As long as sin and Satan exist there is bound to be conflict between darkness and light, falsehood and truth. Since its inception in the early nineteenth century, the Advent movement has realized the fulfillment of the prophecy in Revelation, "The dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ."¹²

Our pioneers had to meet that opposition from sources both outside and inside the church. But the dragon's opposition took a new turn at the Minneapolis conference: ministers and leaders for the first time took a stand on the wrong side.

Therefore the 1888 story is arresting and sobering. Like ancient Bethlehem that was "little among the thousands of Judah," the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a little family among the many millions of Christian church members in hundreds of

¹⁰ Letter 82, 1888; *Selected Messages*, Book Three, p. 178.

¹¹ Ms. 9, 1888.

¹² Revelation 12:17.

denominations in the world. There is only one way to understand why the Lord should honor a humble gathering of Seventh-day Adventist leaders with the beginning of the long-awaited latter rain, the final Pentecost. It is not because they were any more worthy than others. It is the story of ancient Israel. The Lord was true to them, not because they were more deserving than other nations, but because of His honor in His divine election of Abraham's descendants. Heaven is involved in a similar election today.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church was raised up as a fulfillment of prophecy and thus has been given a special divine mandate. There is indeed honor in involved in that destiny (which we are always eager to exploit). But because of that singular honor the Lord has the right both to confront this church with a solemn call to discharge her responsibility and to offer her the means of grace to enable her to succeed in her vast world task. That is the fundamental significance of what He did in 1888.

This divine confrontation has been an on-going crisis now for a hundred years. The 1888 story is closely interwoven with Christ's last message to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans. With deep reverence we can wonder if by now Christ must be tempted to impatience. Surely the angels are waiting impatiently. And the Lord's love for a perishing world must be stronger than His indulgence of our spiritual lethargy.

Can we be sure that Heaven is content to let "business as usual" continue much longer?