

ELLEN G. WHITE ESTATE

1888—ISSUES, OUTCOMES, LESSONS

ROBERT W. OLSON

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Robert W. Olson

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About the Author

Ellen G. White (1827-1915) is considered the most widely translated American author, her works having been published in more than 160 languages. She wrote more than 100,000 pages on a wide variety of spiritual and practical topics. Guided by the Holy Spirit, she exalted Jesus and pointed to the Scriptures as the basis of one's faith.

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Did the 1888 session yield good for the church or bad?

How can we benefit from Ellen White's reaction and counsel?

by Robert W. Olson, Ph. D

Secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate in Washington, D. C.

The General Conference session held at Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1888 proved to be a major turning point in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The change in our course was made slowly during the three years following the conference. During that time the unflagging efforts of Ellen White, A. T. Jones, and E. J. Waggoner helped move the church away from the debating spirit and legalism of former years to an emphasis on justification by faith in the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

But this change in direction was not a natural outgrowth of the Minnesota conference. In many ways the Minneapolis meeting was a disaster. The church hit bottom spiritually at that session. Ellen White called it “the saddest experience of my life”¹ and “the most grievous trial of my life.”² It is the only General Conference session in Adventist history that was marked by open rebellion against Ellen White on the part of a large number of our ministers. She even wondered at one point whether God might have to call out yet another movement. Concerning many of the delegates, she declared: “As reformers they had come out of the denominational churches, but they now act a part similar to that which the churches acted. We hoped that there would not be the necessity for another coming out.”³

¹Endnotes E. G. White [Manuscript 21, 1888](#). All quotations from E. G. White manuscripts and letters in this article are drawn from the four-volume Ellen G. White 1888 Materials (Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1987) unless otherwise noted.

²E. G. White [Manuscript 30, 1889](#).

³Ibid.

Nevertheless, in spite of her deep anguish over the unbelieving spirit manifested by so many, Ellen White confidently anticipated that the Lord would somehow overrule and that much good would come from the meeting. On the last day of the conference, she wrote to her daughter-in-law: “I have spoken nearly 20 times with great freedom, and we believe that this meeting will result in great good. We know not the future, but we feel that Jesus stands at the helm and we shall not be shipwrecked.”⁴

There were others who saw a positive as well as a negative side to the session. Three weeks after its close W. C. White wrote the newly elected president of the General Conference, who was still in Europe: “The delegates at the close of the meeting carried away very different impressions. Many felt that it was one of the most profitable meetings that they ever attended; others, that it was the most unfortunate conference ever held.”⁵

Clearly, that session prompted differing reactions. Some felt that the session was bad—very bad. Others, that it was good—very good. What made that meeting so bad? And what made it so good?

The Negative Side

For several years before the session began, personal differences and animosities had been developing between two groups of church leaders. The Battle Creek brethren were led by George I. Butler, president of the General Conference, and Uriah Smith, editor of the *Review and Herald*. Associated with these men in their sympathies were several local conference presidents, in particular Elders R. M. Kilgore of Illinois, J. H. Morrison of Iowa, R. A. Underwood of Ohio, and I. D. Van Horn of Michigan, as well as a number of lesser lights.

The other group was led by E. J. Waggoner and A. T. Jones, who served as coeditors of the *Signs of the Times* and also as Bible

⁴E. G. White, [Selected Messages 3:177, 178](#) (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1980).

⁵W. C. White to O. A. Olsen, Nov. 27, 1888. Quotations from non-E. G. White letters in this article are drawn from the two-volume *Manuscripts and Memories From Minneapolis* (Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1988).

teachers at Healdsburg College. Among their friends were W. C. White, S. N. Haskell, and C. H. Jones.

Initially, the differences between these two groups centered on their interpretation of two passages of Scripture. The eastern brethren believed that the Huns were one of the 10 kingdoms of [Daniel 7](#), and that the “added” law of [Galatians 3:19-25](#) was the Jewish ceremonial system. The western brethren, on the other hand, favored the Alemanni instead of the Huns, and held that the added law was the moral law.

The fact that Waggoner and Jones were comparatively young men—in their 30s—while Butler and Smith were in their 50s tended to exacerbate the situation. Butler found it difficult to believe that two editorial fledglings could possibly understand the Bible better than he did. ⁶

Seeds of Conflict

The estrangement between the two sides began when Waggoner published his views on [Galatians 3](#) in [The Signs of the Times, September 11, 1884](#). His explanation that the added law was the moral code flatly contradicted the interpretation accepted by Butler and Smith and probably by most contemporary Adventists as well. It so happened that E. J. Waggoner’s father, J. H. Waggoner, had taken a similar position 30 years earlier. The elder Waggoner had maintained in 1854 that “not a single declaration” in Galatians “referred to the ceremonial or Levitical law.” The epistle, he wrote, “treats solely of the moral law.” ⁷

Ellen White apparently settled the earlier controversy by stating that Waggoner’s interpretation was wrong. ⁸ For the next three decades the question of the law in Galatians did not receive much attention; at least the issue did not provoke further controversy. Smith, Butler, and others felt sure that [Galatians 3:19](#) referred to the ceremonial system. They also believed that Ellen White supported this view, since she had rejected J. H. Waggoner’s position. ⁹

⁶G. I. Butler to E. G. White, Oct. 1, [The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials](#), 23.

⁷J. H. Waggoner, *The Law of God* (Rochester, N.Y. Review and Herald, 1855) p. 74.

⁸Uriah Smith to Ellen G. White, Feb. 17, 1890.

⁹Ellen White did not clarify her position on the law in Galatians until several years later. She did not see it as an either-or question, but believed the added law included

Now the younger Waggoner, in a sense, had thrown down the gauntlet and deliberately revived the controversy. He outlined his position in a series of nine articles published in the *Signs* from July 8 to September 2, 1886. Butler was incensed. He considered the articles an affront to his leadership. He decided to settle the question once and for all at the 1886 General Conference session. Hurriedly he produced an 85-page pamphlet and distributed it to the delegates gathered at Battle Creek for the General Conference session in November of that year. In this tract Butler stated: “The writer acknowledges considerable surprise that during the last year or two the subject [of the law in Galatians] has been made quite prominent in the instructions given to those at Healdsburg College preparing to labor in the cause; also in the lessons passing through the Instructor, designed for our Sabbath schools all over the land, and in numerous argumentative articles in the *Signs of the Times*, our pioneer missionary paper, thus throwing these views largely before the reading public not acquainted with our faith. Thus, strong and repeated efforts have been made to sustain the view that the moral law is the subject of the apostle’s discourse in the most prominent texts under discussion in the letter to the Galatians....

“We decidedly protest against the bringing out of controverted views in the manner indicated, concerning matters upon which our people are not agreed.”¹⁰

At the 1886 General Conference session a theological committee of nine members was appointed to study the point at issue, which they did immediately. Something of the tension developing between the two groups of church leaders can be felt in Butler’s letter to Ellen White, written shortly after the close of the meeting. “Brother E. J. Waggoner came on ... loaded for the conflict,” he wrote. “The theological committee was ordered.... It stood, four—Haskell, Whitney, Wilcox, and Waggoner, in favor of the *Signs* position—five, Smith, Canright, Covert, J. H. Morrison, and self, opposed. We had an argument of several hours, but neither side was convinced. The question was whether we should take this into the conference

both the ceremonial and moral law. See *The SDA Bible Commentary*, Ellen G. White Comments, vol. 6, pp. 1109, 1110.

¹⁰George I. Butler, *The Law in the Book of Galatians* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1886), p. 4.

and have a big public fight over it or not. I could not advise it, for I thought it would be most unhappy and result only in heat and debate.”¹¹

[3] Public confrontation at that meeting was not avoided altogether; one resolution aimed at Waggoner was passed, while another was defeated. The conference voted to ask Adventist editors “not to permit doctrinal views not held by a fair majority of our people ... to be published in our denominational papers, as if they were the established doctrines of this people, before they are examined and approved by the leading brethren of experience.”¹²

However, Butler’s resolution that called for a censure of the *Signs* for publishing the nine articles on Galatians earlier that year was voted down. Butler lamented: “I think, in justice, it ought to have been passed. But this was very distasteful to Brother Haskell and some others, that even a word should be said implying that the *Signs* had made a mistake.”¹³

Ellen White’s Role

In an endeavor to bring about unity and a measure of peace, Ellen White, who was in Europe, wrote the disputants on both sides and pointed out their faults. She took Waggoner and Jones to task for advancing their ideas before the students at Healdsburg College and for publishing them before the world.¹⁴ Then, six weeks later, after reading the first few pages of Butler’s pamphlet on Galatians, Ellen White admonished him, “I think you are too sharp.”¹⁵

As a courtesy to Ellen White, the 1887 General Conference session was held in Oakland, California, only about 60 miles from her home in Healdsburg. Public discussion of the Galatians question was avoided, but, according to Elder Butler, there were some serious private discussions of the subject. He later informed Ellen White: “At the Oakland General Conference last year he [Waggoner] took some of our ministers in private conference over this subject and

¹¹G. I. Butler to Ellen G. White, Dec. 16, 1886.

¹²Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, Dec. 14, 1886, p. 779.

¹³G. I. Butler to Ellen G. White, Dec. 16, 1886.

¹⁴E. G. White [Letter 37, 1887](#).

¹⁵E. G. White [Letter 13, 1887](#).

read them a long review he had prepared of my pamphlet, and did every way his ingenuity could invent to impress his view of the subject.... I have no evidence that Elder E. J. Waggoner or those backing him ever have any idea of letting up, but think they still propose to fight this to the bitter end.”¹⁶

Public discussion of the Galatians issue and other controverted points now became impossible to avoid. In fact, early in 1887 Ellen White had already recognized it as inevitable. She told Butler at that time: “The matter now has been brought so fully before the people by yourself as well as Dr. Waggoner, that it must be met fairly and squarely in open discussion.... You circulated your pamphlet; now it is only fair that Dr. Waggoner should have just as fair a chance as you have had. I think the whole thing is not in God’s order. But brethren, we must have no unfairness.”¹⁷

In early summer of 1888, in preparation for the Minneapolis conference, Waggoner, Jones, W. C. White, and a few other California ministers met for several days in a mountain retreat. W. C. White states: “We spent two days tracing down the history of the different kingdoms that acted a part in the dismemberment of Rome, and one day in the examination of Elder Butler’s *Law in Galatians*, and other topics bearing on that question, at the close of which Elder Waggoner read some manuscripts which he had prepared in answer to Elder Butler’s pamphlet.... At the close of our study, Elder Waggoner asked us if it would be right for him to publish his manuscripts and at the next General Conference place them in the hands of the delegates, as Elder Butler had his. We thought this would be right, and encouraged him to have 500 copies printed.”¹⁸

Waggoner published his book *The Gospel in the Book of Galatians* and took a good supply with him when he went to Minneapolis.

Practical righteousness

Nine weeks before the conference began, Ellen White pleaded with her brethren to remember their Christianity at the forthcoming meeting. To the “brethren who shall assemble in General Con-

¹⁶G. I. Butler to Ellen G. White, Oct. 1, 1888.

¹⁷E. G. White [Letter 13, 1887](#).

¹⁸W. C. White to Dan T. Jones, Apr. 8, 1890.

ference” she wrote: “Let every soul now be divested of envy, of jealousy, of evil surmising, and bring their hearts into close connection with God. If all do this, they will have that love burning upon the altar of their hearts which Christ evinced for them. All parties [4] will have Christian kindness and Christian tenderness. There will be no strife; for the servants of God must not strive....

“The correct interpretation of the Scriptures is not all that God requires. He enjoins upon us that we should not only know the truth.... We are to bring into our practice, in our association with our fellowmen, the spirit of Him who gave us the truth.”¹⁹

Somehow a misunderstanding developed as to the topics to be presented at the institute preceding the General Conference. According to W. C. White, Butler had written him a letter in which “he gave a list of the subjects which he said he supposed would come up for consideration. Among these he named prominently the 10 kingdoms, and the law in Galatians.... Elder Butler has forgotten it, and does not admit that he ever wrote such a letter.”²⁰

Waggoner and Jones came fully prepared with their theological and historical ammunition, but, for whatever reason, Uriah Smith and his friends had made no special preparations. They did, however, bring several hundred copies of Butler’s pamphlet on Galatians, which they distributed to the delegates.²¹

Unfortunately, Ellen White’s appeal for kindness and tenderness was largely ignored when the ministerial institute convened on Wednesday, October 10, one week before the opening of the General Conference session. A. T. Jones’s lectures on the 10 kingdoms, presented on the second day of the institute, resulted in discussion that at times became acrimonious. Still, Sister White was hopeful that a good spirit could somehow prevail. On Sabbath afternoon, October 13, she preached on the love of God and then called for testimonies. “Many bore testimony,” she wrote, “that this day was the happiest of their lives.... This was a season of refreshing to many souls, but it did not abide upon some.”²²

¹⁹E. G. White [Letter 20](#), 1888.

²⁰W. C. White to Dan T. Jones, Apr. 8, 1890.

²¹Ibid.

²²E. G. White, [Selected Messages 3:164](#).

Ellen White blamed both Elder Butler and Elder Smith for blocking the way so that truth and light were treated as unwelcome guests. At 2:30 in the morning of October 15 she wrote to Butler, “I have not the least hesitancy in saying that a spirit has been brought into this meeting, not of seeking to obtain light, but to stand barricading the way, lest a ray should come into the hearts and minds of the people through some other channel than that which you had decided to be the proper one.”²³

As the ministerial institute merged into the General Conference session, the presentations included earnest messages by Waggoner on righteousness by faith in Christ, but these were looked upon with suspicion by the Butler-Smith party. Smith no doubt expressed the feelings of many when he declared, “Brother Waggoner’s six preliminary discourses on righteousness we could all agree to; and I should have enjoyed them first rate had I not known all the while that he designed them to pave the way for his position on Galatians.”²⁴

The discussion on the law in Galatians left the eastern and western brethren further apart than ever. Existing aggravations were only worsened when the two sides confronted each other with their opposing views. One of the most regrettable consequences of the bitter spirit manifested by Butler, Smith, and company toward Waggoner and Jones was that these animosities were directed against Ellen White as well. With this development, a much more important issue than the 10 kingdoms or the law in Galatians was at stake: acceptance or rejection of Ellen White as a special spokesperson for the Lord.

Actually, the Butler-Smith people were suspicious of Sister White even before the session began because of the friendship between her son and Waggoner and Jones. They were sure that she was part of the “conspiracy” from California. Concerning this change in their attitude toward her, Ellen White wrote: “It was evident that a delusion was upon our brethren. They had lost confidence in Sister White, not because Sister White had changed but because another spirit had taken possession and control of them.”²⁵

²³E. G. White [Letter 21a, 1888](#).

²⁴Uriah Smith to Ellen G. White, Feb. 17, 1890.

²⁵E. G. White [Manuscript 24, 1888](#).

Sister White characterized the attitude of the Butler-Smith party as rebellion. She declared: “The position and work God gave me at that conference was disregarded by nearly all. Rebellion was popular. Their course was an insult to the Spirit of God.”²⁶

[5] “My brethren have trifled and caviled and criticized and commented and demerited, and picked and chosen a little and refused much until the testimonies mean nothing to them.”²⁷

The rejection of Ellen White was accompanied by a rejection of everything she stood for, including Waggoner’s presentations on righteousness by faith. She wrote Butler, “The spirit and influence of the ministers generally who have come to this meeting is to discard light.”²⁸ It appears that most of the 96 delegates were caught up in this spirit of cynicism and unbelief. Note the terms just quoted: “nearly all” had rejected the prophet’s authority; “the ministers generally” were opposed to new light. Tragically, the prophet was led to pen these almost unbelievable lines: “In Minneapolis God gave precious gems of truth to His people in new settings. This light from heaven by some was rejected with all the stubbornness the Jews manifested in rejecting Christ.”²⁹

“Had Christ been before them, they would have treated Him in a manner similar to that in which the Jews treated Christ.”³⁰

The implications of this unholy attitude are staggering to contemplate. Ellen White held our spiritual ancestors responsible, to some degree at least, for prolonging our world’s long night of misery. She declared: Satan “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.”³¹

²⁶E. G. White [Letter 14](#), 1889.

²⁷E. G. White [Letter 40](#), 1890.

²⁸E. G. White [Letter 21](#), 1888.

²⁹E. G. White [Manuscript 13](#), 1889.

³⁰E. G. White [Letter 6](#), 1896.

³¹E. G. White, [Selected Messages 1:235](#).

The positive side

E. J. Waggoner's sermons on salvation through faith in Christ's righteousness struck a note that had long been missing from Adventist sermons. Most Adventist converts had come from other Christian churches, and their acceptance of Christ was taken for granted. Adventist ministers preached much more about the law and the Sabbath than about Christ. They became skilled debaters who prided themselves on their ability to outargue their Sundaykeeping counterparts. Waggoner's sermons were different. He concentrated on Christ—His deity, His humanity, and His righteousness, which He offers to us as a gift. In this new emphasis Waggoner had the total support of Ellen White. She told the delegates: "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.... That which has been presented harmonizes perfectly with the light which God has been pleased to give me during all the years of my experience."³²

"In Minneapolis," she said later, "God gave precious gems of truth to His people in new settings."³³ "The Lord in His great mercy sent a most precious message to His people through Elders Waggoner and Jones."³⁴

These messages were as living water to many thirsty souls who were present. W. C. White called Waggoner's sermons the turning point in his life.³⁵ Seven years after the conference A. O. Tait was still feeling the glow. He reminisced: "There are quite a number of men in Battle Creek yet who do not see light in this blessed truth in regard, to the righteousness of Christ that has been coming to us as a flood of blessing ever since the Minneapolis General Conference. I found that doctrine just the food that my poor soul needed, there at Minneapolis, and I was converted at that meeting, and have been rejoicing in the light of it ever since."³⁶

Nearly half a century later Elder C. C. McReynolds still looked back to the Minneapolis session as a truly memorable and blessed experience. He recalled: "At the close of Elder Waggoner's fourth or

³²E. G. White [Manuscript 15](#), 1888.

³³E. G. White [Manuscript 13](#), 1889.

³⁴E. G. White [Letter 57](#), 1895.

³⁵W. C. White to G. C. Tenney, May 5, 1893

³⁶A. O. Tait to W. C. White, Oct. 7, 1895.

[6] fifth lesson I was a subdued, repenting sinner. I felt that I must get away alone with the Lord. I went out of the city away into the woods; I did not want dinner; I spent the afternoon there on my knees and on my face before the Lord with my Bible. I had come to the point that I *did* believe the promises of God in His Word for forgiveness of my sins, and that it *did* mean *me* as well as any other sinner. His promise in [1 John 1:9](#); [Isaiah 1:18](#); [Galatians 1:4](#); and [Titus 2:14](#) and many of the promises were reviewed. There I saw Him as my own personal Saviour and there I was converted anew. All doubts that my sins were really forgiven were taken away, and from then till now, I have never doubted my acceptance as a pardoned child of God.”³⁷

This kind of divine encounter must have been experienced by more than a few, for Ellen White stated, “Again and again the Spirit of the Lord came into the meeting with convincing power, notwithstanding the unbelief manifested by some present.”³⁸

In order not to lose the benefits of this new emphasis on Christ and His righteousness, Ellen White, Jones, and Waggoner spent the next three years conducting revivals at camp meetings and in our larger churches across the country. There was still much opposition, especially in Battle Creek, but there were many victories. Concerning two of these revivals Ellen White recollected: “We worked and some know how hard we worked. I think it was a whole week, going early and late, at Chicago, in order that we might get these ideas in the minds of the brethren....

“They think they have to trust in their own righteousness, and in their own works, and keep looking at themselves, and not appropriating the righteousness of Christ and bringing it into their life, and into their character.... It was after one week had passed away before there was a break, and the power of God, like a tidal wave, rolled over that congregation. I tell you, it was to set men free; it was to point them to the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world.

“And there at South Lancaster, the mighty movings of the Spirit of God were there. Some are here that were in that meeting. God revealed His glory, and every student in the college was brought to

³⁷C. C. McReynolds, “Experiences While at the General Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1888,” written in 1931.

³⁸E. G. White [Letter 51a, 1895](#).

the door there in confession, and the movings of the Spirit of God were there. And thus from place to place. Everywhere we went we saw the movings of the Spirit of God.”³⁹

As time passed, many—probably most—of those who had sinned so brazenly at Minneapolis confessed their guilt and asked the Lord for forgiveness. This included not only Elders Butler and Smith but their leading supporters as well. Typical was the attitude expressed by Elder I. D. Van Horn when he wrote to Ellen White in 1893: “I am now heartily ashamed of the part I took in the ‘merriment,’ the ‘satire,’ ‘sarcasm’ and ‘wit’ that was so much indulged in by myself and others in the same room at that Minneapolis meeting. It was very wrong—all wrong—and must have been displeasing to the Lord who witnessed it all. I wish it all could be blotted from my memory.”⁴⁰

In addition to these revivals, between 1889 and 1891 three institutes or Bible schools, totaling 46 weeks in time, were held in Battle Creek for our ministers. These institutes also gave special emphasis to the theme of justification by faith. A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner were among the instructors in these institutes, and they were also the key speakers in most of the General Conference sessions throughout the 1890s. Ellen White’s books *Steps to Christ*, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, *The Desire of Ages*, and *Christ’s Object Lessons*, with their concentration on Christ’s ministry, His teachings, and His character, were all published between 1892 and 1900. We can thank the Lord that beginning with the Minneapolis conference the subject of justification by faith in Christ’s righteousness has come to have a larger place in the thinking and in the experience of Seventh-day Adventists.

Seven lessons for our day

We must not end with a narration of the evils and the virtues of the Minneapolis meeting. We need to learn important lessons from the experience of our forefathers. These lessons need to be pointed out, meditated upon, and acted upon, or we will be in danger of repeating the mistakes they made a century ago.

³⁹E. G. White *Manuscript 9*, 1890.

⁴⁰I. D. Van Horn to Ellen G. White, *Maranatha*, 9, 1893 (written in Battle Creek).

[7] *First*, “we must individually humble our souls before God and put away our idols.”⁴¹ Some have wondered whether the Seventh-day Adventist Church today should, in a General Conference action, make a formal apology to the Lord for the sins of our brethren at Minneapolis. Ellen White recognized the responsibility of leadership in correcting evils and in setting the proper spiritual tone in the church. But in the 27 years she lived following the Minneapolis meeting she never once suggested that we should pass an official action in which we would formally dissociate ourselves from the unChristlike attitude manifested by so many at Minneapolis. She did, however, urge the individuals involved to confess their own sins. She warned, “The words and actions of [all] who took part in this work will stand registered against them until they make confession of their wrong.”⁴² “Repentance,” she said, “is the first step that must be taken by all who would return to God.” And “no one can do this work for another. We must individually humble our souls before God and put away our idols.”⁴³

Second, we should “pray without ceasing” (1 [Thessalonians 5:17](#)). We cannot afford to neglect our prayer life, even for a day. Elder C. C. McReynolds described the prayerless spirit at Minneapolis: “In our lodging house we were hearing a good many remarks about Sister White favoring Elder Waggoner, that he was one of her pets. The spirit of controversy was up, and when the delegates came in from the last meeting of the day there was simply babble, with much laughter and joking and some very disgusting comments were being made, no spirit of solemnity prevailing. A few did not engage in the hilarity. No worship hour was kept, and anything but the solemnity that should have been felt and manifested on such an occasion was present.”⁴⁴

Because many delegates did not maintain constant connection with God, the door was opened for Satan to control their thinking for a time. We must not allow such a sad chapter to be repeated.

⁴¹E. G. White, [Patriarchs and Prophets](#), 590 (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1958).

⁴²E. G. White [Letter 24](#), 1892.

⁴³E. G. White, [Patriarchs and Prophets](#), 590.

⁴⁴McReynolds.

Third, we should learn to love all our brethren, including those who do not share our individual interpretations of Scripture. Referring to Minneapolis, Ellen White lamented: “A difference in the application of some few scriptural passages makes men forget their religious principles. Elements become banded together, exciting one another through the human passions to withstand in a harsh, denunciatory manner everything that does not meet their ideas. This is not Christian, but is of another spirit.”⁴⁵

She admonished the brethren: “A. T. Jones and Dr. Waggoner hold views upon some doctrinal points which all admit are not vital questions.... But it is a vital question whether we are Christians, whether we have a Christian spirit, and are true, open, and frank with one another.”⁴⁶

The law in Galatians and the 10 kingdoms of [Daniel 7](#) were not “vital questions”—nonnegotiables, such as the Sabbath and the investigative judgment doctrines. They were in that class of biblical interpretations where some latitude of belief must be tolerated. On issues that all agree are not vital, is it right to be cool toward our brethren and sisters whose views are not identical with our own? To manifest an un-Christlike spirit toward those in the church who differ with us on these or similar issues is to repeat the spirit of Minneapolis. Just before the Minneapolis meeting Ellen White exhorted the brethren: “Heaven’s enlightenment is what is needed, so that when we look upon the faces of our brethren, we may consider: These are they that have been purchased by the price of the blood of Christ. They are precious in His sight. I must love them as Christ has loved me.”⁴⁷

Surely this is good counsel for us today.

Fourth, we should search the Scriptures for ourselves and not allow others to do our thinking for us. At Minneapolis Ellen White could see that many of our ministers were simply following the lead of Elders Butler and Smith in their understanding of Scripture. They were not doing their own thinking Loyalty to Leadership—a commendable virtue—became a serious weakness when it led to following leadership blindly.

⁴⁵E. G. White [Manuscript 30](#), 1889.

⁴⁶E. G. White [Letter 7](#), 1888.

⁴⁷E. G. White [Letter 20](#), 1888.

On October 19 Ellen White cautioned the delegates: “Do not believe anything simply because others say it is truth. Take your Bibles, and search them for yourselves.” ⁴⁸

Again, on October 24, she entreated: “I want our young men to take a position, not because someone else takes it, but because they understand the truth for themselves.” ⁴⁹

And on November 3, the last Sabbath of the conference, she once more appealed to the brethren: “We should be prepared to investigate the Scriptures with unbiased minds, with reverence and candor. It becomes us to pray over matters of difference in views of Scripture.” ⁵⁰

[8] The following day, November 4, Ellen White wrote her daughter-in-law: “The ministers have been the shadow and echo of Elder Butler about as long as it is healthy and for the good of the cause.... [Elder Butler] thinks his position gives him such power that his voice is infallible. To get this off from the minds of our brethren has been a difficult matter.” ⁵¹ Let us not fall into the trap of putting any man where God alone should be.

Fifth, we should emphasize righteousness by faith in our preaching, we should make the subject as clear as crystal to our people, and we should be sure that we ourselves enjoy a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Ellen White urged: “Faith in Jesus Christ’s righteousness in the behalf of every individual soul should be held before the people for their study and for them to contemplate thoroughly. This theme cannot be dwelt upon too often and too earnestly.” ⁵²

Probably all the delegates at Minneapolis would have insisted that they believed in the doctrine of righteousness by faith in Christ. However, many did not act or sound that way, either at the 1888 conference or in the months following. In addressing the 1889 General Conference session, Ellen White stated: “The true religion, the only religion of the Bible, that teaches forgiveness through the merits of a crucified and risen Saviour, that advocates righteousness by the faith of the Son of God, has been slighted, spoken against,

⁴⁸E. G. White, in *The Signs of the Times*, November 11, 1889.

⁴⁹E. G. White *Manuscript 9*, 1888.

⁵⁰E. G. White *Manuscript 15*, 1888.

⁵¹E. G. White *Letter 82*, 1888.

⁵²E. G. White *Letter 85*, 1889 (April 1889).

ridiculed. It has been denounced as leading to enthusiasm and fanaticism.”⁵³

Even Uriah Smith’s thinking on the subject appeared to have been fuzzy at times. For example, he editorialized in the June 11, 1889, *Review*: The law is spiritual, holy, just, and good, the divine standard of righteousness. Perfect obedience to it will develop perfect righteousness, and that is the only way anyone can attain to righteousness....

“There is a righteousness we must have, in order to see the kingdom of heaven, which is called ‘our righteousness,’ and this righteousness comes from being in harmony with the law of God. In [Deuteronomy 6:24, 25](#), we read: ‘And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as it is at this day. And it shall be our righteousness, if we observe to do all these commandments before the Lord our God, as he hath commanded us.’ The Lord would not command them to do what He had not made adequate provision for them to do; and if they did do it, it would be their righteousness.”⁵⁴

A week after this editorial was published someone asked Ellen White, “What does Brother Smith’s piece in the *Review* mean?” She responded publicly, “He doesn’t know what he is talking about; he sees trees as men walking.... It is impossible for us to exalt the law of Jehovah unless we take hold of the righteousness of Jesus Christ.”⁵⁵

In a manuscript “Looking Back at Minneapolis,” written a few weeks after the conference closed, Ellen White stated: “I bore testimony that the most precious light had been shining forth from the Scriptures in the presentation of the great subject of the righteousness of Christ connected with the law, which should be constantly kept before the sinner as his only hope of salvation....

“It is a study that can tax the highest human intelligence, that man, fallen, deceived by Satan, taking Satan’s side of the question, can be conformed to the image of the Son of the infinite God—that man shall be like Him, that, because of the righteousness of Christ

⁵³E. G. White [Letter 24](#), 1889.

⁵⁴E. G. White in [The Review and Herald](#), June 11, 1889, p. 376.

⁵⁵E. G. White [Manuscript 5](#), 1889.

given to man, God will love man, fallen but redeemed, even as He loved His Son....

“This is the mystery of godliness. This picture is of the highest value. It is to be meditated upon, placed in every discourse, hung in memory’s hall, uttered by human lips, and traced by human beings who have tasted and known that the Lord is good. It is to be the groundwork of every discourse.” ⁵⁶

Sister White could hardly have expressed herself more plainly and more decidedly than when she said: “The point which has been urged upon my mind for years is the imputed righteousness of Christ....

[9] “There is not a point that needs to be dwelt upon more earnestly, repeated more frequently, or established more firmly in the minds of all, than the impossibility of fallen man meriting anything by his own best good works. Salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ alone.” ⁵⁷

Sixth, we should “despise not prophesyings” (1 [Thessalonians 5:20](#)). If Uriah Smith had only heeded this admonition at Minneapolis he would have saved himself and many others much heartache. But the devil convinced Smith that Ellen White had contradicted herself. She had told J. H. Waggoner in the 1850s that his view of [Galatians 3](#) was wrong. Now in 1888 she appeared to support the younger Waggoner, who had essentially the same view as his father.

Actually, Ellen White did not take a position on [Galatians 3](#) at the Minneapolis conference. She carefully avoided taking sides on this issue. She pointed out, in fact, that her understanding of this passage was different in some respects from that of Dr. Waggoner. ⁵⁸

But Smith was not listening. He allowed himself to brood over what he thought were Ellen White’s mistakes. His coolness toward God’s prophet continued for more than two years. Finally, on January 7, 1891, he made a full confession. Of this Ellen White wrote: “[Brother Smith] took my hand as he left the room, and said, ‘If the Lord will forgive me for the sorrow and burdens I have brought upon you, I tell you this will be the last. I will stay up your hands.’ ... It is

⁵⁶E. G. White [Manuscript 24](#), 1888.

⁵⁷E. G. White [Manuscript 36](#), 1890.

⁵⁸E. G. White [Manuscript 15](#), 1888.

seldom that Elder Smith sheds a tear, but he did weep, and his voice was choked with the tears in it.”⁵⁹

This temporary rejection of the prophetic voice was harmful not only to Uriah Smith’s Christian experience but to the confidence of others as well. Ellen White reminded him that he could not recall the ever-extending consequences of his influence. She appealed, “After your course of action has unsettled the minds and faith in the testimonies, what have you gained? If you should recover your faith, how can you remove the impressions of unbelief you have sown in other minds?”⁶⁰ How much better for us to be immovable in our acceptance of the evidence God has given that Ellen White was His prophet.

Seventh, let us maintain our confidence in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This is the church organization referred to in [Revelation 12:17](#). There is no other. Even though Ellen White entertained doubts about this fact at Minneapolis, she did not entertain those doubts for long. Before she left that city she wrote her daughter-in-law: “I tremble to think what would have been in this meeting if we had not been here.... God would have worked in some way to prevent this spirit brought to the meeting, having a controlling power.... But we are not the least discouraged. We trust in the Lord God of Israel. The truth will triumph and we mean to triumph with it.”⁶¹

Throughout the rest of her life Ellen White continued to sound this same note of confidence in the Advent movement. In the 1890s “kingly power” in our General Conference administration drew from her the scathing words “The voice from Battle Creek ... is no longer the voice of God.”⁶² “The church is in the Laodicean state. The presence of God is not in her midst.”⁶³ Yet at the same time she was able to say: “God is at the head of the work, and He will set everything in order. If matters need adjusting at the head of the work, God will attend to that, and work to right every wrong. Let us

⁵⁹E. G. White [Letter 32](#), 1891.

⁶⁰E. G. White [Letter 59](#), 1890.

⁶¹E. G. White [Letter 82](#), 1888.

⁶²E. G. White [Letter 4](#), 1896.

⁶³E. G. White [Manuscript 156](#), 1898 (not published in Ellen G. White 1888 Materials).

have faith that God is going to carry the noble ship which bears the people of God safely into port.”⁶⁴

“The bulwarks of Satan will never triumph. Victory will attend the third angel’s message. As the Captain of the Lord’s host tore down the walls of Jericho, so will the Lord’s commandment-keeping people triumph, and all opposing elements be defeated.”⁶⁵

“I am encouraged and blessed as I realize that the God of Israel is still guiding His people, and that He will continue to be with them, even to the end.”⁶⁶

Discussion questions:

- [10]
1. If the Minneapolis conference was a turning point, was the turn for the better or for the worse?
 2. What law or laws is Paul referring to in [Galatians 3:19-24](#)? (See *The SDA Bible Commentary*, Ellen G. White Comments, vol. 6, pp. 1109, 1110.)
 3. If all parties’ at the Minneapolis conference had heeded Ellen White’s plea for Christian kindness and tenderness, how would the conference have been different?
 4. Did Ellen White’s approval of Waggoner’s Minneapolis messages give a carte blanche endorsement to everything he taught?
 5. How would you have behaved if you had been a delegate at the 1888 General Conference session?

⁶⁴E. G. White, in [The Review and Herald](#), September 20, 1892, p. 594.

⁶⁵E. G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1923), p. 6410.

⁶⁶_____, [Life Sketches of Ellen G. White](#), 437, 438 (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1915).