

**“We” Have a Confession to Make to the World:
THE STORY OF A MESSAGE OF
PHENOMENAL POWER—
Which “We” Did Not Receive
A Century-old Wrong Pleads To Be Made Right**

By Paul Penno Jr.
March 17, 2010

The story is about two young editors, Alonzo Trevier Jones and Ellet J. Waggoner, who dared to be different than the usual run-of-the-mill youth of their day. Healthy and happy, both were enthusiastic and diligent in poring over the Bible, a “hobby” most unusual to their peers. Both enjoyed a vital experience in knowing and appreciating the love of the Lord Jesus Christ. The paths of providence brought the two into working fellowship in the *Signs of the Times* office in Oakland, California.

Then the excitement began. They rocked their church to its foundations.

Waggoner’s love affair with the gospel had begun one “gloomy” day in 1882 when he was only 26. He was seated in a tent listening to a dull camp meeting sermon:

A light shone round me, and the tent was for me far more brilliantly lighted than if the noon-day sun had been shining, and I saw Christ hanging on the cross, crucified for me. In that moment I had my first positive knowledge . . . that Christ died for me. . . I was the whole world with all its sin. . . . I resolved at once

that I would study the Bible in the light of that revelation.¹

When many Californians were digging for gold, he began to dig so deeply in the mines of Scripture ore that New Testament Good News became his obsession.

Jones came to the same experience through a different route. He had found the gospel while a private in the U. S. Army. Lacking formal education, he studied the Bible and history night and day, amassing a vast store of helpful knowledge. Like Waggoner, he possessed a keen, logical mind, and a warm heart.

When their paths joined in the *Signs* editorial office, they lit a fire in the magazine, making it a communicator of New Testament gospel truth that transformed lives, and even outdid the 49’ers’ love for gold. Their editorials and articles broke such new ground that they stirred the hearts of readers across the American continent, and even into Australia and other countries.

How Can the Gospel Be More “Precious” Than Gold?

There is little of the 49’ers’ gold left for new prospectors in California, but Jones’s and Waggoner’s gospel mines can still be explored for greater treasure.

An intimate spiritual fellowship with Paul’s letters to the Romans and the Galatians imbued them with an unusual boldness. Many church members

¹ Letter to M. C. Wilcox, May 16, 1916.

welcomed the clarity and beauty of their new presentations, but clergy readers choked and hemmed and hawed with what they thought was righteous indignation. Speaking so positively and courageously, and making the Good News sound so wonderfully good, seemed quite inappropriate for such young men!

Our clergy were afraid that the editors' apparently radical enthusiasm for the power of much more abounding grace would weaken the church's traditional witness for obedience to the ten commandment law. The seventh-day sabbath was the main visible difference between Seventh-day Adventists' faith and that of their much more numerous Sunday-keeping friends.

But editors Jones and Waggoner had no intent to lessen that emphasis or distinction. They simply wanted to present the grace of Christ revealed at the cross as the true motivation for obeying God's law, including sabbath-keeping. They penetrated centuries of theological fog in order to recapture a pristine New Testament vision of justification and righteousness by faith, a "faith *which works* by love" to produce true heart-obedience. What they unearthed was the basic idea that once turned the world upside down in the time of the early apostles of Christ.

Discovering Long-buried Veins of Gospel Gold

Although they built their convictions on foundation concepts proclaimed by sixteenth century Reformers and the Wesleys, their fresh revelation of "the everlasting gospel" seemed like a new

teaching. As sin has abounded since the sixteenth or eighteenth century, so must grace "much more" abound in our century. In other words, as the lost sheep has strayed further from the fold, so must the Good Shepherd search further to find him. They saw Christ's further searching as a larger view of the gospel, so that the Saviour appeared in a fresh new light. They spotlighted His mighty power to save men and women and youth from the vice-like grip of more abounding sin and the me-first selfishness and sensuality of Western materialism.

That truth was so dear to their hearts that they felt they could not wait to secure the permission of the older ministers. Boldly yet graciously they presented their message of righteousness by faith as the only hope of the church and of the world. This got them into serious trouble. The older ministers and leaders wanted to silence them, but ordinary people were overjoyed to hear their message. Many saw the beauty of the gospel as they had never seen it, and their hearts were won to a devotion to Christ that they never dreamed they were capable of knowing.² Even today few nineteenth century writings can rivet the attention of late twentieth-century youth as do those of Jones and Waggoner.

As has always happened in history, a clearer vision of the Good News met with determined opposition from religious people. Most of our denominational leaders reacted against their message. They were startled and offended by the

² *Review and Herald*, March 5, 1889; March 4, 18, 1890.

editors' forceful writings and challenging "new" ideas. Only a few gave it approval, and still fewer with any enthusiasm. This is a delicate story, for it is hard for a church to admit that their forefathers in responsible leadership turned away from a beautiful truth that the Lord Himself had sent to them. It was a re-play of a familiar old story—"truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne."

Nevertheless, we live in an age of realism when magazine readers expect to be told the full truth.

There was one very notable exception—a spry little widow of 61. Ellen White held no official position of leadership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, but her writings for forty-five years had deeply influenced the movement. Its progress thus far had been largely the result of her many appeals for consecration to Christ, her constant plea to avoid legalism and to lift Him up as Saviour. She saw her emphasis for those years as a presentation of "the matchless charms of Christ,"³ and later voiced her reaction, "Every fiber of my heart said amen."⁴ Unafraid to join a despised minority, she enthusiastically stood up against nearly the entire body of clergy, insisting that the message was "most precious," and the only hope of the church.⁵

A Refreshing Example of Humility

After forty-five years of writing books and magazine articles and speaking at major church gatherings, she might have been pardoned if she

³ Ms. 5, 1889.

⁴ Ms. 5, 1889.

⁵ Testimonies to Ministers, p. 91.

had reacted in a disparaging way toward two young upstart preachers. Not so. It seemed that there was not a jealous bone in her body:

I would have humility of mind, and be willing to be instructed as a child. The Lord has been pleased to give me great light, yet I know that He leads other minds, and opens to them the mysteries of His word, and I want to receive every ray of light that God shall send me, though it should come through the humblest of His servants.⁶

Never does Ellen White stand so tall as in this 1888-1893 conflict. The attitude of her opponents withers in this merciless glare of a century of scrutiny. She held firmly on target throughout years of crisis, unswayed by opposition, and unconfused by debate. The records evidence clear spiritual discernment and the requisite courage to go with it. The keenest edge of modern Biblical research supports Jones and Waggoner in the main features of their fresh message of a century ago, although in most respects the popular theology of that day did not discern what they saw. They were decades ahead of their time.

Something nerved Ellen White and illuminated her perception of issues that none of her ministerial contemporaries seemed able to see. She cherished a hope for the simple, clear message of Good News as the *Signs* editors saw it. Would it spearhead a world-wide spiritual revival? She wanted to see it fulfill the Revelation 18 vision of an angel lighting

⁶ Ms. 15, 1888; Olson, *Through Crisis to Victory*, p. 294.

the earth with the glory of a pure gospel free from eighteen hundred years of confusing controversy and legalism. The *Signs* editors' Good News message gave hope that the Seventh-day Adventist Church could indeed fulfill what Ellen White said is God's ideal for it:

Of all professing Christians, Seventh-day Adventists should be foremost in uplifting Christ before the world. The third angel's message calls for the proclamation of the Sabbath truth. But the great center of attraction, Christ Jesus, must not be left out. . . . The sinner must be led to look to Calvary.⁷

It's Not Too Late To Tell the Truth

But the little old lady was astonished at the blind, legalistic unbelief of her clergy brethren. She told them they had "insulted the Holy Spirit," and had manifested a spirit identical to that of those who rejected Jesus Christ and crucified Him. Strong words! Human nature had proven the same in all ages.

She wisely discerned that if our ministers would wholeheartedly accept the gracious message, they could never again be accused of teaching legalism: "The message of the gospel of His grace was to be given to the church in clear and distinct lines, that the world should no longer say that Seventh-day Adventists talk the law, the law, but do not teach or believe Christ."⁸ But eight years later she lamented that the opposition of denominational leaders had

"in a great degree" suppressed the beautiful message and kept it away from the church and the world itself."⁹

The Battle Spills Over Into the Halls of Congress

The two *Signs* editors were also involved in another issue, one of national interest. In 1888 Senator H. W. Blair of New Hampshire introduced into the United States Congress a law mandating Sunday-keeping in all Federal territories as a "day of worship," and also a religious-education amendment to the United States Constitution. Both bills were supported by the popular clergy-dominated National Reform Association organized in 1863 for the purpose of amending the American Constitution. They wanted to place "all Christian laws, institutions, and usages, on an undeniable legal basis in the fundamental laws of the land."¹⁰

Such legislation clearly implied a repudiation of the First Amendment. Yet many clergy who supported Sunday-keeping in opposition to seventh-day Sabbath-keeping enthusiastically rallied behind Senator Blair. Young Jones and Waggoner loved the American Constitution too much to keep silent. They opposed the bill in *Signs* editorials and in the *American Sentinel* (forerunner of the present-day *Liberty Magazine*). The secret of America's unique prosperity was its pure principles of civil and religious liberty, they insisted. To repudiate them

⁷ Gospel Workers, p. 196.

⁸ Testimonies to Ministers, p. 92.

⁹ *Selected Messages*, Book One, pp. 234, 235.

¹⁰ *American Sentinel*, January, 1886.

would mean national apostasy, to be followed inevitably by national ruin.

Jones appeared personally before the Senate committees in Washington to plead for adherence to the Constitutional guarantee of religious liberty and separation of church and state. Senator Blair learned to respect his knowledge and sincerity, and the bill was defeated. Those who today appreciate the value of religious liberty under the First Amendment have reason to be grateful to Jones's and Waggoner's heroic 1888-1893 efforts. If religious legislation had passed the national Congress and compromised our Constitution a century ago, America would ere this have lost its role as the great land of liberty.

Seventh-day Adventists Must Shed An Image of Legalism

Many Christian people still have the idea that Seventh-day Adventists are strong in proclaiming the law and weak in proclaiming the gospel of grace. According to Ellen White, we have had only ourselves to blame. In her view, the message of 1888-1893 was never truly accepted, in spite of the later confessions and partial repentance of opposers. "The light was not acted upon. It was assented to, but no special change was made to bring about such a condition of things that the power of God could be revealed among His people."¹¹

However, the issue must be clarified. The opponents were not rejecting the traditional *sixteenth-century doctrine of justification by faith*. No Seventh-day Adventist in his right mind then or now would say that he believes in a doctrine of salvation by works. Their acceptance and belief of the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith was and is as strong as that of any of the Evangelical churches.

What they rejected a century ago was the heart-humbling experience brought by greater light, intended to prepare a people for the second coming of Christ. It was a truth and an experience beyond popular ideas of the 1880's, and very humbling to traditional preachers' pride. It still is today!

There is still an "offense of the cross" in the gospel. What is needed is not just "more abounding" grace, but "much more abounding" grace, a message that humbles all human glory and exalts Christ alone.

¹¹ *General Conference Bulletin*, 1901, p. 23.