

CLIFFORD GOLDSTEIN

ADVENTIST
Review

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1888 and All That . . .

While reading the four-volume *Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, I noticed a sharp contrast between Ellen White's theology regarding 1888 and the so-called 1888 message. Almost nothing in this compilation (or, in fact, in any of her writing) expresses what some claim Jones and Waggoner had taught at the 1888 General Conference session. Because Ellen White claimed that she had been teaching for "forty-five years" (*Manuscript Releases*, vol. 1, p. 142) the same message as Jones and Waggoner presented at that session, the absence of "1888 message" theology in her writings reveals that whatever was preached in 1888, it wasn't the "1888 message."

Those promoting this specific message claim that the entire world, every human being, had been legally justified at the cross. Even before we profess faith in Christ (even before we ever heard of Him) our sins were legally forgiven before God. Before we claim justification, we are legally justified; before we claim salvation, we are legally saved. Faith doesn't change our status; it simply acknowledges what that status had always been. Then, as a result of acknowledging what Christ has done for us, we follow the Lord in faith and obedience. This personal acknowledgment leads to what seems to be a "second justification" (what they call "justification by faith"). As long as we do not reject what Christ has done for us, we remain saved. In this view, in fact, it's easy to be saved and hard to be lost.



However assuring, this theology distorts the universality of what happened at Calvary. Yes, Christ tasted "death for every man" (Heb. 2:9); yes, God was in Christ, "reconciling the world unto himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). But this does not mean we were all saved, unconditionally, at the cross; it means that at the cross Christ bore the condemnation of the world's sin, and thus anyone who claims, by faith, what Christ did becomes legally justified in the sight of God (hence the phrase "justification by faith"). The good news, a message full of assurance, is that by faith alone, and not by works of the law, we can stand before God in the perfection and righteousness of Christ. "But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness" (Rom. 4:5).

*As a church,
we're not guilty*

Though there's no space here to debate these differing positions from the Bible, I reiterate the issue posed above: Ellen White said that the "most precious message" of Jones and Waggoner (1888

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Materials, p. 1336) was "old light" (*Selected Messages*, book 3, p. 168), something that she had been preaching for decades. Yet nothing in her writing teaches universal, legal justification, as do proponents of the 1888 message. I'm not talking about a garnered sentence hither and yon; anyone can prove anything from her writings that way. Instead, I ask (in all sincerity), If this was such an important message, why in all of Ellen White's writings does no book, no chapter in a book, no article, or even a simple full paragraph, spell out in unambiguous and systematic terms the idea of universal legal justification prior to personal faith? One would think, for example, that *Steps to Christ*, written in response to the 1888 session, would -in all its simple and lucid pages-have expressed something of this theology, and yet there's nothing, an absence that seriously undermines the credibility of the 1888 message.

Now, I expect a barrage of hot letters accusing me of all manner of perfidy and concupiscence; what I don't expect, however, is something clear and systematic from Ellen White promoting this theology, and that's because it's not there. Which leads, again to this fundamental dilemma: Ellen White said that what Jones and Waggoner preached in 1888 was what she had been preaching for 40 years. Those promoting the 1888 message claim to be teaching what Jones and Waggoner had preached in 1888. Yet Ellen White doesn't teach the 1888 message. What conclusion can one draw, therefore, other than that the 1888 message (so called) isn't the message given in 1888?

Thus, as a church, whatever our faults, we're not guilty today of rejecting the gospel simply because we reject what some call the 1888 message.

On the contrary, it's hard to see how that message could be the gospel, at least as the prophet understood it.

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