

Cornell, Merritt Eaton (1827–1893)

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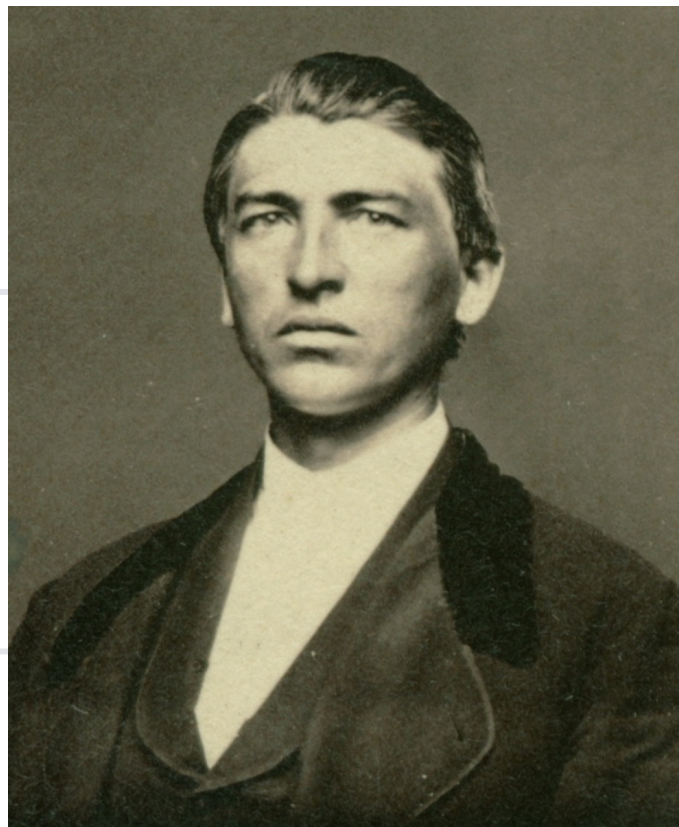
Merritt Eaton Cornell was a tent evangelist, leading debater, and author of five doctrinal books.

Early Life

Merritt Eaton Cornell was born in Chili, New York, on January 29, 1827. While not much is known about his parents he had at least one younger brother, Myron J. Cornell (1829-1920). In 1837, when Merritt was ten, the family moved to Michigan.

During the 1840s, the Cornells accepted William Miller's prediction that the Second Coming of Jesus would occur in 1843 or 1844. After the Great Disappointment (October 22, 1844) Merritt joined the Age-to-Come Adventists, who taught that the Jews would return to Israel and that individuals would have a second chance to be saved during the millennium (the age to come). For the next eight years (1844-1852) Cornell became a self-supporting itinerant Age-to-Come preacher, earning his living as a builder and contractor.

In 1849 Cornell married Angeline M. A. Lyon (1828-1901), the daughter of Henry M. (1796-1872) and Deborah Lyon (1796-1874), early Adventist believers from Plymouth, Michigan. Angeline was also the sister of Cornelia A. Lyon (1836-1922) whom Merritt's brother Myron would later marry. After studying the Bible with Joseph Bates (1792-1872) at the home of Daniel (1817-1897) and Abigail Palmer (1823-1902) in Jackson, Michigan, in August 1852, Merritt and Angeline Cornell (1828-1901) became Sabbath-keeping Adventists.¹ That same year, Merritt convinced his in-laws, Henry (1796-1872) and Deborah Lyon (1796-1874), and farmer and broom shop owner



Merritt Eaton Cornell.

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

Joseph P. Kellogg (1807-1881) of Tyrone, Michigan, to join the Sabbatarian Adventist group in Jackson.

Early Career

In Grand Rapids, Michigan, in January 1853, Cornell and James White (1821-1881) ordained the young J. N. Loughborough (1832-1924), who had also become a Sabbath-keeping Adventist the year before. James and Ellen White (1827-1915) then persuaded both men to go on a preaching tour of Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin in the summer of 1853. During this tour, they converted J. H. Waggoner (1820-1889) of Wisconsin and combated opposing views, especially the age-to-come teachings that Cornell had previously espoused.

In July 1854 Cornell and Loughborough held the first tent meetings sponsored by Sabbatarian Adventists on the corner of Tompkins and Van Buren streets in Battle Creek, Michigan, and they also pioneered the selling of 35-cent packets of tracts. Following these meetings, at Loughborough's request, Cornell rebaptized him in the Kalamazoo River (as an infant, Loughborough had been sprinkled in the Methodist Episcopal Church). Over the next two decades, Cornell and Loughborough would enjoy a productive preaching partnership from Maine to California.

View of Ellen White

In 1855 Cornell's 64-page pamphlet *The Last Work of the True Church* was one of the final publications printed on the press in Rochester, New York, before it was moved to Battle Creek. Later that year, Cornell, Joseph Bates, and J. H. Waggoner addressed delegates to a Battle Creek conference on the subject of spiritual gifts in the church. Fearing that the gift of prophecy had been neglected within the Adventist movement, they expressed concern that "we have grieved the Spirit" by so doing. Once accepted, however, spiritual gifts brought "meekness and humility and holy living" as well as "deep heart-searching before God, and a confession of our wrongs." Cornell acknowledged that Ellen White's messages came from God and agreed with the Bible. Consequently, he declared, "we must acknowledge ourselves under obligation to abide by their teaching, and be corrected by their admonitions."² Seven years later, Cornell's 143-page book *Miraculous Powers: Scripture Testimony on the Perpetuity of Spiritual Gifts* was published by the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association.

Organizer, Evangelist, and Debater

During the late 1850s and 1860s, Merritt and Angeline Cornell held tent meetings throughout the Midwest and with Moses Hull (1836-1907) in Iowa. Angeline assisted her husband as a Bible instructor. Their successful efforts with J. N. Loughborough (1832-1924) and G. I. Butler (1834-1918) in combating the opposing views of B. F. Snook and W. H. Brinkerhoff (see "Marion Party") resulted in the formation of the Iowa Conference in 1863.

A dramatic speaker and convincing debater, Merritt soon gained a reputation not only as one of the most fruitful soul winners, but also as one of the hardest-hitting evangelists in Adventist ranks. Uriah Smith (1832-1903) asserted that he “has defended the views of Seventh-day Adventists more extensively, probably, in public debate, than any man among us.”³ In September 1856, for example, Bates and Cornell held tent meetings in Hillsdale, Michigan, where no Sabbath-keepers lived, and baptized fifty converts.

In the years leading up to the formation of the General Conference, Cornell was a strong proponent of church organization and ably defended James White’s harsh words against “disorganizers” in the *Review*. His third work, a 137-page self-published booklet entitled *Facts for the Times: Extracts from the Writings of Eminent Authors, Ancient and Modern*, appeared in 1858. In May 1862, he organized the believers of Bucks Bridge, New York (who worshiped in the red chapel that John Byington had built in 1855) into the first Seventh-day Adventist church in St. Lawrence County.

Cornell joined Loughborough and the Whites in November 1862 in prayer sessions for Moses Hull following his debates with spiritualist leaders in Paw Paw, Michigan. Subsequently, Cornell joined Hull and Loughborough for several months of team preaching across New England between 1863 and 1865. In Portland, Maine, Cornell debated in November 1865 T. M. Preble (1810-1907) for eight sessions regarding the true Sabbath. Both Loughborough and Cornell were devastated when Hull apostatized despite their best efforts to keep him in the church.

Activities during the Civil War

In May and June 1863, when Cornell and R. J. Lawrence were holding tent meetings in Otsego, Michigan, they were eyewitnesses to Ellen White in vision at the nearby home of Aaron Hilliard when the importance of health reform was made clear to her. Later that year, Cornell officiated at the funeral of James and Ellen White’s son Henry in the Baptist Church across the street from the Howland home in Topsham, Maine. Facing “war excitement” during the Civil War (1861-1865), Cornell occasionally suspended his evangelistic meetings and (like his colleague J. N. Loughborough) allowed his tent to be used by the U.S. Army as a recruitment station. In May 1863 Cornell was chosen as one of the delegates representing the Michigan Conference at the formation of the General Conference.

Despite his many talents and successful ministry, Ellen White sent Merritt letters expressing concern about his extravagant use of money and his jealousy of other ministers (especially J. N. Loughborough). She also admonished Angeline to bear more of life’s burdens as a minister’s wife and to give her husband her full support. While Merritt heeded this advice, his wife did not; in fact, by 1871 Angeline had become a spiritualist.

Ministry in California

Perhaps his wife's apostasy explains, at least in part, why Cornell accepted Loughborough's invitation to join him in California when Daniel T. Bourdeau (1835-1905), Loughborough's preaching partner from 1868 to 1870, left to work among the French-speaking population in New England and Canada. During 1871 and 1872, Loughborough and Cornell held evangelistic meetings in San Francisco, in Yolo County, and in the Napa Valley area. Cornell delivered dozens of discourses, sold over \$125 worth in literature, debated the infamous Miles Grant (1819-1911) on the Sabbath-Sunday issue, and helped to reconvert Merritt G. Kellogg's wife Louisa.

Soon his evangelistic accomplishments were receiving more newspaper coverage than those of Loughborough. Following their meetings in 1872, the Adventist press in Oakland published Cornell's 37-page pamphlet *Spiritualism a Satanic Delusion* in which he shared biblical texts and personal experience to emphasize the soul-destroying dangers inherent in spiritualism.

Yet it was not spiritualism, but adultery, that threatened Merritt's soul. In June 1871 he became infatuated with Sarah E. Harris, an Adventist *divorcée* with two children who lived in the San Francisco area. Soon they were taking long walks in public and (according to her children) spending private time together in Harris' bedroom. Employing redemptive discipline, Loughborough tried reasoning with Merritt in fireside chats and prayer sessions, and when that failed, he sent his friend letters of admonition, but to no avail. So on January 28, 1872 he scheduled a church trial to drop Cornell from church membership and from the ministry.

The night before the hearing, however, Merritt had received a letter from Ellen White (1827-1915) based on a vision she had received on December 10, 1871 (but not mailed until January 18, 1872) warning him that his soul was in danger and that his bad influence was crippling the cause. She then urged him to repent. At a five-hour public gathering in the San Francisco Central Seventh-day Adventist Church, Cornell confessed his indiscretions, apologized for the hurt he had brought to the cause, and asked for forgiveness. Harris, on the other hand, denied the accuracy of Mrs. White's statements, refused to admit any wrongdoing, and was expelled from the church. A few months later, Cornell declared in the *Review*: "My soul thirsts after God, and yields every idol....A genuine conversion and new experience, I must have...I know that nothing short of an entire consecration to the work will fit me to take part in this holy work...The truth looks brighter, and I love it more and more"⁴

Subsequent Career

In 1874 Cornell joined Dudley M. Canright (1840-1919) for tent meetings in Oakland where they battled spiritualism and "Demon Rum." During the day, the two men permitted the anti-alcohol advocates to use their tent for temperance meetings; then in the evening, Cornell and Canright preached Adventist doctrines.

In late 1874, however, when Cornell's previous immoral conduct resurfaced, Ellen White warned him that in his present position he was wholly unfit to be a minister of the Gospel. During the late 1870s she wrote letters to Merritt and Angeline expressing concern for their spiritual welfare.

In 1875 Cornell left California and labored in the Dallas, Texas, area for several months. In 1878 he conducted a series of meetings in Boulder, Colorado, attended by Ellen White and Emma White (1848-1917), Edson's wife, and then moved the tent to Georgetown, Colorado, a rough mining settlement at 9000 feet elevation, where he continued to preach until snow fell. Once again, as he had done in California, Cornell loaned his tent to temperance groups during the day and he preached in the evening. Soon after the meetings ended, he and Angeline moved to Maryland. For the next eleven years (1878-1889) he was not paid by the denomination, but continued doing "freelance preaching" (responding to invitations to speak).

In 1889 Merritt and Angeline Cornell returned to Battle Creek, Michigan, and he was reconciled with Church leaders. During the next three years, he returned to active ministry, visiting local churches and preaching when invited to do so. In 1892 he retired to care for his wife, who was partially paralyzed. Merritt Cornell died on November 2, 1893 at age 67 of an internal hemorrhage. Uriah Smith (1832-1903) presided at his funeral, held two days later in the Dime Tabernacle.

Contribution

Merritt E. Cornell made contributions to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in three major areas. First, during four decades he was an extremely effective tent evangelist, working with several preaching partners across the United States, baptizing hundreds of converts and selling thousands of dollars of Adventist literature. Second, within the Church he was widely recognized as one of the best debaters of Adventist doctrines with non-Adventist ministers and other opponents. Finally, in his five doctrinal books, he ably defended the Adventist position on Bible prophecy, Church organization, spiritual gifts, and the dangers of spiritualism. Although his occasional moral lapses temporarily damaged the Church, he confessed his sins, reformed his life, and ultimately returned to active ministry.

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1. George R. Knight, *Joseph Bates: The Real Founder of Seventh-day Adventism* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2004), 177.
2. Joseph Bates, J.H. Waggoner, and M.E. Cornell, "Address of the Conference Assembled at Battle Creek, Mich., Nov. 16th, 1855," *Adventist Review*, December 4, 1855, 78-79.
3. Uriah Smith, "Merritt E. Cornell," *Adventist Review*, January 23, 1894, 63.
4. M.E. Cornell, "California," *Adventist Review*, December 31, 1872, 22.

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