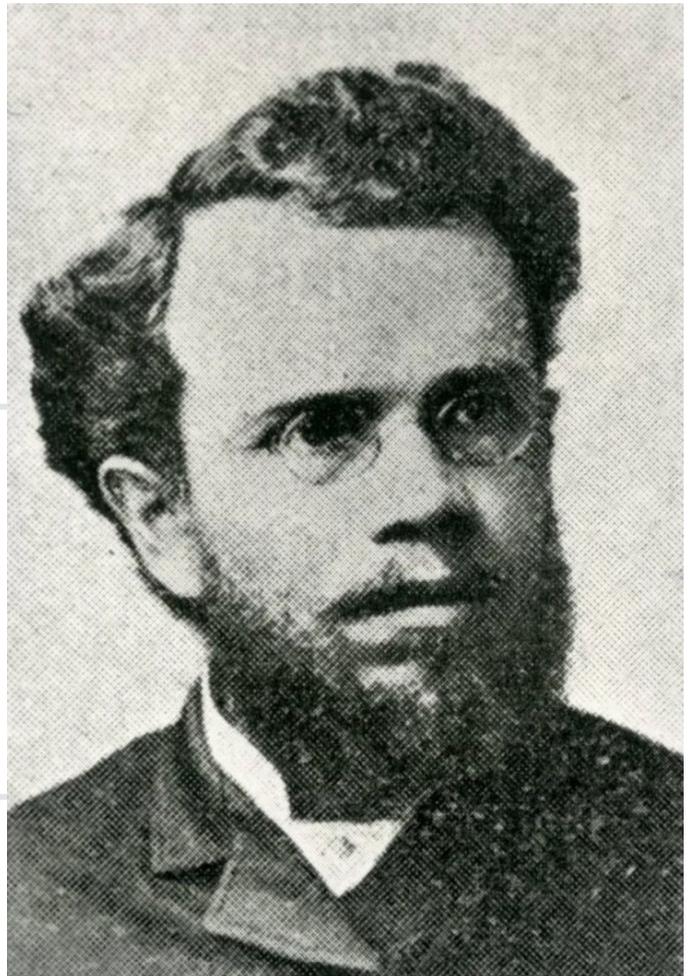


Waggoner, Ellet Joseph (1855–1916)

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Best known for his leading role in the “righteousness by faith” revival stemming from the 1888 General Conference session, E. J. Waggoner’s work as a lecturer, author, and editor has exerted a deep, lasting, and at times controversial influence on Adventist theology.



E. J. Waggoner, c.1890.

Photo courtesy of Department of Archives and Special Collections,
Loma Linda University.

From Medicine to Ministry (1855-1882)

Ellet was born on January 12, 1855 in Waukau, Winnebago County, Wisconsin, to pioneer Adventist minister and editor Joseph H. Waggoner (1821-1889) and his wife Maryetta Hall Waggoner (1823-1908). He was the sixth of their ten children. During Ellet’s childhood the family’s home was in Burlington, Michigan. Though it is not clear exactly when, at some point no later than early adolescence Ellet was sent to western New York where he lived in the home of an Adventist farmer, Charles Lindsay, working on the family’s large farm and attending school in nearby Lockport.¹

Waggoner was part of the first class of students to enter Battle Creek College, the first Seventh-day Adventist institution of higher learning, when it opened in 1874. He chose medicine as his field of service to the church’s mission and took a year of medical training at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor (1875-1876) before

returning for a second year in the “classical course” at Battle Creek College (1876-1877). Waggoner went on to complete his medical degree from Long Island College Hospital of Brooklyn, New York²

Waggoner began his career in 1878 as a physician on the staff of the Battle Creek Sanitarium. In March of 1879 he married Jessie Fremont Moser (1860-1944).³ Ellet and Jessie would have two daughters: Bessie Isadore Harrower (1882-1941) and Winnie Pearl Howard (1885-1969). A son, Ernest Eugene, born in 1889, died in infancy.⁴

Not long after their marriage the couple spent several months in evangelistic ministry, assisting Ira J. Hankins with tent meetings in southeastern Iowa. They moved to northern California in the Spring of 1880 where Ellet joined the medical staff of the Rural Health Retreat (later St. Helena Sanitarium). Yet he remained uncertain as to whether he should continue practicing medicine or if he was called to preach.⁵

A dramatic experience at a camp meeting in Healdsburg in October 1882 both transformed Waggoner spiritually and resolved the question of his life’s direction. He described sitting in a tent meeting on a “dismal, rainy afternoon” as the speaker presented “the Gospel of [God’s] grace.” The “turning point” of his life, Waggoner wrote, came about half way through the message:

Suddenly a light shone about me, and the tent seemed illumined, as though the sun were shining; I saw Christ crucified for me, and to me was revealed for the first time in my life the fact that God loved me, and that Christ gave Himself for me personally. It was all for me. . . .

As the son of a prominent Adventist leader, he had been immersed in the Bible all his life. But this experience prompted him to look for a theme in its pages:

. . . I knew that this light that came to me was a revelation direct from heaven; therefore I knew that in the Bible I should find the message of God’s love for individual sinners, and I resolved that the rest of my life should be devoted to finding it there, and making it plain to others. The light that shone upon me that day from the cross of Christ, has been my guide in all my Bible study; wherever I have turned in the Sacred Book, I have found Christ set forth as the power of God, to the salvation of individuals, and I have never found anything else⁶

Editor, Teacher, Evangelist (1882-1888)

As he pursued his vocation of making the message of God’s love plain for others, E. J. Waggoner rapidly became an influential voice in California, which had become a second center of Adventism, replicating the institutional pattern originated at the church’s headquarters town of Battle Creek, Michigan. In 1883 he began teaching intermittently at the new Healdsburg College (opened 1882) and assisting his father, J. H. Waggoner, in editing the *Signs of the Times*, the major periodical issued by the Pacific Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association (begun 1875, later renamed Pacific Press Publishing Association) in Oakland. These duties were in addition to a

heavy schedule of evangelistic and revival preaching at Adventist churches and gatherings, then mainly located in the northern and central parts of the state.⁷

Waggoner became closely associated with Alonzo T. Jones (1850-1923), another young preacher skilled at forceful speaking and writing, called to California in 1884 from the Northwest, where his ministry had begun in 1875.⁸ Jones joined Waggoner in lecturing at Healdsburg in 1885 and, in mid-1886, when J. H. Waggoner left for mission work in Europe, the duo became co-editors of the *Signs of the Times*. They also co-edited two other periodicals: the *Pacific Health Journal and Temperance Advocate* (with J. N. Loughborough) from 1886 to 1888, and the *American Sentinel*, the denomination's first periodical dedicated to religious liberty, launched by the senior Waggoner in 1886.

The *Sentinel's* predominant concern was to resist the growing momentum for a constitutional amendment that would declare the United States to be a "Christian nation." Convinced that such an amendment would open the door to a union between church and state in violation of the First Amendment, the *Sentinel's* publishers announced that the periodical was dedicated to defending "the United States Constitution as it is, so far as regards religion or religious tests" and more broadly to "the maintenance of human rights, both civil and religious."⁹ Jones would become Adventism's preeminent public advocate for religious liberty. But Waggoner also wrote and lectured extensively against efforts to bolster Christian nationalism through such measures as a constitutional amendment and national Sunday rest legislation that reached a peak in momentum during the late 1880s and early 1890s. When the National Religious Liberty Association was formed at the 1889 General Conference, Waggoner gave a trenchant address on the reasons for Adventist opposition to religious legislation. Calling such legislation "inconsistent . . . with civil liberty" and "un-American, directly subversive" of what the nation's founders struggled to establish, Waggoner went on to declare: "Still more do we oppose it, because it is anti-Christian, tending only to immorality and practical idolatry. It repudiates the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit; it treats the word of God as a common thing, subjecting it to the judgment of men and the caprices of politicians."¹⁰

Both Waggoner, nurtured in the church from childhood, and Jones, a convert as a young man, sought to rethink the Adventist faith for themselves and establish its foundations based on their own intensive study of Scripture, rather than simply accept what the pioneers of the movement handed on to them. Both also inclined toward idealistic, ideologically pure positions rather than pragmatism or moderation in working out the implications of their beliefs. At the 1887 General Conference in Oakland, for example, both took prominent part in an "animated discussion" of the attitude Adventists should take in regard to the color line. Against the argument of some who had worked in the South that confronting the color line would doom chances to reach white people, E. J. Waggoner moved the following:

WHEREAS, The Bible says that there is neither Jew nor Greek there is neither bond nor free, but that all are one in Christ Jesus, therefore,

Resolved, That it is the decided opinion of this Conference, that when the colored people of the South accept the Third Angel's Message, they should be received into the church on an equality with the white members, no distinction whatever being made between the two races in church relations.¹¹

The 1888 Controversy: Buildup

As they developed convictions that differed on some points from positions that had become standard in Adventism during the previous 25-30 years, Waggoner and Jones expressed them through their channels of influence as editors and college teachers without seeking the approval of the church's older, Battle Creek based leadership. While Jones' innovations were mainly in the areas of history and prophecy interpretation, Waggoner's distinctive contributions centered on biblical exegesis and biblical theology, including the topic of the righteousness of Christ and the faith of Jesus, which had become an important area of study since his 1882 experience. But it was Waggoner's interpretation of the "law in Galatians," in particular, that troubled General Conference president George I. Butler (1834-1918) and long-time *Review and Herald* editor Uriah Smith (1832-1903). Waggoner maintained that the law discussed in Galatians 3, which leads to Christ, refers primarily to the moral law (the Ten Commandments) rather than to the ceremonial law, which included various other regulations for worship, sacrificial ritual, and communal life in ancient Israel. Waggoner believed the moral law was in focus because only that could bring profound conviction of sin, explain the necessity of Christ's becoming a "curse for us" (Gal. 3:13), lead sinners to Christ, and be justified by faith (Gal. 3:24).¹²

For Butler and Smith, E. J. Waggoner's position on which law is under discussion in Galatians 3 conjured up memories of what his father, J. H. Waggoner, had argued some thirty years before in *The Law of God: An Examination of the Testimony of Both Testaments* (1854). Leaders such as James White and J.N. Andrews initially supported Waggoner's interpretation but others countered that the law in Galatians 3 had to do with the temporary ceremonial requirements of the Mosaic law that pointed forward to the sacrifice of Christ at Calvary, which rendered them obsolete. The "ceremonial law" position prevailed and James White had withdrawn J.H. Waggoner's book from the market. Butler and Smith believed that the matter had been long settled and that the repudiation of the "moral law" interpretation had the authoritative backing of Ellen White.¹³

During the intervening 30 years Adventist evangelists and writers had relied heavily on the "ceremonial law" interpretation to refute the claim often made by opponents that Christians are no longer under the letter of the Old Testament law, including the Sabbath commandment. The traditional teaching on the law in Galatians had reached such a high level of importance in Butler's thinking that to oppose it constituted an assault on the Sabbath doctrine – a "pillar" of "present truth." If it was wrong, wrote Uriah Smith, then "Seventh-day Adventism has been developed and built upon error" and to adopt the "moral law" position now revived by the younger

Waggoner would be to “overthrow the Testimonies [Ellen White’s prophetic messages] and the Sabbath.”¹⁴

Waggoner countered that clinging to a faulty interpretation would ultimately be more damaging than making a change in order to be right. As they approached the end of time, Adventists must be prepared to have their teachings “subjected to the most rigid criticism,” he urged. To Butler he declared that “you will say that it will be a humiliating thing to modify our position on so vital a point . . . in the face of the enemy. But if a general has a faulty position, I submit that it is better to correct it . . . than to run the risk of defeat because of his faulty position.”¹⁵ Seventh-day Adventists, of all people, Waggoner contended, should not be bound by the views of influential commentators or leaders but “should be Protestants indeed, testing everything by the Bible alone.”¹⁶

The two major centers of Adventism thus were in open conflict in the mid-1880s, with the old guard denominational leadership in Battle Creek expressing in the *Review and Herald* their opposition to the views published in the *Signs of the Times* by the young California based upstarts. Ellen White, the Adventist prophet, found the dispute deeply deplorable. Since the death of her husband, James, in 1881, Ellen White had begun taking an even more central role in denominational affairs. From Basel, Switzerland, her locale on a missionary journey to build up the Adventist cause in Europe, the prophet, who would turn 60 later that year, sent a letter dated February 18, 1887, rebuking Waggoner and Jones for their role in making the controversy public.

“But how do you think I feel to see our two leading papers in contention?,” Ellen White asked. “I know how these papers came into existence. I know what God has said about them, that they are one, that no variance should be seen in these two instrumentalities of God.” She observed that “E. J. W.” had “cultivated” a “love for discussions and contention” just like his father. “E. J. W.,” she counseled, “needs humility, meekness.”¹⁷

At the same time, Ellen White refused to cooperate with G. I. Butler’s urging that she issue a “testimony” affirming she had opposed J. H. Waggoner’s position on the law in Galatians some 30 years before. Butler’s efforts to quash the teachings of Waggoner and Jones with his own polemics (in the form of an 85-page “pamphlet”) and by General Conference vote at the 1886 session also fell short.¹⁸ The conflict remained unresolved and explosive as delegates gathered for the 1888 General Conference in Minneapolis, October 17–November 4, preceded by a ministerial institute, October 10–16.

The 1888 General Conference

E. J. Waggoner gave a series of nine theological presentations in Minneapolis, and preached the concluding sermon on Sabbath, November 3. Ironically, given the status of the 1888 conference as both an enduring landmark and touchstone of controversy in Adventist history, the stenographic transcriptions or summaries such as were typically published giving the essence of speeches and discussion from the floor of General Conference sessions either were never made for these historic talks or were not preserved. Evidence regarding their nature, content, manner of delivery, and impact can only be derived piecemeal from varied sources such as press reports, notes, diaries and correspondence of participants, and later interviews and statements relating

the memories of those who were there.¹⁹

Chester C. McReynolds (1853-1937), for example, wrote in 1931 of his experience as a delegate from the Kansas Conference to the 1888 General Conference. McReynolds arrived anticipating conflict over “the law in Galatians” and very much a partisan who regarded Butler as “a father in the faith” and “held as Gospel” anything he said. By the end of the second lecture, Waggoner’s manner of presentation had begun to work a change in McReynolds’ attitude: “I was ready to concede that he was going to be fair and his manner did not show any spirit of controversy,” he wrote. By the end of the fourth or fifth lecture, McReynolds recalled, “the pure Gospel that he was setting forth had materially changed my mind and attitude and I was an earnest listener for Truth.” He went outdoors to pray alone and review Bible promises about the forgiveness of sins, which became real to him as never before:

There I saw [Christ] 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. For years prior to that time, although I had been preaching the message . . . I had hesitated to proclaim my freedom and that He had saved me and was saving me daily.²⁰

McReynolds’ testimony corroborates other sources in establishing two critical points about the message Waggoner proclaimed at the 1888 conference: First, he presented his disputed convictions about Galatians, but did so in a gentle, winsome, non-polemical manner. In response to Ellen White’s counsel in 1887, Waggoner had acknowledged and emphatically renounced the “spirit of criticism that springs from the meanest kind of pride” that he had harbored.²¹ More than one witness to the manner of his 1888 presentations suggest that he had experienced genuine change. Second, Waggoner’s messages led many listeners to understand and experience the grace of God in the gospel of righteousness by faith in a new and transformative way.

After an overview of the valuable work done by scholars, particularly Clinton Wahlen, in recent decades to glean and synthesize all that can be found in the various sources, Waggoner biographer Woodrow Whidden nonetheless indicates that the witness of Ellen White, who attended and spoke several times at the conference, remains the clearest window on Waggoner’s 1888 messages and their import. In a talk given near the end of the session, Ellen White observed that Waggoner had “presented his views in a plain, straightforward manner, as a Christian should,” and rebuked those who manifested an opposite spirit in resisting his views with harsh criticism and ridicule.

“Some things presented in reference to the law in Galatians, if I fully understand his position, do not harmonize with the understanding I have had of this subject,” Ellen White acknowledged, adding “but truth will lose nothing by investigation.” Rather than use her prophetic authority to denounce Waggoner’s interpretation, as Butler had urged her to do, Ellen White declared her willingness “to be instructed as a child” and affirmed that every believer “should feel that he has the privilege of searching the Scriptures for himself.”²²

Similar to McReynolds, it was not the discussion about which law the apostle Paul had in mind in writing Galatians 3 that Ellen White found most compelling in Waggoner's presentations. Rather: "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."²³ It was along similar lines that Ellen White, seven years later, summarized the "most precious message" that the Lord sent through "Elders Waggoner and Jones" in 1888:

This message was to bring more prominently before the world the uplifted Saviour, the sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. It presented justification through faith in the Surety; it invited the people to receive the righteousness of Christ, which is made manifest in obedience to all the commandments of God. Many had lost sight of Jesus. They needed to have their eyes directed to His divine person, His merits, and His changeless love for the human family.²⁴

Moreover, she wrote, this was "the third angel's message" that Seventh-day Adventists were called to proclaim to the world, a message about "the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Rev. 14:12).²⁵ In their early years, Seventh-day Adventists had generally understood "the faith of Jesus" in this passage, central to their identity and mission, to mean the instruction given by Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament. Now, in the light of the message brought forth by Waggoner and Jones at Minneapolis in 1888, Ellen White brought another dimension of the phrase's meaning to the forefront.²⁶

What constitutes the faith of Jesus, that belongs, to the third angel's message? Jesus becoming our sin-bearer that He might become our sin-pardoning Saviour. He was treated as we deserve to be treated. He came to our world and took our sins that we might take His righteousness. Faith in the ability of Christ to save us amply and fully and entirely is the faith of Jesus.²⁷

Waggoner thus not only brought to Adventism an entirely new emphasis on Christ and His righteousness but also placed it at the center of the church's last-day message for the world. His teaching also placed new emphasis on the all-sufficiency of Christ as the guarantor of the entire experience of salvation, while still recognizing the necessity of the human response of faith and submission. As Ellen White put it, "This was no new light, but it was old light placed where it should be in the third angel's message."²⁸

The 1888 Message: Resistance and Revival (1888-1892)

From the close of the 1888 General Conference through early 1892, Waggoner shuttled between his editorial and ministerial responsibilities in California and speaking at camp meetings, Bible institutes, and other church gatherings throughout the nation. Ellen White and A. T. Jones likewise took every opportunity to advance the 1888 message centered on Christ and His righteousness. They met with considerable resistance, yet, on the whole, the revival spirit generated through their preaching gained prevailing momentum. Though embattled, Waggoner's influence continued to rise, and his speaking was given prominence at every major venue.

He left California on May 17, 1889, to join A. T. Jones and Ellen White in preaching at camp meetings in the East. While en route three days later, he received tragic news of the death of his son, Ernest Eugene, only nine months old. The blow came only a month after Ellet had received a cable informing him that his father, Joseph Harvey Waggoner, had died suddenly in Europe at age 67.²⁹

After preaching at the New York Conference camp meeting in Rome, New York, Waggoner took an intensive course in Hebrew from the renowned biblical scholar William Rainey Harper in Philadelphia during the summer of 1889.³⁰ While launching the National Religious Liberty Association was a prominent involvement for Ellet at the 1889 General Conference in Battle Creek, Jessie Waggoner's work with children's Sabbath School also came into the spotlight. The International Sabbath School Association again called upon her to continue her service as corresponding secretary, begun in 1887. But now her role broadened. She was elected a co-editor of the *Sabbath School Worker*, asked to write the camp-meeting Primary Division lesson for 1890, serve on an "examining committee" for English language Sabbath School lessons, and deliver an address to the association on how to improve the quality of smaller-sized Sabbath Schools.³¹ Jessie later did editorial work for *Our Little Friend* (begun 1890) during its early years, and made several other substantial contributions to Sabbath School work throughout the remainder of her life.³²

Back at home in Oakland for only a brief period following the General Conference session, Waggoner departed on December 20, assigned to teach Hebrew and theology at Battle Creek College, and teach at a ministerial institute (1889-1890) or "ministers' Bible school." The institute was a kind of embryonic seminary at a time when the Adventist church had no formal educational requirements for its ministers. This teaching appointment thus put Waggoner in a position of central influence even though he still faced formidable opposition led by Uriah Smith.

Controversy erupted during the institute when Waggoner, without prior consultation, proposed teaching a course on the biblical covenants, another topic on which his views were known to differ from Smith's. He ended up receiving permission from the institute's principal, W. W. Prescott, to give six presentations on the topic in February 1890, with Smith also given ample time to present his contrasting position.³³

The issue of "righteousness by faith" and the role of human obedience to the law in the experience of salvation was central to the debate over the covenants, just as with the law in Galatians question.³⁴ In a *Review* article of June 11, 1890, for example, entitled "Our Righteousness," Smith insisted: "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." Smith acknowledged that we cannot keep the commandments without Christ's help, but since that help is provided, it follows then that believers need to secure their hold on it "by doing and teaching the commandments."³⁵

For Waggoner, only the righteousness of Christ bestowed as a free gift could give the believer solid ground of security and hope. He put it this way in *Christ Our Righteousness* (1890):

At last the sinner, weary of the vain struggle to get righteousness from the law, listens to the voice of Christ and flees to His outstretched arms. Hiding in Christ, he is covered with His righteousness, and now behold! he has obtained, through faith in Christ, that for which he has been vainly striving. He has the righteousness which the law requires, and it is the genuine article, because he obtained it from the Source of Righteousness, from the very place whence the law came. And the law witnesses to the genuineness of this righteousness. It says that so long as the man retains that, it will go into court and defend him against all accusers. It will witness to the fact that he is a righteous man. With the righteousness which is “through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith” (Philippians 3:9), Paul was sure that he would stand secure in the day of Christ.³⁶

Waggoner understood the conferral of Christ’s righteousness as much more than a bookkeeping entry in the ledgers of heaven canceling the sinner’s guilt. Rather, it brings “that wonderful and miraculous change known as the new birth,” so that “as new creatures in Christ, we may do the good works which God has ordained.”³⁷ His concern was to uplift the all-sufficiency of Christ and His righteousness and thus to oppose teaching that directed the believers’ trust toward anything other than or in addition to Christ alone as the source and basis of their salvation. In a presentation at the 1891 General Conference, Waggoner directly countered Smith’s position: “Is it the spirit of Christ that works in us when we say that we are going to overcome if Christ will give us a little assistance? When we say that, we are going to have heaven by our own work, in part at least; we deny Christ . . .”³⁸

At a second ministers’ institute (October 31, 1890 through February 27, 1891), with enrollment sharply increased from 50 to 130, Waggoner taught courses on Galatians and Romans. At the General Conference session that followed in March 1891, Waggoner had reached “one of the genuinely high points of his public career,” states Whidden. The conflict had been intense and at times bitter in the aftermath of 1888, but Ellen White had given Waggoner and Jones outspoken, sustained support, and in December 1890, Uriah Smith had at least partially surrendered. Waggoner was asked to be the major speaker for the “Bible study hour” at the 1891 session where he delivered another series on Romans. The interest in hearing him was so great among area Adventists, including students at Battle Creek College and workers at the Review and Herald and the sanitarium, that the study hour was changed from 9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. to accommodate them.³⁹

The Christ-centered message had gone forth with considerable effect since 1888, raising the possibility that it would power Adventists to the final fulfillment of their mission. In a November 1892 *Review* article, Ellen White wrote: “The time of test is just upon us, 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.”⁴⁰

By the time these bracing words by the church’s prophet appeared in print, E. J. Waggoner was in London, England, editing the periodical *Present Truth*, the centerpiece of his endeavors to advance the Adventist cause in

Great Britain and beyond.

New Directions (1892-1903)

E. J. Waggoner's 11 years in England would be marked by intensive labor and considerable achievement as an editor, teacher, evangelist and church leader. He also continued serious, probing study, developing his theology in ways that would contribute to a diminishment of influence and finally loss of position in the denomination.

At the time of Waggoner's arrival in London in May 1892, Seventh-day Adventists counted only 257 adherents in Great Britain, 14 years after the church's work began there in 1878.⁴¹ *Present Truth*, begun in 1884, was published twice monthly with an average circulation of 1,500 in 1892. Waggoner moved swiftly to increase publication frequency to weekly, beginning in July 1893. Since the cost of mailing the periodical was prohibitive in the British postal system, *Present Truth* was circulated through direct sales by canvassers. Thus, the periodical was the primary means for disseminating the Adventist message and one that combined mass media with interpersonal contact. The growth in circulation to an average of 20,000 per issue by the end of Waggoner's tenure in 1903 represented not just improved sales but increased involvement of believers in personal evangelism.⁴² The membership total reported for Great Britain in 1903, though still modest at 1,182, was indicative of substantial growth for which *Present Truth* was integral.⁴³

Waggoner also gave a number of relatively brief series of lectures in various parts of London, announced and promoted in *Present Truth* and preached (with W. W. Prescott) for at least one major tent effort, conducted in Portsmouth in 1898. Speaking at camp meetings and lecturing at Bible institutes both in England and continental Europe, was another and likely even larger component of Waggoner's ministry abroad. Waggoner's involvement with the founding of Duncombe Hall Missionary College (later renamed Duncombe Hall Training College) in January 1902 and his teaching there until 1903 was another highlight of his service in England. The school would later develop into Newbold College, a major center of Adventist education.⁴⁴

Waggoner did not return to the United States for the General Conference sessions of 1893 and 1895, but he did for the 1897 session held at College View, near Lincoln, Nebraska. As at the 1891 session, he was the main speaker for the daily Bible study hour at which he gave 18 presentations on the book of Hebrews. This, however, would be the last time he was given central prominence in this way at a General Conference. He would preach and lecture at the next three sessions (1899, 1901, and 1903) but on a lesser scale.⁴⁵

As Waggoner developed his theology during his years in England, new emphases and innovations emerged. It seems clear that Waggoner never viewed righteousness by faith in terms of the distinctions often made in Protestant theology between Christ's saving work completed *for* us and *outside* of us (imputed righteousness or justification) and Christ's transforming work *within* us (imparted righteousness or sanctification).⁴⁶ In a *Present Truth* article published October 20, 1892, he made his rejection of that theological framework explicit: The idea that justification by faith means that the believer is "counted righteous when he is not" is "a great mistake,"

Waggoner declared.

[Christ's] righteousness is given to the one who has sinned, and who believes. That does not mean that Christ's righteousness which He did eighteen hundred years ago is laid up for the sinner, to be simply credited to his account, but it means that His present, active righteousness is given to that man. Christ comes to live in that man who believes, for He dwells in the heart by faith. So the man who was a sinner is transformed into a new man, having the very righteousness of God.⁴⁷

From then on, Waggoner's main emphasis in presenting the theme of "righteousness by faith" was on the indwelling Christ whose freely given life makes the believing sinner into a righteous person in a fully literal, concrete sense.⁴⁸

He also, correspondingly, came to see the cross as the means by which Christ conveyed his life to sinners rather than an act of substitutionary atonement in which Christ bore the penalty of human sin. In an 1893 *Present Truth* article, Waggoner wrote:

Remember that in giving His Son, God gave Himself, and you will see that a sacrifice was not demanded to satisfy God's outraged feelings, but that, on the contrary, God's inexpressible love led Him to sacrifice Himself, in order to break down man's enmity, and reconcile us to Himself.

. . . We are reconciled to God by the death of Christ, because in dying He gave up His life, and He gave it to us. Being made partakers of the life of God, through faith in Christ's death, we are at peace with Him, because one life is in us both. . . . The imparting of His life to us frees us from sin and the continuing of it in us, keeps us from sin.⁴⁹

Corollary teachings about Christology and eschatology are captured in a single remarkable passage from Waggoner's book *The Everlasting Covenant* published in 1900:

. . . Therefore it follows that the cleansing of the sanctuary—a work which is set forth in the Scriptures as immediately preceding the coming of the Lord—is coincident with complete cleansing of the people of God on this earth, and preparing them for translation when the Lord comes.

. . . Before the end comes, and at the time of the coming of Christ, there must be a people on earth, not necessarily large in proportion to the number of inhabitants of earth, but large enough to be known in all the earth, in whom "all the fulness of God" will be manifest even as it was in Jesus of Nazareth. God will demonstrate to the world that what he did with Jesus of Nazareth He can do with anyone who will yield to Him.

Jesus Christ was the perfect temple of God; but if He were to be the only one in whom such fulness is revealed, then the too common idea that Jesus was an unique specimen, not made in all things like unto His brethren, and that it is impossible for anybody else to be in all things like Him, would be warranted; and Satan would not fail to charge God with incapacity and failure, saying that He is not able to take a man born in sin, and bring him to

perfection. Day after day he is making this charge through men who, either despondently, or in self-justification, say that "Christ was different from us, for He was begotten by the Holy Ghost, and being born sinless had the advantage of us." The Lord wants all to understand that the new birth puts men in the same position that Christ occupied on this earth, and He will demonstrate this before the world. The life of Jesus is to be perfectly reproduced in His followers, not for a day merely, but for all time and for eternity.⁵⁰

For Waggoner, then, what mattered most about the distinctively Adventist sanctuary doctrine of the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary was that it entailed Christ's cleansing of His earthly temple – His followers – from sin entirely, so that they, as a corporate body (though of indeterminate number) could demonstrate for the world that it was possible for human beings, through divine power, to overcome sin as fully as did Jesus. This development was necessary before the return of Christ in order to vindicate God against Satan's charges that it was impossible for God to bring sinful humans "to perfection." Jesus had already shown that this was possible by living a sin-free life while incarnate in a human nature like that of other mortals.

It was not until a later epoch in Adventist history that this set of teachings would become seriously contentious. Nor would Waggoner's semi-Arian understanding of Christ's divine nature or his rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity as formulated at the Council of Nicaea have been controversial at this stage of Adventist history.⁵¹ Ellen White remained quite positive in her assessments of Waggoner and his work into 1901.⁵² E. J. Waggoner remained a star in the Adventist theological firmament, even if his light did not stand out with quite the same degree of brilliance that it had a decade before.

Waggoner's preoccupation with the indwelling Christ seems to have led to some rather extreme and idiosyncratic notions about divine immanence in humanity and the world, expressed in some of his presentations at the 1897 and 1901 General Conference sessions. These must have raised some eyebrows, but he also seemed clear on the distinct personality and being of God.⁵³ It was not until circumstances brought him into serious conflict with church leaders in other ways that "pantheistic" leanings were cited as contributing to his problems.

The Struggle Against Creedal Constitutions (1903-1904)

At the 1903 General Conference held in Oakland, California, Waggoner allied with A.T. Jones, Dr. John Harvey Kellogg and others in opposing constitutional changes sought by General Conference leader A.G. Daniells to solidify the major reorganization initiated at the 1901 session. Waggoner and Jones, again on the same page, argued that the further changes Daniells wanted, in particular placing medical and other institutions under denominational ownership, went contrary to the decentralization agreed upon in 1901. In contrast to hierarchical structures of ownership and authority, Waggoner upheld the ideal of individual believers indwelt by Christ, the Lord of the church, and unerringly guided and directed by Him as to their individual duties and relationships. He contended that doing away with "creedal" constitutions would not lead to disorganization.

Rather, church order would result from the individual believers comprising the body of Christ acting “just as the Spirit of God shall move.” But the majority was not persuaded. The “Report of the Minority of the Committee on Plans and Constitution” presented by Waggoner, David Paulson, and Percy Magan, was resoundingly defeated on the floor by an 85-20 vote.⁵⁴

Returning to England after the General Conference, Waggoner again took up the struggle against formalized organizational authority at a joint meeting of the recently formed British Union Conference and South England Conference convened at Swansea on the coast of Wales, May 29-June 7, 1903. Ironically, he had been appointed vice president of the British Union and president of the Southern England Conference in 1902. Nonetheless, Waggoner doggedly crusaded against plans for what he called “fixed creed constitutions” in his daily presentations. In the end, though, he once again faced thoroughgoing defeat.⁵⁵

The Swansea Conference signaled an end to E. J. Waggoner’s ministry in England. Though the factors that went into his decision are not entirely clear, he accepted a call to teach at Emmanuel Missionary College, newly-established by educational reformers Edward A. Sutherland and Percy T. Magan at Berrien Springs, Michigan.

It was around the time of Waggoner’s arrival in Berrien Springs in October 1903, that Ellen White, after delaying in hope for an opportunity to speak with him in person, confronted Waggoner with two letters about concerns that had been building since 1901. She gave him a stark warning against pantheistic tendencies such as found in Dr. Kellogg’s controversial book, *The Living Temple*, calling them “fanciful views of God” which were similar to a “misrepresentation of God” that she was called upon to oppose at the “beginning” of her work when she was seventeen years old. Such views she declared, would result in “apostasy, spiritualism, [and] free loveism.”⁵⁶

Ellen White also called Waggoner out for his recent enthusiasm about “new light” regarding “spiritual affinities.” The gist was that a person could have such an “affinity” with a person who was not his or her spouse in this world and then be married to that person in heaven. In her second letter, she was even more direct in confronting Waggoner’s subtle, but adulterous “free loveism,” warning that “Satan . . . hopes to lead you into the mazes of spiritualism. He hopes to wean your affections from your wife, and to fix them upon another woman.”⁵⁷

For the next several months, though, Waggoner’s life seemed to move forward in a relatively placid manner. Despite the privations of life on the partially-constructed rural campus, Waggoner’s daughters seemed to thrive and there is no record of difficulty surrounding his work during the 1903-1904 academic year.⁵⁸

Disaffections (1904-1916)

In 1904, however, against the counsel of Ellen White, Waggoner made a fateful move to Battle Creek, at the behest of Dr. Kellogg, who by then was on the brink of a final break with the Adventist denomination. Kellogg apparently gave Waggoner employment in connection with Battle Creek Sanitarium or the American Medical Missionary College. Though not all the details are clear, Waggoner’s duties included editing, along with G. C.

Tenney, a monthly periodical, the *Medical Missionary*, published by the Michigan Sanitarium and Benevolent Association, the corporation that controlled Battle Creek Sanitarium. The final appearance of Waggoner's name in the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* is as an editor of the *Medical Missionary* in the 1906 edition, the same year that the sanitarium under Dr. Kellogg's leadership formally separated from the denomination.⁵⁹

It was in Battle Creek during 1904 and 1905 that the circumstances behind Ellen White's sharp warnings about the dangerous direction Waggoner was taking, and his failure to take the corrective action she urged, came to light with devastating consequences. Edith Eliza Adams (1869-1945), an unmarried British woman who had been an editorial assistant to Waggoner during his latter years in England, also came to Battle Creek in 1904 where she was employed as a medical librarian at the Sanitarium.⁶⁰ The renewal of the close relationship they had formed in England eventuated in Ellet's wife, Jessie, suing for divorce, citing adultery as the grounds, in 1905. Waggoner vociferously denied the adultery charge, yet compelling evidence indicates that while they were in England Edith had replaced Jessie at the center of his affections. It was with Edith that he shared the "spiritual affinity" that, he imagined, destined them to be united in eternity. After the Waggoners' divorce was finalized at the end of 1905, Ellet and Edith united in earthly marriage in April of 1907.⁶¹

Soon after their marriage, they moved to Denmark where Ellet found employment teaching English to university students. Frequent visits to Skodsborg, where the church operated a sanitarium, kept them connected with Adventists.⁶²

In 1909, they returned to Battle Creek where, according to a newspaper article, Ellet planned to update his medical training by attending classes at the American Medical Missionary College, with a view towards resuming practice as a physician. No evidence survives to indicate that these plans came to fruition. According to the later account by his daughter Pearl, Waggoner took employment at the Sanitarium mainly doing laboratory work but also teaching "as chaplain, and in Sabbath school, etc."⁶³

After graduating from Washington Missionary College in 1916, Pearl married Ellis Howard and the newlyweds, on their way to mission service in Peru, stopped in Battle Creek for a farewell visit with her father. During that visit, on May 28, 1916, Ellet J. Waggoner died suddenly from a heart attack at the age of 61.⁶⁴

Legacy

Alonzo T. Jones, though likewise alienated from the organized denominational work, delivered the funeral homily at the service held at the Battle Creek Tabernacle for his "blood brother in the blood of the everlasting covenant." In his eloquent tribute, Jones declared:

Only those who knew Dr. Waggoner intimately were prepared to properly estimate his real worth. He was so unassuming, so gentle as not to attract attention to himself. His knowledge of the Scriptures was broad and profound, and he carefully put all that knowledge to practical use in his own life. As a preacher and expositor of

the Bible he was excelled by very few. As a comrade and a brother he was most obliging and kindly — this I know personally from the relationship of a friend and brother of thirty-two years. Never a word of criticism or unkindness concerning others escaped his lips or were permitted to dwell in his heart.⁶⁵

While the Edith Adams affair and accompanying speculations about “affinities” tarnished Waggoner’s legacy, theological rifts that surfaced in Adventism during the 1950s have both magnified and complicated his long term influence. Debates over exactly what Waggoner taught and when and why it was important abound and continue to the present.⁶⁶ Did Waggoner help a legalism-prone Adventist church in 1888 to recover justification by faith as taught by the Protestant reformers and then lose his way theologically? Or did Waggoner in 1888 help Adventists understand how it was only through faith that they could lead lives of obedience to God’s law, and then go on to develop his teachings in ways that help them better understand how that experience connected with their distinctive message and mission for the last days?⁶⁷ How should Ellen White’s vigorous support for Waggoner (until 1903) factor into evaluation of his theology, especially as it developed after 1888?⁶⁸

However these questions are answered, the fact that they have been and continue to be debated with passion and analyzed with careful scholarship is indicative of the remarkable long-term influence of Waggoner’s work. Yet, such debates should not be permitted to obscure Waggoner’s achievement, with Jones, in connection with the 1888 episode. They established two markers identifying Seventh-day Adventism with core tenets of Protestant Christianity. Affirmed by the church’s prophet, this two-fold legacy has endured, even though the church has often struggled to live up to it in practice:

1. *Righteousness by faith in Christ alone.* The “message of the gospel of [God’s] grace” uplifted by Jones and Waggoner, “was to be given to the church in clear and distinct lines, that the world should no longer say, Seventh-day Adventists talk the law, the law, but do not preach or believe Christ,” Ellen White wrote in 1895.⁶⁹
2. *The authority of Scripture, understood through continuously renewed study, over all other forms of church authority*

The great error with churches in all ages has been to reach a certain point in their understanding of Bible truth and there stop. There they anchored. . . .

But from this meeting [in 1888] there will be a different mold ever after upon the work. Our brethren will feel the need of investigating the evidences of our faith far more critically for themselves.⁷⁰

That which God gives His servants to speak today would not perhaps have been present truth twenty years ago, but it is God’s message for this time.⁷¹

E. J. Waggoner’s Writings

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3. "Iowa, County Marriages, 1834-1934," at "Ellet J. Waggoner," *FamilySearch*, accessed July 26, 2021, <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/sources/96YL-VYG>.
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19. Clinton Wahlen provides a valuable summary of what can be derived from these sources regarding each of Waggoner's presentations at the 1888 conference in "What Did E. J. Waggoner Say at Minneapolis?," *Adventist Heritage* 13, No. 1 (Winter 1988): 22-37. The original sources have been assembled in *Manuscripts and Memories of Minneapolis* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1988), accessible at Ellen G. White Writings, <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/936/info>.
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22. Ellen G. White, "A Call to a Deeper Study of the Word," Manuscript 15, November 1888, in *1888 Materials*, 163. George Knight discusses Butler's endeavor to manipulate Ellen White's authority, her refusal to go along, and the significance of this episode for Adventism's claim to uphold

the Bible as the highest authority in *A Search for Identity*, 95-98.

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46. Wahlen, in "What Did E.J. Waggoner Say at Minneapolis?," makes a strong case that Waggoner at no point expressed his soteriology in terms of Reformation-era debates and that for him righteousness by faith always entailed experiential transformation of the believer. In *Ellet Joseph Waggoner: The Myth and the Man* (Fallbrook, CA: Verdict Publications, 1979) contended that Waggoner's writing up to 1888 was influenced by the Reformers' soteriology, yet he also acknowledges that even at this point it was clear that Waggoner had "not fully penetrated the Reformation position" (see 79-80).
47. [E.J. Waggoner], "Being Justified," *Present Truth*, October 20, 1892, 324.
48. Whidden, 290.
49. [E.J. Waggoner], "Why Did Christ Die?," *Present Truth*, September 21, 1893, 388, quoted in Whidden, 271-272. According to Whidden, following McMahon, Waggoner accepted the teaching of the Cambridge University biblical scholar and Bishop of Durham, B. F. Westcott (1825-1901) that blood is life thus Christ died so that he might impart his life blood to sinful humanity; Whidden, 169.
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66. For navigation through these debates see George R. Knight, *End-Time Events and the Last Generation: The Explosive 1950s* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2018).
67. Whidden's 2008 biography, *E.J. Waggoner*, intersperses engaging narrative of Waggoner's life story with sections of extended analysis of these and other theological questions.
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