

Albany Conference

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Albany conference of Millerite Adventist leaders was held in Albany, New York, from April 29 to May 1, 1845.

The Conference

The Millerite movement had been an inclusive movement, inviting people of all denominations to join in preaching its message of the imminent return of Christ. But following the movement's pivotal disappointment in October 1844, the great variety of explanations offered to rationalize what had happened fragmented the movement. The ensuing rapid loss of coherence and momentum contributed to great confusion and dissension among former Millerites. According to David Arthur, it is in this context that the leaders of the movement decided to call a conference "for the purpose of defining true Adventism and combatting what they perceived as pernicious errors."¹ The conference was not "designed to embrace all who called themselves Adventists regardless of views." Rather, it was exclusive and intended to stem the tide of radicalism that had appeared since October 1844. The conference became a catalyst that marked the development of a formal Adventist church identity, giving shape to earlier efforts to systematize the Millerite movement.²

During three days of discussion, the attendees of the conference conferred together on the state of post-Millerite Adventism in various parts of the country and what concerted steps they could take in common to further advance "the cause of truth ... and preparation of man for the near Advent of the Saviour."³ One of their first actions was to adopt a statement of ten beliefs reaffirming the Millerite premillennialist understanding of the second advent of Christ (articles 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8), but without any provisions for time calculations. Other articles discussed the importance of repentance and living a godly life before the second advent (article 4), the relationship between ancient Israel and the church (article 7), the duty of ministers (article 9), and the belief that all the redeemed, including the departed saints, will receive their eternal inheritance together at the second advent (article 10).⁴

The conference also laid plans to continue the spread of the second advent message. They recommended that local congregations of Adventist believers continue to gather for worship, for the observance of the Gospel ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper), and for Sunday schools. They also recommended that they follow a

congregational system of church governance, similar to that of the Baptists and Christian Connexion. They discontinued camp meetings and, in their stead, suggested that smaller conferences be held as a method of reaching new areas.⁵

According to Arthur, the Albany conference was both an ending and a beginning. It marked the closing phase of the Millerite movement, during which, believers had submerged all differences in the great task of spreading the news of God's impending judgment and Christ's coming kingdom. After October 22, 1844, old differences emerged and new ones arose, and together they outweighed the common bonds that had held Adventists together. The Albany conference was called to declare once again the "original Advent faith" and to chart its future course. In this it was successful. Yet its declarations and actions made permanent the existing divisions among Adventists and were the cause of future dissension among its moderate supporters.⁶

On a more solemn note, the conference condemned some "fatal and delusive" teachings and warned Adventist believers against them. First, it rejected a postmillennialist understanding of the conversion of the world, or most of it, before the second advent of Christ. If anything, the Millerite movement had been strongly premillennialist and taught that the destruction of the world, not its redemption, was imminent. It had no inclination toward some forms of universalist salvation, or that wicked and redeemed people would cohabit in God's kingdom during the millennium. Second, the conference also warned against the teaching of the restoration of Israel in Palestine before the second advent, or that Judaism held a special place in end-time events. Last, it cautioned against preachers who made "great pretensions to special illumination" who deceived others with their false teachings and who encouraged despicable religious practices such as "promiscuous feet-washing and the salutation kiss."⁷ To various forms of radical religious expressions that the Millerite movement had unevenly fostered, the Albany conference preferred formal discipline and less charismatic outbursts.⁸ According to George Knight, the conference "identified, unified, and strengthened the moderate Adventists in their defense of the original advent faith," and a core group of educated leaders emerged from the conference to replace an aging William Miller.⁹

Legacy

The Albany conference was a turning point for Adventism, and its effects were widely felt in eastern North America. Although short-lived, Millerism challenged the claims of many established denominations. Its doctrine of the imminent return of Christ led to a breakdown of denominational loyalties and generated a strong appeal among those sections of the population which were concerned with their religious salvation. In the end, however, Millerism produced its own denominations and the Albany conference essentially set in motion this institutionalization process. In the next two decades, Millerism eventually produced four Adventist denominations: Evangelical Adventists (1858), Advent Christians (1860), Life and Advent Union (1863), and Seventh-day Adventists (1863). These denominations were the result of divergent doctrinal views that already

divided Adventist believers even at the time of the Albany conference but became more permanent as a result of the conference.

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. David T. Arthur, "After the Great Disappointment: To Albany and Beyond," *Adventist Heritage* 3, 1 (1974): 7.
2. David L. Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets: Millerites and Dissenting Religion in Upstate New York, 1800-1850*, American Academy of Religion Studies in Religion 38 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 155.
3. Isaac C. Wellcome, *History of the Second Advent Message and Mission, Doctrine and People* (Yarmouth, ME: I. C. Wellcome, 1874), 415-16.
4. "Mutual Conference of Adventists at Albany," *Advent Herald*, May 14, 1845, 105-08; Wellcome, *History of the Second Advent Message and Mission*, 416-19. See also, Denis Fortin, "Nineteenth-century Evangelicalism and Early Adventist Statements of Beliefs," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 36, 1 (Spring 1998): 51-67.

5. "Mutual Conference of Adventists at Albany," *Advent Herald*, May 14, 1845, 105-08; Wellcome, *History of the Second Advent Message and Mission*, 419-21.
6. Arthur, "After the Great Disappointment," 58. See also Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets*, 155.
7. "Mutual Conference of Adventists at Albany," *Advent Herald*, May 14, 1845, 105-08; Wellcome, *History of the Second Advent Message and Mission*, 421-23.
8. Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets*, 155.
9. George R. Knight, *Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1993), 272-273.

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