

Fitch, Charles

(1804–1844)

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Charles Fitch

Source: Adventist Digital Library.

Charles Fitch was a prominent New England clergyman who became a leading figure in the Millerite movement and thereby linked the Second Great Awakening's currents of revival and social reform with Adventism.

Education, Marriage, and Early Ministry (1804-1836)

Charles Fitch was born in Hampton, Connecticut, on December 27, 1804, to Daniel and Zipporah Allen Fitch (1762-1855; 1762-1846). He was their fifth child.¹ Daniel Fitch served in the Continental army in the American War of Independence from England from 1777-1783.²

When about 20 years old, Charles enrolled at Brown University where he studied from 1825-1826 but left before earning a degree.³ Alongside his education, Fitch began pastoring the Congregational church in Holliston, Massachusetts, on January 4, 1825.⁴

Charles Fitch left Holliston for Abington, Connecticut where he began his ministry on April 30, 1828. With him as pastor a "very powerful revival was experienced in 1831," and in January 1832, 33 people joined his church, making for a total of 59 members added during his entire ministry there.⁵ Shortly after beginning his pastorate at Abington, Charles Fitch married Zerviah Roath on May 19, 1828.⁶ They had seven children who can be identified by name from various sources: Charles, William, Mary Elizabeth, Robert, Ellen, Libby, and Jennie.⁷

Fitch then continued his ministry at the Congregational church in Warren, Massachusetts, from 1832 to 1834.⁸ From there he went to the Fourth Congregational church in Hartford, Connecticut, before pastoring the Marlboro Chapel, First Free Congregational Church, in Boston, Massachusetts, beginning May 24, 1836.⁹

Revivalist and Radical Reformer (1836-1841)

In the mid-1830s, Fitch became closely associated with the leading revivalist of the Second Great Awakening, Charles Finney. In 1836 Fitch was called upon to deliver the dedicatory sermon for the opening of Finney's Broadway Tabernacle in New York City. Completion of the structure had been delayed when a mob, stirred up by reports to the effect that white people would be compelled to sit "promiscuously" with colored in the church, set it on fire.¹⁰

Fitch developed strong convictions about the abolition of slavery, and when he became convinced about an idea or cause, he was not one to rest satisfied with tentative, moderate or gradual steps. In his pamphlet *Slaveholding Weighed in the Balance of Truth*, published in 1837, Fitch attacked the institution and those who remained silent about it in language so severe that some said he was "out-Garrisoning Garrison."¹¹ This was a reference to the renowned abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison who, as editor of the *Liberator*, launched in January 1831, stirred outrage both in the South and the North with unsparing denunciations of the slave system as a sin against God that must be immediately abolished.

Soon after publishing his 1837 pamphlet, however, Fitch mounted an all-out attack *against* Garrison, contributing to a major schism developing within the abolitionist camp. Garrison's opponents challenged his rejection of partisan politics as a means of reform and charged him with causing unnecessary division in the antislavery cause with his espousal of other controversial reforms, such as nonresistance and equal rights for women, and with his attacks on the evangelical clergy. Fitch led the charge on the latter issue, as one of two principal authors of an "Appeal of Clerical Abolitionists on Anti-Slavery Measures."¹²

Fitch first encountered William Miller's Second Advent teachings in 1838 when he obtained a copy of Miller's public lectures. The book so enamored him that he read it six times, completely convinced of its truth. Filled with excitement, he immediately began preaching Miller's message and presented it to colleagues at a ministerial association meeting. To his chagrin, Fitch's brother ministers laughed him to scorn, calling the teaching "moonshine." As quickly as he had taken up the message, the embarrassed preacher dropped it.¹³

After pastoring in Boston for over three years, Fitch's ministry led him to the Newark, New Jersey Presbyterian church on September 1, 1839.¹⁴ That same year he charged into another theological war zone. In a book entitled *Views of Sanctification*, he came out fully for Charles Finney's controversial doctrine of holiness. Called "Oberlin perfection" for the Ohio college where Finney had become president, it defined holiness as "perfection of the will" and held that perfection in this sense was possible for all Christians after their initial conversion. From the standpoint of orthodox Calvinism, struggling to maintain its status as the reigning theology in the

Congregational and Presbyterian denominations, "Oberlin perfection" amounted to rank heresy. Fitch's book and articles in Oberlin-based periodicals made him a high-profile advocate of the doctrine. Thus, the Newark, New Jersey Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church placed him on trial for heresy. This time, he did not back down from conviction. He resigned from the Presbyterian ministry in April 1841, declaring himself a full-time evangelist "for the promotion of holiness."¹⁵

During his time in Newark, Fitch's conscience had begun troubling him about his vehement attack on Garrison in 1837. He became convicted that he had been motivated by selfish desire for status and reputation in the ministerial profession. On January 9, 1840, he sent an apology to the *Liberator* editor, stating that he had been moved to do so by the thought of "Jesus Christ in the clouds of heaven, coming to judge the world, and to establish His reign of holiness and righteousness and blessedness over the pure of heart."¹⁶

Despite his reference to the return of Christ, Fitch's new dedication to holiness probably influenced his confession to Garrison more directly than the specifically Millerite teachings that he had renounced. He was none too happy with a visit from Josiah Litch, a leading Millerite preacher, that took place not long after Fitch's resignation from the Presbyterian ministry in 1841. But, as he read the literature Litch left, Charles Fitch once again came under the conviction of inconvenient truth. That Fall he made public his renewed faith in the near Second Advent and returned to proclaiming it, now with unstinting zeal.¹⁷

Second Advent Revivalist (1841-1843)

Among the Millerites, Fitch became a very sought-after speaker. From December 1841 to July 1842 he could not keep up with half of the requests sent to him. He preached once a day, plus sixty times beyond that during this time period. He went to all of the New England states, his usual practice being to preach on holiness in the afternoon, followed by a lecture on the second advent in the evening.¹⁸ In August, Fitch spoke along with Millerite leader Joshua Himes at Albany, New York, with "from four to six thousand" people in attendance.¹⁹ The Millerite "Great Tent" – its vast size in itself an attraction to the curious – was used for the meetings.²⁰

After a short-lived pastorate at Winter Street church in Haverhill, Massachusetts (May 23, 1841 to May 8, 1842) came to an end,²¹ Fitch devoted much of his energies to spreading the Second Advent message in Ohio, where the respect of his Oberlin friends earned him a hearing. His presentations and articles made Millerism a hot topic in Oberlin during 1842 and 1843. He did not make much of a dent in Oberlin's identification with postmillennialism – the widely-held view that revived holiness and social reform would lead to a millennium on earth after which Christ would return. However, Fitch's witness did lead some individuals to change their views, including one of the professors.²²

In late 1842, Fitch moved to Cleveland, Ohio, and launched a periodical entitled *The Second Advent of Christ*, the first issue coming out on January 18, 1843.²³ He also held nightly meetings in Cleveland. One night, as he was making an appeal at the end of a lecture, a certain man named Tom Cotterell descended the gallery and

stumbled when almost at the bottom. As everyone began to laugh, Fitch said, "Never mind, brother, it is better to stumble into heaven than to walk straight into hell."²⁴ Beyond preaching and editing the periodical, Fitch's actions, testified to his belief in the second advent: in a letter published in the *Signs of the Times*, Fitch requested that his estates in the east be sold, and the proceeds sent to him in the form of "Second Advent publications" for use in disseminating the message more rapidly.²⁵

As a Second Advent revivalist, Fitch developed useful aids to spreading the message. He used a carved wooden image of the statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 2. As he was speaking of the prophecies on the rise and fall of kingdoms, each part of the statue that corresponded to that respective kingdom was removed, until only the feet of iron and clay were left.²⁶ This demonstrative figure was only one of Fitch's contributions to Adventist evangelism.²⁷ He and a fellow minister, Apollos Hale, created the "1843 Chart," which illustrated the main arguments for the coming of Christ in the year 1843. This chart was soon the main visual that the Millerites used.²⁸ It depicted the statue of Daniel 2, the beasts from Daniel 7 and 8, and several other illustrations from the books of Daniel and Revelation.

Fitch and Hale unveiled the chart at the May 1842 General Conference of Adventists in Boston. The assembly decided to produce 300 of them. Joseph Bates, chair of the meeting, wrote that "these brethren had been doing what the Lord had shown Habbakuk [sic] in his vision 2468 years before, saying, 'Write the vision and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it. For the vision is yet for an appointed time.'"²⁹

In February 1843, William Lloyd Garrison published an assessment of William Miller and his leading associates in the *Liberator* that was both appreciative and critical. About Fitch, Garrison wrote:

Mr. Fitch (another whole-hearted supporter of Mr. Miller) is well known to the abolitionists of the United States. No one who knows him can doubt his honesty or ability; but his mind appears to be impulsive, and it is, perhaps, fortunate for his consistency, that with the expiration of the present year, will cease all necessity for him to tax his concentrativeness on the subject of "the Second Advent near."³⁰

While poking fun at Fitch's penchant for new enthusiasms, Garrison gave an emphatic endorsement of the preacher's abolitionist credentials and personal integrity, just as he did in the same editorial for the two other foremost leaders of the Second Advent cause, William Miller and Joshua V. Himes.

Come out of Babylon – Now! (1843-1844)

Since 1831 Miller had been preaching, based on his exposition of the biblical prophecies, that he expected Christ would return "about the year 1843." When pressed to be more specific, further study led him to conclude that the crucial 2,300 day-year prophecy of Daniel 8:14 would end on March 21, 1844. As the anticipated time neared, the Millerites became more controversial than ever in the Protestant churches with which they had been affiliated. As they became more confrontational in presenting their views and more insistent about a

specific and rapidly nearing time, their churches became less willing to tolerate them. Congregations began to ban Millerites services from their houses of worship. Some churches expelled Millerites who refused to keep quiet about their views. Some denominational authorities de-frocked ministers who preached the Second Advent, or exerted financial pressure against them.³¹

As conflict intensified Charles Fitch preached a fiery sermon on July 26, 1843 entitled "Come Out of Her, My People," based on Revelation 14:8 and 18:1-5, passages containing the call to come out of the corrupt and oppressive system represented by "Babylon." Widely circulated in pamphlet form, this sermon, more than anything else, would fix Fitch's place in Adventist history. Using his talent for hard-hitting polemics to the fullest, he identified all church's rejecting the message of Christ's soon second advent as "Babylon," and warned all who wished to be found in Christ to come out of them. Anyone opposed to the teaching of the premillennial, imminent return of Christ, and the establishment of his literal reign on earth he declared to be "Antichrist."³²

Fitch also broke new ground in applying the apocalyptic symbol of "Babylon" not just to the papacy, as Protestants had done for three hundred years, but to the Protestant denominations that had "fallen" because of their obstinate opposition to the Second Advent message sent from God. In sum, Fitch declared: "If you are a Christian, *come out of Babylon*. If you intend to be found a Christian when Christ appears, *come out of Babylon*, and come out Now!"³³

William Miller and other leaders who were more on the cautious side never fully accepted Fitch's message, but it struck a chord throughout the ranks of the movement. Thus, "coming out of Babylon" became a central feature of the Second Advent movement in its final stages. According to an estimate generally regarded as conservative, some 50,000 Millerites left or were expelled from their churches.³⁴

Though Fitch's message was radical by any measure, he was adapting a theme well-recognized in the reform culture that Millerites inhabited. In March 1843, for example, about four months before publication of Fitch's sermon, the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society passed a resolution declaring that "the sectarian [Protestant] denominations of New-England should, on account of the sanction and support they afford to slavery, be considered and treated, by every friend of humanity, as the 'Babylon of apocalyptic vision' 'the habitation of devils, the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird.'"³⁵ Radical abolitionists during the 1840s directed the come-outer message to government as well as the churches. "No Union with Slaveholders," became their slogan as they called upon the free states to "come out" of the federal Union that included slave states, just as the abolitionists had come out of the churches.³⁶

Fitch varied the theme in defining Babylon as "everything that rises in opposition to the personal reign of Christ on David's throne, and to the revealed time for his appearing." But his further arguments as to why the term "Babylon" fit "Protestant Christendom" paralleled the charges leveled at "nominal" Christianity by other abolitionist come-outers:

Is she not engaged, for her own aggrandizement, in every species of merchandise ascribed to Babylon, even to slaves and the souls of men? The spirit of oppression reigns, in greater or less portions of the leading sects, unrebuked; and a man may sell or buy his fellow-man, and then sit at the communion table, or even minister at the altar of God, and by the mass of Protestant Christendom go unreprieved. Lust for power is seen among all the sects, and lust for gold is practically regarded by the multitude of Christ's professed disciples as a virtue, and they may resort to any means for acquiring wealth which does not amount to positive transgression of human law, and yet stand in the church as accredited members.³⁷

On December 5, 1843, William – Charles Fitch's seven-year-old son – died. Twenty-two days later, on December 27, Robert, not yet two years old, also passed away.³⁸ "Two dear boys are thus taken in a single month," wrote Fitch.³⁹ Robert was now the fourth child that the Fitch family laid in the grave, two having previously died in the east.⁴⁰

Following the deaths of his two sons, Fitch wrote to George Storrs, a fellow Second Advent preacher, on January 25, 1844:

As you have been fighting the Lords [sic] battles alone, on the subject of the state of the dead, and of the final doom of the wicked, I write this to say that I am at last[,] after much thought and prayer, and a full conviction of duty to God, prepared to take my stand by your side. I am thoroughly converted to the Bible truth, that "the dead know not anything."⁴¹

Despite negative feedback from his congregation in Cleveland, and opposition from other Millerite leaders, Fitch declared to Storrs his determination "henceforth to believe and teach that when a man is dead, he *is* dead, and that when a man is 'cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, and burned up, root and branch,' and 'utterly consumed with terrors,' he cannot after that be eternally alive."⁴² Fitch thus "was the only top leader in the 1843 movement to accept conditionalism and annihilationism in the 1840s."⁴³

Fitch also adopted another departure from his Congregationalist background – baptism by immersion. On January 23, 1844, Charles and Zerviah Fitch were baptized by immersion, along with 19 other people, in Youngstown, Ohio.⁴⁴

Fitch remained strong in his convictions on the Second Advent of Christ after the "first disappointment" when Christ did not return by March 21, 1844. In May he preached in Cincinnati, with close to 5,000 people coming to hear him each evening,⁴⁵ and he continued to travel and preach extensively throughout the summer of 1844.⁴⁶ In September, at a camp meeting in St. Georges, Delaware, Fitch baptized Josiah Litch, the one who had first led him into the Second Advent message.⁴⁷ As he was speaking in Rochester, New York, Fitch stated that "he had a presentiment that he must sleep a little while before the coming of the Lord."⁴⁸ After this impression, he baptized "three successive parties in Lake Erie on a cold, windy day."⁴⁹ His daughter Mary Elizabeth Fitch, recounted that he started for home twice, but turned back to baptize new candidates.⁵⁰

After this, Fitch went to Buffalo where a severe fever attacked him. He died on October 14, eight days before the date to which he with other believers now looked with joyful anticipation for Christ's return, October 22, 1844.⁵¹ His dying words were, "I believe in the promises of God."⁵² A correspondent wrote the *Midnight Cry!* editors on October 17 that "Sister Fitch" remained in Buffalo, "without a tear, expecting to meet her husband very soon."⁵³

Legacy

Fitch was in the top tier of Millerite movement leadership. His uncompromising call in 1843 for all those who claim allegiance to Christ to separate from the established denominations comprising Protestant Christendom in America is an historical landmark in the process by which a separate denomination called Seventh-day Adventist eventually came into existence. Seventh-day Adventists would come to regard the declaration "Babylon is fallen" that Fitch sounded in 1843 as a fulfillment of apocalyptic prophecy – the second of the "three angel's messages" in Revelation 14:6-12, the passage that more clearly than any other revealed the identity and purpose of their movement preparatory to the second advent of Christ.

Conditional immortality and baptism by immersion – two other convictions that Fitch broke with the past to embrace – would also be accepted by the Seventh-day Adventists and would be key points distinguishing them from other Adventist groups that formed in the years following 1844 and from other Christian denominations more broadly.

Finally, Fitch's social radicalism as an abolitionist, inseparable from his Christian commitment, also leaves a legacy with unavoidable implications for all quests for freedom from oppressive systems and institutions.

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