

# Davis, William Cummins (1760–1831)

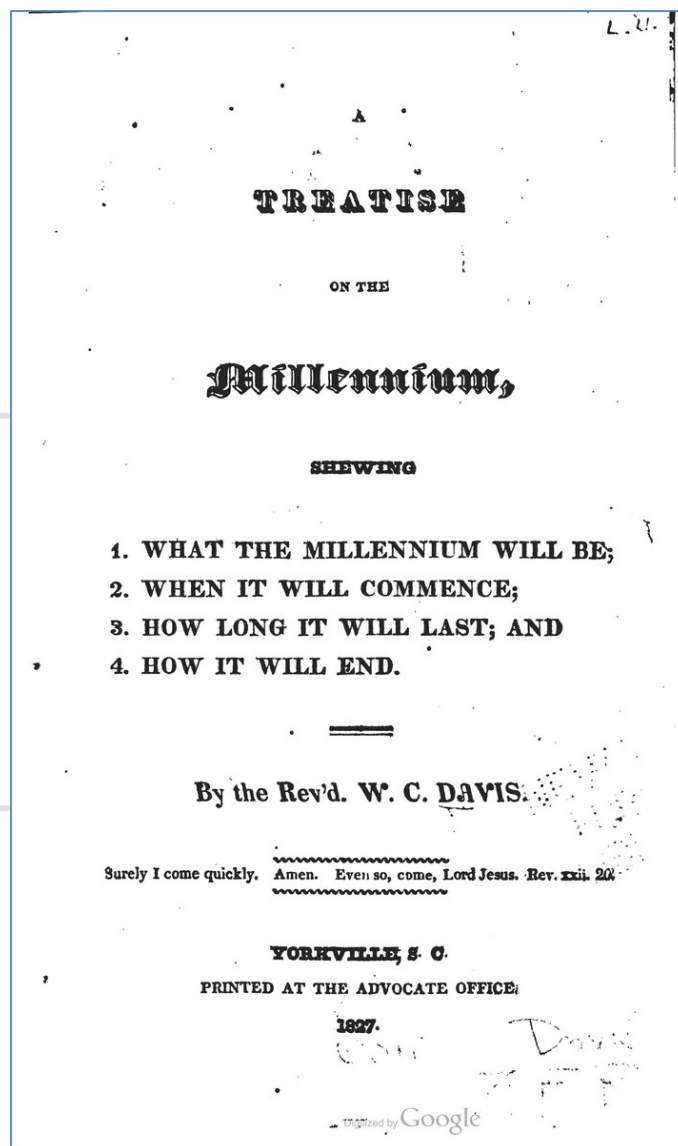
## DOUGLAS MORGAN

Douglas Morgan is a graduate of Union College (B.A., theology, 1978) in Lincoln, Nebraska and the University of Chicago (Ph.D., history of Christianity, 1992). He has served on the faculties of Washington Adventist University in Takoma Park, Maryland and Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee. His publications include *Adventism and the American Republic* (University of Tennessee Press, 2001) and *Lewis C. Sheafe: Apostle to Black America* (Review and Herald, 2010). He is the ESDA assistant editor for North America.

William C. Davis was a Presbyterian minister in the southern United States whose expositions on biblical prophecy and early opposition to slavery made him a precursor to both the abolitionist and Second Advent movements that arose in America during the 1830s. In a work published in 1811, Davis became the first American author to contend that the 2300-day prophecy of Daniel 8:14 would be fulfilled in the 1840s.

## Family

William's parents, David Davis (1713-1776) and Elizabeth James Davis (1721-1788) were of Welsh descent. They settled in Cumberland County on the frontier of colonial Pennsylvania, then moved to Little Cove in Franklin County. Elizabeth's father, William James (1690-1756), was a Seventh Day Baptist minister. In 1756, near the outset of the French and Indian (Seven Years') War, James was killed during an attack on a small fort that David Davis constructed at Little Cove. The Davis family subsequently moved to Frederick, Maryland, where William was born on September 16, 1760, the sixth of nine children.<sup>1</sup>



Credit: Google Books

Around 1768 David Davis took his family further south, settling in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. It would be here, in a region comprising southwestern North Carolina and nearby counties in northwestern South Carolina, that the career of William C. Davis would unfold. He married Isabella McCleary (d. 1834), who bore at least six children, the eldest in 1781 and the youngest in 1805.<sup>2</sup>

## Education and Ministry in the Carolinas

William was among the 60 to 80 students enrolled at Mount Zion College in Winnsboro, South Carolina, when it opened in 1785. The school's founding president, Rev. Thomas McCaule, envisioned it as the "Log College" of the South, patterned after his alma mater, the College of New Jersey, later Princeton University but initially named Log College. Davis's scholarship apparently stood out for he was identified as part of the teaching faculty even while a student. He and three others comprised the first graduating class in 1787, each receiving a baccalaureate degree and a license to preach.<sup>3</sup>

In 1789, Davis was ordained and called to serve two churches in the Presbytery of South Carolina—the Nazareth Church in Spartanburg County and the Milford Church in Greenville County. He became known as a "powerful and popular preacher."<sup>4</sup> However, he caused "great offence to many" in the Nazareth congregation when, in defiance of tradition, he replaced the Scottish Psalter with Isaac Watts's Psalm paraphrases and hymns.<sup>5</sup> In 1793 he accepted the pastorate of the Olney Church, just across the state line in North Carolina.

Despite "worship wars" and other controversies, Davis inspired confidence as a leader. He was elected moderator of the South Carolina Presbytery for three one-year terms between 1790 and 1794, moderator of the Concord Presbytery (North Carolina) in 1799, moderator of the Synod of the Carolinas in 1802, and commissioner to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. in 1797, 1804, and 1810. By avoiding controversy, Davis might have enjoyed a career of relative comfort and prestige in denominational leadership.<sup>6</sup> However, his deep convictions and reforming zeal drove him to risk confrontation and division rather than compromise truth and righteousness. Dissent would become the hallmark of his career and shape his legacy.

## Controversial Theologian

Davis was a serious, independent-minded theologian and biblical exegete who believed it his right and duty to set forth the truth as he understood it, even if it did not entirely conform to tradition. Soon after beginning a new pastorate in 1806 at the Bullock Creek Presbyterian Church in York District, South Carolina, he was accused of going contrary to the Westminster Confession—the defining creed of Presbyterianism. His charismatic preaching seemed to favor the "New Divinity" that was dividing Congregationalist and Presbyterian churches nationwide with a modification of Calvinism that gave greater scope to human responsibility. Davis in fact held to the essential tenets of Calvinism, but in his doctrinal expositions he opposed the "staunch predestinarians"

who thought it futile to make any effort to believe “till God gives them the faith.”<sup>7</sup>

After a complicated series of deliberations in the Carolina jurisdictions, Davis’s case came before the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church that convened in Philadelphia in May 1810. Based on an examination of his 628-page book *The Gospel Plan, or a Systematical Treatise on The Leading Doctrines of Salvation* (1809), the Assembly judged that Davis taught eight “doctrines” that were “of very dangerous tendency.” From a later perspective the dispute seems to have epitomized theological hairsplitting, but the national body urged that local presbyteries deal with anyone found advocating such teachings within their jurisdictions.<sup>8</sup> It is possible that desire to suppress Davis’s antislavery voice was a factor motivating the denominational actions against him, but not likely that it was central. Some of the strongest opponents of his theological innovations were also opponents of slavery.<sup>9</sup>

## The Independent Presbyterian Church

Davis, supported by a large majority in the two churches he pastored, announced his withdrawal from the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., on October 15, 1810, before the Concord Presbytery could complete proceedings against him. He charged that the General Assembly had been superficial in its examination of this theology and had relied solely on the Westminster Confession rather than the Bible in formulating its condemnations. He honored his Presbyterian heritage and respected its creed, but, he declared, “I am not disposed to knock out my brains as a compliment to my ancestors, dearly as I love them.”<sup>10</sup> The church is on the road to “popery,” Davis warned, “when the Bible is kept out of sight, and creeds, and confessions, and votes of Synods and councils are put in its place.”<sup>11</sup>

Under Davis’s leadership, five congregations joined together to form a new denomination, albeit small and regional, the Independent Presbyterian Church. It did not differ theologically from the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., but adopted a congregationalist form of governance and affirmed only two essential doctrines—justification by Christ alone and the necessity of living “a sober, righteous, and godly life.”<sup>12</sup>

## “An Early Advocate of Abolition”

Davis’s first publicly expressed denunciation of slavery on record was in an ordination sermon preached at a meeting of the South Carolina Presbytery in 1794. Though no written copy or summary of the sermon is extant, Alabama clergyman J. R. Witherspoon later wrote that Davis “denounced all his fellow-christians who owned slaves.” He described Davis as an “early *advocate* of abolition,” but did not mean it as a compliment. Witherspoon instead praised a pro-slavery rejoinder by Dr. Thomas Reese for winning the support of the entire presbytery.<sup>13</sup>

Davis maintained his unpopular views and referred to them in *The Gospel Plan* and subsequent works. He pointed out the incompatibility of slavery with the rights to freedom and equality encapsulated in the Declaration of Independence and with the “mild dictates of the gospel which direct us to do as we would be done by, according to the general spirit of the law and the prophets.” He also foresaw disaster for the republican form of government resulting from perpetuation of the institution over the next generation, both because of its impact “on those on whom we bind the iron fetters of eternal slavery” and on those “bred up in the constant habits of absolute tyranny and pride.”<sup>14</sup>

Three other Carolina clergymen influenced by Davis also came out in opposition to slavery. William Williamson (1762-1839), an enslaver himself, was ordained in the 1794 service at which Davis preached against slavery. He was also associated with Davis in revival work and may have been one of his students. Whatever Williamson’s initial reaction to the ordination sermon, he later freed his slaves and moved to Ohio in 1805. Two others—James Gilliland (1769-1845) and Robert G. Wilson (1768-1851)—students of Davis, also ended up in Ohio after speaking out against slavery in the Carolinas. Wilson eventually became president of Ohio University. These three, along with Davis, were the only Presbyterian ministers of their era in South Carolina known to have preached against slavery.<sup>15</sup>

## Advance Insight on Prophecy

In his *Evidence From Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ* published in 1836, William Miller referred to “Davis, of South Carolina,” along with Joseph Wolff, Edward Irving, and others who had previously shed light on the time revealed in Scripture for announcing the imminent return of Christ.<sup>16</sup> It was 25 years before then that William C. Davis became the first American author yet discovered to claim that the keystone of Miller’s message, the prophecy of Daniel 8:14 concerning a “cleansing of the sanctuary” at the end of 2300 days, pointed to the 1840s. In his pamphlet, *The Millennium*, published in 1811, Davis utilized the familiar “day-year” principle in calculating that the prophecy would be fulfilled in 1847. The critical interpretive breakthrough was in seeing that the starting point of the 70-week prophecy in Daniel 9 also marked the beginning of the 2300 days of Daniel 8. Johann Petri of Germany apparently first made this connection in 1768. Then the British author, John Aquila Brown, did so in an article in the *Christian Observer*, published in London in November 1810 and reprinted in Boston. It is conceivable that Davis saw this article before publishing his exposition, but it seems highly unlikely that he would have had time to absorb and incorporate Brown’s points prior to publication of *The Millennium* in January 1811.<sup>17</sup>

Recognizing uncertainties in dating the birth and crucifixion of Christ (key to the 70-week prophecy), Davis thought the 2300 days might end as late as 1848 or possibly earlier, in 1843 or 1844.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Davis’s calculation of the time period did not differ in principle from William Miller’s proclamation beginning in the 1830s that the “cleansing of the sanctuary” would take place “about the year 1843.” Also, both thought that at the close of the

2300 days the millennium (Rev. 20) would begin. However, in contrast to Miller, who thought the prophecy would be fulfilled by the return of Christ to earth to cleanse the world with fire and establish his millennial reign, Davis thought the millennium would begin with the restoration of the church to the “true worship of God” and an end “the reign of popery.” The second coming of Christ would then come at the end of the millennium rather than the beginning.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, in the standard terminology, Davis was a postmillennialist while Miller was a premillennialist. Yet Davis did not envision a steady march to a perfected world, as is sometimes attributed to postmillennialists. Rather, he saw crisis ahead, with evil powers (Napoleon, the papacy, and the Turkish emperor, he thought) stirring strife that would lead to a literal battle of Armageddon. Based on his reading of the seven seals in Revelation 6-8, Davis thought that Great Britain and the United States might be spared the direct impact of the apocalyptic battle. Yet he warned Americans against complacency because it also could well be that the “perpetual oppression” inflicted by the slave system would “call down the vengeance of heaven upon us.”<sup>20</sup>

Davis believed that the time periods found in Daniel 12 indicated that after the demise of the papacy in 1847, it would take another 30 years to extirpate the remaining vestiges of Antichrist’s influence. Then, during the 45 years beyond that, the entire world would be evangelized and the Jewish people converted to Christ. The millennium would then continue for 360,000 literal years, he reasoned, applying the day-year principle to this time period as well as the others.<sup>21</sup> Distilling his millennialist hope in verse, Davis wrote:

In forty seven we may hope  
To find the world without a Pope;  
When thirty more expel the evil,  
We’ll find the world without a Devil;  
...  
The Pope, and Devil known no more,  
Until the thousand years are o’er;  
And Jew and Gentile now the same,  
Rejoice to wear the Christian name;  
The glorious dawn of forty-seven,  
Will introduce new earth and heaven.<sup>22</sup>

## Final Years

The impact of *The Millennium* was extended with several reprints in the 1810s and 1820s, and in 1827 Davis issued a revised and expanded edition. Adding to his literary legacy, his book *Lectures on the New Testament* was published in 1820. It was the first in a planned multi-volume series but the only one published during his lifetime.<sup>23</sup>

In 1815, Davis and his son, Robert McCleary Davis, along with some of their Carolina congregants, moved to Tennessee where they planted a new church called Ebenezer in Rutherford County. When William and Robert returned to South Carolina in 1821, some members of the Ebenezer church accompanied them, and the congregation dissolved. For the final decade of his life, William Davis resumed his former pastorates in South Carolina with some shifts in responsibility to nearby congregations. After a short illness, he died on September 28, 1831, at the age of 70, and was buried in the Rose Hill Cemetery, Yorkville, South Carolina.<sup>24</sup>

## Legacy

The Independent Presbyterian Church added five new congregations during 1831 but never surpassed 500 total members. Due largely to its congregationalist polity it never sustained a united antislavery witness and finally could not maintain a united existence. The Independent congregations in the Carolinas increasingly accommodated slaveholding and in 1863, during the Civil War, joined the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States. However, Independents in Mississippi became firmer in their opposition to slavery and, despite their Deep South location, dedicated Unionists during the Civil War. These Mississippians joined the national Congregationalist denomination during Reconstruction.<sup>25</sup>

Davis made a more direct contribution to the later anti-slavery movement through the three outspoken opponents of slavery that he influenced—the ministers Gilliland, Wilson, and Williamson. After moving to Ohio, each became part of the Chillicothe Presbytery, described by historian William C. Bynum as “the most antislavery judicatory in the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.”<sup>26</sup>

William C. Davis can be seen as a forerunner of the Adventist movement both in his trenchant antislavery witness and in the way he found placement and purpose in history through study of the time periods marked out by apocalyptic prophecy. Though they differed from Davis in some particulars of theology and biblical interpretation, virtually every Adventist pioneer leader—William Miller, Joshua V. Himes, Charles Fitch, Josiah Litch, Ellen White, James White, Joseph Bates, and John N. Andrews, for starters—joined abolitionism with preaching a prophecy-driven gospel for the culmination of history.<sup>27</sup> Though perhaps, like Davis, sometimes prone to extremes, they also shared his underlying commitment to reform, to challenging the status quo with the truth of the gospel revealed in Scripture.

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## NOTES

1. William B. Bynum, "History, Slavery, and Prophecy: The World of William Cummins Davis," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 78, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 263; "Rev. William Cummins Davis," *FamilySearch*, accessed January 18, 2024, <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/sources/KLVS-3VK>; "David Davis," *Find A Grave*, Memorial ID 28436420, July 21, 2008, citing Harry E. Foreman, *History of Little Cove, Franklin County, Pennsylvania* (Chambersburg, PA, 1967), 90, accessed January 18, 2024, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/28436420/david-davies>.
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3. George Howe, *History of the Presbyterian Church of South Carolina* (Columbia, SC: Duffie & Chapman, 1870), 504-506.
4. *Ibid.*, 625-626.
5. *Ibid.*, 626; Bynum, "History, Slavery, and Prophecy," 264.
6. Bynum, "History, Slavery, and Prophecy," 265-266.
7. *Ibid.*, 266.
8. *Ibid.*, 268.
9. *Ibid.*, 276.
10. *Ibid.*, 268.
11. *Ibid.*, 270.
12. *Ibid.*, 272.
13. Howe quotes an extended passage from an 1851 "memoir" by Witherspoon in *History of the Presbyterian Church of South Carolina*, 638-639.
14. Passages from *The Gospel Plan* (1809), *The Millennium; or, A Short Sketch of the Rise and Fall of Antichrist* (1811), and *Lectures on the New Testament 1* (1823) quoted in Bynum, "History, Slavery, and Prophecy," 275-276.
15. Bynum, "History, Slavery, and Prophecy," 274-275.

16. William Miller, *Evidence From Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ* (1836), 231-232, quoted in Le Roy Edwin Froom, *Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, vol. 4 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1954), 817.
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18. *Ibid.*, 217-218.
19. Bynum, "History, Slavery, and Prophecy," 278.
20. *Ibid.*, 276-278.
21. Froom, *Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, vol. 4, 221-223. Davis expanded on his view of the nature and duration of millennium in his revised and enlarged edition of *The Millennium*, published in 1827.
22. Quoted in Froom, *Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, vol. 4, 222.
23. Bynum, "History, Slavery, and Prophecy," 273.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, 277.
26. *Ibid.*, 274-275.
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