

2 Defending Religious Liberty and Adventist Doctrine, 1885-1897

Albion F. Ballenger gradually emerged to some prominence among Seventh-day Adventist ministers. Although sources are limited and we only gain often disconnected glimpses of his activities, during his first decade of work for the denomination he appears to have developed talents as a speaker and writer that he would use for the rest of his life. Adopting the Adventist outlook without question on matters ranging from doctrine to public affairs, and approaching his work with both enthusiasm and thoroughness, Ballenger gained the confidence of church leaders who continued to expand his responsibilities.

EARLY MINISTRY

Ballenger's activities during his first four years of work for the Seventh-day Adventist Church are unclear. Presumably he assisted in public evangelism by managing the tent and other equipment, publicizing meetings, and preaching occasionally. Such were the typical responsibilities of a young Adventist in the 1880s who was preparing for ordination as a minister.

The only specifics available regarding Ballenger during these years are sketchy details appearing in the *Seventh-day Adventist Year Book*. In 1885 this volume listed Ballenger's name for the first time. While the "Ministers' Directory" identified his father, J. F. Ballenger, as a minister in Illinois, Albion appeared as a licentiate (one who had been granted a ministerial license but was not authorized to baptize, perform marriages, or administer the Lord's Supper) in the same location: Ridott, Stephenson County, Illinois.¹ The 1886 *Year Book* again listed Albion Ballenger as a licentiate at Ridott but added that he was the director of the Illinois Tract and Missionary Society.² The following year, Ballenger remained in Ridott, but his father appeared as a minister in Michigan.³

The 1888 edition of the *Year Book* did not list A. F. Ballenger as either a licentiate or a minister. Why this is the case is unknown. It could have been an oversight in the compilation of the material for publication, or possibly the young intern took a leave of absence. Some sources indicate that Ballenger attended Battle Creek College, the Seventh-day Adventist school in Michigan,⁴ which may have occurred at this time, although college records do not mention him.⁵

Ballenger appeared in the 1889 *Year Book* as being located in Sheridan, La Salle County, Illinois.⁶ The Illinois Conference session in September of that year again nominated him to hold a ministerial license;⁷ but more significantly, this year marked his entry into religious liberty work, in which he was to be an active participant for nearly a decade. The General Conference Committee had only recently begun an organized effort to address religious liberty concerns, appointing a Press Committee in December 1888 for the purpose of “devising and carrying out plans for the dissemination of general information to the public, on the questions of civil and religious liberty.”⁸ According to its October 1889 report, “In the last of January of the present year the Secretary [W. H. McKee] was given an efficient assistant in Bro. A. F. Ballenger. From that time articles were sent out more extensively and a system of journalistic work was developed.”⁹ This appointment also apparently gave Ballenger time to write on subjects other than religious liberty. During 1889 he contributed the first of many articles to the church’s general periodical, the *Review and Herald*, often criticizing those who differed with Seventh-day Adventism or celebrating what he regarded as confirmation of the denomination’s teachings.¹⁰

THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS LIBERTY ASSOCIATION

Church leaders evidently considered Ballenger to be a promising intern. On July 21, 1889, when the Press Committee formed a new body, the National Religious Liberty Association (NRLA), with 110 charter members, Ballenger became the assistant secretary and a member of its executive committee.¹¹ The 1889 General Conference Session in November reelected him to these positions.¹² At that session, although not a delegate,¹³ Ballenger introduced a resolution stating that, “In view of the effort soon to be made to secure the passage

by Congress, of a National Sunday law, we urge the immediate appointment by the State Press Agents, of local agents in every city or town in their district where access to a newspaper can be had, and a competent person can be found to act.”¹⁴ This resolution expressed well the NRLA’s purpose, as outlined earlier by its president, Clement Eldridge, in an address at its first annual session in October, 1889:

The National Reformers are up and doing. Our duty is to oppose them, and prevent the passage of any bill that may be presented on religious legislation, whether in the halls of Congress or in the State Legislatures, to render aid and assistance to all who may be persecuted for their conscientious convictions, to proclaim by tongue and pen the true principles of civil government and religion.¹⁵

This flurry of interest in religious liberty issues resulted primarily from the efforts of the National Reform Association (NRA), founded in 1863 as a response to Union defeats in the Civil War, to amend the Constitution with a declaration that the United States was a Christian nation. As its movement developed, the NRA also sought to place Sunday laws in the constitutions of new states, fought relaxation of the enforcement of existing Sunday laws, and in 1879 began promoting a national law establishing Sunday as a day of rest to encourage worship and thereby restore the nation to God’s care. In advocating these causes, the NRA worked with a number of other organizations, including the American Sabbath Union and the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union.

In part responding to these pressures, from the 1870s through the 1890s several states began to enforce Sunday laws more strictly, resulting in the arrest of Seventh-day Adventists, Seventh Day Baptists, and others. Between 1885 and 1896, for instance, government officials arrested more than one hundred Adventists for working on Sunday. These individuals paid \$2,269 in fines and court costs, spent 1,438 days in jail, and worked 455 days on chain gangs. Meanwhile, nearly a decade after the NRA began pushing for a national law, Senator H. W. Blair, a Republican from New Hampshire, introduced into Congress in 1888 a Sunday observance bill applying to areas under federal authority. Although Blair’s efforts were unsuccessful, at about the same time several groups—including the NRA, other Sunday law organizations, and churches—began a

petition drive asking Congress to close on Sundays the Columbian Exposition which was to open in Chicago in 1893. With so much attention being given to Sunday legislation on both the state and national levels, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, with about 25,000 members in the United States,¹⁶ started an organized effort to protect what it believed to be its religious liberties.¹⁷

Ballenger's activities, beginning in 1890, become more clear. Although the 1890 *Year Book* identified him as a licensed minister in Sheridan, Illinois,¹⁸ he was also receiving correspondence in his role as assistant secretary to the NRLA at Battle Creek, Michigan.¹⁹ Later in the year, he moved to Chicago, Illinois.²⁰

Ballenger attended the second annual session of the NRLA, held at Battle Creek in late 1890, and served on the Resolutions Committee. The Association voted to "recognize in it [the NRLA] the only existing organization competent, under God, to perfectly disseminate the true principles of Religious Liberty against the increasing demands for religious legislation." At this same meeting, the Association reappointed Ballenger to its executive committee and voted to publish two songs Ballenger had written, *What Has Papa Done?* and *The Prisoner*, which the delegates had sung to open the meeting.²¹

ADVOCATE OF COMPLETE SEPARATION

Ballenger continued to hold a ministerial license,²² although the *Year Book* for 1891 did not list him in either the "Workers' Directory" or under Illinois in the "Directory of American Conferences." He now lived in Chicago, working for the denomination as a religious liberty advocate, and reported on his work there at the General Conference session held in March, 1891.²³ Soon thereafter, on June 24, 1891, he married Belle Stowell, a third generation Seventh-day Adventist,²⁴ of Battle Creek, Michigan.²⁵ A farm girl originally from Illinois, she had graduated from the three-year English course at Battle Creek College the previous year.²⁶ Unfortunately, virtually nothing else is known of Ballenger's personal life during these years.²⁷

While in Chicago, Ballenger actively campaigned for complete separation of church and state, the position adopted by most

Seventh-day Adventists and advocated by the NRLA. When the Woman's Moral and Educational Union, a local organization of upper-middle-class women, began in 1890 a campaign to place Bibles in public schools, Ballenger reacted strongly. Seeing this effort as "the vanguard of a large and rapidly organizing army,"²⁸ he argued that the Bible did not belong in public schools, a viewpoint that sought to limit the religious activity of some individuals in conformity with the more fundamental principle of separation of church and state. The moral effects which the women's organization sought, he believed, could only come through "soul-saving religion."²⁹ He persuaded a minister to publish an article in the newspaper opposing "the reading of the Bible in the public schools," and expressed satisfaction when several ministers withdrew their support from the effort, which ultimately failed.³⁰

Sunday laws were of even greater significance for Ballenger. In 1890 he had argued in the *Review and Herald* against charges by supporters of such legislation that Sunday work was analogous to Mormon polygamy.³¹ Reflecting his strong separationism, Ballenger said that the Sabbath command was purely religious and not partly civil as Sunday-law advocates maintained. Physical rest was not integral to the Sabbath, he stated, but merely a means to its real object, worship. In contrast, polygamy involved "primarily, a civil relation" and therefore was subject to government regulation.³² Soon he had the opportunity to press the separationist cause into the enemy camp.

Beginning in 1891, Ballenger attended various meetings and conferences, as far away as Ohio, of organizations such as the NRA and American Sabbath Union which advocated strict Sunday observance legislation.³³ Sometimes he was able to speak publicly at these meetings, as when he objected to a lecturer who had "advocated the Christianizing of our Government by means of amendments to its Constitution and laws, as a result of which the people would become Christian," and when he spoke for the opposition at the Illinois Sabbath Union convention.³⁴ He also claimed that he assisted in having material published which exposed "the narrow and bigoted ideas of the Sunday legislationists, and the broad and charitable views taken by other persons of prominence and influence."³⁵