

# 1 The Millerite Movement 1830-1845

*EVERETT N. DICK*

Seventh-day Adventism developed out of a movement that seemed to end in ignominious failure. William Miller, during a widespread resurgence of interest in millenarianism, predicted that Christ would come in 1843 or 1844, and he gained a wide following in the northeastern United States. Although the announced event never took place, leaving the believers in bitter disappointment, the Millerite movement bequeathed a system of prophetic interpretation and biblical literalism that helped shape the character of the Adventism that arose from its ruins. In the Millerite movement of the 1830s and 1840s lie the roots of a Seventh-day Adventist church that, though small by comparison with the mainline Protestant denominations, today circles the world.

As startling as Miller's prediction was, he worked within a time-honored Christian concern. Down through the centuries, the Second Coming of Christ in fulfillment of the prophecies had been the hope of Christendom. But the meaning of the Second Coming, and in particular the millennium—the thousand years when the expectant ones would dwell with Christ—had aroused considerable disagreement.

Although the early Christians expected the imminent bodily appearance of Christ, the post-Nicene Fathers interpreted the biblical prophecies allegorically. The most influential of these Fathers, Augustine, taught that the millennium was a long period in which the saints “reigned” with Christ through an inner spiritual triumph, the “Beast” was the community of unbelievers, and “God’s image” was his simulation in those who did not live according to their professed beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

The allegorical approach to the prophecies dominated Christian thinking until the Reformation. The Protestants took the prophecies “literally,” interpreting the 1,260 days of Revelation 12 as a period of 1,260 years that covered the whole history of the Christian church. Until the latter part of the seventeenth century, most Protestants took a premillennialist position, believing that Christ would come first and the millennium would follow. In the middle of the seventeenth century, however, another view emerged—it said that the millennium would occur before Christ’s coming.

This view received its most influential expression at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when the Anglican clergyman Daniel Whitby in 1703 interpreted the prophecies to mean that the world was progressing toward the millennium. The

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Resurrection, he thought, meant the conversion of the world through a great surge of missionary activity that would result from the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, pagan religions would be subdued, the Jews would be reestablished as a nation, and the papacy and the Turkish Empire would be overthrown. These events would usher in one thousand years of peace and happiness, which he called the “golden age” or the “good time coming”—the millennium. At the conclusion of this period, Christ would return.

Partly because of reaction to the excesses of the Puritan Revolution, which had been premillennialist, this postmillennial theology soon dominated Christian thinking in both England and its American colonies, where Jonathan Edwards was its most significant exponent.<sup>2</sup> But the French Revolution, beginning in 1789, revived literal premillennialism by appearing to fulfill Daniel 7 and Revelation 13. Numerous voices arose in England advocating this line of interpretation. Among them were ministers such as Anglican George Stanley Faber and Scots Presbyterian William Cunningham, as well as laymen like James Hatley Frere and Lewis Way. Edward Irving became the most famous preacher of premillennialism; he translated the Chilean Jesuit Manuel Lacunza’s *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty* in 1826 and played an important role that same year in the Albury Conference, which brought together many noted British millennialists. Irving, however, became an advocate of speaking in tongues, which broke out in his church in the early 1830s, and he died in disgrace in 1834.

As a result of the annual Albury Conferences of 1826 through 1828, the prophetic interpreters came to substantial agreement on the fundamental doctrines of their eschatology. The six points, summarized by Henry Drummond, sponsor of the conferences, asserted the following: 1) the present age would end in cataclysm; 2) the Jews would be restored to Palestine during the time of the judgment; 3) the judgment would fall primarily on Christendom; 4) the millennium would occur after the judgment; 5) Christ would come before the millennium; and 6) the 1,260 years of Daniel 7 and Revelation 13 would be the period from Justinian to the French Revolution, the vials of wrath (Revelation 16) being poured out now, and the Second Advent would be imminent. Some participants predicted that Christ would come in 1843 or 1847, but all expected him to return within a few years. The major elements of this interpretation had taken form by 1830.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, says Ernest Sandeen, America “was drunk on the millennium.” Alexander Campbell, founder of the Disciples of Christ, speculated for several years on the prophecies, and Joseph Smith, prophet of the Latter-day Saints, taught a premillennial eschatology. In time, however, both of these men were to lose their sense of the imminence of Christ’s Second Coming. More extreme views appeared in two communal groups. The Shakers believed that Christ’s return had occurred in the incarnation of God in Mother Ann Lee, and John Humphrey Noyes of the Oneida community taught that it had taken place in A.D. 70. But the most famous of all the American premillennialists was William Miller, a New York farmer.<sup>4</sup>