

Sabbath School Today

With the 1888 Message Dynamic

How to Interpret Scripture

Lesson 5: By Scripture Alone—*Sola Scriptura*

The 1888 message is all about “*sola scriptura*”—the Bible “alone” as its source. The message is not opinion or imagination, but was gleaned from God’s holy Word by two men who were avid Bible students.

The General Conference Session that was held at Minneapolis in the fall of 1888, opened with a Bible Institute that convened October 10. The general business session began on October 18 and ran more than two full weeks, ending on Sunday November 4. This church conference was one of the most significant meetings ever convened by the church. At those meetings, God attempted to shed light on the fact that the church leaders had succumbed to legalism in their presentation of the message of Christ’s second coming.

The leaders, especially George I. Butler, Uriah Smith, and J. H. Morrison, arrayed their influence against A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner, two young men from California. Butler had been president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church since 1872. Smith was the first secretary of the General Conference, elected in 1863 and served in 1876 as the General Conference treasurer. Smith began working in the offices of *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* in 1853 and became its editor in 1855, a position he was repeatedly elected to for more than 45 years.

Jones and Waggoner were considered “up-starts” and untrained in theology. Jones served in the army, and during that time he developed a passionate interest in ancient history. Beginning in 1887, Jones became the editor of the *American Sentinel*, the magazine that eventually became the church’s official organ of the religious liberty department of the church (*Liberty* magazine). In 1897, Jones was appointed editor of the *Review and Herald* magazine. He held this position until 1901. Uriah Smith worked as his associate editor. From 1901 to 1903, Jones served as president of the California Conference. Waggoner was a medical doctor, who in 1883 stopped practicing medicine and became the assistant editor for the *Signs of the Times*, serving under his father.

The opposers of the message presented at the 1888 General Conference Session claimed that Jones was cocky, arrogant and lacked respect for the older brethren who had been at the head of the work for many years. They considered Waggoner’s views on the law in Galatians chapter 3 to be Biblically unsound, and a detriment to the Adventist evangelism work because, to Butler and Smith, it undermined their foundation for preaching the Sabbath commandment.

Because Waggoner had published an article in the *Signs of the Times* that was strongly opposed by Smith and Butler, “the law in Galatians” became the topic of controversy at

Minneapolis. When A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner were challenged on their presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and His righteousness as the only source of our salvation, they stood before the Minneapolis conference delegates and presented their case entirely from Scripture.

In reply to their opponents at that conference Jones and Waggoner stood before the delegates with their open Bibles, nothing more. Waggoner read a verse, and then Jones read a verse, and so it went until they had presented the entire message from their Bibles alone. It would do us well if we dwelt upon the verses they presented, studying them deeply, just as Waggoner and Jones did. It was through a deep, prayerful, Holy Spirit-led study of these verses that they arrived at the truths they presented at Minneapolis. When we become thoroughly conversant in these verses—having knowledge and experience in them—then we will be able to defend the message of Christ and His righteousness against any dissenter.

Waggoner opened their presentation by reading Jeremiah 23:5-7. Jones followed by reading Ephesians 2:4-8. Waggoner: Galatians 2:16-21; Jones: Romans 11:1-33. Waggoner: Romans 1:14-17; Jones: Romans 2:12-29. Waggoner: the whole of Galatians chapter 3; Jones: the whole of Romans chapter 3. Waggoner: Galatians 5:1-6; Jones: Romans 9:7-33. Waggoner: the whole of Galatians chapter 2; Jones: Romans 4:1-11. Waggoner: the whole of Romans chapter 5; Jones: Romans 1:15-17. Waggoner: Romans 8:14-39; Jones: 1 John 5:1-4. [1]

When Jones and Waggoner completed their readings, they calmly took their seats without further comment. The men gathered in that small church in Minneapolis were stunned into silence.

The following summer, Mrs. White was asked whether she endorsed the message presented by Jones and Waggoner and her reply was: “When Brother Waggoner brought out these ideas in Minneapolis, it was the first clear teaching on this subject from any human lips I had heard, excepting the conversations between myself and my husband. I have said to myself, It is because God has presented it to me in vision that I see it so clearly, and they [the church leaders who were in opposition] cannot see it because they have never had it presented to them as I have. And when another presented it, every fiber of my heart said, Amen.” [2]

Ellen White called the message of Christ and His righteousness that Jones and Waggoner taught at Minneapolis in 1888 “the most precious message,” because it brought “more prominently before the world the uplifted Saviour, the sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. It presented justification through faith in the Surety; it invited the people to receive the righteousness of Christ, which is made manifest in obedience to all the commandments of God.” [3]

This statement flies in the face of those who claimed during that time of early opposition that Waggoner’s view on the law in Galatians destroyed their foundation for presenting commandment-keeping, especially Sabbath-keeping. Ellen White recognized that when we believe the message we will become commandment-keepers by faith, and not commandment-keepers by works, striving to keep the law in our own power. In his

treatise on the Book of Galatians, Waggoner wrote that we “become doers of the law.” This is what “righteous” means—a doer of the law by faith in the power of Christ to work out His own character in our lives. “How shall we become doers of the law, and thus escape wrath, or the curse? The answer is, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’ By faith, not by works, we become doers of the law! ‘With the heart man believeth unto righteousness.’ (Romans 10:10).” [4]

Today many voices are being raised proclaiming that overcoming sin is an impossibility, and some even claim that overcoming is not necessary for “salvation.” God just “declares” us saved and that’s enough to get us a “ticket” into heaven at the second coming of Christ. These voices tell us that there is no such thing as a “final generation” through whom God will demonstrate His righteous character of love to the dying world. The increasing argument is that no character change is necessary; no true heart obedience is required. But people who make this claim are “false guideposts.”

“I have no smooth message to bear to those who have been so long as false guideposts, pointing the wrong way. If you reject Christ’s delegated messengers, you reject Christ. Neglect this great salvation, kept before you for years, despise this glorious offer of justification through the blood of Christ and sanctification through the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit, and there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation.” [5]

Let us be like A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner, diligent students of the Bible, searching for the deep things of God that we may present them clearly to anyone who asks us. In this way, we will be true Protestants and able to stand in the final hours of this earth’s history.

—Ann Walper

Endnotes:

[1] From R. T. Nash, “An Eye Witness Account,” *Manuscripts and Memories of Minneapolis 1888*, p. 35.

[2] Ellen G. White, Manuscript 5, 1889, 10; Sermon, Rome, New York, June 19, 1889.

[3] Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 91, 92.

[4] E. J. Waggoner, *The Glad Tidings*, p. 58.

[5] *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 97.

Notes:

Pastor Paul Penno’s video of this lesson is on the Internet at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Puaf-WdyZHE>

Many of Pastor Penno’s sermons are on YouTube in Spanish. Just type **pastor paul penno en español** in the search bar.

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