

William Miller Biography

William Miller

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Biography

William Miller (1782-1849), American clergyman, founded a movement which involved thousands in eagerly awaiting the Second Coming of Christ.

William Miller was born on Feb. 15, 1782, near Pittsfield, Mass. His family soon moved to western New York, where he received a rudimentary education. Battle experience during the War of 1812 aroused his concern with religious questions. Converted from deism by a revival meeting in 1816, he became a Baptist. Gradually, the subject of the Second Coming attracted his attention, and eventually, after laborious biblical investigation, he concluded that Christ would reappear about 1843.

Most enthusiastic Christians of the period were seeking to establish the date of the Second Advent. Doctrinally orthodox, Miller made only one innovation, suggesting that Christ would appear before (rather than after) the millennium. A reserved, somewhat shy man, he hesitated to publish his convictions, but the nearness of the event made it urgent to save as many souls as possible by publishing his news to the world. As a boy preacher, he discovered an unexpected eloquence, and in 1833 the Baptist Church ordained him as a minister.

Miller's message attracted increasing attention in New England and western New York. In 1838 he published *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ about the Year 1843*. Two years later another Baptist cleric, the Reverend Joshua Himes, seeing Miller as a tool to further the cause of evangelism, took over management of Miller's campaign.

Miller's enthusiasm, plus the pressures of an economic depression, drew thousands of converts. As his following grew, so did controversy over his activities. Orthodox ministers condemned but could not silence him. Miller had avoided naming a day for the Advent, but, as 1843 approached, pressures for a precise prediction increased. He chose March 1843. When March passed, he still insisted that 1843 was the fateful year. Others in his movement chose October 22 as the last day; Miller agreed. Some people sold their goods, not expecting to need them after October 22; others took a holiday to watch the Millerites gather to await the Advent. According to older accounts, the undisturbed arrival of October 23 drove some of the faithful to suicide and others to insanity; recent scholars have discounted such tales. Meanwhile, the Baptist Church disowned Miller, and he joined others to form the Advent Society, ancestor of several modern Adventist churches. He died on Dec. 20, 1849, in Hampton, N.Y.