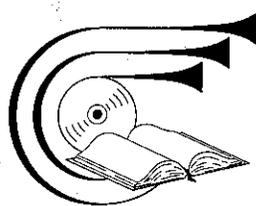


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Lest We Forget

Godly Authority

Lessons
from the
Beginnings
of the
SDA Church,
and the
Life of
John Byington

As our Seventh-day Adventist pioneers considered the issue of church organization, they came with their own unique blend of Biblical and historical understandings and their own life experiences. The Spirit worked through these factors (as He does with each of us) in His attempt to further the work of God at that time. What were in general terms the molding influences that led to organizing the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

The Advent believers that survived the Great Disappointment, who went back to Scripture, and came to an understanding of the Sanctuary and the Third Angel's Message, lived here and there in families and small companies, and were often designated "the scattered flock". Other than the influence of the Spirit, their understanding of Scripture, the printed periodicals, and those who travelled among them (one thinks particularly here of James and Ellen White, Joseph Bates, and John Loughborough), there was not much that held them together. In a strict sense, they were congregational, each group quite independent in terms of organization.

This independence reflected in part the society of the United States at that time, its population more sparsely populated, and by families that were quite self-reliant. Those of that time were also well versed in the history of the abuses of authority in the Old World, both in civil government as well as church structure. The position many took on church organization reflected their independent spirit, springing from their understanding of how creed-bound churches, often laden with a hierarchy that lorded it over the membership, were ungodly structures that hindered rather than facilitated the gospel's spread, since they did not reflect how God runs the universe.

Not a few had been publicly expelled from such churches with trials based on creeds and not on an "It is written". John Byington himself came from a family which in standing for truth had had to meet autocratic church leaders. His minister father had even helped to establish a less autocratic denomination than the Methodist one to which he had once belonged. To them, such organizations clearly fell under the Biblical label of "Babylon",

Continued page 7

John Byington's

*family: Mary
Caroline
Catharine
Fletcher
Martha
Teresa
Luther
William*

G

rowing up in the family of a circuit preacher left the young family without their spiritual head much of the time. As most of his brothers and sisters made no profession of religion, and his mother was quite reserved, John had the responsibility for family worship from 12 years of age when his father was absent. Although he felt it a burden at the time, it was a help and blessing as a foundation in his religious experience.

He married Mary Ferris in Vermont, and their first child, Caroline, was born in 1828. After Mary's death, John moved to Buck's Bridge, New York. There he married Catharine Newton from Vermont in 1830, and she was a real help-meet for John for 55 years. She gave birth to five children, the oldest being John Fletcher Byington, born in 1832. Martha was two years younger, and Teresa was born in 1837. It was at Teresa's funeral, at age 15, that John made his decision to observe the seventh-day Sabbath. The names he gave his sons, John Fletcher, Luther Lee, born in 1838, and William Wilberforce, born in 1840, named after Methodist anti-slavery preachers, reflect his own sympathies for the oppressed race. After becoming Seventh-day Adventists in 1852, the Byingtons were influential evangelists for truth. In 1853, at the Aaron Hilliard home in Buck's Bridge, Martha, then 19, began the church's first elementary school. Later, in 1855, John Fletcher Byington was the teacher.

Vermont and New York Adventists often convened at Buck's Bridge. One year Catharine wove long webs of cloth on her loom, and then sewed the strips together for a tent in which to meet. It was pitched in the pasture and fenced in. The Byington family remembered the vision Ellen White was given at this meeting about the coming Civil War. She repeated several times, "This country is to be deluged with blood." Seeing her in vision helped to establish their belief in her as a prophet for God's people in the last days. They always appreciated James and Ellen White's visits to their home.

It is not known how involved the Byington family was in the "Underground Railway", but they would not turn those away who they knew needed assistance. The old slave, Sojourner

*Before she died,
she asked him to give up
his chores and cares,
and visit the brethren.
She knew this was his first
love. This he did
as long as he was able.
Thinking of others was an
important quality
in this family.*

Continued page 8

JOHN BYINGTON

PIONEER·MINISTER·WRITER·HUSBAND·FATHER·CHRISTIAN

PEACE WITH GOD

“Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” Rom. 5:1, 2. I do not design to write a sermon, or indulge in a long talk, on this all important portion of the word of God; but a few thoughts may help some honest soul in the narrow way to heaven.

Here are four items of truth of great importance: 1. Justified by faith; 2. Peace with God; 3. Access to grace; and, 4. By this, rejoicing in hope of the glory of God. Justification here has no reference to our good works, but to our evil works; in other words, it refers to the pardon of our past sins. A poor lost sinner sees himself, as such, condemned. He knows no peace, has a carnal mind, has done nothing but sin all his days; but believing there is a Saviour, he cries out in faith, God be merciful to me a sinner! Then how sweet the Saviour's voice, Thy sins are forgiven. Go in peace, and sin no more! Oh, what a change, passing from death to life! Can we know this?

Man is so constituted that he can receive the Holy Spirit, that which he did not have before. The unclean spirit is cast out, the Holy Spirit fills the heart; and there is not only pardon, but also regeneration, being born of the Spirit. Now there is peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Oh, the danger of coming short of this! We may be baptized, and have our names written in the church book - all good in its place; but unless the Holy Spirit fills the heart, we cannot have peace with God; we shall have no power to withstand the power of darkness.

We not only receive this peace, this grace, or Holy Spirit, at conversion, but through faith we have access to this grace, or power, wherein we stand. Now the new man not only lives in us, but it is the new man that works; therefore our works are not meritorious, for they are all of grace or divine power, which should influence all we say and all we do. Language cannot express the sweetness there is in the work of God when done in the Spirit, though many times it may be trying. How much better this than a daily round of duty without spirit, without life! Such are our own works, which will never form a character for heaven. But the spiritual-minded and spiritual-working man rejoices in hope of the glory of God. Yes, hope reaches forward to the heavenly rest, and the faithful will soon be there.

J. Byington, Battle Creek, MI, *Review and Herald*, October 26, 1886, pp 665-6.

PREMILLENNIAL CONVICTIONS

While at a Wesleyan General Conference session in 1844, which would set up their new denominational organization, John Byington slipped away from their meeting and heard a Millerite sermon. Because of being so preoccupied with his own conference, he had not been greatly impressed, but it did make him reflect “that such preaching would go far toward correcting the doctrine of the world's conversion - a sentiment which he never endorsed.” (Quotation from the *Review and Herald*, January 25, 1887).

In July, 1850, in the *True Wesleyan*, before becoming a Seventh-day Adventist, John Byington wrote, “The gospel does not design, under the present order of things, to fit up this world for a home for all saints; but to fit them who are willing to work as he worked, for a home he is gone to prepare for them. Therefore we are strangers and pilgrims on the earth.” This was in opposition to the Wesleyan postmillennialist belief in a 1000 years of Christian utopia before Christ's return. In many ways he was more in harmony with the Millerite teaching on this than the Wesleyan understanding.

Waller, John O., *Review and Herald*, December 13, 1979, pp 10,11.



JOHN BYINGTON

SERVANT OF ADVENTISM

The story of John Byington is remarkable, not because any doctrine had its origin with him, or because of any role in the great disappointment. His story is remarkable, solely due to the multitude of ways he provided for the spiritual and physical needs of the church, both as an organization and to its members individually.

He was born on October 8, 1798, The sixth of ten children of Mr. and Mrs. Justus Byington of Hinesburg, Vermont.¹ His father was a Methodist preacher and had served as a soldier in the Revolutionary War of independence, having volunteered for military service at the tender age of sixteen.² Much of his commitment and moral courage is seen reproduced in the life work of his son.

John was baptized into the Methodist church shortly after his seventeenth birthday. Not long after he became one of the church leaders, and was given license to preach as a lay preacher, then called "an Exhorter". As a circuit riding pastor, he worked to support himself, rode, and preached, visiting homes of the needy in his district. Often there was greater need to supply for the physical than the spiritual.

At the age of twenty-one he suffered an almost complete collapse of health, and moved to New Haven, Connecticut, where

he could be near relatives and have access to better medical help. Here he worked in the fishing industry for about three years as his health returned. When completely well, he moved back to Vermont and returned to circuit preaching and farming. He said, "the soil, the plow, and preaching on the circuit are for me and mine."³

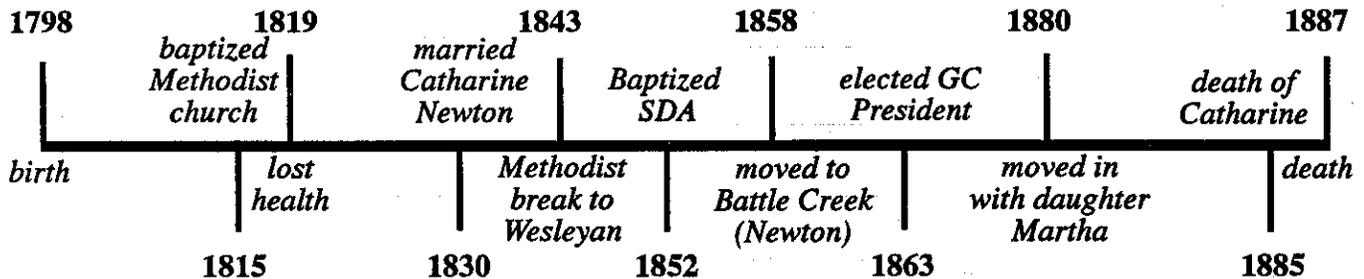
After his move to Buck's Bridge, near the St. Lawrence River in northwest New York, he helped build a house of worship for the Methodist Church around 1837. Slavery became a major issue in the Methodist churches, and a greater issue to John Byington. In his local church he described it in the strongest terms. "Slavery is an outrage. It is a sin. Let us pledge ourselves to use all legal means in our power by preaching, praying, and voting against this unchristian institution."⁴ In 1836, Luther Lee, the local pastor at Fulton, became involved with a crusade - the anti-slavery movement. This soon brought him into a crisis with the Methodist Episcopal hierarchy. The Methodist leaders, anxious to avoid a rupture between Northern and Southern constituencies, tried increasingly, though unsuccessfully, to prohibit abolitionist activity among Methodist ministers. In 1843, this growing rift eventually led to the wide-spread secession that formed the new Wesleyan denomination which both Lee and Byington joined.⁵ John also helped build the Wesleyan Methodist Church and parsonage in Morley, two miles away.

In 1844, Byington heard sermons on the soon coming of Christ. The lectures of William Miller had stirred his entire community. He himself had made a thorough study of the prophecies, but he did not understand some points. Being a cautious man, he was slow to accept new theories. Eight years later, in 1852, H. W. Lawrence gave him a copy of the *Review and Herald* containing articles on the seventh-day Sabbath. On March 20, 1852, the day of the funeral of his fifteen year-old daughter, Teresa, he made his decision to observe the seventh-day. On July 3, G.W. Holt baptized John and Catharine and two of the older children in the Grasse

Continued next page

John Byington's

Time Line



River near Buck's Bridge, New York.⁶

In 1855, John helped build the first SDA church to be constructed, adjacent to the Methodist church he had built. After demonstrating leadership ability at Buck's Bridge, James and Ellen White invited the Byingtons to come to Battle Creek in 1858 to help in the work there. He bought a farm at Newton, near Battle Creek, Michigan, and then brought his family there. Between his trips of ministering to the scattered flocks, he would return to care for the farm.

There was a strong belief in many believers that the church should not be organized, that it would make them like the churches out of which they had come. A leader in the drive to organize, James White felt that there had been sufficient resistance to his work to make his being the president difficult and very likely ineffective. John Byington, often called Father Byington, accepted the presidency of the first General Conference, May 20-23, 1863, after James refused it. Much of the work John did during his term would not have had to be done by him if the members had moved more readily to accept organization. During his year as president, 65 year old Byington visited the Adventists, held communion with them,



Painting by Vernon Nye ©Review and Herald

James White congratulating John Byington on becoming the first president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in 1863.

means generously, he supported himself and others by selling home-churned butter, farm produce, and even fitting dentures when necessary. At the end of his term of office, he returned to his farm, but he continued to visit the churches and the members.⁷

In Michigan he ministered for the next twenty-two years. Frequently his Catharine would accompany him. These trips took him to Port Huron and Saginaw on the east and as far north as Muskegon on the west. These ministering tours were not just Sabbath meetings, but they were daily intercourse with the people. He ate with them and prayed with them, sleeping in their homes when invited. He sold them

Continued page 6

John Byington - Servant of Adventism

Concluded

hymnbook's and Bibles, received their tithes and offerings, and baptized their children when ready. He returned to his farm at Newton between trips, attending to its needs, and taking wheat and corn to the mill to be ground into flour and meal. But he was always wanting to go on another missionary journey, whether winter or summer. He remembered his neighbors around Newton and gave them papers, living the truth before them. Seldom did anyone leave his house without prayer. His chief books were the Bible, *Cruden's Concordance*, *Wesley's Sermons*, *D'Aubigne's History of the Reformation*, *Adam Clarke's Commentary*, and the *Testimonies*.⁸

After his wife's death, he continued visiting and he never lost his love for the young people. "I must feed the lambs of the flock," he wrote. At one time, when he was unable to attend prayer meeting, he sent a message to them on a little slip of blue paper, "Tell, O tell them, to leave the world, and come to their Saviour!" On Friday, December 3, 1886, he wrote, "This is a day of comfort and peace. I have felt my sins were very many; have asked and found mercy of the Saviour, and would declare His loving-kindness to all." His last, brief record on December 5 was, "May I patiently endure." He passed away January 7, 1887.⁹

If we follow this example of godliness practiced on a lifelong daily basis, we also can have lives of peace and victory, and at last, claim with him the testimony he picked for his funeral address, "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne." Revelation 3:21¹⁰. -AC

1.) Ochs, Daniel and Grace Lillian, *Biographies of the General Conference Presidents*, p.8. 2.) Amadon, G. W., *Review and Herald*, January 25, 1887. 3.) Ochs, *ibid.*, p. 10. 4.) *ibid.* p. 10. 5.) Waller, John O., "John Byington of Buck's Bridge", *Adventist Heritage*, Vol. 1(2), p. 9. 6.) Ochs, *ibid.*, pp. 11. 7.) *ibid.* p.15. 8.) Amadon, Grace, "The First President of the General Conference: John Byington, Farmer-Preacher", *Review and Herald*, June 22, 1944, pp. 7. 9.) *ibid.* 10.) Ochs, *ibid.* p. 16.

Our Lord never designed His parables to harden the hearts or blind the eyes of His hearers; but He wished to use every possible means to soften hard hearts and to open blind eyes. J. Byington, RH, Aug. 19, 1884, p. 538.

OUR Readers Write

"...we will be praying for you"

...We thoroughly enjoyed it.... We admire you for taking on this task of reminding us of our heritage and will be praying for you and promoting the paper to our friends.

W. Craig,
Philo, CA

"...believe in it 100 percent"

Dear Friends:...From the very first I have followed the work that you were doing and believe in it 100 percent. I think it is a venture of faith, however, and am somewhat apprehensive lest it not be a financial success. I am enclosing a small contribution to let you know that my heart is in the right place. I shall continue to follow your work with interest.

Very sincerely,
Kenneth H. Wood, Chairman
WHITE ESTATE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

"...capture the main lines of doctrine
that separated us from Babylon"

I want to commend you and your staff for the idea and its implementation surfacing in the periodical entitled, *Lest We Forget*. It is focused and urgently needed. What I find most interesting through the years is that when certain groups are forced to quote LS:196, they will emphasize the romance of the first part of the quote ("the way the Lord has led us") and float into amnesia on the latter part ("and His teaching in our past history").... If your group is interested in only historical aspects of the past, that will be, of course, interesting. But you will feel cheated after all your energy is spent - unless you are able to capture the main lines of doctrine that separated us from Babylon.... So I write to encourage you, with my salute for your commitment and dreams.

H. Douglass,
Weimar, CA

Godly Authority

• c o n c l u d e d •

and many felt that to organize at all would be to identify with a false system. So when the idea of formally organizing into a church was brought forward, a lively discussion ensued, extending over quite a period of time. However, upon further reflection and Bible study, it became clear to them that God Himself runs the universe with order, that He has instituted authority as a principle of heaven and the universe, and that ungodly authority does not prove that all authority is evil. And so they were led to move from the independent, congregational model, while avoiding the autocratic, hierarchical structure, to a representative form of church government.

Hierarchical <— Representative —> Independent

Two events in this transition show the understanding of Biblical authority they had developed. James White declined to be the first president. He was not seeking position, the plague of the carnal nature that the gospels so clearly revealed as existing in the hearts of Christ's disciples. John Byington was chosen to be the first president, a man whose history showed he knew how to be a servant leader. He was no office-bound bureaucrat, but a true pastor who loved nothing more than visiting the flock.

The principle of Biblical authority is the keystone of an understanding of the controversy between Christ and Satan, since sin began with a rejection of God's authority. We are all thereby naturally rebels at heart and have natures that stumble over how to relate to those God has placed over us and under us. We usually fall into the extremes. If in authority, we either oppress or neglect. God Himself shows the only way authority will work, and that is by those in authority serving those under them, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it.

Oppress <— Serve —> Neglect

Christ, as also a man, showed us how to relate to those over us, whether they manifest godly authority or one of the ungodly extremes. The Biblical concept of submission effectively crucifies the rebel extreme while avoiding the opposite, that of a passive acquiescence that in reality denies God's higher authority.

Rebel <— Submit —> Acquiesce

Scripture is full of real-life illustrations of all extremes of the relationships of authority, as well as examples of godly order. The resolution of sin is bound up in an understanding and experience of what is the foundation of God's throne, His authority. Revelation 5 shows the slain Lamb to be the core of the type of King our God is. Such will be the security of His throne and government throughout all eternity. He will rule over only those who choose Him as Lord. And only those who have learned godly submission will understand the principle that permeates and preserves the order of the universe, the self-sacrificing, agape love.

-FB

*God
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and gave
Himself
for it.*

John Byington's Family: *Continued from page 2*

Truth, was much esteemed in the Byington family, as well as Will Locket, another colored slave. John and Catharine always had a warm place in their hearts and homes for these people and others in need.

They were very careful with their finances. Catharine knitted the socks and stockings for the family, used her hand loom for cloth for the children's dresses and shirts. She would weave long webs of white cloth and dye them the same color to save time. The children did not always appreciate this when they all had the same color dresses and shirts. John made the tallow candles with a large candle mold. Because of good business management, the family had funds for travel, for the poor and needy, and for the Lord's work.

One month after John moved his family to Michigan, his son, John Fletcher opened his school in Battle Creek. Later he went back to school and took medicine. In 1872, at 40 years of age, John Fletcher became very ill and two days later passed away in spite of all Dr. John Harvey Kellogg could do. This was a sad time for the family and John wrote in his diary, "We feel Fletcher's death a very heavy stroke." Trusting in God, knowing He knew best, gave them courage for the future.

In 1860, his daughter Martha married George W. Amadon, a pioneer worker in the publishing work for over 50 years.

When John was 80 years of age, Catharine was still helping him get in loads of hay. When he was 82, they moved to Battle Creek to live with their daughter Martha, taking along their horse, cow, and chickens. At 86, he was still milking and taking the milk to the neighbors. He helped mow the neighbors' grass, using it for feed for his horse and cow! He continued to do

chores on the farm until his wife passed away of pneumonia at the age of 82, two years before his death at age 89. In Catharine's obituary, Uriah Smith commented, "One of her chief characteristics was to stand for principle and the right regardless of circumstances. Even an outline of her Christian life and character would be too lengthy to be given in this place.... The last day of her life was perhaps her happiest day, on account of the blessing she enjoyed, enabling her to triumph over great physical sufferings, which were several times relieved in a marked manner in answer to prayer. She praised the Lord for victory, quoting appropriate promises in a manner to send a thrill of joy even through sorrowing hearts. Earnestly she prayed for her two surviving but absent sons, spoke words of tenderness and love to those about her, breathed with her last words the prayer, 'Come, my Saviour, come quickly,' and calmly fell asleep in Jesus." Before she died, she asked him to give up his chores and cares, and visit the brethren. She knew this was his first love. This he did as long as he was able. Thinking of the needs of others was an important quality in this family. -FF

Amadon, G. W., "The Sickness and Death of Elder John Byington", RH Jan. 25, 1887, pp.57,58. Amadon, Grace, "The First President of the General Conference: John Byington, Farmer-Precacher" RH June 22, 1944, pp 6,7. Ochs, Daniel and Grace, "Biographies of the General Conference Presidents". Smith, Uriah, "Obituary of Catharine Byington", RH Mar. 17, 1885, p. 175. Snider, William H., "The Life of John Byington", An Independent Study, August 3, 1967 (courtesy of E.G. White Estate). Waller, John O., "John Byington-our First General Conference President", RH Dec. 6, 13, 1979. Waller, John O., "John Byington of Bucks Bridge: The Pre-Adventist Years", Adventist Heritage, 1(2); (July, 1974), pp 5-13, 65-67.

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