



Understanding the 1888 Message: Rejected Then, Accept It Now

Description

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by [Analiza Guzman](#)

The most significant General Conference Session in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist church was held in the fall of [1888](#) in Minneapolis Minnesota. God appointed two individuals, A.T. Jones and E.J. Waggoner, to deliver a vital message which has become known in Adventism by various titles, most popularly ["Justification by Faith"](#) and ["Righteousness by Faith"](#). Ellen White declared that it was "the third angel's message, in verity" (1SM 372) and that it was the same message she had been teaching for the last 45 years (1SAT 116). One would think that such a message would have been received without controversy, yet, sadly, that is not what happened. Instead, the message was rejected by some of the most influential leaders of our denomination and the light was prevented from shining out to the church and the world. Ellen White put it like this:

"An unwillingness to yield up preconceived opinions, and to accept this truth, lay at the foundation of a large share of the opposition manifested at Minneapolis against the Lord's message through Brethren [E.J.] Waggoner and [A.T.] Jones. By exciting that opposition Satan succeeded in shutting away from our people, in a great measure, the special power of the Holy Spirit that God longed to impart to them. The enemy prevented them from obtaining that efficiency which might have been theirs in carrying the truth to the world, as the apostles proclaimed it after the day of Pentecost. The light that was to lighten the whole earth with its glory was resisted, and by the action of our own brethren has been in a great degree kept away from the world." 1SM pp.234, 235

Ellen White had recognized that her message and [the 1888 message](#) were actually the same and yet, the church back then failed to recognize it.

It's been well over a century now. Has the church come around to accepting the 1888 message or is the resistance still alive? How can we know?

Well, since [the 1888 Message](#) is about [Justification by Faith](#), a comparison on the church's current understanding of [Justification](#) with what the 1888 messengers taught is what will clearly provide the answer.

What is Justification?

Within Christianity, the Doctrine of Justification is commonly described as how guilty people can have a right standing before God, be forgiven of their sins and be invested with a righteousness that remains beyond their ability to make it their own but which they have accredited to them. Another way to put this is that "Justification" is God considering a sinner who believes in Jesus as though he were righteous. When God looks at that believer, He doesn't see his sin, He sees the righteousness of Christ. We all know this doctrine since this is what we, as Seventh-day Adventists, generally believe about "Justification" as well. One leading author and editor in the church described it like this:

Justification entails the legal declaration of forgiveness. It is the gift of a perfectly righteous, sinless, and holy character credited to us even though we can never possess it ourselves. • False Balances by Clifford Goldstein, p.145

This is just one example to illustrate that belief regarding Justification within Adventism today is much the same as the common understanding within the Christian world. Again, the idea is that justification is the act of accrediting to us a righteousness that we cannot actually attain in this life. But now let's see what Waggoner says:

To justify means to make righteous, or to show one to be righteous. • Christ and His Righteousness by E.J. Waggoner p.51

So, clearly, Waggoner was saying that Justification is actually being made righteous, not just having righteousness as a credit applied to us. Later on, in the same book he says:

When Christ covers us with the robe of His own righteousness, He does not furnish a cloak for sin, but takes the sin away. And this shows that the forgiveness of sins is something more than a mere entry in the books of heaven, to the effect that the sin has been canceled. The forgiveness of sins is a reality; it is something tangible, something that vitally affects the individual. It actually clears him from guilt; and if he is cleared from guilt, is justified, made righteous, he has certainly undergone a radical change. He is, indeed, another person. • Christ and His Righteousness by E.J. Waggoner, p.66

Very interesting, indeed! Do you see how widely this differs from the usual view of justification? Waggoner is saying that a real change in the life happens when we transition from a life of sinning to a life of no longer sinning. Let's hear from another prominent voice within the SDA community:

This, then, is what righteousness by faith is all about; it is making real in our lives the righteousness of Christ by faith. In Christ we are perfect and complete in every respect in character, in performance, in nature, and legally [see Colossians 2:10]. This is what God has obtained for us by His life, death, and resurrection [see Hebrews 9:12]. But in actual practice, we often fall short of perfection. • Beyond Belief by Jack Sequeira p.10

His description doesn't sound too far from Waggoner's at first. However, he ends up explaining that righteousness is received only in theory, not in actual practice. Let's compare this with what Jones has to say:

Let it be borne in mind and upon the heart forever by every soul, that justification (being made righteous) by faith of Jesus Christ means in itself, in every sentiment of it, the total abandonment of sins, and the destruction of the body of sin in order that henceforth we should not serve sin. • Studies in Galatians by A.T. Jones, chap. 2, p. 24

Here, A.T. Jones re-iterates that being made righteous requires a total abandonment and destruction of sins in order not to be servants of sin. Isn't this quite clear that justification is all about the practical application and not a theoretical one? It is very important to not miss what Jones is saying so I invite you to read the quote again. Notice that he is saying that to be justified

means to literally not sin any more. Let's take this to a personal level. Imagine what it would be like to live through life, day by day, moment by moment, being assailed by temptations, but not falling into sin. The idea that Jones and Waggoner had presented is that to be justified is to live like how Jesus lived – without sin – doing only righteousness. I know this might sound unbelievable, and the 1888 messengers knew that, but consider this next statement from Waggoner:

“There are just two services. The service of Satan, which is of sin unto death, and the service of Christ, which is of obedience unto righteousness. A man cannot serve two masters. All believe that. Then it is impossible to serve sin and righteousness at the same time. Now we call ourselves Christians. That means – what? Followers of Christ! But in all our Christian experience we have left little loopholes along here and there for sin. We have never dared to come to that place where we would believe that the Christian life should be a sinless life. We have not dared to believe it or preach it. But in that case we cannot preach the law of God fully. Why not? Because we do not understand the power of justification by faith.” • Bible Studies on the Book of Romans by E.J. Waggoner p.21

This is a statement worth reading again and again until we really get what Waggoner is saying. But I hope the basic idea is clear: the justified life is a sinless life.

I know it can be difficult to accept the doctrine that justification means living a sinless and righteous life. We have all thought that we were justified already, but this clearly shows that so long as we sin, we are not justified. The main question burning in our hearts should then be, “How can I be saved?” “How can I receive true justification?”

Thankfully, [the 1888 message](#) provided an answer to these deep questions. Of course, we don't just need to know what justification is, but we also need to know how to receive it. And the way to receive it is “by faith.” But what is [faith](#)?

There is something that needs to be clarified first and foremost. Faith is not a “feeling” or something that you just feel convinced of. As Ellen White clearly states:

“Many have confused ideas as to what constitutes faith, and they live altogether below their privileges. They confuse feeling and faith, and are continually distressed and perplexed in mind; for Satan takes all possible advantage of their ignorance and inexperience!” • 2MCP 536.2

“Feeling and faith are as distinct from each other as the east is from the west. Faith is not dependent on feeling.” • 2MCP 537.1

So, if faith has nothing to do with feelings, then what is it? Simply put, faith is trust.

“Faith is trusting God!” • (Education – Chapter 30: Faith and Prayer)

The most significant word in this statement is that faith is “trusting” – trust. But what are we supposed to place our trust in?

There are many who believe, without a reason on which to base their faith, without sufficient evidence as to the truth of the matter. If an idea is presented that harmonizes with their own preconceived opinions, they are all ready to accept it. They do not reason from cause to effect. Their faith has no genuine foundation, and in the time of trial they will find that they have built upon the sand. Letter 4, 1889

This clearly shows that faith needs to be based on the weight of evidence. In other words, we can say that faith is trust, and we must place our trust on a genuine foundation of sufficient evidence. Often, people use the word "faith" to describe believing something in absence of clear evidence, but Ellen White tells us that our faith needs to rest upon firm evidence. This shows us that "faith," as described in [the 1888 message](#), is not the same as what most people mean by faith. Faith, according to [the 1888 message](#), is very simple. It is trust. But justification doesn't come by trusting anything; we need to trust the right thing.

Ellen White stressed the importance of knowing what faith is and we should take this into serious consideration because it is the means of receiving justification—it's dependent on faith [trust].

Paul tells us that "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Romans 10:17

Sanctify them through Thy truth; Thy word is truth." John 17:17

God's word is truth, and by hearing [learning] his words, faith [trust] is what will be gained. We can translate this to mean: faith [trust] is built from learning the word of God—truth. In order for faith [trust] to be gained, we must learn [hear] the truth. This makes sense in light of the fact that the only way to know what is true is to have sufficient evidence to establish the truth. Thus, we are to trust what can be established to be truth through evidence.

But how does trusting the truth bring about justification? It is actually very simple. Sinning is ultimately acting against the truth. If we sin, it means we are not thinking and operating according to truth. Thus, if we fill our minds with truth, we will be enabled to act according to the truth and thus not sin, but instead live in righteousness as Christ did. As it says in Philippians 2:5, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." That is, we need to adopt Christ's way of thinking—we need to think according to the truth, and the truth shall set us free (John 8:32). There is much more that could be said on this, but for now I'll just repeat the words of Ellen White:

There are many precious truths contained in the Word of God, but it is present truth that the flock needs now." (EW 63)

[The 1888 Message](#) provides for us the highest standard of righteousness in the message of [Justification by Faith](#). A genuine transformation from a life of sin to a life without sin by faith in Christ is the most effective witness the world will ever see. The erroneous theory of justification as

an artificial transformation where there is no real conversion from sin to a life without sin will be of none effect. How could we convince anyone of living a righteous life when we ourselves do not? We all know from personal experience how sin is a destroyer of life. It is the cause of hurt in this world.

Justification by Faith is an invitation for us to see and abhor our apparent sinful condition, to genuinely seek and study the life of Christ, and to live His life by faith in Him. Justification by faith calls us to not only yield ourselves to Him, but to actually live the same sinless life He led, and it tells us that we can experience that life here and now. Christ paved the way for us by exemplifying in his life resistance against temptation and upholding only the truth in order that we may also overcome. Why would we not embrace this solution to all the misery that exists in our lives and finally bring about salvation for this world?

Once again, the message that the Lord saw fit to give in 1888 was not only for the people back in the 1800s but for us now. Yes, while the church has rejected and lost knowledge of [the 1888 message](#), there is still hope â?? God has not left his church. We need present truth, and there is precious light for us.

â??Great light had come to them, and in order to retain that light and have increased light they must appreciate the light already given and put it to practical use, communicating to others that which they had seen and heard and experienced. Then the truth would become firmly engraven upon their own minds.â?• Ms78, 1893, par.43

For further investigation on [Justification by Faith](#), please read [Christ and His Righteousness by E.J. Waggoner](#), [Studies in Galatians by A.T. Jones](#), and be sure to explore this website! Also, hereâ??s a video by [Advancing Adventism](#) giving a concise explanation of the core of the 1888 message: