



What Happened on
OCTOBER 22, 1844
is Not Immaterial



by *Trent Wilde*

Today (Oct. 17, 2021) is the Day of Atonement. 177 years ago, many thousands were expecting Jesus to return on this day, but their hopes were disappointed. October 22, 1844, went down in the history books as The Great Disappointment. A small portion of those disappointed ones went on to form the Seventh-day Adventist church. But how much do you know about that day, and the history surrounding it, beyond what I just related? Unfortunately, most, even within the SDA church, lack knowledge of crucial aspects of that history. What happened on Oct. 22, 1844 is by no means immaterial.

First, it's important to realize that those announcing the soon coming of Jesus leading up to 1844 were not merely saying "Jesus is coming back" with a date attached to their proclamation. In fact, prior to the summer of 1844, they didn't even say Jesus was coming back on any particular day - they just said, "about the year 1843." The emphasis of their preaching was on the *soonest* of Jesus' coming and on the *nature* of his coming; particularly, that it was "personal" - to use their terminology. At the time, most Christians either didn't expect Jesus to literally return at all, or they expected that if he did, it wouldn't be any time soon - it was at least 1000 years away. Against these popular notions, the Adventists argued that he was coming soon, and he was coming personally, or "in person."

The earliest publication containing Adventist teachings that I'm aware of is found in *Vermont Telegraph*, Oct. 30, 1832. It contains a letter written by William Miller to the editor. The letter bears the title, "Personal Reign of Christ." We might ask, "Why say 'Personal Reign' rather than 'Soon Coming' or 'Second Advent' (terms we use far more commonly today)? Again, the reason is that Miller and his associates were not just making the point that Jesus was coming "again" or that he was coming "soon;" they were

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making the point that he was coming “personally.” And they had to make this point because plenty of Christians thought that Jesus’ return wouldn’t be personal, but would instead be “spiritual.” This conflict between “personal” and “spiritual” comes up right here in this earliest of Millerite writings. In his letter in the Oct. 30 *Vermont Telegraph*, Miller responds to objections to the idea of Jesus’ *personal* reign as found in the writings of Rev. A. Fuller. Objection No. 1 is as follows:

“First, the idea of a personal reign seems to me nearly to exclude that of a spiritual one, by leaving little or no place for it.”

Notice – the contrast is between the “spiritual” and the “personal.” What’s the difference? Well, to say that Jesus will return spiritually, is to portray him as a “spirit” – popularly understood as an entity that is beyond the physical realm. If Jesus had such a nature, his return might be rather unspectacular in the sense that it would be something intangible – not able to be experienced by our senses. To say that Jesus will return *personally*, on the other hand, is to say that he, in his own person (his physical body) will literally return. When Millerites said that Jesus was a *person* and that his return would be *personal*, this is, in fact, what they meant. Here are just a few of their statements to illustrate the point:

“...I believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, having a body in fashion and form like man, divine in nature, human in his person, godlike in his character and power.” – William Miller, [The Midnight Cry!](#), Nov. 22, 1842, p. 2

“It seems that Christ was raised up personally-i.e. His flesh was raised up according to promise, that he might reign on the throne of his father David. We are told by a majority of the teachers of the present day, that he is now reigning on David’s throne, and consequently, that we are mistaken in our views, while we contend that he is yet to come personally for this purpose.

...

Many more passages might be brought forward to show the correctness of the position I have taken; but sufficient have been given to show the fallacy of that preaching that points ‘Beyond the bounds of time and space,’ to the place where Christ reigns spiritually on David’s throne.

...

The personal coming of Christ, to reign personally on David’s throne, over immortal subjects raised from the dead, and glorified with Christ, having bodies fashioned like unto his glorious body, appears to me to be the plain teaching of the word of God..” – John J. Porter, The Voice of Truth, and Glad Tidings of the Kingdom at Hand., June 15, 1844

“Those who spiritualize the coming of the Savior, to be consistent, should spiritualize his going away and say it was not personal—in direct contradiction to his own declaration, that he was [not] a Spirit after his resurrection.

If his second coming is spiritualized and made of none effect, then to have matters correspond; the drinking of the new wine in the kingdom of God must be

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nothingized too; and in the spirit of doing away with the Bible truth, we must proceed to evaporate the description of the last supper itself. How inconsistent for disbelievers in the Lord's Advent to show forth the Lord's death, since it is connected with his coming. We are judgment bound and let us use the reason God has given us. Jesus went away personally and will so come in like manner as he went to heaven. He supped with his disciples the same night that he was betrayed, and he will sup with them soon in the kingdom of God..." – R. Winter, *The Advent Harbinger and Midnight Alarm, Aug. 22, 1844, p. 15-16*
(bracketed note in original)

So, the Millerites promoted the idea that the second advent would consist of the return of the real physical person that is Jesus. Those who denied the personal advent were regarded by the Adventists as guilty of spiritualizing. Those who rejected the personal advent, on the other hand, regarded the Millerites as moving in the direction of materialism, or at least dismissing spiritual “realities,” like the spiritual reign of Christ. It was common to think of the afterlife in “spiritual” (aka non-physical) terms; the same goes for God and Christ and Christ’s kingdom. Yet, a small (but notable) minority of Christians promoted philosophical materialism: the belief that all that exists is strictly made of matter. Stated negatively, nothing immaterial exists.

Here’s a little taste of 18th and 19th century Materialistic Theism:

In 1823, Thomas Cooper published a booklet in Philadelphia entitled: *The Scripture Doctrine of Materialism*, in which he argued

that Jesus and the apostles were materialists. Later that year, none other than Thomas Jefferson wrote to him saying,

“That the doctrine of Materialism was that of Jesus himself, was a new idea to me. Yet it is proved unquestionably.” – [Jefferson to Thomas Cooper, Dec. 11, 1823](#)

Jefferson’s embrace of Theistic Materialism is also expressed in another letter:

“To talk of immaterial existence is to talk of nothings. To say that the human Soul, Angels, God, are immaterial, is to say, they are nothings, or that there is no God, no Angels, no Soul. I cannot reason otherwise. But I believe I am supported in my creed of Materialism by the Lockes, the Tracys, the Stewarts. At what age of the Christian Church this heresy of Immaterialism, or masked Atheism crept in, I do not exactly know; but a heresy it certainly is. Jesus taught nothing of it.” – [Jefferson to John Adams, Aug. 15, 1820](#)

Jefferson also read and recommended the works of Joseph Priestley, a Christian Materialist who wrote extensively on the topic. His works include such titles as [Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit](#) and [Letters on Materialism](#).

Those few Christians who promoted Materialism were very few indeed, and they were much despised for it. While Jefferson expressed his views in a few private letters like the ones we quoted above, he made it a point to keep his religious views out of the public sphere. Thomas Cooper and Joseph Priestley were friends

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and there were those who read and supported their writings. Yet, these Christian Materialists didn't have anything like a movement or a church. They were all very much nonconformists when it came to religion and each had their own views.

While the Millerite doctrines certainly went in the direction of materialism with their focus on the personality of Jesus, physical resurrection, a physical renewing of the earth, labelling "spiritualizing" as "nothingizing," etc. most Millerites weren't materialists – they still believed God was a non-physical spirit and they believed in the conscious state of the dead. Yet, to say "most weren't materialists" implies that some were. Indeed, such was the case with George Storrs, who as early as 1842, published six sermons promoting the conditional mortality of man. In these sermons, he doesn't take the position that humans have immaterial souls that become unconscious when we die; he actually takes the more radical position that we don't have immaterial souls at all.

"It is said – 'The soul is a simple essence, immaterial, uncompounded, indivisible, indestructible, and hence immortal.'

...

What is immateriality? Strictly speaking it is, not material – not matter. In other words – it is not substance. What is that which has no substance? – What kind of creation is it? If the Creator formed "all things out of nothing," it would seem that man's soul has taken the form of its original, and is nothing still; for it is not matter, we are told. If it is said – "It is a spiritual substance" – I ask, What kind of substance is that, if it is not matter? I cannot conceive, and I do not see how it is possible to conceive, of substance without matter, in some form: it may be exceedingly

refined. I regard the phrase, immaterial, as one which properly belongs to the things which are not: a sound without sense or meaning: a mere cloak to hide the nakedness of the theory of an immortal soul in man; a phrase of which its authors are as profoundly ignorant as the most unlearned of their pupils.”- George Storrs, Six Sermons on the Inquiry: Is There Immortality in Sin and Suffering?, p. 29

So to summarize the circumstance: the Christian world at large rejected materialism and maintained spiritualistic views of Christ, God, human nature, and the afterlife. The Millerite doctrine went in the direction of materialism without adopting materialism itself. Some Millerites took things further, fully embracing materialism, but they were still a minority among the Millerites. It's important to understand that the Millerites weren't all united when it came to questions related to materialism since knowing this helps to make sense of what happened next.

After The Great Disappointment, different Adventists found different ways of understanding their experience. The story often told in the SDA church today is that a faithful few turned again to their Bibles to seek guidance and those are the people who then formed the SDA church. While there's certainly truth to this, it's also easy to tell this story in retrospect, and telling it with ease may give the appearance that there was one obviously correct way to handle the disappointment. At the time, there were actually many different options as to how to explain Oct. 22, 1844. Here are several:

1. Abandoning the Advent Message altogether.
2. Abandoning the Oct. 22 date while still looking for the personal Advent at some unspecified time in the near future.

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3. Resetting the date for the Personal Advent.
4. Keeping the Oct. 22 date, and saying that Jesus did return but that his return was “spiritual.”
5. Keeping the Oct. 22 date, but saying Jesus didn’t return then; and that he did something unexpected in the heavens.

Remember, by Oct. 22, 1844, the Advent message had been around for a little longer than a decade. One central aspect of their teachings that whole time was the nature of Christ’s coming – it was understood to be a literal, personal coming, that would be accompanied by a physical resurrection and a physical glorification of those alive at the the time of the Advent. They expected to then experience Christ as their personal king and they would be his literal subjects in a literal kingdom, with real food, drink, plants, and houses. The distinctive features of the Advent message moved the advent people closer to the materialist side of the spiritualism-materialism spectrum. But now, Jesus hadn’t personally returned. It isn’t that the evidence upon which they had based their hopes had changed; rather, their experience didn’t align with what they had understood from the evidence. This was a real conundrum, and different ways of solving that conundrum had different implications for where they would subsequently go on the spiritualism-materialism spectrum.

Those who went with options 2 or 3 (expecting the personal advent at an unspecified near date or resetting the date) would be able to maintain the Millerite position on the materialism spectrum. Nothing about either option requires someone to go back in a spiritualistic direction. Likewise, nothing about either option propels someone further toward materialism.

Options 1 and 4, on the other hand, do move people on the spectrum – and they move them back into the direction of spiritualism. And this is probably a good time to mention that

people today often misunderstand spiritualism – conceiving of it in far too narrow terms. Spiritualism isn't just attempts to communicate with the dead, nor is it just occult rituals, or false healings, it is “a characteristic of any system of thought that affirms the existence of immaterial reality imperceptible to the senses.” ([Britannica](#)). This is the philosophical meaning of spiritualism and it is the one early SDAs spoke of and opposed. Anyway, option 1 is abandoning the Advent message altogether. Some who did this returned to their former churches and most likely embraced whatever spiritualistic sentiments that reigned supreme there. Option 4 is to hold on to the Oct. 22, 1844 date as well as to the idea that this is the date for the second advent, but to abandon the Millerite teaching regarding the nature of the Advent; teaching instead that it was a “spiritual” coming. Some Adventists went with this option. They thus were on the path toward materialism, but stopped, turned around, and headed back into spiritualism, perhaps going further than where they had started.

Option 5, as we will see, is the only one that actually leads people to materialism, and it is the one taken by those who would become SDAs. So, how did they take that option and how does it lead to materialism? Well, it all started the day after The Great Disappointment on October 23, 1844 with the well known vision of Hiram Edson in the corn field. Here is his own account:

“After breakfast I said to one of my brethren, ‘Let us go to see and encourage some of our brethren.’ We started, and while passing through a large field, I was stopped about midway in the field. Heaven seemed open to my view, and I saw distinctly and clearly that instead of our High Priest coming out of the most holy place of the heavenly sanctuary to this earth on the

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tenth day of the seventh month, at the end of the 2300 days he for the first time entered on that day into the second apartment of that sanctuary; and that he had a work to perform in the most holy place before coming to the earth; that He came to the marriage, or in other words, to the Ancient of days, to receive a kingdom, dominion, and glory; and that we must wait for His return from the wedding.” – Hiram Edson’s Handwritten Account (1850s)

Hiram Edson then describes how he worked closely with O.R.L. Crosier and F.B. Hahn to study out the topic of the sanctuary and have it published. Here are some excerpts from that [article](#):

The Sanctuary to be cleansed at the end of 2300 days is..in heaven. The true tabernacle which forms a part of the new covenant Sanctuary, was made and pitched by the Lord...{SANC 2.5}

The priesthood of the worldly Sanctuary of the first covenant belonged to the sons of Levi; but that of the heavenly, of the better covenant, to the Son of God... He was “made an High Priest forever, after the order of Melchisedec.”... {SANC 7.1}

The features of the substance always bear a resemblance to those of the shadow, hence the “heavenly things” referred to in this text must be priestly service “in the heavens” (verses 1, 2) performed by our High Priest in His Sanctuary; for if the shadow is service, the substance is service also. {SANC 9.1}

...

The word in [Hebrews 9:8](#), [10](#), [19](#), is Hagion, “of the

Holies”, instead of the “holiest of all”; and shows that the blood of Christ is the way or means by which He, as our High Priest was to enter both apartments of the heavenly tabernacle. Now if there be but one place in the heavens, as many say, why were there two in the figure?... {SANC 16.2}

...

Paul says, Colossians 1:19, 20, “For it pleased the Father that in Him should all fullness dwell, and having made (margin, making) peace through the blood of His cross, by Him to reconcile all things unto Himself; by Him I say, whether they be things on earth or things in heaven.” When “things on earth” are spoken of in connection or contrast with “things in heaven”, no one can understand them all to be in the same place. “Things in heaven” are to be reconciled as well as “things on earth”. {SANC 21.3}

...People have an idea that in heaven where our Saviour has gone, every thing is, and always was perfect beyond change or improvement. But He said, “In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.” He went into heaven, and Paul says that the “building of God, an house not made with hands” is in the heavens; 2 Corinthians 5:1. {SANC 22.1}

For what did He go to His Father’s house? “To prepare a place for you.” Then it was unprepared, and when He has prepared it, He will come and take us to Himself.-Again, Hebrews 9:23, “It was therefore necessary that the patterns of things in the heavens should be purified with these; but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.” What

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were the patterns? “The tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry,” (verse 21), which constituted the worldly Sanctuary; verse 1. What were the heavenly things themselves? The greater and more perfect tabernacle (verse 11), and the good things and the holy things (verses 11, 12).-These are all in heaven itself. “For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself,” verse 24. Paul here shows that it was as necessary to purify the heavenly things, as it was to purify their patterns, the worldly. {SANC 23.1}

This article presents the scriptural truth that there is a sanctuary in heaven and that sanctuary has two apartments. Jesus was in the Holy, and then moved into the Most Holy on the Day of Atonement at the end of the 2300 years ending in 1844. Heaven is presented here, not as some utterly “perfect” Platonic realm, beyond the bounds of time and space – unchanging, immaterial, etc. No! Heaven is a real place with various locations and things as well as changes taking place. Jesus is also presented as a personal being moving from one location to another just as truly as if he personally came to earth. Ellen White specifically endorsed this article as having the true light on the sanctuary:

I believe the Sanctuary, to be cleansed at the end of the 2300 days, is the New Jerusalem Temple, of which Christ is a minister. The Lord shew me in vision, more than one year ago, that Brother Crosier had the true light, on the cleansing of the Sanctuary, &c; and that it was his will, that Brother C. should write out the view which he gave us in the Day-Star, Extra, February 7, 1846. I feel fully authorized by the Lord,

to recommend that Extra, to every saint. – A Word to the Little Flock, p. 12, par. 8

In fact, Ellen had a vision as early as February 1845 regarding what happened on Oct. 22, 1844. Here is part of what she said,:

In February, 1845, I had a vision of events commencing with the Midnight Cry. I saw a throne and on it sat the Father and the Son. I gazed on Jesus' countenance and admired his lovely person. The Father's person I could not behold, for a cloud of glorious light covered him. I asked Jesus if his Father had a form like himself. He said he had, but I could not behold it, for said he if you should once behold the glory of his person you would cease to exist.... And I saw the Father rise from the throne, and in a flaming Chariot go into the Holy of Holies, within the veil, and did sit. There I saw thrones that I had never seen before. Then Jesus rose up from the throne,... And I saw a cloudy chariot, with wheels like flaming fire, and Angels were all around it as it came where Jesus was. He stepped into the chariot and was borne to the Holiest where the Father sat. There I beheld Jesus, as He was standing before the Father, a great High Priest... {Broadside1 April 6, 1846, par. 7}

In this vision, you can see the Millerite view of the “person” of Jesus (that is, his physical, bodily form) extended to even The Father Himself. Just as Jesus is a physical person with a form, so too the Father is a physical person with a form. Again, this manifests that those who would become Seventh-day Adventists were taking the Millerite trajectory toward materialism further.

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Also, it is worth keeping in mind that this vision was given well over a year before James and Ellen accepted the Sabbath. If you are a Seventh-day Adventist today, that entails you professing that people like Hiram Edson, Crosier, James White, and especially Ellen White had the present truth. And what is it that distinguished them from other Adventists at that time? Consider again the 5 Options I listed for how to deal with the Great Disappointment. For the first couple of years after Oct. 22, 1844, the primary thing that distinguished the various Adventist groups was how they dealt with the Great Disappointment. What did it mean to be part of the Proto-SDA group in say 1845 or 1846? Primarily, it meant that you went with Option 5 – you held to the October 22, 1844 date, and you went further along the materialistic trajectory of the Millerites, unlike any of the other groups. You focused on Heaven as a real place, Jesus as a real person offering his real blood in a real sanctuary, and the Father being a real corporeal being.

Also at this time, other Adventist groups were developing their distinctives – whether that was setting new dates, spiritualizing away the Personal Coming of Christ, or something else. In the Day Star of Jan. 24, 1846, the editor published a letter from James White concerning the spiritualizers. Here's a portion:

“for there are certain men,” or a certain class who deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ. This class can be no other than those who spiritualize away the existence of the Father and Son, as two distinct literal tangible persons, also a literal Holy city and throne of David. The plain teaching of Jude 3-4, is, that the faith once delivered to the saints is just what those who deny the only Lord God & our Saviour Jesus Christ are trying to overthrow. This faith father

Abraham cherished, so have his children ever since; for he looked for a city which hath foundation, whose builder and maker is God, [Heb. 11:10](#). Abraham has not reached the end of his faith yet, neither has J. D. Pickand's in the Holy City, which has twelve gates and twelve foundations, while creation groans and on it rests the curse of its Maker; and we have to wallow through snow two or three feet deep, and face the bleak wintry winds of Maine, it will be hard to make us believe we are in the city and have a right to the tree of life, and have no need of the light of the sun and moon. "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away," [Rev. 21:4](#). The way spiritualizers this way have disposed of or denied the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ is first using the unscriptural trinitarian creed, viz, that Jesus Christ is the eternal God, though they have no one passage to support it, while we have plain scripture testimony in abundance that he is the Son of the eternal God. Then they dispose of Jesus; secondly, by quoting [John 4:24](#). God is a spirit, and as they assert, nothing but a spirit, the Holy Ghost, which dwells in a christian,- Thus they dispose of the Almighty God; while I can and will show from two texts of the bible, that they both exist with body and parts, [Dan. 7:9](#). I beheld till the thrones were cast down (set up) and the ancient of days did sit whose garment was white as snow and the hair of his head like the pure wool. The ancient of days, or God, has a head, and hair on his head, and a body, as David saw

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him clad with a snow white garment; Paul, speaking of Christ, in [Heb. 1](#), says, “who being the brightness of his (God’s) glory, and the express IMAGE of his (God’s) PERSON.” God is a person, for he made man in his own image; so is his only begotten son, Jesus; and this same Jesus is to set on David’s throne in the literal city on the new earth, under the whole heavens.— This is THE faith once delivered to the saints and will live in spite of modern spiritualism, and for this we are to earnestly contend. - [THE Faith Once Delivered to the Saints](#)

From this point, those who would become Seventh-day Adventists continued to develop the doctrine of the Sanctuary, learning more specifically of the nature of the work Jesus is doing there - that being, the investigative phase of a judgment. The records of all who profess to follow God are reviewed in the courts of heaven and each is judged according to their works ([2 Cor. 5:20](#); [Rev. 20:12](#)). Given that this work of deciding the outcome of each person did not begin till 1844, it becomes obvious that people could not have souls that depart from them upon death going to either heaven or hell. Thus, the 1844 investigative judgment indicates that George Storrs was right in his view of the non-immortality (and non-immateriality) of the soul. The light given to explain The Great Disappointment also led to clearly establishing the doctrine of the Personality of God, as we’ve seen above. And all this together led to the early SDAs being united on the foundation of full-blown Materialism. Before the Advent Movement began, there were only a few rare Theistic Materialists around, and not organized as a movement. Within the Millerite movement, there were just a few materialists, and so far as we know, their discussions of materialism were extremely limited (mostly confined

to the human “soul” – which they correctly taught is just a term for the whole being.) With this little group of Adventists who went with Option 5 – who took the materialism-bound path – we get a whole movement of organized materialists – people who believe in a strictly material universe, with a strictly material God, material Christ, material heaven, material humanity, etc. They had a radical new view, contrary to the imaginings of the world’s religions, but in harmony with scripture and with reality.

You can read a sample of their articles overtly promoting Materialism by reading our compilation [Materialism: Our Forgotten Foundation](#), and you can read some of what they had to say about the [Personality of God here](#).