

# A Clash of Millennialism's on Capitol Hill

## Explaining Liberty: Part Two in a Series

BY: DOUGLAS MORGAN

The Christian lobby came to Capitol Hill in a big way in 1888. And that meant that the nation's lawmakers were certain to hear from the "counter-lobby" spearheaded by the *American Sentinel* magazine as well. (The *Sentinel* was the precursor to *Liberty* magazine.) As discussed in part 1 of this series, the main purpose of that periodical since its launch just two years before in Oakland, California, had been to resist the efforts of Protestant activists to marshal the power of the federal government in support of their standards of morality.

The running conflict led to a showdown on December 13 in the public reception room of the U.S. Senate. The room was crowded for a hearing on a bill proposed to support "a nation's Sabbath," held by the Committee on Education and Labor, chaired by Senator Henry W. Blair, Republican from New Hampshire.<sup>1</sup> The ensuing debate over the measure, to be sure, revolved around the First Amendment and the proper relationship between church and state, but influences deeper still generated its energy. It was a clash of millennialism's, differing visions of how the message of judgment and hope in biblical prophecy should guide Christian action in American democracy.

With the *American Sentinel*'s founding editor, Joseph H. Waggoner, dispatched to a new assignment in Europe by the periodical's parent organization, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, it fell to one of the young coeditors, Alonzo T. Jones, to make the case in Washington against the national Sunday observance law being considered by the Fiftieth Congress of the United States. Jones would in fact become a principal spokesperson against the formidable forces arrayed in support of the proposed bill.

Sabbath breaking, intemperance, impurity, and gambling constituted the "Big Four" issues on the agenda of a loose alliance of reform organizations and interest groups whose efforts to bring the power of the federal government to bear on those evils began gaining momentum in the 1880s. Though their work overlapped somewhat with the drive for progressive social and economic reforms during the same era, the "Christian lobbyists"—as some of them proudly identified their vocation—made matters of personal morality their main target, according to historian Gaines M. Foster.<sup>2</sup>

However, the work of the National Reform Association, the most significant catalyst for the Christian lobby of the late nineteenth century, had since its origin in 1863 been directed at the heart of the American national identity. Organized as the National Association for the Amendment of the Constitution, it opposed the secular character of the U.S. Constitution and sought to change it with an amendment acknowledging the sovereignty of Christ over the nation. Primarily an effort by ministers of the Reformed and United

Presbyterian churches at first, it soon gained the support of clergy from a broad spectrum of Protestant denominations. Along with a change of name to the National Reform Association (NRA) in 1875, the organization also declared a broader goal—“to Christianize the government”—which entailed a wide range of moral reforms, including recognition of the “Christian Sabbath.”<sup>3</sup>

**D**espite the widening of its support beyond the original denominational base, the NRA never became a mass movement that mobilized an extensive network of grassroots activists. In the early 1880s, though, it formed an ad hoc alliance with an organization that did just that, and did so with great success—the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Under the powerful leadership of Frances Willard, who became head of the organization in 1879, the WCTU broadened its agenda from the single issue of temperance to comprehensive moral reform through political activism. It was America’s largest women’s organization, with close to 150,000 dues-paying members by the end of the 1880s, organized into more than 7,000 local unions throughout the nation.<sup>4</sup>

A charismatic orator as well as a consummate organizer, Willard laid out a sweeping, postmillennial vision of a nation transformed by Christ in her presidential address at the national WCTU convention held in Nashville in 1887:

“The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, local, state, national, and worldwide, has one vital, organic thought, one all-absorbing purpose, one undying enthusiasm, and that is that Christ shall be this world’s king. Yea, verily, this world’s king in its realm of cause and effect; king of its courts, its camps, its commerce; king of its colleges and cloisters; king of its customs and its constitutions.”

Willard called for explicitly Christian politics that would bring to realization the reign of Christ promised by Christian eschatology. “The kingdom of Christ ‘must enter the realm of law through the gateway of politics,’” she declared. While all “enlightened Christians” must oppose “a union of church and state,” Willard proclaimed, they must also “recognize Christ as the great world-force for righteousness and purity, and enthrone Him king of nations in faith, as he will one day be in fact, through Christian politics and laws, no less than Christian living.”<sup>5</sup>

It would be a mistake to dismiss Willard and her movement as attempting to confine the nation in a straitjacket of petty, moralistic legalism. Even in invoking the language of “theocracy,” as in the following passage from an article published that same year, her fervent idealism envisioned much that was benevolent and liberating. The work of the WCTU, she wrote, was directed toward a time when “future orators . . . will point to those days of the saloon, the prizefight, the trampled Sabbath, the grinding monopoly, the disenfranchised womanhood, as a period of semi-barbarism from which they thank God for deliverance in to the New Republic with its virtual theocracy and universal brotherhood in Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

Willard’s inclusion of “the trampled Sabbath” in the same breath as “the saloon,” “the grinding monopoly,” and “disenfranchised womanhood” helps twenty-first-century readers make the necessary historical leap to a time when Sunday observance was a major, contested public issue. A report to the National Council of Congregational Churches in 1877, for example, declared that “Sabbath desecration has assumed alarming proportions, and summons the churches of Christ to a new and rigorous campaign for its repression.” And that report is but one of several pieces of evidence adduced by historian Robert T. Handy to show that in the late nineteenth century, maintaining Sunday “legally as a day apart” remained an important, and newly endangered, sign of the informal but nonetheless real dominance in American culture held collectively by the leading Protestant denominations.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, as part of its expanding agenda, the WCTU added a “Department of Effort to Prevent Sabbath Desecration” in 1884, directed by Josephine C. Bateham, an Oberlin College graduate and former missionary to Haiti who also held office in a similar capacity with the National Reform Association. Bateham

described the Sabbath as the “nerve center of a Christian nation,” and its observance as vital to the common good of society as temperance. Under her industrious leadership 41 state unions appointed superintendents for a Sunday observance department by the end of the decade.<sup>9</sup>



The foremost organizer of the drive for a national Sunday law in 1888 was the Reverend Wilbur F. Crafts, probably the most industrious of the era’s Christian lobbyists. While pastor of a Presbyterian church in New York City, Crafts published *The Sabbath for Man* in 1884 and a year later began campaigning for a national Sunday law. In that book, which eventually reached seven editions, Crafts drew on a distinction made 20 years before by the Lutheran church historian Philip Schaff to argue that legislation in support of a civil Sabbath was legitimate. Government could not enforce religious observance of the Sabbath, but Sunday rest laws did serve civil interests, benefiting society as a whole by promoting public health, limiting exploitation of workers, reducing crime, and strengthening the home.<sup>9</sup>

Like Willard, Crafts directed his endeavors for Sunday legislation and other reforms toward the ultimate goal of bringing all institutions of American society under “the Kingship of Christ.” The Bible, Crafts believed, mandates the “Christianizing of society,” the realization of “the kingdom of heaven, a divinely ordered, divinely promised, human and humane society of purity and justice and brotherhood and humanity, in which God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven.”<sup>10</sup>

Crafts broadened a campaign for national measures for Sabbath observance that began in 1881 as a petition to Congress for a federal law against carrying or delivering mail on Sundays. Yates Hickey of the International Sabbath Association developed the petition, the NRA endorsed it, and Josephine Bateham’s Sunday observance department of the WCTU led in expanding its circulation. A ban on Sunday military parades was added to the petition, and when Crafts came on the scene in 1885, he added a ban on interstate rail traffic and a general Sunday law for the territories to the list of desired measures.

The Sunday law initiative found a welcome response in Congress from Senator Blair, a longtime ally of moral reform causes who had collaborated with the WCTU on behalf of prohibition since 1877. Now, Blair scheduled a hearing on the proposal for a national Sunday law before his Committee on Education and Labor in April 1888. After hearing speakers lined up by Crafts, and thus all favorable, and the reading of a letter from Bateham claiming the support of a million people for the petition, Blair agreed to draft a bill. He also advised Crafts to gain broader support for the measure by seeking the endorsement of the Knights of Labor. Though already declining from the peak of popular national support it reached in 1886, the Knights of Labor remained the nation’s most widely recognized voice of reform on behalf of the working classes.<sup>11</sup>

Then, on May 21, 1888, Blair introduced “S. 2983,” “a bill to secure to the people the enjoyment of the first day of the week, commonly known as the Lord’s day, as a day of rest, and to promote its observance as a

day of religious worship.” Its provisions included prohibition of unnecessary work and recreation “to the disturbance of others” in territories directly under federal jurisdiction, in addition to the restrictions on Sunday mail, interstate commerce and transportation, and routine military “drills, musters, and parades,” as outlined by the petitions from the Christian lobby.<sup>12</sup>

Four days later, on May 25, Blair further introduced, to the cheers of the NRA periodical the Christian Statesman, a joint resolution charting a new path to constitutional recognition of Christianity as the nation’s religion. It proposed an amendment to the Constitution requiring all states to offer free public education that included instruction not only in the “common branches of knowledge,” but also in “virtue, morality, and the principles of the Christian religion.”<sup>13</sup>

In December, immediately after the second session of the Fiftieth Congress convened, Blair proceeded with a hearing on the Sunday rest bill before his committee. This time arguments both pro and con would be heard. In the intervening months, though, the Christian lobby had marshaled further resources. Crafts laid the groundwork for a new organization, the American Sabbath Union, which held its public organizational meeting on the evening following the December 13 committee hearing.<sup>14</sup> Not only did he succeed in gaining the support of the Knights of Labor; Crafts had in his pocket a letter of endorsement from Cardinal James Gibbons, archbishop of Baltimore and the preeminent member of the American Catholic hierarchy. That letter, Crafts claimed, meant he could add 7.2 million American Catholics to the ranks supporting the national Sunday law, making for a grand total of 14 million.<sup>15</sup>



While Frances Willard and W. F. Crafts tapped into the powerful current of idealism in American Protestantism generated by anticipation of progress toward a new millennial social order, Alonzo T. Jones (1850-1923), more than anyone else, brought the distinct eschatology of Seventh-day Adventists to bear on public issues during the late nineteenth century. Jones joined the Adventist movement at the age of 24 in Walla Walla, Washington, where he was nearing completion of a five-year enlistment in the U.S. Army. He rapidly developed into a powerful preacher and polemicist and a prolific writer. By the 1890s he was probably the most influential male leader in the denomination.<sup>16</sup>

His path to that status brought him and his colleague Ellet J. Waggoner into conflict with an older generation of founding leaders at the church’s General Conference headquarters in Battle Creek, Michigan. Since their emergence in the 1850s, Seventh-day Adventists had been largely preoccupied with proving the truth of the teachings on biblical law, doctrine, and prophecy that they held in distinction from the Protestant majority. Coeditors of an evangelistic periodical the Signs of the Times, as well as the American Sentinel, Jones and Waggoner sought to refocus the church’s teachings on Christ as the source of both forgiving grace and empowerment for holiness of life.<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, Jones, in particular, immersed himself in research that enabled him to draw his own conclusions on how history correlated with biblical prophecy, rather than rely on the church’s generally recognized authority, the venerable Uriah Smith. While Seventh-day Adventists had always decisively eschewed calculating dates for the second coming of Christ, remembering the Millerite “Disappointment” of 1844, their proclamation of the imminence of the great event remained tied to the conviction that apocalyptic

prophecies in the Bible pointed in a specific and unequivocal way to fulfillments throughout history, including their time. Jones's differences with Smith over interpretation of prophecy in no way affected the essential thrust of the Adventist message. The main dispute had to do with exactly which 10 of the "barbarian" tribes that supplanted the Western Roman Empire were symbolized by the 10 toes of the great statue described in chapter 2 of the book of Daniel. As the established leaders saw it, however, any alteration in what they had preached for decades as "truth" would undermine the credibility of their entire system of belief.

The stepped-up activity of the Christian lobby compounded the seriousness—even urgency—with which Adventists viewed these matters. In their reading of the biblical prophecies (see part 1 of this series), the national Sunday law and Christian amendment proposals before Congress signaled a new partnership between religion and state coercion that would end religious freedom in America and begin a time of severe and final tribulation, quickly followed by the return of Christ and destruction of the present order of things. Jones contended that if Adventists wished to bear a true and faithful witness through this apocalyptic crisis, they should subject their claims about how history fulfills prophecy to rigorous scrutiny and make adjustments accordingly.<sup>18</sup>

In October 1888, just two months prior to Senator Blair's hearing on the national Sunday law in Washington, this internal conflict played out at the Adventists' General Conference session in Minneapolis, and its outcome connects with our story of how and why the publishers of the *American Sentinel* sought to influence public policy. Ellen White, whose counsels, or "testimonies," carried prophetic authority in the Adventist community, spoke in support of the young upstarts from California. Her enthusiasm for their work had to do not with a system of doctrine or the particulars of apocalyptic exposition, but with how their teaching drew attention to the transforming love of Christ. Adventists, she said, had been hammering away on the importance of the Ten Commandments for so long that they had become "as dry as the hills of Gilboa." It was time for the refreshing showers of a living connection with Christ.<sup>19</sup>

Out of the conflict at Minneapolis, then, came a revival of Christ-centered spirituality in Adventism, which White, Jones, and Waggoner sought to foster with preaching tours throughout the nation. Their hope and belief was that this renewal would prepare the movement for its final witness to the world, even as events in the public realm seemed to be rushing toward the conclusion of the apocalyptic drama.

As pointed out in part 1 of this series, Adventists found their defining text in Revelation 14:12, in which the third and last in a sequence of angels delivers a message concerning "the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus." A burst of power—the "loud cry" of a related passage in Revelation—would, they believed, attend their final proclamation of that message. And, wrote Ellen White in 1892, this very "loud cry of the third angel" had "already begun in the revelation of the righteousness of Christ, the sin-pardoning Redeemer," through the revival emanating from the 1888 conference.<sup>20</sup>

**T**hus, competing eschatology's, differing conceptions of how God's purposes were to be worked out in history, figured prominently in the conflict between Adventists and the Christian lobby on Capitol Hill in 1888 and beyond. What Willard and Crafts saw as a march to the millennium through legislative measures bringing American institutions under the sovereignty of Christ, Jones saw as a slide toward the demise of the nation's celebrated liberties, after which the nation and all corrupt human institutions would be swept away in a radical act of divine judgment and new creation. That expectation, paradoxically, impelled Adventists to vigorous public action to preserve liberty as part of their mission of preparing as many as possible for the new world to come during the time—presumably brief but of indeterminate duration—that remained.<sup>21</sup>

Jones and the Adventists, it should be stressed, were not alone in resisting the national Sunday law. Representatives of the Seventh Day Baptists and an organization of religious liberals also spoke against the bill at the Senate hearing on December 13. Indeed the Adventists' action for religious liberty often brought

them into temporary alignment with Jewish organizations, religious liberals, civil libertarians of more secular orientation, and most uncomfortably of all, with saloon owners in opposing Sunday-only closing laws.<sup>22</sup>

Some Christians “call us Liberals,” Jones acknowledged, “but we are Christians nevertheless.” The *American Sentinel*, he added, was happy to identify with Christians “who are liberal enough to maintain that all other men inalienably possess all the rights, human, civil, and religious, that Christians possess.”<sup>23</sup>

Jones’s testimony, however, took up the largest portion of the time allotted to opponents of the bill on December 13, and over the next four years he would be widely noted in the press for his opposition to Sunday legislation and related measures.<sup>24</sup> And, an examination of the case he made before Senator Blair’s committee reveals not only the depth of religious conviction undergirding his position, but also the remarkable extent to which he grounded his arguments on assumptions about the truth of Christianity and the authority of the Bible that all concerned—the lawmakers and the lobbyists on both sides—either shared or recognized.

Jones contended that Sunday laws possessed an inherently religious character, and thus violated the Constitution’s prohibition against “establishment of religion.” However, he cited not secular reason but divine revelation as the primary validation for that constitutional distinction between the civil and religious realms. He also found in Scripture the criteria for determining the category in which a proposed enactment belonged.

Putting considerable weight on Jesus’ cryptic saying “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21), Jones declared: “Our national Constitution embodies the very principle announced by Jesus Christ, that the civil government shall have nothing to do with religion, or with what pertains to God; but shall leave that to every man’s conscience and his God.” Furthermore, it was the last six of the Ten Commandments, having to do with how humans treat each other, that delineated the proper scope of civil government’s jurisdiction. This ruled out laws regarding the Sabbath (the subject of the fourth commandment), for Jones denied “the right of the civil government to legislate on anything that pertains to our duties to God under the first four commandments.” On this basis, he denounced the proposed national Sunday bill as not only unconstitutional, but “antichristian.”<sup>25</sup>

The question of whether the law would be a religious or a civil measure lay at the heart of the dispute. Senator Blair reasoned that if, in a democratic nation, “Caesar is society,” and if a weekly day of rest is crucial to the common good, it would then come under the proper scope of “Caesar’s” legislation. The references to religion that permeated the bill, Jones countered, belied the claims about its civil purpose. The title itself declared the bill’s purpose both to secure the enjoyment of the day commonly known as the Lord’s day, “as a day of rest” and to “promote its observance as a day of religious worship,” and the language of religious observance and worship extended through the six sections.<sup>26</sup>

Josephine Bateham of the WCTU proposed substituting the word “promote” with “protect,” so that the bill would not give any appearance of a “union of church and state.” Blair, however, saw “protect” as even more problematic—a “stronger and more interfering word” that implied the backing of armed force. Jones happily agreed.<sup>27</sup>

Jones also cited the declaration in a WCTU publication about the coming of a “true theocracy” through “the enthronement of Christ in law and law-makers” as evidence that a “theocratical theory” lay behind the push for the national Sunday law. At that point Blair, who along with the WCTU supported woman suffrage, launched into a line of questions revolving around gender, perhaps seeking thereby to sidetrack Jones; perhaps to inject some dry humor into the proceedings; perhaps simply as a digression; perhaps all of the above. At any rate, the exchange gives us some sense of the dynamics of the hearing and Jones’s ability to hold his own with the senator in repartee:

*Senator Blair.*—Do you think that the question of giving the ballot to women is a religious question?



Mr. Jones.—No. I only read this for the purpose of giving the proof that there is a theocratical theory underlying this, as there was that in the fourth century, so as to show the parallel.

Senator Blair.—But the parallel seems to imply that the extension of the suffrage to woman is by divine appointment, and is the introduction of a theocratic form of government?

Mr. Jones.—Yes, they want the ballot so as to make a theocracy successful.

Senator Blair.—Therefore you would be against woman's suffrage?

Mr. Jones.—I would be against woman's suffrage, or any other kind of suffrage, to establish a theocracy. . . .

Senator Blair.—These women need looking after, I admit.

Mr. Jones.—They do in that respect, and there are many men concerned in the same business.<sup>28</sup>

The parallel with the fourth century mentioned in this interchange refers to the deepest source of Jones's opposition to the Sunday law. He saw it, and the entire agenda of the Christian lobby, as accelerating an American transition from republic to empire, similar to that of ancient Rome. In part 3 of this series we will take a closer look at how this view of history, placed in a broader frame of meaning through the apocalyptic prophecies of the Bible, motivated Jones and his fellow Adventists to counter the postmillennial zeal of the Christian lobby.

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1. "For a Nation's Sabbath, a Hearing of Six Hours Before Senator Blair's Committee," *Washington Post* (Dec. 14, 1888), p. 6.
2. See his *Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill, N. C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), especially pp. 1-7, and on the "Big Four," p. 112.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 22, 27-30, 82-84.
4. Thomas R. Pegram, *Battling Demon Rum: The Struggle for a Dry America, 1800-1933* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998), pp. 68-71; Foster, p. 86.
5. Excerpts from the speech quoted in A. T. Jones, "Misdirected 'Enthusiasm,'" *American Sentinel* (Feb. 1888) pp. 12, 13.
6. Quoted in E. J. Waggoner, "A 'Virtual Theocracy' Promised," *American Sentinel* (Sept. 1887), pp. 66, 67.
7. Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 84-88.
8. Foster, *Moral Reconstruction*, pp. 96, 97.
9. Gaines M. Foster, "Conservative Social Christianity, the Law, and Personal Morality: Wilbur F. Crafts in Washington," *Church History* 71 (Dec. 2002): 802, 803. On Schaff, see Handy, pp. 86, 87.
10. Foster, *Moral Reconstruction*, pp. 110, 111.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 96-98.
12. Alonzo T. Jones, *The Two Republics or Rome and the United States of America* (Oakland: Pacific Press Publishing Co., 1891), pp. 830-832.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 820, 821.
14. Foster, *Moral Reconstruction*, pp. 98, 99.
15. "For a Nation's Sabbath," *Washington Post* (Dec. 14, 1888); A. T. Jones, "The National Sunday Convention," *American Sentinel* (Jan. 1889), p. 4.
16. George R. Knight, *From 1888 to Apostasy: The Case of A. T. Jones* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1987), pp. 15, 16, 159.
17. Richard W. Schwarz, "The Perils of Growth, 1886-1905," in Gary Land, ed., *Adventism in America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 99, 100.
18. George R. Knight, *Angry Saints: Tensions and Possibilities in the Adventist Struggle Over Righteousness by Faith* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1989), pp. 15-39.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 49-57.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 57-60.
21. Douglas Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic: The Public Involvement of a Major Apocalyptic Movement* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), pp. 43-51.

22. Eric Syme, *A History of SDA Church-State Relations in the United States* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1973), pp. 20-28, 55.
23. A. T. Jones, "The American Sentinel and the Churches," *American Sentinel* (Dec. 1888), p. 90.
24. Knight, *From 1888 to Apostasy*, pp. 76, 77; Foster, *Moral Reconstruction*, pp. 99, 100.
25. "The National Sunday Law, Argument of Alonzo T. Jones Before the United States Senate Committee on Education and Labor; at Washington, D.C., Dec. 13, 1888"; pp. 22, 25-26, 37-38, 42-43 (*American Sentinel* tract, 1892), in Religious Liberty Tracts, Online Document Archives, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Office of Archives and Statistics, [www.adventistarchives.org/doc\\_info.asp?DocID=47173](http://www.adventistarchives.org/doc_info.asp?DocID=47173) (accessed April 22, 2009).
26. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 159-162.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 59, 60.