



F L A T
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ACCORDING TO ELLEN WHITE

FLAT EARTH

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What is salvation? Does salvation depend on our knowledge of the shape of the earth? Is it important for us to understand the shape of the earth? Is proclaiming the shape of the earth our commission for these last days? These are a few questions we will try to address. We will take a look at counsel given within the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy on this subject.

FLAT EARTH AND SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST HISTORY

The mid to late 19th and early 20th centuries brought about great strides for God's remnant people. But along with this forward march, many challenges arose; one of these the theory that the earth was flat rather than round. Today we once again see the emergence of this debate.

Ellen White saw early on that the flat vs. round earth controversy could have the potential to bring great problems and difficulties upon the church - something a young church did not need. A fracture of this young church would only set the work back, or worse yet, defeat the movement by sidelining the very important present truth message.

Though Ellen White had ready answers for this controversy, in customary fashion she took her pen to address the issue. The book, *Gospel Workers*, reveals some of these writings:

“When at one time a brother came to me with the message that the world is flat, I was instructed to present the commission that Christ gave His disciples, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations: ...and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end.” [Matthew 28:19, 20.] In regard to such subjects as the flat-world theory, God says to every soul, “What is that to thee? follow thou Me. I have given you your commission. Dwell upon the great testing truths for this time, not upon matters that have no bearing upon our work.” GW 314.1

As Ellen White begins to write, she pens, “I was instructed.” Who instructed her? God, whether by an angel or by Christ himself. It was God that gave Ellen White the instruction for the church on the matter, the issue of the shape of the earth.

The second important thought seen within this statement from the book, *Gospel Workers*, is what God intended for His people: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations: ... and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end.” Matthew 28:19, 20.

God desires His people to take the message to the world, and it is clear by this statement that the message to be delivered is not whether the world is flat or round. She says, “In regard to such subjects as the flat-world theory, God says to every soul, What is that to thee? follow thou Me. I have given you your commission.”

We have been given a commission. Who gave this commission? God gave this commission as was stated, “God says to every soul.” And what does God say? “What is that to thee? follow thou Me.” Yes, what does it matter to us whether the earth is flat or round. Again, God says, “I have given you your commission.”

Let’s look again at the words of God’s messenger “Dwell upon the great testing truths for this time, not upon matters that have no bearing upon our work.”

Brothers and sisters, whether the world is flat or round has no bearing on our salvation, nor does it play a role in delivering the present truth message. How do we know this? Because we have been told by

God. We have been given a commission from God Himself via the Spirit of Prophecy to follow His Son, Christ Jesus, not theories on the shape of the earth.

So how did this teaching of the flat earth make way into the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

The belief that the world is flat finds its origin centuries ago, but a resurgence of Flat-earthism occurred in England in 1849 with the publication of a little book with a big name: "Zetetic Astronomy: A Description of Several Experiments which Prove that the Surface of the Sea is a Perfect Plane and That the Earth is Not a Globe!" Writing under the pen name of "Parallax," Samuel Birley Rowbotham devoted the rest of his life to attacking the theory of a spherical earth.

As a result of Rowbotham's book, many others joined the march following in his footsteps. This included a few traveling Adventists in the late 1880's promoting the theories of Samuel Birley Rowbotham throughout New York and the New England regions. Two of these gentlemen were Brothers Wilcox and Brown whom Ellen White would eventually address as we will read in the following statement:

April 15, 1887, from Basel, Switzerland, to "Dear Brother Brown"

I learn by letters from New York that Brother Brown has accepted and is now preaching the flat world theory. Is it possible that this theory has been brought by Brother Wilcox from England and that you have accepted it and are teaching it? My brother, our work is to teach the third angel's message. Stick to the message. It is a weakness of Elder Wilcox to get hold of hobbies and to stick to some things that he had better let alone.

Any kind of theory or hobby that Satan can lead the minds of men to dwell upon, he will draw their attention to, so that they shall not be engaged in giving the solemn message for this time. Do not, my brother, become entangled with ideas that have no connection with the work for this time. It is better to be teaching the truth as it is in Jesus. Better to be seeking for true godliness, heart holiness, freedom from all selfishness, freedom from all envies and jealousies.

It is better to pray and humble the soul before God and let the world, round or flat, be just as God has made it. Try most earnestly by faithful continuance in well-doing to seek for a clear title in the inheritance in the earth made new. Better lead the flock of God to drink at the higher streams; better by precept and example seek God while He may be found. Call upon Him while He is near. There is a revival needed in the church. When the teachers are drinking fresh draughts from the well of Bethlehem, then they can lead the people to the living stream. My soul is weighed down with the burden of the condition of things in New York. May the Lord raise up helpers, men whom He can teach, humble men whom He can lead to bear a clear, sharp testimony in faith. God help you to seek His face, to walk carefully, to put self out of sight, and exalt Jesus.

I hope Brother Wilcox will be a truly converted man. This is his great need at the present time. He wants meekness, he wants humility, he wants genuine piety, and without it he is as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. His soul and your soul need the indwelling of Jesus. Whether the world is round or flat will not save a soul, but whether men believe and obey means everything. Letter 43, 1887. 21MR 412.6-413.3

This portion of the letter is clear and to the point. There is work to be done, a coming together, a revival, calling upon God while He is still near. This is what is important. And the lessons of this counsel are as of much importance today as in her day.

God requires all to be drinking fresh draughts from the well of Bethlehem. And whether our brother or sister believes the world to be round or flat is irrelevant. What is essential is laying our differences aside regarding the shape of the earth, and to do so by keeping those thoughts private while coming together as one people leading others to the living stream.

During this era there was another prominent figure of note. Alexander Gleason of Buffalo, New York, who, being an Adventist believer, published a book in 1890 titled: "Is the Bible from Heaven? Is the Earth a Globe?" Gleason's book made some interesting connections between the preaching of the Seventh-day Adventist message and the theory of the flat earth with many becoming intrigued by his conclusions and joining in on the spreading of his message. He had

conducted many experiments to prove his theory that the earth is flat and had a sincere desire to harmonize his theory in a Biblical context. Today, just as in Ellen White's day, there are many who have found harmony between scripture and Adventist theology that God created the world contrary to the globe-shape most have come to accept.

Because Alexander Gleason was living in Buffalo, New York, it made this region easily accessible for touring his message. This created much difficulty within the New York Conference with the disruptions stretching into New England as well. This was also the region Wilcox and Brown had been touring.

Throughout the history of the world we have been shown that when one theory arises, a contraction usually results, and often war follows. So it was with the SDA church. Following the year, 1849, when the flat-earth theory gave rise, SDA church leaders had words to say regarding the issue. Some within the General Conference were quite harsh towards flat-earth believers which created division and animosities.

E. Goodrich wrote an article in the "Advent Review, and Sabbath Herald" in 1862 titled "No Spirit". He saw that someone who believes that the earth is flat may be just as good a Christian, as devoted in all their exercises, and as godly in their walk as anyone who believes otherwise. Let's read what Goodrich had to say on this:

The honest deacon who believes the world flat and immovable may be just as good a christian, as devotional in all his exercises, and as godly in his walk, as one that believes otherwise. Such a faith, or such an error, has little or nothing to do with religion or practical godliness, because it neither denies the necessity nor worth of the atonement. January 28, 1862 JWe, ARSH 68.14

Brother Goodrich speaks great wisdom here. Whether one believes the world round or flat does not make him less a Christian. By this he was trying to convey a very important point: we need to love one another and come together as loving Christians; a brotherhood. Goodrich felt it did not matter what one believed on this non-salva-

tional subject. These words were an attempt to bring people together not force them apart or cause them to choose one side or the other. To drive division among church members hindering the sounding of the third angel's message would have only set the movement back - something only the enemy of God's cause desires to do: fail to forward the commission of God.

Ellen White also needed to address the issue, and although she received little light on the subject, she received all that was needed. One of these letters reads:

"Non-Essential Subjects To Be Avoided,"

September 12, 1904. Written by Ellen G. White in Omaha, Nebraska

There is to be an avoidance of controversy. We are to speak the truth in love. False doctrines of every kind will be brought in to divert the mind from a plain "Thus saith the Lord." Wherever we go, we shall find men ready with some side issue. While I was at Melrose, a man came with a message that the world is flat. I was instructed to present the commission that Christ gave His disciples just before His ascension, as recorded in Matthew 28:16-20.

We are not to allow our minds to be occupied by subjects such as that presented by this man. In regard to such subjects, God says to every soul, "What is that to thee? Follow thou Me. I have given you your commission. Dwell upon the great testing truths for this time, not upon matters that have no bearing upon our work."

Again and again these non-essential subjects have been agitated, but their discussion has never done a particle of good. We are not to allow our attention to be diverted from the proclamation of the message given us. For years I have been instructed that we are not to give our attention to non-essential questions. There are questions of the highest importance to be considered. "What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" the lawyer asked Christ. The Saviour answered, "What is written in the law? how readest thou?" "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself."

The questions Christ considered essential are the questions that we are to urge home today. We are not bidden to enter into discussion

regarding unimportant subjects. Our work is to lead minds to the great principles of the law of God. 17MR 303.3-304.3

Ellen White is stressing several thoughts here. One of these is that there is to be an avoidance of controversial non-essential subjects as they only agitate, resulting in no particular good - only diverting us from the proclamation of the message given us. She goes on to say "For years I have been instructed that we are not to give our attention to non-essential questions." Again, who gave her this instruction? Yes, God did! And what are we NOT to give attention too? "Non-essential questions" such as the shape of the earth.

Let's look at another letter, this time in its entirety:

MR No. 1587—True Christianity; Being a Good Samaritan

Written August 29, 1904, from Melrose, Massachusetts, to her son, W. C. White

This morning Mother is rather weary. I spoke one hour under the tent. The weather has been cool and very nice for the meetings. I tried to forget we might have been much better situated, and made a much better impression than we have made. Our tent has been full and the children were in a meeting in another tent.

I am pleased to tell you the Lord strengthened me on Sabbath to bear a decided message. To His name be all the glory. I know the impression was made by His Holy Spirit. On Sunday afternoon I urged the truth with more decided firmness and power. A man was present who had expressed a desire to see me and talk with me in regard to the round and flat world. I sent him a message that when Christ gave my commission to do the work He had placed upon me, the flat or round world was not included in the message; the Lord had taken care of His house, His world here below, better than any human agency could care for it, and until the message came from the Lord, silence was eloquence upon that question.

I then said to the congregation that I had to present to them the science of higher education. Luke 10:17-24. Now all listen, "And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted Him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (verse 25). Here is a question of highest science.

The Lord Jesus turned over the question to the lawyer himself. "He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou? And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself." Christ said unto him, "Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live. But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbor?" (verses 26-29). Then Christ gave a parable of the Good Samaritan. This is the true science of Christianity.

The great question is, What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life? This is the science of what constitutes the higher education, and when this question is properly adjusted, the capabilities of the whole man are called into full exercise. There will be no agitation of the question whether the world is round or flat, but the whole burden of the soul is: What shall I do to inherit eternal life? We need now to make every talent that God has given us to be employed to His name's glory.

I had a very solemn message and it made a decided impression on the many assembled. Several followed me out to the carriage to speak a word with me. Professor Ramsey came to the carriage and spoke with me. Seemed very glad he heard me again. He has fullness of flesh but his countenance is greatly changed in expression. There was not that intelligence and refinement that had once been there, and I felt sorry. Letter 390, 1904

In matters of whether the world is round or flat, the topic is non-essential and is to be left alone. What IS important is that "We need now to make every talent that God has given us to be employed to His name's glory." This is the central theme to which we must all cling when dealing with this subject. We have one message to give and again, it does not include the shape of the earth.

But there's more!

Let those who are presenting theories as to whether the earth is round or flat, leave this question, for God has not given it to them to solve, and earnestly inquire, "What shall I do that I may have everlasting life?" Let them heed the answer, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself." 21MR 419.6

She continues:

Nonessential questions will be brought in by those who do not purify their souls by obeying the truth. They fall far short of the standard of loving God supremely and their neighbor as themselves. I am bidden to say that sophistries will be brought in to take the place of the pure gospel of Jesus Christ. The message is given, "Some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils." This word has been fulfilling among our people. 21MR 420.1.

It is important to remember that the counsel is given as much to those presenting and stressing round earth as flat. The agitation coming from both sides is distracting from the church's calling; it is this disruption emitting from opposite positions for which she urges restraint. Her call, or counsel, is for these divisions to cease this rhetoric and come together for the purpose of finishing the work, as God Himself is asking.

Melrose, Mass., Sunday, August 28, 1904—I speak to the people that shall assemble in the tent meeting in Melrose. My mind is deeply exercised this morning. I have had matters presented to me to give to our people. An urgent request came to me from a man who desired to discuss with me in regard to the round world—to him a very important matter.

My answer was, "I have a message to this people in regard to the life they must live in this world to prepare them for future life which measures with the life of God. We have nought to do with the question whether this world is round or flat. [The important thing] is to serve God with full purpose of a renewed heart, sanctified and made holy by the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ."

Every issue will be brought in in various places by some persons who are not worked by the Spirit of God. Last night the Lord gave me words to speak to the people. Satan has a multitude of questions to bring in through various minds and ingenuity as all-important. Take the Word, plainly stating the truth for 1904; and the messenger that was sent of God had a message the same as the people need now. He was John the Baptist. 21MR 421.3-421.5

This message is the same for us today. Can we see a pattern here? Whether round or flat, we are to leave the shape of the earth alone. We are to present a message that will prepare ourselves and others for the kingdom.

For those who think they must counteract the flat earth teaching and prove what side is wrong, she says:

I had one come up to me and want me to give information about a round or flat world. Said I, I have no such burden on my soul at all. I have nothing to say to you or to anybody else about a round or a flat world. What we want is a round character. We have altogether too much of a flat character, and we want now to think of building a character that shall be round and perfect, as our Father which is in heaven is perfect, and we want that every talent that you have should be in exercise. Grow in grace and in the knowledge of the truth, that you may go forth, and – what says Christ? Teach them all things about a round world? No. That I have commanded you. That is what we are to teach. Teach the lessons that Christ gave in His life practice. Ms155-1904.79

Sister White repeatedly sidestepped the issue of the earth being round or flat and never stated what she believed on the shape of the earth in these particular statements dealing directly with the issue. She is unbiased as she condemns promoting a round earth as well as flat.

Furthermore, Sister White did not join in the controversy when addressing it. However she sought to diffuse it by directing the attention of all on both sides, to the Adventist mission at hand which, again, is our commission: To teach the gospel and take it to the world regardless of its shape. We only hurt the cause of God when we try to convert the other side to our thinking on non salvational issues creating division, discord, and animosity while tarnishing the image of God's remnant people to the world.

Following God's leading, Sister White set out to diffuse the issue attempting to cause this question to fade into insignificance by encouraging everyone on either side to sidestep the debate and to remem-

ber what is truly important. This lesson is for us today. We can learn from history.

What should we say or do when we are approached regarding the shape of the earth?

“And I want to tell you that somebody will rush up every little while with something new and strange, as though that was to take your minds captive. Tell them that you have the old, old story of the cross of Christ, of the life of Christ, and when it comes to these little items that they shall bring out, we have the solid foundation for our feet. It is the solid platform that we want. If you work with Christ, Christ will work with you, and we are getting ready, fitting up for the future, immortal life. Jesus says, I will be with you to the end of the world. Then we will believe Him, and we will work diligently for Him. Ms155-1904.80

When the subject of the earth’s shape comes up, we can simply “Tell them that you have the old, old story of the cross of Christ, of the life of Christ.”

Sister White does not argue with those who hold to the belief of the flat or round earth but rather shows them the light of the clear truths of the gospel and reminds them of the Adventist mission to teach the gospel, as it is in Jesus, allowing the issue to fade into insignificance.

Sister White’s counsel began to change the tide, and it, indeed, faded into insignificance. Both those in the General Conference as well as those throughout the Northeast, including the New York Conference, let it go, ending the debate by heeding her words.

As a result, the church remained free of the debate for decades. The agitation from both sides was gone, and the church moved forward in its commission.

Yes, there is much to be learned from history, and this history must now be magnified as we face a similar situation in our day. In light

of counsel, we must all ask, "How will we now deal with our current debate on the shape of the earth? Will we throw wood on the fire creating agitation and division? Or will we follow the light given by laying this topic aside so that we can come together to finish the commission God has given to us?"

The choice is ours. With our Lord ever before us, may we follow the voice of our Shepherd given through the pen of Sister White.

Blessings to all. No matter what your thoughts on the shape of the earth may be, we have a work to do!

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