

Open and Shut Door

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OPEN AND SHUT DOOR. An expression derived from Rev. 3:7, 8, where Christ is described as the one “that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth” (an allusion to Isa. 22:22), and as the one who says to the Philadelphia church, “Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it.” Seventh-day Adventists have applied these texts to the closing of the first phase and the opening of the second and final phase of Christ’s ministry in heaven, where He has been the Christian’s high priest since His sacrifice on the cross (*see* Sanctuary). Christ’s dual ministry was prefigured by the service of the ancient high priest, who served “unto the example and shadow of heavenly things” (Heb. 8:5). In the earthly sanctuary he served daily in the holy place, the first apartment of the sanctuary, and once a year in the Most Holy Place, the inner shrine where was the golden ark in which were the tables of the Ten Commandments and over which appeared the visible glory of God. This entering into the Holy of Holies took place on the Day of Atonement in the ceremony of the cleansing of the sanctuary (Lev. 16).

In applying the type to Christ, Ellen White declared: “Then Jesus rose up and shut the door in the holy place, and opened the door in the Most Holy, and passed within the Second Veil, where He now stands by the ark; and where the faith of Israel now reaches. I saw that Jesus had shut the door in the holy place, and no man can open it; and that He had opened the door in the Most Holy and no man can shut it: (Rev. 3:7, 8); and that since Jesus has opened the door into the Most Holy Place, which contains the ark, the commandments have been shining out to God’s people, and they are being tested on the Sabbath question.”—*Present Truth* 1:21, August 1849; also *Early Writings*, p. 42.

This application corrected, not immediately but eventually, a misunderstanding of the “shut door” of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins—a misconception that had been derived from the Millerite movement of 1844.

The Millerites had based their expectation of the return of Christ principally on Daniel’s prophecy of the cleansing of the sanctuary at the end of 2300 prophetic days (Dan. 8:14). At the climax of the movement, in 1844, they

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specifically connected this prophecy with the purification ceremony of the ancient Day of Atonement as typifying the ending of Christ’s mediation for sins (though they saw the cleansing of the sanctuary as the purging of the earth in the final fires). At the same time they gave increased and specific emphasis to the prophetic parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Matt. 25).

William Miller had likened his message of the expected Second Advent to the “midnight cry” of the parable (“Behold, the bridegroom cometh”), and had emphasized the point that the wise virgins, who were ready to meet the arriving bridegroom, entered with him into the wedding, where the door was shut after them, leaving the tardy foolish virgins outside. The virgins he interpreted as those summoned to meet the returning Lord; the wedding, the eternal kingdom, from which the unready would be forever excluded. “The door was shut,” he said, “implies the closing up of the mediatorial kingdom, and finishing the gospel period.”—William Miller, *Evidence . . . of the Second Coming of Christ* [1840], p. 237.

Unlike most others who were then looking for the near advent of Christ (*see* Premillennialism), the Millerites placed strong emphasis on the doctrine that at the coming of Christ every human being would be either ready or unready to meet Him, and that opportunity for salvation would then cease. This in theological parlance was called the close of human probation. The Millerites taught “that the

notion of a probation after Christ's coming is a lure to destruction, entirely contrary to the Word of God, which positively teaches that when Christ comes the door is shut, and such as are not ready can never enter in."—"Boston Second Advent Conference," *The Signs of the Times* 3:69, June 1, 1842; reprinted in SB, No. 1083.

Because they expected Christ to return at the close of the 2300 prophetic days, they had emphasized the close of probation at the end of that period. Therefore, for a short period after the disappointment of October 1844, Miller and many others thought that their work for the world was done, that there was only a little "tarrying time" left—perhaps but a few days or months—until Christ would come. In December 1844 Miller wrote: "We have done our work in warning sinners, and in trying to awake a formal church. God, in his providence has shut the door, we can only stir one another up to be *patient*; and be diligent to make our calling and election sure. We are now living in the time specified by Malachi iii:18, also Daniel xii:10, and Rev. xxii:10-12. In this passage we cannot help but see, that a little while before Christ should come, there would be a separation between the just and unjust, the righteous and wicked, between those who love his appearing, and those who hate it. And never since the days of the apostles, has there been such a division line drawn as was drawn about the 10th or 23rd day of the 7th Jewish month."—William Miller letter, in *Advent Herald*, Dec. 11, 1844, p. 142; reprinted in *Western Midnight Cry* 4:25, Dec. 21, 1844.

Others expressed themselves similarly at first. But J. V. Himes, Miller's most prominent colleague, and others held that since Christ had not come, the 2300-day prophetic period must not have ended in 1844; that it must extend to some other date in the future, and therefore that the fulfillment of the "midnight cry" of the parable of the virgins was also still future; and that the October 1844 movement (*see* Seventh-Month Movement) was a mistake, and was not a fulfillment of prophecy. By the spring of 1845 the main Millerite group, including Miller, had come to this view. This group, still possessed of the idea that the "door" of the parable of the virgins was none other than the "door of salvation," argued thus: Since Christ has not come, the door of salvation is still open; therefore, the parable of the virgins has not yet met fulfillment. They concluded that anyone who taught that this parable had been fulfilled must believe that probation had ended, and must, therefore, be ipso facto a "no-mercy" heretic. The phrase "shut door" became an epithet.

But a minority continued to hold that the time had been correct; that the mistake had been in the nature of the prophetic fulfillment; that in October 1844 the 2300 days had ended in the symbolic Day of Atonement and the parable had been fulfilled (though not in the way that they had expected); and therefore that the door of the parable—whatever it might mean—had been shut in fulfillment of the prophecy. To them the phrase "shut door" was equivalent to the affirmation of belief that the "true midnight cry" had been the climax of a God-given message and the 1844 movement had been led of God and permitted, in His providence, as a test of their consecration and willingness to be ready to meet their Lord. Naturally these regarded the majority, who had given up "the time," as turning their backs on the truth and denying the Lord's leading in the "midnight cry."

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Some continued to hold—as Miller had taught—that the door was that of salvation, for they still expected Christ to return very shortly. As time passed, some held that it was the door of "access" to listeners—that obstinate and willful individuals had closed their ears to God's message for that day; in either case there was no chance of winning acceptance of their message by the world at that time. The unfortunate controversy over the "shut door" magnified the subject unduly and prolonged the misunderstanding. As might be expected, feelings ran high in this time of disillusionment and confusion.

The extremists on the shut-door doctrine declared that Christ had come, not literally, but "spiritually" (*see* Spiritualism [1]). But the small group that formed the nucleus of the future Seventh-day Adventist Church opposed alike the vagaries of those who declared that Christ had come spiritually and the position of the majority who "denied their past experience" in the 1844 movement.

They retained their confidence in the 1844 fulfillment, and concluded that the mistake lay in the event they had expected.

They accepted the explanation of the Disappointment that was first advanced by Hiram Edson on the day after the Disappointment, namely, that the ministry of Christ as our high priest in the heavenly sanctuary had not ended with the 2300 days, but had entered another phase, as symbolized (1) by the high priest's entry into the Holy of Holies, the beginning of the symbolic cleansing of the sanctuary, and (2) by the coming of the bridegroom to the wedding (not to the earth); and that the end of this phase, symbolized by the priest's coming out of the sanctuary and the bridegroom's return from the wedding (Luke 12:36), was yet to come, and would be followed by the Second Advent.

Their retention of the belief in the 1844 ending of the 2300 days and their separating of the Second Advent from that prophetic period saved them from the error to which the majority group was susceptible—that of seeking future dates for the end. But it left them with the dilemma of either accepting the no-mercy doctrine or correcting their view of the “shut door” from the initial Millerite definition of it. They gradually came to see the opening of the final phase of Christ's ministry as the shutting of the door of the holy place and the opening of the door to the Holy of Holies—the opening of a new message of the Sabbath, and the opening of a broadened ministry to the world preceding the Second Advent. But this took time.

It is interesting to trace the steps by which the little groups that later became the Seventh-day Adventists moved out of the shut-door dilemma and solved the double problem: (1) Is the door shut? and (2) What is the door?

Ellen G. Harmon (later White) was accused of claiming divine revelation for the no-mercy doctrine. This she denied. She stated later: “With my brethren and sisters, after the time passed in forty-four I did believe no more sinners would be converted. But I never had a vision that no more sinners would be converted. . . . I was shown that there was a great work to be done in the world for those who had not had the light and rejected it. Our brethren could not understand this with our faith in the immediate appearing of Christ.”—Letter 2, 1874, in *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 74.

Her first vision (December 1844) portrayed the “Advent people” journeying along a path to the Holy City with the light of the “midnight cry” behind them, and entering the city at the Second Advent. This, to those who accepted it, meant reassurance that the 1844 message and movement had not been a delusion; or to put it another way, that the 2300 days had ended and the parable, with its “shut door,” had been fulfilled, and that very shortly they would see their Lord, who was delaying His appearance to test their faith.

Her view in February 1845 was in agreement with Edson's explanation—Christ, the high priest, going from the holy place to the Most Holy Place, within the veil, explained as His going to receive the kingdom after which He would “return from the wedding” to receive His waiting ones at the Second Advent. In 1847 she connected this entering of the Holy of Holies with the shutting of the door.

Thus both Hiram Edson and Ellen Harmon taught that Christ's work in the sanctuary had not ended, but was continuing in another phase. However, they thought that this phase would represent only a brief period.

When in 1848 she described a vision depicting the future SDA publications as “streams of light that went clear round the world,” the little group could not comprehend that there was either the time or the possibility for them to bear a message to the world at large.

In 1849 Ellen White had a vision of the heavenly sanctuary that further depicted the significance of the “open and shut door,” in connection with the Sabbath message and in connection with Rev. 3:7, 8 (see extract quoted

near the beginning of this article). The shutting of one door meant the opening of another.

In 1850 James White reported the accession of one man who “had made no public profession of religion” before 1845. By the next year there was a noticeable change. In April, White stated that the

door was shut to “those who had heard the everlasting gospel message and rejected it,” but he held that the following classes may be converted: (1) “erring brethren” in the Laodicean church (the majority group of ex-Millerites), (2) children now coming to the age of accountability, and (3) “hidden souls” compared with the biblical “seven thousand” who had “not bowed unto Baal” (1 Kings 19:18), who would be converted in the future “in His own time,” when they hear the message; but at present, he said, the message was for those in the Laodicean church (editorial note in *Review and Herald* 1:64, Apr. 7, 1851).

In September he reported some converts from this third class. In December G. W. Holt, a fellow minister in New York, wrote that “in some places where but a few months since there was seemingly no sign of there being one child of God, they are now springing up.” The next February White reported “many,” and by May “a large portion,” of those who had had no connection with the 1844 movement. These accessions seem to have changed the picture. White wrote in February, setting forth a new view of the “shut door”: “It however represents an important event with which the church is connected, that was to occur prior to our Lord’s return *from the wedding*. That event shuts out none of the honest children of God, neither those who have not wickedly rejected the light of truth, and the influence of the Holy Spirit” (editorial note 1 in *Review and Herald* 2:94, Feb. 17, 1852).

After quoting Isa. 22:22 and Rev. 3:7, 8 on the shut and open door, he continued: “This Open Door we teach, and invite those who have an ear to hear, to come to it and find salvation through Jesus Christ. There is an exceeding glory in the view that Jesus has OPENED THE DOOR into the holiest of all. . . . If it be said that we are of the OPEN DOOR and seventh day Sabbath theory, we shall not object; for this is our faith” (*Ibid.* 95).

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