

What might have been and what actually was At the 1901 General Conference session

By Gerry Chudleigh
March 21, 2015

Much is said in a recent General Conference-produced video drama, “What Might Have Been Can Be,” about how the GC session of 1901 was a failure and a huge disappointment. The reason for this failure, we are told, is that church leaders refused to humble themselves, put their differences aside and work together in unity. As a result, the Holy Spirit was not poured out on the church in 1901, and the return of Jesus was delayed.

In 2015, according to those telling this story, the church has an opportunity to do it over and to get it right this time. If church leaders from around the world put their different opinions aside this time and ask each other forgiveness for those differences, the Holy Spirit will be poured out and the Lord will return.

This paper will not address the theological issues that some have raised, but will look at the historical premise of the video, which is, at best, misleading.

Our first clue that something is wrong with the video’s narrative is found in the words of Ellen White herself. Here is what she said in November 1901 about what happened at the 1901 GC session, where many initially expected the denomination to split or dissolve:

“During the General Conference the Lord wrought mightily for His people. Every time I think of that meeting, a sweet solemnity comes over me, and sends a glow of gratitude to my soul. We have seen the stately steppings of the Lord our Redeemer. We praise His holy name, for He has brought deliverance to His people” (Review and Herald, “Bring an Offering to the Lord,” Nov. 26, 1901, p. 1 [761]).

Yet, in January, 1903, as she looked back on the same meeting, she said:

“The result of the last General Conference has been the greatest, the most terrible sorrow of my life. No change was made. The spirit that should have been brought into the whole work as the result of that meeting, was not brought in because men did not receive the testimonies of the Spirit of God.” (EGW to J. Arthur, Jan. 14, 1903.

But in April 1901, as the meetings were drawing to a close, she wrote:

“Who do you suppose has been among us since this Conference began? Who has kept away the objectionable features that generally appear in such a meeting? Who has walked up and down the aisles of this Tabernacle? The God of heaven and His angels. And they did not come here to tear you in pieces, but to give you right and peaceable minds.... (General Conference Bulletin, April 25, 1901, pp. 463, 464).

But then, again, in 1903 she wrote about the 1901 GC session:

“One day at noon I was writing of the work that might have been done at the last General Conference if the men in positions of trust had followed the will and way of God. Those who have had great light have not walked in the light. The meeting was closed, and the break was not made. Men did not humble themselves before the Lord as they should have done, and the Holy Spirit was not imparted.” Testimonies for the Church, vol. 8, Page 104.

Does that negate what she wrote in April, at the close of the 1901 meeting?

“I was never more astonished in my life than at the turn things have taken at this meeting. This is not our work. God has brought it about. Instruction regarding this was presented to me, but until the sum was worked out at this meeting I could not comprehend this instruction. God’s angels have been walking up and down in this congregation. I want every one of you to remember this, and I want you to remember also that God has said that He will heal the wounds of His people” (General Conference Bulletin, April 25, 1901, pp. 463, 464).

So what are we to make of this? Ellen White tells us in 1901 that every time she thinks of the 1901 session she is filled with “sweet solemnity” and “a glow of gratitude.” Yet, she says 14 months later that the 1901 session was “the greatest sorrow of her life.” For a mother who had buried a baby, a teen-aged son and her husband, this is a strong statement. She tells church leaders that God Himself “brought deliverance” at the 1901 session, healing the wounds of His people, but she says in 1903 that “no change was made” and God was unable to pour out His Spirit there, because the leaders were stubborn and proud.

What is going on? Was Ellen White wrong in her understanding of what happened at this meeting? If so, was she wrong in 1901 or in 1903?

There is another possibility, a resolution of the apparent conflict that stands up to historical examination: the 1901 session was remarkable for several startling changes that blessed the church for more than a century to come, and the 1901 session was remarkable for at least one disappointing failure that left the church forever poorer.

In 1901 Ellen White seemed to look through a broad lens at the “astonishing” successes of that session, and in 1903 she seems to have looked back through a narrow telescope at the disappointing failure, which by 1903 dominated the attention of Adventists at church headquarters in Battle Creek, Mich.

Of great importance in this discussion are Ellen White’s four words: “No change was made.” This seems to contradict Ellen White’s earlier declaration that God Himself had brought deliverance to His people during this session. And it seems to contradict all Adventist church historians, who agree that the most important organizational changes in the history of the church were made at the 1901 session. Huge changes that decentralized and

distributed the church's decision-making processes were proposed, discussed, voted and put into place, often immediately. The most significant of those changes continue today.

1. Autonomous union conferences were created. Unlike the "districts" that they replaced, the unions answered to their own constituents who voted their own leaders, constitutions, bylaws and policies. Ellen White was clear on the reason for unions: "It has been a necessity to organize union conferences, that the General Conference shall not exercise dictation over all the separate conferences" (Manuscript 26, April 3, 1903).
2. Departments were created at all levels of church structure, and the boards of the previously independent ministries (schools, sanitariums, publishing houses, missionary societies, religious liberty associations, Sabbath School associates, etc.) were dissolved and brought under the direction of the church at local, union and GC levels.
3. The GC Executive Committee was enlarged, with representatives from around the world. (It has also been enlarged several times since 1901.)
4. The office of GC president was abolished, replaced by a chairman of the executive committee who could be (but wasn't) replaced at every meeting. The presidency was restored in 1903.

So huge changes were made, notwithstanding Ellen White's statement in 1903 that "no change was made." Obviously, Ellen White's comments in 1903 were targeted toward specific areas of church leadership where "no change was made" not toward the huge changes that she had called for and that the session delegates had actually voted and enacted.

In 2015 it is important that we understand what worked in 1901 and what didn't work—lest we make the situation worse by killing the good things that were done in an effort to not repeat the bad.

One phrase from Ellen White ties together everything that happened in 1901, 1903 and the months in between: "kingly power." Ellen White began her work at the 1901 session by calling for the end of kingly power. Kingly power meant that the person at the head of an organization thought it his job to make decisions for the group and to make sure that everyone obeyed his decisions. She was not impressed by the claims of a "kingly" GC president who said a committee had made the decisions, when, in fact, the GC president controlled the committee. Ellen White found kingly leadership to be contrary to the gospel and to the leadership style of Jesus. She saw kingly power in many places, including, first, dictatorial GC presidents and, second, dictatorial heads of the sanitariums, schools, publishing houses and other stockholder-owned organizations. The creation of unions solved the first problem by ending the need for local conferences to get permission from the GC for everything they did. And the creation of departments solved the second problem

by placing all parts of the medical, educational, publishing and other ministries under the authority of mostly local and union conferences, with a few answering to the GC.

The 1901 session was all about decentralization. It was about moving decision-making away from individuals and toward committees, and it was about moving decision-making down the flow charts to the levels where the work was being done. The night before the 1901 GC session began, Ellen White laid out her radically changed view of the role of the GC in the now world-wide work of the church:

“In reference to our [General] Conference, it is repeated o’er and o’er and o’er again that it is the voice of God, and therefore everything must be referred to the [General] Conference, and have the [General] Conference’s voice in regard to permission or restriction, or what shall be and what shall not be done in the various fields.... [But] the work carried on all over our field demands an entirely different course of action” (Transcript of Ellen White’s comments in Battle Creek College Library, April 1, 1901, pp. 1-3).

This is particularly interesting because some people were apparently repeating parts of a statement that she herself had made in 1875, that “when the judgment of the General Conference, which is the highest authority that God has upon the earth, is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be maintained, but surrendered” (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. III, p. 492 {PC 422}, 1875). Now, in 1901 she calls for “an entirely different course of action.” But what, exactly, would be “entirely different” from the GC having the final word on “what shall be and what shall not be done in the various fields?”

The creation of unions almost immediately answered that question. Now, when local conferences sought wider council or permission to make changes in ministry methods, they appealed to their union, not to the GC, thus eliminating both the need and the possibility of the GC president, or even the GC committee, controlling how ministry was done in all the conferences around the world. Evidently, months later this change, which freed leaders everywhere to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, was still bringing to Ellen White “a sweet solemnity ... and a glow of gratitude to [her] soul.” In the years immediately following 1901, union decision-making made it possible for the conferences and missions to continue doing the ministry of the church while the GC and health leaders were preoccupied with fighting for control of the denomination in Battle Creek.

Departments were meant to resolve the other conflict of kingly power: the battle of independent ministries to remain independent. Before 1901 almost all ministries of the church were owned by stockholders and governed by their own boards.

Nothing illustrated this conflict better than the collision of wills between the president of the GC, whoever that was at the moment, and Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, president of the Battle Creek Sanitarium. Kellogg believed that Battle Creek Sanitarium was the most important part of the work of the Adventist Church and that he was uniquely qualified to make all decisions regarding health ministry. When the “San” burned in 1902, Kellogg initiated a massive campaign that involved drawing resources from every Adventist facility

and organization in the world to rebuild the Battle Creek Sanitarium as an institution of international renown. Others, including Ellen White, believed the resources of the church could be used much more wisely by spreading them around the world.

At the 1901 session there was great rejoicing at the sight of the leaders of almost all the independent ministries laying down their “kingly power,” and promising to become subject to the decisions of church committees at the appropriate levels. Through this time of rejoicing, Kellogg seems to have kept a low profile and made no firm promises. He was no doubt pleased to see the abolition of the GC presidency (for two years) because he now became the single most powerful leader in the church. He had as many loyal supporters on the GC Executive Committee as anyone did, and saw an opportunity to take control of the church along with control of the medical work. When that didn’t happen, he stubbornly consolidated his ownership of the sanitarium and the medical work.

In 1903, Ellen White and other church leaders watched helplessly as Kellogg, refusing to accept input from either the church’s pioneer and prophet or from the church’s elected leaders, took one step after another separating himself and the Battle Creek Sanitarium from the church. The loss to the church over the next few years, in terms of finances, leadership and membership, was huge. For Ellen White, the loss was also deeply personal, because she had known and worked not only with John Harvey Kellogg since he was a child, but with his parents and siblings, as well.

As she thought in 1903 about all the possible turning points that might have brought about a different ending to this sad story, she focused her attention on the GC session of 1901. If only Kellogg and his supporters had humbled themselves and entered into the spirit of the occasion—as others had done—the medical work, and Kellogg himself, might have been saved. But there was enough blame to go around. The GC leaders had also failed to treat Kellogg and his associates with kindness and humility. But, whoever was to blame, Ellen White was heartbroken.

It is in this context that Ellen White recounts the dream of what might have happened if “men in positions of trust,” “those who have had great light” had humbled themselves in 1901 and worked together (several paragraphs are omitted for space):

To the Battle Creek Church

One day at noon I was writing of the work that might have been done at the last General Conference if the men in positions of trust had followed the will and way of God. Those who have had great light have not walked in the light. The meeting was closed, and the break was not made. Men did not humble themselves before the Lord as they should have done, and the Holy Spirit was not imparted.

I had written thus far when I lost consciousness, and I seemed to be witnessing a scene in Battle Creek.

We were assembled in the auditorium of the Tabernacle. Prayer was offered, a hymn was sung, and prayer was again offered. Most earnest supplication was made to God.

No one seemed to be too proud to make heartfelt confession, and those who led in this work were the ones who had influence, but had not before had courage to confess their sins.

There was rejoicing such as never before had been heard in the Tabernacle. Then I aroused from my unconsciousness, and for a while could not think where I was. My pen was still in my hand. The words were spoken to me: "This might have been. All this the Lord was waiting to do for His people. All heaven was waiting to be gracious." I thought of where we might have been had thorough work been done at the last General Conference, and agony of disappointment came over me as I realized that what I had witnessed was not a reality.

After recounting this "What Might Have Been" dream, Arthur L. White, grandson of Ellen and James, says, "In other references to the same experience she placed the responsibility very largely upon the leader of the medical work, Dr. John Harvey Kellogg. *Ellen G. White: The Early Elmshaven Years, Vol. 5.* p. 239.

Why is it important that in 2015 we understand that, according to Ellen White, some good things happened in 1901, while some other good things did not happen?

In the years leading up to the 1901 session, Ellen White was adamant that the local conference and mission leaders needed to take more responsibility for prayerfully making their own decisions about how to do God's work, without referring decisions to the GC. "Have those in Battle Creek been given superior reason and wisdom that God will not give those in the churches and conferences?" (*Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, p. 325). And, "Has the Lord to go to Battle Creek, and tell men there what the men working in distant countries must do?" (*EGW to A. O. Tait, Aug. 27, 1896. Special Testimonies for Ministers and Workers*, no. 9, p. 32).

At the same time, the church needed Kellogg and other "kingly" leaders, including the GC president, to humble themselves, surrender their need to control everything, and support important decisions made by other people.

So here is the danger in 2015: that some will misrepresent Ellen White's 1903 appeal to John Harvey Kellogg and his supporters at Battle Creek as a call for increased centralization of decision-making, when they were, in fact, the opposite.

Yet, there must be a lesson from Ellen White's counsels to GC leaders, union leaders, conference leaders, local church leaders, and leaders of independent ministries. Perhaps it is this: trust your fellow church leaders and members. Respect church processes at the world, division, union, conference and local church levels, especially at the levels closest to where the work is done. Do not act as if anyone who does things differently from you is an enemy. Pray for humility and for the infilling of the Spirit of God.

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