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The Trauma of Public Shaming in the Life of George I. Butler
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The concept of religious trauma was not known in the 1870s, but its effects were evident in the lives of many Seventh-day Adventist pioneers. The practice of what they called “plain speaking” generated some traumatic experiences in their lives. It was often associated with public shaming, revealing a personal, private matter known only to a few to everyone. The results were often humiliation, embarrassment, and disgrace. The intent of such “plain speaking” and public shaming was to force the erring to confess their sins and shortcomings, and reform their character and conduct on the way to the Kingdom. It worked for those who were most committed to belonging to this community of faith. But for some others, these experiences were traumatic enough to result in withdrawal from the community, move to the fringes of the movement, and even leave it altogether.

There are many illustrations of this phenomenon, and today I’ll share one event in the life of George Butler, president of the General Conference, shortly after his first tenure ended in August 1874.¹

George Butler was sick at home when the session of the General Conference in Battle Creek in December 1871 voted him as the next president of the General Conference. James White had been president for the last four years, as well as president of the Review and Herald Publishing Association since its inception, which was by far the most demanding of all his responsibilities. By then, he had had a couple of strokes. Many colleagues, and especially his wife, Ellen, agreed that it was necessary for him to get some rest and relinquish some of his many responsibilities.

¹ This paper is based on my biography of George Butler (1834-1918). See, Denis Fortin, *G. I. Butler: An Honest and Misunderstood Church Leader* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2023), 116-201.

Butler had been president of the Iowa Conference for a few years. His parents and older siblings had been Millerite believers in the 1840s and were among the first ones to accept Joseph Bates' interpretation of the delay of the Second Coming after 1844. In 1850, they joined the group of Sabbatarian Adventist believers in Vermont. James and Ellen White, along with John Andrews and others, visited his home in Waterbury, Vermont.

While his Adventist credentials were solid, Butler's personal confidence in his abilities to lead any sections of the church was different. He had not always been a believer. In his youth, the fanaticism he observed among former Millerites led him to question the relevance of the Christian faith. Those few years of unbelief nagged at his self-confidence as a spiritual and church leader.

When, in December 1871, he was asked to become president of the General Conference, he could not understand how God could be asking him to undertake such a significant responsibility, given his history of doubting the relevance of Christianity. But, even more important, he fully believed that James White was the true leader of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. His wife, Ellen, had said as much in her testimonies, even as recently as mid-December 1871, during a visit in northern Vermont.²

If, according to the Spirit of Prophecy, James White was the appointed leader of their movement, as Moses had been to the people of Israel, how could the church appoint someone else, one who had been a doubter and unbeliever in his youth? In the few weeks that immediately followed this fateful decision of the General Conference, Butler repeatedly asked Ellen White to verify that this was the will of God for him and for the church. She would not reply to his pleas, and her long silence puzzled him even more. Only after she said he ought to accept the position did he take it.³ Reluctantly, he accepted

² On December 10, Ellen White had received a vision in Bordoville, Vermont, in which God had said that her husband's position in relation to the remnant people of God was similar to that of Moses to Israel, and that God had selected James and "given him special qualifications, natural ability, and an experience to lead out His people." Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, 85, 89.

³ Years later, reflecting on this troubling episode of his life, he mentioned in a letter to her that he had finally accepted the presidency in 1872 only after she finally said it was alright for him to do so. George I. Butler to Ellen G. White, April 17, 1915.

to serve, but not without making it clear that he would serve temporarily until James White could heal sufficiently to return to the presidency. Butler would be a “caretaker president.”⁴

Within this context, Butler did his very best to lead the growing church and make the right decisions. But his lack of self-confidence constantly prevented him from asserting his leadership. Sensing his inability in this role, he wrote numerous letters to James White, sharing with him all the difficulties he faced and asking for his guidance and insights. Unbeknownst to him, this constant deferral to James White, who was supposed to rest from the burden of church leadership, profoundly annoyed Ellen White.

What would further and ultimately alienate him from Ellen White’s good graces was Butler’s attempt at restoring an amicable relationship between James and other prominent Adventist leaders. For years, James had had strained relationships with John Andrews, Joseph Waggoner, and Uriah Smith. James’s temperament and autocratic ways of exercising his authority had caused much harm among these leaders, who came to distrust him. Butler knew all this too well and, for the sake of unity, sought to heal the wounds of this division. His attempt was simple. Based on Ellen White’s testimony that James had been appointed by God to be the chosen leader of the church, and acknowledging that James had an autocratic personality, Butler developed a theory of leadership specifically designed to solidify James’s position. In his tract “Leadership,” first read at the November 1873 General Conference session, and then published in the *Review and Herald* and as a small sixteen-page tract, Butler argued that the biblical example of Moses, as the appointed leader of Israel, could serve as a model for leadership adopted in the Seventh-day Adventist Church and exercised by James White. If this model were to be accepted, other leaders could sensibly and humbly defer to James White the appropriate level of authority, without sensing the need to constantly challenge his decisions.

The immediate effect of Butler’s tract was most positive, and it was endorsed by the session. It also had the effect of almost immediately attenuating the hard feelings

⁴ Emmett K. Vande Vere aptly coined Butler’s first tenure as president of the General Conference as the “caretaker president.” *Rugged Heart: The Story of George I. Butler* (Nashville TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1979), 31.

between James White and Andrews, Smith, and Waggoner. Deferring to James as the sole divinely appointed leader of the church, in a manner like Moses, calmed the stormy sea of church politics.

But not for long.

Within a few weeks, James White realized that what Butler had done was tantamount to making James the de facto sole leader (or “pope”) of the Adventist church, and consequently, piling on him even more responsibilities as more subordinate church leaders deferred to him for all kinds of small decisions. While initially agreeing to the tone and desired outcome of the “Leadership” tract, James and Ellen White later came to realize the harm it had caused. And, even more damaging, was Wolcott Littlejohn’s belligerent critique of the tract. Littlejohn refused to accept the ideas promoted in the tract and went so far as to threaten to leave the denomination if they were not repealed at the next General Conference session. Not only would he not accept that only one man, James White, was to be appointed as the “Moses” leader of the denomination, but he also encouraged everyone to stand up to James’s autocratic style of leadership and challenge him anytime it needed to be done.⁵ It did not take long for James to also have strong reservations about Butler’s ideas and start condemning them.

Butler’s efforts to heal the rift between prominent leaders, although well-intentioned and initially well-received, only created more conflict—and exacerbated Ellen White’s irritation toward him.

To George Butler’s satisfaction, James White was returned to the presidency of the General Conference at the August 1874 session. Holding no grudge against anyone, Butler returned to his home in Iowa to do more church planting and, in time, was reelected as president of the Iowa Conference.

The future would have been reasonably good for Butler and his relationship with James and Ellen White would have continued to be amicable, if Ellen had not precipitated a major rift between them after sending him a scathing rebuke in a testimony.

⁵ The “Leadership” tract was officially repealed four years later at the 1877 session and all remaining copies of it were destroyed.

Before proceeding, it is essential to acknowledge that most early Adventist pioneers recognized and appreciated Ellen White's influence and prophetic ministry among them. They believed in her supernatural gift of prophecy and in God's influence in her written testimonies. Her inspiration placed her in a special place within the leadership of the movement. Never elected to any function, she was nonetheless a major voice and influence in the activities and direction of the church. George Butler heartily endorsed and believed this and had done so since his conversion and joining the Adventist movement in Waukon, Iowa, around 1855.

But his confidence in Ellen White's influence was shaken after she sent him a testimony in January 1875. The testimony was a complete surprise. Yet, while Butler sought to thoughtfully understand White's critique and rebuke of his two and a half years at the helm of the church, of his incompetence and lack of leadership, while he prayerfully sought to understand how to respond, Ellen White published the letter in *Testimony* 25 in early February for everyone to read what God thought of his weaknesses and incompetence.⁶ The humiliation and public shaming deeply troubled Butler.

In the testimony, Ellen White first censured Butler for his refusal to accept the decision of the General Conference session in December 1871 and claiming he did not see how God could be asking him to take this responsibility. It is in this testimony to Butler that she wrote this famous statement, often quoted out of context, "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 be surrendered."⁷

Not expected at all was White chastising Butler for his views on leadership and for ascribing so much authority to one person, James. Butler had not expected her change of mind on this, and he had felt she had been basically in favor of his leadership views, as they were based on her testimonies about James. Her rebuke emphasized Butler's reliance on James for all kinds of decisions Butler could have made on his own. The long

⁶ See *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, pp. 492-509.

⁷ *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 492.

delays in making decisions, she wrote, “tire the angels.”⁸ He needed “to cultivate promptness” and do away with his “hesitating manner.”⁹ “This slowness, this sluggishness of action, is one of the greatest defects in your character and stands in the way of your usefulness.”¹⁰ Butler’s interests in his family and friends were also part of the rebuke, and he needed to sacrifice such “earthly ties” for the cause of God required “full and entire consecration.”¹¹ In the end, she held little hope that Butler’s defects could be overcome, as these bad character traits had been present in him since his youth.¹²

Much of the testimony also emphasized how Butler and other “leading brethren” had not shouldered enough responsibilities to relieve James. In fact, she came to the conclusion that James should not have been reelected to the presidency of the General Conference five months earlier (August 1874). His presence was needed on the West Coast, not in Battle Creek.¹³ Indirectly, this was another vague rebuke to Butler for not continuing as president of the denomination.

The testimony, now made public for everyone to read, shattered Butler’s self-image. Not only did he feel humiliated, but he also came to understand that Ellen White had no hope in his ability, let alone the possibility, of his changing and being useful to the cause. Though White’s counsel was sensible and judicious, it honestly could not be implemented with James in the picture among church leaders. And to publicly blame Butler for what had been happening became counterproductive, as it would cause more colleagues in leadership to defer even more to James.

Within a few days, Butler acknowledged his errors in the *Review*.¹⁴ He confessed to his lack of purpose and slowness of action in his administrative role, as well as his lack of encouragement to others, and his over-reliance on some colleagues to the detriment of

⁸ *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 497.

⁹ *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 498.

¹⁰ *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 499.

¹¹ *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 500.

¹² *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 499.

¹³ *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 503-504.

¹⁴ George I. Butler, “A Confession,” *Review and Herald*, February 25, 1875, pp. 70-71.

others. He thought he had done the right thing in upholding James's role in his "Leadership" tract. The tone of the confession is one of mournful and anguished regret.

A few weeks later, a broken Butler admitted in a letter to James White that he felt no longer fit to hold any positions of responsibility and wished to work in a field where he would be out of other men's way.¹⁵ Even though James had asked Butler to join them in the upcoming summer camp meetings, Butler refused. For weeks, James had also referred to Butler's inefficiency in every church meeting he attended. Being with them at these camp meetings would only bring about further conflicts or alienation between them. The two leaders whom Butler had upheld and who had been his mentors had turned on him and had publicly shamed him as inefficient and unqualified. So, why continue to work with them?

Butler's feelings of emotional dissonance and broken spirit are palpable in this letter to James White. But his frankness borders on anger and resentment. "I never saw a man more pleasant to labor with and be with than you when you are pleased with a person," he wrote. "But woe to the man when you get after him. I think you know how to use the mental and moral thumb screw more effectually than any man I ever knew."¹⁶

Butler's decision not to attend camp meetings, not even the one in Iowa, and lend his support to James and Ellen White greatly displeased them. Butler's complete retreat from association with James White sent shock waves throughout the church, and it appears that many people may have sided with Butler and given him their support. James White, who did not want to be considered the sole leader of the church, nonetheless valued acceptance and submission to his leadership. And for Butler to completely refuse to be associated with White in the upcoming camp meeting season casts a shadow of doubt and suspicion over White's leadership again. Unconsciously and unexpectedly, Butler's underlying ideas in his "Leadership" tract were confirmed: James and Ellen White were in charge of the church; all others needed to defer to them and, in humility, submit themselves to them irrespective of feelings or rebukes.

¹⁵ George I. Butler to James White, March 21, 1875.

¹⁶ In a letter to Frank Belden in 1907, Butler recalled these events and his feelings of resignation in 1875. This letter sheds a blunter perspective on these circumstances. George I. Butler to Frank Belden, March 14, 1907.

It did not take long for Ellen White to reenter the conversation as she addressed another testimony of rebuke to Butler for not agreeing to associate with them that summer.¹⁷ Her letter reveals much about the complexity of the human relationships between the Whites and other church leaders. While James and Ellen White acted as the divinely appointed leader and prophetic messenger to the movement, colleagues also had to relate to the human James and Ellen—a James who was often harsh and oppressive toward his colleagues, as Littlejohn saw him, and an Ellen who also became severe and stern without any forewarning, and who made personal matters public, immediately humiliating and shaming the recipients of her testimonies. It was not easy to relate to them as friends and mentors, only to receive harsh, unexpected public denunciations of their personal faults and character weaknesses. It is no wonder that relationships became frayed and full of suspicion.

In Ellen White's view, the invariable solution to such feelings of alienation and disrupted relationships was for the recipients of her testimonies to humble themselves and make public confessions of their wrongs. To do so was believed to be evidence of God's Spirit at work in their hearts and of genuine conversion. To object to or resist making such confessions was to yield to Satan's "suggestions." At this point, two major factors came into play in resolving the tension. One factor was the level of loyalty a person felt toward the church and the respect they had for James and Ellen White. The second was the level of acknowledgment and acceptance one had toward Ellen White's prophetic ministry despite her obvious imperfect humanity. If one had any doubts or second thoughts about either of these factors, a drifting away from the institution was likely to occur.

In this case, Butler's refusal to participate in the camp meetings that summer of 1875 was interpreted by Ellen White as a rejection of James's leadership and a rejection of, or at least casting doubts on, her prophetic ministry. From Butler's perspective, however, these were not accurate outcomes of his experience. He valued them as God's appointed leaders, but they were human and imperfect, with their own defects and mistakes. No

¹⁷ Ellen G. White to George I. Butler, June 6, 1875.

amount of confidence in their divine appointment or inspiration could transform them into perfect human beings.

The religious trauma George Butler experienced in 1875 stayed with him for the rest of his life. It reappeared in a different form in 1886 and almost caused his death from burnout in December 1888. And it continued to plague his self-confidence until his final days, because he had a nagging suspicion that the woman he revered the most, his spiritual mentor, did not truly believe he was a converted man. He died in 1918 with the feeling that he had never been able to convince Ellen White of the genuineness of his devotion to her.