

HORATIO SPAFFORD: NOT WELL WITH HIS SOUL

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Getting Beyond Hagiography

If one searches for information on the internet or in short books on hymn-writers about Horatio Gates Spafford (1828-1888) and his very popular song “When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,” with its moving chorus “It is well with my soul” and catchy tune by P. P. Bliss, one will typically find repetition of the moving story of the author’s loss of four young daughters in the tragic sinking of the SS Ville du Havre in the North Atlantic (2 November, 1873), the most famous modern shipwreck until the RMS Titanic (15 April, 1912).¹

Unlike most accounts of Spafford and his hymn, Rachel Phillips’ fifty-five page treatment in her *Well With My Soul: Four Dramatic Stories of Great Hymn Writers* is not 100% positive.² She mentions Horatio’s denial of eternal punishment and the failed attempt of a member of his group in Chicago to resurrect a dead baby.³ But these brief references are somewhat mitigated and certainly not explored or condemned. Philips concludes her biography extolling the hymn writer’s “trust in the sovereignty of his God,” “his faith in the love of Christ” and the “light” spread by the American Colony he established and led in Jerusalem.⁴ However, the popular presentation of Spafford—that of a godly man who rose above his afflictions and who is an example to us all—is pure hagiography and bears little relation to the truth.

In her carefully researched book of some 400 pages, Jane Geniesse sets forth the real story of Horatio Spafford, his wife, Anna, and his followers—something

¹ Horatio’s famous hymn is found, for example, in the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster’s *Our Own Hymnbook* (first published 1989, second impression 1998) as number 351.

² Rachel Phillips, *Well With My Soul: Four Dramatic Stories of Great Hymn Writers* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour, 2003).

³ Phillips, *Well With My Soul*, pp. 46, 52.

⁴ Phillips, *Well With My Soul*, p. 61.

which few who sing his famous hymn know or want to hear.⁵ Things were not well with his soul at all.

Heresy and Schism

It all begins with heresy. Although Horatio Spafford was a member of a Presbyterian church, he was a fanatical Arminian, believing the false gospel “that any man could save himself through the exercise of free will” (35; cf. Rom. 9:16; Eph. 2:8-9; Gal. 1:8-9). Contrary to the truth of predestination, Christ’s particular redemption and sovereign grace, Spafford taught that the Lord Jesus died for all men head for head because God loves and earnestly desires to save everybody, even the devil, for there is no everlasting punishment. As Geniesse puts it, after briefly setting forth the orthodox doctrine of the *Westminster Confession*, “Horatio, on the other hand, was becoming obsessed with his Arminian views. God, he believed, loved all sinners, and all sinners might be saved, including Satan himself. He was even prepared to deny the existence of hell” (75)!

Horatio Gates Spafford’s denial of eternal punishment (62, 75, 83) is flatly contrary to the Word of God (e.g., Matt. 25:46; Mark 9:43-48; Rev. 14:11). Over against the hymn writer’s teaching on the salvation of Satan (10, 75, 82, 109), Revelation 20:10 declares, “And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone ... and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (cf. Matt. 25:41). Spafford sought to rob Christ of His punitive work on the judgment day. According to him, Judas, Antichrist, Beelzebub and all his host, as well as “the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars” shall not “have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone” (Rev. 21:8; cf. 22:15). Instead, they shall enter the joy of the everlasting kingdom in the new heavens and the new earth!

In the service of this Origenist theory of the salvation of all men and angels (10), the hymn writer brought in a form of the Roman Catholic doctrine of

⁵ Jane Fletcher Geniesse, *American Priestess: The Extraordinary Story of Anna Spafford and the American Colony in Jerusalem* (New York: Doubleday, 2007). Hereafter numbers in brackets refer to pages in this book.

purgatory (10, 82). Purgatory, of course, denies that Jesus Christ made full satisfaction for all the eternal and temporal punishment which was due to His people. Thus Spafford attacked the Saviour's substitutionary atonement whereby He "by himself purged our sins" and so "sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb. 1:3).⁶

The Bible teaches that there are two places that people go to at death (heaven or hell) and after the final judgment there is everlasting bliss in the new heavens and the new earth or unending woe in the lake of fire. Roman dogma presents three possible destinations at death (heaven or hell or purgatory), with purgatory eventually emptying, leaving the eternal states of heaven and hell. The hymn writer's heresy is even worse than Rome's, for, according to him, the dead go to one of two places (heaven or purgatory—there is no hell) and there is only one everlasting state, heaven, even for the devil!

However, Rev. William C. Young, the minister of Fullerton Avenue Presbyterian Church, Spafford's congregation, held to the infallible Scriptures as summed in the *Westminster Confession* (75). Horatio hated the truth of Jehovah's sovereign grace and was gaining followers to his own "quixotic heterodoxy" (85; cf. 76). He used "his position as head of the finance committee" and the "principal ruling elder" to call a congregational meeting in July 1876 to allege that Rev. Young was guilty of "poor financial management" in order to oust him (76). Evidently, Spafford expected few to attend apart from his friends and followers so that he would have a majority. He was to be disappointed, for 150 parishioners showed up. Moreover, "the church's finances were actually in better shape than they had been in some time," Horatio lost the vote 126-20 and the membership saw through him and his evil ploy.⁷ Rev. Young retained his office in the church whereas an indignant Spafford, in a huff, resigned "white with anger" (76; cf. 79).

John Calvin understood from the Word of God the dignity of a true church of Christ and the seriousness of separating from it:

⁶ Horatio's heresies of universalism and purgatory should be borne in mind in connection with the second and third stanzas of his hymn, which, by referring to the Lord's "blood" and "cross," might deceive the unwary. Spafford does not mean these words in an orthodox Christian sense.

⁷ The hymn writer's own gross financial malfeasance will be discussed later.

... no one is permitted to spurn its [i.e., a true church's] authority, flout its warnings, resist its counsels, or make light of its chastisements—much less to desert it and break its unity. For the Lord esteems the communion of his church so highly that he counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of Word and sacraments. He so esteems the authority of the church that when it is violated he believes his own diminished ... From this it follows that separation from the church is the denial of God and Christ. Hence, we must even more avoid so wicked a separation. For when with all our might we are attempting the overthrow of God's truth, we deserve to have him hurl the whole thunderbolt of his wrath to crush us.⁸

Calvin also states that “no one escapes the just penalty of this unholy separation [from a true church] without bewitching himself with pestilent errors and foulest delusions.”⁹ How true this is, with Horatio Spafford himself being a clear example, as we shall see.

Soon Spafford added the sin of gross public schism to his sins of heresy and of slandering and seeking to depose a faithful minister. “Immediately, he ordered that a chapel be built [on the land he owned behind his] house,” so that in this new congregation “he would regain his position as the undisputed pillar” (76-77).

Like false prophet Harold Camping, from his “bad experience” in an instituted church (brought about by his own egregious sin), Spafford proceeded to write off not just his own local church but all churches. Horatio repeatedly claimed, “God has showed us that ‘the Church’ in all its parts ... is destitute of spiritual power ... Theirs are false teachings” (121). Horatio, his wife Anna and their followers viewed the visible churches with “contempt” (95; cf. 189, 203, 225), calling them “Babylon” (121, 218).

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960), 4.1.10, pp. 1024-1025.

⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.5, p. 1018.

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Instead of the instituted churches, God was now working with Horatio and Anna and their followers, the Spaffordites or Overcomers, as their opponents called them, or the “Saints” (82, 84, 86, 87) or the “Bride” of Christ as they arrogantly called themselves (6, 10, 80, 82, 83, 87, 88, 105, 164, 186, 284). According to Spafford’s teaching, “God had chosen the Overcomers instead of the organized church as the new ‘holy and peculiar people’ to be ‘the Bride made one with Him and one another’” (284). Horatio claimed that “to be a true Christian, one must be ‘consecrated with the Bride’” (80) for they were “the only ones in the world who would be prepared for [the Lord’s] coming” (82), since “the established church had failed in its mission” (80). Spafford’s restorationist view was that the church had been “suppressed” and “buried” for centuries but now “with their help” it would rise “phoenix-like” in “this last of the dispensations before Christ’s return” (80). Only through Horatio’s “developing doctrine,” “new truths” (79) and “remarkable insights” would “the world be led back to God” (80). Never mind the work of the Holy Spirit in the development of doctrine in true churches over two thousand years, salvation was only rightly taught in “a religious system of [Spafford’s] own” (65)!

The hymn writer never joined—nor did he even want to join—a true church. In leaving Fullerton Avenue Presbyterian Church and never again becoming a member in a Christian congregation that manifested the three marks of a true church (faithful preaching of the Word, administration of the sacraments and exercise of church discipline), Horatio and his wife practically excommunicated themselves.

I have been unable to ascertain if Spafford’s group in Chicago had any ordained office-bearers (pastors, elders and deacons) or administered baptism, the Lord’s Supper or church discipline, though, of course, they did have some form of oral communication which may have been called preaching. After they moved to Jerusalem, while Horatio was still living, they appeared even less like an instituted church; after his death, when his wife, Anna, held sway, this trend continued.

In short, whether in Chicago or in Jerusalem, the Spaffordites possessed none of the three marks of a true church (*Belgic Confession* 29) and neither of the two keys by which the kingdom of heaven is opened and shut (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord’s Day 31). With “Horatio’s radical gospel” (76), cultic

ecclesiology and universalist eschatology, he went from the depths of heresy to the highest schism: declaring his sect the “Bride” of Christ and dismissing all the instituted churches of God.

Charismatic Meetings

What were the meetings of Horatio Spafford’s new group like? In short, they were precursors of Pentecostal and Charismatic assemblies and in some instances the Overcomers were even worse. “Holy oranges” were used in their services in Chicago and “for a time the congregation sanctified oranges as the presence of the Holy Ghost” (81)! Various “physical manifestations” occurred (83), such as strong shaking (127), jerking and fainting to the floor (81). These are not characteristics of those filled with the Holy Spirit, for He gives us “a sound mind” (II Tim. 1:7).

Some members would “run noisily about during prayer meetings” (82). Later, when the Overcomers moved to Jerusalem, a Muslim man, with his Islamic prayer beads, came to their eight o’clock prayer meetings and “always arrived promptly.” Whereas prayer is only to be made to the Triune God through Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son who became incarnate to die for the sins of His sheep, the Muslim continually defamed the Holy Trinity in Horatio’s presence (104-105). “His only English words were ‘one, not three!’ which he would shout loudly at intervals” during the prayer meeting in the Spafford house (104). It is ironic that the Overcomers called all other churches “Babylon,” when their own meetings were a veritable Babel of confusion! Peace was not flowing like a river among the followers of the hymn writer.

As well as their disorderly meetings (I Cor. 14:33, 40), the Overcomers claimed they could perform miracles and heal the sick (e.g., 10, 83, 117, 127, 132). Like the Charismatics, but unlike those in Bible times who really did exercise Christ’s power to heal, their fraudulent claims were exposed time and time again. Horatio tried but failed to heal a crippled member of their group (106). They failed to raise a baby from the dead (117). When another Overcomer, Mr. Gould, was sick with consumption, the Spaffordites claimed that they would heal him; after he died, they declared that they would resurrect him (132). Despite their evident failures, like the Pentecostals, few saw through the sham and left. Also this view of sickness, as being brought on and

not cured because of an individual's sin, gave scope for Overcomers to accuse an ill fellow member against whom they had a grudge (137).

To cite a couple more bizarre charismatic experiences of the Overcomers, here are two claims of Horatio's wife, Anna, that remind one of the fanaticism of charlatans like Kenneth Hagin or Benny Hinn. First, she was "literally lifted between the floor and the ceiling in her fight with the Devil whom she conquered;" second, she was "transported bodily to the Mount of Transfiguration" (177). Very heady, mystical stuff! But, of course, she saw neither Christ, Moses nor Elijah (on that mountain) nor Satan (in the air) and it was the devil with his lies who got the victory, overcoming Mrs. Spafford.

False Prophecy

The thoughtful reader will not be surprised to learn that along with their claims of charismatic manifestations, healings and experiences, Horatio and his wife and group claimed to receive supernatural and miraculous messages, prophecies, signs, encounters, visions, visitations and revelations from God (e.g., 81, 82, 85, 105-107, 158, 161, 168, 169, 172).

Horatio's sister, Margaret Lee, who claimed to have received the "baptism in the Holy Spirit," joined Spafford's group very early (80-81). Maggie received "signs," through movements of various parts of her head. At first, God indicated His will to her through "a loud crack of her teeth," but the volume was too high for her husband and her manifestations could come at inopportune times, such as in the middle of a meal. In response to his prayer, Margaret's sign was transferred to her eyes, which, when drawn back into her head, indicated the divine affirmative. This certainly made for "a more dramatic form of worship than biblical exegesis" and drew a crowd. An observer remarks,

A little community gathered round her who all brought everything in their lives to be tested by the cracking of her jaw [or the withdrawing of her eyes]. They engaged or dismissed servants, arranged their households, transacted their business, gave up old businesses, entered into new businesses, formed friendships, gave up friends, dressed, did everything in fact by the guidance of [Maggie's] sign (81).

Later, Horatio's sister received a third manifestation: the sticking out of her tongue, which the Overcomers viewed as "thrilling, natural, and sacred" (107).

Another lady in the group gave guidance not through her teeth or eyes or tongue but by her nose or, more specifically, her nose's sniffles.

At one point a small party travelled to Boston with neither money nor purpose, guided solely by "a sniffle" from one of their "prophetesses." They were discovered sitting on a curbstone, waiting for further direction from the sniffle. While they all returned safely and quite enjoyed their excursion, the newspapers got wind of the escapade, and there was no end to the ridicule or the interest of reporters (81-82; cf. 158).

Compared to learning God's will from cracking teeth, drawn-in eyes, a protruding tongue or a sniffing nose, opening one's Bible at random for guidance and seizing upon whatever sentence the eye may fall upon (81) or taking "one word out of one passage of Scripture, two out of another and so on, stringing them together so as to make the sense they wished" (109) almost seems semi-sane.

The Spaffordites did not shirk from drawing the inevitable conclusions from these divine messages to male and female members. They advocated and practised women preaching (169), contrary to Scripture (I Cor. 14:34-35; I Tim. 2:12), and called Horatio, Anna and others "prophets" and "prophetesses" (6, 82, 283, 294). This, as many Pentecostals and Charismatics realise, logically follows from their (false) claim to direct revelation, the "Thus saith the Lord" (161). However, the Overcomers were more consistent than most similar groups in our day in that the oracles they received were written down and "treasured as the utterance of God" (148; cf. 168, 298).

Not content with claiming the mantle of "prophets," the original twelve adult Spaffordites who left Chicago for Jerusalem were also "apostles" (90, 253). Horatio's sister, Margaret Lee, was called "Moses" (81, 105) and one "Mrs. L." (another reference to Maggie or a different lady in the group?) "claimed to be John the Baptist, Elijah, Moses and Aaron" (127). Surely, this would have made her much greater than any prophet in the Bible!

But the highest titles were given to Mr. and Mrs. Spafford. Horatio was the "Branch" (105, 106, 127, 164), which Geniesse understands as a reference to John 15:5: "I am the vine, ye are the branches" (105). Anna was the "Bride"

(105, 164), for, although originally the group itself was called the “Bride,” she “started to lay claim to the title for herself” (105). Thus not only were the Spaffordites the real church on earth, the “Bride,” for the Christian churches were apostate, but Horatio’s wife was the “Bride” in the highest sense and he personally took upon himself another term for God’s church, the “Branch” which abides in Christ (John 15:5)!

Four Bad Reasons for Migrating to Jerusalem

Of the four bad reasons for the departure of twelve adult Spaffordites and four children from Chicago for Jerusalem in 1881, two were push factors and two were pull factors. The first push factor was Horatio’s grave financial problems. He had been re-mortgaging property and borrowing heavily (83). He was guilty of “financial malfeasance for several years” (64), abusing a number of trusts committed to him, even spending money belonging to his own niece (49, 97). The year he left America for Palestine, Horatio owed over \$100,000 (88) and feared that “at any moment he would be served a subpoena from one of his creditors” (89) for he was “in danger of being arrested” (90, 132). Horatio’s fraudulent borrowing and financial woes continued in the promised land (e.g., 117-118, 130-131). As we have seen, he was definitely a religious “crank” and probably a financial crook or, at least, an “unmitigated rascal” (131). The U.S. Consul in Jerusalem, Selah Merrill, “was aware of forty-one creditors demanding payments” from the Spaffordites, including their landlord, for they “had not paid rent for over two years” (153). Among the many issues brought up in a Chicago court in April and May of 1895 were the financial improprieties of Horatio and his wife and group (158-162).

The second push factor was the strong (and justified) criticism of Spafford and his followers for their heretical theology and bizarre behaviour. The members of Fullerton Avenue Presbyterian Church and Horatio’s neighbours and creditors were disgusted with him (82-90). The Chicago press understandably ridiculed him and his group (3). Not only the *Chicago Daily Tribune* (76, 84, 326, n. 10) and the *Chicago Daily News* (82, 326, n. 6), but even the *New York Times* denounced the “new sect” (10).¹⁰

¹⁰ They very soon earned a bad reputation in Palestine too. “From the start, they were viewed

While some speak of Horatio's leaving Chicago for Jerusalem as "stepping out in faith," it is more correct to see it as his fleeing creditors and escaping from bad publicity. Anna herself acknowledged the last two points as reasons for their migration to Palestine: "We must pray now that Mr. Spafford is relieved by the Lord of these debts. We must pray that Mr. Spafford is delivered from those who are persecuting him. We must turn our thoughts to Jerusalem" (87).

The third reason, and the first pull factor, was Spafford's premillennial ideas: the Jews would return to Palestine, Christ would come bodily to Jerusalem and there would be a golden age of 1,000 years (6, 9-10, 36-39). Moreover, Horatio was fascinated with date-setting schemes which claimed to fix the time of the Lord's return (38-39, 84, 166-167). So Jerusalem was an attractive destination to them, especially if they knew (more or less) when Jesus would descend. This is, of course, contrary to Christ's own teaching (Matt. 24:36), though it is fitting that Spafford's first name comes from the Latin for "time"!

To Horatio's millennial mania was added a fourth element: charismatic revelation. His wife received a "supernatural visitation" calling the Overcomers to Jerusalem (89, 105). They must go to the holy city to greet Christ personally at His descent on the Mount of Olives (2, 10, 82, 88, 162, 211), for the hymn writer and his followers were commanded by God to travel to Jerusalem to be the Saviour's special welcoming committee. After that, so they claimed, the Bride will "return in great triumph and blessing to bring the Word to the world" (88)!

Failed Eschatological Prophecies

The Spaffordites believed that

the day after they arrived in Jerusalem, the Star of Bethlehem was to ... settle on the head of one of them, and this fact would go out to the world, and immediately all the people who were expecting the Lord's coming, and looking for it, would hasten as fast as possible to Jerusalem and gather round the

as cranks and degenerates by Jerusalem's Protestant missionaries, and particularly by two successive U.S. consuls who ascribed to them immoral practices and sexual license" (7; cf. 121, 193).

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Star, and then, when all the saints were gathered, the Lord would ascend, and His saints with Him, into the air above Jerusalem (82).

Needless to say, the Star of Bethlehem (Matt. 2:1-10) did not settle on any of their heads. This was just the first of their failed eschatological prophecies.

Soon after their arrival in Jerusalem, “The appointed time found the Overcomers assembled in ascension robes on Mount Olivet ... waiting for the heavens to part” (106). While tarrying for that holy event, Horatio’s wife and sister got into a “vitriolic spat” over which of them was the greater prophetess and leader (106). The second advent did not come and the party did not return singing, “When peace, like a river, attendeth my way.” This sorry spectacle of the Overcomers traipsing back from the Mount of Olives should be carefully considered by anyone singing this stanza of Spafford’s popular hymn (64):

And, Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll,
The trump shall resound, and the Lord will descend—
“Even so—it is well with my soul.”¹¹

The clouds did not roll back, the trumpet did not sound and the Lord did not descend that day in 1881. The hymn writer is in the long and sorry list of false prophets who engage in date-setting, including William Miller, a baptist lay preacher and a key figure in the rise of the Seventh Day Adventist cult (between 21 March, 1843 and 21 March, 1844; 18 April, 1844; 22 October, 1844), and Harold Camping (on or about 6 September, 1992; 21 May, 2011; 21 October, 2011). By reason of Spafford’s shenanigans, “the way of truth [was] evil spoken of” (II Pet. 2:2).

That none of the Saints would die before the Lord’s coming “had been one of the group’s core beliefs” right from the start (121, 134, 139). But die they did. As its typical with apocalyptic sects, Horatio now introduced a condition

¹¹ The Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster hymnal renders this stanza differently, though still maintaining Spafford’s apocalyptic references:

But, Lord, 'tis for Thee, for Thy coming, we wait;
The sky, not the grave, is our goal;
O trump of the angel! O voice of the Lord!
Blessed hope! blessed rest of my soul!

to try to explain away the falsified prophecy: “no one would die as long as ‘they believed in God and overcame all worldly temptations’” (135). But if “avoiding temptation” was “the only way of immortality,” as Spafford claimed (136), then a ready excuse is provided (and is even inevitable) for every Overcomer, for no one is sinlessly perfect in this life (I John 1:8)!

After John Whiting, one of the original twelve “apostles” of the Overcomers, died, his mother-in-law (a sharp critic of the sect) sought to erect a headstone on his grave. The Spaffordites refused her “because they expected John to rise soon and meet them walking in the street” (146). This (failed) prophecy of resurrection was just another way of getting around their false eschatological claims proceeding from their millennial madness.

But surely Horatio, the “Branch,” would never die! Such was his faith and that of his community: Christ would come before he would die. One version of Spafford’s famous hymn declares, “The sky, not the grave, is our goal.” This was definitely his own personal hope, for he was not supposed to die and be buried at all! On this basis, even when he was seriously ill, a doctor was deliberately not called (139). Even when Spafford died of malaria on 16 October, 1888, four days shy of his sixtieth birthday, the delusion continued: there was no point erecting a grave stone because the Lord’s return was so near (140)!

A mysterious prophecy of Anna’s, “Seven years in the land,” which was made in 1881 and which could well have been meant and/or understood to fix the year of Christ’s return as 1888 (106), was now applied to Horatio himself who had died that year. The “marvelling” (and gullible) Spaffordites were reassured. The apocalyptic prophecies were being fulfilled (141)!

More Overcomers died in the following years. But if anyone wondered how this fitted with their claims of “immortality,” “Anna reminded them that, as long as sinful thoughts were not excised with the ruthlessness of a surgical blade, people would die” (148). “The Advent,” Anna claimed, “was delayed because her followers had been ‘iniquitous’” (215). How convenient!

During World War I, “Anna predicted that Armageddon was at hand” (263). A few months later, General Allenby defeated the Turks at the Battle of Megiddo (September, 1918) and Mrs. Spafford “was deeply satisfied by these biblical associations and assured her people that the prophecies would be fulfilled at last” (272).

Anna especially was believed by herself and her followers to be immortal (186, 285, 294, 296) but she too died (17 April, 1923). After that,

Months passed. There was no sign of the millennium. The Messiah did not come; the prophecies remained unfulfilled. Bereft, the congregation floated, doing what they had always done. As they had been trained, they asked no questions; they tried not to think (297).

Horatio's millennial predictions were a grand delusion, as empty as a dream. As an instance of those "evil men and seducers" of whom II Timothy 3:13 warns, the hymn writer ruined his life and many others by "deceiving, and being deceived."

Cultic Practices

We should now consider more closely the cultic practices of Horatio Spafford's group and see how they flowed out of their key beliefs and fitted together. Hannah Whitall Smith, herself a Quaker and generally sympathetic to "deluded" people "of every stripe," investigated many fanatical religious sects, compiled a file (324, n. 16) and published her findings. Out of all the various weird groups, she calls the Overcomers "one of the strangest" (325, n. 4). She had very good reason, as we shall see.

While in Chicago, the Spaffordites manifested bizarre behaviour, but it was when they established the American Colony in Jerusalem and lived "as one religious household" (109) that they became even more cultic. They practised a form of communism (109, 193) for all things were to be shared in common (238, 290). People would sell their farms or give their savings into a common kitty (90, 165, 193, 333, n. 17), into which salaries too would go (290). Members were not allowed a bank account of their own and had to ask for money from the cult leaders, say, to buy clothes or shoes (165, 234).

Like those in the church at Thessalonica whom Paul rebuked for not working because of a mistaken notion that Christ was to return in the next few days (II Thess. 3:6-12), Horatio too refused to work (129, 132-133, 149, 312-313), merely idling and rambling around Jerusalem (118). Though rejecting work, he did not reject borrowing or indebtedness (313). "The Lord," he said, "has

better things for us to do than work” (133). However, in Psalm 128:1-2, the church sings “Blessed is every one that feareth the Lord; that walketh in his ways. For thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands: happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee.”

The Overcomers’ false view of the imminence of Christ’s coming also led to their neglecting the education of their children (except those of the Spaffords!) because, once the millennium arrived, “they would be educated in a moment” (163; cf. 120, 180). Horatio also betrayed his Anabaptist and cultic spirit when he rejected historical and Christian books given to a member of his community, and promptly returned them: “We have no need of these histories. Our true education is about to come” (119).

Horatio’s eschatology meant that he and his group, unlike all the missionary groups in Jerusalem, “made no attempt to proselytize” (104; cf. 111, 255). Why? Spafford’s first reason was that the millennium had not yet come.

Horatio and Anna did not wish to evangelize the Jews they met any more than they hoped to convert their Arab friends. The time was not ripe, they acknowledged to themselves, although one day the Lord would surely summon the world to the truths He had vouchsafed their little fellowship (111).

Second, Horatio denied hell, affirmed purgatory and taught universalism, even including the salvation of Satan.¹² For Spafford, ultimately, it will be well with everyone’s soul for all will end up in heaven. But then why bother witnessing, especially to Jews and Muslims and in such a combustible place as Jerusalem, if all will eventually be saved anyway? Horatio’s hyper-Arminian universalism led to the same sinful paralysis of witnessing as the evil of hyper-Calvinism does at the other extreme!

The Spaffordites’ charismatic view of healing involved a “strict ban on medicine and doctors” (177; cf. 117, 118, 145, 147, 188, 255), resulting in preventable deaths (117, 177). After all, calling for a doctor or using medicine betrays a lack of faith! This rule was applied even to Horatio himself during

¹² Geniesse even links the writing of Spafford’s poem, which became his famous hymn, to his universalism (64-65). Horatio reckoned that his four children were in heaven but what about the others who went down with the SS *Ville du Havre*? And what of everybody else? “Perhaps, he thought, there was no such thing as hell ... If God were love [understood wrongly as if He loved every single human and angel], why could not everyone be saved?” (65).

his final illness (139). The Overcomers' cultic position that there was to be no mourning for the dead (140, 142, 145, 188-189, 254) was also observed regarding the hymn writer. His own wife never mourned for him (139-140, 143) and she even danced at his death (223, 295-296)! Following their mother's example, her daughters celebrated when Anna died (295-296). This is unnatural and unbiblical. We are not forbidden to weep at the death of a believer—Christ did (John 11:35). We are forbidden to sorrow as if we had no hope of the general resurrection, like the unbelieving pagans (I Thess. 4:13).

Attack on Marriage and Family

One of the most distressing cultic characteristics of the Spaffordites involved marriage. First, millennial sects like theirs often abolish marriage.¹³ The argument is simple to grasp. Since marriage is a feature of this age and not the next (Luke 20:34-35) and the millennium is just about to start, those who are truly zealous for the Lord can hasten or prepare for His coming by ending marriage. Second, Horatio claimed that God had given him divine revelation, which he passed on first to his wife (136) and then to his community (137): now all the Overcomers had to be celibate! Wedding rings were to be taken off and destroyed or sold (137, 145).

What the Spirit “expressly” calls the devilish doctrine of “forbidding to marry” (I Tim. 4:1-3) was introduced as if it were the teaching of the Holy Ghost, and married people had to live as if they were not married (161, 172-174, 212), though not all readily acceded to this new revelation (137, 163, 173, 192). Anna even had the gall to declare that “marriage was license to sin” (215), again directly contrary to the Word of God (Gen. 2:18; I Cor. 7:19).

The *Chicago Journal* noted that the Overcomers' household in Jerusalem consisted of “175 persons, of whom 100 are women, many other girls of marriageable age, and only 40 men.” It all made for a “hotbed of sexuality”

¹³ Geniesse lists several other sects which “revolved around a charismatic leader who drastically reordered traditional family relationships,” such as “the celibate dancing Shakers who followed ‘Mother’ Ann Lee in 1776, then, in 1830, Joseph Smith’s polygamous Mormons, and, finally, the Oneida Perfectionists who practised ‘free love’ as preached by John Humphrey Noyes in 1848” (5).

(192). Mrs. Spafford's unclean spirit had given her a revelation that made a bad situation worse:

At a meeting, Anna revealed a message. Her followers were to be tested by having "affinities." There were no longer any married couples. Instead, each man was to have an "affinity" with one of the younger women. Anna set about designating couples, commanding them to spend the night in bed together. They were to abjure sexual attraction as a vehicle to "overcome" temptation, and to report to her any details of their relationships. "We are to be like Adam and Eve before the fall," she warned, and frequently invited Jacob Eliahu to her room alone (149; cf. 151, 153).¹⁴

This is not "overcoming" temptation; this is putting oneself needlessly in the way of temptation and so tempting God (Deut. 6:16). Holy Writ calls us to "flee fornication" (I Cor. 6:18; Gen. 39:12) and to "make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof" (Rom. 13:14).

Even before Horatio's death, Anna repeatedly committed adultery with another man. This was how she piously sought to pass it off: "For 'the spiritual training' of herself and her husband, she told the group, she would become 'one' with another man" (138). This is Antinomianism of the worst sort! Spafford's wife was a modern "Jezebel" and the hymn writer falls under the condemnation of Revelation 2:20: "thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication." Scripture says, "Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge" (Heb. 13:4)!

Following logically upon the dissolution of marriage, children were "forcibly taken away from their parents to be supervised and to sleep in rooms with unmarried women" (177), bringing many tears and much grief (177-

¹⁴ Geniesse gives the example of Mr. Rudy, another member of the Spaffordites: "every night a young Swede came to him in her nightgown. She was married and the mother of two children. They spent the night together and did their best to resist the temptations of the flesh. But should on occasion they fail, they knew they had only to confess quietly to Anna, and she would forgive them" (195). Contrary to Rachel Phillips' claim that the American Colony spread "light," they were living in darkness, engaging in appalling and sick practices. No wonder they were accused of practising "free love" (192).

178, 214-215). Why should the church sing hymns written by an enemy of the Christian family? Why not sing songs given by the Holy Spirit, such as Psalms 127 and 128 on the permanence and blessedness of godly marriage and children in this life?

“New Dispensation”

With a cooling of apocalyptic fervour and the community’s increased chaffing at the unnatural denial of marriage, the beginning of the twentieth century marked a “new dispensation” at the American Colony (219, 234). “Anna, ever the realist, decided it was time to countenance young men and women ‘going together,’ and accordingly received a ‘message’” (215). Charismatic revelation can be so convenient!

Mrs. Spafford, however, still wanted to retain control. After all, she had renamed the members of the community (103, 119) and she, the undoubted leader, was to be called “Mother” (172, 297), as well as the “Bride,” for all were subject to her (161, 163). Just as she appointed her favourite as manager of the Colony’s store (208), she “also decided who was to be ‘engaged’ and to whom” (215; cf. 216-217). Later, Anna claimed that the Overcomers “had won their battle for purity” (even though they had fallen into debauchery) and they could even have an extremely lavish wedding for her daughter, Bertha, with a Lutheran pastor officiating. Evidently, the instituted churches were no longer “Babylon” (218)!

With the return of courtship and marriage, parents could now raise their own babies (234). Around the same time, doctors and medicine were permitted—first of all in the instance of an Overcomer who survived his suicide attempt (216). Even the bizarre ban on gravestones, which supposedly “prevented the dead from rising” (188; cf. 140, 163), was overturned, with Mrs. Spafford herself being buried on Mount Scopus with “a simple stone marked ‘Mother’ on her grave,” though the prohibition against mourning was apparently still in place, for that day the Overcomers were “trying to suppress their tears” (297).

Conclusion

Horatio’s story, complete with sanctified oranges, holy sniffles, ascension

robes and discarded wedding rings, is fascinating but sad, and much more that is bizarre and instructive could be added.¹⁵

But enough has been said to reveal that Horatio Spafford was a rabid Arminian and a universalist, who believed in the salvation of Satan and purgatory (like Roman Catholicism). The hymn writer was also a false prophet, a charismatic and a cult leader. The heretical teaching and utopian community of the “Branch” and his “Bride” were not in the way of Christ’s peace. It was not well with his soul. Surely, it is far better to sing the 150 inspired Psalms written by true prophets of Jesus Christ, the Branch (Isa. 11:1; Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Zech. 3:8; 6:12), for His beloved bride, the church (Eph. 5:23-32).

¹⁵ One also has to appreciate Geniesse’s skilful setting of her subject in the context of European migration to the U.S., America’s Gilded Age, D. L. Moody’s revivalism, the great Chicago fire (1871), Zionism, World War I and the creation of the modern state of Israel.

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