

# William Foy and Hazen Foss: A Reconsideration

Frank Zimmerman

## CONTENTS

<i>Historical Timeline</i> .....	1
<i>Inaccurate Histories</i> .....	5
<i>The Experience of Hazen Foss</i> .....	8
<i>Differences Between Foy and Foss</i> .....	9
<i>Refusing God's Call</i> .....	10
<i>The Calling of Elisha</i> .....	12
<i>God's Character</i> .....	13

“I’m curious what J. N. Loughborough relayed about William Foy, in his book *The Great Second Advent Movement*. In a nutshell can you give us an idea of what struck you as faulty in that regard?”

**T**HIS is a very interesting question! But first, some brief background information:

### Historical Timeline

William Ellis Foy was born in 1818 and died in 1893. Hazen Little Foss was born in 1819 and died in 1893. Both men were involved in the Millerite phase of the early Adventist movement in America.

Foy was given some visions, prior to the Great Disappointment in the fall of 1844, which he related, and finally published in 1845. Foss was also given some visions, just a few weeks before the Great Disappointment (October 22, 1844), and again shortly after 1844, which he was instructed to relate to the believers. He refused to relate them.

As a side note, Foss’ older brother, Samuel, was married to Ellen White’s older sister, Mary Plummer Harmon. So there was a bit of family connection between them.

Loughborough's view, which became the standard for most other Adventist church history books, is that Foy and then Foss, were supposed to be *the prophet*, as Ellen White later was. But that each, in turn, refused, and therefore the work was given to Ellen White. Loughborough relates that Foss, because of his refusal to do the work of the prophet, lost his eternal life. To be fair, this is from a statement Foss made to Ellen White. But Loughborough seems to imply that Foy suffered the same fate, for he "died shortly after."

And that was the standard view, until some recent years ago, when an African American Adventist scholar did some investigation into the life of Foy, and found out that he did not die, but lived a fairly long life, as a minister, which is what he had been training for, prior to 1844. This research is in the book, *The Unknown Prophet*, by Delbert W. Baker.

Now I'll tell you why this story had such an interest for me. When Fred Wright received a calling to preach the message full time (it was not a vision, but more of an internal voice), he saw all the difficulties: the hard labor, the travel, long periods away from home, the betrayals, and so forth. When he saw all that, he thought to himself,

"No! not for me!"

Then he remembered how Foss and Foy had (supposedly) rejected their calls, and had (supposedly) lost their eternal life, and he thought,

"Well, I don't want that either!"

So he made conditions for the acceptance of the Lord's call: he would only go where God sent him (by invitation, not by advertising), and he would never ask for money, and if the money dried up, he would quit! That might seem a bit odd, but that's the deal he made. I believe he strongly disliked the way modern ministers and ministries begged for money. Instead, he believed that "if the work was of God, He would support it." He also used to say,

“If you work for an employer, is it not right that he pays you? Would you want to work for him, and then also have to raise your own wages?”

So anyway, you can see that the Foss & Foy story were embedded into the beginning of our church. Naturally, then, when I heard about the new history on Foy, I was eager to investigate. And indeed, when you look at Foy’s story, it’s impossible to say that he rejected his call, or turned away from it. And he certainly did NOT “die shortly after” as Loughborough claimed.

Now as to the book, *The Unknown Prophet*. It’s an interesting read, but I felt it was mostly full of “filler” material, to bulk it out into a book length. The actual important details could have been condensed to about 5 or 10 pages.

Nevertheless, involved in this story, especially as Loughborough laid it out, are some interesting questions about God’s character, and how He deals with those whom He directly calls. Does God indeed “cast off” anyone who rejects a call to either a prophetic, or ministerial office? Does such a person lose his eternal life, when he rejects the call?

First, let’s give the brief timeline of Foy’s life (and some dates relating to Foss):

1835	Baptized
1842 January	First vision 2.5 hours
1842 February (Friday night)	Second vision 12.5 hours
3 days later	Starts to share the visions publicly. On Sunday Pastor J. B. Husted and several members of the Bromfield Street Second Methodist Episcopal Church, a White congregation, visited Foy and asked him to come to their house of worship and relate to them his visions.
1842: March to May	Preaches the Advent message

1842: May to August	Labors manually to support his family
1842 August until first printing of book (1845)	Continues in ministry
1844 mid (?)	Third vision (only referred to by Loughborough)
1844 (?)	Fourth vision (referred to by E. G. White)
1844 October: a few weeks before <i>Midnight Cry</i> ended	Foss receives a vision
1844 (after the Disappointment)	Foss is told to relate the vision. He refuses.
1844 (winter)	Foss is given the vision again and told to relate it, with warnings.
1844 (winter)	Foss is given a third vision, people urge him to present it; but he said he was deceived, and then the voice says he has grieved away the Spirit of the Lord, and that he was “released.”
1844 (winter)	Foss is alarmed, tries to hold a meeting, but can’t remember the visions.
1844 December	Ellen White (Harmon at that time) given her first vision in Portland, Maine. Foy has an “interview” with her. Ellen speaks the next evening and Foy is present. All of a sudden, right in the middle of Ellen’s presentation. Foy let out a shout of joy, rose to his feet, and excitedly “jumped right up and down.” As Ellen remembered, “Oh, he praised the Lord, praised the Lord.” He testifies publicly that her vision was legitimate, just what he had been shown.
1845 spring	Millerites meet and unite on certain points, one of which is the “opposition to all claiming special illumination.”
1845	Foy publishes his two visions “to comfort the saints.”

1845	Ellen White receives visions and relates them. Foy overhears and tells her it was what he had been shown.
1846 (?)	Foy moves to Augusta
1850	Foy moves to New Bedford, Mass., to answer a call to pastor
1855	Foy moves to Chelsea, Maine, to pastor a Freewill Baptist congregation there.
1860	Foy moves to Burnham, Maine, to pastor a Freewill Baptist congregation there.
1865	Foy moves to East Sullivan, Maine, still pastoring. Makes a permanent settlement there, until his death in 1893.

### Inaccurate Histories

Now we read what Loughborough and other historians (who build on his platform) say:

#### **Great Second Advent Movement (1905), Chapter 8:**

As he [Foy] expected the Lord Jesus to come in a very short time, he failed to recognize the fact that a third message was to follow the first and second messages of *Revelation* 14. Consequently the vision was to him unexplainable, and he ceased public speaking. After the close of the prophetic period, in the year 1845, he heard another relate the same vision, with the explanation that “the first and second messages had been given, and that a third was to follow.” Soon after this Mr. Foy sickened and died.

#### **Story of the Advent Message (1926), M. E. Andross, p. 58:**

However, it is interesting also to know that even before the disappointment, God was calling men to act as His messengers to the advent believers. In 1842 He gave a man of Boston, William Foy by name, two visions. They related to the new earth and the travels of God’s people to the holy city. William Foy was an educated man, a minister, and an able speaker. Large audiences listened spellbound to his story of what he had seen of the heav-

only land. Not long before the disappointment in 1844, God gave him a third vision, in which he saw three steps or platforms, the third extending clear to the kingdom of God. This vision he could not understand, as he was looking for Jesus to come very soon, and so he did not make it public, as he should have done.

**The Story of Our Church (1956), Department of Education, p. 188:**

After traveling extensively with his message, Foy was given a third vision shortly before the disappointment. New material was presented to him, showing three platforms, which indicated a third phase in the message from God for that time. His firm belief in the immediate coming of Jesus prevented a clear understanding of the vision. He discontinued public work. A few months later, at a public meeting, while Ellen Harmon was relating her first vision, Foy stood up, shouted, and explained that her vision was the same as his had been. Soon afterward he died.

**Light Bearers to the Remnant (1979), R. W. Schwarz, p. 64:**

Opposition to private revelations had helped to keep two other advent believers from accepting the divine commission later offered Ellen Harmon. Early in 1842 William Foy, of Boston, a Baptist studying for the Episcopal ministry, received two visions dealing with Christ's soon return and the reward of the righteous. Foy was reluctant to relate the visions publicly, partly because, as a mulatto, he was aware of the prejudice displayed toward men of color. Overcoming his initial reluctance, he accepted the nearness of the advent and related the visions to large audiences throughout New England. Later, however, financial pressures and a third vision, which he could not understand, led Foy to stop recounting his experiences.

These histories reiterate three ideas:

1. That Foy and Foss were supposed to fill the prophetic office that Ellen White later received
2. That Foy ceased preaching because he could not explain or understand the vision.
3. That Foy died soon after 1844.

Point #1 is not easily proved. In the book, *The Unknown Prophet*, Delbert Baker suggests that Foy could have been just a “John the Baptist”-like figure, who played his limited role for a short time, and therefore was never intended to fill the role of prophet as Ellen White did.

Point #2 does not seem to be backed up by any evidence. Foy did not cease public work, except for the 3 months mentioned in the timeline. The book *The Unknown Prophet* comments:

We can only approximate the time of Foy’s third and fourth visions. The best reconstruction points to his receiving both visions during the summer of 1844. We do know that he received all of them before the Great Disappointment and that he traveled and shared them up to that time. We also know that we cannot agree with Loughborough’s account that “he ceased public speaking” around 1845 and soon after “sickened and died.” We know that Foy lived until 1893, almost 50 more years, and that he continued to pastor, preach, and hold revivals up to the time of his death.

Point #3 is just flat wrong, as Foy lived until 1893. On his tombstone was written the verse:

“I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.” (2 *Timothy* 4:7)

The other thing that I am not able to verify right now, from the books I’ve looked at, is the idea that Foy refused the prophetic call and therefore lost his eternal life. I’m not sure where Fred Wright got this idea, for Loughborough does not directly draw the conclusion; it’s only there by implication. Perhaps there is another Adventist history book that made this statement more directly.

## **The Experience of Hazen Foss**

Certainly there is some evidence to show that Foss may have experienced this loss, although it is based on his own confession, as Ellen White records it. She does *not* state, “The Lord showed me that Foss was lost,” or any such thing. So there is a question there

whether it was actually too late for Foss to repent, or whether his own disappointment and disbelief in the 1844 message caused him to doubt his salvation.

It seems strange that a “lost man” who has no more spiritual interest, should encourage Ellen White to “be faithful” and that “she can have the crown he could have had.” Why should he have such remorse if the Spirit left him? Why should he encourage another to be faithful, when he no longer believes in those things? It is quite possible that Foss was just so disappointed by the failure at 1844, that he himself gave up his faith, and looked at himself as a “lost man,” when this might not have been the case at all, if he had but looked upward. It could have been a sad case of self-pity and remorse, out of control due to a wrong view of God’s character. Ellen White later wrote:

**Selected Messages, book 1, pp. 63-64:**

I was shown in vision, and I still believe, that there was a shut door in 1844. All who saw the light of the first and second angels’ messages and rejected that light, were left in darkness. And those who accepted it and received the Holy Spirit which attended the proclamation of the message from heaven, and who afterward renounced their faith and pronounced their experience a delusion, thereby rejected the Spirit of God, and it no longer pleaded with them.

If Foss was correct in assessing that the Spirit of God left him, and that therefore he lost his eternal life, it was not his refusal to relate the visions that cost him his eternal life, but because he “renounced his faith and pronounced his experience a delusion,” as Ellen White states above. God does not reject people, they reject Him, and then He accepts the fact.

**Romans 11**

<sup>29</sup> The gifts and calling of God are without repentance,

—and therefore, the rejection must come from the human side, not from the Lord.

There ARE some Biblical examples of lost people confessing the righteousness of others:

1. Saul confessing David's righteousness, when David reveals that Saul was under his power in the cave (*1 Samuel 24:16-22*)
2. Judas confessing the innocence of Jesus, before the priests, when he casts away the pieces of silver (*Matthew 27:3-5*).
3. The apostate Adventists bowing before the feet of those who are faithful (*Revelation 3:9*).

For evidence of Point #3, there is this:

**A Word to the Little Flock, p. 12:**

You think, that those who worship before the saints' feet (*Revelation 3:9*), will at last be saved. Here I must differ with you; for God showed me that this class were professed Adventists, who had fallen away, and "crucified to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put Him to an open shame." And in the "hour of temptation," which is yet to come, to show out every one's true character, they will know that they are forever lost; and overwhelmed with anguish of spirit, they will bow at the saints' feet.

Did Foss have an experience like that? Possibly.

### **Differences Between Foy and Foss**

Here are some of the differences between Foy and Foss:

1. Foy related the visions shown him; Foss didn't.
2. Foy anticipated redemption; Foss didn't.
3. Foy retained his Advent beliefs after the Disappointment; Foss didn't.
4. Foy maintained his religious interest and church connections; Foss didn't.
5. Foy's experience was validated by others; the experience of Foss wasn't.

Let's also consider what Foy did in 1844 and 1845. Apparently he continued ministering. After the Disappointment, he published

his visions. Why would he do this, if he had no confidence in them? It certainly was not a favorable time for publishing Advent views, especially not visions, but he went ahead anyway; that requires some faith. Secondly, sometime in 1845, he attends a meeting where Ellen White speaks. Why would he even go to the meeting, if he had rejected God? Ellen White's account of Foy is recorded in *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 17, p. 95-97. Here's one paragraph (although it is worthwhile to read the whole thing):

I had an interview with him. He wanted to see me, and I talked with him a little. They had appointed for me to speak that night, and I did not know that he was there. I did not know at first that he was there. While I was talking I heard a shout, and he is a great, tall man, and the roof was rather low, and he jumped right up and down, and oh, he praised the Lord, praised the Lord. It was just what he had seen, just what he had seen. But they extolled him so I think it hurt him, and I do not know what became of him.

So, he REJOICES to hear the same message; he leaps up and down, praising God! That doesn't sound like a lost man. It doesn't sound like someone who rejected the message.

### **Refusing God's Call**

Now let's look at the matter of God's calling of prophets and messengers. Have any others refused God's call? Yes!

1. Jonah. When he ran from the Lord's call, the Lord pursued him, until he relented.
2. Moses. He argued to be relieved from the call for quite a while. But the Lord kept after him, until he relented.
3. Elijah. He ran from his post of duty after the victory on Carmel. The Lord pursued him, and gave him another work.

One might also mention Balaam, as he was once a true prophet. But even in his greed, the Lord held him to the contract, when he was willing to speak the Lord's words.

Did you also know that there is an instance where Ellen White also refused to relate a vision? Here it is:

**A Letter to Joseph Bates, July 13, 1847:**

After I had the vision and God gave me light, He bade me deliver it to the band, but I shrank from it. I was young, and I thought they would not receive it from me. I disobeyed the Lord, and instead of remaining at home, where the meeting was to be that night, I got in a sleigh in the morning and rode three or four miles and there I found Joseph Turner. He merely inquired how I was and if I was in the way of my duty. I said nothing, for I knew I was not.

I passed up [to the] chamber and did not see him again for two hours, when he came up, asked if I was to be at meeting that night. I told him, no. He said he wanted to hear my vision and thought it duty for me to go home. I told him I should not. He said no more, but went away.

I thought, and told those around me, if I went I should have to come out against his views, thinking he believed with the rest. I had not told any of them what God had shown me, and I did not tell them in what I should cut across his track.

All that day I suffered much in body and mind. It seemed that God had forsaken me entirely. I prayed the Lord if He would give me strength to ride home that night, the first opportunity I would deliver the message He had given me. He did give me strength and I rode home that night. Meeting had been done some time, and not a word was said by any of the family about the meeting.

Very early next morning Joseph Turner called, said he was in haste going out of the city in a short time, and wanted I should tell him all that God had shown me in vision. It was with fear and trembling I told him all. After I had got through he said he had told out the same last evening. I rejoiced, for I expected he was coming out against me, for all the while I had not heard anyone say what he believed. He said the Lord had sent him to hear me talk the evening before, but as I would not, He meant His children should have the light in some way, *so He took him.*

There were but few out when he talked, so the next meeting I told my vision, and the band, believing my visions from God, received what God bade me to deliver to them.

“...so He took him.” Presumably, it means “He [God] took him [Joseph Turner].” So when Ellen White would not relate the vision, God used Joseph Turner. It’s not clear whether he also had a vision, or was just impressed with truth in his mind. But in any case, Ellen White did not “lose her salvation” for refusing to relate this vision. She *does* say though that “it seemed that God had forsaken me entirely.” So it was not a light matter, and she swiftly repented of her stubbornness.

Now, I don’t share this with you so that if the Lord lays upon you some vision, that you should feel at liberty to refuse to share it. But just bear in mind that the Lord has patience, and does not let go of His people. They may let Him go, but He remains faithful.

## The Calling of Elisha

Now another interesting example that throws some light on this issue of God’s calling is Elisha:

### Prophets and Kings, p. 220:

#### 1 Kings 19

<sup>20</sup> And he left the oxen, and ran after Elijah, and said, Let me, I pray you, kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you...Go back again, [was Elijah’s answer,] for what have I done to you?

This was not a repulse, but a test of faith. Elisha must count the cost—decide for himself to accept or reject the call. If his desires clung to his home and its advantages, he was at liberty to remain there. But Elisha understood the meaning of the call. He knew it was from God, and he did not hesitate to obey. Not for any worldly advantage would he forgo the opportunity of becoming God’s messenger or sacrifice the privilege of association with His servant.

<sup>21</sup> He...took a yoke of oxen, and slew them, and boiled their flesh with the instruments of the oxen, and gave unto the people, and

they did eat. Then he arose, and went after Elijah, and ministered unto him.

Without hesitation he left a home where he was beloved, to attend the prophet in his uncertain life.

It says, regarding Elisha's calling that "he was at liberty to remain there," if he should choose not to follow Elijah. Really? Was he really "at liberty"? Or would he have lost his eternal life if he decided to refuse the call? Certainly it would have been a more selfish choice if he had refused, and if this selfishness was not overcome, it would eventually have choked out the life of God. But I don't think that God would have seized away Elisha's eternal life and left him a doomed man. He would have continued to work with him, and lead him over the same ground to overcome his selfishness. But perhaps God would have found someone else to be the prophet instead in the meantime.

## God's Character

There's a wonderful series of studies on *Religious Liberty* written by A. T. Jones, and published in 1905. Let's read a few paragraphs from the first study:

Now, though that is the first of all possible relationships, and the first of all duties; though that relationship and duty are inherent in the very existence of intelligent creatures; yet even in that inherent obligation, God has created every intelligent creature *free*—free to recognize that obligation or not, free to discharge that duty or not, just as he chooses. Accordingly it is written:

### **Joshua 24**

<sup>15</sup> Choose you this day whom you will serve.

### **Revelation 22**

<sup>17</sup> Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.

Thus it is absolutely true that in religion—in the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it—God has created man entirely "exempt from the domination of others and from restricting circumstances;" has made him free "to make his choice, and decide his conduct for himself, spontaneously and voluntarily."

Thus religious liberty is the gift of God, inherent in the gift of rational existence itself. Any service as to God that is not freely chosen by him who renders it is not service *to God*. There can be no virtue in it; there can be none of God in it. Any service rendered as to God that is not freely chosen on the part of him who renders it cannot be of God; because...

#### **1 John 4**

<sup>16</sup> God is love:

—and love and compulsion, love and force, love and oppression, never can go together. Therefore any duty, any obligation, anything, offered or rendered as to God that is not of the individual's own freely chosen choice, can neither be of God nor to God. Accordingly when the Lord created whatever creature—angel or man—in order that that creature should be happy in the service of God, and in order that there should be virtue in rendering service or worship to God, He created him free to *choose* to do so.

And freedom to choose to do so carries with it, and in it, freedom to choose *not* to do so. Therefore, when God says to all creatures:

#### **Joshua 24**

<sup>15</sup> Choose you this day whom you will serve,

...it is left to each creature in the universe to decide for himself in his own freedom what he will do; whether he will serve God or not. And when in that freedom he makes a wrong use of his choice, and chooses not to serve God, *then*, even then, mark it—even then, God, being God, does not persecute him, does not set him at naught, and does not hunt him; He does *seek* him; yet not to pursue him, *but*, as it is stated in the parable of the one sheep that was lost away on the mountain alone, He goes to *find* him, and seeks him to bring *him back*.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore note this truth: when God has made every creature perfectly free to choose to serve Him, and in that, free to choose *not* to serve Him—when that creature exercises his choice in the way *not* to serve God, even then God only loves him: for God is only love. The only disposition that God has toward him is to love him, and by every possible means to win him yet to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Luke 15:4-7.

choice to love him and serve him. That is God, and that is religious liberty.

In these studies, A. T. Jones argues that God gave Adam and Eve perfect liberty to obey or not to obey. He did not build into disobedience some kind of “booby trap” to punish them if they didn’t obey. Instead, God knew that sin would punish man. There was no need to directly punish man, because God’s way is the only way of life, and every other way is the way of death. So you don’t need to kill a man that’s already on the path to death. In other words, God would *not* say,

“In the moment you disobey, I will take away your eternal life.”

That would lead to the obedience of fear, not love. Then why should it be any different in the calling of a prophet? Clear, there is the warning in *Ezekiel* 3:15-21 that if you do not deliver the warning, “their blood will be on your hands.” Ellen White had a similar experience where she saw the frown of Jesus when she would try to soften down the message. It is a serious matter to deliver God’s message faithfully, for the life of souls hangs in the balance. But even such a sin is not the “unforgivable sin.”

When we think about ancient Israel, God never took His sanctuary away from them, even when they were worshiping other idols. The Babylonians and the Romans took the temple away, but God never did. His gifts and calling are without repentance (*Romans* 11:29). However, they did eventually lose the spiritual understanding of these things, and of His word, so that it became quite meaningless to them. This only further demonstrated that it was not God who punished them, but sin that brought darkness and punishment on the sinner.

In like manner, it was not God who removed the Bible from the people, but the papal church. And what was their argument?

“The people are not worthy of the Bible, they will misunderstand and misuse it!”

But in the end it was the papacy that misused the Bible. The very ones who thought themselves capable of protecting the Word, became the ones who distorted it. It is a warning to us. If God were to act like the papacy, then His kingdom would also be one of fear and compulsion.

Then it must be the same with God's calling. He does not punish people for refusing the call; rather, they punish themselves by making the wrong choice. But He has great patience with them to help them make the right choice; and if they refuse the call, to bring it back to them again.

Those are about the extent of my thoughts. I realize that when I am discussing the finer points of God's character, that it is holy ground. So I want to be sure that everything is correct. I see the danger that some would act presumptuously if they thought they could avoid God's commands with impunity. But at the same time, serving God out of fear that He will take away your eternal life, is not the pure...

**Romans 8**

<sup>39</sup> ...love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.