

Seventh Day Baptists And Adventists: A Common Heritage

by Raymond F. Cottrell

One Sunday morning early in 1844 Frederick Wheeler, a Methodist-Adventist minister whose circuit included the Washington (New Hampshire) Christian church, conducted the communion service there. Present was a middle-aged woman, Mrs. Rachel Oakes (later Preston). In a subsequent conversation with Wheeler, Mrs. Oakes witnessed to her belief, as a Seventh Day Baptist, that the seventh day of the week was the Bible Sabbath. A few weeks later, Pastor Wheeler kept his first Sabbath and on the same March day preached a sermon about the Sabbath. Many of his parishioners followed him, and eventually Rachel Oakes Preston became an Adventist. Pastor Wheeler was the first Adventist to observe the seventh-day Sabbath; Mrs. Preston was one of the first Sabbathkeepers to become an Adventist. They became the first sabbatarian Adventists, and the Washington church the first sabbatarian Adventist congregation.¹ Seventh-day Adventists are happy to recognize their debt to the Seventh Day Baptists for this important facet of Adventist belief.

On the continent and in England, sabbatar-

ian Baptists trace their spiritual ancestry to the Anabaptist movement of Reformation times, and many of the Anabaptists are said to have observed the seventh-day Sabbath.² “Many conscientious and independent thinkers in the reign of Elizabeth (1558-1603) advocated the seventh-day,” and “in 1552 many in England were known as sabbatarians.”³

About 1664, Stephen Mumford, of the Bell Lane Seventh Day Baptist church in London, migrated to Newport, Rhode Island, where, finding no church of his own faith, he united with the Baptist church. By December 1671, he and a few other Baptist families were forced to form the first Seventh Day Baptist church on the North American continent, the church of Newport.⁴ In 1801, at least 20 congregations and settlements of Sabbathkeepers formed the Seventh Day Baptist General Conference, with a reported membership of 1,031.⁵

In the years just before 1844, Seventh Day Baptists generally listened approvingly to the Millerite proclamation of an imminent Advent, and sought to share with the Adventists their own conviction with respect to the Sabbath — seemingly in the hope of uniting the Advent and Sabbath truths. The Millerite leaders, however, resented any diverting of attention from the Advent to the Sabbath,

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which they considered an unimportant side issue. Consequently, few Seventh Day Baptists espoused the 1844 message.⁶

Early issues of the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, which began publication in November 1850, testify to the indebtedness of Seventh-day Adventists to the Seventh Day Baptists for the Sabbath. On page 7 of the first issue, James White wrote:

We call special attention of the brethren to the articles, in this number, from the publications of the Seventh-day Baptists. They are clear, comprehensive and irrefutable. We intend to enrich the columns of the *Review and Herald*, with extracts from their excellent works on the Sabbath. We also design to get out a large pamphlet, containing the same material from their publications, that we publish in this paper. Such a work, judiciously circulated, will certainly do a great amount of good.⁷

That issue of the *Review* contained four such “extracts,” fully three-fourths of all the space. The second issue, in December, contained one Seventh Day Baptist article on the Sabbath along with one each from J. N. Andrews and Joseph Bates. In the 12 issues of volume one, nearly 40 percent of the space

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was devoted to the Sabbath. The extent to which pioneer Seventh-day Adventists were indebted to the Seventh Day Baptists for their understanding of the Sabbath is reflected in the fact that throughout the first volume over half of the Sabbath material was reprinted from Seventh Day Baptist publications.

On the front page of the sixth issue of volume one is a poem of seven stanzas about the Sabbath, “It’s Jewish,” by Roswell F.

Cottrell, at that time a Seventh Day Baptist minister. On October 19, 1851, Cottrell wrote James White from Mill Grove, New York, that “after some nine months of careful and cautious examination, I have just arrived at the decision [to accept the Advent message]. I believe with all my heart, it was from heaven.”⁸ As a Seventh-day Adventist minister, Cottrell devoted the next 40 years to the proclamation of the Sabbath *and* the imminent coming of Jesus. Repeatedly, through the columns of the *Review*, he expressed his ardent desire for the spiritual growth of Seventh Day Baptists and his hope that they would accept the Adventist faith.

Unfortunately, certain Adventists, acting on their own initiative, gradually drove a wedge between Seventh Day Baptists and Seventh-day Adventists. The years 1850 to 1880 witnessed relatively rapid growth of Seventh-day Adventists and a corresponding occasional loss of Seventh Day Baptists to the Adventists. This loss might have been sustained with a minimum of misunderstanding except for several instances of the traumatic breakup of a Seventh Day Baptist church by Adventists whose crude tactics aroused distrust and resentment that lingered for many years. Articles about “sheep stealing” appeared in journals on both sides.⁹

Despite these unfortunate incidents, Seventh-day Adventists and Seventh Day Baptists continued to take a fraternal interest in each other. In 1869, the Adventist General Conference proposed an exchange of observers at their respective General Conference sessions. At their 1870 session, the Seventh Day Baptists welcomed Roswell Cottrell to “take part in their deliberations” and voted “cooperation with the Seventh-day Adventists, but without compromising distinctive principles.” In the years 1871 to 1873, J. N. Andrews and Uriah Smith alternated as Adventist representatives at the Baptist General Conference sessions.

In 1876, “Elder James White appeared as delegate from the Adventists, and, later, gave an address on the relations of the two denominations.”¹⁰ White wrote in an 1879 issue of the *Review*: “Both bodies have a spe-

cific work to do. God bless them both in all their efforts for its accomplishment. The field is a wide one. And we further recommend that Seventh-day Adventists in their aggressive work avoid laboring to build up a Seventh-day Adventist church where Seventh Day Baptist churches are already established.”¹¹

At the Baptist session in 1879, Nathan Wardner, the Baptist representative to the Adventists, “expressed the opinion that that people [the Adventists] were modifying in their sentiments; and that each change brought them nearer to us in belief.” Their minutes for that session record that “Elder James White, of the Adventists, was introduced and welcomed to a seat in our Conference; and his report of their prosperity was met by a resolution expressing fraternal joy.”¹²

The tradition of exchanging observers continues to this day. The Seventh-day Adventist observer at the August 1976 Seventh Day Baptist General Conference Session in Houghton, New York, was Don Roth of the Seventh-day Adventist General Conference.

The historic Seventh Day Baptist concept of the Sabbath was built on explicit statements of Scripture. The Sabbath command memorializes the Creator-creature relationship, and so does the day. The fourth commandment is not an inherently moral law in the strict sense of the word — like the commands against murder, adultery and theft, whose rationale is self-evident to conscientious people — but a positive precept that could not be known except by revelation. God intended the Sabbath for all mankind, and it cannot be altered by the church.

In historic Seventh Day Baptist thought, the Sabbath also has an eschatological dimension. In a great future crisis, truth will be in the balance (as foretold in Daniel 7:25). “The rest of the holy Sabbath” is “an earnest to God’s people, of that eternal rest, which is reserved for them in heaven,” an earthly “type” of a heavenly “antitype.” This perspective argues for the perpetuity of the Sabbath: “Now it is the nature of a type to continue until its use is superseded by the antitype. . . . The earthly Sabbath, then, being a type of the heavenly [rest], it must continue

till all the people of God shall have entered into their eternal rest; when there will be no more occasion for it. In other words, it must continue to the end of the world.”¹³ The Sabbath is thus both a memorial of the perfect world as it came forth from the hand of the Creator, and a type of the earth made new. It bridges the great interregnum of time and sin.

The Sabbath means more than physical rest. We are to “search and cleanse our hearts from the cares of the world, . . . to reflect upon the tender care which God has exercised over us,” and “to see what improvement we have made of the last Sabbath’s instruction.” We are to engage in prayer and the reading of Scripture, and to converse upon religious subjects. We are to attend the Sabbath services and participate actively in them, in order that they may have “an important influence upon us during the succeeding week and . . . look forward with pleasure for the return of the weekly day of rest.”¹⁴

It would be difficult to draw a distinction between the historic Seventh Day Baptist concept of the Sabbath and that of Seventh-day Adventists. As the early issues of the *Review and Herald* make evident, we gratefully appropriated their well-developed understanding of the Sabbath, without modification, and made it our own.

Almost exclusively until recent years, Seventh Day Baptists emphasized Sabbath observance as man’s proper response to a divine command — as the Sabbath is, of course, presented in the Bible. This was the basis on which Rachel Oakes Preston witnessed to it in Washington, New Hampshire; and Seventh-day Adventists have followed this approach. God commands; it is our duty to obey.

More recently, at least some Seventh Day Baptists have been looking at the Sabbath from the added perspective of our need for it — as a gracious provision by a wise Creator to enable us to cope with the frenetic rush of the modern world. This approach makes the Sabbath more important today than in any previous generation. The Sabbath is the same, and man’s duty with respect to it is the

same. But instead of keeping it *only* because God requires it, there is emphasis on the Creator's purpose in giving man the Sabbath, on its intrinsic value, and on an intelligent observance of it. Ahva J. C. Bond aptly expressed this new perspective in the terse statement: "It is God's Sabbath; he made it," and "it is man's Sabbath; he needs it."¹⁵

An understanding and appreciation of the value of the Sabbath provides a more effective motivation for keeping it, and results in greater blessing than mere rote compliance with the Sabbath command can provide. In fact, true Sabbath observance is possible only when a person understands the purpose of the Creator in consecrating it as holy time, and chooses to keep it, not only because his creatureliness obliges him to do so, but also because, as a rational being, he sincerely desires to enter into the true Sabbath rest. This new emphasis sets the tone for Herbert E. Saunders' recent (1971) book, *The Sabbath: Symbol of Creation and Recreation*,¹⁶ which is reminiscent of Abraham Heschel's classic, *The Sabbath*. Every thoughtful Seventh-day Adventist might profitably read both of these books. Saunders quotes from Heschel more than 20 times (and several times from M. L. Andreasen).

According to Saunders, the Sabbath is a continuing symbol of God's presence in the world, a "perfect link between God and our race," a constant reminder of the Creator's interest in us and of our creatureliness in relation to Him as our Father.¹⁷ "Man was God's crowning achievement, and the Sabbath became the memorial of that achievement." Its observance is a supreme expression of loyalty to Him.¹⁸ Neglect of the Sabbath leads to forgetfulness of the God of creation and the act of creation. Conversely, "the Sabbath remembered, God cannot be forgotten."¹⁹

According to Saunders, the Sabbath is a symbol that time is more important than the material things that occupy space. It symbolizes God's activity as well as His presence in time. "It is the recognition of the sanctity of time that leads us to an understanding of the Sabbath." For six days each week, we are concerned primarily with space and the things that occupy space; on the seventh we celebrate the holiness of time. The Sabbath is

rest after work, and consecrated rest demands consecrated work. The seventh day of the week thus sanctifies the six that precede it, if both are made what God intended them to be. The Sabbath is the cornerstone of time rejected by modern builders.²⁰

The Sabbath stands not only at the apex of God's creative activity, but also of His redeeming power, and is a symbol of both.²¹ It is a symbol of true spirituality and a perfect representation of true spiritual life, and Sabbathkeeping is an accurate barometer of that life.²² It is time set apart for renewal, for

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spiritual restoration and reconciliation.²³ "The Sabbath raises man from the level of earthly existence to the plane of the spirit."²⁴

The Sabbath is also a symbol and an "example" of the world to come. Entering into its true spirit, "we have some idea of what heaven and eternity will be like for we have experienced the presence of the Father."²⁵ Again Saunders approvingly quotes Heschel: "The essence of the world to come is Sabbath eternal, and the seventh day in time is an example of eternity . . . a foretaste of the world to come; . . . a token of eternity." Unless we enjoy the taste of the Sabbath here, in time, we will be unable to enjoy the taste of the world to come.²⁶

And how shall we keep Sabbath? Saunders asks. First, we must understand it. A person should do on the Sabbath that which leads toward an understanding of God's will. Anything that detracts from such contemplation or that allows one to forget it is the Sabbath, any use of the Sabbath hours that interferes with its purpose, in any way or to any extent, is a violation of the Sabbath. Conversely,

word or conduct that does not hinder one's own Christian growth or that of others, directly or indirectly, is appropriate. Unless we find God in the Sabbath, it is meaningless. There is no fixed human standard for observance; a person's conscience is to be his guide.²⁷

What will the Sabbath do for those who understand its meaning and enter into its true spirit? It will enable them to face life with fresh hope, renewed strength and confidence; it will give a sense of harmony with the universe. It highlights the personal identity and worth of man, and frees him from the tyranny of the world.

Saunders devotes one section to the idea of the Sabbath as a day designed to bind the family together. "The Sabbath kept must be a Sabbath shared," he says, and sharing begins at home. The Jewish people make the Sabbath a significant family experience. It provides for a renewal of family ties, and for relating personally to members of the family and their needs. "Save the Sabbath and it will go a long way toward saving the family," he quotes George Bernard Shaw.²⁹

The author repeatedly stresses the relevance of the Sabbath in the modern world. Far from being outmoded, it provides the very therapy modern man needs, the therapy of silence and quietness amid the pressures of a madly rushing, neurotic society; it dispels the frustrations of the present age.³⁰ In a world that tends to depersonalize people and transform them into robots, it makes each individual important; it restores the personal quality of life.³¹

Like Heschel, Saunders finds in the Sabbath "a different climate" from the other days of the week, an air that "surrounds us like spring," an oasis of tranquillity, serenity, peace and repose.³² Again, like Heschel, he sees the Sabbath as a "sanctuary built for us in time," "a sheltered place of rest and refreshment," a "regular moment in time when men and God meet and share together in spiritual and living fellowship,"³³ an "island of stillness" in the "tempestuous ocean of time and toil."³⁴

The Sabbath is the only point of belief on which Baptists and Seventh Day Baptists differ. Saunders specifically cites it as the

"only just reason for our denominational existence, separate from other Baptists."³⁵ This suggests the question, Is commitment to the Sabbath, in and of itself, sufficient reason to maintain a separate church organization? The continuing existence of Seventh Day Baptists implies that they believe this to be so; their dwindling membership implies that it is not so. Their 1803 U.S. membership stood at 1,130; in 1844, it had grown to nearly 6,100; in 1863, to 6,516 (compared with about 3,500 Seventh-day Adventists). In 1902, it peaked at 9,292 and has been gradually declining ever since. Today, it is back to 5,230.³⁶ In 1803, there was one Seventh Day Baptist to every 4,698 of the U.S. population; in 1976, the ratio was one to every 41,014 — proportionately one-ninth as large as 173 years ago.³⁷

These considerations lead Saunders to conclude that "something is going to happen soon, if the Sabbath and all that it stands for in the Christian context is not to be lost."³⁸ "Either the Sabbath has meaning for this age or it does not. If not, it is time we found out and extended our energies into other areas of concern. But if the Sabbath does have meaning for this age," its spiritual values should be reflected in Seventh Day Baptist lives and in a renewed dedication to proclaiming the Sabbath. "Lack of conviction about the Sabbath is the most serious threat we face" today, he says.³⁹ "The time has come for us to begin the process of Sabbath renewal" by a "re-examination of our reason for keeping the Sabbath, and if it has no value then to discard it. But if it has what we have for centuries insisted that it had, of spiritual quality and significance, then it must be offered to a world in need."⁴⁰

This concept of the Sabbath gives Seventh Day Baptists "a tremendous responsibility," and the time has come for them to restore it to a central place in their faith. "The demands of the present age are calling us to either a new commitment or to a relinquishing of our rights to the Sabbath. Seventh Day Baptists are either on the threshold of a new experience in Sabbatism or on the brink of denomi-

national disaster. God is calling us to a new awareness of the Sabbath in the life of modern man and we have something wonderful to offer.” “The time has come. The era of Sabbath need has arrived and we have been in existence for lo these many years because, I believe, we have been saved ‘for such a time as this.’ ”⁴¹

Perhaps there is still something of value we can learn about the Sabbath from our Seventh Day Baptist friends. We are grateful to them for their devoted witness to the seventh-day Sabbath, which in God’s providence brought it to our attention and made it a vital part of our belief and life as Seventh-day Adventists.

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