
Has God's Church Always Kept the Passover?

Some in the Church believe that God's Church has always kept both the Sabbath and the Passover. So important is the meaning of the Passover to Christians that it is assumed that God's Church would have always observed it. Of course it's also assumed that the Church would have observed Passover not as Jews do, but instead would have enjoined the New Testament emblems of "bread" and "the fruit of the vine" as symbols of the crucified Christ.

But are the assumptions correct? Has the Church of God always kept the Passover?

The Worldwide Church of God has traced its origins back through the Church of God (Seventh Day), the Millerite movement of the 1840s, and the colonial congregations that later formed the Seventh Day Baptist Church. Much printed material documenting the history of Sabbatarianism during these periods has survived to our day, so it is possible to trace much of the modern doctrinal histories of many Sabbatarian groups. These records include denominational histories, church records, correspondence, business-meeting minutes, doctrinal tracts and papers, personal recollections and the observations of outsiders, former members or relatives of members.

Among those through whom we trace our history, for two centuries before the 1840s, Passover observance was unknown. Instead of keeping the Passover, the churches observed the Lord's Supper at different times throughout the year. The Pinner's Hall church, for example, observed the Lord's Supper in 1686 on

October 25.¹ Not one example of a Christian Passover observance has been found during that period.

Those familiar with the origins of the Newport, Rhode Island, church will recall that one of the principal issues that led to the separation of the Sabbatarians from the other Baptists involved the Communion service. For several years the Sabbatarians had observed Communion with the Baptists. Yet because some who had accepted the Sabbath had returned to Sunday-worship, the Sabbatarians wondered if they should take the Lord's Supper with them. They decided that they should not.²

The opposition to the Sabbatarians within the Baptist community at Newport focused on their Sabbath observance. The Passover was never an issue because no one was keeping the Passover. The Sabbatarians and the Baptists observed the Lord's Supper in the same way and at the same time.

In 1845 that situation began to change. In Philadelphia a small Sabbatarian Adventist group observed their first Passover Communion. Led by "Brother J.L. Boyd" and "Sister C.S. Minor," this small church observed the Lord's Supper using bread and grape juice to commemorate Jesus' death. They also washed one another's feet, following Jesus' Passover example. They continued this practice alone for 30 years before they ever found any others who agreed with them.³

It was with this small beginning that the idea of a once-a-year Passover Communion began spreading to an ever-increasing circle of believers.

¹ Katz, David S. *Sabbath and Sectarianism in Seventeenth-Century England*. Leiden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1988, page 125.

² Sanford, Don A. *A Choosing People: The History of Seventh Day Baptists*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992, pages 97-99.

³ Kiesz, John, with help of the ministerial students of the Midwest Bible College. *History of the Church of God (7th Day)*. Stanberry, Missouri, 1965, page 66.

Richard Nickels understands Kiesz' comments as proving 175 Philadelphian Sabbatarians kept the Passover in 1845. But Kiesz only states that Boyd had been a part of a group of 175 Millerites who had awaited Jesus' return on the night of the Great Disappointment. He does not state that all 175 then went on to keep the Sabbath and Passover. See his book *A History of the Seventh Day Church of God* (1973), page 90.

Left unanswered is the date on which they observed their Passover. Adventists as a whole placed greater faith in the Karaite Jewish calendar than in the rabbinic Jewish calendar. Since these calendars did not always agree as to the months when the Holy Days fell, it is possible that these Adventists would not have been keeping the Passover the same month as the Jewish community.

David Arnold hosted a small conference of Sabbatarian Adventists on his farm near Volney, New York, in 1848. Heavily influenced by the teachings of George Storrs that the Millennium was already past, David and his brother William used the conference as a forum to advocate that the Lord's Supper should be observed on Passover.⁴

It is said that William disagreed with his brother about the Millennium. William held to the "Age-to-come" doctrine — traditional millennialism. This places William Arnold squarely in the Church of God tradition.

Present at the conference were James and Ellen White.¹ A recent convert to the Sabbath who claimed prophetic gifts, Ellen White opposed all mention of the Passover. The Whites published the first edition of their paper *The Present Truth* the following year. In that very first edition, they explained why they had accepted the Sabbath but rejected the biblical Holy Days. Their position later became official Seventh-day Adventist doctrine. Nevertheless, Sabbatarians opposed to Ellen White's prophetic claims kept the discussion alive.

Early in the next decade, the Seventh Day Baptist congregation of South Fork, (West) Virginia, began to deviate from common Baptist practice. More and more they took on the appearance of Orthodox Jews. Even among Sabbatarian Baptists, they were criticized for being pharisaical. Among their innovations was a Passover Lord's Supper.⁵

By the close of the 1850s, clear divisions among the Sabbatarian Adventists began to take shape. Opponents to the Whites started to publish their own papers, beginning with *The Messenger of Truth* and then later *The Hope of Israel*. The latter evolved into what we know today as *The Bible Advocate* magazine. These papers became the voice of those who eventually united to form the Church of God (Adventist), today known as the Church of God (Seventh Day).

From about 1860 until 1890, the church paper published assorted opinions about when, how often and with what the Lord's Supper should be observed. In the early part of that period, most Church of God ministers kept Communion at different times of the year, some as often as quarterly. Yet gradually the idea

that the Lord's Supper should be observed only once a year, and then only on the Passover, became universally accepted. Even the name Passover came to replace Lord's Supper. This in turn led to questions about the other Holy Days. Today, the Church of God (Seventh Day) prefers the term Lord's Supper. In that way they make it clear that though they observe Communion on the Passover, no one should conclude that they observe the Holy Days.

It should be apparent that the idea that God's Church has always kept the Passover is not true. It would be more accurate to say that the Church has always had a Communion service, at times called "the Lord's Supper." Even a superficial reading of the New Testament makes it clear that bread and some form of juice "of the vine" should be taken in memory of Jesus' sacrifice for us. For centuries that was all that the Church understood.

Recognizing these facts, we should take care not to read our experiences and beliefs into the experiences and beliefs of the Church in centuries past. In doing so we might misrepresent them and discredit ourselves.

We also should recognize that a historic precedent or its lack should not be the determining factor in deciding proper doctrine and practice. Such precedents might give us insights into how others viewed the Scriptures, but ultimately it is the Scriptures themselves that should guide us into doctrinal truth. And truth should be one of the great hallmarks of God's Church.

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⁴ Spaulding, Arthur W. *Origin and History of Seventh-Day Adventists*. Review and Herald Publishing Association, Washington, D.C., 1961, volume 1, page 193; Nickels, page 109.

⁵ Randolph, Corliss. *History of Seventh Day Baptists in West Virginia*. Plainfield, New Jersey: American Sabbath Tract Society, 1905, page 201; *Seventh-Day Baptists in Europe and America*. Plainfield, New Jersey, American Sabbath Tract Society, 1910, volume 2, pages 854-861.