

December 23, 1985

Worldwide Church of God
300 West Green Street
Pasadena, California 91123

Dear Sirs:

Thank you for my free copy of your new book Mystery of the Ages. On the whole I have found it very interesting--especially the chapter entitled "Mystery of the Church." On page 237 you mention the denomination of which your church is an outgrowth--the "Church of God." This is readily understandable as a prelude to a discussion of your own Work. I fail to see, however, why on the preceding page the man Stephen Mumford, and the Sabbath-keeping congregations at Newport and Hopkinton, Rhode Island, are brought into the discussion. For the Church of God has never had a member--whether pastor or lay-person--named Stephen Mumford; nor has it ever had churches at either of those locations. Perhaps you are thinking of the Seventh Day Baptists. They did have a member by that name; he did help organize a Sabbath-keeping church at Newport; and that church did branch out to Hopkinton and other locations in colonial America in the years following 1664.

As I tried to explain in a fairly detailed letter to you last June 3, there is no connection whatever between the Seventh Day Baptists and the denomination now known as the Church of God (Seventh Day). Each is totally independent of the other. The first American Seventh Day Baptist Church was established, as mentioned above, at Newport, Rhode Island in 1671; the S.D.B. General Conference was organized in 1802. The Church of God, on the other hand, began in Michigan in 1858 under the preaching of Gilbert Cranmer, and in Iowa in 1860 through the efforts of some converts of a Seventh-day Adventist preacher named M. E. Cornell. Its General Conference was organized in 1884--at which time the name "Church of God" was officially adopted. (Prior to this time they had used various names: "Church of Christ," "Church of God," "Church of the First-born," "Sabbatarian Adventists," "Free Commandment-keepers," etc., etc.)

I believe I have already included some of the following information in my earlier letter; however, I will go over it once again for your convenience. According to Church of God sources, the earliest congregations of what is now the Church of God (Seventh Day) were established in Michigan in the years following 1858 by an Elder Gilbert Cranmer. Mr. Cranmer, born in Newfield, New York on January 18, 1814, had participated in the advent movement of 1844 and shared in the October 22 disappointment. However, it was not until 1852, while living in Michigan, that he began to observe the Sabbath, having been convinced of this truth by the preaching of Joseph Bates who, along with James and Ellen White, is usually regarded as one of the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. Four years earlier, in 1848, James and Ellen G. White had assumed control of the Sabbath-keeping adventist movement through a series of "Sabbath Conferences" held in Connecticut, New York, Maine and Massachusetts between April 20 and November 19 (see The Sabbath in Scripture and History, p. 249). In late 1857, therefore, Cranmer sought authorization from the Whites to preach. He attended one of their meetings in Otsego, Mich-

igan, December 19-20, 1857, during which Ellen G. White purportedly had a vision concerning him. She said that she had been shown that Cranmer had the ability to teach and preach, but that two things were holding him back; his alleged use of tobacco, plus a fear of praying and reading Scripture before his family. When he overcame those two obstacles, she said, it would be an evidence that he was called to preach.

Six weeks later in Battle Creek, during an adventist mid-week prayer meeting conducted by James White and J. N. Loughborough, Cranmer walked in, and afterwards asked for a "card of recommendation" (license to preach) from White. According to Loughborough:

Brother White said to him, "Have you gained those victories you were to gain as proof that the Lord would go forth with you in the ministry?"

He replied, "No, I have not gained them yet, but I am going home to gain the victories."

Brother White then said, "Well, Brother Cranmer, when you have gained those victories there will be no difficulty about your getting a card recommending you to our people as a minister."

He went home. Did he gain the victories?--No. But in six weeks, he had started out to preach. Denouncing the Testimonies, he stated that Brethren White and Loughborough "would not give him a card of recommendation because he did not believe the visions." With this kind of food he gathered up some of the relics of those who had supported the Messenger paper. He got the old second-hand press and type, and started a paper entitled The Hope of Israel. His hope of Israel was the teaching of probation for the Jews and others, in the future age. Instead of gaining the victory over tobacco, he now used it freely and openly, and in fact put no injunction against its use upon those associating with him.

His first effort at gaining converts was an attack upon our people by a warfare against Sister White's gift. Finally he turned to raise a company with no knowledge of our work. Some persons, as Elder Horton, of Michigan, accepted the Sabbath under his teaching. They did not like the lax habits of that people, learned of the Seventh-day Adventists, and threw their influence with the third angel's message. The Hope of Israel party was a more feeble effort than that of the Messenger, and in the spring of 1863 that paper died, and the press was laid up the second time. The man Cranmer became an incessant user of tobacco. (from the Pacific Union Recorder, Dec. 15, 1910.)

Within a few years Cranmer had established several independent Sabbath-keeping congregations in Michigan, all taking the collective name "Church of Christ." On August 10, 1863, these churches published Vol. 1 No. 1 of The Hope of Israel.

Meanwhile, another convert of Joseph Bates, a young adventist preacher

named Merritt E. Cornell, had raised up a small Sabbath-keeping church in Marion, Iowa. On June 10, 1860, they adopted the following covenant:

"We the undersigned, do hereby express our wish to be associated together in Christian fellowship as a Church of Jesus Christ, at Marion, whose covenant obligation is briefly expressed in keeping the commandments of God and faith of Jesus, taking the Bible and the Bible alone, as the rule of our faith and discipline" (Coulter, The Story of the Church of God (Seventh Day), p. 15).

It is important to realize that M. E. Cornell was one of the "approved messengers" of James and Ellen G. White. The Marion, Iowa church was therefore founded as a seventh-day adventist congregation in good standing, and probably would have remained so if Cornell had not held up Mrs. White's writings and visions as being of equal authority with Scripture. But he did, and it split the church down the middle. Half of the people accepted the visions, and remained seventh-day adventists; the other half, while retaining all other adventist doctrines, rejected the visions and started a new movement which the main body of adventists afterwards referred to as the "Marion Party." This latter group soon learned of the churches in Michigan and eventually united with them.

In 1866--six years after its founding--this Marion, Iowa church for the first time adopted the Name "Church of God," while the Michigan churches continued to call themselves "Churches of Christ." And in 1874, the churches in Missouri--having been established through the efforts of the Church in Iowa--organized what they called the "Sabbatarian Adventist Conference of Missouri." It was not until 1884--the year the General Conference was organized--that all branches of the church, including Michigan, finally accepted the name "Church of God." (See Coulter, pp. 34-35.)

The facts contained in the above discussion prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that the Church of God (Seventh Day) is what adventists and others have always contended that it is--an off-shoot from the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. Both Gilbert Cranmer and Merritt E. Cornell--founders of the churches in Michigan and Iowa respectively--were converts of Joseph Bates, one of the pioneers of the Adventist movement.

Some confusion, however, has resulted from a book first published in 1936 entitled A History of the True Church. Written by Church of God ministers A. N. Dugger and C. O. Dodd, the book purports to trace the history of the Church "from 33 A.D. to date." Mr. Dugger also prepared an article for the 1936 Census of Religious Bodies, based upon the book. When the Seventh Day Baptists found out that Mr. Dugger had "lifted" their history, calling it the history of the Church of God, they were very upset. Extremely upset might be a better description of their reaction. Corliss Fitz Randolph, for example, the author of Seventh Day Baptists in West Virginia, wrote a rather unflattering review of Mr. Dugger's book in which he described it as "pitiful" and "all but ludicrous." And Miss Evalois St. John of the Seventh Day Baptist Historical Society has since characterized it as a "very garbled history."

It was particularly the 1936 Religious Census article that was, for a time, the source of some confusion in the religious world. In the first three editions of his Handbook of Denominations, for example, Frank S. Mead used this material as the source for his article on the Church of God; his fourth edition, in 1965, and all subsequent editions have utilized more factual sources. Likewise, the people at Encyclopaedia Britannica had prepared a research paper based on the 1936 Dugger article. When Miss St. John of the SDB Historical Society learned of this paper, she and the Society immediately protested, as well as advising F. D. Nichol of the Seventh-day Adventists of the situation. After visiting the Britannica offices, Nichol wrote the following letter to Miss St. John, dated August 17, 1961:

This is to report on my visit to Encyclopaedia Britannica when I was in the midwest not long ago. I found them mortally embarrassed over the blunder they had made in crediting the Church of God folks as the source of a lot of very fine religious people. They have recalled the document they have prepared and are correcting it in harmony with the facts.

Thank you for having called this matter to my attention.

In my letter to you of last June 3, in which I included some but not all of the above material, I concluded by saying that the main root cause of the Dugger-Dodd misunderstanding of Church of God origins was a wrong interpretation of early Seventh Day Baptist history. I no longer feel this to be true. It is certainly one of the factors involved, but was itself occasioned by a still more fundamental cause. I frankly think that the name "Church of God" lies at the bottom of the whole matter. Most Christians, if they use the phrase at all, use "Church of God" to refer to Christianity as a whole, to the entire body of Christ; not just some one denomination. There is no danger of ambiguity in such a usage. However, in the case of an individual church organization, or collection of such organizations (there seem to be many Sabbath-keeping "Churches of God" today)--it is an altogether different story. It is perhaps inevitable that some in such a "Church of God" would sooner or later begin to suppose that theirs was the "true church," to the exclusion of all others. This is what Dugger and Dodd did. They then attempted to push their church's history back as far as possible, even if it meant appropriating some other denomination's history as their own.

On the other hand, if the Church of God had adopted some other name in 1884, it is likely that none of this would have happened. There may never have been a "Salem-Stanberry" split, nor any of the many Sabbath-keeping "Churches of God" that have grown up in its wake. And the denomination we call "Church of God (Seventh Day)" might have become a growing, thriving part of the body of Christ, many times its present size, instead of a small, almost unheard-of denomination struggling to maintain its very existence.

Yours truly,

William T. Voyce