

Why Study the History of Sabbath-Keepers?

An Indian proverb states, "A people without history are like the blowing wind." Today, there is an abysmal lack of knowledge among Sabbath-keepers of their own history. This dearth has motivated me to write a couple of books on the fascinating subject of church history.

Why should you study church history? Because you cannot understand what is happening today in the Sabbath-keeping Churches of God without a background of what has happened in the past. Unless we learn the lessons of the past, we are destined to repeat the mistakes of our ancestors. The history of God's Church is both thrilling and educational. "He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches," **Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29, 3:6, 13, 22.**

I have long been interested in the history of Sabbath-keepers. Not knowing one's history is like starting to watch a movie in the middle. You don't know what happened before, and have difficulty understanding what is happening now. When you look into the history of Sabbath-keepers, you see striking examples of the maxim, "history repeats itself." You see the relationship between different groups, and appreciate more fully how they arrived at their position today. You find characters, such as John James, Dr. Peter Chamberlen, Gilbert Cranmer, and many others, with whom you can identify. You can appreciate their work for the Master, their problems and their trials.

Giving & Sharing has reprinted a revised, expanded, edition of my book, *Six Papers on the History of the Church of God*, originally published in 1972. The *Six Papers* book covers the history of Sabbath-keepers from seventeenth century England to America, through the Adventist period and the formation of the modern Church of God (Seventh Day) as well as the independent movement of G.G. Rupert. John Kiesz, elder statesman of the Church of God (Seventh Day), wrote paper number six.

A companion book is *History of the Seventh Day Church of God, Volume I*, which gives further details of the formation of the Church of God (Seventh Day) in the mid-1800's down to the present.

Who "Owns" Sabbatarian History?

History has not as much to do with *time*, as with *how we live and believe*. In updating my book, *Six Papers on the History of the Church of God*, part of which covers the history of Sabbatarian Baptists in England and America from the 1500's to the 1800's, I was inspired and encouraged to learn that early Sabbath-keepers practiced nearly the same beliefs that we hold today. Through the pages of history, I have discovered my spiritual ancestors.

Yet some would deny my claims of spiritual kinship with early English and American Sabbath-keepers. Don Sanford, today's official historian of the Seventh Day Baptist Church, has recently written a revised Seventh Day Baptist history, *A Choosing People: The History of Seventh Day Baptists* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1992). Sanford holds that other Sabbath-keepers cannot rightfully appropriate Seventh Day Baptist history as their own (see *The Sabbath Sentinel*, October, 1992, pages 6-7).

I believe many Sabbath-keepers of today can indeed validly claim early English and American Sabbatarian Baptists as their spiritual predecessors. Actually, many Church of God groups today are doctrinally *closer* to early English and American Sabbath-keepers than are today's Seventh Day Baptists. Early American Sabbatarians rejected the Trinity doctrine as well as immortal soul teaching, and eschewed Christmas and Easter, which is generally contrary to modern Seventh Day Baptist doctrinal teaching.

Who "owns" Sabbatarian history? Those who believe and practice what early Sabbath-keepers believed and practiced, **John 8:39**. Sabbatarian history should not become the intellectual property of any particular group.

Recent Historical Developments

A revision and update of my material on church history was necessary due to developments over the past twenty years. There have been at least three significant books published, which have expanded the horizon of knowledge on the history of Sabbath-keepers. They are: 1) Sanford's book, mentioned previously, 2) *Andreas Fischer and the Sabbatarian Anabaptists*, by Daniel Liechty (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1988), and 3) *Sabbath and Sectarianism in Seventeenth-Century England*, by David S. Katz (New York: E.J. Brill, 1988). Liechty adds interesting data about Sabbath-keepers in Slovakia during the early 1500's. Katz, a non-Sabbatarian, makes the astounding conclusion that the Adventist Movement (of which the Seventh Day Church of God is a derivative) is the direct spiritual descendant of seventeenth-century Sabbatarians who kept the Sabbath and believed in the soon-coming millennial rule of the Messiah.

There is yet another reason why it was necessary to revise and update this history. The past twenty years have seen dramatic doctrinal changes in many Sabbath-keeping groups. At this point in time, some Sabbath-keepers are saying that they do not have a need anymore to support their doctrinal position by showing that other believers down through the ages have upheld the Sabbath and related doctrines. While Katz and Liechty have provided additional proofs that we have indeed found our spiritual ancestors, some today are ignoring the lessons of this history.

I do not hold such selfish views. A careful study of the evidence shows that in every age, there have been a few who have not "bowed the knee to Baal." I have written about a small portion of these valiant individuals. May we always remember how we have received and heard the Truth of God (**Revelation 3:3-4**) and remain faithful, holding fast to the end, no matter what others do!

— written by Richard C. Nickels

Six Papers on the History of the Church of God, and *History of the Seventh Church of God, Volume I*, are available from **Giving & Sharing**