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## Resources in Review: Sabbatarian Anabaptists

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Most of us have heard of Peter Waldo and the Waldensians of the 12th century. But where was the Church of God in the 16th century? Here's a discussion of Church history and a review of a book that describes the little-known history of a group that had some important points in common with the Church of God today.

*Andreas Fischer and the Sabbatarian Anabaptists*, by Daniel Liechty, Scottsdale, Pennsylvania, Herald Press, 1988 (167 pages, \$32.94).

Henry Clarke's *A History of the Sabbatarians, or Seventh-Day Baptists in America* (published in 1811), began the modern writing of Sabbatarian history. Since then numerous articles, tracts, pamphlets, theses and books have delved into the subject. Daniel Liechty has written one of the most recent and scholarly of these efforts. His new book, *Andreas Fischer and the Sabbatarian Anabaptists*, is bound to become a standard reference.

The English origins of American Sabbatarianism have been well documented. Planted in the colonies by

Stephen Mumford in 1664, the Sabbath is now embraced by several groups, most of whom trace their history through the Newport, Rhode Island congregation that Mumford helped to establish. He came to the colonies probably because persecution in England against Non-Conformists had increased. Previously, during the 1650s, the Commonwealth [when England was ruled by Cromwell, a Puritan] had created an atmosphere where Sabbatarianism could flourish. During that time, a number of Sabbath-keeping congregations were established and ministers ordained.

But before 1650, Sabbatarian history is a little murky. Congregational histories fade away. Individual Sabbath advocates are known. But some were clearly Anglican, refusing to depart from the established church. There is the case of John Traske, in 1618. But it is said that he did not practice baptism. How could he then be in God's Church? Prior to him, no post-Reformation Sabbath advocate is known from England. Where was God's Church?

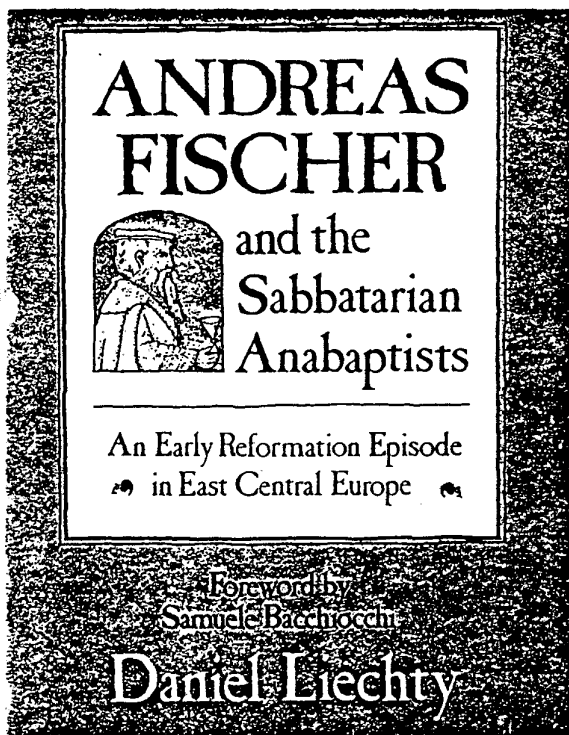
### The Anabaptist connection

In the 1800s, Baptist historians tried to establish their origins in baptizing movements on the Continent. Among those with whom they identified were the Anabaptists. The term *Anabaptist* was a generalization applied by their enemies. It meant "re-baptizer" because they rejected the childhood baptisms of other faiths and required the "rebaptism" of adult converts. Originating in the "Radical Reformation," they were a widely divergent group, including the Hutterites, the Mennonites, the Amish and the Schwenkfelders. Among them were a few Sabbath-keepers.

In England, Baptists of the 1650s were also called Anabaptists. That did not mean that there was a direct organizational link between them and their Continental counterparts, but there were certain doctrinal similarities. Whether those similarities were the result of direct contact with the Continental Anabaptists or simply the result of arriving at similar conclusions from a study of the Scriptures is still a matter of debate in some circles.

Today, historians generally apply the term *Anabaptist* to the followers of the Radical Reformation, and not to the Baptist churches. The Baptists are commonly viewed as arising independently.

It was claimed during the 1800s that English Sabbatarianism had its roots in Sabbatarian Anabaptism. "This sect arose in Germany in the 16th century," wrote Robert Cox (*Literature of the Sabbath Question*, London,



1865, page 158). Yet Cox provided no clear proof for his claim. Neither has any other historian since then.

Of course, we know that the Church of God has always existed. We know this not because we can clearly trace its history, but because of the promises that Jesus gave. We see that the Church exists today. Therefore, the gates of hell have not prevailed against it. So even in our history, we walk by faith, not always by sight.

#### Modern research

Despite the importance of studying the history of Sabbatarian Anabaptists, little research was done in this area until recent years. *The Seventh Day Baptists in Europe and America* (Plainfield, New Jersey, 1910) simply left the readers with the impression that nearly all Anabaptists were Sabbath keepers, when in fact only a very small minority held that view (see page 36). Dugger and Dodd, in *A History of the True Religion*, imply that a large number of Anabaptists kept the seventh day (pages 242-243). They repeated the errors of those going before them. Not until the 1960s was any scholarly work written in English about Sabbatarian Anabaptists.

Renewed interest in Sabbatarian Anabaptist history arose from a 1960 thesis of Gerhard Hasel, a student of Andrews University (an Adventist school). He and others who wrote on the subject published articles in Adventist and Mennonite journals in the late '60s and early '70s. Liechty's biography of Andreas Fischer is an outgrowth of that renewed interest. (The publisher, Herald Press, is a division of the Mennonite Publishing House.)

#### Correcting errors

Liechty goes beyond what was previously written. Having done research in Czechoslovakia and Austria, he is able to bring additional information to light. His command of German, Czech and Hungarian gave him access to resources not available in English. His multilingual notes and bibliography give evidence of his linguistic skills. Because of this, he is able to correct a number of errors published in previous works. Therefore, no one can soundly write on the subject without consulting his work.

Liechty concentrates on the life of Andreas Fischer, who, though not the founder of Sabbatarian Anabaptism, became its most important leader. He was born about 1480. A man of linguistic talents, Fischer was aided by boldness, courage and love of the common man. He found many converts among the miners of Slovakia (about 1528), and consequently drew the wrath of the Holy Roman Empire's Captain John Katzianer. Fischer's wife was sentenced to death by drowning, while Fischer was to be hung from a castle's wall. After seeing his wife die, Fischer hung by a rope for several hours. But somehow he escaped. You may read the rest of the story and an account of his beliefs in the book.

#### Major sections of the book

Liechty gives an overview of Anabaptism in Austria and introduces several influential Anabaptist ministers of the early 1500s — Hans Hut, Caspar Schwenckfeld, Valentine Crautwald and Oswald Glaidt. Hut was active in Austria, the others in Silesia (southwest Poland and northwest Czechoslovakia).

Glaidt wrote a book, which hasn't been found, in support of Sabbath-keeping. Schwenckfeld tried to refute his book, and it is from Schwenckfeld's book that Liechty reconstructs 35 points that Glaidt made.

Fischer also wrote a book, also lost, in defense of the Sabbath. Crautwald wrote against it, listing 16 of Fischer's points. Liechty, based on Crautwald's counterarguments, reconstructs 17 other points made by Fischer. Liechty analyzes the arguments and concludes that Glaidt was the originator of the Sabbatarian teaching. Liechty also analyzes what Fischer believed about Christology, Church history, the Bible, baptism, pacifism, communalism, celibacy and Judaism.

Liechty notes that "Fischer's Sabbatarianism was not simply a peculiar doctrine tacked onto his otherwise generally Anabaptist faith. It was an essential and integral part of his whole approach to Christian reform.... He wanted only to revive the faith and practice of the apostolic church" (page 105).

This book is not for the casual reader. It expects its readers to have a basic knowledge of Reformation and Anabaptist history. If you do not have such a background, read the book with a good church history reference at your fingertips.

The current volume is the 29th in a series of studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite history intended for the scholar. As such it contains a thorough bibliography. Yet its language is not beyond the interested layman.

Two drawbacks of the book are its failure to analyze possible pre-Reformation influences upon the movement, and the group's continued survival after Fischer's death. Several other sources indicate that there were Sabbatarians in Moravia until about 1600. Where the group went from there has never been proven.

For us in the Church of God, we will take particular notice of the fact that the Sabbatarian Anabaptists were for the most part pacifists, separated themselves from the government, believed in the Millennium and were possibly anti-Trinitarian. No other group in the 16th century shared so much in common with us. The Spirit of truth may well have been among them. They may well have been our brothers in the faith. *Andreas Fischer and the Sabbatarian Anabaptists* gives us important insights into their past. Students of Sabbatarian history will want to include it in their libraries.

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