

## COVER STORY

When Oxford University Press accepts a manuscript for publication, the author can feel a glow of pride. When the author is a Seventh-day Adventist and the book deals with the history of the Sabbath, Adventists everywhere should take notice. The *Seventh-day Men: Sabbatarians and Sabbatarianism in England and Wales, 1600-1800*, released in 1994, was authored by Bryan W. Ball, president of the South Pacific Division. It is here reviewed by Douglas Morgan, assistant professor of history at Columbia Union College.

**I**n October 1661 the English preacher John James was arrested while preaching to his congregation and charged with treason. He was convicted and beheaded, and as a gruesome warning to others, his head was displayed on a pole outside the meeting place where he had been arrested. Why the brutal treatment? During those turbulent times in England, he had been identified with an apocalyptic group deemed politically threatening. Moreover, statements by James prior to his execution indicate his belief that part of what placed him in jeopardy was his affirmation of "the seventh day of the week to be the Lord's Sabbath." He declared his refusal to break any of God's commandments, even in order to save his life.

The story of John James's execution is but one detail in a vast range of evidence presented in Bryan Ball's new book, *The Seventh-day Men*, pointing to the existence of a significant body of Christians in seventeenth-century England who observed the seventh-day Sabbath as part of their commitment to walk in the way of Christ. These Sabbathkeepers, for the most part, also emphasized the soon return of Christ and practiced believers' (in contrast to infant) baptism.

The Sabbath, Dr. Ball shows, was hotly disputed in seventeenth-century England. Advocates of the seventh-day Sabbath included eminent ministers and other socially prominent figures such as the court physician Peter Chamberlen, and Thomas Bampfield, member of Parliament from Exeter in the 1650s and speaker of the House of Commons for a brief period in 1659. One proponent of the seventh day claimed that in the period around 1660 the

# Sabbath

# Keepers

# in the 17<sup>th</sup>

By Douglas Morgan

# Century

Saturday versus Sunday issue was the most debated point in the Church of England. The fact that some of the nation's foremost writers, such as Richard Baxter and John Bunyan, engaged in the controversy by arguing against Saturday observance, lends support to that claim.

Observers of that era applied the gender-exclusive label "seventh-day men" to the Saturday Sabbath party. But, for the record, numerous "seventh-day women" occupy a prominent place in the story. Of the 43 believers who signed the covenant forming the seventh-day congregation in Pinners' Hall, London, in 1676, 27 were women. In the village of Watlington, Margaret Hinton regularly hosted a "conventicle" of Sabbathkeepers in her home, for which she is "presented" to Church of England authorities for church discipline. Mary Chester was imprisoned in Bridewell in 1635, charged with being a "Jewess" for her views on the Sabbath and "distinction of meats." She is reported to have recanted, but then after her release resumed espousing her "heretical views." Dorothy Traske refused to recant or conform, and died in 1645 after several years of imprisonment—maintaining a faithful witness during a brief period in which there were virtually no other identifiable believers in the seventh-day Sabbath in England.

Important as it is for simply documenting a greater extent of seventh-day Sabbath observance in English history than was previously known, *The Seventh-day Men* does more than that. It also explores the character of the seventh-day movement. In so doing, it reveals facets of the thought and experience of these ancestors in Sabbatarian faith that offer both inspiration and caution to us today. Their experience speaks to us in particular about the Sabbath as a mark of a reforming church and of a confessing church.

#### Mark of a Reforming Church

To understand why the Sabbath had become such a significant issue, involving not only public disputation but arrest, imprisonment, and book burnings by parliamentary decree, we need to see its relationship to the Protestant Reformation in England. By the late sixteenth century many English Protestants had become disillusioned with the Church of England for failing to carry the Reformation far enough.

Called Puritans, they dedicated themselves to purifying the Church of England through full restoration of the teaching, worship practices, and church order believed to have been observed by the apostolic church. Ornate priestly vestments, costly altar pieces, and rule of the church by bishops had to go! In their place must come a church renewed by a living, personal faith in Christ and faithful to the Bible in its worship and practice.

Conflict between the Puritans and the established Church and monarchy erupted into civil war in the 1640s. Puritan victory and the decapitation of King Charles I in 1649 brought the monarchy temporarily to an end in England. A series of experimental forms of government unfolded over the next decade, with Oliver Cromwell (holding the title of "lord protector" from 1653-1658) exerting controlling power. A variety of religious innovations flowered during this period, including seventh-day Sabbatarianism.

The Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 was soon followed by an Act of Uniformity (1662), requiring all clergy to take an oath of loyalty to the Church of England. Those who refused were ejected from their positions and called Nonconformists. The following quarter century was a period of severe, if intermittent, hardship and persecution for Nonconformists, including seventh-day believers.

Throughout these decades of upheaval, the Puritans persisted in their objective of a church brought into accordance with biblical authority. Despite their image in the popular mind today, they were not first and foremost killjoys. Instead, they were driven by desire to complete the Reformation in the Church of England by purging it of the vestiges of Catholicism and restoring it to apostolic

purity. And here is where the Sabbath came in. A biblical church must be a Sabbathkeeping church, the Puritans asserted, and they were appalled by the way England "observed" the Sabbath (Sunday). It was a day of revelry and entertainment—hunting, hawking, drinking, dancing, and many other "flagrant abuses" were the norm.

Some Anglican representatives took the position that the Sabbath commandment was not binding upon Christians. Sunday was simply designated by the church as the "Lord's day." But the Puritans insisted that the fourth commandment was perpetually binding, a part of the eternal moral law—the Ten Commandments. The day of observance, the majority maintained, had been transferred from Saturday to Sunday in the apostolic era. But observance of the fourth commandment was central to the program of a church reforming in accordance with biblical

authority and sweeping away corruptions accumulated over the centuries.

Ball points out that the "seventh-day" advocates simply pressed the Puritan movement to follow through in its fundamental commitment to biblical and apostolic authority. The quest to complete the Reformation leads to the seventh-day Sabbath because, they argued, that remained the practice of the church in the New Testament era. The Christian Sabbath, as James Ockford put it in 1650, originally

was the seventh day of the week, but in the transfer of its observance to Sunday, it had been "deformed by popery." For the Sabbath truly to be "reformed and restored to its primitive purity," as the Puritans demanded, it must be observed on the seventh day, as it was "in the time of the gospel," as well as in the "time of the law."

Francis Bampfield, eloquent pastor of the

## The conception of the Sabbath as a decisive issue in the final controversy was not an invention of Seventh-day Adventists.

Pinners' Hall congregation in London, connected seventh-day Sabbath observance with a Protestant understanding of justification and sanctification. He pointed out that observance of the seventh-day Sabbath was part of the perfect obedience of Christ applied to the sinful believer through faith. Those to whom this "suitable Sabbath-righteousness from Christ" has been applied should in turn follow His example of Sabbathkeeping.

So for the Puritan seventh-day believers the Sabbath was not a matter of works righteousness or legalistic nit-picking, but a matter of following Jesus rather than a corrupted tradition. Despite the excesses and aberrations of a few, in general they displayed a Sabbatarianism located squarely within the ritage of Protestant Christianity. Indeed, they claimed their position to be the true extension of that heritage. They show us a Sabbathkeeping that marks a church firmly grounded in salvation by faith in Christ and the authority of Scripture, a church that encourages questioning all human tradition and authority on the basis of the Word of God—in short, a reformed and ever-reforming church.

### Mark of a Confessing Church

The experience of the seventh-day believers of the Puritan era also speaks to us about what it means to be a confessing church; that is, a people who adhere to their confession of Jesus' lordship no matter what the pressure from earthly powers. Many of the seventh-day believers took a urageous stand for their beliefs. Several gave their lives for their convictions. Dorothy Traske, Francis Bampfield, and Robert Halder died soon after imprisonment. John James was beheaded. Others lost incomes and houses or were forced to flee to avoid such harassment.

A sense of being part of the last crisis of the world's history undergirded this confessing stance. *The Seventh-day Men* makes clear that the conception of the Sabbath as a decisive issue in the final controversy between good and evil, and pictured as such in apocalyptic prophecy, was not an invention of Seventh-day Adventists in the nineteenth century. The Puritans held an ardent hope in Christ's soon return and a deep interest in the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. The seventh-day advocates among them saw, as Adventists later would, the general turn to Sunday observance in

## "I Was Surprised"

Bryan Ball shared with Review editor William Johnsson personal perspectives on his new book.

### Describe the nature of your research.

Initially the research was relatively easy. I had leads from my previous work on *The English Connection*, and I knew of libraries where I suspected that other materials could be located. Later in the project the going got much tougher. There were indications that Sabbathkeeping congregations had existed in parts of the country for which there was no known evidence. In such instances it meant beginning from scratch, spending days, even weeks, with original materials that in some cases literally fell apart in one's hands. Many of the English country record offices were a fruitful source of information. One such collection has six miles of shelving; much of the material consists of old ecclesiastical records going back many centuries. Altogether I worked in more than 50 libraries and archives looking for the material.

### Any surprises or serendipities in the course of your investigation?

In addition to Sabbathkeeping congregations in unexpected and previously unknown locations, I was surprised at the significance of the movement in its own day. At one period during the seventeenth century the English Parliament established a committee to investigate the theological claims of those who observed the seventh-day Sabbath. Apparently that committee never reported back to Parliament, or Parliament chose not to make the findings known. There were also many prominent people of the time who were committed and active Sabbathkeepers, and who between them produced substantial literature in defense of the seventh-day amounting to more than 60 titles.

### And the most exciting discovery?

The clear evidence that Sabbathkeepers existed among the Lollards, the followers of John Wycliffe, within 20 years of Wycliffe's death. We now have documentary evidence dating from 1402 of the existence of Sabbathkeepers in that part of England bordering Wales, and perhaps also in London.

### What has been the impact of these studies on you personally?

The evidence presented in *The Seventh-day Men*, particularly the significant body of literature that these Sabbathkeepers produced, confirmed in my mind the intrinsic appeal of the Sabbath doctrine to those who come to Scripture as divine revelation and with open minds. It reaffirmed my belief that the Sabbath has an unassailable basis in Scripture and in history.

### Oxford University's publication of the book greatly enhances its standing. How did this come about?

I kept in touch with my Ph.D. professor, who, although now retired, is still regarded as one of the leading ecclesiastical historians of the period. He showed a keen personal interest in this project from the very beginning, to the point of commenting on each chapter as it was written, and hence giving much valuable assistance.

When the manuscript was submitted to Oxford University Press for assessment, he was one of the two readers they sent it to for evaluation. I like to think that this was perhaps more than coincidence, since there are many hundreds of scholars around the world whom OUP uses for manuscript assessment.

Also, the second reader to whom OUP sent the manuscript for evaluation made some suggestions that enabled me to strengthen those sections in the book that deal with the change of the Sabbath. Thus both readers independently chosen by OUP had a significant impact on its acceptance.



Bryan Ball

Christendom as part of the unfolding of history disclosed in prophecy. As Peter Chamberlen put it in an open letter to the Lord High Chancellor and the English judiciary in 1682, the "Triple-Crowned-Little-Horn-Changer of Times and Laws" had changed the day of Sabbath observance.

Recovery of the true Sabbath, then, would mark God's faithful followers in the last days. Edward Stennett, who wrote several tracts defending the Sabbath and pastored a Sabbathkeeping congregation in Wallingford, declared, "It greatly concerns us to show ourselves the remnant of the woman's seed." This remnant, he noted, was characterized as "keeping the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus." The radical Thomas Tillam also employed language later adopted by Adventists in describing the Sabbath as "the last great controversy between the saints and the men of sin," and offering the assurance that the saints would gain "victory over the mark of the beast."

These Puritan forebears thus provide a precedent for understanding the Sabbath as a mark of the loyalty to God displayed by a faithful remnant in the climactic crisis of history. But with the encouragement comes a warning. For the same Thomas Tillam who wrote clearly about the Sabbath as a last-day issue ended up leading his followers to withdraw from English society entirely and set up, in the Palatinate region of Germany, a commune in which certain Old Testament practices such as circumcision and polygamy were enjoined. Tillam's extremism and idiosyncratic interpretations had a devastating impact on several seventh-day congregations.

The episode reminds us that obsession with apocalyptic aspects of the Sabbath can shade into a paranoid exclusivism that withdraws from the world, sows discord in the

church, and sees conspiracies ever lurking behind the actions of the Roman Catholic Church, the United States government, and the United Nations (for starters!).

We must also note that many of the seventh-day believers, such as John James, were identified with a group known as the Fifth Monarchy Men. This radical group emerged during the upheaval of the era of civil war and its aftermath, convinced that they were the agents of the fifth kingdom of Daniel 2—that is, Christ's kingdom, represented by the stone that destroys the statue symbolizing the previous kingdoms and becomes a mountain filling the whole earth. They advocated political action and on occasion even violent uprising as the means for ushering in the millennial kingdom. The government suppressed the group, and it faded away in the 1660s and 1670s.

Yet the connection between the Fifth Monarchy Men and the seventh-day men is undeniable and significant, particularly in the aftermath of Waco and the Oklahoma City bombing. Now more than ever we need to be clear that a biblical apocalyptic faith never calls us to take up arms on behalf of the kingdom of God or even to defend ourselves against persecutors. Rather, as a faithful remnant we follow the Lamb in the way of the cross, the way of love and nonviolence.

On the other hand, we can learn something positive from the radicality of the Fifth Monarchy Men and of Tillam and his associates. The Fifth Monarchy Men were wrong in attempting to bring about the millennial kingdom through force. But they were right in seeing themselves as advance agents of the kingdom, with their entire agenda and way of life shaped by that allegiance and identity. Tillam and his followers were wrong in attempting to isolate themselves from society, and in their extreme practices. But their "Solemn Covenant" is

worthy of reflection. In an era when nationalistic and ethnic loyalties tighten their hold, and the pursuit of material wealth dims spiritual vision, the radicals can help teach us what it means to be a confessing church that makes it unmistakably known that its allegiance is to Jesus Christ alone, not to the principalities and powers of this world.



The history Ball relates in *The Seventh-day Men* builds up our faith by helping us see that important aspects of Sabbatarian belief have

been held throughout the history of English Christianity to a greater extent than ever before realized. And the experience of the Sabbathkeeping movement emerging out of Puritanism leaves us with some challenges. The challenge of holding a "remnant" identity without degenerating into arrogant and destructive exclusivism. And the challenge of being a church that confesses Jesus as its only Lord and on that basis offers a clear alternative to the surrounding society without so losing touch with society that we are unable to make an impact.

Failure to hold together both sides of these tensions places us in danger of the factors that Ball believes caused the seventh-day movement in England to die out, for the most part, by 1800. For, on the one hand, the seventh-day believers ultimately failed to sustain a distinct identity. They did not establish and support the associations and organization necessary to keep the movement dynamic. Evangelistic outreach too often was lacking. On the other hand, extremism on the part of some and a tendency toward contentiousness worked to make them isolated and ineffective in reaching others.

*The Seventh-day Men* is a formidable work of scholarship and thus not a book that you're likely to breeze through on a leisurely Sabbath afternoon. Yet it calls for careful attention, because a look back to the church history of England in the 1600s and 1700s turns out to help us see ourselves more clearly and find our bearings as we move into the future. ≡



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