

REPORT ON THE FRIENDS OF THE SABBATH CONFERENCE – SYDNEY - 1997

Over a considerable period, I have been in touch with various branches of God's Church. At no time did this ever undermine my faith or impact upon the doctrines or truths I had been taught from the Church I was associated with. We should be aware of Christ's example: he associated with Pharisees and Sadducees and was an example and a light to them. How much more should we associate with other branches of the Sabbatarian community without compromising our beliefs. Hence the Friends of the Sabbath conference series.

East European Sabbatharians

My relationships with these various groups has grown over the years and over the past few years many tremendous new contacts have been made. For instance the Churches of God in Poland and Czechoslovakia have been tremendous new contacts and have provided some fascinating information.

Bujok Pavel in a letter sent to me in November 1996 wrote that:

"I am sending a brochure of [the] religious belief that is the same for all the churches that observe or celebrate the Sabbath: Poland, Czech Republic, Germany, Ukraine, Moldavia and all of Russia. The celebrants of the Sabbath in the Ukraine have written documents from the 14th century, from the missionaries that came from Armenia and Russia."

Now that's fascinating! And well worth investigating! Correspondence with the Polish Sabbatharians confirm that the Sabbath Day Christian Church was formed in the early 1930s from the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This and other valuable data is found in their booklet *The Sabbath Day Christian Church*. Their doctrinal statements reveal basic beliefs similar to the Church of God (seventh day), the parent Church which gave birth to the Worldwide Church of God which in turn gave birth to over 126 groups! The Sabbatarian groups today are like a tree with many branches. Some, sadly, grow old and die, falling off from the Sabbatarian tree. Some flower and are beautiful to behold; others are withering; some are flourishing; many others are struggling to stay alive; and some have been poisoned and have become rather carnal.

In a letter dated 26 September 1996 they indicate support for a Sabbatarian conference and reveal some of the hardships caused by the Church of Rome. Let us all pray for our brethren in other groups and show love and concern for them. They are members of the Body of Christ and we should show them due Christian love.

Protestants switch to the Sabbath!

Shortly after the Friends of the Sabbath conference last year I began to hear of a group in Queensland which had switched from Sunday to Sabbath. It took a long time until I was able to track them down. Whilst at the Feast I was hoping to visit them, but did not receive their telephone number until after the Feast. Although a little disappointed that I was not able to meet them, I did find out that one of their speakers would be visiting Canberra.

Although I was not able to attend the meetings, a non-aligned Sabbatarian who lives in Canberra and who issues various newsletters, Dale Heslin, attended the meetings. His report was that the presentations were 'spot on' in regard to the Holy Days.

On further investigation and with discussions with various of their people and leaders I found that the group is associated with an annual 'pilgrimage' of Protestants to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles and to show solidarity with the Jews. They are known as the International Christian Embassy.

From further study and due to public statements made in support of the Sabbath at a recent Feast, many of them have been keeping the Sabbath and all the Holy Days in homes. More and more of them are coming to an understanding of these vital truths and are edging away from former error. Are we witnessing the birth of another Sabbatarian group? That remains to be seen. But in the meantime we should introduce them to the broader sabbatarian community and keep in touch with them.

Tremendous Historical Information

Vital information with associated overheads and slides were presented by Dr Bryan Ball, President of the South Pacific Division of the Seventh-day and David Currie, President of the Trans-Australian Union of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Dr Ball's presentation centered on his unique and deeply scholarly work, *The Seventh-day Men. Sabbatharians and Sabbatarianism in England and Wales, 1600-1800*. It is available from Oxford University Press

(hardback, ISBN: 0-19-826752-5; illustrations, maps). No researcher of Sabbatarian history should be without this work.

David Currie's exciting presentations concentrated on the Sabbatarians in SE Europe and the ancient Celtic Church. The slides made the presentations come alive. The comments afterwards were all very positive with many delegates wishing that they could hear more of the subject matter. Church of God people would be well advised to attend conferences where these men are presenting due to their expertise in Sabbatarian Church history.

Chinese Sabbatarians!

The Seventh-day Adventist Church today numbers 9 million and the various branches of the Church of God may add up to 500,000! But another great Sabbatarian Church with at least 2 million members in mainland China and tens of thousands elsewhere may be found today! It is the True Jesus Church. How did they originate? And why do they observe the Sabbath and not Sunday?

Whilst some Ukrainian Sabbatarians may have long roots back to the 14th century as related above, the majority appear to have begun due to a revelation to observe the Sabbath in 1946. A similar account may be found with the Chinese Sabbatarians. But before we discuss the modern-day Chinese Sabbatarians, let us take a brief trip back in time.

Evidence for the existence of Sabbatarians in China may be found in Benjamin Wilkinson's acclaimed work *Truth Triumphant* first published in 1944 (available from Richard Nickel's Giving & Sharing). Another work which discusses the Chinese Sabbatarians of the 19th century is *Facts of Faith* by Christian Edwardson (1943) who devotes an entire chapter to these Christians. Dr Herman L. Hoeh wrote an article on them titled "The Dramatic Story of Chinese Sabbathkeepers" published in the *Good News*, December 1955. An updated version appeared in the same magazine Nov/Dec 1990. It is well worthwhile revisiting these works.

My understanding is that Dr Philip Arnold, Founder and Director of the Religion-Crisis Task Force, and the Reunion Institute of Houston, Texas, has undertaken some extensive study into the 19th century Chinese Sabbatarians. Anyone wishing to explore this subject further should make contact with him.

Yet another Sabbatarian Church which sprang up this century is the True Jesus Church which was founded in 1917. The first I heard of this group was about January 1996 when Dale Heslin of Canberra informed me. After he was able to find their address in Melbourne I wrote to them. After a while a response was received via their Secretary in Sydney, Esther Wee. In my reply to her I sent her a copy of Dr Hoeh's article on the Chinese sabbatarians which arose last century, but no reply was received.

So it was a pleasant surprise to receive a telephone call from one of their officials in Melbourne, Mr Walter Vu who rang me a couple of months prior to the 1997 conference series. I immediately put him in touch with Leon Lyell, the Friends of the Sabbath organiser in Melbourne and they were invited to attend the conferences. The 20 minute message by Ms Wee in Sydney was crystal clear and fascinating: she concentrated on the history of their group and why they observe the Sabbath. But she told me privately that no linkage to the Chinese sabbatarians of the 19th century is known. However, as there may be a link of some Seventh-day Adventists to this group, and as the tiny remnants of the Chinese Sabbatarians, if any, may have found its way into the Seventh-day Adventist Church, perhaps a continuous chain is possible. Perhaps we shall not know in this life. Truly, there are more Sabbatarians on this earth than we think.

Other speakers in Sydney were Brad Burman of the Messianic Jewish Alliance, Ron Dart of Christian Educational Ministries, Colleen Buxton of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and Melvin Rhodes of the United Church of God whose report in the Journal will provide additional information about the conferences "down under".

With hundreds in attendance, the conference series was a great success and WILL be continuing.

Please note: the author does not necessarily agree with the positions of the various groups which attended the conferences. He regards the conferences as an educational series with some interesting information. Nor does he know all of the doctrinal beliefs of these groups. But what he is trying to do is to ascertain the extent of Sabbatarianism in Australia and to learn more about these groups and to build bridges where necessary.