Similarities and Differences Between Sabbatarian Churches

**Study No. 163**

Two Protestants happened to be walking past a Seventh Day Baptist  Church. There was sign out front with the title, "Seventh Day Baptist  Church." One Protestant pointed to the sign, and remarked to the other, "There is a Seventh Day Adventist Church." "Yes," replied the other, "Isn’t that Armstrong’s Church?" As Sabbath-keepers, our ignorance of others of like faith is sometimes like these two ill-informed Protestants. Let’s face it, we often don’t know much about the history and doctrines of our own church, let alone others of like faith.

One of the purposes of The Bible Sabbath Association and Friends of the Sabbath is to promote understanding among Sabbath-keepers. *The Directory of Sabbath-Observing Groups*, published by the BSA, and Friends of the Sabbath seminars, are excellent tools to break the ice, and help us Sabbath-keepers know more about each other. The BSA plans to publish *Beliefs of Sabbath-Observing Groups*, verbatim listings of fundamentals of beliefs of many groups. Let us analyze some of the similarities and differences between some Sabbath-observing groups. There are five main groupings of Sabbath-keepers: (1) Seventh Day Adventists, (2) Church of God, Seventh Day, (3) Worldwide Church of God and splinter groups, (4) Sacred Name groups, and (5) Seventh Day Baptists.

**Seventh Day Adventists**

The Seventh Day Adventist church (over 8 million members worldwide, 800,000 in the USA) dwarfs all other Messianic Sabbath-keeping groups combined. It was organized in the early 1860s. It is a church which is growing, and operates through many departments and ministries. It is governed through a representative system that advances from the local church through various levels. Elders are elected locally, while paid pastors are sent from the district. The SDA statement of doctrine has 27 points, which begins with a recognition of the Holy Bible as the written Word of God, the Trinity, belief that God created the earth in six days, that man is mortal and that Christ is our Savior, that the Sabbath is to be observed, and Christians are to live exemplary lives, that marriage and family are sacred institutions, and that Christ will return soon to establish His kingdom. SDA’s promote their church’s teaching by radio programs such as *Voice of Prophecy*, literature such as *Signs of the Times*, *Liberty*, etc., and public seminars. Their services open with Sabbath schools for various age groups, followed by singing, testimony, and a sermon. SDA’s often sponsor church schools, called academies, for elementary grades. They hold large annual campmeetings that last about a week, and have many sermons and church activities, which are similar to a "Feast of Tabernacles," although held in the summer.

Most non-SDA Sabbath keepers can agree with many of the SDA doctrines and programs. Attending a SDA service, especially the Sabbath school, is an uplifting experience. Many non-SDA Sabbath-keepers would disagree with SDA’s over point #17 of the SDA Fundamentals of Belief: "One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church, and was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White. As the Lord’s messenger, her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth which proved for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction." Many, such as myself, have investigated Mrs. White’s writings, and have found errors, contradictions, and what is worse, official church tampering and "cleansing" of her writings to make them more palatable to the modern world. One cannot be a good SDA without believing in the inspiration of Ellen G. White. Please see our free articles, "We Are Sabbath-Keepers, Not Seventh-Day Adventists," and "Church of God Meets Seventh-day Adventists," along with "Church of God - Adventist!"

In addition, many would disagree with SDA’s over the Trinity, which historically even early SDA’s objected to, and even further back, Seventh Day Baptists eschewed. Modern SDA’s hold doctrines which early SDA’s would object to and consider liberal, such as observance of Easter and Christmas. Most non-SDA Sabbath-keepers believe the Millennium will be the establishment of the Kingdom of God on the earth for a thousand years, and not in Heaven as SDA’s believe. Finally, the 1844 Investigative Judgment doctrine is a major point of difference between SDA’s and other Sabbatarians.

Contrary to prevalent opinion, Seventh-day Adventists are not all in one church organization. There have been, and are, independent Sabbath-keeping Adventists not tied into the main group. And, within the SDA Church, there is a wide variety of believers that run the spectrum from liberal to conservative. It is a diverse group, to say the least! On the one hand, the SDA Kinship group promotes gay rights, while on the other side, Sydney Davis and many other SDA’s promote keeping Passover and the other annual Festivals. They all consider themselves SDA’s in good standing.

**Church of God, Seventh Day**

Previously known as "Church of God, Adventist," this grouping of churches comes from the Adventist movement launched by William Miller, who predicted the end of the world in 1844. While having similar roots to Seventh-day Adventists, the Church of God people never acquiesced to the Battle Creek, Michigan, organization led by James and Ellen White. It is not historically accurate to say that the Church of God came out of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is more correct to say that during the late 1850s and 1860s, they parted company over the "shut door" doctrine and the visions of Ellen G. White. My books, *History of the Seventh Day Church of God, Volume I*, and also, *Six Papers on the History of the Church of God*, cover the history of the Church of God, Seventh Day.

There are four or five major groups of the COG7, headquartered in Denver, Colorado; Meridian, Idaho; Caldwell, Idaho; Salem, West Virginia; and Jerusalem, Israel. These groups tend to be decentralized, not led by a central hierarchy. Generally, they believe in the Kingdom of God on the earth, not in Heaven; they are not trinitarian; they believe that Christmas and Easter are pagan holidays and are not to be observed. They publish magazines and literature promoting their beliefs, but generally do not use mass media such as television and radio. In the United States, they are barely holding their own; however, in foreign fields, they are growing. COG7 churches looking to Caldwell, Idaho, and Jerusalem generally observe the annual festivals. The Denver Group is more tightly organized than the other major COG7 groups, but is organized upon state conference lines similar to that of SDA’s. It publishes *The Bible Advocate* magazine, which has been circulated since 1863.

COG7 services are open and friendly to newcomers. Their Sabbath schools are lively and interesting. The small size of most of their churches make them very attractive for fellowship. The Denver Group sponsors a boarding high school in Owosso, Michigan. Annual or bi-annual campmeetings are held in conjunction with election of church officers.

**Worldwide Church of God and Related Groups**

Although founded in the 1930s by a COG7 minister, Herbert W. Armstrong, the Worldwide Church of God developed along different lines. Radio, and later, television, became major tools to expand the Church’s message. In the early 1950s, the Radio Church of God, as it was known at that time, developed a strong central hierarchial government, which was radically different than SDA and COG7 structure. Membership grew from a few hundred to over 100,000 at its peak. Until later years, services were closed to members or minister-approved invited guests. *The Plain Truth* free magazine and *The World Tomorrow* broadcast became known to millions around the world. Herbert Armstrong, and his son Garner Ted Armstrong, became household words. In 1968, the church’s name was changed from Radio to Worldwide Church of God.

There are at least ten major doctrinal differences between the "Church of God" groups and Seventh-day Adventists: (1) the Trinity, (2) Ellen G. White, (3) going to Heaven, (4) the "Investigative Judgment," (5) name of the Church, (6) vegetarianism, (7) military service, (8) time element of the crucifixion and resurrection, (9) observance of Easter and quarterly communion, (10) moral issues such as homosexuality, abortion, and alcohol.

Like SDA’s, the WCG has undergone a number of splits and divisions. Unlike the SDA church, however, the main body of the WCG is only a shadow of its former self. About 10,000 members and hundreds of ministers left in 1974 over church government, Pentecost, and other doctrinal issues. To stem the tide of loss of membership, Armstrong instituted a number of doctrinal changes at that time, in which he accepted most of the doctrines espoused by the dissidents (the exception being his rigid adherence to a strong central church government). Most of these "dissidents," as they were dubbed, left the faith altogether, led by Dr. Ernest Martin. The exceptions are Raymond C. Cole, who leads The Church of God, The Eternal, from Eugene, Oregon, and Kenneth Westby, who leads the Association for Christian Development from Seattle, Washington. Both these groups have scattered brethren around the country, and hold annual Feast services. Cole’s group is distinguished by its observance of a Monday Pentecost, and holding to most of the church’s doctrines prior to the 1974 changes.

In 1978, Garner Ted Armstrong was ousted, and he formed his own Church of God International. In 1995, due to charges of sexual misconduct, the CGI split in two roughly equal groups, the original CGI and the loosely organized grouping known as The Churches of God. Both groups are vigorously involved in radio and printing work, and are organized around local churches rather than a tight central authority.

Armstrong died in 1986. His successor, Joseph Tkach, who died in 1995, led a host of doctrinal changes that totally remade the church, from top to bottom. Tkach openly embraced the trinity doctrine, and taught that the Sabbath and Holy Days are not a Biblical requirement, that members may eat unclean foods and observe Christmas and Easter, and abandoned its central teaching on prophecy, that the United States, Britain, and other Anglo-Saxon peoples are Biblical Israel. This reversal caused a mass revolt of about 40-50% of the church’s ministers and members, many of which became part of the United Church of God, and even more staying at home or becoming independent.

In 1990, Gerald Flurry left to form his Philadelphia Church of God, in 1992, Roderick C. Meredith founded the Global Church of God. These two groups today have about 5,000 members each. Flurry is on numerous television stations and publishes *The Philadelphia Trumpet* magazine. His services are open only to those who agree that Herbert W. Armstrong was the end-time Elijah and Flurry the end-time Elisha. Recently, Flurry published the copyrighted last book of HWA, *Mystery of the Ages*, in defiance of the Worldwide Church of God, which had discontinued the book shortly after Armstrong’s death. Meredith’s Global Church of God publishes *The World Ahead* magazine, and is also on radio. Like Flurry, Meredith practices tight central church government, although his services are open to others.

The Worldwide Church of God, led by Joseph Tkach, Jr., continues to assemble on the Sabbath, but could not be considered a Sabbath-keeping church because its doctrinal teaching is that the Sabbath is not a Biblical mandate. Apparently, the real reason they continue to meet on the Sabbath is not to prevent further loss of membership, but to continue to have association with other Sabbath-keepers so that they can convince others to abandon the Sabbath. Joseph Tkach, Jr.’s close relationship with the Denver Group COG7 does not appear to be an attempt to take over the much smaller group, but instead is directed toward influencing the leadership to take the same doctrinal path of the WCG. *The Good News* magazine was killed, Ambassador University has been closed, and just about every significant doctrine has been altered or done away with. *The Plain Truth* magazine is a shadow of its former self, now having paid subscribers.

Differences between the WCG today and the COG7 are still significant, although the current leadership of the Denver Group of the COG7 has a strong friendship with Tkach.

It is possible that today there are about 200,000 people or more who were once associated with the Worldwide Church of God. More than half of them are not part of any organized group. It is these scattered brethren which is a major object of concern for non-church service organizations such as The Bible Sabbath Association and Giving & Sharing.

Two more churches descended from the WCG are John Ritenbaugh’s Church of the Great God, and Ronald Dart (who left GTA in 1995), who heads Christian Educational Ministries. Mr. Dart holds Sabbath services and annual Festivals, and syndicates his radio program, *Born to Win*, on a number of stations, which are sponsored by local churches who are in loose or no affiliation with him. Dart’s church presents a phenomenon similar to independent SDA ministries. He does not present himself as being a church, although he is in operation exactly that. Another church that claims not to be a church is Norman Edwards, who publishes *Servants’ News*, and holds independent Sabbath services and festivals.

The trend in the WCG grouping of Sabbath-keepers, unfortunately, is toward more fractionalization. The grouping has undergone extreme stress as a result of twenty years of doctrinal changes and divisions, but many groups outside the parent WCG appear to have a solid basis for growth and development. An exception is Raymond Cole’s Church of God, The Eternal. The reason why their prospects do not look good is because of their lack of openness, and not doing the work of spreading the gospel to others.

The positive news is that non-church ministries, such as *The Journal* newspaper, Giving & Sharing, the BSA, and others, are flourishing, providing a service to Sabbath-keepers without a paid staff of ministers. These service organizations encourage brethren to become involved in personal evangelism, keep brethren aware of what is going on in the Sabbath-keeping community, and encourage cooperation and understanding between the Church of God grouping of Sabbath-keepers. On a larger scale, The Bible Sabbath Association, performs this function to SDA’s and Sacred Name believers as well.

**Assemblies of Yahweh**

Aside from their insistence of exclusive usage of the Hebrew names, Yahweh and Yahshua, Sacred Name believers have much in common with the more conservative ex-Worldwide groups. There are three or four larger groups, with many small independents. Jacob O. Meyer of Bethel, Pennsylvania, leads the largest group, the Assemblies of Yahweh. Its *Sacred Name Broadcaster* magazine and radio program have popularized the doctrine that we should use he Hebrew names for the deity. Meyer runs a tight central government, and has been compared to Herbert Armstrong.

Another, more loosely run organization is Yahweh’s New Covenant Assembly, of Kingdom City, Missouri, led by Donald Mansager. Their literature and magazine, *YNCA Light*, are among the most professionally done and interesting of all Sabbath-keeping group’s publications. The House of Yahweh of Abilene, Texas, led by former Worldwide Church member Yisrayl Hawkins, is tightly run. Newspapers have run stories on this group, claiming Hawkins is a dangerous cult leader.

Generally, Sacred Name believers are scrupulous in their observance of the Sabbath and food laws. They are avid Bible students. Most, but not all, Sacred Name believers keep the annual Holy Days, and of those who do, most do not follow Jewish postponement rules.

Fellowship and contact between Sacred Name believers and other Sabbath-keepers is difficult. It is offensive for Sacred Name believers to hear the names of "God," and "Jesus," in prayers, songs, and scripture citations. They have their own Bibles which leave the Hebrew names for the deity in tact. A Sacred Name believer cannot be silent on a central tenet of their faith, and as a result, non-Sacred Name groups are uncomfortable when Sacred Name believers attend their congregations. Non-Sacred Name believers find the Yahweh groups’ tendency to constantly "harp" on the Sacred Name doctrine in person and in their literature somewhat offensive.

For further information on Sacred Name history, please see my article, "History of Sacred Name Groups," 6 pp. available from Giving & Sharing for a donation of $1.00.

**Seventh Day Baptists**

Like the Church of God, Seventh Day, the Seventh Day Baptists number about 5,000 in the United States, and have many more members worldwide. They are loosely organized under a local church government structure, from their headquarters in Janesville, Wisconsin (formerly Plainfield, New Jersey). Their magazine, *The Sabbath Recorder*, has been published continually since 1844. Unlike most other Sabbath-keepers, SDB’s are Baptists first, Sabbath-keepers second. Many SDB’s feel more comfortable around Sunday Baptists then SDA’s or Church of God people. Like Seventh-day Adventists, SDB’s have over the years undergone doctrinal changes, from a non-trinitarian to a trinitarian position, and from eschewing Christmas and Easter to full participation in these holidays. Their observance of the Sabbath is similar to Sunday-keepers observance of Sunday: go to Church and then pursue one’s own interests.

There are, of course, exceptions. Australian Seventh Day Baptists, such as

David Hill, are much more conservative than their American counterparts. In fact, it appears that this doctrinal spread between American and Internationals is a common factor in other groups as well. The trend of the times is the moral downturn of the United States, and Sabbath-keepers in other parts of the world are picking up the slack.

In general, Seventh Day Baptists are interesting people, fiercely independent minded, and open to others of differing opinions. My friend David Hill of Australia noticed the closed mindedness of Sabbath-keepers of the Armstrong group, as contrasted to SDB’s: "We discovered that they were quite unique in that they believed most of the things that we believed, but were not dogmatic. They were not worried if their members held different points of view. They believe in the individual’s right to have the personal teaching of the Holy Spirit. The S.D.B.’s welcomed us as brothers and sisters in the Lord, without regard to our beliefs on minor issues. We immediately knew that this is where God wanted us to be and started to fellowship with them straight away. I was also encouraged to foster a new fellowship in our local area and before long I was leading a small group of believers."

**Conclusion**

We Sabbath-keepers are a motley crew. The doctrinal statements of the different groups, show more similarities than differences. As believers, we value the Bible as the word of the Almighty, and the Sabbath as a key path of life. There are many areas in which we can work together. There are many reasons why we fellowship separately. May the Eternal speed the day when we shall all see eye to eye.

written by Richard C. Nickels ****

For further information about different Sabbath-keeping groups, please request the book, *Directory of Sabbath-Observing Groups*, for $10, from

The Bible Sabbath Association, 3316 Alberta Drive, Gillette, WY 82718,

or to order with a credit card, call toll free 1-888-687-5191.