

# SABBATARIAN GROUPS

## A SCATTERED AND LITTLE FLOCK

By C White

The Church of God sabbatarian groups have always been a scattered into various remnants. However, this century, due to the nature of organised nations and governments, and to enable it to do an end-time witness, it is essential for the Church of God to be united.

Yet there have always been various branches and eras of the Church. This century, the WCG stood out and proclaimed a major Work. Yet it is now more important than ever to do a Work, yet the remnants of this group just refuse to cooperate.

The genesis of this era are particularly interesting and serves to give us insights into the early WCG.

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Ever since the scattering of God's sabbatarian church (Acts 8:1), it has not been one composite organisation, but has consisted of many groups related to one another. Some of those groups have died out; some seem spiritually without life; but some are alive and well, doing a Work to bring many to salvation. This article is about some of these groups today.

### **The Historical Links Between Adventists and Churches of God**

Both Adventists and Churches of God are familiar with their roots and beginnings last century. With the formation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, some individuals and fellowships either never joined and remained outside of the SDA Church, withdrew in 1863 or withdrew in 1866 (see Linden, *1844 and the Shut Door Problem*, pages 80-81; Bjorling, *The Churches of God, Seventh Day. A Bibliography*, pages 10-14). Of course the Seventh-day Baptists remained a separate entity.

With the incorporation of the scattered non-SDA and non-SDB churches, the new group eventually became known as the Church of God (Adventist) which indicates strong, intertwined links and relationships between the Church of God and the SDAs. Later, in 1922, the name was officially known as Church of God (Seventh Day) and has remained such to this day.

Membership and new elders to the Church of God (Adventist) was added from the Seventh-day Adventist Church from time-to-time. One such elder was Greenberry G Rupert, whose writings later proved very impressionable on Herbert W Armstrong, founder of the Worldwide Church of God (initially known as the Radio Church of God).

Rupert brought with him the belief that the annual sabbaths, in addition to the weekly sabbath, are important for Christians to understand and to observe which impacted upon sections of the Church of God, a few who were already observing these days. During his time with the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the late nineteenth century, he performed missionary work in parts of South America. Later, in the 1960s, Worldwide Church of God ministers stumbled across many of these scattered remnants of Rupert's missionary work. They never associated with any other sabbatarian group, but continued to faithfully observe the sabbath and in many cases, the annual sabbaths.

The Churches of God today have a Seventh-day Adventist elder to thank for bringing the annual sabbaths into their theological framework. To this day, many Adventists privately observe these days. Rupert died in 1922, still a Church of God elder, leader of the Church of God (Independent), having been part of the splits from the Church of God (Adventist) in 1905. It was also in 1922 that the unofficial name of the Church of God (Adventist) was formally changed to Church of God (Seventh Day). It split again in 1933 with re-amalgamation in 1950, although some did not rejoin the General Conference. More recently attempts to unify with the latter group failed in a vote, but now appears to be occurring by default with individual congregations joining the larger group.

In 1931 the Church of God in Poland was formed as a result of a split from the SDA Church. Coincidentally the Church of God in Portugal also started that year, as an SDA Church splinter group and the Adventist Church of Promise in 1932 in Brazil which is now a member of the Church of God (Seventh Day) General Conference which has around 60,000 members around the globe. Also in the 1930s an SDA minister in Australia, pastor AH Britten, established the Remnant Church of God (although it was not registered until 1939). A small group continuing that church may still be found extant in Perth, Western Australia to this day.

There can be no doubt about it: the Adventists and Churches of God are related, have a common history and are much closely related than we might sometimes admit. By the way, not all of the Churches of God in East Europe which were underground during the oppressive years under Communist rule were offshoots of the Adventists. One particular group in the Ukraine came about due to a revelation in 1946 and others trace their history to groups dating back to the Middle Ages.

## **The Worldwide Church of God**

In 1931 Herbert W Armstrong was ordained a minister of the Church of God (Seventh Day) and in 1933 he formed a congregation known as the Radio Church of God (later changed to Worldwide Church of God in 1968). After seven years his credentials as a minister of the Church of God (Seventh Day) was withdrawn in 1938 although he still co-operated with them until 1945 and Radio Church of God members visited with the mother church until the early 1950s. After that time, unfortunately, virtually all communication between the two groups ceased. Why mother and children churches

cannot speak to each other is beyond this writer's comprehension – hopefully communication will recommence some day.

Further clues to our close relationship may be found in commonalities in our literature: The WCG's booklet *The True History of the True Church* was drawn, in part, from Adventist publications such as *The Church in the Wilderness* and *Facts of Faith. Proof of the Bible* was based on the SDA's *Prophecy Speaks: Dissolving Doubts*. Even the booklet *Seven Laws of Healthful Living* seems to have a basis in the SDA's eight health principles.

Beside the Sabbath and it being a sign for Christians, other similarities include the belief in seven church eras, the identification of the Roman Catholic Church with the Mystery Babylonian religion, the historic Beast power has been the Roman Empire and its successor Holy Roman Empire, water baptism, concept of the end-time remnant church, places of protection for God's people during the Great Tribulation and so forth.

This indicates that the Churches of God are not intellectually separate from the SDA Church and owes it a debt for certain concepts.

In 1934 Mr Armstrong commenced publication of the *Plain Truth* magazine and commenced the *World Tomorrow* radio program which grew to become the largest radio program on earth by the late 1960s and when it was cancelled in the early 1990s, it was, by that time, the longest serving program in history. During the 1960s, there was a small flow of Adventists into the Worldwide Church of God's (WCG) ranks. A flow in back toward the Adventists has also been occurring, particularly since the WCG theologically eschewed the seventh day sabbath.

By the time of his death, the WCG had 150,000 members; the *Plain Truth* magazine had a circulation of over 8 million in 5 languages and in full-colour; a *Good News* magazine in several languages and in full-colour with over 1 million published each issue); a Correspondence Course with hundreds of thousands of students; a theological college; a world famous performing arts centre; scores of free quality booklets and hard cover books; a radio and TV program on hundreds of stations across the globe. All literature was totally free without any cost or obligation.

At the time of writing, the WCG's membership had plummeted to about 35,000; the radio and TV programs had been cancelled; the college closed; all books and booklets withdrawn; the *Good News* magazine and Correspondence Courses cancelled and the *Plain Truth* is being replaced by an ecumenical magazine with different titles in various countries (circulation may only be 250,000).

Today we are aware of about 126 groups which have split from the WCG. More recently the United Church of God and the Global Church of God have split-off to continue the beliefs their members hold precious. Most former WCG members have now forsaken the Sabbath or observe it privately at home. A few have joined the SDA Church.

The number of groups observing the Sabbath may be counted in the hundreds, numbering 9 million Adventists, approximately 2 million True Jesus Church members (mainly Chinese), hundreds of thousand of various Church of God members plus Messianic Jews and other groups.

Communication between these groups has never been good, and as a result in Australia a new group has been formed to generate communication and to build bridges.

## Organisation and Cooperation

Established in 1945, the **Bible Sabbath Association** (BSA) is a non-sectarian association of Sabbathkeepers. Members include United Church of God, Global Church of God, Church of God International, Seventh-day Adventists, Seventh Day Baptists, Church of God (Seventh Day), Assembly of Yahweh and other groups and independents. BSA is not a Church nor is seeking to become one. Nor does it propose ecumenicalism or mergers between groups.

The BSA is a network of Sabbathkeepers promoting the Sabbath in a positive way. We seek to encourage understanding, communication, and mutual respect among Sabbathkeepers; to promote the knowledge, acceptance, and observance of the seventh-day Sabbath among all Bible believers; and, to defend the freedom of believers in all nations to rest and worship on the seventh day of the week, and to seek to repeal all legislation that hinders Sabbath observance. Join the BSA today! The BSA publishes a variety of literature advocating the Sabbath: *The Directory of Sabbath-Observing Groups*, listing over 350 different Sabbath groups; *The Sabbath Sentinel*, a full colour bi-monthly magazine published since 1948 and a variety of books.

We have had a few fascinating years in Australia recently. In Australia 1996 the first *Friends of the Sabbath* (FOS) conference followed by the 3 held in 1997 were catalysts in breaking down barriers. In those three conferences plus a seminar held in 1998 in Sydney, various groups and non-aligned persons were represented. This has led to several other initiatives which we welcomed. The *Friends of the Sabbath* was formed in 1995 after a major crack in the WCG with Church of God members and ministers wishing to keep in touch with fellow Churches of God and to build bridges with other sabbatarians. For instance, many are unaware that ministers of different groups were brought together over dinner and in other ways by BSA/FOS outside of organised conferences.

In 1998 Dr Rick Sherrod toured the various towns and cities (Sydney, Canberra, Coffs Harbour, Brisbane, Toowoomba) and in 1999 Melvin Rhodes and Dr David Lewis, PhD (Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Auckland) presented extensive lost tribes and prophecy conferences with hundreds in attendance. This was under the auspices of *History Research Projects* which has been in operation since the mid 1980s. This neutral environment attracted members from at least seven sabbatarian

groups, assisted in them keeping in contact and coming together in joint church Sabbath morning services.

Early 1996 the name *Friends of the Sabbath and Bible Sabbath Associates* was registered with permission by the parent bodies in the USA. It is still registered as such, but a committee now oversights it and other activities which have similar synergies.

The committee oversights the following:

1. HWA Memorial Video & Audio Library;
2. History Research Projects literature, seminars and “*Origin of Nations*” magazine
3. Bible Sabbath Association material, including the “*Sabbath Sentinel*” magazine
4. Giving and Sharing material;
5. Friends of the Sabbath materials;
6. The Journal periodical.

The committee does not necessarily agree with everything that is produced by the organisations represented under the its umbrella, but the overwhelming bulk of the material is very useful.

The new committee feels that it is paramount that these various functions are kept together to ensure that there is direction and efficiency in these various tasks. They are of the opinion that in a country with such a small population and which has a tiny Church of God membership, it would be very ineffective to have these several efforts being run from different places by different people who do not know each other. The unified approach means greater efficiency and people sharing the workload, information and assisting one another.

### **List of groups in Australia**

Our aim is not to be exclusivist and as such, we intend to provide a service to all sabbatarians. Neither is the committee interested in becoming a church or to encourage mergers. Following is a list of known sabbatarian churches, fellowships and groups in Australia beside non-aligned ‘no name’ and living room Sabbatarian groups whom we would service:

Apostolic Church of God	Church of God, Williamstown
Beth Messiah Fellowship	Philadelphia Church of God
Christian Biblical Church of God	Remnant Church of God
Christian Churches of God	Seventh-day Adventist Church
Church of God, International	Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement

Church of God, acf	Seventh-day Baptist Church
International Christian Embassy	Philadelphia Church of the Very Elect
Hope International	Southern Highlands Church of God
Independent Church of God	The Church of God
People's New Covenant Fellowship	The House of God
LLT Productions	The Sabbath Movement
Melbourne Church of God	Three Angels Message
Messianic Jewish Alliance	True Jesus Church
Messianic Jewish Ministries	United Church of God, aia
Church of God, Restored	Church of God
Church of God, aic	

### **Sabbatarian periodicals in Australia**

A Word from Jerusalem	Sabbath Sentinel
Adventist Laymen's Newsletter	The Good News
Alert	The Herald magazine
Faith in Australia	The Journal. News of the Churches of God
Giving & Sharing Newsletter	The Link
Independent News	The Remnant Herald
Midrash Lekahyim	The Shofar
Philadelphia Trumpet	New World Ahead
Remnant Messages	WorldWatch
Sign of the Times	Tomorrow's World
	Vision

The above represents all Sabbatarian groups and periodicals that I am aware of in Australia. If readers are aware of any others, I would appreciate hearing from them.

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### **SUGGESTED READING**

- Andrews, A (1912) *The Sabbath in History. Part II. The Sabbath in History.* Review & Herald Publishing Association. Washington.
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