

## Church of God History Series

# Merritt Dickinson - An Overlooked Pioneer in the Early Church of God

By Craig M White

Version 1.0

“Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, **respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.**” (Romans 13:7, ESV). See also Romans 12:10; Hebrews 13:7; Luke 10:16; 11 Timothy 2:1-2.

### Introductory Remarks

Among the many influential but little-known figures in the history of the Church of God (Seventh Day), few deserve renewed attention more than Merritt Nelson Dickinson. Although largely remembered for [introducing British-Israel teaching into the Church of God](#) during the early twentieth century, Dickinson's importance extends far beyond that single doctrine.

His Church experienced was during the time when several of the most significant developments in Sabbatarian history. He personally knew the family of James and Ellen White, spent several years living in Jerusalem before the First World War, challenged leading Church of God ministers on matters of doctrine, published widely on the identity of Israel, and appears to have been [one of the earliest Church of God ministers to argue that the Hebrew Calendar or sacred time should be based upon established Church authority rather than private astronomical observation](#).

Although relatively little of his own writing survives, the available evidence (gathered by Richard Nickels) suggests that Dickinson occupied a unique position at the crossroads of Adventism, the Church of God (Seventh Day), British-Israelism, and later calendar debates that would influence the Worldwide Church of God and related Sabbatarian movements.

### Early Life

He was born in Ohio in 1863 before moving with his family to Michigan during childhood, where they settled near Saginaw.

The Dickinson family became associated with the early Church of God (Seventh Day), attending conferences at White Cloud, Michigan, one of the denomination's principal centres during the late nineteenth century.

An intriguing aspect of Dickinson's early life is his family's close proximity to James and Ellen White, founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. According to Church historian Richard Nickels, Merritt and his brother Leroy lived practically next door to the White family for a period and knew them personally. Richard and I talked about this over the phone in the late 1990s.

Despite these close associations, the Dickinson family never joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Instead, they remained within the Church of God community while maintaining friendly contact with leading Adventists. This gave Merritt firsthand exposure to the formative years of both Sabbatarian movements.

### **Marriage and Adventist Connections**

In 1883, at only twenty years of age, Merritt married Ida Permelia Nichols, who worked as a Seventh-day Adventist colporteur (literature evangelist).

Nickels suggests that Ida may have been the daughter of the well-renowned John Harvey Nichols, one of early Adventism's pioneering ministers who preached the first recorded Sabbath sermon west of the Rocky Mountains in Santa Rosa, California, in 1862.

If correct, this would place Merritt Dickinson within an extended family that maintained close relationships across both the Church of God and Seventh-day Adventist groupings, demonstrating the fluidity that existed between Sabbatarian groups during the late nineteenth century.

### **Early Religious Development and the Jerusalem Expedition (1898–1900)**

During his Michigan years, Dickinson observed the seventh-day Sabbath and the annual Passover. According to surviving historical accounts, the Dickinson family kept Passover on 15 Nisan.

This detail is historically significant because it demonstrates that Dickinson's understanding of sacred time evolved over the course of his ministry rather than beginning from a fixed calendar position.

One of the most remarkable episodes in Dickinson's life is a journey that remains largely unexplored by historians.

According to family traditions preserved by Richard Nickels, Merritt, his brother Leroy, and their mother travelled to Jerusalem, where they remained for approximately three years between 1898 and 1900.

During the journey they reportedly visited Britain and examined the Stone of Scone after Merritt became convinced of British-Israelism through reading *Judah's Sceptre and Joseph's Birthright*.

Very few Church of God ministers of that era spent extended periods in Palestine. Dickinson's residence in Jerusalem therefore raises several intriguing historical questions:

- Did he observe Jewish festivals while living there?
- Did he witness the operation of the traditional Hebrew calendar?
- Did his experiences reinforce his later views concerning continuity between Biblical Israel and later Jewish practice?

No surviving diary or correspondence has yet been discovered to answer these questions definitively, unless Nickels had access to them.

### **Ministry in Oklahoma**

Following their return from Palestine, the Dickinson family settled in western Oklahoma, eventually near Longdale. By 1912 Merritt Dickinson had become an active preacher, conducting evangelistic meetings throughout the region.

In 1913 he invited Elder M. W. Unzicker to conduct meetings at the White Horse Schoolhouse, assisting personally despite difficult weather conditions.

His ministry gained sufficient recognition that the 1923 General Conference Report of the Church of God (Seventh Day) listed Dickinson among its ordained ministers.

This is particularly interesting because family traditions also state that Dickinson resisted denominational control and initially declined formal ministerial credentials, preferring to preserve his independence.

Whether he later accepted ordination or was recognised despite earlier reluctance remains uncertain.

### **British-Israelism and Conflict with Church Leadership**

Dickinson is best known historically for introducing British-Israel teaching into the Church of God (Seventh Day).

Through extensive personal study, he concluded that the peoples of Britain represented Biblical Ephraim while the United States represented Manasseh.

In 1919 he published a series of articles in *The Bible Advocate* entitled *The Final Gathering of the Children of Israel*. These articles were subsequently issued as a separate tract for wider circulation.

In the series Dickinson argued that the so-called "Lost Ten Tribes" remained identifiable among north-western European peoples and would ultimately participate in the prophetic restoration of Israel.

This teaching generated considerable controversy within the Church. One of the most revealing incidents concerns his conversation with Andrew N. Dugger, who would later become one of the Church's most influential leaders.

According to family recollections, Dugger acknowledged that British-Israelism might contain truth but expressed concern that preaching it would alienate potential converts.

Dickinson reportedly replied: "You admit it is the truth, but you won't preach it."

Whether remembered verbatim or not, the exchange illustrates Dickinson's willingness to challenge denominational leadership when convinced Scripture supported his position. Although the Church of God never officially adopted British-Israelism, several prominent ministers including R. K. Walker, Frank Walker, S. S. Davison and Roy Davison sympathised with similar ideas, making the subject one of the denomination's most significant theological controversies during the 1910s and into the 1930s.

## **Dickinson on Calendar Authority and Influence on Later Church of God Calendar Teaching**

While Dickinson's British-Israel teaching has received most attention, his significance may extend even further.

Surviving evidence suggests that he also advocated an important principle concerning Biblical sacred time: that the calendar should rest upon recognised historical authority rather than private observation by individual believers.

No surviving document presents Dickinson's complete calendar theory in the systematic manner later produced by Herbert W. Armstrong. Nevertheless, references to his ministry consistently reveal an emphasis upon continuity with Biblical Israel rather than independent religious belief.

Many modern calendar debates revolve around whether Biblical months should be established through local observation of the new moon or by adherence to an inherited calculated calendar preserved by recognised authority. Dickinson appears to have favoured the latter principle.

Rather than allowing every congregation or individual to establish sacred time independently through astronomical observation, his broader theological outlook consistently emphasised continuity, preservation and recognised authority.

This represented an important foundation that would later become central to twentieth-century calendar observation and debate within the Church of God family.

However, Dickinson's influence upon later calendar belief appears to have been primarily indirect rather than institutional (ie accepted by a Church board).

There is no evidence that the Church of God (Seventh Day) officially adopted a calendar system based upon his writings. Nevertheless, his influence can be identified.

First, Dickinson belonged to the same generation as Andrew N. Dugger, during which Church practice generally accepted common church observance rather than permitting each congregation to determine Biblical months independently. This would have resulted in confusion, in-fighting and different dates for Passover observance.

Secondly, Dickinson helped encourage a climate that emphasised historical continuity with ancient Israel.

This perspective later became highly significant for Herbert W. Armstrong, who entered the Church of God (Seventh Day) while Calendar, Holy Day and British-Israel ideas were circulating among several ministers.

- Mr Armstrong eventually accepted three related positions:
- British-Israel identity.
- Observance of the Holy Days.
- Reliance upon the traditional calculated Hebrew calendar later on.

Armstrong argued that Scripture itself did not preserve sufficient information to reconstruct an independent Biblical calendar and therefore concluded that God had preserved calendar authority through the historical Jewish community.

Although Armstrong never appears to cite Dickinson directly regarding the calendar, the similarities are noteworthy.

Merritt N Dickinson	Herbert W Armstrong
Biblical institutions preserved through historical continuity	Calendar preserved through Jewish authority
Historical continuity over individual innovation	Calculated Hebrew calendar accepted rather than independently constructed calendars
Established authority guides sacred practice	Church unity requires a common calendar

Other similarities were: both men operated fairly independently within the Church of God (Seventh Day); both wrote to Andrew Dugger about British-Israelism and were disappointed by the response not to proclaim the doctrine widely; both visited Jerusalem; and both visited London (Armstrong visited in 1947, 1954, 1956, 1959 although he did not state that he viewed the Stone of Scone in his [Autobiography](#)). Whether Dickinson observe all the Feast Days or only the Passover still needs to be researched.

These similarities do not demonstrate direct contact or continuity, but they strongly suggest that Dickinson formed part of the environment from which Mr Armstrong's later conclusions emerged. We know that Andrew Dugger had a strong influence on Mr Armstrong, and Greenberry G Rupert's literature may have, but did Dickinson? I think that is likely.

### Historical Significance

Finally, while those who know about Dickinson mention him only as an advocate of British-Israelism, such a description understates his broader importance.

He occupied a unique position within early Sabbatarian history:

- personally acquainted with James and Ellen White while remaining within the Church of God tradition
- connected by marriage with influential early Adventist families.
- one of the few Church of God ministers known to have lived in Jerusalem before World War 1.
- an early advocate of British-Israelism within the Church of God (Seventh Day).
- a contemporary and at times a theological challenger of Andrew N. Dugger.
- and a contributor to the intellectual framework that later shaped discussions concerning Biblical calendar authority and sacred time.

Although so many aspects of his life remain undocumented, Dickinson deserves recognition as one of the most interesting transitional figures linking nineteenth-century Sabbatarianism with several major developments in the Church of God during the twentieth century.

Further archival discoveries - particularly correspondence, unpublished manuscripts - may substantially increase our understanding of his influence. Any assistance in this regard is most welcome.

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### History Research Projects

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