

THE PRACTICE OF BEGINNING THE SABBATH IN AMERICA

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During and since the early American colonial period, varied concepts of the proper time for beginning and ending the weekly day of worship have existed side-by-side, both among closely related, and other religious groups in the United States. With the passing of years, actual belief and practice in this respect has experienced a variety of changes, in some cases within the same religious group.

Many colonial Sunday-keepers in America observed their day of worship from evening to evening, beginning on Saturday evening. Cotton Mather, grandson of the Puritan clergyman John Cotton who had fled from England to Massachusetts in 1633, wrote of John:

The sabbath [Sunday] he began the evening before: for which keeping of the sabbath from evening to evening, he wrote arguments before his coming to New England: and I suppose 't was from his reason and practice, that the Christians of New England have generally done so too. When that evening arrived, he was usually larger in his exposition in his family, than at any other times: he then catechised his children and servants, and prayed with them, and sang a psalm; . . .¹

Another illustration of this practice is found in a law issued by the General Court (or Assembly) of the New Haven Colony on January 31, 1647, which states:

Whosoever shall, within this plantation, break the sabbath [Sunday] by doing any of their ordinary occasions, from sunset to sunset, either upon the land or upon the water, extraordinary cases, works of mercy and necessity being excepted, he shall be counted an offender, and shall suffer such punishment as the

¹ Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana, or the Ecclesiastical History of New England* (Hartford, Conn., 1820), Bk. 3, chap. 1, sect. 30 (Vol. 1, p. 253).

particular court shall judge meet, according to the nature of his offense.²

However, the sunset, or evening, beginning time for the day of worship has been associated more closely with various groups who observe the seventh day of the week, or Saturday, as Sabbath, than with Sunday keepers. Seventh-day Sabbath-keeping was introduced in America by Stephen Mumford, who came from England and joined the Baptist church in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1664.³ As a result Seventh Day Baptists organized their first church in Rhode Island in 1671.⁴

The German Seventh Day Baptists in the Ephrata community of Pennsylvania, in the eighteenth century kept their Sabbath from six o'clock to six o'clock, beginning on Friday evening. Note that they used the term, sunset, in connection with six o'clock:

The Sabbath was ushered in with the first hour of the sixth day (Friday, 6 P.M.) and closed at the end of the twelfth hour of the seventh day (Saturday, 5:59 P.M.), as before stated the peculiar reckoning was adopted so as to conform to the very letter of the law in the New Testament, wherein it states that the disciples broke bread upon the first day. . . . It will be noted that, according to the Ephrata reckoning the Sabbath ended at sunset (6 P.M.) of the seventh day.⁵

The Ephrata method of daily reckoning began with the first hour of night at six o'clock in the evening, and ended at the close of the twelfth hour of the day which began at five o'clock the following afternoon.⁶

In 1843, W. H. Fahnestock wrote a formulation of the beliefs of the German Seventh Day Baptists which included

² [No author,] *Records of the Colony and Plantation of New Haven from 1638 to 1649* (Hartford, Conn., 1857), p. 358.

³ *Seventh Day Baptists in Europe and America* (Plainfield, New Jersey, 1910), I, 122.

⁴ Benson Y. Landis (ed.), *Yearbook of American Churches* (New York, 1961), p. 24.

⁵ Julius Friedrich Sachse, *The German Sectarians of Pennsylvania, 1742-1800* (Philadelphia, 1900), pp. 184-85.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

the statement, "the Sabbath terminating at sunset of the Seventh Day, . . ." ⁷

In a brief summary of the actions of the Seventh Day Baptist General Conference sessions throughout the nineteenth century, entries frequently occur with reference to the time for the beginning of the Sabbath. In 1827, the minutes note that "it was declared to be the sense of the Conference that the Sabbath begins at evening."⁸ Following this, in 1843, the Conference stated that, "according to the Scriptures, the Sabbath begins on what is commonly called Friday evening."⁹ A clearer statement is found in the minutes of 1849, affirming "the beginning of the Sabbath at sunset on sixth-day."¹⁰ The Conference recorded the statement in 1863 of "the need of more public teaching in regard to the time and manner of Sabbath observance."¹¹ Some still apparently were inquiring into the subject as late as 1880, when the minutes state, in answer to a letter of inquiry, that the Conference declared its belief "that night and the following daylight constitute the day of Scripture."¹²

Several other references to the problem occur after the middle of the nineteenth century from Seventh Day Baptist writers. One, in 1852, reflects the argument of a writer in *The Sabbath Recorder*, a periodical of the Seventh Day Baptists, with some who oppose the evening-to-evening view, and advocate that the Sabbath should be only twelve hours in length.¹³ Another writer for the same paper, in the following year, shows an acquaintance with the six o'clock to six o'clock time, in a discussion of the keeping of the Sabbath on a round world.¹⁴ A

⁷ *Seventh Day Baptists in Europe and America*, II, 1203.

⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 176.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 210.

¹³ [No author,] "Time for Commencing the Sabbath," *The Sabbath Recorder*, reprinted in *Review and Herald*, III (December 9, 1852), 113.

¹⁴ [No author,] "Rotundity of the Earth and the Sabbath," *The Sabbath Recorder*, reprinted in *Review and Herald*, III (April 28, 1853), 197.

writer of the American Tract Society in 1854, in a discussion of Acts 20 : 7, makes the statement that the Jews commenced the day at sunset.¹⁵ Another Seventh Day Baptist, writing in 1870, in reference to Mt 28 : 1, says plainly that the "Sabbath closed at sunset."¹⁶

During the first months of 1844, Rachel Preston, a Seventh Day Baptist, introduced the Sabbath to Adventists in Washington, New Hampshire. She had shortly before visited the home of Cyrus K. Farnsworth in Washington, and, having become deeply interested in the Adventist views of the soon coming of Christ, accepted their teachings. In turn, she instructed the advent believers in the Sabbath truth. About forty accepted the Sabbath as a result of her witness, and began to observe the seventh day.¹⁷

About this time, T. M. Preble, an Adventist minister, accepted the Sabbath and began to teach it.¹⁸ His first essay on the Sabbath doctrine appeared in the *Hope of Israel* of February 28, 1845, published in Portland, Maine.¹⁹ Preble did not discuss the time for the beginning and ending of the Sabbath in his first tract. However, he shortly rewrote it, and, in a short supplement at the end of the enlarged revision which also appeared in 1845, he introduced the time element:

Therefore, though the sun may rise at a different time in Palestine from what it does here, yet it will make no difference in the time of our beginning the Sabbath. "The evening and the morning were the first day." Therefore, we should begin the Sabbath on Friday evening, and end on Saturday evening.²⁰

¹⁵ [No author,] "The American Tract Society, versus the New Testament," *Review and Herald*, V (August 1, 1854), 202.

¹⁶ A. H. Lewis, *The Sabbath and the Sunday* (Alfred Centre, New York, 1870), p. 58.

¹⁷ James White, *Life Incidents* (Battle Creek, Michigan, 1868), p. 268.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ J. N. Andrews, *History of the Sabbath and First Day of the Week* (Battle Creek, Michigan, 1887), p. 507.

²⁰ J. H. W[aggoner], "T. M. Preble on the True Sabbath," *Review and Herald*, XXXIV (December 21, 1869), 203.

It was from the writing of Preble that the attention of Joseph Bates was called to the matter of the Sabbath.²¹ Among early Adventists in, and for a short time after, 1846, much of the discussion relative to the time to begin and end the Sabbath came from Bates' pen. From his background as a former sea captain, and from his study of the Bible on the subject, he concluded that the proper time to begin and end the day was at six P.M. In his tract, published in 1846, Bates gives the reader insight into his reasoning for the six o'clock time:

"And God said let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven, to divide the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and for years." [Gn 1:] 14v. 16v. says, "the greater light to rule the day,"—from sunrise to sunset. Now there are many modes invented for computing time. We say our day begins at 12 o'clock at night; seamen begin theirs twelve hours sooner, at noon; the Jews commence their days at 6 o'clock in the evening, between the two extremes. Are we all right? No! Who shall settle this question? God! Very well: He called the light day, and the darkness he called night, and the evening and the morning were the first day. Gen. i: 5. Then the twenty-four hour day commenced at 6 o'clock in the evening. How is that, says one? Because you cannot regulate the day and night to have what the Saviour calls twelve hours in the day, without establishing the time from the centre of the earth, the equator, where, at the beginning of the sacred year, the sun rises and sets at 6 o'clock. At *this* time, while the sun is at the summer solstice [*sic.*], the inhabitants of the north pole have no night, while at this same time at the south it is about all night, therefore the inhabitants of the earth have no other right time to commence their twenty-four hour day, than beginning at 6 o'clock in the evening. God said to Moses "*from even, unto even, shall you celebrate your Sabbath.*" Then of course the next day must begin where the Sabbath ended. History shows that the Jews obeyed and commenced their days at 6 o'clock in the evening.²²

There is no evidence that Bates formed his six o'clock beginning time from any knowledge of the earlier practice of the German Seventh Day Baptists at Ephrata. Rather, he came to these conclusions as a result of his knowledge of a

²¹ Andrews, *op. cit.*, p. 508.

²² Joseph Bates, *The Seventh Day Sabbath, a Perpetual Sign, from the Beginning, to the Entering into the Gates of the Holy City, According to the Commandment* (New Bedford, 1846), pp. 31-32.

seaman's computation of equatorial time. This type of reasoning, the result of his life background, was typical of the articles which Bates wrote on the subject, and was accepted by many Adventists for several years. It was from the reading of this tract by Bates, and from listening to, and questioning his arguments, that James and Ellen White, early Adventist pioneers, decided to begin keeping the Sabbath.²³

Bates' six o'clock time, however, did not convincingly satisfy many of the early Adventists. James White, writing a review of the entire matter in the year 1868, states that the "six o'clock time was called in question by a portion of believers as early as 1847, some maintaining that the Sabbath commenced at sun-rise, while others claimed Bible evidence in favor of sunset."²⁴ As the Bible was carefully studied, the articles appearing in the early Adventist journals advocated more and more that sunset was the correct beginning time.

It was in the atmosphere of this continuing, unsettled problem that Joseph Bates wrote, in 1851, adding fresh arguments for his six o'clock equatorial, beginning time. He was aware of the various views which opposed his six o'clock time and stated:

Much has been said in relation to the time of the commencement of the Sabbath. Some say it should commence at sunset (Mark i, 32) while others contend that it should not commence until midnight. And still there are some who say the morning is the proper time.²⁵

When Bates visited the church in Ashfield, Mass., in the summer of 1853, he found some there advocating the commencing of the Sabbath in the morning, while others, he said, "adhered to the Bible rule to commence all days in the week with evening, or even, the twelfth hour of the day."²⁶

²³ Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White, Messenger to the Remnant* (Washington, D.C., 1959), pp. 34-35.

²⁴ James White, "Time to Commence the Sabbath," *Review and Herald*, XXXI (February 25, 1868), 168.

²⁵ Bates, "Time to Begin the Sabbath," *Review and Herald*, I (April 21, 1851), 71.

²⁶ [A Letter] "From Bro. Bates," *Review and Herald*, IV (July 7, 1853), 30.

Seeing the need for a thorough study of the subject, to clarify the time problem and to unify the Adventist believers and churches, James White, upon meeting J. N. Andrews in the summer of 1855 in Maine, urged him to make a careful study of the subject and write an article which might be presented to the believers.²⁷ On his way to Iowa in the autumn, Andrews stopped to see James White in Battle Creek, Michigan, and left with him a copy of the manuscript which presented the results of his prolonged and diligent study. Andrews' article was read before a Conference held in Battle Creek on November 17, 1855. The *Review and Herald* of December 4 stated that "a most thorough examination and discussion of the time to commence the Sabbath," was conducted. The sunset time was accepted by almost all who were present at that conference.²⁸

Andrews' article appeared soon afterward in the *Review and Herald*. In his study of the time to begin the day, and the Sabbath, he reviewed favorable and opposing evidence to the sunset view. In addition, he discussed and evaluated new support from the Bible, from which he showed that both the day, and the Sabbath, began at sunset. In summary, he stated that "there is no Scriptural argument in support of six o'clock, as the hour with which evening commences," and also that "the Bible, by several plain statements, establishes the fact that evening is at sunset."²⁹

In the following numbers of the church paper, several letters appeared in comment on the problem in general, and on the article of J. N. Andrews in particular. For the most part, they expressed confidence in, and gratitude for, the sunset position.

Bro. B. M. Adams writes from Philadelphia, Dec. 30th, 1855:

²⁷ James White, "Time of the Sabbath," *Review and Herald*, VII (December 4, 1855), 78.

²⁸ [No author,] "The Conference," *Review and Herald*, VII (December 4, 1855), 75.

²⁹ Andrews, "Time for Commencing the Sabbath," *Review and Herald*, VII (December 4, 1855), 78.

—"I am, most truly, glad to see in a late No. of the paper that Bro. J. N. Andrews, and the other brethren, have, at last, reached the definite Scriptural time of commencing the Sabbath: at the evening, sunsetting, instead of 6 of the clock: which latter view I never could see had any Scriptural ground."³⁰

Ellen G. White, writing to the believers late in 1855, pointed them to the Bible for solution to the problem, the source from which the sundown position was clarified by J. N. Andrews. She said:

I saw it was even so, "From Even to Even shall ye celebrate your Sabbath." Said the angel: "Take the word of God, read it, understand, and ye cannot err. Read carefully, and ye shall there find *what* even is, and *when* it is."³¹

Following the appearance of Andrews' study, as the years passed, comments by the various writers of the church paper manifested a decisive, clear witness for the sundown time wherever a question was asked, or an article referred to the matter. For example, J. H. Waggoner, in a tract in 1857, said clearly that "those who observe the seventh day commence the day at sunset."³² James White, discussing Acts 20 : 7 in a tract sometime after 1863, the year in which the Seventh-day Adventist church was officially organized, clearly says that "each day commences at sunset, according to God's division of time."³³

James White, on two occasions, and J. N. Andrews, in his 1855 article, suggested an answer as to why it took so long for a solution to be found, in order that general agreement might exist among Adventists on the sundown beginning time. In a short article which accompanied Andrews' presentation in December of 1855, James White said: "The subject has

³⁰ [No author,] "Extracts of Letters," *Review and Herald*, VII (January 10, 1856), 119.

³¹ E. G. White, *Testimony for the Church* (Battle Creek, Michigan, 1855), p. 4.

³² J. H. Waggoner, *A Review of a Series of Discourses Delivered by N. Fillio, in Battle Creek, Mich., March 31st to April 4th, 1857, on the Sabbath Question* (Battle Creek, Michigan, 1857), p. 33.

³³ James White, *The Sabbath in the New Testament* (Battle Creek, Michigan, [n.d.]), p. 7.

troubled us, yet we have never found time to thoroughly investigate it.”³⁴ Andrews, in his article in the same issue, stated that “the Seventh-day Baptists have always held to this doctrine, but I have never happened to meet with their views. Had I done so, I should not have remained in error on this subject.”³⁵ Later, in 1868, James White indicated another reason as he wrote of Joseph Bates that “his decided stand upon the question, and respect for his years, and his godly life, might have been among the reasons why this point was not sooner investigated as thoroughly as some other points.”³⁶

Following careful study on this point of the Sabbath doctrine by early Adventists, the leaders and members of the church accepted the results, particularly as pointed out by J. N. Andrews in 1855. Since the organization of the Seventh-day Adventist church in 1863, the sunset beginning time for the Sabbath has always been observed by its leaders and membership.

³⁴ James White, “Time of the Sabbath,” *Review and Herald*, VII (December 4, 1855), 78.

³⁵ Andrews, “Time for Commencing the Sabbath,” *Review and Herald*, VII (December 4, 1855), 78.

³⁶ James White, “Time to Commence the Sabbath,” *Review and Herald*, XXXI (February 25, 1868), 168.